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Rethinking the Right to the City: Which City? What Kind of a Right? Kent Hakkını Yeniden Düşünmek: Hangi Kent? Nasıl Bir Hak?

Abstract

This article aims to revisit Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city in a broader framework and discuss it as a material, social, and emotional component of everyday spatial experiences of vulnerable and precarious individuals like the homeless. Without focusing on lived experiences and needs of different groups, the concept of the right to the city will fall short of providing a meaningful urban appropriation for all inhabitants as envisaged by Lefebvre and contributing to the creation of a more ethical socio-spatial reality. Within this context, homelessness stands out as an example that enables a discussion of how a moral and ethical everyday life can be made possible for everyone in the urban space.

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Öz

Bu makale, Lefebvre'in kent hakkını kavramını yeniden ele almayı ve onu evsizler gibi kırılgan grupların günlük mekansal deneyimlerinin fiziksel, sosyal ve duygusal bir parçası olarak tartışmayı amaçlıyor. Farklı grupların yaşanmış deneyimlerini ve ihtiyaçlarını göz önüne almayan bir kent hakkı kavramının Lefebvre'in ön gördüğü tüm kent sakinleri için anlamlı mekansal sahiplenmeyi sağlayamayacağını ve daha ahlaklı bir sosyo-mekansal gerçekliğin oluşmasına katkıda bulunamayacağını öne sürüyor. Bu bağlamda evsizlik, kentsel mekanda herkes için ahlaklı ve etik bir gündelik hayatın nasıl mümkün kılınabileceğini tartışmaya açan bir örnek olarak öne çıkıyor.

Keywords

The right to the city, Lefebvre, urban appropriation, homelessness, spatial ethics, ethics in everyday urban life

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kent hakkı, Lefebvre, mekansal sahiplenme, evsizlik, mekansal ahlak, gündelik kent hayatında ahlak

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June 30, 2021, the eighth day of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. I was strolling through the internet and looking for news about the Turkish recurve archer Mete Gazoz, who had advanced to the final sixteen when I came across the story of Osamu Yamada. Sixty-four-year-old Yamada was one of the hundreds of homeless people in central Tokyo. Since Japan won the bid to host the Olympic Games in 2013, the authorities have taken a strict approach to the homeless. Parks were locked down and lit up to discourage people from sleeping at those sites. According to BBC news, one day Yamada, who had been living in Meiji Park in central Tokyo for many years, found eviction notices plastered all over his belongings. He was not the only one. People were forced to move out because of the constructions related to Summer Olympics. Street tents around train stations and Olympic venues were removed. The homeless community helped each other move their belongings before being taken away by the authorities. Fences were built to prevent homeless people like Yamada from entering the areas around the Olympic Stadium and venues. Homeless people with such evictions and restrictions, they were forced to hide from sight and move to less visible spots.

While I kept reading about the issue, I thought it was as if the authorities were trying to hide the homeless, the poorest of the poor, to make the international audience see Tokyo in the “best” possible way. What happened in Tokyo was not unique. Displacement, what Smith (2012, p. 120) refers to as “the dark side of events,” has become a defining feature of cultural and sporting mega-events that take place in a new city every few years. Sporting mega-events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup have generated large-scale displacement of the urban poor through forced evictions associated with event-related urban renewal projects (Watt, 2013; Suzuki, Ogawa, and Inaba, 2018; Lees, Elliot Cooper and Hubbard, 2019;). In Rio de Janeiro, several thousand favela residents were relocated due to the 2016 Summer Olympics and the 2014 FIFA World Cup (Freeman, 2014; Gaffney, 2015; Kassens-Noor and Ladd, 2019). Often the homeless are removed from public spaces to make way for foreign visitors (Kennelly, 2015).

The story of Osamu Yamada and other homeless people bothered me for the rest of the day. I couldn't help but think whether it was ethical to force people to move out from urban public spaces when they're entitled to a right to “be” there. Accordingly, the article aims to argue that the concept of the right to the city should not simply be considered a right to remedy the adverse effects of the capitalist society. It should go beyond sheer material gains like better infrastructure, affordable transportation, and social housing. To maintain more ethical socio-spatial conditions and change the city into a good place for everyone, the right to the city should correspond to the right of *all inhabitants*, including the vulnerable groups, to remain in and make use of the central urban space. As denoted by works of Zengin (2014) and Bezmez (2013), it should be a material, social and emotional component of everyday experiences of vulnerable and precarious groups like women, people with disabilities, migrants, LGBTI+ individuals. However, the case of homelessness remains rather neglected in the literature. The

article begins with discussing the right to the city. It then focuses on the issue of homelessness as an example of crystallizing vulnerability and precariousness.

Revisiting Right to the City

The concept of the right to the city was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la Ville*. Since then, there has been a growing scholarship concerning the right to the city. Lefebvre envisages the city as a metaphor corresponding to a new way of everyday life, a new understanding of government, a new social system, and a new physical space, a built environment. Therefore, he did not formulate the right to the city as a legal right, which can be enforced through the judicial system. He rather formulated it as a political and moral right, as a demand for social justice and social change. As Purcell asserts (2014), Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city entails "*inhabitants appropriating space in the city*," which means urban inhabitants owning the city (p.149). Yet, he does not discuss ownership within the framework of property rights; the city belongs to those who inhabit it. Accordingly, inhabitants have the right to make full and complete use of urban spaces in their everyday lives:

"The right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (citadin) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the 'marginal' and even for the 'privileged'.)" (Lefebvre, 1996, p.34)

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For Lefebvre, the right to the city does not only imply the right to appropriate the urban space but also the right to participate. The right to participate refers to the inhabitants engaging in society through different everyday practices like work, housing, education, leisure, transportation, etc. However, it also denotes active participation in the political decision-making processes regarding the urban space, participation in the production of the urban space. As asserted by Dikeç (2001), "the right to the city, therefore, is not simply a participatory right but, more importantly, an enabling right, to be defined and refined through political struggle (p.1790). The right to difference is another indispensable component of the right to the city. In Lefebvre's own words, it is "the right not to be classified forcibly into categories which have been determined by the necessarily homogenizing powers" (1976, p. 35).

Contemporary literature on the right to the city includes a variety of discussions concerning its definition and scope. According to Harvey (2012), the right to the city mainly tackles the character and organization of urban space. In a similar vein, Vasudevan (2015a) focuses on the production, distribution, and occupation of public space, whereas Mitchell (2003) questions the production/reproduction of spatial inequalities and their political out-

comes. Staeheli, Dowler, and Wastl-Walter (2002) consider the right to the city as a critique of urban policy that is increasingly being implemented in exclusionary and undemocratic ways. The concept is contemplated as a response to neoliberal urbanization and a tool to struggle for a better, more just, sustainable, and democratic city. (Brenner et al., 2012; Harvey, 2003; Marcuse, 2009; Mitchell, 2003; Nicholls and Beaumont, 2004; Purcell, 2006; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008; Smith and McQuarrie, 2012).

Without a doubt, there is extensive literature on the right to the city. While there has been an emphasis on how to define it, to whom to grant it, who are deprived of it, and its benefits and impacts, the question of how it is experienced and embodied by the inhabitants remains somewhat neglected. Decades after its debut, some scholars asked whether the right to the city has become an empty political signifier, a popular slogan, or a catchphrase (Merrifield, 2011; Attoh, 2011) whose ethical and political connotation “depends on who gets to fill it with meaning” (Harvey, 2012, p. xv). As asserted by Duff (2017), this can be remedied by shifting the focus to the everyday urban experiences of vulnerable groups and how they struggle to claim their right to the city. Rather than approaching the right to the city from a social and political perspective, Duff tackles it from an affective and performative one to understand how it is realized by groups such as the homeless, whose daily lives are shaped by their exclusion from the city (2017, p.516).

The right to the city and vulnerable groups: The case of homelessness

In a narrow sense, homelessness can be defined as not having stable, safe, and adequate housing and not being able to obtain it (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). However, such a reductive definition falls short of acknowledging the multifaceted deprivation and social exclusion experienced by homeless individuals. Therefore, different definitions addressing various forms of homelessness like “persons living in the streets, in open spaces or cars; persons living in temporary emergency accommodation, in women’s shelters, in camps or other temporary accommodation provided to internally displaced persons, refugees or migrants; and persons living in severely inadequate and insecure housing, such as residents of informal settlements” have been adopted by scholars, civil society and international organizations (UN OHCHR, 2021). Over the years, the literature on homelessness has been enriched with studies exploring the everyday experiences of homelessness (Duff, 2020; Preece, Garratt and Flaherty, 2020; Marquardt, 2016; Lancione, 2016). Such studies constitute a salient framework for questioning what right to the city means for vulnerable groups and discussing how they experience it in their everyday lives. In that sense, Vasudevan’s work on homelessness and the city can be considered a significant prologue. According to him, homelessness is a lived struggle for place, and how “lived materialities” of this struggle and survival strategies by which precarious groups claim urban space and urban life should be questioned (Vasudevan, 2015b, p.339). To do so, the political,

moral, and spatial constraints with which the homeless are confronted should be acknowledged. Since these constraints are dynamic, the daily experiences and survival practices of the homeless are also subject to constant change. Without understanding the relationship between the daily experiences and survival practices of the homeless and the constraints imposed on them, it would not be possible to perceive homelessness as a “lived” struggle. The spatial constraints are particularly relevant because homeless people’s work, meals, and personal relationships depend on where they live. The condition of homelessness itself necessitates the individuals to come up with daily tactics for shelter and food in urban spaces that are neither designed nor intended for such purposes. In that sense, homelessness challenges the modern, capitalist urban order and structure. As the discordant daily practices of the homeless people intersect with the culturally normative everyday routines in urban public spaces, authorities introduce various measures to monitor and control the homeless, like forcing them to evacuate public places like parks and stations and move in shelters. To escape such measures, homeless people are obliged to move from central urban space to the margins, where they are least likely to taint the spaces and practices of mainstream society.

Unlike San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago, Tokyo is not immediately associated with homelessness. In Japan, the homeless are often referred to as rough sleepers or people sleeping in public places (Hasegawa 2005). Aoki (2003) argues that these definitions are often narrow and include only the visible forms of homelessness. Advocacy and Research Centre for Homelessness (ARCH) underlines that government surveys systematically undercount the homeless population. According to the ARCH Tokyo Street Count survey, the number of rough sleepers in Tokyo is nearly 2.8 times the number confirmed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. The homeless community in Tokyo is concentrated in city parks and riverbanks, where they build tents and cardboard structures. They also take shelter in train stations. They engage in day labor jobs like collecting aluminum and other recyclable materials and gather in *yosebas*, community centers for day laborers, along with middle-aged unskilled constructions workers (Aoki 2003, Hasegawa 2005). Gill (2007) asserts that *yosebas* are also hiding places for people who are marginalized from mainstream society for various reasons like crime, loss of jobs, and shame. The negative perception of these centers contributes to the stigma and discrimination directed to the homeless. Local residents tend to avoid such centers and express uneasiness when there is an increase in the number of homeless people living in parks near *yosebas* (Suzuki 2008).

Osamu Yamada is one of the many homeless living in central Tokyo. His story crystallizes the need for a greater engagement between discussions of the right to the city and everyday spatial/urban experiences of precarious and vulnerable individuals. As illustrated by what Osamu Yamada and other homeless people have been through in Tokyo, their lived experiences of right to the city have been far from how Lefebvre envisaged it. As mentioned above, inhabitation and participation appropriation are vital components of his conceptualization of the right to the city. As they appropriate the city space, inhabitants should be able to use

the city for themselves. Korosec-Serfaty (1984) defines appropriation as a way of “possessing and managing space, irrespective of its legal ownership, for its everyday use or as a means of identification.” Some scholars explain appropriation as a process by which people constantly reclaim urban spaces (Osterman & Timpf, 2009). It is also discussed as an interactive process through which individuals transform their physical environment into a meaningful place while transforming themselves (Feldman & Stall, 1994).

Based on these definitions, it can be argued that appropriation entails informal, spontaneous acts and practices that are part of a struggle for the right to the city and manifestations of it. As an informal and spontaneous act, it should go beyond being planned by any authority for a particular space and time. How we appropriate the urban should originate from our creativity, desire, and need as urban inhabitants. However, this has not been the case for Yamada and other homeless people. Their appropriation of urban spaces has been relatively inflexible, programmed, regulated, permanent, top-down instead of being flexible, spontaneous, temporary, and participative. Decisions taken by Japanese authorities like locking down and lighting up parks, building fences, issuing evacuations curbed homeless people’s agency concerning their lived experiences of right to the city. Even though real and active participation as an integral part of the right to the city includes the right to be part of the urban decision-making processes, neither homeless people nor nonprofit organizations like Advocacy and Research Centre for Homelessness (ARCH) were invited or consulted while taking such strict measures towards the homeless community on the eve of the Olympic Games.

As Vertovec (2007) points out, we live in the era of super-diversity. He uses the term superdiversity to underline the increasing number of migrants in major cities and the variety of their characteristics. Indeed, cities have become the most significant space of encounter where people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender, religion, (dis)abilities, socio-economic levels, and legal statuses interact with each other in their everyday lives. How to deal with super-diversity and such differences constitutes a question that is hotly debated in social sciences and urban studies. In his book “City of Fears, City of Hopes,” Zygmunt Bauman (2003) discusses two opposing views regarding this question. Accordingly, the city of fears refers to two different strategies to deal with diversity and create a relatively homogenous society. While the first one includes measures of surveillance, discipline, and assimilation, the other one entails expulsion, exclusion, and segregation. Yet, city space should not solely be perceived as a space to eradicate diversity. Bauman’s city of hopes acknowledges the city as the space where inhabitants with different backgrounds engage in meaningful interaction and learn to live together. In that sense, city of hopes resonates well with Lefebvre’s notion of the city space. He sees city space as a space for encounter, connection, difference, learning, and novelty, enabling meaningful interactions among the inhabitants. Through such interactions, the urban inhabitants will have the opportunity to learn about each other and accommodate their differences. More importantly, they will be able to reflect together about the city’s meaning and future.

Lefebvre's theory of space is based on the assumption that space is a product created by power relations embedded in society. His spatial triad is composed of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. The spatial practice refers to the materialized, socially produced, empirical spaces of houses, streets, city squares, buildings, parks, etc. According to Edward Soja, who was inspired by Lefebvre's spatial triad, spatial practice is where our repetitive everyday routines and networks occur. Representations of space correspond to the conceptualized space; created by means of signs, symbols, statements and conceived through ideologies, power, and knowledge. Representational space, on the other hand, is what we make of the space. It refers to the various ways in which we experience space and the ways we feel at home, happy, threatened, ashamed, or in danger in particular spaces and places.

Turning the city into a good place for everyone to appropriate, maintaining socio-spatial ethics, and creating a city of hope requires the right to the city to be conceptualized as a right to safeguard representational space for all urban inhabitants, regardless of their sex, gender, income, age, legal status, race, ethnicity, and physical ability. As a right, it should pave the way for an appropriation of urban space that is not planned by any authority for a specific time and space; but spontaneous, flexible, bottom-up, and participative. Accordingly, it is necessary to focus on lived everyday experiences and the actual needs of inhabitants, particularly those of vulnerable and precarious groups, to ensure their participation in and appropriation of the city space as a whole and not to confine them into representations of space, which is a construct of various power relations embedded in society.

On the eve of the 2020 Summer Olympics, Osamu Yamada and hundreds of homeless people in central Tokyo were forced by the authorities to evacuate the Meiji Park and move into homeless shelters. From a Lefebvrian point of view, they were deprived of their representational spaces; of their home, where they felt safe; had a belonging, and of their survival networks. They were neither allowed to appropriate urban public places according to their needs nor were they able to make a claim about the decision-making processes concerning those places. It was not only a violation of their right to the city but also a deviation from the good, moral city Lefebvre has envisaged for *all* inhabitants.

Conclusion

As James Holston (1999, p.155) has beautifully written, "cities are full of stories in time, some sedimented and catalogued; others spoor like, vestigial, and dispersed. Their narratives are epic and every day; they tell of migration and production, law and laughter, revolution and art." They also tell of everyday experiences of people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender, religion, abilities, socio-economic levels, and legal statuses. As a concept, the right to the city has been considered as a salient framework to discuss how these experiences unfold at the spatial level and what kind of relationships inhabitants

establish with the urban space.

Inspired by the displacement of homeless people in Tokyo on the eve of the 2020 Summer Olympics, this article has aimed to discuss the right to the city as the right of *all inhabitants*, including the vulnerable groups, to remain in and make use of the central urban space. It argues that to turn the city into a good place for everyone to appropriate, maintain socio-spatial ethics, the right to the city to be conceptualized as a right to ensure meaningful participation and appropriation. Homelessness constitutes a significant case to illustrate the unique relationship each and every urban inhabitant establishes with the city space according to her/his needs. It also portrays the specific spatial limitations stemming from belonging to a vulnerable and precarious group. Therefore, a discussion of the right to the city with respect to homelessness contributes to the broader literature on everyday urban experiences of vulnerable and precarious groups like women, migrants, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTI+ individuals, and the urban poor, and on how to ensure morality and ethics at the spatial level.

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