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Claiming the Right to the City: Towards the Production of Space from Below

Mehmet Baris Kuymulu

Graduate Center, City University of New York

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CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY:
TOWARDS THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE FROM BELOW

By
Mehmet Barış Kuymulu

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: TOWARDS THE PRODUCTION OF
SPACE FROM BELOW

by

Mehmet Barış Kuymulu

Advisors: Professor David Harvey and Professor Neil Smith

This dissertation examines the theoretical and political contradictions surrounding the notion of the right to the city. The right to the city concept has lately attracted a great deal of attention, both from academics who have long engaged with urban theory and politics, and from grassroots activists around the globe who have been fighting on the ground for an alternative just urbanism. In addition to urbanists and grassroots urban justice activists, the right to the city concept has also drawn considerable attention from the United Nations (UN) agencies such as UN-HABITAT and UNESCO, which have organized meetings and outlined policies to absorb the notion into their own political agendas. This wide-ranging interest has created a conceptual vortex that has pulled discordant political projects behind the banner of the right to the city. By reframing the notion of the right to the city to foreground its roots in Marxian labor theory of value, this dissertation offers a theoretical framework to analyze diverse and often contradictory struggles for realizing the right to the city. Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in New York, Boston and Istanbul, the dissertation is organized around the three pillars of the labor theory of value, namely, use value, exchange value and value. It begins with an examination of the political struggles that are mobilized for accessing use values in the city. This is followed
by an examination of the UN agencies’ claim over the right to the city that is primarily for realizing exchange values in the city. Although this dissertation acknowledges the usefulness of the analyses of urban political struggles based on the contradiction between use value and exchange value, it concludes with the shortcomings of such analyses and argues for a politics of value, which aims to cast labor in the epicenter of struggles for the right to the city.
for Neil, with Neil.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER I**
INTRODUCTION:

THE USE OF THE RIGHT TO THE CITY........................................1-26

**CHAPTER II**

APPROPRIATING THE VALUE

OF THE RIGHT TO THE CITY....................................................27-70

**CHAPTER III**

GLOBAL INCLUSIVE URBANISM: THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

AS A BRIDGE ACROSS THE URBAN DIVIDE.................................71-141

**CHAPTER IV**

FROM “URBAN REDEVELOPMENT” TO URBAN UPRISING AND BACK AGAIN:

GEZI PROTESTS AMID “ECONOMIC GROWTH”..............................142-211

**CHAPTER V**

CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTICS

OF CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY....................................212-220

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**........................................................................221-232
List of Figures

Figure 1. Pepsi consuming beggar in India, who UN-HABITAT presents as an evidence of urban inclusiveness……………………………………………………………………………p. 126

Figure 2. Protestors set up tents where bulldozers previously entered the park to block the next attempt……………………………………………………………………………………..p. 149

Figure 3. A protestor during the Emek Theatre protests……………………………………………………………………………………p. 152

Figure 4. A graffiti that reads, "Claim your right to the city..." in Istanbul..................p. 153

Figure 5. A banner reads, "End the urban plunder! Capital be gone, Istanbul is ours"………………………………………………………………………………………………..p. 154

Figure 6. A Demonstration in Kadikoy, Istanbul…………………………………………p. 163

Figure 7. A demonstration in Taksim, Istanbul…………………………………………p. 165

Figure 8. Demonstrators running away from the police……………………………………p. 167

Figure 9. Socialist Feminist collectives at Taksim Square……………………………..p. 168

Figure 10. A demonstration at Taksim Square held in June to commemorate the deaths of young people……………………………………………………………………….p. 175

Figure 11. A graffiti criticizing TOKI………………………………………………p. 187

Figure 12. Istanbul’s skyline dominated by high-rise construction…………………..p. 192

Figure 13. Taksim Square claimed by the protestors…………………………………p. 194

Figure 14. Taksim Square during Gezi protests……………………………………….p. 195

Figure 15. Flags and banners at Taksim Square………………………………………..p. 196

Figure 16. "Revolution Market. Everything is free.”……………………………………p. 199

Figure 17. Map of workgroups at Abbasaga Park Forum……………………………p. 201
Figure 18. A participant addressing the crowd in Abbasaga Park Forum………………p. 203

Figure 19. "Iftar of the earth" in Istiklal Street, Istanbul………………………….....p. 205

Figure 20. Yogurtcu Park Barter Festival, Istanbul...........................................p. 206

Figure 21. Feminist groups in Yogurtcu Park Barter Festival..............................p. 207
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE USE OF THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Political struggles in the twenty-first century are marked by a curious homogenization of political lexicon. Ostensibly opposing sides of political engagement seem to express their political aims in identical terms, most notably through the language of freedom, human rights and democracy. Perhaps this is not very bewildering, since these idealized political notions—the constant variation and evolution of their meaning with regard to spatio-temporal contexts notwithstanding—have long been at the center of political grammar, ever since the eighteenth century European enlightenment, at least. They have been so, argues David Harvey, by shaping and appealing to “our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit.” Consequently, these concepts have become “so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to discussion” (Harvey, 2005: 5). It is nevertheless a perplexing situation when, for instance, both support for and opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decade of the twenty-first century were, to a large extent, framed through the language of freedom, democracy and human rights (Çubukçu, 2011a). It appears as though it is not currently possible to articulate political projects without engaging with the questions of human rights and democracy, even though many political projects mobilized around these notions may entail contradictory and incompatible ends. Such concepts as human rights, democracy and freedom, in short, create a conceptual vortex, which pulls even discordant political agendas towards itself, for an already-justified shortcut to legitimacy.
Such a vortex effect can be observed in the notion of the right to the city, albeit it is much more recent in its origins than democracy, human rights, or freedom. The right to the city concept was first introduced by Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1996) in the tumultuous political atmosphere of the late 1960s in Paris. It has lately attracted a great deal of attention, both from academics (Purcell, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2003; 2008; Dikec, 2007; Busà, 2009; Leavitt, Samara, & Brady, 2009; Marcuse, 2009; Attoh, 2011; Mayer, 2012), who have long engaged with urban theory and politics, and from grassroots activists around the globe—from Rio de Janeiro to Hamburg, Istanbul and Johannesburg—who have been fighting on the ground for an alternative just urbanism (Fernandes, 2007; Right to the City Alliance, 2009; Caruso, 2010; Kuymulu, 2013a). In addition to urbanists and grassroots urban justice activists, the right to the city concept has also drawn considerable attention from a less anticipated mix of organizations. United Nations (UN) agencies such as United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have been quick to organize meetings—with the occasional participation of delegates from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—and have outlined policies to absorb the notion of the right to the city into their own political agendas. Any notion that embodies myriad political projects—ranging from grassroots politics of occupying vacant buildings or central squares of cities, to market-based prescriptions such as microfinancing the urban poor—begs close scrutiny. It is the aim of this dissertation to provide a theoretical framework in chapter II to delineate and analyze urban political struggles that are pulled
into the vortex of the right to the city by mainly conceptualizing them as struggles around use value, exchange value and value.

My interest in the political contradictions surrounding the notion of the right to the city goes back to 2007, when the Right to the City Alliance in the United States (RTTC-US) was founded as a national alliance of community-based organizations from nine cities across the country (RTTC-NYC, 2009; Leavitt, Samara, & Brady, 2009; Caruso, 2010). The RTTC-US was primarily formed to build a united response to gentrification, displacement and lack of affordable housing in US cities. Its aims, moreover, included offering a vision for an urbanism “that meets the needs of working class people,” building alliances among social movements against gentrification and displacement, as well as connecting these movements to “other local and international struggles for human rights, land, and democracy” (RTTC-NYC, 2009: 3).

The emphasis of the RTTC-US on building alliances among local community organizations was one of its two striking characteristics that grabbed my attention at the time. The RTTC-US seemed to be convinced that the housing problem they set to fight against could not be sufficiently addressed at the local neighborhood level. Therefore, in addition to the work that has been done at the neighborhood level by its member organizations for years, the alliance got organized to confront urban problems at the urban and the national scales, aiming as well to connect with other such organizations beyond the United States. I found this move politically very exciting since, as an alliance which set to confront gentrification and displacement in particular and the housing
problem in general, the attempt of RTTC-US to scale-up was timely at the wake of the collapse of the housing market in the United States, the shock waves of which were felt across the globe.

The second salient characteristic of the alliance that grabbed my attention was its emphasis on and political struggle around use values embedded in the urban space in major US cities, in which these use values were almost completely dominated by their exchange values. Take housing, for instance. It satisfies one of the most primary needs of human beings and its use value is defined primarily by its function as a shelter. However, the access to the use value of housing is only possible, especially in the US but increasingly so around the world, by paying its exchange value. This leads to lack of affordable housing and homelessness, the two of the major problems the RTTC-US was set to confront.

The RTTC-US’ emphasis on confronting urban problems at the urban scale by building alliances among community organizations working at more local scales and its struggle around use values in the city became even more intriguing for me as my earlier readings on the notion of the right to the city—as a conceptual apparatus to understand contemporary urbanism and as a tenet for political struggle to solve its problems—were guided by Henri Lefebvre’s writings, who introduced the concept in late 1960s (Lefebvre, 1996). The crux of Lefebvre’s argument was that the generalized domination of exchange value over use value under capitalism undermined urban life, by turning the potential of the city as *oeuvre*, the collective artwork of urban inhabitants, into an actual product. The
generalization of exchange value relation and subsequent transformation of *oeuvre* into product, he argued, necessarily overwhelm the user, the simple inhabitant who relies on use values embedded in the city. Thus he formulated a right to the city, a claim over the city as a totality, for use value against the domination of exchange value.

My interest in the right to the city struggles around use value got amplified as I took part in one of the political campaigns of the New York City branch of the RTTC (RTTC-NYC) in 2009. The aim of the campaign was to count the number of vacant properties in New York’s five boroughs in order to propose a plan for their conversion into affordable housing. After the research phase that took six months, the RTTC-NYC shared its findings with the public by publishing a report, *People without Homes and Homes without People: A Count of Vacant Condos in Select NYC Neighborhoods* (RTTC-NYC, 2010a).

The report revealed the extent of the housing crises in New York City: There were 264 residential buildings that were completely constructed, and either entirely or partially sitting vacant in the city. The report also estimated that the number of vacant housing units exceeded 4,000 in these buildings, while the average number of days these units had been on the market was 418, well over a year. In a city, where the number of homeless individuals who live in the shelters of the city administration fluctuates around 40,000 (Marcuse, 2010a: II; Bosman, 2010), the report revealed that the real estate market was not exactly there to bring together the homes without people and the people without homes. The stunning number of existing vacant housing units notwithstanding, moreover,
the research report also noted that more than 3,200 housing units were still under construction, which would eventually increase the number of vacant units under the existing crises-ridden conditions of the real estate market in New York City (RTTC-NYC, 2010a: 5-7).

*People without Homes* does not limit its scope to demonstrating the extent of the housing crises by simply displaying the number of vacant residential units in the city. “It’s a scandal” proclaims Peter Marcuse, one of the most prominent theorists of radical urbanism and the author of the foreword to the report, “that there is housing that could easily be available for occupancy and it is held empty only for speculative purposes, while whole families are in desperate need of housing that they can afford” (2010a: II). In this spirit, the condo count report identifies both new and existing mechanisms to convert these vacant condominiums into low income housing in order to bring together the homes without people with the people without homes.

According to the RTTC-NYC, the conversion process required the active involvement of state agencies, both at the city and state levels in New York. Two distinct methods were identified in the report, by which vacant condominiums could be appropriated by the state institutions (RTTC-NYC, 2010a: 49): The municipal government could mobilize the tax foreclosure mechanism, since, after all, the study identified 138 buildings that are tax-delinquent and their property owners owed a total of US$3,797,690 to the city. “It’s a luxury ghost town,” the then RTTC-NYC coordinator David Dodge said. “If they are not paying taxes, the city has a right to acquire these buildings” (The city and my life, 2010).
At the New York State level, the report goes on, the appropriation could be done through eminent domain, the process by which the government obtains private property for better public use. Once the acquisition is accomplished, the RTTC-NYC proposed that these buildings could be owned and operated either by the public housing system or by establishing community land trusts (CLTs). The underlying aim of the RTTC-NYC in these proposals was to ensure that the converted units remained “permanently affordable” and “free from the pressures of the speculative market” (RTTC-NYC, 2010a: 47). This represents an important political intervention in a city, which has been refashioned as the capital of global capitalism in the last few decades.

The release of the report sparked two very different responses to its proposed solutions for vacant housing units in New York City, which, I will argue, embody two different formulations of what urban justice and the right to the city should be about. The first response resonates with the RTTC-NYC’s position: Housing is a universal human right; therefore, its use value and social function should be privileged against its exchange value that is dictated by the market. If the real estate market is unable to humanely provide everybody with a shelter to live in, then other mechanisms should be mobilized, which does not exclude state intervention, so that the existing supply of housing can effectively be distributed to those who are in need. Some of the elected officials, including City Council members Melissa Mark Viverito, Leticia James and Brad Lander, responded positively to the report and admitted that housing was way too important to leave its distribution to market mechanisms alone. They agreed that “bold government action” was required to convert these vacant condos in New York City into affordable
housing units. For instance, Council Member Brad Lander from Brooklyn commented that “in a city where a record number of families are going homeless every night, this report shows us that there is an opportunity to turn some of these problematic buildings into real community benefits” (RTTC-NYC, 2010b: 2). Cerita Parker, member of Mothers on the Move—a South Bronx-based community organization, led almost entirely by women of color and which took part in the production of the RTTC-NYC’s report—agreed that these condominiums had nothing to do with benefiting her community. Having been born and raised in the Bronx, Parker told reporters that an astonishing number of condominiums were built recently in her neighborhood, which is essentially populated by working class people of color. “They are building luxury unaffordable housing in my community and I can’t afford to live in it,” she said. “My two professional daughters can’t afford to live there” either, she added and asked: “Who are they [condominiums] for? I can’t live in these buildings, and I can’t shop in these stores” (Moore, 2010). An analogous sentiment is articulated by Arvanetta Henry, a member of Picture the Homeless—RTTC-NYC member organization directed and run by homeless people—who said at the press conference that she became homeless in 2008 because she was unable to keep up with her constantly increasing rent, and many in her community were in a similar situation. “My landlord decided to raise our rents to $2,100, which I couldn’t afford. If this happened to me it can happen to anyone. It makes me sick to see all this empty housing when there are thousands of people in NYC who need somewhere to live” (RTTC-NYC, 2010b: 1). As we can see, the major grievance of both RTTC-NYC members lies in the fact that the use value of housing is almost made irrelevant by its exchange value.
The second response to the report, however, immediately rejected with much sarcasm the RTTC-NYC’s proposal of converting vacant condominiums into affordable housing. Steven Spinola, the president of the Real Estate Board of New York, a powerful organization of landlords, reportedly asked if it was April Fools’ Day when told of the RTTC-NYC’s condo conversion plan. “If an owner wants to charge a certain amount and believes he can get it, he has a right to hold onto it,” he told to Metro daily newspaper. “These people clearly don’t believe in the idea of private property” (Oder, 2010).

Michael Slattery, senior vice president at The Real Estate Board of New York, said real estate is far more complicated than turning the vacant units to people who are in need. “The call for the confiscating of private property for ideological reasons is the most startling since the Russian Revolution,” he said. “To simplify it, and say that we should take private property and turn it over to the homeless population, it seems to me that we shouldn't try to feast on someone's misfortune,” Slattery said (Markey, 2010).

I juxtapose these two responses here because they encapsulate two different notions of urban justice, two distinct right demands and two different group’s claim for the right to the city. The first position privileges the use value of housing, vacant condominiums in this case, and the right of every urban inhabitant to a humane shelter. The implication behind the appropriation proposal is that the urban space is primarily for those who realize its use value. The second position, in contrast, emphasizes the exchange value of these units and the right of property owners to own and command their private property. After all, under the jurisprudence of private property laws, the vacant properties belong to
their owners and they are free to do whatever they want with them, including keeping properties vacant as long as they please. While the first position implies a right to the city defined by the realization of use values embedded in urban space, the second position pushes forth a right to the city of those who seek to realize spatial exchange values in the city.

The struggles for the right to the city that crystallize around use value against exchange value are vital, especially when we take into account the ideological and material hegemony of exchange value in contemporary urbanism. And certainly, the right to the city struggles for accessing use values in the US, exemplified by the work of the RTTC, are not unique and isolated given the globalization of exchange value’s dominance around the world in the past few decades, which instigated similar struggles for use value in different cities. Several movements and their struggle around use value have become increasingly salient around the globe especially since the turn of the twenty first century. For instance, the Shack dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo founded in Durham, South Africa, has been fighting primarily against evictions and for prioritizing “the social value of urban land” and housing against their “commercial value” since 2005 (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2010). Its campaigns include other issues that take shape around the politics of use value such as access to clean water, electricity, transportation and free education (Pithouse, 2010) for the poor and working classes who are marginalized by the exchange values of these urban services.
Another notable movement fighting for accessing use values in the city is Recht auf Stadt (Right to the City), a network of squatters, tenants and artists in Hamburg, Germany. It emerged out of the occupation of vacant buildings that were owned by the city of Hamburg in 2009 and since then they developed into a viable community (Souza, 2010). The city had been keeping the buildings on purpose letting them deteriorate with the hope of selling them to a developer to increase city’s revenues. The plan seemed to work initially as the city found a Dutch investment company, which aspired to demolish the run-down working class housing stock and build high-end office buildings and luxury condominiums in its stead (Boeing, 2010). However the investment company was hit hard by the global financial crises, which was instigated by the collapse of the housing market in the US, and had to delay the construction in August 2009, which was followed by the occupation of these buildings by the squatter movement (Oehmke, 2010). In a way, the crises of exchange value enabled a network of 29 activist groups gathered under the banner of the right to the city to claim these buildings for realizing their use value.

The most recent example of a right to the city claim for realizing use values that received widespread public debate and visibility across the globe comes from the home of 2014 Football World Cup, Brazil, a country that has been a hotspot for the struggles around accessing use values for some time. Only a year before the political controversies around the World Cup and its effect on rising housing costs that grabbed global public attention, the major urban centers of Brazil had been shaken by a countrywide uprising, the initial flame of which was a rise in public transportation costs and diminishing urban services (Watts, 2013; Bowater, 2014). As the 2013 uprising dwindled by the end of the summer,
the organizations such as Homeless Workers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST) accelerated their organizing efforts against the evictions and rising prices in the housing market that were caused by organizing the World Cup.

On 2 May 2013, the MTST led hundreds of families in Sao Paulo to occupy a vacant lot and set up a tent city only four kilometers away from the newly built stadium where the opening ceremony of the World Cup was to be held (Langlois, 2014). The number of occupying families was an estimate 5,000 only a week later. The rapid increase in the number of occupying families is a testament to the gravity of the “chronic affordable housing problem in Brazil” (Kestler-D’Amours, 2014). For instance, the Itequera neighborhood, where the occupiers set up the tent city has seen 165% increase in the cost of each square meter of housing in the rental market during the last six years (Langlois, 2014). The displacement due to the skyrocketing housing prices in the past few years got even worse due to the evictions caused directly by the efforts to open space for building new stadiums and other facilities for the World Cup. The recent estimates that were published right before the 2014 World Cup began suggest that around 250,000 people were evicted from their homes as a direct cause of World Cup related constructions (Sanchez, 2014; Bowater, 2014). 90,000 of these evictions took place in Sao Paulo alone (Bergfeld, 2014). It is fair to assume that the evictions at such a massive scale put even more pressure on the problem of affordable housing, which suggests some shortage of available housing. On the other hand, however, according to a UN-HABITAT report (2013), there are at least seven million vacant housing units in Brazil, 70% of which are in urban areas. Sao Paulo, where the magnitude of the lack of affordable housing problem
led thousands of families to occupy a vacant lot and live in a tent city, has almost 1,500,000 vacant housing units alone (UN-HABITAT, 2013: 22).

This brings us to the contradiction between use value and exchange value in capitalist urbanism. How come a metropolitan area like Sao Paulo can have 1,500,000 vacant housing units, the use values of which sit unrealized, while having a shortage of affordable housing, which leaves masses without an adequate shelter, thus blocking their access to use values? Recall that the crux of the right to the city struggle in New York revolves around the same contradiction. The excessive property vacancy goes hand in hand with excessive homelessness, hence the title of RTTC-NYC’s report: *People without Homes and Homes without People*. The right to the city struggles for accessing use values lie at the root of the examples that we briefly mentioned in Hamburg and Durban as well. In all of these examples, the desire to realize exchange values put serious limits to the urban inhabitants’ ability to access use values. In other words, what could be expressed as the right to the city struggles of the privileged for realizing exchange values comes face to face with and overrides the right to the city struggles of urban inhabitants for accessing use values. It is therefore no coincidence that we observe various grassroots struggles around the world over the city that take shape around accessing use values against the globalized hegemony of exchange value.

As important and geographically widespread as these struggles for accessing use values are, this dissertation argues that an exclusive focus on use value—both as a target of political struggle and as an analytical focal point of analysis—faces certain limits. In
order to develop an understanding of the ways in which contemporary capitalist urbanism operates, and to device tactics and strategies to overcome its problems, the argument goes, we have to get into a theoretical exploration of exchange value and value, and analyze the right to the city struggles that are primarily about exchange value and value. After the brief introduction about the right to the city claims on use value presented at the outset of this chapter, this dissertation will examine two other right to the city claims that are primarily over exchange value (chapter III) and value (chapter IV).

It is crucial to note at this point that the right to the city claims that crystallize primarily around exchange value and value are indeed about use value and about different kind of urbanisms that would, in different ways, enable urban inhabitants to access use values. This is the main reason why we observe a certain kind of vortex effect in the notion of the right to the city. This vortex effect is two-sided. Both various right to the city claims over the city that are mostly discordant in their political aims and the literature on urbanism that sets to analyze such struggles are pulled into the conceptual apparatus of the right to the city. Hence, for instance, an anarchist movement mobilized for occupying vacant buildings to realize their use values such as Recht auf Stadt and powerful agents of international development such as UN-HABITAT, mobilized for finding solutions to the problems of capitalist urbanism by primarily staying within the realm of exchange value can talk about their mostly incompatible political projects through the language of the right to the city.
In order to delineate and analyze the often-irreconcilable political projects represented by the right to the city claims that crystallize around use value, exchange value and value, I initiate a theoretical discussion of the right to the city concept in chapter II, “Appropriating the value of the right to the city.” As I discuss in a greater detail there, the ways in which Henri Lefebvre (1996) theorized the notion was open enough to allow for conflicting interpretations. I identify a series of oppositions, which could be extracted from Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city, and I argue that these oppositions lie at the root of the conflicting interpretations of the concept. While some of the oppositions are, in part, offered by Lefebvre himself, others emerge or become more salient in the literature on the right to the city that discusses Lefebvre’s work. In both cases, though, the two concepts that form each opposition open up a space for interpreting Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city and make it possible to take the implications of the concept towards different and often-conflicting directions. For the sake of simplicity, I will call these different directions liberal and radical interpretations of the right to the city. The two paths are not mutually exclusive in absolute terms but rather characterized by a dialectical tension. The tension between the two paths is a productive one that underwrites multiple right to the city claims I scrutinize in this dissertation. In other words, the tension between the liberal and radical conceptualizations of the right to the city is productive of politics as the specific components of each strand is present in each claim I examine in varying degrees.

I begin to identify the conceptual oppositions by focusing on the two aspects of Lefebvre’s theorization of the right to the city that are persistent themes in the writings of
his interlocutors, namely, the “right to participation” and “right to appropriation.” I argue that both its liberal and radical readings are enabled by the oppositions implied in Lefebvre’s discussion of each concept. Lefebvre’s lack of clarity about what specifically the urban inhabitants were supposed to participate in allows on the one hand for a set of interpretations that reduce the idea of political participation to a liberal call for procedural participation in existing formal practices and structures of urban governance. I call this liberal notion of participation “reproductive participation” as it rarely challenges the dynamics of existing hegemonic urbanism and the power relations it embodies. On the other hand, the right to participation implied in Lefebvre’s work opens up a more radical path. By offering a close reading of Lefebvre’s discussion on participation both in *Writing on Cities* (1996) and in his larger body of work, I argue for a reading of his emphasis on participation to realize the right to the city as a call for participation in political struggles for a radical transformation of the processes that orchestrate the production of capitalist urban spaces and cities. The right to participation in Lefebvre’s understanding, as I read it, underscores a kind of political activism directed towards transforming the social processes that shape capitalist urban space and its very governance. I call this radical notion of political participation “transformative participation” as it aims to transform the ways in which urban space and cities are produced along with the social relations they sustain. One of the discerning features of “transformative participation” is that it aims to transform the conditions under which its political participation became possible in the first place. Thus, it does not primarily look to reproduce the system but to transform it in unprecedented ways.
The second opposition I discuss, which rests in the notion of the “right to appropriation” is very much dormant in Lefebvre’s account and faintly implied in the literature on the right to the city. Lefebvre is even less clear about what he means by appropriation than he is on participation as he refers to the right to appropriation directly only in passing. Although he is vague about it, it occupies a central place in his discussion on the right to the city and the notion of appropriation rarely goes unmentioned in the literature that discusses his work. Lefebvre’s lack of clarity on the meaning of the right to appropriation is frequently reproduced by his interlocutors, and curtails the political potential of the concept. To clarify the two elements of the opposition that are conflated in the notion of appropriation, I conceptualize two forms of appropriation, namely, “appropriation in consumption” and “appropriation in production.”

A great majority of Lefebvre’s interlocutors tend to equate the notion of appropriating urban space with having access to and utilizing urban spaces. While having access to already produced urban spaces in order to use them is important—as it implies an argument against spatial marginalization and exclusion while underwriting the struggles we mentioned around use value—I argue that the politics of “appropriation in consumption” does not take advantage of the possibilities inherent in the notion of “appropriation in production,” which is implied but not realized in Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city. As I discuss in chapter II in a greater detail, Lefebvre’s use of the concept of appropriation vacillates between “appropriation in consumption” and “appropriation in production” both in his writings on the right to the city and beyond. Hence, he indeed implicitly creates the opposition by using the notion of
appropriation vaguely and using its two meanings I identify interchangeably, which simultaneously opens the path for the liberal appropriation of the concept. To tackle this problem, I go back to Karl Marx’s *Grundrisse* (1993) and *Capital* (1990) to substantiate a notion of appropriation that goes to the heart of the process of producing use values, i.e., the labor process. Incorporating “appropriation in production” in Lefebvre’s notion of the right to appropriation as a critical component of the right to the city is necessary, I argue, if we are serious about formulating the right to the city as the right of inhabitants to radically transform the processes that orchestrate the *production* of cities and urban spaces, rather than as a liberal right to access and *consume* what is offered in the socio-spatial repertoire of existing cities.

The third opposition I identify in Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city is much more salient and creates a theoretical and political fissure between liberal and radical interpretations in a much deeper manner than the previous two oppositions do. As aforementioned, one of the fundamental ways in which Lefebvre weaves the notion of the right to the city is based on his argument that the contradiction at the heart of capitalism between use value and exchange value is also inscribed under the skin of urban space. Unlike the previous two oppositions, in which Lefebvre’s lack of clarity contributes in the production of the theoretical and political fissure between the liberal and radical interpretations, Lefebvre is crystal clear about this one. He argues that the capitalist urbanism privileges exchange value and enables the right to the city of capitalists over use value and the right to the city of those who rely on use value and social function of urban spaces. This turns the city more and more into a “product” whereas it should be
built and lived as an “oeuvre.” Lefebvre thus calls on the inhabitants who are users of the city to organize themselves in order to claim their right to the city by transforming the capitalist processes that marginalize them for their lack of command over exchange value. It is hard to miss the point here. Therefore, I treat the liberal interpretations that spring from this opposition in a particular way, conceptualizing them as political appropriations, which I discuss in a greater detail in chapter III. One of the central arguments encapsulated in my discussion of dialectical oppositions is that the diverse right to the city claims I examine in this dissertation are better understood, assessed and evaluated if seen through the dialectical relations I offer in chapter II.

“Global inclusive urbanism: The right to the city as a bridge across the urban divide,” the third chapter of the dissertation, begins with examining the brief history of popularization of the notion of the right to the city in grassroots activist circles and in the policy circles of UN-affiliated organizations such as UNESCO, UNDP, and UN-HABITAT. Initially discussed and put in practice by the urban social movements in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s (Fernandes, 2007: 212; Friendly, 2013: 158), the notion of the right to the city was made more popular at the global scale by grassroots activists from around the world who gathered in various international social forums from 2001 onwards. UN agencies grasped the global popularization both of the forum format and the right to the city concept as an opportunity early on and launched the World Urban Forum in 2002, allocating a significant portion of the discussions to the right to the city and its policy implications. The engagement of UN agencies with the right to the city amplified in each forum and
climaxed in 2010, carrying the notion to the title of the World Urban Forum as the main theme: “The right to the city: Bridging the urban divide” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a).

I take this political engagement seriously and examine the right to the city politics of UN agencies as one of the various right to the city claims I analyze in this dissertation. By examining the documents, reports, and policy papers drafted by the UN agencies—particularly the World Urban Forum reports produced by UN-HABITAT, which lay out the central themes and discussions in the forums as well as the policy implications and implementation plans—I investigate the main direction UN agencies tend to take the notion of the right to the city. I say the main direction because of the nature of the World Urban Forums. The forums claim to bring “all stakeholders” of the global urban politics together and the group of participants is fairly heterogeneous, ranging from grassroots organizations to top global corporations, from high-rank government officials to urbanists, conservative and progressive alike.

I am aware that this appears to present a problem for my analysis because I attribute a certain degree of agency to UN-affiliated organizations and argue that there is an identifiable trend in UN organizations’ take on the right to the city. I do so because I detect these trends and tendencies—especially the constant translation of Lefebvre’s emphasis on use value into exchange value terms, among others—in the ways in which UN-agencies present and discuss the important themes of the forum. Moreover, as I analyze in the third chapter in detail, although the UN-HABITAT advertises the forum as a democratic platform that brings together all the “key urban stakeholders,” including
grassroots organizations, this is not entirely true. As the forum reports show, the overwhelming majority of the participants are “heads of state, government ministers, mayors and leaders of global foundations and big business,” which UN-HABITAT talks about as a very good thing. This reaffirms, according to the 5th World Urban Forum’s report, “both the Forum and its glittering exhibition as the world’s premier cities convention” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2). Therefore, even though some participants of the forum make some radical remarks, I infer that such participants, especially those who criticize the commodification of urban spaces and cities, remain marginal at the forum.

I analyze UN agencies’ right to the city politics against the background of two dialectical oppositions I lay down in chapter II. One constant theme in World Urban Forums and in the documents published by the UN agencies to explicate how the right to the city is central to UN’s “global campaign on urban governance” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 8) is the question of participation. I go through the aforementioned documents and examine what the UN-HABITAT presents as desirable, among other ideas discussed in the forums, and argue that the idea of participation in the context of realizing the right to the city remains to a large extent to be a “reproductive participation” rather than a transformative one. I also examine these documents to detect how Lefebvre’s emphasis on use value instead of exchange value resonates in the forums. Although some discussion takes place about the importance of use value and the social function of urban spaces, I identify a remarkable tendency to translate the centrality of use value in Lefebvre’s account into exchange value terms. In other words, I argue that anytime UN agencies talk about and promote the importance of use value in these documents, they
presuppose that use values will only be accessible to consumers in the market, i.e., use value will be mediated by exchange value.

In this chapter, I try not to develop a moral argument. I argue that those who reduce the idea of democratic participation of the people to “reproductive participation,” and those who constantly translate Lefebvre’s emphasis on use value into exchange value, do so due to the class position they occupy. I also argue that there is a liberal, rather than neoliberal, strand within the UN agencies. They organize these forums and publish these documents because they try to contest neoliberal urbanism and the exacerbated inequality it produces without, however, in anyway challenging the perpetuation of capitalism. It is also notable that some organizations and individuals in the UN world are very concerned about the sustainability of contemporary urbanism, ecologically, socially, politically and economically. This is the core reason why I examine the urban politics that emerges out of UN documents and forums as a right to the city claim, which attempts to contest contemporary neoliberal urbanism. However, the contradiction lies in the fact that the UN agencies’ and many of the participants’ trust in the market to solve urban problems, one of the central components of neoliberal ideology, remains constant. All the forums I examine over-represent the members of global corporations, talking about how their companies work to reduce unemployment, poverty, and socio-economic marginalization in cities testifying to their “corporate responsibility.” The reality is, I argue, that the hegemonic urbanism that emerges out of the documents and forums I examine treats the city as a space of free market for realizing exchange values, and equates the idea of political/economic inclusion in the city with inclusion of consumers in the market. For
this reason, while the issue of accessing use values is a part of the right to the city claim made by the UN agencies, I analyze their urban politics as a set of political struggles primarily for exchange value. In this light, the right to the city claim of the UN agencies that I analyze in this chapter appear as a counterpoint. It lays bare, on the one hand, the contrast between the politics of use value (chapter I) and the politics of exchange value. It also demonstrates, on the other hand, how the politics of use value could be absorbed and appropriated by the politics of exchange value. It therefore demonstrates one of the central arguments of this dissertation: Without understanding the contrast between the struggles for use value and those for exchange value and how the latter absorb the former, it would be hard to grasp the specificities of the politics of value, which I analyze and argue for in chapters IV and V.

The right to the city claim I examine in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, “From urban development to urban uprising and back again: Gezi protests amid ‘economic growth,’” emerged out of the spontaneous collective mobilization of massive numbers of people to save a public park from government-planned destruction in Istanbul, Turkey. The spark that drew Istanbul into a fire of protest and uprising was initially set off by a modest “occupy style” peaceful sit in, initiated by roughly 25 people in May 2013 against the planned destruction of a small park, in order to make way for a shopping mall. Following serious police brutality against the protestors, who were quickly dismissed by the government as a few looters and extremists, urban centers of Turkey saw a full-fledged uprising with the participation of millions of its ordinary citizens. I was based in London when the small protest turned into an uprising and was drawn to it right away for
personal, political as well as intellectual reasons. I went to Istanbul in the early days of June and participated in the uprising, staying as well to attend the park forums that emerged after the heat of the uprising. I spent two months organizing, documenting and participating in the events. Although the two months spent in the streets and parks might not qualify as ethnography, this chapter contains ethnographic moments. The intensity of political organizing and struggle, as well as my longstanding personal connections with the people who have been part of the urban social movements in Istanbul contributed to this. I attempt to reflect this close and first hand engagement with the uprising in the organization of this chapter by initiating my account with the early days of the uprising, depicting the unfolding of lively events to give this chapter the flesh and blood it calls for. Following the path of the social mobilization flowing from Gezi Park to larger geographical scales of the neighborhood, the urban, the national, and beyond, I analyze the expanding political geography of the uprising in the first part of the chapter, and attempt to make a case for the necessity and effectiveness of the politics of scale to claim the right to the city.

The fact that the uprising emerged for protecting an urban commons against the construction of a private shopping mall in the park’s stead puts this right to the city claim squarely within the politics of use value mobilized by the inhabitants against the hegemony of exchange value defended by the state and capital. Although I discuss various reasons for such a widespread collective mobilization, the emergence and the course of the uprising as well as the novel political forms, such as the collective park forums where the money was absent in transactions show, I argue, that the main
grievance collectively shared by the inhabitants of urban Turkey was the commodification of every aspect of urban life. Therefore, as in the third chapter that examines the right to the city claim made within the institutional confines of UN agencies, this chapter situates the practical politics on the ground in urban Turkey within the theoretical discussion occasioned by the dialectical opposition between exchange value and use value.

The second part of the chapter takes a step back from the heat of the uprising and examines the growth-based political economy of Turkey in the last decade, which, I argue, has been primarily based on land redevelopment and production of space. This gave way to a very diverse, albeit mostly localized resistance and dissident politics that eventually exploded in the urban centers of Turkey during the June 2013 uprising. Having discussed the expanding political geography of the uprising and the political economy that set the stage for it, finally, the third part of the chapter focuses on novel forms of political activism that, like the uprising itself, sprung from Gezi Park and spread across urban Turkey. Neighborhood assemblies, or as the people call them, park forums have been unique both in terms of the political form they have taken, and the degree of popular participation in them. The forums provided people with a new space of political engagement outside the familiar venues such as political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In this section I argue that park forums embody a desire for direct democracy, for enacting new solidarities, and provided people spaces to practice and experiment with politics rather than simply talking about it. But above of all, park forums represent a popular will for grassroots organizing to redefine what living together means,
the meaning of civility and solidarity; the forums represent an attempt by the people to redefine what is socially necessary outside the neoliberal imposition, that is, individual self-interest and commodification of life in its every aspect. In short, the social, political and economic experiment embodied in park forums was an attempt to define in practice what the right to the city is about, which I conceptualize as a politics of value.

Finally, the last chapter of the dissertation “Dialectics of claiming the right to the city” discusses the dialectical relations I establish in chapter II and their further development by means of following the practical politics of claiming the right to the city, discussed in the rest of the dissertation.
CHAPTER II

APPROPRIATING THE VALUE OF THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

This chapter offers a theoretical discussion on the right to the city concept in order to lay the groundwork for interpreting different right to the city claims that rest on the politics of use value, politics of exchange value and the politics of value. By reframing the notion of the right to the city to foreground its roots in Marxian labor theory of value, this chapter aims to develop a theoretical framework, in which contradictory political projects proposed for realizing the right to the city could be distinguished and analyzed.

The theoretical discussion begins with the emergence of the urban problematic for Henri Lefebvre and the ways in which he weaves the notion of the right to the city with the systemic transformations he identifies within the workings of capitalism at the end of the 1960s. After a close reading of how Lefebvre frames the right to the city, I identify three nodal points that are paramount in Lefebvre’s theorization, dominating as well the ways in which Lefebvre’s interlocutors have discussed the notion, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century. I do not, by any means, argue that the three nodal points I identify, namely, “participation,” “appropriation,” and “value,” are the only important aspects of Lefebvre’s right to the city. I argue, however, that each nodal point implicitly or explicitly carries an opposition, and these oppositions lie at the root of the conflicting elucidations between the liberal and radical interpretations of the concept. In other words, the two concepts that form each opposition open up a space for interpreting Lefebvre’s
formulation of the right to the city and make it possible to take the implications of the concept towards different and often-conflicting directions. I discuss these oppositions one by one, and argue that there is a dialectical tension within each opposition and therefore they cannot be thought of separately in absolute terms. However, this does not mean that the two concepts should be conflated either, as one of the concepts in each opposition, I argue, opens the path for a more radical interpretation of the right to the city, which this chapter aims to construct.

My discussion of Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city naturally pays specific attention to his Writings on Cities (1996), which contains a translation of his short book, Le Droit à la Ville, where he first introduced the concept. Coined during the tumultuous days that led to the Parisian uprising of 1968, the concept of the right to the city sprung from the “cry and demand” rising from the streets, and resonates in various forms of urban politics I analyze in this dissertation. In addition to Writings on Cities, my analysis of Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city will delve into his other work, especially The Urban Revolution (2003[1970]) and The Production of Space (1991[1973]). I will then critically discuss how the interlocutors who follow Lefebvre from various academic disciplines have interpreted and engaged with the notion of the right to the city.

This chapter, then, establishes the right to the city as a critical theory of radical and alternative urbanism.
Emergence of the “urban problematic” and the Right to the City

Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city is linked to his powerful and farsighted argument in *The Urban Revolution* (2003), originally published in 1970. There, Lefebvre argued that industrialization, which had been the primary force of capitalism for more than two centuries, was increasingly accompanied, even sidestepped, by the related process of urbanization as the dominant life force of capitalism. Observing the invigorated role of uniquely urban processes in the formation and accumulation of capital in the late 1960s, Lefebvre presciently argued that urban processes such as “real estate speculation and construction” became “the principal source for the formation of capital, that is the realization of surplus value” (Lefebvre, 2003: 160). What Lefebvre recognized in his time was a set of social processes that gave the urban question a certain salience within the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production. The urban problematic, for him, was bringing about its unique crisis, which could not be easily subsumed under the crisis of industrial capitalism. The crisis that led to the 1968 uprising, for instance, during which he penned *Le Droit à la Ville* (The right to the city), “was more profoundly a crisis of urban society than a crisis of capitalist industrialism” (Smith, 2003: xi). In the following book he published in French the same year, *The Explosion*, where he examined the 1968 uprising, he made a similar point. While discussing the “void”—structural problems with the “neo-capitalism” and “centrality of the French state”—that enabled the “spontaneous uprising,” he argues that “the dominant problems” [the void] “are those relating to urban society. These are becoming increasingly more important than the problems of an industrialization still in progress” (1969: 157). Therefore, rather than interpreting urbanization merely as a process subsumed under the workings of industrial
capitalism, Lefebvre argued for the significance of urbanization as a distinctive process to examine closely, with a dynamic of its own.

This did not mean, however, that urbanization should be understood as an isolated process, severed from the processes emanating from industrialism. Nor did it mean that the renewed salience of the urban question Lefebvre sought to explain rendered the dynamics of industrial capitalism irrelevant. Rather, he offered an analysis that revealed the ways in which industrialization was funneled more and more into the dynamics of urbanization. For Lefebvre, industrial capitalism became crucially about urbanization, which was itself becoming a global phenomenon and the central problematic of advanced capitalist societies.

Lefebvre’s argument was as path breaking as it was prescient. He was one of the first to reveal the imperative role of urbanism in general, and production of urban space in particular, in the reproduction of capitalist relations. This role, according to him, went well beyond the simple production of urban space as a commodity exchangeable in the market. Lefebvre went further and argued that capitalism survived in the 20th century, not by simply organizing production in space but by orchestrating the production of space (Lefebvre, 1976: 21; 1991; 2009: 156), which underscores his call, at the end of the 1960s, for a struggle over shaping the very processes that produce a capitalist urbanism, which denies the right to the city to most of its inhabitants.
Both Lefebvre’s analysis of capitalism and his politics of emancipation underpin his understanding of urban space as the primary battleground of political struggles for democracy, social rights, and justice (Isin, 1999; Soja, 2010). The right to the city, in Lefebvre’s framework, does not only imply a right to urban space but a right to “a political space as well, constituting the city as a space of politics” (Dikeç, 2001: 1790). Reflective of his emphasis on the city as a space of politics, Lefebvre envisions a city where its inhabitants could properly participate in urban political life. Geographers Don Mitchell and Joaquin Villanueva also insist that the right to the city is “an argument for the right not to be excluded, and especially for full political participation in the making of the city” (2010: 668, original emphasis). This emphasis on the city as a space of politics and an arena of full political participation is most visible in the specific way Lefebvre frames the right to the city. “The right to the city manifests itself,” he argues, “as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the oeuvre, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property) are implied in the right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996: 173-174, original emphasis).

Although Lefebvre’s observations regarding the emerging salience of the urban process, with a dynamic of its own, and the surfacing of “the urban” as a space of politics are quite intriguing and compelling, the nature of economic processes that underpin his observations remains somewhat vague. In a quite Lefebvrian manner, he asserts very gripping and provocative arguments about the fact that urban space became one of the most crucial foci of political struggle, yet he leaves such an important argument relatively
unfounded, especially on the question of the changing economic dynamics within capitalism and their role on the emergence of the city as the primary space of politics. For instance, Lefebvre argues that speculation on fixed capital investment—any form of built environment to be used for productive purposes such as factories and railroads—as a second circuit supplants the first circuit, which is simple industrial production of moveable commodities for realizing surplus value. In the section that Lefebvre discusses this important process in the lengthiest and most detailed manner in The Urban Revolution he argues:

“Real estate functions as a second sector, a circuit that runs parallel to that of industrial production, which serves the nondurable assets market, or at least those that are less durable than buildings. This second sector serves as a buffer. It is where capital flows in the event of a depression, although enormous profits soon slow to a trickle. In this sector, there are few "multipliers," few spin-off’s. Capital is tied up in real estate. Although the overall economy (so-called domestic economy) soon begins to suffer, the role and function of this sector continue to grow. As the principal circuit—current industrial production and the movable property that results—begins to slow down, capital shifts to the second sector, real estate. It can even happen that real-estate speculation becomes the principal source for the formation of capital, that is, the realization of surplus value. As the percentage of overall surplus value formed and realized by industry begins to decline, the percentage created and realized by real-estate speculation and construction increases. The second circuit supplants the first, becomes essential” (Lefebvre, 2003: 159-160).
In this crucial passage, Lefebvre clearly states that when the primary circuit of industrial production starts to face its limits, thus facing a crisis, the capitalist start to invest in the secondary circuit of real estate construction in order defer the crisis. What is not so clear is the economic conditions in the primary circuit under which the problems that lead to a crisis takes place. We do not also find any elaboration on the role of the shift from the primary to the secondary circuit on capitalism and its consequences vis-à-vis the urbanization process. In short, Lefebvre asserts but does not substantiate the relationship between the internal contradictions of capital accumulation and circulation, and the emergence of “the urban” with a dynamic of its own, as a space of intense political struggle. There is a missing link, in other words, between the two of his crucial observations: the role of urbanization in the process of capital accumulation and the emergence of “the urban” as a principle site of political contestation.

I think that this missing link could be provided by David Harvey’s analyses on the process of urbanization under capitalism. According to Harvey, urbanization has had a historical role in absorbing capital’s surpluses. The process behind this historical role is pretty straightforward to him. The “coercive laws of competition” forces the capitalist to reinvest some of the surplus value s/he extracts from the laborer in a profitable manner so that the capitalist can later extract even more surplus value out of the process of expanded production. The result is the perpetual expansion of surplus production at a compound rate, which is what the capitalist growth is all about (Harvey, 2012: 5). This process, nevertheless, is not without frictions. In order to achieve perpetual expanded production, the capitalist constantly needs to find new sources of labor, means of production and raw
materials and has to chase new technologies if s/he wants to remain as a capitalist under the coercive laws of competition. Moreover, the capitalist needs also to expand the market in which the increasing number of products could realize their exchange values. When the capitalist hits the limits in any of these aspects of expanding production (be it labor, means of production or the process of realization), the capital accumulation is stalled and the capitalist faces with an imminent crisis. In other words, the capitalist faces the realization problem, i.e., the surplus capital cannot be invested in a profitable manner, which leads to its devaluation (Harvey, 2012: 6).

Under such conditions of crisis, which emerge out of the internal contradictions that exist within the primary circuit of capital accumulation, the capitalist has to look elsewhere to reinvest the over-accumulated surplus capital. The tendency towards overaccumulation of capital, according to Harvey, periodically produces such conditions under which the capital might look to flow from the primary into the secondary circuit (Harvey, 1978: 106). In other words, by investing in the built environment, the capital looks for a “spatial fix” to avoid the crisis of overaccumulation (Harvey, 1982). This process has huge repercussions for the process of urbanization. The investment in the secondary circuit takes physical shape either in the form of fixed capital (productive fixed assets in the form of factories, warehouses, highways etc.) or in the form of consumption fund (physical entities for the consumption and reproduction of labor such as houses, streets and parks). Periodic heavy investment in the built environment (in either form) in order to avoid the crisis of overproduced capital has been one of the main motors of urbanization throughout the historical geography of capitalism and produced and
reproduced the cities we live in. Here, Harvey crucially notes that the flow from the primary into the secondary circuit plays a stabilizing role on capitalism. However he argues that this stabilizing role is temporary. The shift from primary to secondary circuit does not eliminate but defers the overaccumulation problem. Moreover, it leads to “a pervasive tendency towards over-investment” in the secondary circuit as well. “This over-investment,” Harvey stresses, “is in relation solely to the needs of capital and has nothing to do with the real needs of people, which inevitably remain unfulfilled” (1978: 112).

I would like to argue that this is the crux of the missing link in Lefebvre’s analysis on the relation between the emergence of the “urban problematic” and the materialization of the city as a primary locus of political struggle and contestation. Almost all urban political struggles around use value has something to do with the fact that the process of urbanization (investment in the secondary circuit of capital accumulation) has a little regard for the “real needs of people” and has almost everything to do with the “needs of capital” to avoid crisis or to seek new venues of capital accumulation. Recall that in the first chapter we briefly discussed the right to the city struggles in New York and Sao Paulo, both of which were mobilized against the irrationality of a capitalist urbanism that concomitantly produces the shortage of affordable housing on the one hand, and massive numbers of vacant housing on the other. The city is a site of political struggle to a large extent due to its role in solving or deferring the realization problem that the capitalist faces periodically. “A process of displacement and dispossession” in the words of David Harvey, “lies at the core of the urban process under capitalism,” and it constitutes “the
mirror image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment” (2012: 18). It is largely for this reason that a revolutionary urban politics would require “the right to appropriation” and “the right to participation” that Lefebvre talks about when he formulates the right to the city. The contemporary city is a product of capitalists’ search for solving the realization problem, thus, by and large, it is produced as a space of capital, which gives way to all sorts of political resistance and struggle. Hence Lefebvre’s argument that a right to the city claim should encompass the “right to appropriate” the spaces of capital and its political process should embody the “right to participation.”

Let us now focus on these two aspects of the right to the city, namely, the “right to participation” and the “right to appropriation.” I would like to do so for these two aspects of the right to the city occupy a central place in the analysis of scholars who have engaged with the concept in the past decade. Despite their popularity and centrality, the notions of participation and appropriation remain vague and unspecified, used by many urbanists in conflicting ways. This partly stems from the fact that Lefebvre is not immediately clear about what the urban dwellers’ right to participation means. The question of what exactly the urban inhabitants are supposed to participate in does not have a uniform answer in Lefebvre’s account. This initial ambiguity gives way to a series of interpretations from some of Lefebvre’s interlocutors who reduce his emphasis on participation to participation in the formal procedures of existing urban governance without contesting the liberal capitalist order. In other words, they take the city as it is, and promote participation in city administration’s formal political processes. I argue against such an elucidation and make a case for a close reading of Lefebvre’s account,
which renders a much more radical notion of participation that aims to transform the processes that orchestrate the capitalist production of space.

Likewise, Lefebvre’s lack of clarity on the notion of appropriation enables some of his interlocutors to reduce the notion to utilizing and having access to city’s already produced spaces. To contest this reductionism, I go back to Karl Marx’s *Grundrisse* (1993) and *Capital* (1990) to substantiate a notion of appropriation that goes to the heart of the process of producing use values, i.e., the labor process. But first, let me delve into the question of participation in the notion of the right to the city.

**Participation in the right to the city**

Lefebvre’s emphasis on the right to participation in urban politics within his discussion of the right to the city constitutes perhaps the one aspect of the notion that rarely goes unmentioned. Whether coming from liberal or more radical readers of Lefebvre, the notion of participation has mostly been a welcome facet of the right to the city, enjoying a certain degree of primacy in the discussions. However, we can detect a tendency in the literature of affirming the notion of participation without much qualification. Alessandro Busà, urbanist and architect, for instance, argues that the right to the city “seeks to encourage the democratic participation of all urban dwellers in decision-making processes … thus fundamentally challenges existing power relations” (2009: 6-7). Edésio Fernandes, lawyer and city planner asserts that the right to the city basically consists of the right of city dwellers to enjoy urban services and the right to participate in the management of their cities (2007: 208). Similarly, for city planner Anna Plyushteva, the
right to the city can contribute to the meaning and practice of urban citizenship by bringing to the forefront “the right to have sufficient access to urban public spaces” and “the right to directly participate … in urban political processes” (2009: 95). Mark Purcell, a human geographer who published extensively on the right to the city in early 2000s, and who has been affirmatively referenced by the urbanists above and some others (Fenster, 2005; Fernandes, 2007; Busa, 2009; Duke, 2009; Plyushteva, 2009) also argues that the right to participation forms one of the most fundamental aspects of the right to the city and it poses a serious challenge to the established structures of liberal citizenship (Purcell, 2002: 103).

I think the importance attributed to the notion of participation by these urbanists is understandable, yet I do not share their affirmation of participation without qualification. Assuming that the participation of urban dwellers in decision-making processes would fundamentally challenge existing power relations, as Busa does, or associating the participation of dwellers in urban management with a better access to urban services and spaces, as Fernandes and Plyushteva do, is not entirely convincing. Nor do I think the right to participation automatically poses a serious challenge to the established structures of liberal citizenship, as suggested by Purcell. If such calls for participation in urban management and decision-making take the city as it is, presupposing the liberal capitalist order, they might merely end up reproducing existing socio-spatial relations. Participation in urban management and decision-making processes, for instance, are fundamental themes in UN-organized World Urban Forums and, as I shall demonstrate in chapter III, do not necessarily challenge the existing power relations. Let me demonstrate my
argument that participation, in and of itself, might not change existing power relations by focusing on how the notion of participation operates in Mark Purcell’s formulation.

As mentioned, Mark Purcell is favorably quoted in the analysis of many urbanists and enjoys a certain degree of importance in the discussions concerning the right to participation. However, Purcell’s analyses have a series of problems. His examination of participation within the right to the city framework is, in fact, structured to criticize the liberal democratic citizenship model. He argues that the notion of participation within the confines of “liberal democratic citizenship” is primarily “limited to decisions taken by the state,” which according to him is a misguided target for claiming the right to the city. Instead, he argues, urban dwellers should participate in “the decisions that produce urban space” (Purcell, 2003: 577, original emphasis). Purcell supports his position with a highly radical reading of Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city and participation:

“I suggest that Lefebvre’s right to the city is an argument for profoundly reworking both the social relations of capitalism and the current structure of liberal-democratic citizenship. His right to the city is not a suggestion for reform, nor does it envision a fragmented, tactical, or piecemeal resistance. His idea is instead a call for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond. Key to this radical nature is that the right to the city reframes the arena of decision making in cities: it reorients decision-making away from the state and toward the production of urban space” (Purcell, 2002: 101).
While this quote implies a quite radical interpretation of Lefebvre, let us look at what exactly Purcell asks the urban dwellers to participate in “for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond:” In his 2003 article “Citizenship and the right to the global city: Reimagining the capitalist world order” he argues that “those who have a right to Los Angeles would have the right to participate centrally in a corporate board decision of a transnational corporation headquartered in Chicago that would affect urban space in Los Angeles” (2003: 578, emphasis added). He is more forthcoming when he details his example a few pages later:

“To take an example of decisions outside the state, now that Boeing (headquartered in Chicago) owns Hughes Electronics’ satellite communications operations (in the Los Angeles region), Los Angeles inhabitants would have the right to participate in any decision Boeing might make to shift satellite investment … elsewhere … Since the geography of employment is a key component of inhabitants’ lived space, the right to participation would allow Angeleno inhabitants a seat at the table in Chicago” (Purcell, 2003: 581, emphasis added).

Although Purcell’s interpretation of Lefebvre sounds quite radical, as he acknowledges that Lefebvre’s call is not for reform but for a radical transformation of capitalist relations; and although he recognizes the significance of inhabitant participation in the production of space, he ends up offering city dwellers a seat at the corporate table in a boardroom. He does so because his alleged radical reading of Lefebvre is severely curtailed by the fact that he accepts the city as it is. While Purcell argues that the
inhabitants should participate in the decisions concerning the production of urban space “for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond” (2002: 101), all he sees the right to the city providing is a seat in a corporate headquarter. This means Purcell’s horizon is limited to the capitalist city. From this vantage point, the subtitle of his 2003 article makes more sense: “Reimagining the capitalist world order.” He re-imagines a right to the city within the capitalist world order, indeed. Even though he reimagines a renewed city, it is still a capitalist city. Despite Purcell’s radical remarks, then, he ends up formulating a notion of participation that would, to a large extent, reproduce existing social, political and economic relations in the city. I would like to call such a notion of participation “reproductive participation.”

Liberal interpreters who remain within the confines of “reproductive participation” interpret Lefebvre’s emphasis on participation in political struggles over the production of urban space as a simple call for democratic participation in existing formal procedures of urban governance. Or, as Purcell does, they renounce the seat in the municipal boardroom for a seat at the corporate table. But the city of the right to the city remains the existing city. Although Lefebvre’s ambiguity contributes to such a reading, “reproductive participation” is surely not all there is in Lefebvre’s discussion. Rather than participating in urban space as it is, and rather than participating in the existing procedures of urban governance, what Lefebvre prioritized, I want to argue, was a kind of political participation directed towards transforming the social processes that produce capitalist urban space and its very governance. Lefebvre’s call to urban dwellers for claiming their right to participate in urban politics should be understood as a form of political
participation directed towards a fundamental restructuring of capitalist city and the social and economic relations it sustains. “Reproductive participation,” on the other hand, presumes an already established capitalist urban governance in which the participation of urban residents through pre-established channels then might become desirable. In Lefebvre’s original formulation, too, asserting the right to the city involves the participation of urbanites, but this participation is for remaking the city in novel ways, not for reproducing its existing dynamics. The crux of my argument is that “the city” of the right to the city is not the existing city, but the city that has not been produced yet; the one that exists in potentiality.

This is most evident when Lefebvre frames the ideal city as the political cradle of continuous social change, collectively driven by city’s inhabitants. “The ideal city,” he puts forth, “would be the ephemeral city, the perpetual oeuvre of the inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this oeuvre” (1996: 172-173, original emphasis). This is an important argument that reveals how Lefebvre encapsulates the city and its inhabitants within a dialectical framework. The “ephemeral city” is the fluid and dynamic product of its inhabitants, who are themselves products of the city, mobilized and inspired by the city. By virtue of being interwoven with the city, Lefebvre argues, its inhabitants have a fundamental right to the “ephemeral city,” that is, the city to come; the city that exists in potentiality; the city in the making (Lefebvre, 1996: 173). For him, “to direct growth towards development, therefore towards urban society, means firstly to prospect new needs, knowing that such needs are discovered in the course of their emergence … they do not pre-exist as objects” (1996: 165, original emphasis).
Margit Mayer aptly captures this, when she argues that the rights implied in the right to
the city exist only insofar as people fight to create them through social and political
action (2009: 367). They are not given as inalienable rights. If the appeal and strength of
universal human rights is its promise to all humans of certain inalienable rights by birth,
by virtue of them being human, the strength of the right to the city comes from the
absence of such an *a priori* promise. Instead, the right to the city implies certain rights to
urban inhabitants only insofar as they envision such rights, and get organized to fight for
them. David Harvey makes a similar point when he argues: “the right to the city is an
empty signifier. Everything depends on who gets to fill it with meaning … The definition
of the right is itself an object of struggle, and that struggle has to proceed concomitantly
with the struggle to materialize it” (2012: xv). This is what Mustafa Dikeç has in mind,
when he argues that “the right to the city is not simply a participatory right but, more
importantly, an enabling right, to be defined and refined through political struggle”
(Dikeç, 2001: 1790). Therefore, Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city implies a notion
of participation in politics in order to discover and determine new needs in a new city in
the course of the political process itself, rather than inviting city dwellers to the
participatory processes of liberal urban administration.

Revolutionary, transformative and forward-looking character of the social rights
embedded in the right to the city is also evident in Lefebvre’s own formulation. The right
to the city, according to him, “cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a
return to traditional cities” (Lefebvre, 1996: 158). Instead, he argues that the right to the
city “can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre, 1996: 158). It is important to pause for a moment and contemplate on the meaning of Lefebvre’s emphasis on the right to the city as transformed and renewed right to urban life, because it foregrounds what kind of a “right” Lefebvre talks about and also implies what kind of “participation” he has in mind when he talks about the right to the city.

First of all, he immediately puts forth a notion of right that should not be perceived as a simple “visiting right,” by which he means that the right to the city is not limited to, and aims beyond, advancing liberal notions of tolerance, hospitality and individual liberty in the city, where even the most marginalized can roam and live free from discrimination, exclusion and harassment. This is what David Harvey echoes when he argues that the right to the city is not simply about “individual liberty to access” to what the city has to offer (Harvey, 2008: 23). The right to the city, if understood as a visiting right, argues geographer Mustafa Dikeç, would bring Lefebvre too close to a Kantian notion of liberal cosmopolitanism, which is underwritten by universal hospitality and conditional tolerance. Dikeç argues that “the stranger” (read excluded or marginalized), following Kant’s famous essay on “Perpetual Peace,”

“cannot claim a right of residence but rather a right of visit. The stranger, upon his or her arrival also enjoys another right, that of hospitality, which suggests that he or she not be treated as an enemy by the host of the territory in question. There is no room for the stranger to claim a right, but simply to enjoy a right to visit or pass through.” (Dikeç, 2001: 1789-1790)
Neither such conditional hospitality towards those who are practically and essentially unwelcome, nor such transitionary right of passage for those who are at best temporarily tolerated are what Lefebvre has in mind when he argues for the right to the city. His notion of the right to the city aims at achieving much more central a place for urban dwellers, the users of the city; a centrality that is best understood both spatially and politically. The right to the city “would affirm, on the one hand,” argues Lefebvre, “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: 34). Here, centrality refers to being at the center of both urban politics—in terms of not being excluded from the political processes determining the fate of the city—and of urban space, in terms of not being pushed to the geographical peripheries of the city.

Second, in addition to dismissing a possible reductionist interpretation of the right to the city as a liberal visiting right, Lefebvre also remains distant from a romantic longing for the traditional medieval city, the old urban cores of which were “exploded” by the generalization of the exchange value relation. His comparisons between pre-capitalist European cities—where the work-of-art credentials of the city, the city as oeuvre, were more salient—and the modern capitalist city—which eventually erased those credentials and the primacy of use value off the face of the urban space—might possibly tempt some to read a certain romanticism in Lefebvre’s account. After all, the city as oeuvre, “which was the dominant mode of its production in western history,” (Isin, 2000: 13), was
replaced with the city as product, according to Lefebvre, by the ever expanding processes of modern capitalism. However, he is very clear on the implausibility of conceiving of the right to the city as a return to traditional cities. The notion of returning to some mythical urban past would be as absurd as politically undesirable for Lefebvre. “It is impossible to envisage the reconstitution of the old city,” he notes, “only the construction of a new one on new foundations, on another scale and in other conditions, in another society” (Lefebvre, 1996: 148).

New foundations, on another scale, in other conditions and another society are, I want to argue, what we should keep in mind when we construe Lefebvre’s highly celebrated notion of urban dwellers’ right to participate in urban politics integral to the right to the city. When we read this alongside his emphasis on the “ephemeral city” as the ideal city that should constantly be in the making by the city’s inhabitants, both the conception of “rights” and the vision of the “city” embedded in the right to the city concept strike us as dynamic, transformative and anticipative notions.

I would like to call this radical notion of political participation “transformative participation,” as it is geared to transform the ways in which urban space and cities are produced along with the social and economic relations they sustain. There is a considerable tension between “reproductive” and “transformative” forms of political participation. While the former implies a participation in the existing social, political and economic institutions in the existing city, the latter implies a participation in producing a new city, “on new foundations, on another scale and in other conditions, in another
society” (Lefebvre, 1996: 148). The tension between the two forms of participation is a dialectical one, similar to the dialectical tension between the actual and the possible, the existing and the potential. As Marx famously put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1972: 10), “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past.” We do not, in other words, have the luxury to transform social relations without getting engaged with the historically produced present conditions in the first place. Therefore, by distinguishing between “reproductive” and “transformative” modes of participation, I do not mean that they are mutually exclusive in absolute terms. It is much more productive, I think, to grasp and keep them in a dialectical tension.

The fact that the two forms of participation are dialectically related and should be thought of together does not mean, however, that there is not a meaningful difference between the two. The fundamental difference resides in the ways in which the existing social relations and institutions are treated, and to what extent getting over them is put in the horizon. There is also another component of this difference: Since Lefebvre frames the city and inhabitants’ fundamental right to it in such fluid and dynamic terms, he is wary of any urban prescription wrought and imposed from top down by capital, state or experts. According to him, urban life could not be recovered or stimulated “by authoritarian means or by administrative prescription, or by the intervention of specialists” (1996: 146). Instead he advocates for a right to the city, where human needs would be collectively defined by the inhabitants in the course of their struggle for a new urban
society. In other words, the right to the city “entails not a right to be distributed from above to individuals, but a way of actively and collectively relating to the political life of the city” (Dikeç, 2001: 1790). Hence Lefebvre’s insistence of “the ideal city,” as the “ephemeral city, the perpetual oeuvre of the inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this oeuvre.” (Lefebvre, 1996: 172-173). Therefore, there is a genuine democratic potential to be mobilized within “transformative participation.” Here, we do not talk about the participation of inhabitants in an already established political program. This is what the “reproductive participation” promises. Rather, we are talking about a “transformative participation” in the very process of building political programs. Only in this way can Lefebvre’s “ideal city,” which is the perpetual oeuvre of the inhabitants appear in the horizon as a possibility. Such fluid and processual formulations of the city, and our fundamental right to reshape it, intentionally carry all the dialectical tensions between the actual and the possible, while keeping the prospect of collectively determining the political paths that might lead to realizing the right to the city.

The Right to Appropriation

Although it has not been the center of attention as much as the right to participation, the right to appropriation, too, attracted some interest from those who have recently engaged with Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city. Upon review, the first salient characteristic that catches the eye in the literature is the tendency to equate the notion of appropriating urban space to the notion of having access to and utilizing city spaces. Joanna Duke, for instance, defines “the right to appropriate” as “utilizing city’s use value” (2009: 112).
Feminist geographer Tovi Fenster, argues by quoting Lefebvre, that “the right to appropriate urban space” implies the right to use. More explicitly, for her it refers to “the right of inhabitants to ‘full and complete use’ of urban space in their everyday lives. It is the right to live in, play in, work in, represent, characterize and occupy urban space in a particular city” (2005: 219). On similar grounds, Eugene McCann asserts that “the right to the city entails a continual and active process of appropriation in the sense of use … of urban spaces” (2002: 77). Finally, geographer Mark Purcell, who is again widely and favorably quoted by many of these scholars, makes a similar argument, noting that “[a]ppropriation includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space” (2002: 103). More specifically, for Purcell, “the right to appropriation is a right of use” (2003: 581, original emphasis).

Although the notion of appropriation certainly implies the right to have access and to use urban spaces—an argument against spatial marginalization and exclusion—I would like to argue that limiting the meaning of “appropriation” to “use” would lead to capturing only a part of the story. In other words, all of these accounts are helpful in suggesting what the appropriation of urban spaces might entail for the right to the city politics in terms of having access to and use what already exists in the spatial repertoire of the city. For instance, the right to housing, right to move freely in the streets free from all sorts of harassment, and the right to occupy and assembly for political expression in public spaces could all be considered as important aspects of the right to appropriation as characterized by the urbanists above. However, by equating the right to appropriate to the right to use already produced urban space, these accounts reflect a notion of appropriation that is
limited to the domain of “consumption,” and leave out crucial political possibilities immanent in foregrounding appropriation in “production.” Let me be clear: my aim here is not to dismiss the kind of urban politics revolving around what I want to call “appropriation in consumption,” but to suggest that a much more productive understanding of appropriation could be developed by bringing “appropriation in production” into the analysis.

Among those who have recently engaged with the notion of the right to the city, Mark Purcell indeed hints at this direction when he argues that “[n]ot only is appropriation the right to occupy already-produced urban space, it is also the right to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants” (2002: 103). However, Purcell simply asserts this and does not substantiate the argument any further. Purcell’s claim on the importance of the appropriation of urban space and its critical relation to production of space thus remains unfounded. Maybe this is not so surprising. Purcell acknowledges, recall, that Lefebvre’s call is not for reform but for a radical transformation of capitalist relations, while he recognizes the significance of inhabitant participation in the production of space. Yet he still ends up implying that what the right to the city could offer for city dwellers is a corporate seat at the boardroom. His political horizon, in other words, does not get beyond the existing city and excludes any formulation of a post-capitalist urban order, where there are no corporate seats to be claimed. Therefore, the question remains: how should we frame the notion of appropriation so that the analysis of “appropriation in consumption” does not conceal or inhibit the analysis of “appropriation in production?”
The kind of appropriation concept I would like to mobilize here could take its cue from the way Karl Marx frames the concept both in *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. One could argue that Marx’s notion of appropriation encompasses both appropriation in consumption and production without losing the dialectical tension between the two. For instance, in one of the key passages of *Grundrisse* he lays it down explicitly:

“[I]n production the members of society appropriate (create, shape) the products of nature in accord with human needs; distribution determines the proportion in which the individual shares in the product; exchange delivers the particular products into which the individual desires to convert the portion which distribution has assigned to him; and finally, in consumption, the products become objects of gratification, of individual appropriation” (Marx, 1993: 88-89).

Here in this passage, we can see that Marx uses appropriation in two dialectically related but different meanings: The first form of appropriation he refers to is what I call “appropriation in production.” Humans appropriate nature in order to produce use values. According to Marx, human societies cannot reproduce themselves without producing their livelihoods, and the production process requires appropriating nature through human labor. In the production process, therefore, humans appropriate and metabolize nature through their labor and concomitantly produce use values, the rest of nature (space) and human nature within a single process (Smith, 1984).
The second form of appropriation Marx refers to is what I call “appropriation in consumption.” Products become objects of individual appropriation hence become subjectified in “use” during the (final) consumption process. In the former conception, appropriation is cast as an inherent and inevitable moment of the production process, in the sense that humans appropriate external nature and socialize it through labor. Hence, in this conception, appropriation becomes a *sine qua non* element for the production of space. “All production,” Marx argues “is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society” (1993: 87). For him, “appropriation through labour”, should be understood as “the real economic process of *making something one's own*” (1993: 514, emphasis added). He makes a parallel argument in *Capital* when he defines productive activity as “an activity that appropriates particular nature-given materials to particular human wants” (1990: 29). In the latter conception of appropriation (in consumption), appropriation is represented as an inherent moment of the consumption process, whereby objective products of labor are made one’s own through final consumption.

In contrast to Marx’s appropriation of the concept of appropriation, Lefebvre’s appropriation is vaguer and vacillates between appropriation in consumption and appropriation in production. In addition to the difficulty presented by the fact that what Lefebvre means by the term appropriation is unclear at any given time, it also seems like he uses the term in one sense in one paragraph and in another sense in another paragraph without warning the reader. If we limited ourselves with what he wrote in *The Writings on Cities* (1996), we would find that he refers to the concept of appropriation
unsystematically, without explicating what he means when using the concept. Most of what Lefebvre’s interlocutors make out of the notion of appropriation in the context of the right to the city comes from the famous passage where he argues that “[t]he right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property) are implied in the right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996: 174, original emphasis). Other than that, Lefebvre refers to appropriation at various points in contradistinction to domination, but never goes into detail on any of these concepts. However, if one traces his thoughts on appropriation in his magnum opus, *The Production of Space* (1991), it is possible to see more clues on the different meanings in which he uses the term, as he discusses appropriation in relation to both domination and diversion.

According to Lefebvre, there is a highly significant distinction between domination and appropriation, hence between dominated and appropriated spaces. Yet, these concepts are inseparable from one another as they dialectically oppose each other. By dominated space, Lefebvre seems simply to mean abstract space of power, superimposed on an existing space by means of technology. “Military architecture, fortifications and ramparts, dams and irrigation systems—all offer many fine examples of dominated space,” which he defines as a space that is transformed and mediated by technology (1991: 164). “A motorway brutalizes the countryside and the land, slicing through space like a great knife. Dominated space is usually closed, sterilized, emptied out” (165). “Dominated (and dominant) space,” he goes on, “is invariably the realization of master’s project” whereby “technology introduces a new form into a pre-existing space—generally a rectilinear or rectangular form such as a meshwork or chequerwork” (164-165).
Although Lefebvre’s initial definition of dominated space as a preexisting space that is transformed by power via technology is terribly general—any space can be deemed as transformed by technology, which always involves a practice of power—it is pretty clear what kind of spatial practice Lefebvre has in mind. At a general level, dominated spaces could be understood as spaces produced by the powerful, while at a more particular level, Lefebvre seems to use this concept to denote certain interventions in space, which could be exemplified by Hausmann’s transformation of Paris through boulevards and Moses’s reshaping of New York by taking the “meat axe” to the Bronx. In both these examples, one could argue, preexisting space is transformed via boulevards and highways in order to attain the “master’s project,” to use Lefebvre’s term.

Lefebvre neither defines nor explains his understanding of appropriation as clearly as he does with domination. One simply has to follow his line of reasoning, hoping that it will become more clear what he means by the concept in the next paragraph. Right at the outset of his account of appropriation, he ventures into a discussion of appropriation in Marx and never really goes back to what he thinks of the notion of appropriation himself, except in a few phrases. He begins his discussion by noting that appropriation is the dialectical opposite of domination. Then comes the paragraph where Lefebvre is more forthcoming in terms of his understanding of appropriation:

Only by means of the critical study of space, in fact, can the concept of appropriation be clarified. It may be said of a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that
group. Property in the sense of possession is at best a necessary precondition, and most often merely an epiphenomenon, of 'appropriative' activity, the highest expression of which is the work of art. An appropriated space resembles a work of art, which is not to say that it is in any sense an imitation of a work of art. Often such a space is a structure — a monument or building — but this is not always the case: a site, a square or a street may also be legitimately described as an appropriated space. Examples of appropriated spaces abound, but it is not always easy to decide in what respect, how, by whom and for whom they have been appropriated” (Lefebvre, 1991: 165, original emphasis).

This is the passage where Lefebvre comes closest to an understanding of appropriation we have seen more clearly in Marx’s formulation. When Lefebvre states that “[i]t may be said of a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that group,” he seems to use the concept of “appropriation in production.” A natural space is appropriated in order to serve the needs of that group within the process of production. However, notice the difference when he discusses the notion of appropriation in the following passage:

“The diversion and reappropriation of space are of great significance, for they teach us much about the production of new spaces … From a purely theoretical standpoint, diversion and production cannot be meaningfully separated. The goal and meaning of theoretical thinking is production rather than diversion. Diversion is in itself merely appropriation, not creation — a reappropriation which can call but a temporary halt to domination” (Lefebvre, 1991: 167-168, emphasis added).
Different from the earlier passage, Lefebvre here argues that diversion—a reappropriation of space that outlived its original purpose—is merely appropriation, which is cast as external to the process of production of use values. Here it seems like what he has in mind is the appropriation of an existing space, not the production of space through appropriation. It is worthwhile to note that in this second meaning, Lefebvre clearly puts forth that such appropriative activity (appropriation in consumption) would only temporarily halt the “master’s project,” i.e., the process of domination of space. It is in this second sense—appropriation in consumption—that attracted the attention of most of those who have recently become engaged with the notion of the right to the city. The notion of appropriation in production is simply absent in these accounts. By taking into account the right to appropriation in production as I suggest here instead of merely casting it as utilizing and accessing urban spaces would highlight the process of production of urban space, as well as the laborers who take active part in this production process and their fundamental right to radically transform the ways in which urban space is produced.

I think it is important to distinguish instead of conflating the two forms of appropriation since the urban politics based on “appropriation in production” and the “appropriation in consumption” would look very different from one another. While the latter would entail the democratic distribution of what already exists in the city, which is very important, the former would push for a revolutionary transformation of the ways in which urban life is produced. Moreover, while the latter could partially be subsumed under and swallowed
by hegemonic liberal urbanism, the latter would necessitate a renewed urbanism, at another scale, produced under entirely different conditions. Finally, limiting the meaning of appropriation to having access to what already exists in the city would block the transformative and revolutionary potential of the right to the city concept. The politics of the right to the city, in short, should include the politics of appropriation in consumption but should transcend and transform itself by extending into the politics of appropriation in production. Limiting what the right to the city implies to the political struggle over what already exists in the city would cripple its transformative radical potential.

**Collective Individualism of “Rights Talk”**

Some contemporary radical urban theorists, such as David Harvey (2008) and Peter Marcuse (2009) have recently reiterated this crucial point by arguing that the right to the city should not be construed simply as a right to have access to the resources of existing city, but as a right to radically transform the material processes shaping it. As Harvey puts it explicitly:

“The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I
want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”

( Harvey, 2008: 23)

Along similar lines, Peter Marcuse argues that the right to the city is not limited to single, isolated rights such as right to housing, right to information, or right to access to the city center, although each is important and has a role to play in achieving the right to the city. Instead, ‘the right’ of the right to the city embodies a political claim that encompasses multiple rights. This claim is about “the right to a totality, a complexity, in which each of the parts is part of a single whole to which the right is demanded” (Marcuse, 2009: 193). More significantly for him, “the totality” to which a right is demanded is not the totality of what now exists under the current circumstances in cities today. Rather, it is “the right to a totality, to something whole and something wholly different from the existing city, the existing society” (Marcuse, 2009: 194).

However, the rights discourse, deeply embedded in the liberal capitalist tradition, does not sit easily with these radical formulations. There are many different sorts of right-claims, securing myriad interests, and more often than not, they are in conflict with one another (Attoh, 2011), precisely because the “open” and “indeterminate” language of rights could be incorporated in any political project (Tushnet, 1984: 1375). More crucially, rights discourse is dominantly individualistic, and seems to be inseparable from private property rights (Mitchell, 2003). As David Harvey points out, “we live in a society in which the inalienable rights to private property and the profit rate trump any other conception of inalienable rights you can think of” (2003: 940). This is why he, for one, insists that the right to the city should be conceived in terms of collective rights as
opposed to individual rights of private property (Harvey, 2008). Harvey goes on to suggest that those concerned with social justice issues should wage a political struggle to define social rights as collective rights against those who have a vested interest in defining them on an individualistic basis (Buckingham, 2010; Caruso, 2010). Peter Marcuse agrees with David Harvey, insisting that the right to the city is concerned with “the collectivity of rights, not individualistic rights” (Marcuse, 2009: 193; also see Horlitz and Vogelpohl, 2009: 1068).

It is important to carve out a space for collective rights against the often-undisputed political power of individualistic rights, especially under the neoliberal hegemony of the past few decades. Although collective rights imply a mechanism for collective voice and action, such juxtaposition, nevertheless, still leaves us with certain questions we must address in order to engage critically with the theory behind the right to the city concept, and the practical political problems that might flow from it. How does framing the right to the city as a collective right overcome the difficulties that may arise from the very embeddedness of rights discourse within the liberal tradition? From a liberal standpoint, Immanuel Kant’s early formulations of cosmopolitanism onwards, corporations and even nation-states “can be regarded as single individuals” that aim to maximize their self-interest within the political-economic field (Kant, 1983: 115). The concept of “corporate personhood” ratified and protected by the US juridical system might be considered as a case in point.
However, this peculiar individualism is not simply confined to large corporations or nation-states. Grassroots community organizations, often mobilized around an axis of social difference (race, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual preference) are also susceptible to what I wish to call collective individualism. I suggest this term to highlight the tendency of social groups, small or large, to mobilize against a social problem, not because its logic is seen as “universally” unjust, but because it is happening “particularly” to them. In this context, the sort of collectivity produced through collectivist—yet simultaneously particularist—politics on the one hand, and liberal individualism on the other seem to be the two sides of the same coin. In other words, political mobilizations around collective rights neither necessarily open a space for radical politics, nor such mobilizations automatically fall outside of the liberal tradition. As such, the problems implicated in collective individualism—that surface in a variety of collective mobilizations and have been a hallmark of “not-in-my-backyard politics”—are not easy to overcome by a simple resort to defining the right to the city in terms of collective rights as opposed to individual rights, as Harvey and Marcuse seem to be suggesting.

Harvey’s analysis of the right to the city, however, proposes more than defining the right to the city in terms of collective as opposed to individual rights. Criticizing the politics of human rights at the outset of his article for occupying the center stage of oppositional politics while not fundamentally challenging “hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics, or the dominant modes of legality and state action” (2008: 23), he argues for an alternative human right, namely that of the right to the city, which could, according to him, pose such a fundamental challenge. In order to make his case for the importance of
the right to the city, Harvey examines the historical coupling of urbanization and the process of capital accumulation. Elaborating on two examples—of Haussmann’s Second Empire Paris in the 1850s and Moses’ New York in the 1940s—Harvey forcefully argues, as we discussed earlier, that urbanization has historically played a crucial strategic role “in absorbing the surplus product that capitalists perpetually produce in their search for profits” (2008: 25). At both of these historical moments as well as with the neoliberal turn in the 1970s, Harvey observes, urban transformation at ever increasing geographical scales, accompanied by innovations in the financial system, played a chief role in solving the problem of “absorption of capital surpluses” (2008: 37).

The specificity of the contemporary era, as Harvey correctly points out, is that both urbanization, and the financial system together with the problem of absorption of capital surpluses are globalized (2008: 37). If the right to the city should “mean the right to command the whole urban process,” as Harvey argues (2008: 28), then fragmented social movements around the world should come together, according to him, for devising a sufficiently unified response to this globalized process in order to assert their right to the city (2008: 37). “Signs of rebellion are everywhere,” he notes, but “unlike the fiscal system” social movements of opposition “are not tightly coupled” and integrated (2008: 37). While Harvey’s critique of “fragmented social movements” did not go unchallenged (Shepard, 2010; Souza, 2010), I would like to direct our attention to elsewhere: to what Harvey deems a “simple enough” answer to the question of what movements should demand, if they somehow come together to claim the right to the city. I would like to do
so as this question is directly linked to our discussion of what constitutes a radical formulation of the right to the city.

The “democratic management” over urban deployment of capital, “as the urban process is a major channel for surplus use,” is what constitutes the right to the city, according to Harvey (2008: 37). The right to the city, then, is about democratically managing how to use accumulated capital within the urban process. For Harvey, “the neoliberal assault” was mainly about preventing “the public share from expanding as it did in the 1960s.” Therefore, on the question of how to achieve the “democratic management of its [capital’s] urban deployment,” he argues “raising the proportion of the surplus held by the state will only have a positive impact if the state itself is brought back under democratic control” (2008: 37, emphasis added). Now, even if we brush aside Harvey’s appropriation of the language of “democratic management”—which unfortunately echoes UN-HABITAT’s liberal technocratic discourse on urban governance—there is a significant mismatch between Harvey’s attempt to render a radical interpretation of the right to the city and what he thinks constitutes the right to the city. By mainly targeting the neoliberal assault on the public share of surplus, and by proposing to bring back the state under democratic control, Harvey’s formulation ends up affirming and calling back 1960’s capitalist welfare state, perhaps as part of a new “new deal.”

To be fair, Harvey also mentions democratic control over the conditions of surplus production, which would require a more thorough restructuring of capitalist relations beyond reviving the 1960s style welfare state, of which Lefebvre, by the way, was an
adamant critic, calling it “a bureaucratic society of managed consumption” (1996: 147). Harvey seems not to sufficiently emphasize democratic control over the conditions of surplus production in his formulation of the right to the city since he does not see any strong and sufficiently unified political movement capable of challenging capitalists’ control over the production process. However, even so, we have to ask whether confining the right to the city to the “democratic management” of surplus’ urban deployment by “raising the proportion of the surplus held by the state” through “bringing back the state under democratic control” transcend the political limitation Harvey highlighted at the beginning of his article? That is, can Harvey’s analysis be considered as going beyond reproducing “hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics, or the dominant modes of legality and state action” (2008: 23), while his analysis implies a longing for pre-neoliberal welfare state? More precisely, does Harvey’s analysis transcend the “liberal” market logic, modes of legality and state action as successfully as it does the “neoliberal” ones? If we cannot satisfactorily answer this question with a solid yes without reservations, then how could we frame the right to the city so that its radically transformative potential remains open?

**The Value of use value for the Right to the City**

Instead of grounding the notion of the right to the city in the binary of individual vs. collective rights, or limiting its scope to the “democratic management of surplus’ urban deployment,” I propose starting from Lefebvre’s earlier formulation by framing the right to the city in terms of the use value of urban space, and the ensuing rights of its inhabitants who “use” the city. According to Lefebvre, the fundamental contradiction at
the heart of capitalism between use value and exchange value is also inscribed under the skin of urban space. After all, he argues, space “is producing and produced by social relations” (Lefebvre, 2009: 186; see also, Smith, 1984). Spatial processes and social relations are interlaced in such a way that “space and politics of space express social relationships but react against them” (Lefebvre, 2003: 15).

For Lefebvre, the spatialization of the contradiction between use value and exchange value reflects capitalist social relations, in which the inhabitants who ‘use’ the city are marginalized in favor of those who seek to realize ‘exchange’ value of urban space. He argues that the capitalist strategy of privileging exchange value over use value requires producing and controlling urban space in a way that necessarily “overwhelms, the ‘user,’ the ‘participant,’ the simple ‘inhabitant’” (Lefebvre, 2003: 156; see also, Dikeç, 2009). Capitalist urbanism simply reduces the user, the inhabitant to “being a buyer of space, one who realizes surplus value” (Lefebvre, 2003: 156); or still worse, it displaces and excludes the ones who are unable to pay the price from what is essentially a social, but commodified and commercialized space under capitalism. For Lefebvre, however, “city and urban reality are related to use value. Exchange value and the generalization of commodities … tend to destroy it by subordinating the city and urban reality which are refuges of use value, the origins of a virtual predominance and revalorization of use” (Lefebvre, 1996: 67-68). The form of exchange and equivalence, however, is “indifferent towards urban form; it reduces simultaneity and encounters to those of the exchangers and the meeting place to where the contract or quasi-contract of equivalent exchange is concluded: the market” (1996: 131). Reduction of the urban to the market and
subordination of use value to exchange value is the core of the reason why Lefebvre frames the right to the city primarily as the right of a city’s inhabitants, who daily use the city, rather than the right of developers, real estate agents and financiers who perceive the city as a space of opportunities for realizing (spatial) exchange values. If the constant generalization of exchange value relation under capitalism tends to “destroy the city and urban reality,” and “overwhelms, the ‘user,’ the ‘participant,’ the simple ‘inhabitant,’” then it is the exchange value relation itself that should be abolished so that the right to the city could meaningfully be realized. As Lefebvre asserts in *The Production of Space* by echoing Marx, “a new society can only be defined as a turning of the world upon its head” (1991: 348). That new definition requires nothing short of the production of an alternative urban society based on use value. Lefebvre thus calls on the inhabitants who are users of the city to organize themselves in order to claim their right to the city by transforming the capitalist processes that marginalize them for their lack of command over exchange value (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009).

Lefebvre’s analysis of the right to the city, and the way he formulates it around the central contradiction of capitalism between use value and exchange value—presciently formulated at the dawn of what we could call today the globalization of capitalist urbanism—are nothing short of a testament to his insight and brilliance. Be that as it may, it is in fact curious that Lefebvre, dialectician and theorist of triads, limits his analysis to the contradiction between use value and exchange value, and does not introduce “value” into his formulation of the right to the city to give a more dialectical spin to his analysis. In the capitalist mode of production, the source of value, as classical political economists
and Marx agreed, is labor, while value embodies the contradiction between use value and exchange value. Far from being a simple synthesis of the two in Marx’s framework, value presents a convergence point of use value and exchange value that should be further expanded and explained. The relational dialectics between use value, exchange value, and value forms the fundamental triad through which Marx establishes his examination of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital* (1990).

Lefebvre’s exclusion of value from his analysis of the right to the city is curious, because on multiple occasions he argues against the productivity of simple oppositions and promotes a dialectical analysis that springs from triads. For instance, right after introducing his famous triad of “spatial practice,” “representations of space” and “representational spaces” in *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre pauses to warn his reader: “A triad: that is three elements and not two. Relations between two elements boil down to oppositions, contrasts or antagonisms,” which philosophy, he suggests, has found “very difficult to get beyond.” Instead, Lefebvre highlights “the dialectical relationship which exists within the triad” (Lefebvre, 1991: 39). “Dialectical processes,” he argues even more forcefully later in the book, “cannot be reduced to binary oppositions, to contrasts” but they “mobilize triads, tripartite conflicts or connections” (1991: 228).

Lefebvre’s curious exclusion of value from his analysis is also interesting as inclusion of value would not undermine, but strengthen his main argument. The crux of Lefebvre’s critique in his short book, *Le Droit à la Ville* (The right to the city) is that the city as
oeuvre, the domain of use value, is reduced to a product by the generalization of exchange value relation in the capitalist city. That is to say, under capitalism, the city as oeuvre, the city as the “materialized labor” of its inhabitants, as value, is reduced to, and represented by exchange value. The collective materialized labor of city’s inhabitants—which is the substance of value—is the substance that makes the city an oeuvre. Value, however, is represented only by its form of appearance, exchange value.

From this vantage point, Lefebvre’s argument could be read as not a simple privileging of use value of the city within capitalist relations, but as an argument for the critical nexus between use value and value that should be established in an alternative urbanism where the capitalist law of value is abolished. Only the integration of value and use value, without the mediation of exchange value, would reveal use value as the ultimate form of value, which is possible only outside of capitalist relations. As long as value is represented by exchange value, a city’s useful qualities and its use value will be dominated by quantified exchange value. This means cities will be made and remade along the interests of capital and its constant appetite for profit and not by the social needs and requirements of its inhabitants, the ventricle of the right to the city as conceptualized by Lefebvre.

Taking value into account enables us to strengthen Lefebvre’s argument against the determination of what is of value in urban life by exchange value, which reduces the city to a product, the urban to the market. More importantly, it also enables us to excavate and bring to the forefront the collective labor process behind the creation of city as an oeuvre,
which remains implicit and quiescent in Lefebvre’s framework. Underlining the
importance of value, and its substance—labor—for the right to the city is vital since, it is
labor that builds the city and makes it livable by producing use values, and under the
capitalist mode of production, it is primarily labor that is excluded from urban space, the
city, the oeuvre and hence from claiming the right to the city.

Last but not least, there is yet another reason why we should establish the critical nexus
between use value and value, and this point is political as much as it is theoretical. Mark
Purcell, for one, argues in numerous places for the primacy of use value for the right to
the city (2002; 2003; 2014), yet, as we have seen, he still imagines a capitalist city where
the democratic participation of inhabitants would be defined by their ability to get a seat
at the corporate table. Furthermore, as we shall see in the next chapter, UN agencies have
little difficulty in talking about the importance of use value and the social function of
urban space. Nevertheless, every time they do so they translate the centrality of use value
in Lefebvre’s account into exchange value terms. In other words, anytime UN agencies
talk about and promote the importance of use value in the documents and forums I
examine next, they take for granted that use values will only be accessible to consumers
in the market, i.e., use value will be mediated by exchange value.

That is to say, although the primacy of use value is recognized as one of the radical
aspects of Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city, it also provides an entry point
for liberal appropriation. The main reason for this, I think, is that just like the notion of
appropriation, which is interpreted by liberal observers as accessing and utilizing what
already exists in the spatial repertoire of the city, the notion of “use” in use value implies accessing and consuming what the existing city has to offer. Therefore, similar to what I attempt to do in this chapter by offering the notion of “appropriation in production,” which brings to the forefront the labor process and the process of production as opposed to (final) consumption, I argue for the inclusion of value in the right to the city, both to enable a more dialectical understanding of the notion and to render the collective labor process behind the production of oeuvre an integral part of the right to the city. Otherwise, as we will see in the next chapter, Lefebvre’s argument could be read simply as an emphasis on the significance of use value of urban space within capitalist relations, rather than as an argument for establishing the critical nexus between use value and value that could only be formed in an alternative urbanism where the capitalist law of value is abolished. In order to prevent the hijacking of the politics of use value by a consumer politics for accessing use values in the city, which constructs the urban inhabitant as a passive dweller and user of urban services, we need to recast the urban inhabitant as an active political architect of appropriation in production. One of the ways to achieve this is building creative means of transformative (political) participation for establishing the critical nexus between use value and value, which I would like to call the politics of value. For this, going beyond Lefebvre by incorporating value into the theory of the right to the city is indispensable.

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This chapter discussed the trans-disciplinary literature on the right to the city and attempted to construct the right to the city as a theory of radical and alternative urbanism. It mainly identified three nodal points (participation, appropriation and value), each of which embodies dialectically opposed concepts (reproductive/transformative participation, appropriation in consumption/appropriation in production, exchange value/use value-value) that I use in the rest of this dissertation as a framework for theoretical analysis and political evaluation.

The following two chapters take varied cuts into the politics of and political struggle for the right to the city and evaluate and analyze two right to the city claims in relation to three dialectical relations I establish in this chapter. These dialectical relations for analyzing diverse urban political projects form the foundation of the central argument that undergirds the next two chapters: To the extent that any urban political project is able to move its political practice from appropriation in consumption towards appropriation in production, from the politics of exchange value towards establishing the critical nexus between use value and value, while establishing mechanisms for political participation that are characterized by a move from reproductive to transformative participation, it comes closer to realizing the right to the city and the more just urbanism embodied in it. This would be a move towards the production of space from below.
CHAPTER III

GLOBAL INCLUSIVE URBANISM: RIGHT TO THE CITY AS A BRIDGE ACROSS THE URBAN DIVIDE

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the right to the city claim made by UN agencies in their attempt to reform the hegemonic neoliberal urbanism and argues that their attempt falls short because UN agencies trip on their own contradictions. In the heart of UN agencies’ contradictions lies the belief shared by most of its political agents, whether institutional or individual, that the primary venue to solve urbanized world’s problems is the global free market.

The chapter begins with a brief history of the globalization of the struggle for the right to the city among the activist circles in various national, regional, and world social forums and offers a narrative about how the UN institutions got interested in the notion of the right to the city. As I hope to show, these two narratives are intertwined, as the development of UN agencies’ interest in the right to the city is not detached from the popularization of the notion among grassroots activist circles. The chapter then shows how the formulation of the right to the city differs between the grassroots World Social Forum activists and the UN-organized World Urban Forum participants by looking at the documents that were drafted by UN agencies, particularly the World Urban Forum reports produced by UN-HABITAT. I juxtapose the ways in which the notion of the right
to the city is understood in World Social Forums and World Urban Forums to make the argument that, other differences notwithstanding, the fundamental difference lies in UN agencies’ translation of use value into exchange value terms as the defining characteristic of the right to the city concept.

In addition to the translation from use value into exchange value, I also detect a salient tendency in the World Urban Forum reports that attempt to define the right to the city as a “group of ethical values,” which the urban poor must “adhere to” in order to claim their right to the city. According to this stance within the UN institutions, the poor can only claim their right to the city if they are “responsible.” This standpoint argues that the poor must be taught “how to live in cities,” which I examine as an example of paternalist urbanism that is not particularly inconspicuous within the UN circles.

The chapter then moves on to examine the fifth World Urban Forum convened in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil in 2010, as the notion of the right to the city was carried to the title as the central theme, and was elaborated in a more detailed way than it had been the case in previous World Urban Forums. After examining what the forum report brings to the forefront as desirable aspects of the right to the city, its policy implications and plans, I identify another salient tendency that does not sit easily with the paternalist urbanism detected earlier: UN agencies’ genuine effort to push for a more participatory politics to create inclusive cities. Closely examining in the reports and documents what this political participation entails and the meaning of inclusive cities, as well as the prominence of market as the primary venue to solve the problems of the urbanized world, I argue in the
end that when UN agencies talk about inclusive cities, they have in mind the inclusion of the marginalized and the excluded in global capitalism, as it is, perhaps without its worst outcomes. Since the dominant urbanism that emerges out of UN agencies, their reports and forums, implies a right to the city defined by exchange value terms, the city consequentially emerges from this picture, first and foremost, as a space of free market.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter I dwell upon conceptual and political conundrums of UN agencies’ appropriation of the right to the city against the backdrop of the relatively recent discussions on the emergence and consolidation of a postpolitical, postdemocratic social condition. I do so because the symptoms identified in the postpolitical urban condition by important urbanists such as Eric Swyngedouw, symptoms such as the dominance of expert knowledge, stakeholder-based arrangement of governance, and consensual vision of the urban environment are quite prevalent in World Urban Forums I examine. In this section I question the helpfulness of framing the right to the city claim made by UN agencies as a process that contributes to the consolidation of postpolitical, postdemocratic society. Instead, I propose that one should approach and analyze UN agencies’ right to the city politics as a political project, which has identifiable political agenda and objectives.

**Globalization of the struggle for the Right to the City**

Although the Brazilian urban social movements have been using the right to the city language since the 1980s and 1990s (Fernandes, 2007: 212; Friendly, 2013: 158), it would still be fair to argue that early in the twenty-first century, the right to the city idea
gained a whole new momentum. Urban justice movements around the world began to express their urban politics through the language of the right to the city, which in turn increasingly popularized the concept in activist circles as an explicit organizing tenet and guide for political action. Some of these activist groups, networks, and grassroots organizations that led the political revival of the concept were not newcomers to the global activism scene, and had their roots in the anti-globalization struggles of the 1990s, and in the anti-war mobilizations of the early 2000s (Leavitt et al., 2009). It is not possible to put a finger on the exact historical moment when diverse and geographically scattered social justice movements around the globe began to express their urban politics through the language of the right to the city. Nevertheless, one could start from the World Social Forum where the right to the city idea was carried to the global stage in its first convention, held in Porte Alegre, Brazil in 2001.

The World Social Forum was conceived as an open space to exchange ideas, experiences, and proposals constructed for and by a variety of activist networks, grassroots organizations, social movements and other civil society initiatives that opposed neoliberal globalization (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003; Leite, 2005; Waterman and Sen, 2007). “Another world is possible,” the emblematic common cry of the forum, was an affirmation of the very demand for an alternative globalization, and of the various ways in which activists who attended the World Social Forum situated themselves against the “domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism” (World Social Forum, 2001). Since its inception, the forum has served as a ground to collectively reflect “on the mechanisms and instruments of domination by capital, on means and actions to resist and
overcome that domination, and on the alternatives proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and social inequality … with its racist, sexist and environmentally destructive dimensions” (World Social Forum, 2001). Given the role and the prominence of cities as command centers within the intricate network of global capitalism that activists overtly opposed, it is understandable that the notion of the right to the city surfaced in discussions among various social movements that came into contact in Porte Alegre, Brazil.

Among activists and grassroots organizations, interest in the idea of the right to the city became more salient at the second World Social Forum, as “the World Seminar on the Right to the City – Against Inequality and Discrimination” was held in 2002. This seminar was very crucial in initiating the first steps towards the formulation of a World Charter for the Right to the City, which was drafted in 2003, and later revised in 2004 (Busà, 2009). Concomitantly, the aim of mobilizing for “a global movement for the right to the city” was first expressed at the World Social Forum in 2003, and “since then it has been renovated in later editions while growing and facilitating a degree of convergence among a growing number of activists” (Caruso, 2010: 103). Increasing interest in the notion became very visible, for instance, in Porto Alegre in 2005, where more than seven hundred activists took active part in a workshop on the right to the city during the fifth World Social Forum (Osorio, 2006: 107; Fernandes, 2007: 216). Many of the participants of the forum, in short, increasingly embraced the idea of the right to the city as a common ground to form alliances against urban injustices, and to produce alternatives that “stand
in opposition” to a globalization “commanded by the large multinational corporations … governments, and international institutions” (World Social Forum, 2001).

The grassroots activist networks that sprung from the World Social Forum facilitated, for instance, coalition-building practices among urban justice groups across the United States, and paved the way for the formation of the National Right to the City Alliance (RTTC-US) in 2007 (Caruso, 2010; RTTC-NYC, 2009; Leavitt et al., 2009), which we briefly examined in chapter I. In addition to inspiring a US-wide alliance of urban justice movements, Lefebvre’s concept as invigorated in various national, regional and World Social Forums, has been embraced increasingly by radical grassroots movements around the globe. Geographically and socio-economically distant groups—whose struggles crystallize around accessing use values—such as the Shack dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durham, South Africa (Pithouse, 2010), and Recht auf Stadt, a network of squatters, tenants and artists in Hamburg, Germany (Souza, 2010: 316), frequently use the language and organizing tenets inspired by the right to the city concept. Moreover, even though they may not be part of the same formal alliance, common right to the city language and international network of activists enable similar groups to get into contact with each other. For instance, one of the founding RTTC-NYC organizations, Picture the Homeless travelled to Budapest, Hungary, to meet and exchange experiences with A Város Mindenkié (The city is for all), a similar grassroots homeless organization fighting against the criminalization of homelessness in Budapest (Udvarhelyi, 2012).
The popularization of the right to the city at the global scale, both as a concept to problematize and examine existing sociospatial relations in increasingly commodified, privatized, and gated cities, and as a political slogan to flame the revolutionary transformation of these cities is not surprising. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the right to the city idea was revived and gained global political momentum—for activists and academics alike—many of the political economic problems Lefebvre addressed at the end of the 1960s had already reached unprecedented levels in cities around the world. Lefebvre’s call to reclaim the city for the increasingly impoverished urban dwellers, who rely on the use value of urban space rather than its exchange value resonated with manifold social groups who were excluded from urban spaces that are brought under the hegemony of exchange value relations. The enclosures of the urban commons, surveillance of public spaces, criminalization of homelessness, as well as the widening gap between those who toil everyday and those who speculate over the labor of others are not unique to any specific geography of global neoliberalism. Lefebvre’s slogan thus appealed to myriad urban social movements, fighting against the disenfranchisement of cities’ users and inhabitants.

In the meantime, however, the right to the city concept has also drawn considerable attention from a less anticipated mix of organizations, which have not been renown for their valorization of the social function of urban space and use values embedded in cities. UN agencies such as UN-HABITAT, UNDP and UNESCO have been quick to organize conferences and symposiums—gathering governmental and non-governmental elites as well as experts from around the world—and have outlined policies to absorb the notion of
the right to the city into their own political framework. How is that the UN-affiliated institutions—often accompanied in these conferences by the delegates from the institutions of global finance capital, such as the IMF and the World Bank—got interested in the notion of the right to the city? How did a notion put forth and elaborated by a Marxist theorist find itself a seat in the boardrooms of UN-affiliated organizations? Even a brief glance at the history of UN agencies would suffice to suggest that these institutions, which have been critical for the sustenance of global capitalism in the past six decades are not marching behind the banner of the right to the city in order to challenge the hegemony of exchange value in capitalist urbanism. What is it, then, that makes the right to the city concept so attractive for UN-HABITAT and UNESCO? What are the political ends UN-agencies attempt to realize by reframing their urban politics within the right to the city framework?

The answer to these questions, I want to argue, partly lie in the two conflicting tendencies within the UN institutions. On the one hand, there is a strong tendency within the UN circles to equate human well-being with the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms in the free market. As I argue later in the chapter, this neoliberal strand constitutes the hegemonic majority, and characterized by a trust in the market to solve globalized urban problems. As we shall see shortly, many urban problems, according to this faction, can be solved with more investment, more credit and by including the poor in business practices in the free market. Letting free market capitalism do its job, albeit with a few regulations and reforms, would suffice, they hold. Theirs is the main discourse that defines the hegemonic urbanism at the World Urban Forum, and in the larger UN
circles. I would like to frame this hegemonic urbanism within UN institutions as “global inclusive urbanism.” I would like to do so because, although UN agencies hardly discuss the urban issues of the cities of the Global North, such as homelessness in New York, or spatial segregation in Paris, the scope of their policies is global. This global urbanism, which takes the global free market as the primary venue to solve urbanized problems, decidedly aims at a more inclusive urban setting.

In addition to this neoliberal strand, there are some organizations and individuals within the UN institutions that are highly worried about the ecological, social, political and economic sustainability of contemporary neoliberal urbanism. Raquel Rolnik, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, for instance, often talks about the detrimental effects of contemporary neoliberal economic policies on the urban poor and criticizes market-based solutions to the housing problem as it leads, according to her, to massive displacement of poor people (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 28). Furthermore, she argues that the states have “obligations to take steps to ensure and sustain the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing” and that the financialization of housing only helps to increase the gap between the rich and the poor (Rolnik, 2013: 3; 2009).

Raquel Rolnik is not alone in her critique of free market fundamentalism. Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has significantly contributed in the formulation of the Human Development Report published by the UNDP and advised UN’s International Labor Organization for years. Sen argues that the most crucial question of our times is whether we can change the nature of capitalism to have a more just society. In the context
of United States, for instance, he suggests that the most effective stimulus to counteract 2008 crises might be state health care spending (Smith, 2009: 11). I take this tendency, which remains critical to the straightforward neoliberal stance within the UN circles as the liberal strand. As the two figures I mentioned shows, the liberal strand is heterogeneous, containing people like Rolnik who attempts to push UN-affiliated politics towards the left, and people like Sen, who is borderline neoliberal but still highly sensitive to issues pertaining to social justice (Harvey, 2005: 184).

The liberal strand within UN organizations seems to see the notion of the right to the city as an opportunity to curtail the excesses of neoliberal urbanism, and this might be one of the factors behind the liberal interest in the right to the city. They emphasize the social function of urban land, promote sustainable, inclusive cities and endorse poverty reduction programs in the World Urban Forums. As we will see in the forum reports shortly, the chief problem for the liberals that attend these forums is that they remain minority and their voice is marginal in the forums. Although the UN-HABITAT advertises the forum as a democratic platform that brings together all the “key urban stakeholders,” from all political backgrounds, this is not entirely the case. As the forum reports show, the overwhelming majority of the participants are “heads of state, government ministers, mayors and leaders of global foundations and big business,” which UN-HABITAT is proud of (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2). Despite the presence of critical voices from the liberal faction, the UN agencies’ and most participants’ trust in the market as a venue to solve urban problems remains powerful and dominant. As I will demonstrate shortly, if the liberals within UN-affiliated organizations thought that the
right to the city concept provided them with a leverage to break neoliberal hegemony within UN circles, it is hard to argue that they were right in that respect.

Before examining the World Urban Forum reports, and other documents drafted by the UN agencies, particularly by UN-HABITAT and UNESCO, to detect the chief ways in which the right to the city is elaborated on, I would like to say a few words about the constitution of the World Urban Forum and forum reports themselves. Although the World Urban Forum provides a venue for the expression of diverse views on globalized urban problems by diverse actors, UN-HABITAT remains the most important player in the forum as the convener of the event. The forum report of the inaugural meeting of the World Urban Forum reflects this under the title: Working Arrangements of the World Urban Forum.

“The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) will serve as the convenor and secretariat of the World Urban Forum. It will organize the dialogue sessions in consultation with Governments, local authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners, taking into account, as far as practicable, the need for geographical, partner and gender balances. It will also be responsible for supporting the Chair in the preparation of the report of each session. It may delegate the organization of particular dialogue sessions to specific partners” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 48-49).

“The provisional agenda for each session of the World Urban Forum will be prepared by the secretariat in consultation with national governments, local
authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners, at least six months in advance of the session” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 48).

UN-HABITAT makes a couple of important points here. First, it announces that the dialogue sessions are organized by UN-HABITAT in consultation with governments and local authorities. That is to say, the primary agenda and context in which diverse actors share their views at the forum is set by UN-HABITAT and state agents. Second, the reports of the sessions, which I draw a lot from in my analysis, are written by the Chair of the forum, supported by UN-HABITAT.

“In essence, the main discussions of the Forum will be conducted in the form of dialogues among all participants. Towards this end, selected panelists would introduce and make short substantive presentations on specific issues followed by discussions among all participants on those specific issues” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 48).

“At the end of each dialogue session, the Chair of each session, drawing from the deliberations, would prepare a summary of the main issues and observations raised during the presentations and discussions. These dialogue summaries should be as inclusive as possible. Once endorsed by the plenary as an accurate reflection of what transpired in the dialogues, these dialogue summaries would be part of the report to be submitted by the Chair of the Forum to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT for consideration and appropriate action, including transmittal to the biennial sessions of the Governing” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 48, emphasis added).
As it is evident in this quotation as well, even though diverse actors express opinions on various issues at the forum, it is the Chair of the forum who eventually decides what the “main issues and observations” are in sessions, which are then reflected in the forum report. The primary aim of the forum report is also set as providing advice and recommendations to world’s governing elites.

“The report of the World Urban Forum will be presented to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT for consideration and appropriate action, including transmittal to the biennial sessions of the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 47, emphasis added).

This aim of the report writing is also expressed by the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, which is reflected in the report of the 2002 inaugural World Urban Forum.

“The Executive Director noted that as a biennial event, the World Urban Forum would be held in inter-sessional years when the Governing Council of UN-HABITAT was not held. The World Urban Forum would complement, not replicate the work of the Governing Council. Its mandate was to make and forward substantive recommendations, through the UN-HABITAT Executive Director, to the Governing Council” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 51, emphasis added).

These substantive recommendations, according to Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, the
Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, should not only concern UN-HABITAT but also all national governments.

“Since the World Urban Forum fundamentally is meant to provide advice to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, who may then advise the Governing Council and ECOSOC on issues of priority importance, the direct recipients of the recommendations from this World Urban Forum are besides UNHABITAT itself, all national governments … In this regard, the Executive Director thanked Government participants, particularly Ministers and other very senior officials who had attended. The Forum will have little impact if governments and other actors do not make use of the Governing Council to discuss what has transpired and to *mainstream appropriate recommendations into the official decision making system*” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 59, emphasis added).

Besides providing advice and recommendations to the world’s governing elites, primarily composed of state agents, another crucial aim of UN-HABITAT in the forum seems to put the ideas developed in the forum in the service of UN’s global development agenda and its partner international development agencies. This is expressed explicitly by Sankie D. Mthembi-Mahanyele, then the Minister for Housing of the Republic of South Africa and the chair of the first session of the World Urban Forum. In the opening session of the 2002 World Urban Forum, Mthembi-Mahanyele implied that the primary function of the World Urban Forum was to bring together governments and international development agencies to solve problems posed by urbanization.
“As an open-ended gathering of Governments and all Habitat Agenda partners, the Forum was expected to recommend solutions to current urbanization challenges, identify synergies among development agencies and contribute, from the human settlements point of view, to the global debate on sustainable development. The current session of the Word Urban Forum would also serve as a preconference event to finalize inputs on Habitat issues for the World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in Johannesburg in August 2002” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 50, emphasis added).

“By remaining focused on these challenges of urbanization, the World Urban Forum would evolve into an effective venue for global civic engagement that would have a continuing impact on the development agenda of the United Nations” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 51, emphasis added).

If we take a look at the UN-HABITAT document that describes the “objectives of and arrangements for the World Urban Forum,” it would not be unfair to argue that the United Nations General Assembly imagined and aimed for a forum, to a large extent, that would bring together government elites and experts to resolve urban issues:

“The United Nations General Assembly decided, in its resolution 56/206, that the Forum would be a “non-legislative technical forum in which experts can exchange views in the years when the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme does not meet.” At the same session, the General Assembly, in paragraph 7 of its resolution 56/205, encouraged local authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners to participate, as appropriate, in the World
Urban Forum in its role as an advisory body to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 47, emphasis added).

The same document, under the title of “participation,” details the actors, whose participation in the forum is important:

“Participation in the World Urban Forum will be open to representatives of national governments, local authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners. The latter include, inter alia, global parliamentarians on Habitat, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, human settlement professionals, research institutions and academies of science, the private, business and non-profit sectors, foundations, relevant United Nations organizations and other international agencies” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 47).

The elite and expert dominated composition of the World Urban Forum also transpires in the opening statement of Luis F. Garcia Cerezo, Permanent Representative of Spain to UN-HABITAT on behalf of the European Union, reflected in the forum report.1

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1 The elite composition of World Urban Forum is visible in the constitution of the Advisory Group for the First Session of the forum: “At its first plenary meeting, the Chair, on behalf of the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, announced the names of the persons who would constitute the Advisory Group for the first session of the World Urban Forum and who would advise and assist the Executive Director with the organization, management and conduct of the meetings of the session. These were the following:

(a) Mrs. Sankie D. Mthembi-Mahanyele, Minister for Housing of the Republic of South Africa (Chair);
(b) Mr. Sören Häggroth, State Secretary for Housing and Deputy Minister for Finance of Sweden (Co-chair);
(c) Ms. Jan Peterson, President, Huairou Commission;
(d) Mr. Alan Lloyd, President of the World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination (WACLAC);
“Speaking on behalf of the European Union, Mr. Garcia Cerezo welcomed the decision by the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements through its resolution 18/5, paragraph 10, to merge the Urban Environment Forum and the International Forum on Urban Poverty into a new Urban Forum. He was confident that the active participation of experts from European Union member countries and the European Commission would make a valuable contribution to the discussion of the wide range of subjects on the agenda. He noted the presence of experts from many countries around the world and praised the innovative format of the Forum which he described as its greatest asset. The Forum, he said, was an important step, particularly in relation to the preparation of a report for the preparatory committee of the World Summit on Sustainable Development” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 56, emphasis added).

At this point it is worth noting that the main concerns of the world’s governing elites that set the agenda in the forum, which is then discussed with experts and other participants, are not the only source of elitism in the constitution of the World Urban Forum. A lot is at stake for UN-HABITAT itself as well. Organizing a united event with the merger of two distinct events on urban issues would give, UN-HABITAT actors hope, a leverage to UN-HABITAT for pushing for more power within UN and more funding from its member states. This is reflected in the summary of the opening statement of Daniel (e) Mr. Sergey P. Melnichenko, representative of the City of Moscow; (f) Mr. David Painter, United States Agency for International Development (USAID); (g) Mr. Markku Villikka, International Federation of Surveyors (FIG); (h) Mr. Arputham Jockin, President, Slum Dweller Federation of India; (i) Mr. René Frank, International Real Estate Federation (FIABCI), representative of the private sector” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 3).
Toroitich arap Moi, the President of the Republic of Kenya and the host of the event, who called for more resources for UN-HABITAT’s valuable work. The forum report notes:

“UN-HABITAT would require a predictable and sufficient flow of resources to enable it to fulfil [sic] its mandate. He [the president] therefore appealed not only for a significant increase in the regular budget provision for UN-HABITAT, but also for more non-earmarked contributions from member countries. He proposed that such contributions should be directed into UN-HABITAT’S foundation fund. This would give it the desired flexibility in carrying out a wider range of programmes” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 52, emphasis added).

The closing statement of Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT also lauded UN-HABITAT’s efforts and argued that its practices were successful and on the right track to achieve its “global programmes.”

At the last session of the Human Settlements Commission, where UN-HABITAT was given the task of organizing this Forum, it was stated that UN-HABITAT was on the right road towards playing a more significant role within the United Nations system. The vibrancy of discussion during the Forum suggests that UN-HABITAT is also on the right programmatic track. She reassured that UN-HABITAT will be revisiting the proceedings of the World Urban Forum as a priority technical resource in order to make UN-HABITAT’s campaigns, global programmes and technical cooperation activities even more responsive to the voices of the Habitat Partners (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 59, emphasis added).
In her statement at the closing session, the Chair Sankie D. Mthemb-Mahanyele also described the first World Urban Forum as a success.

“The open-ended gathering of Governments at all levels and organizations of civil society had already, at its first session, demonstrated its capacity to be a global marketplace of collecting and exchanging views on the future of cities and other human settlements, and on their role in sustainable development” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 57, emphasis added).

The Forum was expected to make a major contribution on advising on the best ways to meet the targets set by world leaders at the Millennium Summit of improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020. At this first session, the Urban Forum had pronounced itself very clearly on several principles including: the concept of the “right to the city” and its essential element of citizenship…” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 57).

Let us now examine the forum reports and other documents drafted by UN agencies to interrogate how successful the World Urban Forum has been in becoming “a global marketplace of views,” and in meeting “the targets set by world leaders” as well as in pronouncing “itself very clearly on several principles including the concept of the right to the city.”

UN-Right to the City: Paternalist urbanism and civilizing the urban poor.

In 2002, the same year that the second World Social Forum organized “the world seminar on the right to the city,” the first World Urban Forum, was organized by the UN and held
at the headquarters of UN-HABITAT in Nairobi, Kenya. The inaugural meeting of the World Urban Forum saw the participation of urban justice and human rights organizations similar to those at the World Social Forum. However, unlike the World Social Forum, more than half of the participants were composed of local and national state officials, agents of intergovernmental organizations, as well as UN-affiliated representatives (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 2). The presence of such officials at the Urban Forum, however, was not what primarily distinguished the Urban Forum from the Social Forum. Rather, their fundamental difference resided in the lexicons through which they framed their politics, and in the disparities between their stated political objectives, suggested as appropriate ways of realizing the right to the city amidst the problems that flow out of the globalized urbanization of the twenty-first century.

The “central theme” of the first World Urban Forum, established by the “UN General Assembly,” revolved around the question of “how best to tackle the problems of urbanization so that everyone, rich and poor alike, can fully address their Right to the City” (UN-HABITAT, 2002a). In the words of Sankie D. Mthembi-Mahanyele, the chair of the first session of the World Urban Forum, one of the fundamental aims of the forum was “to balance the overall market demands on land in an urban environment with the urgent need for land and shelter for the urban poor” (UN-HABITAT, 2002a). The seasoning of the recalcitrant language of the World Social Forum for a liberal appetite digestible in the Urban Forum is evident in the latter’s omission of the anti-capitalist ingredients of the World Social Forum’s discourse. Notions such as “domination of the world by capital,” and “corporate globalization” prominent in Social Forum’s language
cede to softer liberal conceptualizations such as “everyone, rich and poor alike,” and “balancing market demands on land with the need for land for the urban poor” in the Urban Forum (UN-HABITAT, 2002a). Moreover, the flattening language used in the Urban Forum to frame the right to the city as the right of “everyone, rich and poor alike” also runs against the radicalism of the Right to the City activists, who see the notion as a vision for an urbanism “that meets the needs of working class people” (RTTC-NYC, 2009: 3). Although the substitution of the radical language of the right to the city visible in World Social Forum’s discourse by a liberal one in World Urban Forum is nothing of surprise, it demonstrates the main direction the right to the city is taken to, and the gap between the two discourses.

Besides being emphasized in the “central theme” of the first World Urban Forum in 2002, the right to the city also appeared as the subtitle of the first “thematic dialogue” the same year, entitled “Global Campaign on Urban Governance: Right to the City” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 8). Panelists of this dialogue pointed out that the right to the city of “every citizen, even the poorest” was central to the aims of UN’s global campaign on urban governance (2002b: 9). For these aims to be fulfilled, however, the impoverished material conditions in which the urban poor lives had to be uplifted. To this end, “many participants,” the report of the World Urban Forum tells us, “championed the participation of the urban poor in poverty reduction programs” (2002b: 9). Consider the following excerpt from the forum’s report, which makes clear how the participants perceived the notion of participation as the central component of realizing the right to the city:
“An important relationship was identified by many between participation and citizenship. ‘Do the poor have a right to the city’ asked one participant, ‘yes, they do if they stand up and be counted and show they can be responsible.’ There was a call for a new ‘culture of citizenship,’ a new civism. As one speaker pointed out, ‘we need to teach people how to live in cities.’ Another speaker mentioned the role of faith-based groups in the process” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 9-10).

What is remarkable about such formulations is the obscurity of their foundations, for example, of the requirement to “be responsible” as a condition for claiming one’s right to the city. Nor is it clear how the poor could show that they are responsible, or what this responsibility entails. What is clear, however, is that what the panelists refer to as “responsibility” could be cultivated pedagogically by teaching the urban poor how to live in cities, and that the faith-based groups could play a role in this enculturation process. It appears that the poor can participate in urban politics and claim their right to the city, only after going through such a civilizing enculturation process for becoming responsible subjects. It is also important to note that this formulation implies that participation in UN programs by the urban poor, such as the aforementioned poverty reduction programs, appear to be a prerequisite of expressing a political claim such as the right to the city of the urban poor.

But who are these panelists, who engage in an enthusiastic debate on the limits and preconditions of one’s right to the city? After all, what these panelists posit does not sound quite like how impoverished and marginalized urbanites themselves would articulate democratic participation with their right to the city. In fact, the panelists include
government officials such as Sankie D. Mthemb-Mahanyele, Minister for Housing of South Africa; UN bureaucrats such as Paul Taylor, the Chief of Urban Development Branch of UN-HABITAT; and bank representatives such as John Flora, the Director of the Transport and Urban Development Department of the World Bank (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 8). Who the panelists are sheds some light on the roots of the didactical liberal paternalism in the thematic dialogue, while this patronizing stance reveals the gap between the panelists’ interpretation of the right to the city and how Lefebvre and grassroots activists framed it as “a cry and a demand” from the streets.

In addition to blending the right to the city with disquietingly paternalist language, and erasing all anti-capitalist components from it, UN agencies have recently attempted to claim credit for the origins of the right to the city concept. In other words, UN agencies have not only attempted to appropriate the content of the notion as established by the existing right to the city movements around the world, but have also attempted to rewrite the history of this concept. In a “policy paper,” named *Urban Policies and the Right to the City: Rights, Responsibilities and Citizenship*, produced at the request of UN-HABITAT and UNESCO, the section entitled “evolution of the concept of the right to the city” opens with the following sentence. “The year 2008 marked the 60th anniversary of the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, which created a common standard for all people and nations to liberty, justice and equality” (Brown and Kristiansen, 2009: 13, original emphasis). The policy paper asserts later in the paragraph that “human rights instruments have also provided inspiration to the concept of the right to the city” (2009: 13, original emphasis). Citing Lefebvre, not as the theorist who originally coined the
term, but as “among the first to promote the idea” (2009: 14), UN agencies attempt to construct an unwarranted genealogy of the term, according to which the origins of the right to the city lies in the UN declaration of human rights: “The right to the city is founded in the intrinsic values of human rights, as initially defined by the UN declaration” (Brown and Kristiansen, 2009: 17).

This unwarranted genealogy is also reflected in the words of the “UNESCO expert, Brigitte Colin,” who argues that “the right to the city is a group of ethical values that all urban dwellers have to adhere to in order to promote new content for an urban social contract … The ethical values included in the concept are particularly relevant with regard to UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UN-HABITAT, 2010b: 3, emphasis added). Later in the report, it is further argued that the “international advocacy to the right to the city is justified by the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (2010b: 3, emphasis added). What is striking here—in addition to an attempt to fix the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the source and justification of the right to the city politics—is the prominence of the same paternalistic and moralist language

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2 This position that reduces the right to the city to but one aspect of UN Universal Human Rights is problematic as it leaves out the radical aspects of the notion. More importantly, this position can make sense of any right to the city claim insofar as it fits the human rights framework.

“The answers as to how the right to the city can influence relations between urban dweller and State, and promote broader access to urban culture and democracy could be based on the entire spectrum of human rights, rather than civil and political rights alone. This could imply moving from a right to the city as it is perceived at present, to an approach that combines citizenship and human rights in the urban realm. As concerns citizenship, the societal ethics which is cultivated through sharing space could be based on human rights. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, could provide a common set of values, to be achieved at the city level, thereby addressing the many aspects and underlying principles of human rights (e.g. the principle of nondiscrimination) which are essential to the humane development of inclusive cities. Human rights in the city as conceived in recent years take this approach, including rights, responsibilities and citizenship in the city” (Brown and Kristiansen, 2009: 40).
that was prevalent in the 2002 World Urban Forum. The reductionism that frames the right to the city as “a group of ethical values” which should be adhered to by all urban dwellers replicates the paternalist moralism of “teaching people how to live in cities” and the proposal to grant economically marginalized inhabitants their right to the city as long as they are “responsible.”

UN agencies’ attempt to take credit for the right to the city concept—by bypassing Lefebvre and arguing that its “inspiration” and “justification” are grounded in UN’s declaration of human rights—is also visible in their effort to overstep the World Social Forum and grassroots right to the city activists as the regenerator of the term. Although it appears to be the case that what brought the right to the city concept to the attention of UN-affiliated organizations is the World Social Forum’s espousal of the concept starting in 2001, UN agencies claim that “the idea of a project on the right to the city was first presented at a UNESCO Round Table in 1995 … and at the City Summit in 1996, UNESCO held a dialogue … [that] touched on the right to the city” (Brown and Kristiansen, 2009: 11, emphasis added).

How Lefebvre and grassroots World Social Forum activists and their foundational role in formulating and practicing the right to the city concept are treated by UN agencies is also explicit in the keynote speech of Anna Tibaijuka, Under Secretary General and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, given on the occasion of the public debate on “Urban policies and the right to the city” on 18 March 2005 in the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

“Meanwhile, a number of NGOs and stakeholders have been working towards
the adoption of a World Charter on the Right to the City. A proposed text was discussed during the recent World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and this initiative deserves our attention. The right to the city is to be understood as a collective right of all city inhabitants, especially those vulnerable and disfavoured. This concept draws from many sources, including, importantly, from the Habitat Agenda and the principles promoted by UN-HABITAT’s Global Campaigns” (UNESCO, 2006: 26, emphasis added).

The designation of grassroots organizations and activists that come together at the World Social Forum as “NGOs and stakeholders,” and the source of the right to the city as UN-HABITAT and its “Global campaigns” are two of the evidences that help us to understand a couple of crucial points. First, at a general level, the UN agencies’ attempt to make sense of the world require them to pull diverse reality into its own language and framework. Hence, grassroots organizations and activists of the Social Forum become “NGOs and stakeholders.” Second, it shows us, again, that UN agencies attempt to claim credit for the origins and scope of the right to the city by consistently linking the origin of the term to UN’s human rights framework, and its agencies’ campaigns.

If the UN attempts to create a clean lineage between the right to the city and its own declaration of human rights of 1948 and UN agencies’ human rights campaigns—by concomitantly bypassing Lefebvre and grassroots activists—it is probably because the UN wishes to take the concept somewhere else. To reveal where this appropriation is directed, I suggest taking a brief look at the 2010 World Urban Forum, convened in Rio de Janeiro. At this forum, the notion of the right to the city was carried to the title as the
central theme, and was elaborated in a more detailed way than it had been the case in previous World Urban Forums. To be sure, the right to the city was touched upon in the World Urban Forums between 2002 and 2010. However, the examination of these reports reveals that the right to the city was less elaborated than simply mentioned. It is incorporated in general statements such as “every urban citizen has the Right to the City” (UN-HABITAT, 2004: 23), and “new challenges and emerging issues that need to be addressed by joint efforts include the ‘Right to the City’” (UN-HABITAT, 2006: 60). To be precise, the right to the city concept was mentioned twice in the 2004 Urban Forum report, and three times in 2006, whereas a keyword search returns only one result for the notion in the 2008 World Urban Forum report. While for a moment, it looked like the right to the city concept was losing its popularity within UN circles in this period, it was abruptly brought to the epicenter of discussions concerning the urban question in the World Urban Forum in 2010 as the central theme, which, recall, is decided by UN-HABITAT. In that capacity, UN-HABITAT provides us with an understanding of what, through its own glances, constitutes the right to the city and its key components through manifold discussions on a variety of topics in the forum. Let us, then, briefly look into the 2010 forum report, which is written by the Chair of the Forum in consultation with UN-HABITAT to follow UN-HABITAT’s path to the right to the city.

The Right to the City as a bridge across the urban divide

Titled as “The Right to the City: Bridging the Urban Divide,” the fifth World Urban Forum in 2010 saw the participation of 13,795 people from 150 countries, which makes it the largest World Urban Forum convened until then. Similar to the previous Urban
Forums, government officials, such as parliamentarians, mayors and other representatives of municipalities formed the largest participant group (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 7). They were accompanied by a large number of representatives from “big business” and financial institutions, most notably from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. Organizing the World Urban Forum under the theme of the right to the city, essentially as a summit for the world’s powerful governmental and financial elites does not seem to have posed any contradiction for the forum organizers. On the contrary, the forum report shows that the overwhelming elite presence at the forum is perceived as a success, for the report boasts that “the presence at the fifth session of the World Urban Forum of a greater

3 Note that the advisory group, who advise and assist the Executive Director with the organization, management and conduct of all the meetings and events at the forum is almost exclusively made up of governmental elites, World Bank and UN members.

“The Chair of the fifth session of the World Urban Forum, Mr. Marcio Fortes de Almeida, at the request of the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, announced the names of the members of the Advisory Group for the current session. The terms of reference of the Advisory Group were to advise and assist the Executive Director with the organization, management and conduct of all the meetings and events. The members of the Advisory Group were as follows:

(a) Mr. Marcio Fortes de Almeida, Minister of Cities of Brazil, Chair of the fifth session of the World Urban Forum and Chair of the Advisory Group;
(b) Mr. Shaun Donovan, Secretary of State of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Co-Chair of the fifth session of the World Urban Forum and Co-Chair of the Advisory Group;
(c) Ms. Salamata Gakou Fofana, Minister for Housing, Lands and Urban Development of Mali, Vice-Chairperson of the Africa Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development;
(d) Mr. Ali Nikzad, Minister of Housing and Urban Development of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Chair of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development;
(e) Mr. Valery E. Yegoshkin, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to UN-Habitat;
(f) Mr. Augusto Barrera, Mayor of Quito, Ecuador, Vice-President of the United Cities and Local Governments World Council;
(g) Mr. Peter Gtz, President of the Global Parliamentarians on Habitat;
(h) Mr. Jan Olbycht, Member of the European Parliament, Poland;
(i) Ms. Abha Joshi-Ghani, Manager of the Urban and Local Government Unit, World Bank;
(j) Ms. Jan Peterson, Chair, Huairou Commission;
(k) Ms. Sheila Patel, Chair, Shack/Slum Dwellers International;
(l) Mr. Musa Ansumana Soko, Member, UN-Habitat Youth Advisory Board” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 9).
number of heads of state, government ministers, mayors and leaders of global foundations and big business reaffirmed both the Forum and its glittering exhibition as the world’s premier cities convention” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2). Nor was it apparently seen as contradictory to organize a World Urban Forum on the right to the city—a notion that has mobilized considerable number of urban justice organizations around the world against gentrification and displacement—at the freshly gentrified waterfront of Rio de Janeiro. It would, in fact, be highly surprising if such a global “gentry” had convened its “glittering exhibition” in one of Rio de Janeiro’s numerous disinvested and neglected neighborhoods. Instead, the forum took place in a brand new convention center, and its report begins by praising the “spirit of generosity and creativity” of the Brazilian Government for taking “the opportunity to build a modern waterfront convention center, bringing new prestige investment, social space and visitors to a once depressed Rio dockside neighborhood in need of upgrading” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2, emphasis added). This praise is telling because such mega development projects that redesign urban space in accordance with cities’ (and in fact globe’s) elite interests have been the kernel of the critique embedded in the right to the city concept, and a main issue around which the right to the city activists have been mobilized around the world (see Gold and Gold 2008; Bowater, 2014).

Securing the right to the city of “every citizen, even the poorest,” the 2010 Forum suggests, is only attainable in “inclusive cities.” UN-HABITAT has an “important role to play,” we are told, “in advancing the right to the city,” as it has the capacity “to bring all the actors together to develop a common action” by forging partnerships between
“people, markets and governments” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 21). Creating new investment opportunities through partnerships—a central constituent of neoliberal governance (Jessop, 2002; Miraftab, 2004; Kuymulu, 2011)—in order to solve manifold urban problems is a fundamental theme in the 2010 World Urban Forum. In fact, the forum report underscores that “forging effective partnerships between and with the public, private and civil society sectors” is “one of the main objectives of UN-HABITAT” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2, emphasis added). In tandem with this main objective, it is not surprising that “some of the most distinctive issues emerging from the Forum were those on the evolution of new forms of partnership” (2010a: 3).

The reason behind attributing such a key role to building partnerships in the World Urban Forum is a widely shared belief among its participants that these partnerships are an effective means for advancing democracy and reducing poverty. “New partnerships and business models that could address the bottom of the economic pyramid,” it is argued in the report, “provide more inclusive solutions to the lower segments, for the benefit of all” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 72). The “bottom of the pyramid” approaches and practices “that include the poor in business processes” are presented as necessary “to tackle growing urban poverty worldwide,” and to develop a right to the city which includes all (2010a: 4).

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4 A highlight of the Forum was the launch of the World Urban Campaign to elevate the drive by UN-Habitat and its Habitat Agenda Partners for better, smarter, greener and more equitable cities to a new level. Launched by Ms. Anna Tibaijuka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat, it also underscored one of the main objectives of UN-Habitat – that of forging effective partnerships between and with the public, private and civil society sectors” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2).

5 One of the “emerging issues” of the thematic dialogue “Innovative Approaches to Realizing the Right to the City,” presented by the forum report, states the following: “It [is] necessary for urban professionals and the private sector to partner with the poor on an equal basis to build a sustainable society in cities” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 20).
The important role attributed to the private sector for “bridging the urban divide” is visible in the thematic dialogue titled “Global Debate: Sustainable Infrastructure.” The first point highlighted by the forum report under the title “major issues and concerns” reveals a certain consensus among the panelists.

“The debate was underpinned by the view that, for the private sector, the theme of the current Forum [the right to the city] entailed enhancing affordability and accessibility that could help bridge the divide between the rich and poor urban communities, between the developed and under-developed urban areas, and between safe and unsafe neighbourhoods. Those efforts could be reinforced by innovations through new partnerships and business models that offered more inclusive solutions” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 73).

What is salient in the 2010 World Urban Forum report is a significant consensus among the participants in forum sessions on the key role of the private sector in realizing “one of the main objectives of UN-HABITAT,” that is, building inclusive partnerships that “bring all the actors together to develop a common action” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 21). In such partnerships, the private sector, credit institutions, and lending agencies have, nevertheless, a particular “responsibility” to “include the urban poor in business processes” (2010a: 104), so that “the poor” could be uplifted to a certain standard of living reflected in the UN Millennium Development Goals. This particular responsibility is different, according to Deepak Jolly, the vice-president of Coca Cola, India, from the...
“outdated viewpoint” of Milton Friedman, who once argued that “a company’s only social responsibility was to enrich its stakeholders” (2010a: 75). Thus, “all Coca Cola practices,” in contrast to Friedman’s version, Jolly claims, “involve low-income groups since the majority of its customers were in the low-income and middle-income groups.” What is more, the report goes on, “Coca Cola provided training and microcredit facilities to those people to start their own businesses” (2010a: 75). Corporate responsibility, we are instructed by Coca Cola at the World Urban Forum on the right to the city, required engaging in the “beneficial business practices that supported the poor,” so that the theme of the Forum’s “business caucus”—Greening Cities, Bridging the Urban Divide—could become a reality in the cities around the world (2010a: 74-75).

A close examination of the 2010 World Urban Forum report also reveals the prominence of a certain discourse on creating inclusive cities in tandem with creating partnerships that involves the urban poor in business processes. New public-private partnerships have to be built; participation of urban poor should be enhanced; women and youth should not be left out so that right to the city of “every citizen, even the poorest” could be realized. Taking a closer look at this discourse on inclusivity discloses that the crux of what is meant by the notions of participation and inclusion is the participation and inclusion of “the excluded” in global capitalism, as it is. The bitter irony of presenting what is essentially a market expansion for capital as “social responsibility” to “include the urban poor in business processes” left aside, what is noteworthy here is how more of the same medicine that created the symptom in the first place is offered, again and again, as the panacea for solving urban problems. For instance, at the height of a debt-infused global
financial crisis that had begun in 2007 as a sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US housing markets, more credit for lower income households and deeper financialization of housing markets are proposed at the forum to solve the housing problem. 6 “Developers [are] now attracted into low-income units as they [have] guaranteed market through loans for end-users,” celebrates the forum report. However, more could be done, the report goes on, as it is crucial to make “finance more readily available to lower-income people than [is] currently the case. There [is] a need for housing finance to be accessible to the majority who [are] currently excluded by income” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 27).

It is striking that such proposals are made at a time, when hundreds of thousands of households in the US alone were foreclosed upon and the social cost of predatory lending practices and debt-ridden financialization of housing markets, especially for the already indebted low-income households, became salient. Here, I should stress, my intention is not to develop a moral argument about the motivations of those who prescribe more capitalism to heal the ills of capitalist urbanism. What I would like to emphasize instead is that the forum participants, such as World Bank representatives or CEOs of companies like Coca Cola, who contribute in the appropriation of the notion of the right to the city and incorporate it in a liberal development agenda do so due to a particular class position they occupy. Their social role as representatives of powerful governmental, non-

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6 For instance, the list of “recommendations on the implementation of the gender equality action plan,” discussed in the “Report on the Gender Equality Action Assembly” mentions the following as a necessary step towards gender equality:

“Better programmes to empower women economically, through access to credit and housing finance, while guaranteeing their equal rights to land and housing through laws and actual practices” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 69).
governmental, and financial institutions that are critical for the sustenance of global capitalism requires them to discuss urban issues only in such a way that would create opportunities, first and foremost, for further capital accumulation in the city. Theirs is the main discourse that defines the hegemonic urbanism at the World Urban Forum. Although UN-HABITAT advertises the forum as a democratic platform that brings together all the “key urban stakeholders,” including grassroots organizations, participants who criticize further commodification of urban spaces remain marginal at the forum. Others, such as the right to the city activists protesting right outside the “waterfront convention center,” were not as lucky and faced police brutality for raising their voice against the appropriation of their right to the city by UN organizations. The irony of all this is reflected in the fact that grassroots right to the city activists were pepper sprayed in front of the World Urban Forum for protesting UN’s appropriation of the right to the city, while the representatives of UN-affiliated organizations and global capital discussed investment plans for creating inclusive cities. This situation reveals a fundamental political divide between how the notion is understood by the two parties. This divide, it seems, is not so easy to bridge.

We can shed a light on the nature of this political divide by comparing the notion of the right to the city as framed by Lefebvre and radical activists on the one hand, and its

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7 According to activists who organized “people’s alternative Forum” right next to the World Urban Forum, there was a thorough discussion among the activists on whether it was worthwhile to participate in a UN-organized urban forum, which, according to them, aimed at “reinventing the meaning of the phrase ‘The Right to the City’ to mean ‘basic service provision.’” (http://usf2010.wordpress.com/2010/03/25/can-right-to-the-city-work-within-a-capitalism-system/). It is some of these activists who were pepper-sprayed at the entrance of the building where World Urban Forum was organized http://usf2010.wordpress.com/2010/03/23/david-harveys-speech-opens-the-urban-social-forum/ (Accessed 8 April 2014).
business-oriented version among the UN circles on the other. As I examine in Chapter II, the first thing that catches the eye in Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city is his attempt to put at the forefront *use values* embedded in the *city as oeuvre*, and the ensuing rights of its *inhabitants* who “use” the city to transform it, as Harvey puts it, to their “hearts’ desire” (Harvey, 2008: 23) Although UN agencies present a continuation between Lefebvre’s use of the concept and their urban human rights agenda, the defining characteristic of right to the city’s UN version is privileging the *exchange values* in the *city as a space of market*, and the ensuing rights of *capitalist actors* who “exchange” space and other commodities in the city. While the grassroots right to the city activists around the world work to frame their urban politics around use value (chapter I) as “a cry and a demand” from the streets of the city, the policy proposals lauded at the UN organized forums frame the city primarily as a market that could work more humanely with the intervention of experts and elites. What is clear is that according to the dominant urbanism emerges from the UN agencies, the primary venue to work to realize the right to the city is free market. For that reason, when most panelists of the World Urban Forum speak about urban problems and how such problems could be addressed through the right to the city framework, they often talk about a business proposal. In the world of UN agencies, it seems, every urban issue has an equivalent market-name: affordable housing means “affordable finance;”8 slum poverty means “financing slum upgrading;”9

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8 Jaime A. Fabiana, Chief Executive Officer of “Home Development Mutual Fund” (Pag-IBIG Fund), Provident Fund and Home Financing Institution, Philippines, “introduced the Philippines’ experience, where *affordable housing*, resettlement programmes and *affordable finance* were promoted. Concentrating on finance, he described the Home Development Mutual Fund, a mandatory savings fund for housing distributed through employers. Through tax-free employer and employee contributions with a maturity of 20 years, the funds were used for housing finance. When applied to social housing, they offered the lowest rates in the market and were crosssubsidized through different rates for capital borrowing levels” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 27).
feminization of poverty means “microcredit market” for women’s organizations; lack of employment in formal economy means “microfinance market for micro enterprises,” and so on.

The prominence of the idea that free market is an appropriate venue for solving urban problems becomes even more evident in 2010 World Urban Forum as the forum report announces that “a business caucus was held over two days and served as a major platform for the private sector to share best practices and innovations for sustainable cities” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 6). The importance of private sector for the aims of UN-HABITAT and the World Urban Forum is also visible in the speech of Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, as she addresses the business caucus. The forum report summarizes this speech as follows:

She reminded the audience that the private sector was crucial to the future of cities. Climate change challenges could be seized as a new business opportunity with clean, low-carbon infrastructure investment and retrofitted buildings being opportunities for green investment. That in turn called for true and operative partnerships with the private sector. She then invited the business community to engage in the World Urban Campaign to carry the message of “Better cities, better life” and ultimately have a real impact on policies and people’s lives”

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9 Tibaijuka, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, “highlighted the challenges of the south-south cooperation and commented on the role played by Sir John Kaputin in mobilizing European Union-African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) funding for the Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme implemented in ACP countries. She also highlighted the importance of financing the construction industry in Africa and the leading role that Brazil, China and India could play” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 82).
10 See footnote 7.
Paying specific attention to the language employed by the UN agencies while talking about the right to the city reveals more. Certain conceptualizations and specific ways in which certain issues are framed at these forums lay bare the limits of political objectives of those who are well versed with the highly standardized language of UN agencies. To begin with the subtitle of the 2010 Urban Forum theme—bridging the urban divide—it is clear that what UN agencies have in mind is not putting an end to the processes that create the urban divide, hence ending the divide itself. Rather, what was put forth as an aim was to “bridge the divide,” which leaves the divide intact. This is not intended as a mere polemic on wording and framing of UN-sponsored politics. I think it is important to look into the language used as it also embodies a degree of honesty and a portion of political truth that are revealed by the “bridging the divide” language. UN agencies do not seem to take issue with the fact that a divide exists between rich and poor, socially, economically, and spatially. The divide is fine. What poses problems seems to be that the divide became too wide for capitalist urbanism to operate in a healthy fashion. Social, economic and spatial barriers—partially captured by “the urban divide” discourse—present serious threats to health and smoothness of capital accumulation and economic cohesion. To give one example, if cities’ ability to keep the flow of people going between home and work is compromised by the urban divide, then one could expect not only an “urban chaos” as Neil Smith argues, but also a “fragmentation and disequilibrium in the universalization of abstract labor.” (Smith, 2002: 435). The likely effect of this is that value production would be ceased and the process of capital accumulation would be scarred, if not stalled downright. To avoid such a grim scenario, bridging the urban divide
“between the rich and poor communities, between the developed and under-developed urban areas, and between safe and unsafe neighborhoods” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 73) is necessary for UN agencies. However, I should stress again, the aim here is not disintegrating the difference between rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped and safe and unsafe, but to bridge these differences just enough for capitalist urbanism to operate in a healthy fashion. That is why UN’s slogan is bridging the urban divide, not, for instance, eradicating the urban divide.

The examples of UN agencies’ peculiar language that reveals a part of their political agenda could be multiplied. Similar to the urban divide, poverty is discussed in a very specific language in Urban Forums. One of the most oft-cited global problems of the urbanized world in UN-HABITAT forums, poverty is almost always discussed through a market-oriented language of “poverty reduction.” The language of poverty reduction has been prevalent since the first World Urban Forum and captured in forum reports.

“Economic and social sustainability is simply not possible when a significant portion of the urban population lives in abject poverty and is socially and politically excluded. Deliberate policies and action plans for urban poverty reduction are required, including slum upgrading, skills training, entrepreneurship development and access to credit and micro-credit” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 35).

A similar emphasis on poor’s participation in poverty reduction programs is also visible in the 2010 World Urban Forum. For instance, Anders Knape, president of the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities, highlights “local governments as key
partners in implementing Habitat Agenda” of UN-HABITAT and distinguishes “the poverty reduction and sustainable development efforts of cities” as the most crucial efforts towards realizing Habitat Agenda (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 51). In short, UN agencies aim to reduce poverty but do not aim to inhibit the processes that produce poverty and wealth. Just like the urban divide must be bridged but not ended, poverty should be reduced, or to name another favorite term, “alleviated,” but not to be ended.11

Likewise, slums are referred in the World Urban Forums as one of the most dramatic side effects of rapid urbanization, and are often portrayed as among the gravest urban problems of our time. Most of the reports penned by UN agencies begin with the truism that “more than half of the world’s population now live in cities,” which is often followed by “two thirds of the world’s population will live in cities by 2050 and one third of the urban population will live in slums” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 14, 58; UN-HABITAT, 2011: ix, 5, 12). The solutions that are lauded in UN circles vis-à-vis the “slum problem” are to “integrate slum areas into the urban fabric” or “upgrading slums” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 23).12 Just like bridging the urban divide and reducing poverty do not take issue

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11 For instance, the title of one of the “networking events” reads “Harnessing Urbanization for Growth and Poverty Alleviation.” This event was organized by World Bank (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 92).

12 The “Overview of the Forum” presented in the beginning of 2010 forum report, and written by the Chair of the World Urban Forum reflects this peculiar language of slum upgrading and its collision with “big business.”

“Added to the dynamic mix were the foundations – both large and small – that could not afford to lose the opportunities offered by the Forum. Big business groups were also present and some of them are now working with UN-Habitat around the world, promoting the World Urban Campaign, bringing know-how in disaster relief programmes, and also in water and sanitation improvements, initiating educational interventions and new ways of bridging the digital divide, and also financing slum upgrading” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2-3, emphasis added).

Summary of the special sessions, too, emphasizes that “slum upgrading” was one of the important
with capitalist processes that produce the divide or the social existence of poverty, slum integration and slum upgrading do not tell us much about the socio-spatial processes that produce slums at one end of the city, and the gated communities of the rich at the other. Again, the aim is not putting an end to processes that produce the most extreme examples of uneven development i.e., slums, but to “upgrade” them with credit and finance.

If we read the emphasis on “bridging the urban divide,” “reducing poverty,” “upgrading slums” together with UN agencies’ stress on inclusion and participation of the urban poor, the notion I introduced in chapter I, and attempted to substantiate in chapter II, namely, “reproductive participation,” gains a new meaning and prominence. There I argued that “reproductive participation” is not aimed at ensuring urban dwellers’ participation in processes that would transform existing social relations. Reproductive participation implies a notion of political participation that would, to a large extent, reproduce—if ameliorate—existing social, political and economic relations in the city. The crux of the logic that operates in the language of “bridging the urban divide,” “reducing poverty,” “upgrading slums,” their commonality, so to speak, is the reproduction of capitalist mode of production in a healthy manner.

Note that the language that gives meaning to the dominant urbanism that emerges out of World Urban Forum reports points to a focal point, which is concentrated on mitigating issues discussed.

“During the Brazil World Urban Forum, a number of special sessions were held, on a range of themes, including rebuilding in Haiti; sanitation, wastewater and solid waste management; the right to the city; integrated slum upgrading, and others” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 77).
the worst outcomes of capitalist urbanism. And this focal point is shared both by the liberal and the neoliberal strands within UN circles. This language also reveals that the problems defined and solutions presented in these forums remain at the level of surface appearances. The urban divide, poverty, slum formation are important social problems but they are only symptoms of deeper underlying processes that hit the surface. In order to face the root causes of these phenomena one has to critically examine capitalist mode of production that enables a specific production of urban space that is so uneven that the UN agencies acknowledge it as “the urban divide.” Beyond looking for ways to mitigate, minimize or reduce poverty, a more serious critical approach would necessitate de-fetishizing such concepts of surface appearances, such as “reducing poverty,” or “upgrading slums,” and instead require scrutinizing capitalist processes that produce wealth and poverty, rich gated communities as well as poor slums and so on. The World Urban Forum reports are inundated with discussions that problematize the geographies of deprivation, be it from capital, credit or basic services, but not a page is allocated in the reports to the geographies of abundance, because they do not problematize processes but the symptoms. Without confronting accumulation of capital in fewer hands and geographical concentration of abundance, it is difficult to confront poverty, slum formation and uneven geographical development.

Looking at the surface appearance of capitalist symptoms stems, Erik Swyngedouw argues, from the assumption that takes problems of capitalism, not as repeated symptoms of capitalist processes, but as side effects that remain external to the normal workings of capitalist society. “The social and ecological problems caused by modernity/capitalism
are external side effects,” according to this view, argues Swyngedouw, “they are not an inherent and integral part of the de-territorialised and re-territorialised relations of global neo-liberal capitalism.” That is the reason why we speak, he goes on, “of the excluded or the poor, and not about social power relations that produce wealth and poverty, or empowerment and disempowerment” (Swyngedouw, 2010: 199).

When the aim is to bridge the urban divide, to reduce poverty and to upgrade slums, the means to realize these aims put forth in UN-organized Urban Forums often lead to the market. It is perhaps important to note that the key role attributed to the “private sector” in bridging the urban divide, upgrading slums and enhancing the right to the city for all is a persistent theme and a frequent panel subject, not only in 2010 World Urban Forum I have focused thus far, but also in previous UN-organized urban forums as well. In other words, the tendency to solve burning urban problems with investment from the private sector, which is salient in 2010 World Urban Forum report, is neither new nor accidental, but a persistent one. Let me demonstrate this point with two examples.

In the 2004 World Urban Forum convened in Barcelona, for instance, the panelists argue in one of the “thematic dialogues” on “Urban Resources,” that “while there is an urgent need for more international aid targeted at slum upgrading, it is also important to design innovative strategies to mobilize domestic capital, including strengthening housing and micro-finance institutions.”13 The important issues the panelists identify in this session

13 The section of the forum report that summarizes the panel on “Urban Resources” reads as follows:

“Eight prominent professionals from a range of disciplines discussed the challenges of mobilizing
are “affordability, risk mitigation, mortgage finance systems for the urban poor and how strategic partnership between the public and private sectors can be built to leverage private domestic capital for slum upgrading” (UN-HABITAT, 2004: 31). Instead of confronting the “slum problem” as one of capitalist processes that inevitably produce uneven development (Smith, 1984), which cannot be overcome by “more credit,” the problem is coined here as one of slum upgrading. Then, it appears that the problem is lack of resources and what is needed is more international or domestic capital, and credit for financing the process.

The contribution of private sector and credit institutions in enhancing the right to the city is underscored in the World Urban Forum in Vancouver 2006 as well. In another “thematic dialogue,” this time on “Slum Upgrading and Affordable Housing,” some panelists argue, the report informs us, that “there should be a role for the private sector and that micro-finance is part of the solution.” Several others note that “the World Bank should work with communities to ensure that their loans reach the urban poor” (UN-HABITAT, 2006: 32). Along similar lines, during another “dialogue” on “Water

resources in developing countries to meet the shelter needs of a rapidly urbanizing world. Moderator Michael Cohen effectively summarized the discussion as a simple question: How do we set interest rates in new markets? The answer to this question, he said, requires us to define the market, identify and calculate risks, assign those risks and identify and valuate collateral. Collateral includes not only physical assets but also social assets such as ‘peer pressure’ and organizational and technical resources not captured in current models, as well as contributions of governments in legitimizing land ownership or providing infrastructure. When some of these questions are answered, a better understanding will emerge of how and when to bring the private sector into the market at the earliest possible point” (UN-HABITAT, 2004: 31, emphasis added).

14 “The background paper highlighted that the cost of meeting the internationally-agreed target on improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 is estimated to be in the region of US$70 billion to US$100 billion.” (UN-HABITAT, 2004: 31).
Sanitation and Sustainable Human Settlements,” the important function of the “private sector” and “lending agencies” is reemphasized. “The private sector in today’s globalizing world has a major role to play,” proclaims the report, “in mobilizing resources and improving delivery. International lending agencies, such as the World Bank, regional development banks, as well as non-governmental organizations involving communities at all levels could use” the World Urban Forum “to build a new consensus on water and sanitation for sustainable human settlements” (UN-HABITAT, 2006: 69).

These arguments and proposals, and their persistence over the years, are telling as they reflect the strong belief among those who crowd the UN circles in the supposition that no matter what the inherent dynamic of the problem is—be it water sanitation, affordable housing, or “slum upgrading,”—the solution lies in the shiny corridors of global financial institutions. Consequently, these manifold urban problems are, essentially, credit problems. Thus the translation of right to the city into UN’s language becomes very straightforward and effortless: “Find: use value;” “Replace with: exchange value.” This is the crux of UN’s appropriation of the right to the city.

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15 One of the “Highlights and Emerging Issues” of the 2006 World Urban Forum is reflected in the forum report as follows:

“Meeting the financing challenge of slum upgrading and sustainable infrastructure development. The Forum recognized the critical need for increased financial resources to attain the slum upgrading target of the Millennium Declaration. It further recognized that the challenge is to shift from relying on international development finance to tapping local capital markets. In this context, the Forum acknowledged the need for international donors to play a catalytic role in building the capacity and improving the credit-worthiness of cities, and to package such assistance with seed capital, as piloted by UN-HABITAT’s Slum Upgrading Facility, in line with paragraph 56(m) of the 2005 Millennium Summit Outcome which calls for investments in pro-poor housing and urban infrastructure” (UN-HABITAT, 2006: 6, original bold characters).
Monopolization of political space: ‘All things urban’

Reviewing the short history of UN-agencies’ engagement with the notion of the right to the city reveals a certain attempt of these agencies to appropriate and redefine the notion. UN agencies, in other words, get involved in the ongoing struggle to define what the right to the city should be about, and what sorts of politics could flow from the concept. As I have demonstrated, the crux of the notion of the right to the city as framed by Henri Lefebvre and practiced around the world by grassroots right to the city activists is use value (chapter I). UN agencies’ move to redefine the concept in exchange value terms and recast its origins and justification as rooted in the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* could be read as a part of this struggle. However, there is a related yet deeper process at work here. UN agencies, I want to argue, do not simply attempt to appropriate the notion of the right to the city—by offering competing definitions of the concept and alternative urban policies for a liberal capitalist implementation—but attempt to monopolize what the right to the city politics could be about. It is an attempt to include and represent alternative forms of right to the city politics, and hence, to keep such politics under check. The endeavor of forum’s organizers to provide a stage for marginalized groups and organizations so that the forum could represent all urban political claims is strategic towards this end and facilitates translating various political claims that are articulated in manifold ways into right claims. UN agencies can then absorb these various and heterogeneous political claims into the language of human rights and make sense of them within the human rights framework.

In this regard, World Urban Forum, established by the UN and organized by UN-
HABITAT, does not simply serve as a platform for the global elite to discuss urban issues, the overwhelming elite presence notwithstanding. A specific effort to get various grassroots organizations—some of which are pretty radical in their political orientations—actively involved is also quite visible in these forums. Grassroots women organizations, slum and shack dwellers, youth organizations and various community activists and groups have been present since the first Urban Forum in Nairobi, in 2002. For instance, the 2010 forum report proudly announces that the forum is a vehicle through which the members of the disadvantaged groups could talk to governing elites.

“Indeed, by assuming a more informal nature, the Forum was able to serve as a vehicle for international conversations and cooperation at every level, and also across social and economic divides. For example, at networking events and in other contexts, government ministers from many different countries met to discuss the problems of a rapidly urbanizing world. They used these meetings to forge new approaches to North-South, and South-South cooperation. It also provided a chance for fresh interactions between mayors and Governments. Furthermore, it was a vehicle through which grassroots women’s groups, youth or slum dwellers were able to interact with Government representatives, global parliamentarians and municipal leaders” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2, emphasis added).

The effort to include “all stakeholders,” to use UN’s language, is quite visible and repeatedly expressed in policy documents. Back in 2002, in the inaugural meeting of the World Urban Forum, for instance, one of the major aims declared at the opening was to
“promote partnerships between all stakeholders and empower communities to become equal partners” (UN-HABITAT, 2002b: 13, emphasis added). The widest possible participation of various groups is key for UN-HABITAT and appears on the official webpage of the forum as follows:

“The Forum is one of the most open and inclusive gatherings of its kind on the international stage. It brings together government leaders, ministers, mayors, diplomats, members of national, regional and international associations of local governments, non-governmental and community organizations, professionals, academics, grassroots women's organizations, youth and slum dwellers groups as partners working for better cities”.

What is clear in this statement is that UN-HABITAT does not only attempt to ensure the participation of various actors in the forum, but also takes these actors with asymmetric powers simply as “partners” working towards fulfilling a common aim. Once cast as partners, the discursive effect is the erasure of power inequalities and conflicts (both actual and potential) between actors that are highly different from one another. A head of state, and a slum dweller, in this scheme, simply become two stakeholders among many, and both are partners working together for better cities, according to UN-HABITAT. The language of stakeholdership actually comes from corporate governance literature (DeKoninck, 2007, Kuymulu, 2011) and its lurking in UN-organized forums on the right to the city is neither a coincidence, nor without a specific political function. Such flattening terminologies as stakeholder and partner imply a democratic platform, where

different groups can express their political agendas and negotiate their differences with equal power. The hierarchy of protocol in the quoted paragraph above, which lists all stakeholders as equal partners, nevertheless, starts with “government leaders and ministers” and ends up with “youth and slum dwellers” at the bottom, only points to the inherent hierarchy of power among these actors while attempting to cast them as equal partners.

Even though UN-HABITAT’s self-representation points to an inclusive and democratic platform, where “every stakeholder”—from “government leaders and ministers” to the “youth and slum dwellers”—has an equal voice as “equal partners,” the “forum and its glittering exhibition” remains “the world’s premier cities convention” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 2), where the elites and elite interests reign. Despite all the lip service paid to the presence of grassroots organizations and activists in the 2010 World Urban Forum, I could only count a few members affiliated with disadvantaged groups among hundreds of panelists.\(^1\)

Even though there may be some members of grassroots organizations at the forum, they are not given their voice to discuss issues that are related to their marginalization. For

\(^1\) Arlene Bailey, Founder, Fletchers Land Parenting Association, Member of the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International (Grassroots Women’s Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood);

Fati Alhassan, Director, Grassroots Sisterhood Foundation, Ghana;

Sheila Patel, Chair, Shack/Slum Dwellers International;

Rose Molokoane, Coordinator of the South African Urban Poor Federation and Coordinator of Slum/Shack Dwellers International.
instance, notice the full list of panelists and their affiliations participating the roundtable discussion titled “Indigenous Peoples and Sustainable Urban Development with Culture and Identity” in 2010 urban forum:

“Celeste McCay, Researcher, Native Women Association, Canada;
Jecinaldo Satere-Mawe, Secretary of State for Indigenous People, Amazon State, Brazil;
John Gordon, Director, Urban Aborigine Strategy, Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada;
Jurema de Sousa Machado, UNESCO;
Janeen Comeneot, National Indian Family Coalition, United States;
Liliane Mbela, Member, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous People, Democratic Republic of the Congo;
Sonia Smallacombe, Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples;
Tonya Gonnella Frichner, Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 55-56).

The forum report does not give us any information on the number of grassroots activists and organizations that attend the World Urban Forum, although we are presented with detailed information on the number of ministers, parliamentarians, mayors and members of “big business” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 6-8). However, I would argue for taking seriously UN-HABITAT’s claim of housing grassroots activists and organizations at the World Urban Forum. I think there is a genuine effort to enhance the political participation of marginalized groups in the World Urban Forum, but this participation is, by and large,
directed at social policies for reproducing existing social, political and economic relations in the city, not transforming them in a meaningful way. UN-HABITAT’s “reproductive participation” does not allow urban dwellers to discover and determine new needs in a new city in the course of the political process itself, which is what the “transformative participation” does. Rather, it invites inhabitants to participate in the existing formal procedures of urban governance. The UN-HABITAT’s forums do not, in other words open a path for urban dwellers so that they can devise their own political program, through which they can discover new needs and new ends, figure out as well new means to achieve them. Instead, urban inhabitants are incorporated in a “central theme” of the World Urban Forum that is established by the “UN General Assembly” (UN-HABITAT, 2002a). Also, recall that the themes of discussion sessions are set by UN-HABITAT. Yet, as Lefebvre reminds us, the right to the city cannot be imposed from top down by capital, state or experts. Accordingly, the urban politics cannot be stimulated “by authoritarian means or by administrative prescription, or by the intervention of specialists” (Lefebvre, 1996: 146). Instead he advocates for a right to the city politics, where human needs would be collectively defined by the inhabitants in the course of their struggle for a new urban society. Such genuine democratic potential is hardly present in UN-HABITAT-organized Urban Forums.

In this light, one may wonder why community activists and organizations participate in the World Urban Forum. The motivations of grassroots organizations in participating World Urban Forum are certainly various. While some organizations possibly participate due to their faith in and high expectations from the UN agenda on the right to the city,
some others perhaps do so in order to challenge and subvert this very agenda, or to take advantage of UN’s resources, or still, to build networks and connections with like-minded organizations that also attend UN-organized forums. It is not my aim, therefore, to dismiss those who participate in the World Urban Forum as complicit to the UN agenda. Neither is it my aim to argue that the grassroots organizations that choose to participate in the World Urban Forum are simply appropriated by the UN agencies. The appropriation I try to underline in this chapter is not so much directed to the grassroots activists per se, as to the meaning, content, and transformative political potential of the right to the city concept itself.

The monopolizing tendency I am trying to describe here is not limited to who participates in these forums. This monopolization also applies to what is being discussed in the forum as well, and is best expressed by the UN-HABITAT executive director Dr. Joan Clos, who argues that “[t]he Forum has become the preeminent conference on all things urban” (World Urban Forum official webpage, emphasis added).18 From urban infrastructure to street art, transportation to urban lifestyles, from climate change to rough slums, all things urban are on forum’s plate. Just like the effort to get “all stakeholders” involved in World Urban Forums is an expression of the attempt to assimilate and represent each and every fraction of progressive urban politics behind the banner of the right to the city, organizing the urban forum ostensibly on “all things urban” signifies an interrelated tendency to monopolize the urban political field.

This resonates with what political theorist Wendy Brown detects with human rights politics in general. According to her, while human rights activists and organizations often represent their work as moral and ethical rather than political—such as reducing human suffering or protecting the powerless individual against the powerful state—human rights practices and discourses are political as they “organize political space” in a peculiar way to “preclude” and “negate” other forms of politics and activism. In other words, the fact that human rights politics occupy the central stage, not simply as an international justice project but as the progressive international justice project, simultaneously “displaces, competes with, refuses or rejects other political projects” (Brown, 2004:453). In short, according to Brown, international human rights activism tends to monopolize progressive politics by marginalizing other forms of politics that could not be subsumed under the rubric of human rights.

UN-HABITAT’s deliberate effort to provide a platform for “all stakeholders,” to borrow its language again, and discuss “all things urban” could be interpreted as part of the same process that monopolizes the political field, while at the same time delegitimizes and negates politics in alternative forms. The aforementioned irony of discussing the ways of creating inclusive cities to bridge the urban divide at the right to the city conference in the gentrified convention center, while grassroots right to the city activists were pepper-sprayed by the police right outside the building does, in fact, succinctly capture the process of subsuming certain kinds of right to the city politics into what is acceptable in the UN-World, while delegitimizing and outlawing certain other forms.
UN agencies’ attempt to monopolize the political space of the right to the city still has another dimension. Just like the UN-organized forums have to represent “all stakeholders,” from World Bank delegates to slum dwellers, to talk about “all things urban,” it endorses a right to the city, unsurprisingly, for “everyone.” When we look at how UN agencies discuss the actual and possible political agents of the right to the city, and whom this right should cover, we are either presented simply with a list—starting from the head of state extending to the homeless—or, simply with a vague shorthand notion: everybody. “Everyone, rich and the poor alike” and “every citizen, even the poorest,” are the two of the most popular phrases repeatedly used to denote who has a right to the city. On more than one occasion the aim of the forum is stated as to “develop a right to the city which includes all” (UN-HABITAT, 2010a: 104). But, one might wonder, what does it mean to work for the right to the city of everyone, and what are its implications?

First of all, the slogan of “the right to the city for everyone” appears to be just another catchphrase for achieving the monopolization of the right to the city politics in the hands of the UN agencies. It is a part of the same effort to encompass and represent all there exists about the right to the city by expanding its scope to include everyone. Second, this slogan neatly overlooks the fact that the process of urbanization and our globalized urban society are underwritten by all sorts of divisions ridden with deeply entrenched inequalities of class, race, gender, ethnic/national origin or sexual preference and it is precisely because of these divisions that the right to the city of everyone could not be
realized under the present circumstances. As I have discussed earlier, the business friendly version of the right to the city that is lauded in UN circles rests on translating Lefebvre’s stress on use value into exchange value terms and postulates the free market as the legitimate stage for realizing the right to the city. Since, as the historical geography of capitalism shows us, the capitalist free market relies structurally on the exclusion and marginalization of those who are not well situated to take advantage of opportunities along manifold axes of social difference (class, race, gender and so on), free market does not seem to be the proper stage of realizing the right to the city of everyone, but rather appears to be a major obstacle to it. As we have seen, since UN agencies’ version of the right to the city does not seem to be striving towards eradicating the urban divide between the rich and the poor—but simply advocates the right to the city of “even the poorest”, or the right to the city of everyone, “rich and poor alike,”—it reproduces the social divisions that are obstacles to the right to the city of everyone, which might be realized only in a more egalitarian political economy.

Last but not least, the themes of “the right to the city for everyone” and its kin, “creating inclusive cities for all” are very troublesome in terms of what “everyone” was supposed to be included in. Since UN-right to the city is not about use value but exchange value, the city it cherishes is not an *oeuvre* but a *product*. The city in this framework is not about a collective artwork that embodies use values produced for and by its inhabitants. The city of UN’s right to the city is, indeed, a space of free market, where, those who are unable to pay the exchange value of products are inhibited from laying their hands on use values, even though use values are produced in a collective labor process. The inclusion
and participation of urban inhabitants in urban governance, heavily promoted by UN agencies, is thus characterized by “reproductive participation” that aims to enhance the political participation of urban dwellers in existing procedures of urban administration of capitalist city.

In this light, the much-celebrated inclusive city appears to be about including everyone, rich and poor alike, in the market, and at times UN agencies are quite blunt about it. For instance, the 2010-2011 edition of *State of the World’s Cities: Bridging the Urban Divide*, a yearly report on cities prepared and published by UN-HABITAT, allocates the last of its three parts to “Bridging the Urban Divide,” the first chapter of which is “Taking forward the right to the city: Urban advantage for all” (UN-HABITAT, 2011: 122-135). The theme of inclusive cities underwrites much of the discussion on the right to the city in this chapter, which makes a strong argument for “human rights-based urban policies” to attain such cities. “Short of a human rights-based reform of municipal policies,” proclaims the report, “the urban divide cannot be bridged and the right to the city cannot become effective.” (UN-HABITAT, 2011: 133). The chapter does not do a terribly good job on elaborating what exactly is meant by inclusive cities. It is rather treated as a self-evident virtue of urban life throughout the text. We are presented with a glimpse on what constitute such inclusiveness, however, on page 126, which is completely covered by a single photograph of an evidently very poor man, a beggar perhaps, sitting in the street in Delhi, India, holding a Pepsi bottle. The one-liner at the bottom of the photograph brings the point home: “Rights-based urban policies pave the way for inclusiveness” (UN-HABITAT, 2011: 126).
This lays bare the fact that UN-HABITAT is very serious in its aim of including everyone, even the poorest, in the city yet in UN-HABITAT’s framework, the city appears as a space in which one can access the market. Moreover, the fact that a beggar holding a Pepsi bottle is represented as being included in the city lays bare that the criteria for urban inclusion is one’s ability to consume. Recall that the 2010 forum report
argues that “for the private sector” the right to the city entails “enhancing affordability and accessibility that could help bridge the divide between the rich and poor communities, between the developed and under-developed urban areas, and between safe and unsafe neighborhoods” (2010a: 73). In other words, the UN agencies seem to be saying that more intensified consumerism is a tool in the fight against socio-economic and spatial inequality and exclusion. The Pepsi-consuming beggar image seems to make the same point for UN-HABITAT. Everyone, whose rights would be covered by UN-HABITAT’s right to the city framework, is essentially understood and treated as passive consumers rather than active citizens. Hence, UN-HABITAT’s slogan—the subtitle of the chapter on the right to the city—“urban advantage for all” takes on its full meaning.

In this light, given the importance attributed to the private sector and the market for realizing the right to the city within UN circles, 2002 Forum Chair Sankie D. Mthembu-Mahanyele’s characterization of World Urban Forum as “global marketplace of views” can be understood in quite literal terms.

The monopolization of who attends and what is talked about the right to the city could be seen as an attempt by the UN agencies to create a global consensus about what the acceptable form of urban politics is in the globalized world of urbanization. For the UN agencies, by monopolizing the political space of the right to the city, aim to achieve the standardization of urban policies at the global scale under the rubric of “best practices,” which attends to the generalization and expansion of mainstream liberal urban policies around the globe. It is the role of consensus in the process of such standardization that I would like to return to now.
Monopolization of politics, or consolidation of the postpolitical condition?

In his 2009 article, “The antinomies of the post-political city: In search of a democratic politics of environmental production,” Erik Swyngedouw examines a set of processes, which, according to him, gives way to the emergence and consolidation of postpolitical, postdemocratic condition. Even though Swyngedouw takes his cue mainly from the work of quite a few highly influential political theorists such as Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe, here I will confine my discussion to the arguments of Swyngedouw, who sharply reworks the arguments of these theorists on postpolitics, while clearly foregrounding the implications of such arguments for the contemporary neoliberal urbanism (Swyngedouw, 2009; 2010), which is what I am primarily interested here.

According to Swyngedouw, “the present consensual vision of the urban environment” points to “a clear and present danger” that “annuls the properly political moment and contributes to … the emergence and consolidation of a postpolitical and postdemocratic condition” (2009: 601). The contemporary postpolitical urban order has a number of salient characteristics and Swyngedouw examines them in a highly enlightening and engaging discussion. One of the defining characteristics of the postpolitical condition for Swyngedouw is its reconfiguration of “the act of governing to a stakeholder-based arrangement of governance in which the traditional state forms (national, regional or local government) partake together with experts, non-governmental organizations and other ‘responsible’ partners.” Hence, for him, the postpolitical condition embodies “new
forms of autocratic governance-beyond-the-state” (2009: 608). Postpolitics “rejects ideological divisions,” according to Swyngedouw, and “insists on the ‘democratic’ inclusion of all” into the present social order, which Swyngedouw identifies as a sign of “the ‘totalitarian’ temptation of democratic institutions” (2009: 609). This last point is particularly important for him because the impulse to include everybody—ostensibly divorced from ideological differences—into the decision making process seems to remove barriers before the political process, but the effect is indeed quite the opposite. For Swyngedouw, the “postpolitical condition is one in which a consensus has been built around the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism as an economic system, parliamentary democracy as the political ideal, humanitarianism and inclusive cosmopolitanism as a moral foundation” (2009: 609). Postpolitics is therefore about “the administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains and they remain, of course, fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations” (2009: 609).

One of the key axes that Swyngedouw establishes masterfully in his discussion is the one between the processes that, according to him, give way to a postpolitical and postdemocratic condition and a certain populist gesture. In other words, the ways in which “people” are excluded from what Swyngedouw calls politics proper dovetails with a rampant populism, which is, in principle, underwritten by a people-know-best-politics, which seems to put the people at the forefront of politics. A postpolitical urban condition argues that “all people are affected” by the problem at hand therefore “silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and papers over conflicts of interests by distilling a common threat” (2009: 611). “The people know best” populism, according
to Swyngedouw, is “supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy, and advocates a direct relationship between people and political participation” (2009: 612). The lurking danger here is that the “actually existing democratic politics is” thus replaced by “good governance” or “best practices.” For Swyngedouw “the architecture of populist governing takes the form of stakeholder participation or forms of participatory governance,” which confirms and functions “under the aegis of a non-disputed liberal-capitalist order” (2009: 612)

Last but not least, for Swyngedouw, populist politics avoid identifying a privileged subject position or political actor of social change “like the proletariat for Marx, women for feminists or the ‘creative class’ for competitive capitalism,” but instead appeal to a common threat, social condition or collective predicament. This requires, for the same populist tactic, “the need for common humanity-wide action, mutual collaboration and cooperation.” The fact that postpolitics—in its populist guise—does not recognize any internal social tensions or ideological differences is quite important here as “the enemy is always externalized and objectified” (2009: 612). The externalization of the source of the problem functions to keep the system pure. The solution of the problem can then be presented as the assimilation of the external problem back into the system. Swyngedouw nicely captures this when he argues that

[p]opulism’s fundamental fantasy is that of an intruder or, more usually, a group of intruders, who have corrupted the system. Pollution, ‘environmental degradation’ or ‘CO2’ stand here as the classic examples of a fetishized and externalized foe that require dealing with if sustainable urban futures are to be
attained. Problems, therefore, are not the result of the ‘system’, of unevenly distributed power relations, of the networks of control and influence, of rampant injustices and inequalities, of the police order and its non-egalitarian distribution of functions and places or of a fatal flow inscribed in the system, but are blamed on an outsider. It is something that does not play its proper part within the structure (Žižek, 2008: 279). That is why the solution can be found in dealing with the pathological phenomenon, the resolution for which resides in the system itself. (Swyngedouw, 2009: 612)

If what Swyngedouw describes here sounds familiar, it should. What he calls “the consensual vision of the urban environment,” which mobilizes “stakeholder-based governance” that “denies ideological differences” and “insists on the democratic inclusion of all” under the guidance of “experts” and other governmental and non-governmental elites might as well have been written for describing one of the UN-organized World Urban Forums. His stress on “the lack of privileged subject position or political agent of social change” in discourses on the “postpolitical city” also coincides well with UN agencies’ attempt to frame the right to the city as the right of monolithic “everyone,” with no ideological, social and economic divisions. Swyngedouw certainly does a solid job in analyzing the pitfalls of actually existing global urban governance, in which the right to the city agenda of UN agencies form an important part, both at the levels of its ideological production and global implementation. In this vein, following Swyngedouw, one is tempted to conclude that UN agencies’ business friendly version of the right to the city, UN-HABITAT’s and other UN agencies’ meetings, conferences and “business caucuses” and all the rest of it form essential moments of the process that
opens the path for and consolidates postpolitical, postdemocratic condition. Although Swyngedouw’s analysis of postpolitical condition, especially his discussion of the processes that, according to him, lead to postpolitical condition are quite astute and on target, I have some reservations in following his lead towards identifying these symptoms as signs of postpolitical postdemocratic urban society.

In a nutshell, I would argue that Swyngedouw and other scholars who argue that we now live in a postdemocratic and postpolitical era are quite successful in identifying the symptoms of our current predicament but is not as convincing when they argue that this leads to a postpolitical condition. In other words, Swyngedouw is quite right in arguing that techno-managerial elite consensus runs our cities and the paths for realizing popular grassroots democratic initiatives are increasingly foreclosed. There are certain problems, however, with naming these symptoms as configurations of postpolitical, postdemocratic condition.

One of the most obvious problems is that the notions of postpolitical and postdemocratic imply, despite the rejections of Swyngedouw and other scholars of postpolitical condition, a political and democratic social order that has once existed and which at one point lost its “proper” political and democratic character. For instance, “the consolidation of an urban postpolitical arrangement runs,” Swyngedouw argues, “parallel to the rise of a neoliberal governmentality that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic environmental management” (Swyngedouw, 2009: 604,
emphasis added). The implication that properly political and democratic urban order once existed and has been lost is all the more salient when we pay attention to how much space Swyngedouw allocates to “the disappearance of the political in a postpolitical arrangement [that] leaves all manner of traces that allow for the resurfacing of the properly political” (2009: 613-617, emphasis added) in his discussion. Such implicit historicism towards the postpolitical turn is also visible when Swyngedouw argues that the “actually existing democratic politics is” thus replaced by “good governance” or “best practices” (2009: 612).

Moreover, the notion of postpolitical postdemocratic condition inevitably calls for the notion of “politics proper.” While Swyngedouw and other scholars of postpolitical condition loosely agree upon a “classical Greek” notion of proper politics as the “metaphorical universalization of particular demands,” I do not see why liberal democrats could not define it as a process whereby all stakeholders are included as equals in the decision making process, which is how hegemonic notion of liberal democracy in the twenty-first century would define it. A related problem also presents itself: The discussions on “politics proper” inevitably narrow the scope and frequency of appearance of “the political.” For Swyngedouw, following Badiou and Ranciere, “the political” is rare. He writes against 1970s dictum that everything is political. Yet, for Lefebvre, for instance, the production of space is political all the way down, in which everyday life occupies an important part. “(Social) space is a (social) product,” Lefebvre’s simple yet path-breaking assertion in The Production of Space (1991: 26), rests on a notion of politics that infuses the process of production of space from beginning to the end,
including the everyday practices through which the space is lived and experienced. As he argues more clearly for the political character of everyday practices in *The Explosion*, he notes: the “dissociation between the political and non-political—both fictitious and real—is itself political” (1969: 51).

Instead of conceptualizing these processes that Swyngedouw discusses as the consolidation of postpolitical urban condition, which implies there once was proper politics that is now lost, I suggest understanding UN agencies’ claim on the meaning and scope of the right to the city as political attempts by the global capitalist elite to appropriate and tame the notion of the right to the city. This is the core reason why I have discussed UN agencies’ claim over the notion of the right to the city as a right to the city claim. The claim is here plainly political. Grasping and analyzing UN-affiliated and sponsored urban projects as politics rather than postpolitics is more productive in my point of view than discussing whether these projects could be seen as a legitimate part of “politics proper” because doing so then enables us to ask what kind of politics UN-urbanism represents, where it is headed (and through what kind of counter-politics it could be turned around) rather than sweeping heterogeneous set of projects, discourses and practices under a monolithic social condition that is ostensibly postpolitical and postdemocratic. If we subscribe to the latter, it seems like there is nothing left to analyze further. Contemporary elites and their institutions create and consolidate a postpolitical condition, and that is that. The former path, however, takes the discourses and practices of UN agencies’ global inclusive urbanism that undergirds its own version of the right to the city as a conflicting and heterogeneous set of political projects in order to appropriate
the radical and transformative version of the right to the city. Once cast as a specific form of politics, then we are able to ask where this appropriation is headed politically and what its actual and possible political outcomes might be. In this way, there still exists further dialogue and discussion as well as for a space for further political activism.

The literature on postpolitical postdemocratic condition, then, ironically gives way to an unintended effect that it actually powerfully criticizes: foreclosing dialogue and dissensus. The crux of the problem here is not that a certain kind of urbanism, implicated in the UN’s version of the right to the city, successfully forecloses political paths or not. Rather, the problem is the kind of political paths it actually opens, which, as I have argued, leads to a dead-end for realizing the city as a collective artwork of city’s inhabitants who produce use values, that also ultimately leads to a drastic reduction of the city to a space of market. Moreover, as the abundance of the right to the city struggles for accessing use values that we discussed in chapter I, and the urban uprisings in Turkey which will be discussed in chapter IV show, the argument for the successful foreclosure of politics is highly questionable. Politics is constantly regenerated in practices of grassroots organizing and it may unforeseeably explode at any time as it did in Istanbul or resurface anywhere in unanticipated milder forms.

This was indeed the case in 2010 World Urban Forum as well. One might argue, following Swyngedouw, that “the consensual vision of the urban environment,” which mobilizes “stakeholder-based governance” that “denies ideological differences” and “insists on the democratic inclusion of all” under the guidance of “experts” and other
governmental and non-governmental elites in World Urban Forums all lead up to an attempt to successfully foreclose the politics proper. Yet, despite the efforts of UN institutions to encompass and represent all there exists with regard to the right to the city struggles, nevertheless, the grassroots right to the city activists were able to organize an alternative peoples’ forum adjacent to the World Urban Forum under the name of the Urban Social Forum. As I mentioned earlier, this was a group of grassroots activists, who were specifically worried about the appropriation of the right to the city by UN organizations.

According to the blog of the Urban Social Forum, “[w]hen the UN announced that the theme of the 5th Session of the World Urban Forum … would be called ‘The Right to the City’ the first reaction of many intellectuals and social movement members of the Brazilian Urban Reform Forum was a sense of worry that the UN, in collaboration with institutions like the World Bank and business interests, would co-opt the term and change its definition, depoliticizing the concept.”¹⁹ Therefore, both in order to keep the UN-organized forum in check, and to organize their own version of the forum on the right to the city, the activists organized the Urban Social Forum with support and sponsorships from the Brazilian labor unions such as the Brazilian Industrial Federation and Brazilian Federal Petroleum Workers Union. The topics covered in both forums were similar, reports Peter Marcuse, who participated both events. According to him, there were lengthy discussions on poverty and inequality in both forums but the ways in which they were addressed, their ideological content, and the range of alternative solutions to these problems were radically different. One of the most notable ideological differences

between the two forums, argues Marcuse, that the “desirability/inevitability of capitalism was a foundational belief at the World Urban Forum” whereas it was not the case at the Urban Social Forum (Marcuse, 2010b). A similar divide existed on the issue of the right to the city too. Whereas the right to the city mostly meant “a laundry list of goals to be achieved with better designed, planned, managed cities” in the UN-organized forum, “its content was much more radical—a demand for an alternative organization of the city” in the Urban Social Forum (Marcuse, 2010b).

I think the intervention of grassroots activists is important for our discussion because it points to an always potentially existing possibility that no matter how powerful and elite sponsored political projects may be, there are possibilities for contestation. According to an activist account, in one of the sessions at the World Urban Forum, for instance, an activist commented how important it is for everyone “to remember that the Right to the City is a concept that has been developing over the course of 40 years and it is a political concept. After all of this struggle,” activist went on “we can’t let it be redefined in a technocratic manner that depoliticizes its central message.”

Although what went on in the World Urban Forum most of the time might look like a postpolitical social situation, taking grassroots resistance and contestation into account suggests that the urbanism that emerges out of UN-sponsored meetings and documents are indeed political projects that can be resisted and contested, rather than successful attempts to “foreclose the politics proper.” Taking the contestation at the World Urban Forum by the Social Forum into account also reminds us David Harvey’s point when he argues that the right to the city is nothing but “an empty signifier” and everything depends on “who gets to fill it with

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meaning.” In other words what the right to the city should be about “is itself an object of struggle and that struggle has to proceed concomitantly with the struggle to materialize it” (Harvey, 2012: xv).

I think the literature on the postpolitical urban condition cannot sufficiently address the significance of such a double-edge struggle, neither do the more recent critiques of the notion of the right to the city. Andy Merrifield, for one, argues that “the city” of the right to the city does not necessarily present a well-defined object of struggle anymore because the urban process went global as “it is now energized by finance capital” (Merrifield, 2011: 476). “Right to what city,” he asks and argues that since urban territoriality is so “formless and expansive” and “so global in its reach” there is little political purchase in framing political struggles around “something urban” (Merrifield, 2011: 475). Instead of making “facile, abstract right claims for something that’s now redundant in an age when planetary urbanization has become another circuit of capital,” he concludes, we should “ditch” the concept, “abandon it, give it up to the enemy,” especially in the light of “recent bourgeois reappropriation” (Merrifield, 2011: 473). Brenner and Wachsmuth agree with Merrifield by putting forth similar reasons and also propose to “retreat from the right to the city altogether” (Brenner and Wachsmuth, 2014: 201).

There is a series of problems with such propositions and it is not because the right to the city is a perfect theoretical tool and an unchallengeable tenet for organizing urban struggles. First of all, Merrifield’s argument is that the urban process is now global because it is energized by finance capital does not necessarily point to a new process.
Harvey, for one, examines the ways in which the attempts to solve capital’s realization problem historically have had to devise new financial instruments to revolutionize urbanization at larger geographical scales. He convincingly discusses how the urban transformation in Haussmann’s Paris and Moses’ New York required in each case further financialization of urban processes (Harvey, 2012: 7-11).

Moreover, even if the financialization of urbanization and larger urban processes has very recently gone global, this would be a reason to think further about the right to the city, not to ditch it, especially if we agree with Harvey that the right to the city struggles should primarily be about command over the whole urban process. If a social process that is rightly an object of political struggle is now global, why ditch a tool for organizing political struggles around it. The argument that we should give the right to the city up to the enemy, because there have been attempts by multinational companies and UN institutions to “co-opt” it, as put forth by Merrifield, shares a similar problem. The attempts to co-opt the right to the city may very well be due to its transformative political potential, and in this sense Harvey’s argument about the importance of waging a political struggle over the content and definition of the concept seems to me all the more important. Finally, as the example of urban justice activists who organized the Urban Social Forum in response to World Urban Forum’s appropriation attempt should remind us, such grassroots attempts to contest elite projects and fight back co-option may be a lot more productive than simply giving it up to the enemy, which would indeed replicate the problem we identified with the literature on postpolitical condition: foreclosing dialogue and dissensus. Once we ditch the concept, there is not much left to talk about and analyze
politically about the right to the city just like sweeping heterogeneous set of political projects embedded in UN’s version of the right to the city under a monolithic postpolitical condition forecloses further dialogue on the issue.

Regardless of whether one calls the dominant urbanism that comes out of UN agencies’ reframing of the right to the city as postpolitical or not, the right to the city claim made by the UN agencies has immense political implications. UN agencies, both in their liberal and neoliberal guises, engage with the notion of the right to the city because they genuinely worry about the sustainability of globalized urbanization, and the hegemonic neoliberal urbanism that underwrites it. Therefore, the right to the city claim made by UN agencies attempt to contest and ameliorate hegemonic neoliberal urbanism. Their attempt falls short, however, because they trip on their own contradictions.

In the heart of UN agencies’ contradictions lies the belief shared by most of its political agents that free market is a legitimate venue to solve world’s urban problems because capitalism is somewhat inevitable. As I argued at the beginning, although there are people who contest this fundamental belief within UN circles, their voice is marginal and their presence is minor. Once the free market is cast as the legitimate ground to solve the problems of the urbanized world, other contradictions follow. I think the UN agencies are impressed by the democratic potential implied in the notion of the right to the city, yet since they rarely think outside the market, Lefebvre’s emphasis of use value gets translated into exchange value terms. UN agencies might be worried about the exclusionary mechanisms of neoliberal urbanism, yet they attempt to include those who
are excluded by promoting “reproductive participation” of urban dwellers into already-set elite interests, which inevitably dominates UN agencies and their forums.

One is not qualified to comment on the “motivations” of political agents but only on practices. As Talal Asad (2007) argues, motivations of political agents are obscure, complicated and difficult to pin down. I do not know whether the political agents that instigated the interest of UN agencies’ in the right to the city did so with the intention of appropriating the notion from the beginning to tame its actual and potential radicalism. But following their practices leads me to conclude that appropriation of the right to the city, intended or not, is the end product of UN agencies’ right to the city claim.
CHAPTER IV

FROM “URBAN DEVELOPMENT” TO URBAN UPRISING AND BACK AGAIN: GEZI PROTESTS AMID “ECONOMIC GROWTH”

Introduction

This chapter examines the right to the city claim that arose out of June 2013 urban uprising in Turkey, which was not made as part of a planned political project designed and organized in advance by specific agents and organizations. Instead, it emerged spontaneously out of a relatively small struggle to fulfill the rather limited political aim of stalling the construction of a shopping mall in a small park’s stead in Istanbul and evolved into a significant claim over the city with the participation of millions of ordinary citizens as the struggle burst into a countrywide uprising in the space of three days. Such an irruption, as Lefebvre would have it, is rarely foreseen or calculated. Writing during the French upheaval of 1968, he argues that “[e]vents belie forecasts; to the extent that events are historic, they upset calculations” (1969: 7). Such explosive events as the French upheaval and the uprising in Turkey show that “a (contesting) practice, which upsets established separations and hierarchizations opens the way for analysis” (Lefebvre, 1969: 102).

By analyzing the right to the city claim mobilized in Turkey during and after the uprising, I want to make an argument about the dialectics within the process of claim-making over the city, between spontaneous appropriation of urban space and assertion of the right to
centrality on the one hand, and long term political organizing on the other. The dialectics I am talking about here are not given; rather, they must be established through political practice and organizing. In a nutshell, I argue that the two sides of the dialectics do not present a choice to be made for those who want to make a transformative right to the city claim. A successful right to the city claim should mobilize both sides of the opposition and keep the dialectical tension between the two alive during the claim making. More specifically, the urban uprising following Gezi Park protests in Turkey shows, I argue, unless successful appropriation (in consumption) of urban space is accompanied and followed by political organizing towards more durable organizational forms, the radical transformative potential that is glimpsed as a possibility during the appropriation of urban space can hardly be realized.

The conflict between an alternative urbanism that privileges use value and the actually existing urbanism that privileges exchange value runs through this chapter, as it did in the previous one. The dialectical opposition between a sort of political participation into existing order of things (reproductive participation) and a kind of political participation in the processes that would lead to alternative social forms (transformative participation) is another important theme of the chapter. Finally, since the uprising that was inflamed in Istanbul and caught fire across the urban Turkey was significantly about “taking space,” the dialectical opposition between “appropriation in consumption” and “appropriation in production” is another nodal point of exploration in this chapter.
The June 2013 uprising in urban Turkey, the central argument of this chapter goes, comes closest in spirit and in action to the total transformation Henri Lefebvre was implying when he formulated the notion of the right to the city. However, this right to the city claim that flowed out of the uprising goes beyond Lefebvre’s version of the right to the city as it was not simply about the politics of use value against exchange value. That is to say, this claim represented a possibility that was implied but not realized in Lefebvre’s formulation. The right to the city claim of the uprising and the novel social, economic and political experiment that unfolded in public parks of urban Turkey embodies the seeds of a politics of value, that is, a politics of establishing the critical nexus between use value and value, by appropriating space in production through autonomous channels of transformative participation. A successful politics of value would give way to a different mode of production and certainly the right to the city claim encapsulated in the urban uprising of Turkey did not do this. However, I think such a politics was glimpsed as a possibility during and in the immediate aftermath of the uprising.

The spark that drew Istanbul into a fire of protest and uprising was initially set off by a modest ‘occupy style’ peaceful resistance, staged against the planned destruction of a historical public park, an urban commons, in order to make way for a shopping mall in Istanbul. Following heavy police violence against the protestors, who were described by the government as being a little more than a few looters and extremists, the urban centers of Turkey saw a full-fledged uprising. Following the path of this social mobilization flowing from Gezi Park to larger geographical scales of the neighborhood, the urban, the national, and beyond, the first part of this chapter analyzes the expanding political
geography of the uprising, and makes a case for the effectiveness and significance of politics of scale for claiming the right to the city.

The second part of the chapter takes a step back and examines the growth-based political economy of Turkey in the last decade, which, as I shall argue, has been primarily based on privatization, urban development and production of space. Although there is considerable involvement of the state, both local and national, in the ways in which urban political economy takes shape in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, I show that the hegemonic urbanism in Turkey is predominantly neoliberal. As I will explain in a greater detail shortly, the neoliberal urbanism that has been slouching toward birth in Turkey since the 1980s was a “class project” from the beginning, the central aim of which has been the transfer of accumulated value from the public to the private. Both privatization and urban development have been important strategies to accomplish this and state’s involvement in these processes was confined to act as an intermediary in the value transfer. Trade liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s and its effect on the dominantly rural society led simultaneously to the impoverishment of the rural and the growth of the urban population. Concomitant flexibilization of urban labor markets, wage repression, and weakened social provision and welfare have led to the urbanization of poverty in Turkey. This gave way to a very diverse, albeit mostly localized resistance and dissident politics that eventually exploded at the urban centers of Turkey during the June 2013 uprising.

Having discussed the expanding political geography of the uprising and the political economy that set the stage for it, finally, the third part of the chapter focuses on novel
forms of political activism that sprung from Gezi Park and spread across the urban Turkey like the uprising itself. Neighborhood assemblies, or as the people call them, park forums, were unprecedented both in terms of the political form they have taken, and the degree of popular participation in them. Forums provided the people with a new space of political engagement outside the familiar venues such as political parties and NGOs. I shall argue that park forums embody a desire for direct democracy, for enacting new solidarities, and provided people spaces to practice and experiment politics rather than simply talking about it. But above all, park forums represent a popular will to redefine what living together in the city means, the meaning of the collectivity and solidarity; they represent an attempt by the people to redefine what is “socially necessary”—implicated in the concept of value—outside of the neoliberal imposition, that is, individual self-interest, market hegemony and commodification of life in its every aspect.

PART I

The spark

It was almost midnight on 27 May 2013 when bulldozers entered Gezi Park, without any warning, and it turns out, without any legal permission to take down the trees. The demolition of Gezi Park was to make way for a shopping mall in central Istanbul, which was to be placed in a replica of a nineteenth century Ottoman military barracks (Topcu Kislasi). In response to bulldozers’ incursion, activists quickly organized and called more people using social media (primarily through Twitter) to the park in order to stop the bulldozers from uprooting the trees. One of the first messages tweeted from Gezi Park

21 This shopping mall was going to be the 94th shopping mall in Istanbul, which ranks fifth in the world in terms of the number of shopping malls a city houses. (Turhan, 2013).
right after midnight shows how small the number of activists was on that first night: “We are 25 people still waiting in Gezi Park, and we will stand guard until the morning” tweeted Ahmed Saymadi, now a well-known member of Taksim Solidarity Platform (Taksim Dayanismasi), which was founded the previous year to forestall the redevelopment of Taksim.22

Setting up tents and standing guard all night long, the primary aim of activists was to prevent another bulldozer incursion into the park. And they succeeded. Adjacent to Taksim Square, the centrality and public visibility of the park—as well as the additional organizing efforts of the activists through social media—brought about a hundred more people to the park the next morning, on 28 May (Ince, 2013). While the atmosphere in the park was turning festive by the minute, the activists saw more bulldozers coming towards the park, this time accompanied by a heavier police force in riot gear. This attack was stopped, to a large extent, by Sirri Sureyya Onder, a Member of National Parliament (MP) from the leftist pro-Kurdish movement “Peace and Democracy Party” (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi, hereafter BDP, its Turkish acronym). If he were not there, the resistance of about a hundred people notwithstanding, the police would not have hesitated to use force to get the limited number of people out of the park to enable bulldozers.

Having stood between the bulldozer and the trees, and shouted “we will not let you sell the shadow of these trees where poor people rest everyday for free,” MP Onder did not only stop the destruction of trees that noon but immediately became one of the symbols of resistance. Against the police and municipal officials who hesitated to employ physical

violence on an elected MP—for he has parliamentary immunity—but who still verbally challenged the MP in terms of jurisdiction, MP Onder emphasized that he was elected from that district and he was a representative of the people as well as the trees. Having stopped the initial attack MP Onder tweeted: “I am in Gezi Park. Supporters of the right to breathe, get here!” This message brought many other people to the park.

Still, the number of people who were organizing and participating in the park resistance did not exceed a few hundred by the second day. Although minuscule when compared to the number of people that were to come to Gezi Park in the next few days, the Islamist/neoliberal “Justice and Development Party” (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, hereafter AKP, its Turkish acronym) that has been in government since 2002, already felt threatened and triggered the police. The police entered the park as the night fell and fired teargas and pepper-sprayed protestors in order to disperse the crowd and to break the resistance. But activists hung on to their park.

As the news spread through social media about the police intervention and the resistance to it, more people came to the park on 29 May, the third day of resistance. What these newcomers saw in the park was not only a growing number of people but also a growing degree of police brutality. The now usual cycle went on all along that day: People gathered in the park, police fired tear gas, people ran away, and when the teargas clouds cleared, protestors came back, chanted and danced in joy only to be tear-gassed again. On top of growing police brutality, what increased the number of protestors were the comments of Prime Minister (PM) Recep Tayyip Erdogan. On that same day Erdogan
made his first public statement on the national TV since the beginning of the protests, and called the protestors “just a few looters”\textsuperscript{23} and extremists, who did not want Turkey to develop and get richer. Addressing the protestors directly he said, “We’ve already made up our mind about Gezi Park. We’re going to demolish the park no matter what. Protest all you want—we won’t stop the demolition” (Turkmen, 2013).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{Protestors set up tents where bulldozers previously entered the park to block the next attempt. Image by Nazim Serhat Firat.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{23} The exact Turkish word Erdogan used was \textit{capulcu}, literally looter or vandal. In Turkey, \textit{capulcu} has a direct class connotation as well, which roughly means “underclass” or “very poor person.” Ironically, PM Erdogan’s intended insult was quickly appropriated by the protestors, who immediately called themselves \textit{Capulcular} (Looters/poor people). Moreover, the protestors even invented a new concept called “chapulling” that is its English transfiguration into verb form, which now means to protest or to be recalcitrant.
As this confrontational tone escalated the tension across the country, the number of protestors grew into a thousand by the end of the night. Now the park was completely appropriated and covered with tents to stand guard.

So, in the first three days, the primary aim of activists camping at the park was to prevent the destruction of an urban commons for the construction of a shopping mall. In other words, early on, the resistance was organized against an urbanism that puts the exchange value interests of capital over the use value interests of ordinary inhabitants of Istanbul. As Lefebvre would have it, at that specific point in time in Istanbul the “capitalist strategy of privileging exchange value over use value” required “producing and controlling urban space in a way that necessarily” overwhelmed, “the ‘user,’ the ‘participant,’ the simple ‘inhabitant’” who relied on use values embedded in the city (Lefebvre, 2003: 156, see chapter II).

However, it is worth noting that during the first three days of Gezi Park resistance the crowd was not simply made up of “the user, the participant” or the ordinary inhabitants of Istanbul. Although many people crowded the park during the day, it was the nighttime when police and bulldozer attack was most imminent, and by then, the protestors were mostly composed of the “usual suspects” of Turkey’s recent street politics. Leftists, students, artists, environmental activists, and LGBTQ groups were joined by the anti-gentrification activists who had long been active around the Taksim area, where Gezi Park is situated.
Despite the heterogeneity and diversity of the limited number of people and groups, or maybe just because of it, a right to the city agenda was fairly easy to identify. The sole aim of this heterogeneous group was to defend the last public park left in central Istanbul, also literally the last venue in the city center to spend time without spending money. Yet, most of them had been involved in such political activism in the larger Taksim area and in adjacent Beyoglu neighborhood—where gentrification has been rampant in the past few years—to know well that this was not an isolated attack. A similar crowd had been fighting against a neoliberal urbanism that used gentrification almost as a weapon against the “unwanted groups” such as Roma people in Sulukule and Kurdish migrants in Tarlabasi and displaced them to make way for five star hotels and upscale residential buildings. The same urbanism that removed dive bars and cafes along with their tables and chairs in the street, to clear and purify the streets for a touristic shopping experience without obstacles also led to a closedown of a century-old historical cafeteria, and a movie theatre (Emek Sinemasi), both of which have been invaluable in public memory of countless people across class, to make way for another shopping mall.

It is not a coincidence, therefore, that one of the most influential political agents of the Gezi Park resistance, the “Taksim Solidarity Platform” was founded the previous year with the participation of 128 groups, involving civil society organizations, trade unions, labor unions, and several oppositional political parties. The platform had been organizing hard and had already been gaining steam when the Gezi resistance began. Similarly, a smaller but influential group, “Our Commons” (Mustereklerimiz), was founded to “stop the requalification of Taksim Square” and other gentrification processes going on around
Beyoglu district in February 2013, a few months before the Gezi resistance began (Mustereklerimiz, 2013).

Figure 3 Demolition of the historic movie theatre, Emek Sinemasi, faced a huge resistance from the people, who were watered and tear-gassed by the police throughout last year. "Emek" was finally demolished just a week before Bulldozers entered Gezi Park. This photograph was taken by Nazim Serhat Firat, during one the protests right before Gezi resistance.

Thanks to the organizing efforts of such groups that have been fighting against urban redevelopment and gentrification in and around Beyoglu and Taksim, most of the early participants of Gezi resistance did not perceive the attempt to destroy Gezi Park as an isolated incident, but saw it as part of an urbanism that targeted any space that did not yield profit. This relational understanding was audible in their chants—especially when the tension with the police escalated—such as “The park is ours, the city is ours” and on the huge banner, hung between the trees in the park that read, “Don’t touch my tree. Don’t touch my park. Don’t touch my city!” Another banner in the park was as
forthcoming: “End the urban plunder! Capital be gone, Istanbul is ours.” This classed
language, which denotes Capital as the source of the problem, implies that the activists in
the park understood their struggle to be a fight for a right to the city as encapsulated in
Lefebvre’s formulation.

Figure 4 The graffiti reads “Claim your right to the city...” The photograph was taken by Esen Kara a few
streets away from Taksim Square on 1 June 2013, the day Taksim Square was claimed by the protestors.
However urban its agenda was, initially, the resistance was confined to the scale of Gezi Park, which did not automatically express itself at the urban scale of Istanbul. But, opportunities for jumping scale to stage a wider resistance were already in place. For one, the destruction of Gezi Park was never presented as an isolated project by the AKP government. In fact, destroying Gezi Park for a shopping mall-cum-military barracks was packaged as part of a larger project of “urban transformation”—AKP’s euphemism for gentrification and redevelopment of urban land—which aimed to radically transform one of the most iconic urban centers in Turkey: Taksim Square. Euphemistically called the “Pedestrianization of Taksim Project,” it aimed to transfer the vehicle traffic underground, while apparently opening the whole square for the use of pedestrians. What this project intended to do, however, was to raze Taksim Square and erase the public
memory encapsulated in it.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Taksim Square for the peoples of Turkey. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Beyoglu, the neighborhood surrounding Taksim Square, was the “western” face of the Ottoman Empire and later of Turkey. The density of Beyoglu’s non-Muslim population, its lifestyle, cafeterias, *meyhanes* (literally, drinking-houses), architecture, and the vibe of larger urban life have been unique in Turkey. Since the founding of the new republic in 1923, Beyoglu and Taksim Square have always been the spatial center of Turkey’s secularization and modernization and reflected spatial practices that were inscribed in material space. In other words, Beyoglu and Taksim Square as the primary center of Istanbul have been entangled in the “regime question” in Turkey from the beginning.

For instance, *Topcu Kislasi*, the 19th Century Military Barracks, which the AKP government wants to revive by building its replica was razed by the new secular republic in 1940 as part of the urban planning efforts to render the space “more European and modern.” Moreover, *Topcu Kislasi* had allegedly become the epicenter of conservative and fundamentalist Islamic political activities, which the new republic had little tolerance for. In its stead, was built the Gezi Park. Efforts to rebuild *Topcu Kislasi*, then, should be placed within the political question of which political side gets to inscribe its ideology in the spatial center of urban Turkey as well as within the contemporary economic question of who gets to extract the profit therein. It is the *zeitgeist* of the neoliberal order that such a political battle over the production of space can only express itself in so far as it yields
profit. It is ironic as well as very telling that the replica of Topcu Kislasi is planned as a shopping mall, “the spatial incarnation of neoliberal order” (Altinors, 2013).

Since urban space is such a primary battleground of political struggles, plans to build a replica of 19th Century Ottoman military barracks in Gezi Park’s stead, along with an over-sized mosque (100 meters from the park) on the location of the biggest cultural and art center in Beyoglu—both of which were part of the “pedestrianization project,”—instigated a strong reaction among many groups. On top of its aforementioned symbolic and material significance, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when leftist political activism was considerably vibrant, Taksim Square represented labor movement’s “right to centrality,” as Lefebvre would have it. On many special occasions, Taksim Square was the central space over which class war was waged with the police, in quite literal terms: the long state tradition in Turkey to close Taksim Square on May Days and labor movement’s struggle to enter the square by pushing through the police blockade. This specific form of class struggle has always been a struggle over space in Turkey.

One such occasion that expresses the symbolic value of Taksim Square for the leftist movement in Turkey is “Bloody May Day.” At the height of its power, the largest worker union Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (Turkiye Devrimci Isci Sendikalari Konfederasyonu, DISK) gathered 500,000 people at Taksim Square on 1 May 1977. While the general atmosphere was festive at the beginning, all of a sudden unidentified individuals fired machine guns from the rooftops of multiple high buildings over the crowd. The ensuing panic along with bullets killed 34 people that day, which led the
government at the time to introduce a ban on Taksim Square for political demonstrations. The identities of those who opened fire on the crowd are still unknown, but the fact that the state has never done anything to identify them gives one a clue. Unfortunately, “Bloody May Day” is among the many incidents in the long bloody history of struggle between the state security forces and Turkey’s working classes (Celik, 2013). It is for this reason that, to this day including the May Day demonstration of 2013 (a month before the uprising), Taksim Square has always been a battle ground between the leftist groups and the police forces. Much of the time, this “battle” has been quite literal. It is also noteworthy that the symbolic and material significance of Taksim Square is not limited to the labor movement in the classical sense of the term and relevant to many others such as the LGBTQ groups, which brought together approximately 100,000 people at the square during the Gay Pride day of 2013. Organized for the first time in Istanbul’s Taksim Square in 2003 with the participation of merely 30 people, the scale of the Gay Pride March grew exponentially over the years, reaching to 10,000 in 2011.24 This is significant—apart from indicating the expanding success and level of LGBTQ organizing—because it represents the political centrality of Taksim Square as well as the Square’s significance for political groups to claim their “right to centrality.” It is due to the centrality of Taksim Square for various political groups’ assertion of the right to centrality, the so-called pedestrianization project was designed to rebuild the square in such a way to facilitate the control of its entry points, so that it is much easier to fend off political demonstrations. What this project exposes is the fact that neoliberal production of space in Istanbul aims to determine both the material qualities of the area as well as what specific activities should take place in there. It is welcome to walk in pedestrianized

Taksim for shopping. It is not welcome to walk there in a demonstration.

Because of the political and symbolic significance of Taksim Square and surrounding Beyoglu area for a wide range of people, the urban redevelopment project that aims for a wholesale transformation of such a central public space has led to a strong opposition. Yet, it is important to remember that the plan to transform Taksim and surrounding Beyoglu is only a part of AKP’s generalized strategy of urban redevelopment across urban Turkey. Although I will examine this issue in the second part of this chapter, at this point it is important to note that the AKP government passed legislation in October 2012 (Karajeski, 2012), allegedly for disaster preparation, which enabled the government to demolish and rebuild legally any building at risk in the event of an earthquake—which covers an overwhelming segment of urban Turkey—rendering the whole country legally ripe for redevelopment and gentrification.25

“Everywhere is Taksim, resistance everywhere!”

If a specific regime of capital accumulation through real estate construction and gentrification that is hegemonic at the urban and national scales enabled the struggle for Gezi Park to jump scales more easily to the urban and the national, it still received a great deal of help from the authoritarian reflexes of the AKP government and the police brutality it inflicted on people. After successfully defending the park for two days and three nights, the activists were woken up at five in the morning on 30 May 2013, by what the Istanbul police called “operation dawn,” which saw the police raiding the park with

25 There are surely economic barriers to such a generalized gentrification across the urban Turkey, although the AKP rendered the legal barriers before it irrelevant. I will also examine this point more deeply in part II of this chapter.
tear gas bombs and water cannons, burning protestors’ tents and other personal property on the way. This was the most brutal police attack that the activists had experienced until that point, which consequently injured scores of people. Here, the problem was not the fact that the police used “disproportionate force” in the park, as many liberal commentators argued. The problem was police used force against the protestors, and raided the park “at dawn” as if the protestors were dangerous enemy combatants. After all the protestors had just been sitting for three days in a public park, where everybody has a right to be at any given time of the day, according to the Turkish law.

The so-called “operation dawn” was the breaking point for the protests. In all probability, the AKP government and its police thought this heavy-fisted intervention was enough to disperse the resistance in the park for good. Although the protestors had prioritized the defense of Gezi Park against bulldozers the first three days, they were forced to flee the park and regroup at adjacent Taksim Square, turning into a spontaneous demonstration. In the span of a few hours, an exceptional act of collective mobilization gathered several tens of thousand of people at Taksim Square (estimates range to a few hundred thousand). This civic mobilization was almost exclusively organized through social media, while mainstream media was cooperating fully with the AKP government and imposing a media blackout of the event.

What ensued was nothing short of a war over space. The riot police used every violent means—from chemically enhanced water cannons to “sound bombs;” from beating unarmed people with batons to close-range shots of tear gas canisters and plastic
bullets—to push demonstrators from Taksim Square. However, tens of thousands of people flocked the streets not only in Taksim Square, but also in other public spaces in Istanbul and soon spontaneous solidarity demonstrations were held in other cities, leading to a full-on uprising across the urban Turkey. The famous slogan of the uprising started to echo in every city center: “Everywhere is Taksim, resistance everywhere!” Pandora’s Box was now open.

As the Minister of Interior Muammer Guler announced in retrospect on 15 November 2013 in front of the cameras, there were protests in 80 out of 81 cities of Turkey, and according to the estimate of the Ministry, two and a half million people took it to the streets in early June alone when the protests irrupted into an uprising. Although no one really knows how the Ministry of Interior counts from one protest to another, the Minister announced that there were 5,532 demonstrations after Gezi Park was raided at dawn on 30 May (Today’s Zaman, 2013). What the Minister Guler did not announce that day was the human cost of the police brutality the Ministry of Interior inflicted on “two and a half million people” on the streets. According to the report published by Turkish Medical Association (2013), entitled “Health Status of the Demonstrators,” the number of injured people who went to state hospitals, private hospitals, and other medical centers as well as those who were treated at the makeshift infirmaries in the streets was 8,163. The report notes that this figure does not cover the injured people who were too afraid to seek medical help as the police reportedly made many arrests in the hospitals. Among the 8,163 injured, 106 people were brought in with a serious head trauma. Most of them were hit by a tear gas canister shot directly into the crowd by the police. According to the same
report, the number of people in intensive care was 63. Eleven people lost an eye due to plastic bullets. A 14-year-old kid, Berkin Elvan, who was shot from a close range by a tear gas canister on the head on 15 June, and having stayed in a coma for 269 days died on 11 March 2014. Seven men were killed in total, all between the ages of 14 and 27.

Such was the scale of state violence.

Once this violence started to take its toll on people, it became much harder to remember that the initial resistance organized at Gezi Park had a clear urban agenda to claim the right to the city of ordinary urbanites who rely on use value in the city and to place it over the right to the city of capitalists, developers and their allies in the state who recast the city as a locus of exchange value and capital accumulation. Contemporary urbanism, which privileges the healthy accumulation of capital over the health of people, was in fact recognized for what it was by the protestors at Gezi Park, who kept chanting “Sermaye defol, Gezi Parki bizimdir” (“Capital be gone, Gezi Park is ours”).

As the resistance to the actions of the AKP government and the violence it inflicted on people jumped from Gezi Park to the urban and national scales, its primary political focus shifted from a clear right to the city agenda to civil rights and individual and collective freedoms. The “regime question” suddenly appeared at the heart of the nationalization of the uprising. Once seen as a democratizing force by a considerable segment of people in the early years of its government—primarily due to the challenge it posed to the established forces of the state, such as the military and state bureaucracy, the AKP
government have been increasingly perceived as a repressive force, which have not hesitated to use violent means on the people.

This created a growing resentment as the scale of violence and the death toll increased during the uprising. The largest demonstrations were organized to condemn each murder and to commemorate the lost ones. In spite of the thick teargas cloud covering much of urban Turkey, this much was clear enough to see. If the AKP government had not ordered its police to violently crackdown on peaceful protests at Gezi Park and had instead withdrawn its project of demolishing Gezi Park, the massive mobilization itself, which turned a small-scale peaceful resistance into full-blown urban uprisings across Turkey in the space of three days, would probably not have taken place. Nevertheless, neither the police nor the AKP government was willing to compromise. With solidarity movements spreading both in and out of Turkey, the mobilization quickly came to embody every grievance people had against the AKP government and its increasingly defiant and authoritarian political regime. Slogans like “Capital be gone, Gezi Park is ours” were replaced with “Erdogan resign, government resign,” and “shoulder to shoulder against fascism.”
This turn from a political mobilization with an urban agenda towards the one that had the repressive qualities of the political regime at its target was, in part, enabled by Prime Minister Erdogan himself. As I mentioned earlier, from his first address on television onwards, PM Erdogan decisively took the confrontational path, discrediting protestors as looters and a few extremists, asserting on every occasion that the government had already reached a decision, and nothing, including the protestors, could change it. What is more, PM Erdogan went on to threaten the demonstrators live on national television not only with further police intervention, but also by calling on his million supporters to go to Taksim Square to confront the protestors.

Such an imperious language telling people what to do and what to think was indeed nothing new for the people of Turkey. It is difficult to recount every event that turned
people from docile individuals into a new militant collectivity. In the span of a year, people in Turkey, especially women, were repeatedly told to have at least three children, not to use contraception, to avoid cesareans, that every abortion was a murder and that everybody who drinks alcohol was an alcoholic. People heard PM Erdogan declare that he did not want a youth wandering around drunk, and that instead, he wanted a religious youth. He also scolded young couples on public television for kissing in the subway, telling them to behave in accordance with “his nation’s” religious and moral codes. Those who criticized the government for the “operational accident” (Çubukçu, 2011b) that killed 34 Kurdish civilians in 2011 in Roboski (Uludere)—allegedly mistaken for Kurdish guerillas—also became targets of PM Erdogan’s anger. He told people and the media to stop talking about this “accident,” which was what the “terrorists” wanted. Such cultural and political conservatism, constantly micro-manages what people should do and how people should think, intertwined with a neoliberal assault on common living spaces and the cities, kept a very diverse body of protestors together during the heat of the uprising. After heavy clashes with the police for three days and nights over the control of Taksim Square, on 1 June the police forces finally had to withdraw and Taksim Square was claimed and appropriated by hundreds of thousands of people.

At this point, it is important to go back to the agency question we previously touched upon. As I have mentioned, the initial resistance in Gezi Park during the first few days did not necessarily involve the “ordinary inhabitants of Istanbul.” However, what turned the protest into an uprising was precisely the participation of the ordinary urban inhabitants. The uprisings that caught AKP government off-guard brought together an
unlikely body of people from all walks of life for the first time in recent memory. The overwhelming majority of people who regularly took to the streets everyday during the uprising reportedly did so for the first time in their lives (Bilgic and Kafkasli, 2013). The invisible wall of fear that had kept people at home for so long seemed to be superseded by the sheer creative energy released by massive numbers of bodies on the streets.

Figure 7 The banner mocks the authoritarian tendencies of PM Erdogan referring to him as the "Sultan," the absolute Ottoman monarch. It reads, “Even if the absolute authority belongs to the Sultan, the parks still belong to us!” This is an adaptation of famous proverb from the Ottoman times that has “the mountains” instead of “the parks” in the original, which refers to the widespread guerilla activity at the time. Image by Mehmet Baris Kuymulu.

The very process of claiming and appropriating the central public space and fighting over it with heavily armed riot police for days brought about a process of political education
for people who did not share the same politics. The heterogeneity of banners, colors, flags and other political symbols I saw in Taksim Square was simply unprecedented in any political event in the history of Turkey. It was hard to find any oppositional political fraction, large or small, which was not somewhat represented at the square. It would be naïve, of course, to think that all these groups, some of which have long been hostile to one another, simply co-existed in Taksim without any friction.

On the one hand there were Turkish nationalists, who chanted, “We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal,” referring to the “founding father” and the first president of the modern, secular, and nationalist Republic of Turkey. This chant represented secular nationalists’ disgruntlement with the new political regime of Islamic AKP government and its reforms, which the former saw as a threat to the secular foundations of “Ataturk’s republic.” However, this militarist chant with nationalist overtones was constantly interrupted by the anti-war groups, anarchists and conscientious objectors who chanted, “We will not kill, we will not die, we will not be soldiers of anyone.” In its other variations the same nationalist/militarist slogan was humorously appropriated by the LGBTQ groups who chanted, “We are the soldiers of Zeki Muren,” referring to the infamous gay Turkish singer of 1960s and 1970s. In other repeated occasions, the same militarist/nationalist slogan was interrupted, this time, by Kurdish groups, who chanted in Kurdish, “Biji Serok Apo” (Viva Leader Apo), referring to the imprisoned leader of Kurdish guerilla groups that have been fighting for Kurdish autonomy against the Turkish army for over 30 years.
The fragility of new solidarities enacted against a common opponent during the uprising at Taksim Square was captured neatly by one incident, recounted to me later on by a participant. The usual safe distance between a socialist fraction of secular Turkish nationalists and militant socialist Kurdish groups were lost at one point due to the constant flow of people at the square. Each found the other by its side. At that moment, the leftist Turkish nationalists started to chant, “We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal,” which was immediately countered by “Biji Serok Apo!” As the tension escalated, both groups exchanged curses and started to poke one another with the sticks of the banners. “It was a matter of seconds, my friend” the participant told me “and we started shout the
infamous socialist chant, ‘Shoulder to shoulder against fascism’…and thank god they both joined in.”

All these happened alongside the soccer fans and their mostly sexist chants and slogans, which were constantly interrupted by socialist feminist collectives. Socialist feminists raised much attention and appreciation when they started a campaign to erase sexist slogans and graffiti off the walls, attaching a note that read, “Removed due its sexist content.”

Figure 9 Socialist Feminist collectives at Taksim Square. Image by Saygun Gokariksel.

Those who thought that the people in Taksim Square were exclusively composed of secularists who had been anxious of the increasingly conservative and Islamist reforms of the AKP government had their share of surprise when they saw a huge banner (and a large crowd underneath) that read, “Property belongs to Allah, Capital get out of Taksim”
(Altinors, 2013). This was an organization called “Anti-capitalist Muslims” and they were not alone. Further down in Gezi Park “Revolutionary Muslims” had their banner that read, “Trees bend before Allah, AKP bends before Capital.” Both groups were preaching how capitalism was completely in discord with the teachings of Qur’an and were extremely influential during the uprising. “Anti-capitalist Muslims” and “Revolutionary Muslims” were yet another fraction standing “shoulder to shoulder against fascism” with more pro-capitalist secularist fractions.

What was interesting with the frictional heterogeneity in Taksim Square was that all these groups and many more were united against massive police violence, and came to contact with one another to a large extent for the first time. The fact that they were necessarily united to resist police violence gave them a chance to talk and get to know one another. Resisting “shoulder to shoulder” enabled talking face to face. For instance, after the successful campaign by the feminist collectives, more people started to hush others when they started to chant sexist slogans intending to insult PM Erdogan. The same went for homophobic chants and slogans. For instance, the most widely used homophobic insult in Turkish would probably be *ibne*, a derogatory term for a male homosexual, the equivalent of which would be “faggot.” As it is one of the most favorite insults of straight men, it was widely used to insult the police, PM Erdogan or whomever the crowd was resentful and angry against during the early uprising. As I mentioned the LGBTQ communities were very well represented during the uprising and their presence was felt strongly by many straight man, who would not otherwise spend time with the former. After a few days loaded with homophobic chants and slogans, the members of LGBTQ groups started
to carry small hand-banners that read “What if we’re faggots?!” and even further appropriated the intended insult with their chants: “What if we’re faggots, get used to it, we’re everywhere!” “What if we’re faggots, freedom is all we’re after!”26

In one of the park forums I attended in Besiktas district in late June, right below the Taksim area towards the Bosphorus, where people who want to speak could do so for three minutes, I heard one man confessing in front of hundreds of forum participants that during the Gezi protests he learnt that he was such a homophobe, and he added that he probably still is (laughter from the crowd). “But now I know better,” he said and “I try not to use the word ibne for the gay folk.” He shared his experience in which he was running away from a police officer in one of the dark winding back streets of Beyoglu in the middle of the night, and as the police just caught him, a group of gay and transvestite individuals appeared out of nowhere and confronted the police. The police had to flee. “They were just living in that building, you know, where I was just caught… and they took me upstairs. We just sat down for a few hours waiting for the ‘storm’ to pass.” He added, “They weren’t what I thought they were. They were great brave guys”27 (Crowd applauding and cheering).

There is one more crucial dimension to what I have been calling the frictional totality that emerged during the uprising. Apart from the social groups that would not come together easily, such as homophobes and transvestites, or sexist soccer fans and feminist

26 I’d like to thank Oguz Erdur, who helped me with translating this difficult slogan, worded in quite a specific way in Turkish.
27 He was making an obvious reference to a widely-held stereotype in Turkey and elsewhere about gay man being more like a woman, hence not man enough, not brave, courageous or feisty.
collectives, this frictional totality also represented a confrontation between what could be called the old social movements and the new social movements in Turkey. As I mentioned, the protests and uprising emerged as a spontaneous irruption and the more traditionally organized political actors, such as political parties, trade and labor unions were latecomers to the event. It was not until the first week of protests were over that two of the largest progressive labor unions, Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DISK) and Confederation of Public Workers Unions (KESK) joined forces for a general strike (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013c). That such labor unions and opposition parties did not jump on the bandwagon quickly enough led to their dismissal by some groups and protestors, as they were seen as too big and too bureaucratic, too well entrenched in the bigger game of politics at the state level to react to a spontaneous uprising. During the early days of the uprising, there were many calls to labor unions and political parties for support in such an unprecedented event and criticism ensued. However, after the first week or so, as Taksim Square was already appropriated and police had withdrawn, the arrival of the organized “old forces” of political society created as much criticism and reaction from various groups of protestors. The old forces that had been criticized for being late to the uprising were, this time, criticized for joining the protests to co-opt “the Gezi spirit” for it was decidedly leaderless and spontaneous, led by the principles of direct democracy and solidarity. The organized forces of political society were blamed for their presumed desire to sit in the front seat behind the steering wheel. The rejection of such allegations by the leaders of old forces that joined the uprising notwithstanding, such allegations continued to be a matter of contestation and dispute throughout the uprising as there were a considerable number of protestors who valued spontaneous and
leaderless form the uprising represented. There seemed to be a conundrum. While there were some leftist groups which criticized DISK and KESK for holding the general strike for only three days and for going back to work, there were others who argued that the protests were not about political parties, labor unions and their red and yellow socialist flags, because the Gezi protest was not about “politics”; It was only about saving the trees.

Although the confrontation between the older traditional actors and the newer less organized members of the political society did not go away completely, they cooperated and stood by each other most of the time during the heat of the uprising. None of those actors boycotted the events, for instance or deserted the streets and squares due to the presence of the other. They simply kept on existing side by side during the uprising. In a way, the older and more organized social forces and the newer ones were the two other somewhat hostile groups that made up the frictional heterogeneity of the uprising. Nationalists, the Kurdish movement, Anti-capitalist Muslims and secularists as well as the old forces and the new forces had tensions among them, but this did not deter cooperation and solidarity in the short run during the uprising and in its immediate aftermath. One could argue, moving from Lefebvre’s insightful observation about the revolutionary irruption in Paris, that during the times of revolt and uprising people are “endowed with intense, rapid, and lucid perception of immediate possibilities,” even though more often than not this may be temporally limited (1969: 113). Certain options that were traditionally seen as impossible before the uprising glimpse as possibilities in the heat of it. The co-existence and cooperation between, say, the secularists and the
Islamists, the old forces and the new forces glimpsed as a possibility in the fleeting moment of the uprising, yet it would not be entirely true to argue that their contradictions were fully worked out in the long run.

The formation of the frictional heterogeneity, which was enabled by the uprising, therefore, was a process of political education for most people, its inconsistencies and incompleteness notwithstanding. The participation of massive numbers of heterogeneous group of people was “transformative” in many respects. They participated in the protests and uprising to transform the ways in which they were told to live in the city. It was an uprising against a certain kind of urban life that was imposed upon them, the one that constantly enclosed and privatized their commons and tell them what kind of activities could take place in public space. People responded to this by appropriating central squares and parks in many cities. They set up tents, put up banners, embellished the trees and set up a solidarity economy where the money, the universal form of power, was rendered irrelevant. They cleaned the streets and parks together, sang, cooked and ate together. In other words, the protestors did not only appropriate the already existing spaces but transformed them into social laboratories where they experimented an alternative urbanism at a very small scale. Moreover, the protestors’ “transformative participation” partially transformed them as well. They enacted new solidarities, talked to the members of groups seen as hostile, and brought politics into everyday life, in the sense I exemplified with the account of admittedly homophobic man in Besiktas.
After the heat of the uprising, especially after the police reclaimed Gezi Park on 15 June, the transformative participation in appropriation also gave way to slightly more durable forms of political practices and spaces, like the park forums, which I will examine in the third and final part of this chapter. But before going on with the spontaneous formation of such new political spaces and organizational forms that sprung from the uprising, I would like to take a step back and examine the basic pillars of the growth-based political economy of the AKP decade (2002-2014) in order to establish the relationship between growth and revolt. After all, as Lefebvre notes in *The Explosion*, “contestation arises spontaneously.” However, “the explosion of spontaneity arises out of prior conditions” (1969: 69).

**PART II**

‘Specter of comparisons’ and the middle class

As I have tried to elaborate in the first part, the pace and spontaneity of the unprecedented collective mobilization of millions of people without the overt lead of established and organized actors of Turkey’s democratization, such as leftist trade unions and the Kurdish movement, took the governing AKP by surprise. However, AKP was not the only actor that was caught off-guard and many analysts, both in and out of Turkey, those who remained critical to the mobilization as well as those who celebrated it, shared AKP’s shock.

This initial shock and awe was quickly translated into a search for the origins, causes, and agents of the uprising. A specter of comparisons haunted the initial analysis. Some
argued that the so-called Arab Spring finally knocked on Turkey’s door. Others brought to our attention the similarities between the encampments in New York City’s Zuccotti Park and Gezi Park in Istanbul and the ensuing police violence unleashed in both cities. Still, others developed several arguments to place Turkey in the politically boiling southern fringe of Europe, along with Greece, Portugal and Spain.

Figure 10 Demonstration at Taksim Square on 22 June to commemorate the deaths of five young people (then the death toll) during the heat of the uprising. In the background one of the protestors wave a Brazilian flag in solidarity with Brazilian protestors. Image by Mehmet Baris Kuymulu.

However, the people in the streets of Turkey were not trying to topple an unelected tyrant, calling for the first free elections in recent memory, as Egyptians and Tunisians did. Nor, was the reaction clearly directed at a financial elite, holding the rest of the society hostage, as in the United States, although class-based disgruntlement was very salient in the streets of Turkey. Moreover, similarities between the streets of other
Mediterranean countries and Turkey’s eventually hit the wall of comparison between the contracting economies of Greece, Spain and Portugal, and the relatively constant upward trend in the development of Turkey’s economy in the past decade. If all this was not enough to satisfy the appetite for comparison, protests broke out in Brazil and Bulgaria roughly at the same time Turkey’s urban protests were grabbing international media attention in June (O’Brennan, 2013).

There is nothing wrong, in and of itself, with the attempt to understand post-2011 urban mobilizations around the world in relation to one another, as each represents a growing dissatisfaction with the globalized capitalism that is increasingly neoliberal and repressive in character. On the contrary, such connections between distant and apparently unconnected urban mobilizations should be made; and the common structural mechanisms behind each of them should be carefully revealed and analyzed. In the end, youth unemployment, precarious and insecure working conditions, enclosures of commons, and rampant privatization as well as the widening gap between those who toil everyday and those who speculate over the labor of others are hardly unique to any specific geography of global neoliberalism. However, this common dissatisfaction with aforementioned aspects of authoritarian neoliberalism seemed to get lost in comparison as the theme of “middle class” became salient to explain protests. Discussions around the middle class component of social unrest usually took place around vague notions such as “middle class militants” (Surowiecki, 2013) and “global middle-class revolution” (Fukuyama, 2013).
For instance, one of the more influential political scientists, Francis Fukuyama, in a short article he penned for the *Wall Street Journal* at the end of June 2013, argues that “the political turmoil” that he sees “all over the world” stems from “one common theme: the failure of governments to meet the rising expectations of the newly prosperous and educated” (Fukuyama, 2013). Fukuyama asserts that “the rise of a new global middle class” is the theme that connects not only Turkey with Brazil but it connects them with Tunisia and Egypt as well. Citing a 2008 Goldman Sachs report that defines “the global middle class” as those who make anything between 6,000 US$ and 30,000 US$ a year, Fukuyama attests that “the corporations are salivating at this emerging market” since this new class will “grow by some 2 billion people by 2030.” Moreover, if one takes the education and not just income into consideration, Fukuyama goes on, it will then be obvious that the size of the new global middle class is actually larger.

It might look ironic, even futile to take issue with a political scientist who announced the end of history in 1989 and who still talks about urban upheavals that make history (Fukuyama, 2000 [1989]). It is not hard to dismiss him right away and outright, yet this would do a little to change the fact that he enjoys a great deal of global influence, writing in venues like *the Wall Street Journal* and *Foreign Affairs*, and his views are reproduced by more locally influential figures in such countries as Brazil and Turkey, where the urban mobilizations take place. Figures like Fukuyama, writing in journals that are the voice of global capital, or even in more liberal publications such as *The New Yorker* (Surowiecki, 2013) and the *BBC News* (Yueh 2013) are largely responsible both from global and more local circulation of “the global middle-class” thesis in explaining the
post-2011 urban mobilizations. I engage with this thesis here in order to make the argument that what is deemed as middle class by these commentators is made up of unemployed and underemployed youth, precarious laborers, underpaid professionals, most of them highly indebted. In other words, the class in formation throughout the 2013 urban uprising in Turkey is much more complicated than the proponents of “the global middle class” thesis would have it.

There were certainly many among the “two and a half million people” (according to the figures of Turkish Interior Ministry) who took it to the streets during the Gezi protests that would fit in Fukuyama’s generous category of educated middle class. But whether they are as “prosperous” as Fukuyama imagines them to be is less certain. To begin with, recent research demonstrates that almost 70% of those who were in the streets during the uprising were younger than 30 years old (Bilgic and Kafkasli, 2013, also see Altinors, 2013). Had Fukuyama looked at the youth unemployment rate in Turkey (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013a), he would see that it surpassed 20% in 2013 and he might have hesitated to call the demonstrators “newly prosperous.” Although we cannot be absolutely sure that the youth in the streets during the uprising was exclusively made up of young people without jobs, the high percentage of youth participation in the events and high youth unemployment figures suggest that there may be a relationship between youth participation and youth unemployment. What is more, the problem with Fukuyama’s argument is not limited to unemployment and growing pauperization of youth. Those who are lucky enough to have a job with a living wage are not exactly better off either. Let me try to demonstrate this with one example.
The medical doctors who work in Turkey’s research universities would definitely fall into Fukuyama’s global middle class category, both in terms of income and surely in terms of high level of education. However, the AKP governments over the past decade transformed the legal structures that govern worker rights, length of the working week, pension rights, social security, and many other legal structures that turned Turkey’s growing population into a flexible labor force. Flexibilization of labor has been one of the key tasks of neoliberal state around the world, which have undermined the share of labor in accumulated social value to the advantage of capital in the past four decades and this process has been highly visible and important in Turkey as well. The neoliberalization of medical sector in Turkey has historically been achieved by the privatization of almost every state hospital and by introducing tax-cuts for new private investment in the sector. Moreover, the AKP government initiated a series of structural transformations by introducing a new law, effective January 2011, which now dictates that doctors should be paid according to a “performance evaluation system” (Hurriyet Daily News, 2011). The Turkish Medical Association (Turk Tabibler Birligi) and the faculty of various university hospitals repeatedly protested the new law and explained that it threatens scientific research, the healthy working conditions of doctors, as well as the wellbeing of patients. The “performance evaluation system” poses such multifarious threats, according to the medical association, because it ties the amount of money doctors could earn to the number of patients they examine, and to the number of surgeries they perform during the working day. The more one examines, the more “prosperous” one gets. By doing so, it takes precious time away from scientific research, which is what the primary function of
university doctors is supposed to be. It threatens the well-being of patients as they are examined very quickly, not as patients who need proper care, but as another obstacle before a higher pay.

I intentionally chose my example from the flexibilization of medical doctors because they belong to one of the most privileged strata of wage laborers. The arguments like Fukuyama’s do not even consider such labor conditions under which people produce; the alienation they experience; the rights violations they have to endure; on the growing insecurity and precariousness workers experience. That is to say, Fukuyama and others (Bohn and Bayrasli, 2013; Deen, 2013; Yueh, 2013) make such claims about “the global middle class” only by looking at the income figures of the laborers without even considering the material conditions under which people produce.

By questioning how quickly Gezi protests were identified as a middle class mobilization by many, I do not mean to argue that people deemed as middle class were absent in the protests. Instead, I argue that the class in formation throughout the uprising was much more complicated than simply being about “middle class.” However, there is a good reason why such broad-based mobilizations around the world are labeled as middle class movements. Ideologically, it is handy for the ruling elite and for its media pundits, since, what middle classes often demand is more of something that already exists. This can be more democracy, more freedom, or more purchasing power, but such movements are thought to exclude a demand for the wholesale transformation of the social and economic structure that enables such demands. That is to say, the ideological function of
representing the agency of such mobilizations as “middle class” is to imply that the hegemonic neoliberal capitalism is working just fine except an issue here, and a trouble there, and these problems could be reformed with a few minor touches.

The middle class card is especially handy in an explosive situation like Gezi protests because it also appears to quickly explain why such a grand mobilization took place in a country like Turkey, which has been a star student of the IMF, with relatively healthy growth rates in the past decade, unlike, say contracting economies of Greece, Spain and Italy. It is often argued by the liberal commentators who subscribe to “the global middle class” thesis that while the recent urban mobilizations in the latter stem chiefly from the austerity measures that inhibited economic growth, the protests in Turkey happened precisely because there was such growth, which ostensibly uplifted people’s living standards (Keyder, 2013; Deen, 2013; Yueh, 2013). Therefore, in order to interrogate the ideological function of postulating a freedom searching newly prosperous middle class as the agent of social mobilization in Turkey, it is necessary to unpack Turkey’s so-called economic success.

The “construction” of growth in Turkey

Caglar Keyder, one of the most prominent urbanists and social theorists of Turkey, argues in his piece “Law of the Father,” published during the uprising in the London Review of Books that the protestors in Istanbul were the “beneficiaries of economic growth and greater openness to the world” accomplished by the AKP government. Furthermore, Keyder argues, economic growth was coupled with the AKP’s policies that
allocated “more money for education,” which led to some 200 universities in total, and 2.5 million new graduates were added to the population since 2008. Therefore, greater investment for education powered by economic growth under AKP’s decade-long rule gave way to a new middle class, according to Keyder, that is more open to the world and demands the standards of its global counterparts (Keyder, 2013).

So much has been made of the growth-based economic success of the AKP government. It is lamentable that Keyder’s account among others remains uncritical of this success story and simply offers a local version of Fukuyama’s “global middle class” argument. It is true that one observes about 5% annual growth rate, fluctuations notwithstanding, throughout early and mid-2000s, which is deemed healthy by liberal economists. To equate such growth rates with the increase in purchasing power of the population and with the rise in its general standard of living and welfare, however, is to assume that the extra wealth occasioned by economic growth is distributed across the society in such a way to make up for the existing class inequalities. Even if we brush aside crucial issues of social justice and look at the growth rates in isolation, which is what many liberal economists do, we would still see worrying signs in Turkey’s numbers. Especially with the global economic crises unleashed by the collapse of the US housing markets in 2007, the growth rate of Turkey is fluctuating wildly, from 0.8 in 2008 to -4.8 in 2009, from 9.2 in 2010 to 8.8 in 2011, and to 2.2 in 2012 (The World Bank, 2013). The optimistic expectations of the AKP government estimated Turkey’s 2013 growth rate as 4.4 but it got stuck at 3.7. The projections for the next year shows that it will be 3.2 (PwC, 2014), the bare minimum of a healthy capitalist economy (Harvey, 2012: 80).
Serious fluctuations in Turkey’s growth rates in synchrony with the systemic global capitalist crisis only makes sense, considering the long process of neoliberalization Turkey has gone through since the early 1980s. However, the permeability of Turkish economy is still exacerbated by the economic regime the AKP government has built in the last decade. AKP’s so-called economic success primarily rests on high amounts of foreign capital flowing into Turkey’s economy. According to economist Mustafa Sonmez, ten years of AKP rule witnessed an unprecedented 421 billion dollars foreign capital flowing into the country, 340 billion of it being in the form of unpaid external debt (Sonmez, 2013a). The economic vulnerability caused by foreign debt is only aggravated by Turkey’s account deficit as the currently growing private sector debt is exclusively in foreign currency (Savran, 2013). However, in complete accord with the neoliberal orthodoxy, foreign capital inflow—even though it mostly comes as debt or speculative short-term investment—is still lauded as the most important aspect of healthy and growing Turkish economy. Yet, barely one third of the 421 billion dollars’ worth of this foreign capital landed in Turkey as foreign direct investment, mostly for purchasing what already exists, such as state economic enterprises and banks that were put on sale. The other two third of it came in for short-term speculative gain in Istanbul stock exchange market (Sonmez, 2013b).

Unpaid foreign debt is only a part of the problem with the debt-infused growth economy during the last decade. The figures on internal debt are as worrying. The 9.2% growth in Turkey’s economy in 2010, and 8.8% in 2011, which the AKP government is so proud
of, and which is constantly applauded in international liberal circles, relied heavily on household consumption within the domestic market. The share of household consumption in the total growth of Turkey’s economy in this two-year period was 60% (Sonmez, 2012). According to the “Financial Stability Report,” published in May 2012 by the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, disposable household income is estimated to be 487.2 billion Turkish Liras. Household debt figures as 51.7% of this amount, around 252 billion Turkish Liras (2012: 25). Only a decade ago in 2003, one should remember, the share of household debt in disposable household income was 5.5%, which is a staggering testament to the fact that both much-celebrated economic growth of Turkey and the ostensible rise in people’s standard of living, has been based on intense “indebtization.”

A recent news-piece in one of the Islamic newspapers in Turkey announced that 1.6 million people are completely unable to pay their credit card debts (Zaman, 2013). Note that official household debt figures only reflect formal household debt based on credit card debts and consumer credits obtained from banks. The figures exclude any form of informal debt from friends and family or from the informal or underground debt institutions, which are not hard to come by in Turkey. Although the figures that demonstrate how indebted the citizens of Turkey are do not let us conclude for sure that the people in the streets during the uprising were primarily made up of the indebted, they suggest that there were probably many indebted people protesting in the street during the summer of 2013 in Turkey.

The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey seems to be unconcerned with an 18-fold increase in formal household debt in the last decade as the same “Financial Stability
Report” announces in a favorable tone that “the ever increasing use of credit and debit
cards, which plays an important role for the registered economy, and consumption
expenditures of households via credit cards, continue to increase” (Central Bank of the
Republic of Turkey, 2012: 24). This is the core reason why I began examining Turkey’s
growth-based “economic miracle” by challenging the analyses that hastily labeled the
agency behind Turkey’s urban uprisings as “middle class” (Keyder, 2013), and the
process as part of “the global middle class revolution” (Fukuyama, 2013). Considering
the indebtedness and precarious working conditions of Turkey’s so-called middle classes,
it is not tenable to argue that two and a half million “newly prosperous and educated”
members of “global middle class” participated in Gezi protests in order to demand the
consumerist advantages of their global counterparts.

At this point let me go back to the issue of foreign debt as it provides a joint that connects
to another pillar of AKP’s so-called economic success. As I mentioned, the 421 billion
dollars foreign capital inflow during the AKP decade was unprecedented in the history of
Turkey’s economy. It is not surprising, then, that such unprecedented foreign capital
inflow was accompanied by an equally unprecedented pace in privatization of public
assets. Although the early attempts of privatization go back to mid-1980s when the
process of neoliberalization started, it was not until the end of 1990s that privatization
shifted from being sporadic to systematical. Turkey privatized its decades-long
accumulated social wealth for 54 billion US dollars in 29 years. More than 40 billion US
dollars of this privatization, that is 78% of it, has taken place during AKP rule in the last
decade. Just in the first half of 2013, the AKP government privatized 8 billion US
dollars’ worth of public property, which is a testament to the ongoing accelerated privatization under AKP’s rule (Sonmez, 2013c).

Dovetailed with foreign capital inflow and such rapid and vast privatization of public wealth, including urban public lands, one of the chief sectors that gained a new prominence during the AKP decade is the construction sector (Baysal, 2010: 39; INTES, 2013: 1-2). Powered by state driven urban redevelopment schemes that have been chiefly about privatization of urban public lands and their redevelopment, the construction sector became one of the driving motors of Turkey’s economy under the AKP rule. Imperative in this process has been the transformation of “Housing Development Administration of Turkey” (popularly known as TOKI, its Turkish acronym) from a state institution established to serve the housing needs of urban working classes into an almost autonomous institution with extraordinary powers. Directly answering to the Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry, TOKI is indeed acting as a proper ministry. However, TOKI became more independent and powerful than any regular ministry in Turkey with the introduction of new legal adjustments. For instance, even though TOKI is still formally a state institution, it can work independently with foreign capital and act as an investor both in construction and finance sectors (Baysal, 2010: 40). Moreover, TOKI can change land use patterns, without consulting with the Ministry of Environment and Urbanism or conferring with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, or Ministry of Forest and Water Resources which are allegedly responsible for the protection of cultural and natural wealth and heritage in Turkey. TOKI has become the absolute authority over public land, and is able to singlehandedly determine land use patterns, and to make necessary changes
in zoning plans to expropriate any piece of land that it can valorize (Adanali, 2011: 10; Deniz, 2013).

“The Law number 5609 was published in the Official Gazette on 8th March 2007 and entered into force. With the amendment made in the Law on ‘gecekondu’ (shanties) number 775 within this framework, authorities and tasks of the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement have been assigned to TOKİ. With the same law, the Department of Dwelling Affairs within the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement has been assigned to TOKİ as well” (TOKI Official Website)²⁸

Figure 11 Graffiti by an unknown artist in now gentrified Sulukule, historic ROMA neighborhood in Istanbul. It humorously play with the popular Turkish proverb that says, “The well-fed will never understand the hungry.” Well-fed is “tok” in Turkish and by adding the letter “i” at the end, the graffiti says “TOKİ will never understand the hungry.” Photo by unknown photographer taken during the uprising in Istanbul.

²⁸ https://www.toki.gov.tr/
With such centralization of power, TOKI became the chief institution that has been orchestrating urban redevelopment of Turkey’s lands. It is a hybrid institution that blurs the usual categories through which we understand neoliberal urbanism. On the one hand it is a state institution, and seems to be the chief institutional actor of Turkey’s state-led urban development. But, on the other hand, it is an autonomous market actor, that barrows credit from international financial institutions, partners with global construction companies, and buys and sells land and real estate. If we are to understand neoliberalism, not as a set of political economic practices that excludes the state in favor of private market actors, but as a set of political economic practices that aim to raise the share of capital at the expense of labor, and a set of practices in which the state is specifically implicated with specific functions, then TOKI and AKP’s urbanism seems to me more neoliberal than its predecessors, because, the AKP government in general and TOKI in particular form the vital institutional link between public property and domestic as well as global capital, transferring former into the latter.

It is within the confines of this specific function, TOKI and AKP transformed Turkey’s urban spaces literally into a vast construction site. Yet, as we witnessed in other countries where capital rushed into construction and real estate for accumulation, such as in Spain from the early 1990s up until 2008, this process does not go without leading to a housing bubble. And bubbles burst, as we are harshly reminded by the systemic crises that began in housing markets in the US in 2007. In this context, the flow of capital from the primary to the secondary circuit, the relative stabilizing effect of urbanization and real
estate construction on the economy and its crisis-proneness, which we have discussed in chapter II as the missing link in Lefebvre’s analysis of the “urban problematic,” appears to be very important.

It can be argued that the relative growth of the construction sector in Turkey since AKP came to power in 2002 played a positive role in the overall stability and growth of the Turkish economy. It opened a new path for capital accumulation in the domestic economy that had been terribly scarred by the 2001 crisis, which had led to a sharp depreciation of Turkish Lira and a contraction of GDP by 5.7% in real terms of 2001 (Macovei, 2009: 5). The construction sector also functioned as a site for attracting foreign capital into the country as well, especially in financing the development thanks to the transformation of TOKI. The construction sector’s stabilizing effect on the overall economy is visible in the correlation between the growth patterns in the construction sector and the GDP growth. Between 2002, when the recovery period started and 2013, every year the GDP grew, the rate of growth of the construction sector scored bigger numbers than the domestic economy. In the same period when the Turkish economy contracted, the construction sector contracted even more severely than the overall economy. For instance, in 2006 while Turkey’s growth rate was 6.9%, the construction sector grew at 18.5%. When the GDP growth was stalled in 2009 and Turkish economy contracted by -4.8, this was reflected in the construction sector’s -16.3% contraction rate (INTES, 2013: 1-3).
After relatively high co-growth rates of the GDP and the construction sector in 2010 and 2011, there has been an alarming trend of decline in the growth of construction sector since 2012. While the construction sector grew only by 0.6% in 2012 (INTES, 2013: 1), in the first four months of 2014 the unit sales of new apartments decreased by about 8% (Kenarli, 2014), contributing to a total supply of 1.5 million empty unsold apartments (400,000 in Istanbul only). It is important to note that the total supply of unsold apartments was closer to 200,000 in 2006 (Thomas, 2014; Kenarli, 2014).

These numbers indicate that the relative stability provided by capital investment in the secondary circuit between 2002 and 2007 came to an end, and the sharp decline in real estate sales, coupled with the staggering supply of unsold empty housing point to an overinvestment trend in the secondary circuit. Recall David Harvey’s argument, discussed in chapter two, that the relative stabilizing effect of investment in the secondary circuit is temporary and it is usually followed by an overinvestment problem. This might be followed by an overaccumulation of capital in the built environment, which might lead to the devaluation of capital and a larger economic crisis (Harvey, 2012). The numbers seem to confirm the theory.

The grim picture of Turkey’s debt-infused growth in general, and relative contraction of the construction sector in particular notwithstanding, there may still be a few reasons to believe that Turkey’s economy, motored by urban redevelopment and construction, might be able to grow and sustain itself for the near future. Aforementioned new legislation, passed in 2012 ostensibly for earthquake preparedness, probably will breathe fresh life
into the construction sector. Unless there are serious shifts and transformations in the global economy, the urban redevelopment and construction sectors of Turkish economy might be able to grow thanks to the fact that it is now legally possible to demolish and rebuild any building that is deemed an earthquake risk in Turkey. It is imperative to remember that 99% of Turkey is considered to be first-degree earthquake zone. The planned magnitude of urban redevelopment at the national scale is announced by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanism on its official website. According to the ministry, there are 19 million buildings in Turkey and 14 million of them require handling, whereby six to seven million (about 40%) will be demolished and rebuilt within an average period of 20 years against disaster risk (Ministry of Environment and Urbanism, ND).\(^{29}\) This means that the process of urban redevelopment and consequent value hikes in property and living costs that have displaced so many in working class neighborhoods in Istanbul and other major cities of Turkey will likely be observed even in better off neighborhoods.

Privatization, debt-infused development, especially of urban land, together with thus far constant inflow of foreign capital have been the pillars of AKP’s political and economic power in the last twelve years. In this period, AKP transformed Turkey’s urban spaces into a construction site, especially through massive and widespread urban redevelopment projects orchestrated by TOKI. It is no coincidence, then, that the largest spontaneous social protest in Turkey’s history was mobilized to protect a small public park in the heart of Istanbul from AKP’s largest urban redevelopment project to transform one of the most

iconic urban centers in Turkey, Istanbul’s Taksim Square. Just like the accumulation of capital in one place brings about the accumulation of working class, and hence of the possibility of resistance as Marx reminds us, the primary engine of capital accumulation, i.e., the redevelopment of urban land and gentrification led to a massive resistance in Taksim Square at a scale unlike anything the AKP or any preceding government has ever seen. The class in formation during the uprising, in other words, had very much to do with large scale investment in the secondary circuit of capital and the political resistance occasioned by the threat inhabitants feel on their social spaces.

Figure 12 A very familiar view in Istanbul. High-rise building construction dominates the skyline. Image by Nazim Serhat Firat.

Many people, including myself (Kuymulu, 2013b), argued early on during Gezi Protests that if Prime Minister Erdogan had not escalated the tension by denouncing hundreds of thousands of protesting people across urban Turkey as a few looters and extremists, and
had he stepped back from his appetite for the urban redevelopment project, the massive protests would not have escalated into a full-fledged urban uprising. While this may be true, it is also clear why he did not do so. Stepping back from the largest urban redevelopment project designed to transform probably the most symbolic and important urban space in Turkey in the face of resistance would quickly send the right message to many others who are organized against such schemes in their neighborhoods, in their cities across Turkey: that urban redevelopment can be stopped. It is precisely to inhibit this message, I think, we witnessed such a brutal police crackdown on protestors. However, the resistance sparked by Gezi Protests did succeed in halting the transformation of Taksim, saving Gezi Park from destruction, and the message did get out. This message led to an unprecedented sense of political empowerment in Turkey. One of the most significant ways in which this new sense of empowerment expressed itself was the constitution of what people call the park forums.

PART III

From Taksim Commune to park forums: Towards a politics of value

It is hard to draw the temporal borders of the uprising. It is more or less apparent that the peaceful protests that were instigated by the plans to turn Gezi Park into a shopping mall transformed into an uprising due to excessive police violence, first on the protestors in Gezi Park, then on others who crowded Taksim Square in solidarity with the protestors on 30 and 31 May. It is harder to tell when the uprising dwindled because large-scale spontaneous demonstrations and nighttime clashes with the police went on well into September in many cities of Turkey, especially in Ankara, Dersim and Antakya.
Although the beginning and the end of such explosive events are always debatable, a good argument can be made that one of the most special and crucial periods of the uprising, at least for Istanbul, took place between 1 June and 15 June.

![Taksim Square claimed after heavy clashes with the Police on 1 June. Image taken that night appeared in Wikipedia.com](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezi_Park)

The first of June was the day of the biggest crowd in Istanbul’s Taksim Square. As mentioned, after heavy clashes with the police for three days and nights over the control
of Taksim Square, on 1 June the police forces finally had to withdraw and Taksim Square was claimed by hundreds of thousands of people. Thus began the Taksim Commune.

Figure 14 The building in the background is Ataturk Kultur Merkezi (Ataturk Cultural Center). PM Erdogan voiced on several occasions his intention to demolish the building as part of Taksim’s transformation. According to the rumor, this is where AKP desires to build a grand mosque, the highly popular fantasy of Islamist movement since 1994, when now PM Erdogan became the mayor of Istanbul. Figure 10 is taken from the roof of this building. During the Taksim Commune the Center was completely covered by flags and banners of leftist political fractions. Ironically, once the Taksim Commune was dispersed and spaces reclaimed by the State, the Center was transformed into a riot police headquarter. Image by Nazim Serhat Firat.

The first action of people was to set up barricades on every road that led to Taksim and Beyoglu area in order to be able to defend the appropriated space against the police incursion and backlash. For a total of 15 days Taksim Square and Gezi Park were completely controlled and sustained by the people who appropriated the space and refused to leave. This was two weeks when the state was almost completely absent in the
The Taksim Commune ended on 15 June with the heaviest police blow until then and both Taksim Square and Gezi Park were evicted, “cleaned up,” and reclaimed by the state.

Figure 15 The image by Saygun Gokariksel shows Ataturk Kultur Merkezi at Taksim Square completely appropriated by protestors and covered with flags and slogans of Leftist fractions.

It was this heavy crackdown by the police in Taksim Square and Gezi Park to push the Taksim Commune out that ironically turned many smaller neighborhood parks into Gezi Park. The attempts towards practicing self-management through forming collectives and volunteer groups were already in place in Gezi Park from day one. Many groups, such as “Our Commons” (Mustereklerimiz), the Taksim Solidarity Platform (Taksim Dayanismasi) and many others played significant roles in organizing “a free medical center, food center and library.” They organized workshops, help centers, and
information desks “that aimed to produce a database of oral testimonies and visual records of the protests and police violence” (Gokariksel, 2013).

More significantly, perhaps, the withdrawal of the state and its services from the Taksim area led to a rapid collectivization of individual protestors and gave way to a spontaneous experiment with self-management. Along with the police, garbage collectors and street cleaners were now absent, for instance. Every little errand was run collectively, first very spontaneously, and then in more organized ways. For instance, every morning began with the collective garbage collecting. Protestors set up volunteer teams to distribute the food that was sent in the park by hundreds of anonymous people. Others served food, while some others set up and ran a free library, namely “the Looter Library” (Capulcu Kutuphanesi), sustained by book donations from anonymous individuals as well as from publishing houses.

As Lefebvre observes during the 1968 upheaval in Paris, such experiments with self-management, no matter how temporary they are, can be transformative for its participants. The errands previously undertaken by the state has to be run by the people themselves. Decisions have to be made collectively. This opens up great possibilities. Self-management, for Lefebvre, “makes a breach in the established network of decision – making centers which manage production and organize consumption without granting producers and consumers the slightest concrete freedom or participation in making genuine choices” (Lefebvre, 1969: 85). In Taksim Commune, the experiment with self-management “made a breach,” so to speak, in the established system of practices and
decisions concerning the reproduction of everyday urban life, albeit for a limited time and at a smaller scale.

What is more, for over two weeks money did not make any appearance in the park. The commune set up what they called “the Revolution Market” (Devrim Market) where various goods, ranging from clothing to gas masks, from snacks to garbage bags were there to be taken freely by those who were in need. In the absence of money, the market was not sustained by the infamous supply and demand either. As Lefebvre observed during the French upheaval of 1968, “events upset the structures which made them possible.” When such structures as commodified market relations or the demand and supply mechanism are upset, the new elements of social life suddenly “become briefly visible in luminous transparency,” to put it in Lefebvre’s words (1969: 7). What became briefly visible in luminous transparency in Gezi Park was a possibility of organizing exchange without the hegemony of exchange value. In the absence of money and the formal market, those who volunteered to undertake required tasks made “list of needs” and attached them on the tents and desks of organizations and political fractions situated in the park. These lists were a heavy presence in the social media as well, constantly circulated and updated according to the flow of goods in the park and their consumption pace. Protestors set up a kitchen where people cooked and kept it open for over two weeks. The makeshift hospital, where volunteer doctors treated the wounded early in the resistance, was kept open for 24 hours, where many homeless received treatment for the first time in their lives (Turan, 2013: 70). Volunteers even established a firefighter squad, since many trees and tents had caught fire in the early days of resistance due to countless
tear gas canisters launched by the police. That is to say, the organization of solidarity-based self-management was already underway at Gezi Park.

Figure 16 "Revolution Market. Everything is free," reads the banner, followed by “the list of needs.” Image from (Turan, 2013: 69).

As the police crackdown on 15 June evicted this commune, vandalizing on its way the library, makeshift hospital, kitchen and other institutions established collectively by the commune, people retreated to their neighborhoods and quickly set up smaller versions of Gezi Park in their own neighborhood parks. One major difference was the absence of
tents to spend the night, as there was no need to guard the trees. Instead, most park forums gathered around 8pm and dispersed after midnight. The collectivism that rendered money irrelevant was still effective in park forums to a large extent, sustained by people who cooked and brought to the park more food than they would need in order to share with others who did not or could not undertake such a task. For instance, in Abbasaga Park Forum of Besiktas/Istanbul, where I attended the assembly several nights, cigarettes, snacks, alcohol as well as other beverages were stashed in the middle of the park and sustained by the “leave or take freely” logic. The communal solidarity was not confined to the collective consumption of material goods either. In Abbasaga Park as well as in others, after the first few days in which people mostly talked about the police violence of 15 June, participants started to set up workgroups and workshops.

Topics and dates decided upon collectively, these workgroups served as platforms where experience, information, and knowledge of individual participants were circulated and shared freely, thus they were collectivized. Some of the problems discussed in these workgroups included “communication and media,” “urban renewal and displacement,” “agriculture and ecology,” “women and law,” and “animal rights.” As many people voiced their enthusiasm for learning more and getting organized vis-à-vis specific issues, certain volunteers who had professional background on such issues stepped up to share their knowledge and experience. Doctors offered brief first-aid workshops, for instance. Lawyers explained how to deal with the police in the event of an arrest. Such workgroups and workshops proved to be functional for connecting different park forums with each other as those who wanted to do deeper political organizing on similar subjects in
different forums formed alternative workgroups such as “Inter-forum Workgroup on Resistance to Urban Renewal” (Forumlar Arası Kentsel Dönüşümle Mücadele Çalışma Grubu). Therefore, the park forums, like the Taksim Commune in Gezi Park, emerged as significant spaces of communal solidarity where the famous “another world” was experienced and practiced daily.

Figure 17 Abbasaga Park Forum announces the specific meeting points of various workgroups in the park and the topics to be covered. Image by Mehmet Baris Kuymulu.

Equally important, moreover, that practicing alternative ways of organizing social life at a small spatial scale of the neighborhood park was accompanied by lengthy discussions at night on how to translate such practices into long-term social transformation at larger
scales. According to “CommonGround, the forum post” (Hemzemin Forum Postasi), published by activists to link all park forums together, after the eviction of Gezi Park on 15 June, within five days people established 34 park forums, meeting nightly, across Istanbul alone. By 25 June, there were more than hundred park forums in 13 cities of Turkey (Hemzemin, 2013). Therefore, the set-up and organization of forums, as well as the socio-economic background of its participants varied significantly from one forum to another. However, each forum functioned as a much-needed space to come together and discuss concerns raised by the uprising. The main format in which this was organized was that each person who wanted to talk about an issue lined up to address the crowd for three to five minutes.

Chief among the topics of discussion was the ways in which alternative political economies to neoliberalism—which the participants saw freshly in action in Gezi Park—could be organized. The nature of alternatives and proper ways of realizing them were the most hotly debated problem since many participants had many ideas that were often in conflict with one another. For instance, the array of activities and methods proposed by forum participants in Abbasaga Park in Besiktas/Istanbul ranged from doing electoral work for the main opposition party that some saw as the best bet of the people to end the AKP decade, to forming a brand-new political party that would represent the demands of people in the streets during the uprising. Others objected to such politics around mainstream institutions and argued that the political value revealed by the uprising could not be and should not be reduced to formal party politics. While some expressed the need for initiating dialogue with the conservative voters of the AKP by going into its
stronghold neighborhoods, others saw such a project as elitist and compared it to the civilizing mission of the colonial mentality. Still, most participants constantly expressed the value of solidarity and direct democracy experience unleashed by Gezi protests and discussed how such practices could be expanded in a decentralized yet coordinated manner in local neighborhood parks and other public spaces.

Figure 18 A participant addressing the crowd in Abbasaga Park Forum. Image taken from the blog of ResistTaksim.30

Two very successful campaigns are worth mentioning as examples of decentralized but coordinated practices of solidarity and alternative economies. Both were brought up, debated, decided upon and organized in the forums by participants. The first one is the

30 http://resisttaksim.blogspot.co.at/?zx=d839566051220517
“barter festivals” organized in various parks and the second is “Iftar of the Earth” (fast breaking dinner) organized during Ramadan in July (Gokariksel, 2013). It was the “Anti-Capitalist Muslims” who came up with the idea of the latter and Iftars were organized daily during Ramadan in park forums by various groups and ordinary citizens. The success of “Iftar of the earth” (Yeryuzu Sofrasi) lay in its simplicity. People who wanted to participate did so by simply bringing a piece of newspaper to lay the food they brought along on the ground (hence Iftar of the “earth”) in public spaces decided and announced by the forums. Iftars were both organized independently in many small parks as well as being organized in more coordinated ways in central public spaces of Istanbul, such as the Istiklal Street, which is the most famous shopping street that leads to Taksim Square. Whatever food brought in by people was collectively shared with everybody who was willing to sit down on the ground to eat together. Like in Gezi Park and in ensuing park forums no money was necessary. The idea of “Iftar of the earth” and its practice proved to be very strategic and clever for multiple reasons.

First, it was a communal act totally in line with the “Gezi spirit.” It was politically symbolic as well as practically functional. “Iftar of the earth” was simultaneously a political statement and a chance for the poor to sit down and eat at the end of the day without having to pay any money. It brought different people across class borders together in a common public space. Second, Ramadan began after the violent eviction of Gezi Park on 15 June and its complete enclosure by the police to any political demonstration. Many groups that attempted to come together in and around Taksim
Square faced fierce police opposition and received their fair share of now normalized tear gas, plastic bullets and arrests.

Therefore, “Iftar of the earth” presented a chance for an alternative public political demonstration, which would not initiate violence from the highly conservative and pious Turkish police (although at times this proved to be wrong and police did violently disperse a few Iftars). Third, “Iftar of the earth” disarmed the AKP government and invalidated its main propaganda, which constantly conveyed to people, mainly by the PM Erdogan, that those who participated in Gezi protests were exclusively secular militarist nationalists who were against Islam and hostile to Islamic practices. Finally, as pointed out by anthropologist Saygun Gokariksel (2013), “Iftar of the Earth” exposed the sheer
contrast between its communal and civic spirit and the extravagant Iftars organized and sponsored at five star hotels by big Islamic capital and the AKP government.

The second campaign I would like to mention as an example of decentralized but coordinated practices of solidarity and alternative economies is the numerous “barter festivals” organized by various park forums. The idea behind these is not as creative as “Iftar of the earth,” but in a similar fashion, “barter festivals” were politically symbolic and practically functional like the Iftars. They were symbolic and political statements against consumerism and of practical use as they formed alternative markets in which anything from clothes to household items, from books to food were exchanged, without the hegemony of exchange value.

Figure 20 Yogurtcu Park Barter Festival. Image by Nazim Serhat Firat.
The idea of organizing “barter festivals” emerged out of the debates in various park forums that often revealed how so many people had enough of being passive agents of a consumer society. People remarked, often in a confessionary tone, that going to shopping malls and consuming commodities was how they spent most of their leisure time. Many said that they often ended up with things they did not need, while many other people could not afford to buy the very same goods. Hence the idea of setting up free exchange bazaars in parks so that while some “return” the goods they do not need while some others get the much needed products. Mostly governed by “give or take as you need” dictum, “barter festivals” simultaneously served as significant spaces for political organizing, especially for women and socialist feminist collectives. “Women Solidarity
Desks,” embellished with flags and banners against economic inequality between men and women, sexual harassment and gendered violence, were very common in such “barter festivals.”

The bottom up organization and coordination of events such as “barter festivals” and “Iftar of the earth” where people directly experimented with communal solidarity and direct democracy in harmony seems to contrast the heterogeneity of concerns voiced and discussed in park forums. Despite the frictional heterogeneity of political ideals, ideas and alternatives that were debated every night, park forums still proved to be ideal spaces of political mobilization when the need surfaced. For example, when an 18-year-old Kurdish man, Medeni Yildirim, was shot dead by Turkish soldiers during a protest in Lice, Diyarbakir (the largest and most politicized Kurdish city in Turkey) on 28 June 2013, thousands took it to the streets the same night in Istanbul and other major Turkish cities for the first time in history (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013b). If the newly found political solidarity with the Kurds that was mobilized in Turkish cities due to the murder of a Kurdish man by Turkish soldiers owed to a large extent to the common struggle and experience during Gezi protests, the rapid and massive mobilization in the majority Turkish cities owed largely to park forums. People communicated through twitter and facebook pages of their individual park forums and collectively decided to suspend the political debate that night, and instead coordinated and participated in massive rallies at the city centers.
Conclusion

The Taksim Commune and subsequent park forums took place in appropriated spaces by means of the transformative participation of countless urban inhabitants in order to experiment with alternative ways in which urban life can be organized. One of the most crucial novelties people established, which deeply contrasted their realities before the uprising was the formation of the alternative ways in which labor and objects it produces were valued. Neither labor, nor objects were commodities in these spaces. Tasks that required labor were undertaken collectively by groups of individuals according to their abilities. Doctors labored for free in makeshift hospitals, set up collectively by people who were able to build and construct structures. Garbage collection was collectivized, as well as food distribution and other daily tasks. The information shared by lawyers, doctors, and other professionals in these appropriated spaces did not find its expression in monetary terms. That is to say, both objects and labor lost their exchange values and commodity characters temporarily. However, they were still valued. The fundamental difference was that the “magnitude of value” of objects and labor was not determined by the “socially necessary labor time,” the signature of capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1990). Everything that was valued in park was valued because they were of use, hence embodied use values. Such a political and economic experiment comes closest to what I have been calling the politics of value, that creatively interlinks use value and value, without the mediation and hegemony of exchange value.

Now, neither constructing a “temporary autonomous zone,” as one of the banners proclaimed in Gezi Park during the Taksim Commune, nor appropriating public parks
and turning them into spaces of intense politics and free exchange do not form an alternative political economy. Their scale is way too small for putting serious challenges to capitalist mode of production. What they do, however, is to embody the seeds of a right to the city claim that makes a successful move from claiming the existing city towards producing a new one, under a different political economy. The appropriation of public space—reshaping its spatial qualities, organization, rule of conduct and meaning—manifest in urban Turkey during and in the immediate aftermath of the uprising vacillated between appropriation in consumption and appropriation in production. It showed the qualities of the former, as it was mostly about the appropriation of existing urban spaces. However, it was a move towards the latter as the appropriation process challenged the existing ways in which appropriated urban spaces were perceived and lived, to the extent that these spaces were lived as different spaces, where alternative social relations were sustained for a limited time.

The right to city claim unfolded in Turkey strikes us as a claim made by the transformative participation of millions of ordinary urban inhabitants that was against such generalization of exchange value relations in Turkey’s cities. They responded to capital’s attempt to appropriate inhabitants’ urban commons, albeit a small park, by appropriating urban spaces at a scale unforeseen in Turkey. The appropriated spaces of novel politics and free exchange set up by inhabitants after the uprising encapsulated the seeds of a creative nexus between use value and value. As such, this right to the city claim comes closest to a politics of value that would abolish the capitalist law of value.
The appropriation of urban spaces and the subsequent transformation of them into different spaces where novel political practices and forms take place began as a process in Turkey, but did not realize its full potential. The richness of debates in public spaces concerning how to transform the political potential unleashed by the uprising and park forums into more durable political and organizational forms notwithstanding, the agents of the uprising were unable to construct such forms. This curtailed the political potential released by the successful appropriation of urban space. The right to the city claim made in urban Turkey was not able to institutionalize the politics that it spawned, largely because it was relatively unable to construct durable political and organizational forms.

Lefebvre once proclaimed “[a] revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses” (1991: 54). Although this is certainly true, having examined the right to the city claim made in urban Turkey, we might be tempted to assert that the reverse also holds true. Transformation of institutions and political apparatuses are necessary steps towards keeping alive the potential released by the successful appropriation of space.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTICS OF CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

In *Capital*, Karl Marx, while setting up his historically situated critique of capitalist political economy, makes one trans-historical argument early in his discussion of labor theory of value in the first chapter. Labor, he argues, “as the creator of use values,” as useful labor, “is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself” (1990: 133). The life of every individual as well as the continuation of life of the society, therefore, absolutely depend on the process of appropriation (in production) of nature by labor in the process of creating use values. The capitalist mode of production values this labor expended to produce use values by the time that is socially necessary for its production. Both socially necessary labor time (value) and the useful qualities of the object produced (use value) are represented by exchange value “as the necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance” of both value and use value (1990: 128). That is to say, exchange value almost completely dominates both use value and value under capitalism.

Henri Lefebvre’s brilliance in *Le Droit à la Ville* (The Right to the City) was to capture and demonstrate how such a generalized domination of exchange value under capitalism undermines urban life, by turning the potential of the city as *oeuvre*, the collective artwork of urban inhabitants, into an actual product. The generalization of exchange
value relation and subsequent transformation of oeuvre into product, he argued, necessarily overwhelm the user, the simple inhabitant who relies on use values embedded in the city. Thus he formulated a right to the city for use value against the domination of exchange value.

As I tried to demonstrate in chapter II, the exclusion of value from this picture nevertheless, has a series of consequences. First, as a theorist of dialectics that, according to him, flow from triads, Lefebvre leaves his dialectical formulation incomplete and presents us with a simple opposition between use value and exchange value to understand capitalist urbanism. In general, he remains critical to such oppositions as he argues that the “relations between two elements boil down to oppositions, contrasts or antagonisms,” which are “very difficult to get beyond” (Lefebvre, 1991: 39). Second, the importance of labor as the creator of use values and the city as oeuvre remains underemphasized in his account. This is unfortunate because it is primarily the labor that experiences the overwhelming effects of exchange value relations’ generalization in the city that he brilliantly explains. Third, and intertwined with the second, Lefebvre leaves his formulation of the right to the city open for a liberal appropriation. Formulating the politics of use value as the foundation of a right to the city claim, Lefebvre implicitly puts his version of the right to the city in the domain of final consumption, hence it becomes possible to absorb his right to the city into a consumerist politics, in which having access to use values offered by the existing capitalist city becomes the primary concern. As Marx asserts, use values are only realized in use or in consumption (1990: 126). Under the dictates of the capitalist mode of production the road to the realization of use values is
marauded by exchange value. Since Lefebvre leaves his right to the city in the domain of consumption, his liberal interpreters can absorb his emphasis on use value and turn it into an emphasis on reforming the barriers to accessing use values in the capitalist city. In short, Lefebvre’s privileging of use value and his consequent politics of use value opens the path for a liberal appropriation, to put it in Lefebvre’s language, that “necessarily overwhelms” “the creator of use value,” i.e., labor.

Rather than a right to the city that is based on privileging use value, I proposed a right to the city that makes establishing the nexus between use value and value—without the domination of exchange value—the primary political concern. This would potentially do three things. First, it would not leave labor as the producer of use value overshadowed by its product. Second, it would set a booby trap against liberal appropriation. It is much easier, for instance, for the UN institutions, to talk about the right to the city when it is about realizing use values in the city, as this politics of use value remains in the domain of consumption. However it would be much harder for them to talk about the right to the city when it is formulated as a politics of value, which privileges the labor as the creator of use value rather than privileging its product. Making the right to the city about labor should thus be the primary political concern. Third, a politics of value that can creatively interconnects use value and value by bypassing exchange value would provide a space in which the crucial debate on the question of what is socially necessary could take place. After all, if it will not be the socially necessary labor time that would dictate the value of labor and the objects it produces, what will? This debate would not only open a path for
debate about *alternative forms of social valuation* but also would enable us to think about *alternative political economies*, which are not guided by the capitalist law of value.

*Claiming the Right to the City: Towards the Production of Space from Below* examined diverse political struggles mobilized for realizing the right to the city that crystallized around the question of value. It attempted to delineate these struggles while dialectically intertwining them through the glances offered by the three pillars of Marxian labor theory of value: use value, exchange value and value. The first chapter introduced several contemporary political projects that aim for a better access to use values in the city. It argued that although these struggles for use value are extremely important for they are about the reproduction of social and material life of urban inhabitants, they are in the end appropriated by the hegemony of exchange value. The second case consisted of an examination of the ways in which the struggles around the question of use value are appropriated and absorbed by a right to the city claim made by the UN agencies. Although the issues that occupy UN agencies, such as poverty, the quality of urban life, spatial segregation and the urban divide are indeed about accessing use values, I argued that the fundamental trust of UN agencies in free market for solving the problems prevalent in the globalized urban world requires them to translate the issues about use value into exchange value terms.

The underlying argument in these cases was that both the politics of use value and the politics of exchange value fall short of realizing the transformative potential embedded in claiming the right to the city. The examination of the last right to the city claim, which
unfolded during the urban uprising in Turkey, consisted of an argument that the transformative potential of claiming the right to the city could be realized in a politics of value, which is about producing and consuming use values without the hegemony of exchange value. Such politics of value would encompass the questions raised by the politics of use value and the politics of exchange value. To be sure, the political struggle that started in Istanbul was initially about use value. The attempted appropriation of an urban commons—embedded with use values that are realized daily by urban inhabitants—by the exchange value interests represented by government’s plan to build a shopping mall in park’s stead, puts the initial struggle at the park squarely within the politics of use value. As the struggle jumped scale from the park to the city and then to the rest of the urban Turkey, it became a question of the political regime that has been increasingly hegemonic in the past 12 years in Turkey. I think the question of regime had two interrelated aspects. As I discussed in chapter IV, the AKP period is characterized by an intensified neoliberalization at an unprecedented pace, blended with repressive and authoritarian qualities.

As the Gezi protests evolved into a countrywide uprising, the struggle against these two aspects of the political regime in Turkey became salient. On the one hand the uprising represented a widespread resentment against the economic policies underlined by unprecedented privatization, expanding urban redevelopment, enclosure of the commons, and the loss of labor rights. On the other hand, the uprising was against a cultural and political conservatism, which AKP mobilized to keep any form of resistance under control by using extremely repressive and violent measures. In other words, the uprising
exploded against a political regime, which pushed for an amplifying hegemony of exchange value and social and political control that micromanages people’s lives on such issues ranging from the number of children women should have to how to behave in public spaces. The regime attempted to exert a tight social control, so to speak, that aimed to manage its citizens from the scale of the body all the way to the national scale.

The people responded to this regime by appropriating public spaces and taking control of their cities where they formed alternative social relations based on solidarity, cooperation and direct democracy, while experimenting with an alternative political economy in which exchange value had no purchase. The self-management in Taksim Commune and the Park Forums was a response of the people to the hegemony of exchange value and the social and political control it brings along. The uprising brought along a moment, in which people “glimpsed” the possibility of an alternative politics, a politics of value that enabled them, if only for a fleeting moment, to collectively produce an urban life, where the repressive political measures that are necessitated by the hegemony of exchange value had no place. This makes the social, political and economic experiment enabled by the urban uprising in Turkey this dissertation’s culmination point of analysis offered based on the nodal point of value (exchange value/use value-value).

Apart from the dialectical relations that flow from the nodal point of value, Claiming the Right to the City suggested two other major nodal points to examine contemporary political struggles for the right to the city. The first nodal point was concerned with appropriation, which I examined through the dialectical relation between appropriation
in consumption and appropriation in production. While I argued that the appropriation of existing urban spaces, which is appropriation in consumption, is a *sine qua non* aspect of a successful right to the city claim, it lacks the political potential revealed by appropriation in production, which is the process of producing a “new space” to “change life itself” through revolutionary practice, that Lefebvre talk about in *The Production of Space* (1991: 54).

The second major nodal point was concerned with political *participation*. The dialectical relation that flows from reproductive participation and transformative participation, this dissertation argued, helps us to understand urban political projects that aim for social change. While I argued that reproductive participation opens limited channels for social change, as it aims for the participation of urban inhabitants into existing procedures of urban governance for the reproduction of the existing city, I also acknowledged that such struggles over the existing city through current political channels are important as it is not possible to change the city as it is without engaging with it first. However, I also argued that the transformative participation, i.e., the political participation of urban inhabitants in the process of discovering new needs for a new urban society, would bring about a much deeper social change, the aspects of which would be formulated democratically by urban inhabitants.

The tight dialectic between the three nodal points (value/appropriation/participation) that I attempt to establish here in this dissertation should more importantly be established in practice. The project of formulating and practicing a *politics of value* that would embody
an appropriation in production at its core, this dissertation argued, necessitates autonomously established mechanisms of transformative participation. To put it in more fluid terms, inasmuch as any urban political project is able to move its political practice from appropriation in consumption towards appropriation in production, from the politics of exchange value towards establishing the critical nexus between use value and value, while discovering mechanisms for political participation that are characterized by a move from reproductive participation to transformative participation, it comes closer to realizing the right to the city and the promise of more just urbanism embodied in it.

Among the diverse urban struggles this dissertation examined, the right to the city claim mobilized by the urban uprising in Turkey comes closest to the kind of politics of value I tried to establish here. The struggle in Turkey’s cities involved the participation of massive numbers of people to appropriate urban space. What it lacked, however, was the evolution of massive transformative participation that enabled urban space appropriation into more durable organizational and political forms. This was, in part, due to the overwhelming power of the state and the capital, which looked to crush any attempt of political organizing after the uprising. However, it was also due to the unresolved tension between the more organized actors of political society and the newer political actors that approached more durable organizational forms by a degree of skepticism. This was the Achilles heel of the political potential unleashed by the uprising.

However, more long term political organizing and production of relatively durable organizational forms are necessary because of two related reasons. First, the physical
appropriation of existing urban space—though *sine qua non* for a right to the city claim—is “appropriation in consumption,” which, more often than not, can only temporarily claim what already exists in the city, the existing city. Therefore, it can hardly transform the city in the long run in significant ways towards a city where the urban justice implied by the right to the city concept could flourish. Second, the “appropriation in production,” the process of creating a new space and a new life by establishing the critical nexus between use value and value without the hegemony of exchange value i.e., the process of abolishing capitalist law of value, necessitates the political production of the tight dialectic between spontaneous appropriation of urban space and relatively durable organizational forms. Only the long term sustained political organizing and activism might lead the way to producing new needs, new urban spaces, new urbanism, and revolutionary cities that the notion of the right to the city I attempted to establish here promises.
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