**Right to the City and Contemporary Public Policy - Some Preliminary Reflections on the UK Context**

**David Waite, June 2015**

Urban development strategies take a familiar, “identikit” form (Bristow, 2010). Expressing urgencies for skills, innovation and connectivity interventions, to name but a few key headings, such documents fail to steer tractable policy development in many instances, and are regularly revisited, revised and re-reproduced to say much the same thing. That urban development strategies often hinge on consultation with elites - through steering groups, for example – may be one explanation for why such anodyne reiterations continue to emerge. Typically, though not uniformly, invested in the maintenance of the inherited economic order, it is perhaps expected that policy programmes lean on branding and marketing as core activities. Releasing our fixation on such orthodox approaches gives an opening to consider alternative and opposing approaches. Indeed, what form and content could emerge from an urban development strategy that adopts, or gives substantial reference to, a “right to the city” ethic?

Henri Lefebvre’s right to the city must be considered for the prevailing politics of the time, or more particularly, the intellectual production associated with the social shifts of the late 1960s. This was a politics, inescapably, of resistance and an attempt to usher in a new distributive political economy (Marcuse, 2009). At the heart of right to the city is that denizens should have power to use and inhabit urban spaces, and market or exchange logics that tend to dominate urban administration should not frustrate citizen use. In this respect, right to the city clearly stems from the author’s Marxist commitments. Over the last decade and a half, a resurgent interest in Lefebvre’s urban politics can be observed (see, for example, Purcell, 2002; Aalbers and Gibb, 2014; Purcell, 2014). Despite this, much remains unclear, given the capacious nature of the term and ambiguity about what “right” one is talking about or giving precedence to (Attoh, 2011).

Looking at select interventions or programmes gives scope to consider whether right to the city gauges with existing policy practice. For example, “Made in Lambeth” – which is an initiative that challenges “highly skilled” residents to jointly “come up with solutions to local problems” (Marsh, 2013), from managing food waste to designing an online sexual health service - would appear to chime with some aspects of the right to the city. Supporting this association, three factors can be pointed to:

* First, as a co-operative council, a stronger citizen focus is promoted by Lambeth Council (the council helps to resource Made in Lambeth). The document, *Behaviours for the Co-operative Council*, broadly sets out the high-level position sought (Lambeth Council’s, 2013). A council ethos, moreover, to do things “with people” than “to people” is striking (Murray, 2012).
* Second, “Made in Lambeth” seeks to generate solutions through co-production with a range of public and third sector groups. This has included the Brixton Pound and Vauxhall City Farms, as well as public health bodies.
* Third, independent and membership run community trusts - such as the “Young Lambeth Cooperative”, which was established, with a designated budget, to take charge of youth services - have benefited from participation in Made in Lambeth events.

The aforementioned points have been drawn from a preliminary documentary analysis, so more detailed empirical work, measuring effectiveness and distinguishing rhetoric from reality, will of course be needed. On the face of it, nevertheless, aspects of the right to the city can be observed in Lambeth Council’s approach.

There are perhaps two issues that warrant further focus when considering conceptual applicability. First, shaping all local authority activities and contexts is ongoing and deepening austerity. This raises questions as to whether co-operation with stakeholders is genuine or a smokescreen for policy dumping. Many councils do not choose austerity, but end up having to wield the axe in any case. Second, it is important to consider the nature and extent to which the voice of marginalised groups impacts the co-production events that “Made in Lambeth” champions. A middle class cabal designing policies for peers, is not the politics Lefebvre typically envisaged (Marcuse, 2009; c.f. Glass et al., 2014).

A key issue when testing the relevance of the concept, therefore, is the difference between echoing some of the principles of right to the city in contemporary policy initiatives, and adopting right to the city as a fully-fledged political and policy orientation. The extent to which the former satisfies the term will be subjective given no hard lines are drawn around the concept. However, depth of citizen engagement may give some indication (contrasting tokenistic consultation exercises). The latter requires a more normative rather than procedural pre-occupation, and the vision of a radically different political economy is critical here (Purcell, 2014).

Finally, as a definitional concern, a reading of the literature raises questions as to whether right to the city is a strictly urban problematic. Recalling Scott and Storper’s (2014) desire to separate the distinctively urban from more general socio-spatial patterns – in other words, what activities and processes are unique to urban spaces vis-à-vis what are present in urban settings amongst a wider range of spatial contexts - one might be inclined to suggest that the concept is tractable in terms of broader geographies of state-capital-citizen interactions. It is conceivable, however, that the densities and proximities afforded by urban space may be more conducive to a right-based politics emerging.

Though, typically, not an easy bedfellow of contemporary public policy - due to both prevailing political currents and definitional breadth (a concept that is at “once complex and fluid” (Purcell, 2002)) - it is intriguing to consider how right to the city may be usefully deployed to craft new spaces of policy engagement.

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