**Right to the City (If You Want It): Marshall Berman, Henri Lefebvre and Urban Culture**

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**Abstract:** This article examines how Marshall Berman’s writings on urban culture and politics illuminate and extends our understanding of the role that culture plays in Henri Lefebvre's emancipatory notion of the right to the city, a role that tends to be underplayed by contemporary critical urbanists. The article begins by summarising Berman’s arguments about culture and the right to the city. Berman understands culture in two ways that are helpful. The first is urban culture as spectacle and the second is culture as appropriation. The article then reviews Berman’s account of the birth of hip-hop from the South Bronx in order to demonstrate how urban culture is imbricated in the right to the city before discussing the implications and challenges posed by Berman’s arguments.

**Keywords**

Marshall Berman

culture

right to the city

hip-hop

Henri Lefebvre

Marxist humanism

urbanization

These kids aren't dancing yet, but they are *there*. The Square is taking more people, and letting the world know it's big enough to hold us all. (Berman 2006: xxxiii original emphasis)

Marshall Berman (1940-2013) published a string of articles and books on modern urban culture including *The Politics of Authenticity* (1970), *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982)and *On the Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square* (2006).He lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and taught at City College of New York and CUNY Graduate Center. It was the culture of New York City that prompted Berman’s deepest meditations on Marxist humanism and the city. Systematic analyses of Marshall Berman's contribution to critical urban studies exist elsewhere (Merrifield 2002), but this article focuses on how Berman illuminates and extends understanding of the role that culture plays in Henri Lefebvre's emancipatory notion of the right to the city.

In Lefebvre, the right to the city denotes a ‘superior right’ concerned with truly inhabiting the city, rather than simply residing or working there or being allowed to contribute to decision-making. The right to the city involves *appropriation* (of time, space, body and desire) and the freeing of the city from technocratic control to become a work of art, or *oeuvre*, that people and groups accomplish under historical conditions (Lefebvre 1996: 173). Culture does not simply involve the consumption of material goods; rather, it offers an antithesis to either the ‘ghetto of leisure’ or the ‘retreat of creativity’ (ibid: 158). Urban culture evades ‘the science of the city’ and restitutes the meaning of the *oeuvre* (ibid: 156). Play is also important; indeed, Lefebvre argues that energies should be ‘wasted’ in play (ibid: 147). Hereby, the city recovers the priority of use over exchange value (ibid: 66). This is why ‘apart from the economic and political revolution (planning oriented towards the social needs and democratic control of the State and self-management)’, the right to the city demands, ‘[…] a permanent *cultural* revolution’ (Lefebvre 1996: 180 added emphasis). The city should no longer be experienced passively and urban life should be rediscovered as the realm of drama and pleasure (ibid: 156). The right to the city implies a renewed urban society and a renovated centrality based not upon a concentration of economic and political power but the regrouping of differences. Crucially, the cultural revolution that is allied to the right to the city will not be established as an adjunct to economic and political reform (ibid: 155); rather, urban society is created through ‘the *unity* of art, technique and knowledge’ (ibid: 158 added emphasis).

Surprisingly, in light of the above, many influential accounts of the right to the city underplay or misunderstand the importance of culture. It is almost as if critical urbanists have been unsure of what to do with these aspects of Lefebvre’s formulation. This risks diminishing or diluting what Lefebvre has in mind. For example, Dikeç (2001: 1790) argues the right to the city implies not only the participation of the citizen in social life but *more importantly* his or her participation in the political life, management, and administration of the city. The right to the city is an enabling right, ‘to be defined and refined through political struggle’ (Dikeç 2001: 1790). For Purcell (2003: 565) the usefulness of the right to the city is that it represents an ‘imaginative opening, [...] a challenge to the current [urban] structure that points towards a new politics’. These readings see a ‘new politics’ as the end goal of the right to the city, but as Lefebvre reminds us, it is only through the spatial practices of urban culture—in art, music or everyday life—that the *totality* of the city is realised. Amin and Thrift (2002) make it clear that politics is not an end in itself (ibid: 141), and they also have a broad notion of participation in city life that includes spaces of consumption and recreation (ibid: 132). Yet while they claim to be inspired by Lefebvre, especially the idea that the city ‘is a place of becoming, and the fulfilment of social potential’ (ibid: 142), they not do appreciate the role that culture might play in this process, focusing more upon education and the role city institutions must play in this. Perhaps, as Marcuse (2014: 5) explains, these authors have fallen into the trap of taking Lefebvre’s use of the terms ‘right’ and ‘city’ too literally. He doesn’t mean ‘right’ in a legal sense, but as an appeal to the highest human values. In addition, Lefebvre was not talking about *an existing city*, but a future city: ‘a city that could and should be’ (ibid). Taking Marshall Berman as an inspiration, this article expands upon Lefebvre’s insistence upon the importance of culture to the right to the city, ‘[…] a transformed and renewed right to *urban life*’ (Lefebvre 1996: 158 original emphasis). The challenge, elaborated upon here, is how to accept the essentiality of culture even when culture appears anti-democratic and/ or takes the form of disobedience (see Attoh 2011). The article begins by summarising Berman’s broad position on culture and the right to the city. Berman understands culture in two ways that are helpful. The first is urban culture as spectacle, though by no means does Berman view spectacle in such debilitating terms as Debord (1977). The second is culture as *appropriation*. The article reviews one example from Berman’s work that helps explain how urban culture is imbricated in the right to the city before discussing the implications and challenges posed by Berman’s arguments.

**Marshall Berman, Urban Culture and the Right to the City**

Marshall Berman references the idea of the right to the city in two places. In the first instance, in the forward to the 2009 reprint of *The Politics of Authenticity,* Berman argues that an underlying theme that may bring the book together, for new readers, is the right to the city. That this book dreams of ‘an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed’ (Berman 2009: xvii) makes his retrospective adoption of Lefebvre’s tag-line enticing. Berman clearly has a feel—better than most—for what Lefebvre has in mind. *On the Town* (2006) is bookended by references to the right to the city. In the preface, Berman writes, somewhat cryptically that ‘[...] city life is an experience that all human beings are entitled to, whether they know it or not’ (ibid: xxxvi). At the close of his sweeping, yet intimate history of Times Square, Berman claims there are two big ideas contained in his book: ‘The first big idea, which goes back to the start of the Enlightenment, is that *the right to the city is a basic human right’* (Berman 2006: 224 original emphasis). The second big idea is ‘*the right to be part of the city spectacle*’ (ibid: 224-5 original emphasis). Consideration is now given to unravelling these ideas by pointing to where Berman elucidates these themes in other writings.

Marshall Berman’s emphasis upon the city spectacle arguably offers a reworking of Lefebvre's (1996, 2003) insistence on the irreducibility of the right to centrality *within* the right to the city (i.e. the latter cannot exist without the former). Berman uses Times Square as a potent example for explaining what he means by the right to be part of the city spectacle. His understanding of the spectacle diverges from the pessimism that is common among many cultural critics on the Left. Berman explains how Times Square:

'[...] has always been a place that wakes people up and makes them feel more alive, more alive than they are supposed to be. It presents the modern city as its most expansive and intense. It gives people ideas, new ideas about how to look and how to move, ideas about being free and being oneself and being with one another. [...] [T]he Square has enticed and inspired all sorts of men and women to step out of line, to engage actively with the city, merge their subjectivity into it, and change the place as they change themselves. Sometimes this has crushed the self [...], but sometimes it has brought joy and creative triumph.’ (Berman 2006: 225)

In this spirited, hopeful passage Berman portrays the centre, or spectacle, as a place of intense stimulation; it is not a site where we are numbed or led into an ‘estranged life’ but a place where we are compelled to think our own and others freedom. The centre may be a place of assembly and conformity—it *can* feel crushing—but it is also cradles dissent, creativity and inter-subjectivity. Centrality facilitates, but is also sustained by, the experimentation that ensues when individuals connect with each other, whilst indulging in and producing great—often competing—visions of how urban life *could* be. In Berman, the city spectacle is where ‘the free development of each’ becomes ‘the condition for the free development of all’ (Marx and Engels, 2011: 89). It is from within ‘moments’ of centrality that it becomes possible to reach out to *others* elsewhere or to draw them into the life world of the centre. Breath in, breath out: centres resonate to a respiratory rhythm (Millington 2011). They circulate the oxygen needed to envisage and grasp the utopic potentialities in the everyday present, what Lefebvre (2003) calls the 'possible impossible'.

One of the most extravagant and expansive products that arise from great modern urban centres like Times Square is the emergence of a *world culture*. Berman’s inspiration here is Marx. Marx argues that in a world market culture becomes common property, that ‘anything created by anyone anywhere is open and available to everyone everywhere’ (Berman 2011: 7). Berman believes this to be one of the most generous and hopeful things Marx ever wrote. Culture is *made* by writers, film-makers and musicians and so forth, but under conditions of bourgeois capitalism, it ‘slips through the owners’ fingers’ so that everybody can possess culture. (Of course, internet piracy makes shared ownership even more possible). Ideas, poetic images and songs quickly become common property and in so doing, help us all feel at home in the world. Culture is therefore integral to an emergent *globality of sense* (Nancy 2007)*;* a cosmopolitan world culture that enables us to ‘imagine how people all over the world could someday share the world's resources’ (Berman 2011: 7). In this way, culture is also intertwined in complex, sometimes unintentional ways, with radical concerns with material inequality. Here, Berman deals—inadvertently, no doubt—with a conundrum posed by Lefebvre. Lefebvre claims the urban model is expanding to the worldwide scale, heralding ‘a transitory period of mutations in which the urban and global crosscut and reciprocally disrupt each other’ (Lefebvre 2014: 204). How, under these circumstances, is the right to the city possible? If planetary urbanization is a reality, is the right to any specific city really worth fighting for? Greater attention to the role played by a world urban culture in extending the right to the city makes these questions far less formidable than they might be, if too literal readings of Lefebvre are adopted. Moreover, this means that culture is not as bad for us as many on the Left would have us believe. One is reminded of Fredric Jameson's (1979: 144) argument that even if mass culture appears to legitimise the existing order, it cannot do this job ‘without deflecting in the latter’s service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity [...]’.

In Berman, the city spectacle is a means through which to access the hopes, desires and fears that the modern city inspires. Yet this is not simply a visiting right, but access to an apparition that, whether it appals or arouses, may lead to individual and collective acts of appropriation, of participation in the *oeuvre*. And so, as is discussed below, urban culture in Berman also takes the form of ‘practical-critical activity’: ‘the activity of forming projects and plans for one’s life, modifying them in the light of experience, and striving to put them into effect’ (Berman 1999: 54).

**Grandmaster Flash stakes a claim**

One example of how culture achieves a partial, yet revealing fulfilment of the right to the city concerns the birth of hip-hop subculture in New York City during the crisis-ridden 1970s. Marshall Berman (2007: 25) takes up the story:

‘The South Bronx, at its moment of greatest misery and anguish, and in some sense because of its misery and anguish, created the mass culture called hip-hop. Hip-hop today envelops the whole world. The kids of those neighbourhoods in those days created because they had to; they couldn't help themselves, they couldn't stop’.

Berman captures the drive or social libido among the forgotten youth of the South Bronx to appropriate and re-make their city of ruins. Hip-hop emerged from spontaneous block parties and jams in public parks and in its formative years it truly resembled a street culture, with its composite elements of graffiti, MCing, DJing and graffiti practiced in the public spaces of the city. Whereas city authorities denounced graffiti, Berman argues that graffiti shows young people making themselves at home in a drab and disintegrating environment, whilst also developing a visual language that was copied in cities across the globe. The music, which is the element that eventually came to define hip-hop subculture more than any other, was created on the turntables of innovative DJs such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, all residents of the South Bronx. Through ‘mixing’ old soul, funk and disco records, often repeating their drum breaks to create a whole new track, these pioneering DJs ‘staked out a loud scratchy, in-your-face aesthetic that, to this day, still informs the culture [...]'’ (George 1998:xi). As Berman (2007: 27) writes, ‘I remember the first time I saw it. Like so much else I saw, it started on the subway, with a single ragged and scrawny kid, backed by small speakers with a drum track, telling the story of his life’. It was Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five who, in 1982, had hip-hop's first big hit with ‘The Message’: ‘[m]yriad horrors are packed into two minutes: aggressive rats, aggressive junkies, nice girls turned into addicts and whores; kids burned out before the age of ten, who want to grow up to be drug dealers, because they are the only people they know who command respect [...]’ (Berman 2007: 28). So what *is* the message of this track? Berman’s take is that social disintegration and existential desperation can be sources of life and creative energy (ibid: 29). Kids growing up in poverty and isolation may have suffered great losses but they did not lose themselves. The global horizon and capacity of the nascent b-boys and b-girls ‘for soul-making in the midst of horror, gave the whole city a brand new aura’ (ibid).

In reconfiguring the forgotten and derelict Bronx as a centre in its own right—a space from which to *breath in* and *breath out—*the origins of hip-hop validate Lefebvre's (1996: 161) claim that urban space is so fascinating because centrality is *always possible*. Moreover, it becomes clear how the right to the city denotes not only *local* rights of appropriation; it also constructing a new kind of citizen of the world. Iveson (2013: 954) argues that ‘DIY urbanisms’ ‘do not necessarily constitute a democratic urban politics that will give birth to a new city’. Yet, in getting hung up about the ‘proper’ way of organising democratic rights in the city, or by seeing *politics* as the end goal of the right to the city, it is possible to miss the point that DIY events—such as the birth of hip-hop for instance—provide a glimpse of the idealism, resolve and creativity that the right to the city surely implies. Berman’s discussion of hip-hop shows young people claiming a right to the city that, *only in process of appropriation*, do they realise is theirs if they want it.

**A broad-minded and many-sided urban culture**

For sure, many will not share Berman's taste for hip-hop. There is much to be wary of in this example, but then ‘there is no “pure” art, free from society and history’ (Berman 1999: 139). One may object to the sexism, homophobia and self-degradation evident in some hip-hop (see Rose 2008), but, in a way, this merely emphasises the implicit point Berman is making. The world culture that Marx envisages is broad-minded and many-sided (Berman 1999: 141). It is only to be expected that cultural claims on the city are not made as coherent theses. Moreover, such claims do not and *need not* engender an urban politics that delivers a more democratic city. Cultural evocations of the right to the city may appear misjudged, or in the eyes of some, just plain wrong, but then as Stuart Hall argued over many decades, culture is a contradictory space, a realm where hegemony is fought over. Moreover, expressive cultures work in the form of antiphony, or ‘call and response’ (Gilroy 1993: 78). They initiate and animate *conversations* about the city, about identity and politics. This brings us to Berman's point that the right to the city, like any revolutionary right, is a *process*. Revolution is not punctual as Perry Anderson (1984: 112) claims. Anderson criticises Berman for seeing revolution everywhere and for devaluing the term, but Berman is unapologetic. He kicks hard against Anderson's stuffiness—he who ‘only has eyes for World-historical revolutions in politics and world-class masterpieces in culture’ (Berman 1984: 123)—while making the case for immersion in ‘the messy actuality in which modern men and women and children live’; a milieu where we might just find ‘revolutions *in the making*’ (ibid: added emphasis). As a Marxist humanist, Marshall Berman favours praxis over abstract theory.

Urban culture ‘overcomes’ the segregation and fragmentation of the city that so frustrates Lefebvre. Art reveals how ‘a totality grows out of partial determinisms’ (Lefebvre 1996: 157). Hip-hop demonstrates how culture evades segregation, even if this is only to connect with ghettos and degraded zones of cities elsewhere. Hip-hop expresses a deep desire to make ‘whole’ a city from the hundreds of thousands of fragmented ghetto spaces across the globe. As hip-hop matured, Lauryn Hill articulated this perfectly when she sang: ‘Every ghetto, every city’. That hip-hop culture is so resonant in the US (not just with the kids, but anyone who came of age from the 1970s thereafter) allows political commentators to claim Barack Obama ‘surfed to power on a hip-hop wave’ (Abraha 2013). What they mean is that Obama embraces hip-hop as a way of reaching out to social groups who don’t vote or those who are disillusioned with democratic politics. Obama realises that urban culture reaches far *deeper* into the body politic than does enthusiasm for, or faith in, democracy and/or citizenship.

Marshall Berman believes the right to the city is more tangible that we might think. There is no need to wait for democratic politics to catch up with our desire to appropriate our inherited urban environments. In his final public lecture, in May 2013 at CCNY (where he had taught for almost half a century), Berman explains that he wants his students to learn *collectively*, to develop themselves whilst at the same time helping to re-make the city and its institutions. Surreptitiously he is also talking about the right to the city: ‘Our students have the right to this, but really our whole city has the right to it. It has the right, whether it knows it or not; it has the right, whether it wants it or not’ (Berman 2014). We must discover ourselves as active, empowered urban citizens (city dweller and citizen recombined; or in Lefebvre’s words: *la citoyenneté*) because *really,* that is what we *all* are—if only we would recognise it. (The final line of Berman’s *Politics of Authenticity* is: ‘[…] you may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you’). Berman is also inspired by John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s famous 1968 peace slogan: ‘WAR IS OVER, If You Want It’, which he recalls seeing on a billboard in Times Square (where else?) (Berman 2006: 221). The power of the slogan lies in its provocative simplicity; it is both a statement of fact and an inducement to act. You may not realise you have the power to end the war but actually, you do. You may not realise you have the right to the city, but actually, you do. It is there for the taking. It’s a hopeful message, but a demanding one too.

And so, Berman’s position presents a considerable challenge. Just how easy would it be to live in a city premised upon ‘the free development of each’ and ‘the free development of all’? If the right to the city is granted to everybody (and all forms of expressive culture) then we must be prepared for the eventuality that the right to the city will result in a city of ‘unknown human spaces with no limits at all’ (Berman 1982: 114). This is revealing of Berman’s Nietzshean tendency to embrace rather than flee from complexity and paradox. The open future promised by Marx will be joyful and thrilling but also ‘problematic, scary, dangerous’ (Berman 1999: xi). Marxism’s strength though, is to begin from these frightening realities, and to ‘work through them and work them through’ (ibid: 139). The right to the city is based upon an unsettling encounter between alternate and disguised or submerged truths: ‘[…] none of us is capable of identifying with other people until we can identify with the dark side of ourselves, until we can bring our shadows into the light and find ways to live with them’ (Berman 2006: 29). Dialectical motion necessitates this, adding another layer of meaning, and a sense of jeopardy perhaps, to the title of this article: The Right to the City (*If You Want It*).

**Conclusion**

In Marshall Berman’s view, our desires to live richly fulfilling individual and collective urban lives can be expressed *now* if we so choose. This may occur in both remarkable and subtle forms of appropriation. Alternatively, we might find excitement, danger and inspiration in the city spectacle. In urban culture we may find the resources to help make sense of the messiness, unfairness and joys of city life. The grand hopes and fears that sustain urban culture and the drama and mix of the city enable us to expand our horizons beyond the individual and the local. Through this process, the city itself is enriched. As Merrifield (2012: 478) argues, ‘the politics of the encounter […] is something that can mediate between the lived and the historical, between an individual life and dynamic group fusion. It can overcome the inertia of apparent mass powerlessness’. We may not be part of the same city (yet) but, as Marshall Berman demonstrates, through urban culture—in the sense of both city spectacle and appropriation—it is eminently possible for us to better connect with ourselves and build stronger bonds with each other (bonds that often find an affinity with notions of equality and justice). Marshall Berman expands upon Lefebvre’s insistence that culture is integral to any notion of the right to the city. He makes this point with more clarity than Lefebvre, inspiring readers with his imagination and a series of exegetic illustrations of urban culture (too many to include in this essay). The role that culture plays in the right to the city is often downplayed by scholars, despite its prominence in Lefebvre’s original formulation. Urban culture enthuses individuals across the urban planet to remake their cities and to search for more authentic selves but, as Marshall Berman warns, urban culture cannot be expected to offer intellectual clarity or revolutionary timeliness; nor will the integration of culture within conceptions and expressions of the right to the city guarantee a smooth or democratic ride.

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