Urban Environmental Politics meets Urban Theory
Insights from Lefebvre's Right to the City

Margaret Haderer

Two claims are common in current discourses in environmental politics: that cities are key sites of intervention for a shift towards greater sustainability; and that grassroots initiatives in more sustainable everyday practices (food co-ops, urban gardens, sharing initiatives, eco-housing projects) are promising signs of such a shift. Urban theory, especially theory that draws on Lefebvre's Right to the City, challenges both claims. For one, it delivers an 'episteme of the urban' that focuses less – as is commonly the case – on 'sites' (cities) than on the planetary processes that underpin the making and re-making of given sites. Second, it challenges the common 'doxa' that 'truly' transformative grassroots interventions have to operate at a distance from dominant political languages, such as the language of rights. By brining urban theory into conversation with urban environmental politics, this contribution suggests a) that the scope and limits of urban environmental politics heavily hinges on how one conceives of the urban; and b) that the fact that grassroots initiatives in sustainability often remain 'stuck in the niche' may have to do with political strategy.[1]

urban environmental politics; Right to the City; lifeworld environmentalism; planetary environmentalism; heterodox right claims

---

Introduction: Common eco-political sense

Given ongoing urbanization, a common narrative in environmental politics goes, coming to terms with socio-ecological challenges, such as climate change and resource exhaustion, is increasingly an *urban* challenge. Especially cities in the Global North are being conceived of and conceive of themselves as key players for a shift towards greater sustainability (UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2011; WBGU 2016). Urban environmental politics encompasses institutionalized politics and governance networks. It also includes grassroots interventions. Instead of waiting for a *great socio-ecological transformation* to be launched *from above*, an increasing number of urban dwellers and citizens grow and distribute food locally; join repair cafés; take part in clothing swaps; borrow tools from libraries of things; build and live in eco-housing; and commit to more sustainable forms of mobility. Although none of these bottom-up practices are *bound* to emerge in cities, as a matter of fact, they *do* commonly emerge in urban environs. As a result, they nourish the widespread perspective that a socio-ecological transformation hinges on the transformative power of cities and their environmentally engaged citizens (Bulkeley 2010; Bulkeley/Betsill 2003; Bulkeley/Broto 2013; Bulkeley et al. 2010; Evans et al. 2018; Seyfang/Haxeltine 2012; Seyfang/Smith 2007).

In this contribution, which is conceptual in nature, I offer a critical perspective on the *urban turn* in environmental politics. By revisiting Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1996a, 1996b, 2003a, 2003b) and critical urban theory more generally (Brenner/Schmid 2011, 2014, 2015; Merrifield 2013; Wachsmuth 2014), I introduce an analytical distinction between framings of the urban as a *site* (the city) and framings of the urban as a *process.* One key insight from this distinction is that *how* the urban is portrayed in a given political discourse, policy, or strategy, has a major impact on the scope and limits of an eco-political intervention – hence the need for greater reflexivity on the *episteme of the urban* that are underpinning given discourses and practices. If the urban is primarily understood and framed as a *site*, urban environmentalism may boil down to mere *lifeworld environmentalism*: the creation of cleaner, greener, more desirable, and more pleasant local environs. Yet if the urban is, as Lefebvre suggests, understood and framed as *an effect of planetary processes* (processes that are economic, socio-metabolic, ecological, political, and morphological in nature), making the urban more sustainable means more than the pursuit of greener, local lifeworlds: it implies *planetary environmentalism*.

The second key insight from Lefebvre's Right to the City is on political strategy. Lefebvre is critical of practices and discourses that conceive of operating *at a distance from* dominant political languages and institutions as being the distinguishing feature of and crucial to *truly* transformative politics. This *doxa* is, among others, widespread amongst civil-society driven sustainability initiatives and academic discourses on them. Some authors on urban environmental activism depict the carving out of niches for practices in which more sustainable nature-society relations are prefigured (Muraca 2017; Schlosberg 2019) as a key stepping stone towards societal change. Others perceive of operating within society's "cracks" (MacGregor 2019: 1); exploring and practicing "inoperativity" (Pellizzoni 2020: 1); and "acting otherwise" (Fladvad 2019: 331) as central approaches towards greater sustainability. The political strategy that underpins Lefebvre's Right to the City is a different one: one that actively appropriates dominant political languages, including the language of rights, to challenge and reconfigure existing "contract[s] of citizenship" (Lefebvre 2003a: 238) and their underpinning grammar. Margaret Kohn frames this political strategy as a strategy of "heterodox right[s]"-claims (2016: 176ff), of which the Right to the City – as will be explained below – is itself an example.

To be sure, Lefebvre's insight on political strategy has less to do with the crossing of disciplinary boundaries than with a specific perspective on what radical, grassroots politics may imply – an insight that offers a critical perspective on some current approaches to and academic perspectives on grassroots sustainability initiatives. In fact, Lefebvre's conceptualization of the urban is *per definitionem* interdisciplinary. For him, the urban encompasses questions of sociology, no less than questions of politics, geography, architecture, law, or economics. In fact, Lefebvre was a fierce critic of disciplinary silos when it came to making sense of the urban in particular and the production of (urban) space in general (Lefebvre 1991, 2003b). Nonetheless, his insights on the urban have become prominent and elaborated on particularly in the field of urban studies (Angelo 2017; Angelo/Wachsmuth 2015; Brenner/Schmid 2011, 2014; 2015), yet have remained marginal in environmental politics. With view to the latter, a cross-fertilization between disciplines may occur – the central focus of this edited volume and one key focus of this contribution.

The structure of this contribution is as follows: in the next section (2), I present Lefebvre's differentiation between the urban as a *site* and the urban as a *process*. Based on this distinction, the section argues that urban environmentalism may mean (city-centric) *lifeworld environmentalism*, but it may also

mean *planetary environmentalism*. Section 3 makes sense of and problematizes the dominance of lifeworld environmentalism. It argues that there is a clear need for planetary environmentalism, a need that is commonly and rightly addressed by civil society-driven environmental initiatives and practices. Yet one challenge of the latter is that they often remain *stuck in the niche*, which, as this section also shows, may have to do with the political strategy of operating *at a distance from* dominant political languages and institutions. Section 4 introduces an alternative political strategy, the strategy of heterodox rights-claims. Section 4 is followed by the conclusion and a relocation of this contribution within interdisciplinary research (5).

Questioning the Urban in Urban Environmental Politics

For the first time in human history, it is commonly suggested in environmental discourses, more people live in urban instead of rural areas. Most of the worldwide energy consumption, the common narrative continues, is *urban* consumption and relatedly, most of the worldwide carbon is emitted in cities (Bulkeley et al. 2010b; UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2011; UN-Division for Sustainable Development 2019; WBGU 2016). Against this backdrop, it seems to be self-evident that a shift towards more sustainable nature-society relations depends to a considerable extent on making cities more sustainable – a shift that hinges not only on policy makers, architects, and planners who are expected to govern, build, and plan more sustainable urban environs, but also on engaged citizens.

In his writings on cities (Lefebvre 1991, 1996a, 1996b, 2003b), Lefebvre provides a more nuanced interpretation of the meaning of urbanization and the challenges that come with it. From a Lefebvrian perspective, urbanization cannot be reduced to the demographic and morphological growth of urban agglomerations. Nor does he conceive of the urban as a specific site or administrative unit, the city. According to Lefebvre, urbanization is best understood as a societal and planetary process with far-reaching implications. Driven by his study of post-WWII changes to the French countryside, already in the 1970s, Lefebvre notes a double crisis: a crisis of the traditional countryside and a crisis of the traditional city (Lefebvre 1996b: 118ff, 2003b).

According to Lefebvre, the traditional city – a reference by which Lefebvre implies, without further reflexivity, a *European* vision of the city – is in crisis because it has lost its contained form, political autonomy, and its cultural dis-

tinctiveness. Simultaneously, the countryside has undergone a *de-ruralization* due to the industrialization of agriculture, the devaluation of craftsmanship, and the loss of importance of small, local centers (Lefebvre 1996b: 118ff, 2003b). Although even today cities still celebrate their *city-ness* and villages their *rural-ness*, such celebrations have often more to do with nostalgia for a time long past and with profit-driven place branding to attract tourists – with, as Boltanski and Esquerre frame it, "enrichment" (2020) – than with the actual existence of *distinctively* urban or *distinctively* rural spaces. The dissolution of the traditional urban-rural divide – a binary that is nonetheless still shaping academic disciplines, such as political science and sociology (Angelo 2017)– has ushered in the spread of what Lefebvre calls an "urban fabric" (Lefebvre 2003b: 3). The latter

> "... does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all [emphasis added] manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country. In this sense, a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric. Of varying density, thickness, and activity, the only regions untouched by it are those that are stagnant or dying, those that are given over to 'nature'." (Lefebvre 2003b: 3-4)

Thus, instead of focusing on cities as if they were distinct sites, which is just one variant of conceiving of the urban (Brenner 2017), Lefebvre suggests to put more attention on the specific societal and planetary processes that go along with urbanization in late modernity and the related unfolding of the urban fabric (Lefebvre 2003b). The latter implies, as Lefebvre puts it, a dual process: the implosion of the traditional city and the explosion of urban processes that remake local environs, reach far into the countryside and hinterlands, and across the globe (Lefebvre 2003b: 14). Understanding the urban as a manifestation of planetary processes comes with economic, socio-metabolic, morphological, socio-cultural, and socio-ecological implications – implications that call for interdisciplinary research.

From an *economic* perspective, late modern urbanization (in contrast to previous forms of urbanization) constitutes a post-industrial mode of production to which *steam* is less important than the *conquest of space* (Lefebvre 2003b). An example of the latter is highly mobile capital whose investors are less interested in making profit by producing and selling goods than with the speculation with urban and agricultural land at a global scale. From a *socio-metabolic* point of view, urbanization in late modernity implies the consumption of biophysical nature (green land, rare earths, water, fossil energy

etc.) that subjects not only urban hinterlands and the countryside to the production and reproduction of the urban fabric's nodal points, but also distant parts of the world. *Morphologically*, urbanization ushers in suburbanization, which dissolves the traditional distinction between city and country; leads to deserted rural settlement in some parts of the globe and the emergence of megalopolis in other parts. *Culturally*, urbanization implies forms of consumption and lifestyles that cut across traditional urban-rural divides and geographical boundaries. The things one can consume in a suburban box store are often no different from the things one can purchase in an inner-city mall regardless of where the mall is located, close to one's home or in a different country. *Socio-ecologically* urbanization entails what Bill McKibben calls 'the end of nature' (2006). Although we may still think of an adventure to Argentine's Tierra del Fuego or a swim in a remote Alpine lake as escapes form urban life, from a Lefebvrian perspective, both are part of the latter. They hinge on an infrastructure (airports, highways, the tourist industry) that connects urban agglomerations to wilderness and that subjects the latter to consumptive, urban lifestyles (Lefebvre 2003b).

Against this backdrop, one key insight from Lefebvre's analyses of the urban (analyses that have been taken up and developed further in various strands of critical urban theory, among others, in Angelo/Wachsmuth 2015; Brenner/Schmid 2015; Merrifield 2013; Wachsmuth 2014) is an *epistemic* one. It suggests that the scope and limits of urban environmentalism depend not only on how one defines an environmental goal (e.g., sustainability) and the pathways towards it (e.g., green growth or degrowth), but also on how one understands and frames the urban, that is, on *episteme of the urban*.

If the urban is primarily understood as a *site* of intervention (the city), the scope of urban environmentalism is likely to be limited to what Daniel Hausknost refers to as "lifeworld sustainability" (2020: 24): the transformation of local environs into cleaner, more pleasant, socially and materially secure, and desirable environs. Lifeworld sustainability, as Hausknost explains, typically includes concerns for environmental quality (such as clean air and water, safe and affordable food; the absence of toxic substances in the immediate lifeworld, and green space for recreational purposes); material abundance for and the well-being of local citizens (embodied by monetary income, opportunities for consumption and individual mobility, social security); and realms for cultural expression and activity (Hausknost 2020: 24ff). Although pleasant for all those who come to enjoy 'lifeworld sustainability', from a planetary perspective, the greening of local environs, including urban environs, has so far

been spectacularly unsustainable. Resource consumption and CO_2-emissions have risen rather than fallen in and because of countries in the Global North, *despite* three decades of sustainability discourses and interventions, including urban interventions (Bendell 2018; Fritz/Koch 2016; Steffen et al. 2015).

Certainly, also city-centric urban environmentalism – urban *lifeworld environmentalism* – has led to successes. In contrast to the nineteenth-century European or North American City, the environmental and social costs of urbanized life are no longer in the face of local urban dwellers and citizens, but largely out of their sight. Yet one common implication of the latter has been the externalization of the social and environmental costs of Western lifestyles to other parts of the world (e.g., the Global South), non-human beings, and into the distant or not so distant future (Brand/Wissen 2018; Lessenich 2019). To bring the latter into view, going beyond "city-ism" (Angelo/Wachsmuth 2015: 16) is key. In the realm of environmental politics, conceiving of the urban as an effect of planetary processes would involve more than lifeworld improvements. It would also imply the mapping, problematization, and – ideally – transformation of the unsustainable economic, socio-metabolic, socio-ecological, and socio-cultural processes that underpin the production and reproduction of given social spaces. Thus, for urban environmentalism to be planetary in scope (urban *planetary environmentalism*) an episteme of the urban that takes into account the processes that underpin a given lifeworld is *a conditio sine qua non*.

On Cities, Citizens, and Approaches to a Socio-Ecological Transformation

Urban lifeworld environmentalism understood as the greening of cities tends to be the key concern of institutionalized politics: e.g., the politics of the (local) state and its governance networks. Given the dependency of local governments on local electorates, environmental politics that are more concerned with lifeworld improvements than changes to planetary processes are, from an environmental and social perspective, clearly insufficient. Yet they do not come as a surprise and even make sense against the backdrop of political rationalities, such as concerns for political legitimacy. Political rationalities, to state the obvious, are not always compatible with environmental rationalities, such as living within planetary boundaries in order to avoid jeopardizing the long-term habitability of the planet (Rockström et al. 2009).

One prominent example of urban lifeworld environmentalism is the smart city trend. Cities seeking to become *smart* are investing in energy-efficient technologies and infrastructures (Hajer/Dassen 2014). Technological innovations do certainly make for (the experience of) greener lifeworlds, yet it is a well-known fact that resource-savings from increases in energy efficiency tend to be set off by increases in consumption – the so-called *rebound effect* (Ward et al. 2016). Another example of urban lifeworld environmentalism is the Agenda 21 (2013), to which many cities have subscribed. The latter encourages citizens to participate in local, socio-ecological projects that are geared towards increasing the sustainability of given environs. It foregrounds the global implications of local interventions and in this sense, it is planetary in scope. Yet the slogan it has become associated with, "think globally, act locally"[2] has so far served primarily as an unbinding, ethical appeal to citizens, who may or may not feel addressed. Thus, neither of these urban, local state interventions are really touching on the unsustainable societal and planetary processes that underpin the making and remaking of a given lifeworld. In fact, they may even sustain these processes (Hausknost 2020).

Given the limits of institutional approaches to environmental change, some strands of the environmental politics literature have turned their attention to urban grassroots interventions and have come to conceive of the latter as the more promising alternative to top-down approaches to socio-ecological change (Brand/Wissen 2018; Meyer 2015; Paech 2011; Schlosberg/Coles 2016; Schneidewind 2018; Soper 2016; Stolle/Micheletti 2015). Certainly, mapping, problematizing, and politicizing unsustainable societal and planetary processes is quite common in urban farming initiatives, food co-ops, repair cafés, eco-housing projects, and similar hands-on, bottom-up initiatives. Concerns for, endorsements of, and even active pursuits of more than mere lifeworld reform, are shared concerns, which one is more likely to find in food co-ops than a supermarket; in local, bottom-up farming initiatives than in associations of conventional farmers; and in initiatives that emphasize repairing and sharing than among people who spend their leisure in shopping malls. Yet so far, also bottom-up initiatives have hardly interfered with, let alone fundamentally disrupted the unsustainable processes that underpin everyday lives and local environs. Some of these initiatives, which

---

2   For a critical engagement with the localism that underpins the Agenda 21, see Lawhon/Patel (2013).

come in many forms and with many different normative orientations[3], have certainly enlarged existing perspectives on what living (more) sustainably may mean and imply. Yet frequently, these initiatives and practices seem to be *stuck in the niche* (Sengers et al. 2016: 9). In light of continuously worsening rather than improving socio-ecological conditions (Rockström et al. 2009), it may be argued that so far, not only institutional approaches to sustainability, but also grassroots approaches have left unsustainable societal and planetary processes largely in place.

The reasons for the latter are certainly manifold and, in many respects, clearly beyond the sphere of influence of any given initiative, network of initiatives, or movement. Among the obvious reasons are power relations, structures and institutions that are unfavorable to pursuits of transformative change; deeply engrained conceptions of the good life as a consumerist life; competing political logics and rationalities. Yet, with view to grassroots initiatives, *being stuck in the niche* may also have to do with political strategy: the strategy of operating at a distance form dominant political languages and institutions, which constitutes a *doxa* in some initiatives and numerous academic discourses on grassroots environmentalism (Fladvad 2019; Mac-Gregor 2019; Muraca 2017; Pellizzoni 2020). In his writings on a Right to the City, Lefebvre, someone who was clearly committed to fundamental societal change (albeit not from an environmental, but from a socialist perspective), takes issue with this *doxa* and presents an alternative to it, "heterodox right[s]"- claims (Kohn 2016: 176ff).

Framing Radical Political Claims as Right Claims

It may be puzzling that someone influenced by the Marxist tradition, as Lefebvre certainly was, appropriates the discourse of rights rather affirmatively. As is well known, Marx was a fierce critic of the idea of human rights, the role it played in bourgeois revolutions, and, relatedly, liberal political institutions. He argued that the rights of men are never universal but always particular rights: the rights of *bourgeois* men (Marx 1978). By being depicted as *universal* rights, they not only mystify social inequalities but also actively entrench them. The right to private property, for instance, clearly privileges those who

---

3   On the pluralism within alternative, local, gardening and farming practices, see, for instance, Ernwein (2014), McClintock (2014), Yang and Carolin (2019).

own more than their labor power due to the lottery of birth, that is, due to having been born into a rich rather than a poor family. As Anatole France once put it sarcastically, "the majestic quality of the [liberal, my insertion] law [...] prohibits the wealthy as well as the poor from sleeping under the bridges, from begging in the streets, and from stealing bread" (France 2006: Ch. VII). Marx was critical of the mystifying function of the liberal rights discourse, but also because of the latter's reduction of the meaning of freedom to the freedom *from others*, that is, to non-interference.

Lefebvre was, of course, fully aware of these Marxist critiques of the liberal discourse of rights. Nevertheless, he took recourse to it in his writings on cities. More so, he suggested its appropriation for not only reforming, but transforming the societal *status quo* (Lefebvre 2003a; Purcell 2014). In the liberal tradition, claiming rights usually means one of the following two things: extending an existing catalogue of rights to a hitherto disenfranchised group (e.g., women's right to vote; religious or cultural rights for minorities; legalization of gay marriage); or expanding an existing set of rights by a new set of rights (e.g., social rights which were 'added to' civil and political rights due to highly successful working class mobilization (Marshall/Bottomore 1992). Lefebvre, however, was not interested in either. For him, formulating political claims in the language of rights served, among others, a strategic purpose. It is easier to mobilize a collective subject in the name of a right in late modern, liberal-capitalist societies, such as the right to the city, to public housing, to public transit, or to food sovereignty, than in the name of a more abstract political goal, such as the end of capitalism. Yet, for a right claim to be transformative instead of simply reformatory, it has to be formulated in such a way that it is, as Margaret has Kohn put it with view to Lefebvre, located "inside and outside of a dominant order" (Lefebvre 1996a, 2003a; Kohn 2016: 188).

To illustrate how right claims can be formulated as "heterodox right[s]"-claims (Kohn 2016: 176ff), let's take a closer look at the example of the Right to the City: the specific form of the claim, the *right*-form, is a common one for making claims in a liberal-democratic context. Yet the object of the right's claim, the city, points beyond such a context. The city, given its contested meaning, collective and diverse nature cannot be owned akin to how one owns "the body, the home, the castle" (Kohn 2016: 187). Although a person (be the latter natural or juridical) may acquire large parts of urban land and urban real estate, s/he is nonetheless not in the possession of the city, since the latter exceeds what can be acquired, owned, or exchanged on a liberal capitalist market. The city encompasses not only private property (which can be exchanged

on the market), but also public infrastructures (which are exempt from/at a distance to market relations); it is shaped and re-shaped by societal and planetary processes that exceed the sphere of influence of any given person (e.g., water supply systems, electricity networks, the availability of labor); and it entails ways of life and social imaginaries that conflict with private property-related norms (e.g., social networks, communities, cultures and subcultures). Thus, from a traditional liberal rights-perspective, claiming a right to the city is rather incomprehensible (Kohn 2016: 187-188). Yet this very incomprehensibility is an entry point for re-politicizing the very meaning of the city (can we still speak of *the city* in an urbanized society?) and existing structures of ownership in as well as questions of entitlement to the city (who is the subject of the right to the city?).

Lefebvre's plea for claiming the right to the city was, as Kohn puts it, not conceived of "as a way of resolving conflicts over right but as a way of staging such conflicts" (2016: 187). He suggested to take recourse to the language of rights, a key language in liberal politics, while seeking to transform the latter's grammar. In the words of Margaret Kohn:

> "'Hetero-rights' [...] expose the limits of dominant ways of thinking about political problems, but they [...] cannot be realized by gradually expanding rights. They are *political tools* [emphasis added], because they make claims about injustice that cannot be resolved without political change." (ibid: 189)

The normative horizon towards which Lefebvre wanted to see the grammar shift was democratic socialism. Self-rule and participation (instead of state-ism); property relations that would prioritize the utility value of things, spaces, and social relations over their exchange value; and a redefinition of human freedom that would give ample space to the explorative and playful, i.e., to the ludic dimensions of human life were key to Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1971, 1991, 1996a, 2003b; Schmid 2005, 2012). The idea of framing political claims as hetero-rights is, however, not bound to Lefebvre's specific normative horizon, which one may find convincing or not. Heterodox right claims may also serve as relevant political tool for and as a means to reflect critically on existing political strategies and *doxa* related to them in other political contexts, such as struggles for greater sustainability. There are numerous reasons for hetero-dox rights to be of relevance for environmental interventions. Strategically, formulating environmental demands in the language of rights may increase the chances of being heard and perceived more widely. It may also open the door towards building coalitions between different social groups and

across issues: the creation of "chains of equivalence" (Laclau/Mouffe 2014: xviii). Thus, appropriating the language of rights in a heterodox way may help overcome the "resonance dilemma" (Meyer 2015: xx) that environmental niche interventions often face.

Environmental change clearly hinges on both, the politicization and the transformation of the unsustainable processes, structures, and norms that underpin urban(ized) everyday life. Heterodox right claims aim at both. In liberal societies, how people live, eat, consume, and get around is widely perceived as archetypically belonging to the private sphere. Although this is, of course, not an empirical truth, since housing, work life, leisure, consumption, and mobility are heavily shaped by laws, regulations, and public infrastructures, these domains of everyday life are closely associated with individual freedom, including the freedom from interference by others and from the state (Meyer 2015). Similar to the feminist politicization of family life, which was for long perceived as archetypically belonging to the private sphere, making the societal and planetary implications of ways of life and their underpinning structures visible, is a key concern of environmentalists. But politicization alone, is, from a Right to the City-perspective, not enough. Claiming the Right to the City, when understood as a claim to a hetero-right, means formulating political claims in such a way that they, on the one hand, strike a responsive chord among different interest groups and seem to be realizable within a given social and political order (a strategy to circumvent, among others, outright opposition), while, on the other hand, actively pursuing the transformation of an established order's foundations.

Let's take the example of claiming the right to public transport. This claim is a common one among environmentalists, given the adverse environmental effects of individual transport. It is also a common claim among social activists, such as housing and anti-gentrification activists, given the well-known negative correlation between housing affordability and public infrastructure, i.e., the decrease in the former as a result of an expansion or improvement of the latter. To be sure, a joint coalition between environmentalists and social activists fighting for a right to public transport may be reduced to a struggle for the mere expansion of existing public infrastructures. Yet formulating claims to a right to public transport as a hetero-right means more than asking for more trains and buses. If public transport is framed as a right every citizen and urban dweller is entitled to *qua* being a citizen and/or living at a certain

place rather than an option or asset[4] some people have access to while oth-
ers do not based on financial resources, this would, for one, imply a massive
expansion of existing public infrastructures and, relatedly, the curtailment
of private transport. It would also imply a fundamental rethinking of exist-
ing mobility concepts, land use practices, and private property arrangements
through the lens of the public: Which mobility concepts and related infras-
tructures and settlement patterns are in the interest of the public against the
backdrop of socio-ecological challenges? Who is to be served and why? What is
the very meaning of the public with view to mobility questions and questions
of social-ecological challenges and in-justices?

As mentioned above, formulating demands in the language of rights while
seeking to change the latter's grammar was not an option for Marx. The same
applies to environmentalists who decide for other political languages, such
as civil disobedience (a more radical political language than the language of
hetero-rights) or sustainable consumerism (a less radical political language
than the language of hetero-rights). All these different political languages
and strategies come with their own, respective benefits and risks. The main
risk that comes with speaking the language of (hetero-)rights is the risk of
co-option. Right claims have an addressee, most commonly, the (local) state:
the grantor of rights. Even if heterodox right claims aim at transforming the
state's fundament by asking not only for the adaptation of existing contracts
of citizenship, but for their transformation, the grantors of rights remain in
a position of power: they may or may not listen to the claimant; they may give
in to far-reaching demands or pull the teeth of the latter. Fully aware of the
risk of co-option by employing the language of rights in pursuit of not only
lifeworld, but planetary environmentalism, I nonetheless take up the cudgels
for a heterodox appropriation of the language of rights – especially in the
context of environmentalism and against the backdrop of worsening socio-
ecological conditions.

Law, to be sure, not only mystifies and excludes, but also enables. The same
applies to the political institutions and the public infrastructures that shape
our everyday lives and environs. Neither law, nor political institutions, nor
public infrastructures merely subject us. Although they are depoliticizing in

---

4   Public transport becomes an asset if public investments allow for private capitaliza-
      tions on them. An example of the latter are laws and regulations that permit private
      property holders to charge higher rents and property prices if the real estate object is
      well embedded in public infrastructure.

the sense that every institution, *qua definitionem*, builds on habitualization[5], there is more to law (the focus of Lefebvre), institutions, and public infrastructures (my added foci) than subjection and depoliticization: they also connect us as citizens (Arcidiacono et al. 2018; Honig 2017). One may seek to map, politicize, and transform unsustainable societal and planetary processes at a deliberate distance from law, institutions, and infrastructures, that is, from within a society's niches, cracks and at its margins. But one may also re-appropriate law, political institutions, and public infrastructures in order to shift (or, e.g., in case of pressures towards privatizing public infrastructures, preserve and/or re-legitimize) the latter's grammar.

So far, bottom-up engagements with, the appropriation of, and reconfiguration of dominant political languages, institutions, and infrastructures for transformative goals (e.g., planetary environmentalism as opposed to reformatory ones (e.g., lifeworld environmentalism) seem to be an underexplored terrain in some strands of the environmental politics literature, especially the strands that engage with urban environmental initiatives and movements. Without seeking to present heterodox right-claims as *solutions* to current socio-ecological challenges, I present them as a *possible* way of pursuing societal change. Lefebvre remarked, with a view to the Marxist tradition to which he was in many ways indebted, that its common out of hand rejection of the discourse of rights may have been a fallacy (Lefebvre 2003a). The point of this section is to reiterate this critical remark with a view to environmental activists and scholars who bet their horses on transformative change emerging from a society's margins, cracks, and niches.

Conclusion: Bridge-Building between Discourses

Historically speaking, as David Wachsmuth puts it, environmental sociology has had little to say about the urban except "to treat it as a machine [or, as I would add, *site*] for consuming nature" (2012: 520). The same applies to environmental politics, even though the latter also conceives of the urban as the

---

5   As Berger and Luckmann (1981) famously point out, institutionalization is the effect of habitualization that shapes horizons of expectations. It liberates us from having to constantly re-invent and re-decide what we do, how we act, and what we believe to be right as opposed to wrong.

local state (Betsill/Bulkeley 2007) as well as an important "space of appearance" (Arendt 2010[1958]): 199) for civil-society driven forms of environmental action (Meyer 2015; Paech 2011; Schlosberg/Coles 2016). By bringing environmental politics into conversation with urban theory, this contribution sought to spark greater reflexivity on how the urban is framed in environmental discourses and interventions: as a (territorially or politically bound) site or as a process. If framed as *site*, urban environmentalism is likely to foreground lifeworld environmentalism (the greening of local environs). If understood as an *effect of planetary processes* that underpin the making and re-making of a given site, pursuing urban environmentalism means pursuing planetary environmentalism. Thus, the first insight from Lefebvre's Right to the City was that the scope and limits of the transformative thrust of urban environmental interventions and citizenship hinges not only on the nature of the practices and the normative goals pursued, but also on the *episteme of the urban* that underpins a given approach. Bridging discourses that tend to be prominent in their respective disciplines, yet that less commonly traverse disciplinary boundaries, has been one goal of this contribution. Theories of the urban are prominent in urban studies, yet marginal in (environmental) politics, where the urban tends to be (still) equated with territorially and administratively bound units of governing and living: cities.

The second insight from Lefebvre's Right to the City was one on political strategy, an insight that challenges a *doxa* that commonly shapes practices of and discourses on civil society-driven activism *regardless* of the specific practice field or field of research it emerges: the doxa that the best *breeding ground* for transformative change are society's niches, its margins, and its cracks. This contribution has foregrounded an alternative political strategy as one worth exploring, among others, for environmental purposes: formulating political claims as heterodox right claims. The latter means, as was explained, appropriating dominant political languages and institutions, such as the language and institution of law, while changing the latter's underpinning "contracts of citizenship" (Lefebvre 2003a: 238ff). Heterodox right-claims bring into view that dominant languages, such as the language of law, but also powerful institutions, such as the state, or public infrastructures, are not only means of subjection, but also means of enabling. Whether they are the former or the latter very much depends on how, for whom, and for what purpose they are appropriated, (re-)signified, and put to use – questions that are profoundly *political* questions.

References

Angelo, Hilary (2017): From the city lens toward urbanisation as a way of seeing: Country/city binaries on an urbanising planet, in: Urban Studies 54(1), pp. 158-178.

Angelo, Hilary/Wachsmuth, David (2015): Urbanizing urban political ecology: A critique of methodological cityism, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 39(1), pp. 16-27.

Arcidiacono, Davide/Barbera, Filippo/Bowman, Andrew, et al. (2018): Foundational economy: The infrastructure of everyday life, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Arendt, Hannah (2010[1958]): The human condition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bendell, James (2018): Deep adaptation: A map for navigating climate tragedy, IFLAS Occasional Paper 2.

Berger, Peter/Luckmann, Thomas (1981): The social construction of reality, Hammondsworth, England: Penguin books.

Betsill, Michele/Bulkeley, Harriet (2007): Looking back and thinking ahead: A decade of cities and climate change research, in: Local Environment 12(5): 447-456.

Boltanski, Luc/Esquerre, Arnaud (2020): Enrichment: A critique of commodities, Cambridge, UK/Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Brand, Ulrich/Wissen, Markus (2018): The limits to capitalist nature: Theorizing and overcoming the imperial mode of living, London: Rowman and Littlefield International.

Brenner, Neil (ed.) (2017): Implosions – explosions: Towards a study of planetary urbanization, Berlin: Jovis Verlag.

Brenner, Neil/Schmid, Christian (2011): Planetary urbanization, in: Gandy, Matthew (ed.), Urban constellations, Berlin: Jovis-Verlag, pp. 10-14.

Brenner, Neil/Schmid, Christian (2014): The 'urban age' in question, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 38(3), pp. 731-755.

Brenner, Neil/Schmid, Christian (2015), Towards a new epistemology of the urban?, in: City 19 2-3), pp. 151-182.

Bulkeley, Harriet (2010): Cities and the governing of climate change, in: Annual Review of Environment and Resources (35), pp. 229-253.

Bulkeley, Harriet/Betsill, Michelle (2003): Cities and climate change: Urban sustainability and global environmental governance, London: Routledge.

Bulkeley, Harriet/Broto, Vanessa (2013): Government by experiment? Global cities and the governing of climate change, in: Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (38), pp. 361-375.

Bulkeley, Harriet/Castan Broto, Vanessa/Marvin, Simon, et al. (Eds.) (2010): Cities and low carbon transitions, London: Routledge.

Ernwein, Marion (2014): Framing urban gardening and agriculture: On space, scale and the public, in: Geoforum 56, pp. 77-86.

Evans, James/Karvonen, Andrea/Raven, Rob (Eds.) (2018): The experimental city, London/New York: Routledge.

Fladvad, Ben (2019): Diverse Citizenship? Food Sovereignty and the Power of Acting Otherwise, in: Social Sciences 8(12), 331.

France, Anatole (1894/2006): The Red Lily, The Gutenberg Project, [online] https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3922/3922-h/3922-h.htm, [02.02.2021].

Fritz, Martin/Koch, Max (2016): Economic development and prosperity patterns around the world: Structural challenges for a global steady-state economy, in: Global Environmental Change 38, pp. 41-48.

Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate Change, [online] https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org, [02.02.2021].

Hajer, Marteen/Dassen, Ton (2014): Smart about cities: Visualizing the challenge for 21st century urbanism, Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers.

Hausknost, Daniel (2020): The environmental state and the glass ceiling of transformation, in: Environmental Politics, 29(1), pp. 17-37.

Honig, Bonnie (2017): Public things: Democracy in disrepair, New York: Fordham University Press.

Kohn, Margaret. (2016): The death and life of the urban commonwealth, New York: Oxford University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto/Mouffe, Chantal (2014): Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics, London/New York: Verso.

Lawhon, Mary/Patel, Zarina (2013): Scalar politics and local Sustainability: Rethinking governance and justice in an era of political and environmental change, in: Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 31(6), pp. 1048-1062.

Lefebvre, Henri (1971): Everyday life in the modern world, New York: Harper & Row.

Lefebvre, Henri (1991): The production of space, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, Henri (1996a): The right to the city, In: Kofman, Eleonore/Lebas, Elizabeth (Eds.), Writings on Cities, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 63-181.

Lefebvre, Henri (1996b): Writings on cities, Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Lefebvre, Henri (2003a): From the social pact to the contract of citizenship, in: Elden, Stuart/Lebas, Elizabeth, Kofman, Eleonore (Eds.), Henri Lefebvre. Key Writings, New York: Continuum, pp. 238-254.

Lefebvre, Henri (2003b): The urban revolution, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lessenich, Stephan (2019): Living well at others' expense: The hidden costs of Western prosperity, Medford, MA: Polity.

MacGregor, Sherilyn (2019): Finding transformative potential in the cracks? The ambiguities of urban environmental activism in a neoliberal city, in: Social Movement Studies 16(1), pp. 1-17.

Marshall, Thomas/Bottomore, Tom (1992): Citizenship and social class, London: Pluto Press.

Marx, Karl (1843/1978): On the Jewish question, in: Tucker, Richard C. (Ed.): The Marx-Engels Reader, New York: Norton, pp. 26-52.

McClintock, Nathan (2014): Radical, reformist, and garden-variety neoliberal: coming to terms with urban agriculture's contradictions, in: Local Environment 19(2), pp. 147-171.

McKibben, Bill (2006): The end of nature, New York: Random House.

Merrifield, Andrew (2013): The urban question under planetary urbanization, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 37(3), pp. 909-922.

Meyer, John (2015): Engaging the everyday. Environmental social criticism and the resonance dilemma, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Muraca, Barbara (2017): Against the insanity of growth: degrowth as concrete utopia, in: Heinzekehr, Justin/Clayton, Philip (Eds.), Socialism in process, Anoka, Minnesota: Process Century Press, pp. 147-169.

Paech, Nico (2011): Befreiung vom Überfluß. Auf den Weg in die Postwachstumsökonomie, München: oekom verlag.

Pellizzoni, Luigi (2020): Prefiguration, subtraction and emancipation, in: Social Movement Studies, pp. 1-16.

Purcell, Marc (2014): Possible worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the right to the city, in: Journal of Urban Affairs36 (1), pp. 141-154.

Rockström, Johan/Steffen, Will/Noone, Kevin, et al. (2009): Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity, in: Ecology and Society 14(2), p. 32.

Schlosberg, David (2019): From postmaterialism to sustainable materialism: the environmental politics of practice-based movements, in: Environmental Politics 8(4), pp. 1-21.

Schlosberg, David/Coles, Romand (2016): The new environmentalism of everyday life: Sustainability, material flows and movements, in: Contemporary Political Theory 15(2), pp. 160-181.

Schmid, Christian (2005): Stadt, Raum und Gesellschaft, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Schmid, Christian (2012): Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city, and the new metropolitan mainstream, in: Brenner, Neil/Marcuse, Peter/Mayer, Margit (Eds.), Cities for people, not for profit. Critical urban theory, and the right to the city, London: Routledge, pp. 42-62.

Schneidewind, Ulrich (2018): Die große Transformation: eine Einführung in die Kunst gesellschaftlichen Wandels, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch.

Sengers, Frans/Wieczorek, Anna/Raven, Rob (2016): Experimenting for sustainability transitions: A systematic literature review, in: Technological Forecasting and Social Change 145, pp. 153-164.

Seyfang, Gill/Haxeltine, Alex (2012): Growing grassroots innovations: Exploring the role of community-based initiatives in governing sustainable energy transitions, in: Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 30(3), pp. 381-400.

Seyfang, Gill/Smith, Adrian (2007): Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: Towards a new research and policy agenda, in: Environmental Politics 16(4), pp. 584-603.

Soper, Kate (2016): Towards a sustainable flourishing. Ethical consumption and politics of prosperity, in: Shaw, Deirdre/Chatzidakis, Andreas/Carrington, Michal (Eds.), Ethics and Morality in Consumption, New York: Routledge, pp. 11-27.

Steffen, Will/Broadgate, Wendy/Deutsch, Lisa, et al. (2015): The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration, in: The Anthropocene Review 2(1), pp. 81-98.

Stolle, Dietlind/Micheletti, Michele (2015): Political consumerism: Global responsibility in action, New York: Cambridge University Press.

UN-Division for Sustainable Development (2019): Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11, [02.02.2021].

UN-Habitat -United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2011) Global report on human settlements: Cities and climate change, Nairobi.

United Nations (2013): Agenda 21: Earth summit. The United Nations Programme of Action from Rio.

Wachsmuth, David (2012): Three Ecologies: Urban metabolism and the society-nature opposition, in: The Sociological Quarterly 53(4), pp. 506-523.

Wachsmuth, David (2014): City as ideology: Reconciling the explosion of the city form with the tenacity of the city concept, in: Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 32(1), pp. 75-90.

Ward, J. D./Sutton, Paul, et al. (2016): Is decoupling GDP growth from environmental impact possible?, in: PloS one 11(10), pp. 1-14.

WBGU (2016): Humanity on the move: Unlocking the transformative power of cities, Berlin: WBGU.

Yang, Mundo/Zorell, Carolin (2019): Real world citizenship between political consumerism and material practices, in: Social Sciences, 8, 311.