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## Lefèbvre and the periphery: an interview with professor Marie Huchzermeyer

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### ABSTRACT

This interview provides a short introduction to some relevant but usually dismissed debates regarding the relationship between Lefèbvre's oeuvre and peripheral/semi-peripheral regions of the world. By talking about some parallels between South African and Brazilian uses of Lefèbvrian concepts, on the one hand, and about Lefèbvre's use of the reality of Latin American favelas to develop his own concepts, Professor Marie Huchzermeyer proposes challenges to the established scholar Anglophone view on the role of legal rights in the quest for the 'right to city'. She alternatively points towards a bottom-up reading of the 'right to the city' that goes beyond the famous 'far and cry' claim, highlighting the importance of institutional advancements as a means within the Lefèbvrian framework for social change.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Marie Huchzermeyer is a professor at the School of Architecture and Planning/University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her research has covered housing and informal settlement policy across different contexts and from a historical, political and rights-based perspective. In 2004, she published her first book 'Unlawful Occupation: Informal Settlements and Urban Policy in South Africa and Brazil' (Huchzermeyer, 2004). This was followed in 2011 by two further books: 'Tenement Cities: From 19th Century Berlin to 21st Century Nairobi' (Huchzermeyer, 2011a) and 'Cities with "Slums": from Informal Settlement Eradication to a Right to the City in Africa' (Huchzermeyer, 2011b). She has also co-edited two books, guest edited several journal special issues and contributed to housing policy debates through academic and non-academic journals as well as the media.

She has recently undertaken research on the relationship between Henri Lefèbvre's intellectual production and his trips to Latin America. In this interview, she particularly emphasizes the importance of readings of the right to the city from the point of view of semi-peripheral regions and their urban social movements, among other related issues.

**Erick Omena de Melo: The influential concept of the 'right to the city' (Lefèbvre 1996/1968) positioned the use value of urban space at the centre of a new political agenda and reframed the possibilities of common people intervening in the production of space. This is directly related to claims made by urban social movements for popular protagonism in the production of space, represented by the ideas of 'insurgent citizenships' (Holston 2008) and 'grassroots planning' (Irazábal & Neville 2007). How do you see the similarities and differences between these developments in South Africa and Brazil?**

Marie Huchzermeyer: I can speak in more detail about South Africa. And, in many ways, South Africa lags behind Brazil on exactly these points. One is that South Africa has only recently reached the majority of its population being in urban areas. It now is around 63% urbanized, at least in the last census, which was in 2011. And the urban isn't as yet fully in the political forefront, whereas in Brazil for a long time the urban has been on the political agenda. In Brazil 20 years ago more than 80% of the population were urbanized, with the effect though that the

smaller towns and slums issues, for instance, in smaller semi-rural areas, were not, sufficiently, on the agenda, I think. So there was a dominance of the large city urban agenda, possibly to the detriment of other urban formations, but it's my assumption.

In South Africa, only very recently it's become interesting for political parties to start thinking more creatively about the urban; because the constituency has shifted from the rural to the urban zones. The majority of constituency, particularly for the ANC,<sup>1</sup> has been in rural areas, but this is shifting. That is not to say that the ANC is managing to capture the urban vote, and this is all the more important for the contestation about the urban agenda, and for that agenda to be in the public. But it means that issues such as the right to the city – particularly ordinary people's involvements in the key urban decision-making and so on – have n't been in the forefront. And that has n't been questioned enough either. So, whereas in Brazil you've had a very extensive urban reform movement that had major victories through the constitutional change in 1988, through the Statute of the City more than a decade later, and subsequently the ongoing struggle for its implementation, in South Africa there isn't an equivalent of that at all.

In South Africa, there was a very small Urban Sector Network – an organization of NGOs that evolved in the mid-80s out of demands from grass-roots movements in townships and informal settlements that needed technical assistance as development needed to happen while the apartheid struggle was still ongoing.

So a group of progressive professionals organized themselves into NGOs in all the major cities, collaborated a lot and occupied that space. But there was a big shift in 1994 with the government becoming legitimate under the ANC leadership. The space of NGOs was really dissipating. And the government initially and quite rightly started to do a lot of what these NGOs had struggled for with the constituencies. But in 1996, two years into its rule the new government became quite neoliberal. The more deeply participatory governance policies were abandoned, and far more economic growth oriented policies were brought in. Planning became again very top down, and urban development is very much an issue of experts rather than something that is debated widely.

There has been a shift, but this is quite recent, in part as a result of the World Urban Forum agendas that get set. Two to three years ago, the agenda was for governments to develop urban policies. And on the African continent that is a very important issue to push for. Very few governments had an urban policy or an urban strategy framework for their cities. And South Africa in response to that and partly also in response to internal dynamics finally undertook the development of an Integrated Urban Development Framework, which has gone through quite a protracted process of somewhat shallow participation. But at least it exists for the first time, and it was adopted by Cabinet in 2016. There had been previous attempts and these went nowhere, because there was never the political backing and because the rural agenda at the time was more important. This is the first time that an urban framework has seen the light of day and might start being implemented.

The drafters of the Urban Development Framework don't specifically include the right to the city, but they do include issues such as the need to upgrade informal settlements and the need for tenure security. But, at the same time, the agenda is also to make cities more efficient. And that always remains a problem in South Africa's cities because the legacy of apartheid is also a legacy of huge economic inefficiencies, and that does have to be overcome. But it easily overtakes the agenda for deeper democracy and the meaningful realization of rights.

**Erick Omena de Melo: You have recently begun studying the relationship between Lefèbvre's intellectual production and his trips to Latin America in the early 1970's. Do you think these Latin American experiences were important in his conceptualizations, particularly in regard to the right to the city?**

Marie Huchzermeyer: No, not directly .... He wrote 'Right to the City' in 1967 and published it in 1968 already. But there must have been quite a lot of interest [in this book] in Brazil, because, in 1969, 'The Right to the City' had already been published by a Brazilian publisher. So I think Brazil must have been very interested in it at the time. But, apart from that fact, it is very hard to trace any real memory of that period. He wrote the 'Right to the city', but then he wrote 'The Urban 'revolution'. Of course he wrote many things in-between as well. But the book 'Urban Revolution' also

refers again to 'The Right to the City' and gives it more of a position and a political strategy. And then 2 years later he wrote 'The Production of Space', which goes far more into the analysis of space. But again he uses the analysis of the right to the city in it. Later towards the end of his life, he wrote about the contract of citizenship. And then again he talks about how important the right to the city is, among many other rights, the right to differences and so on. So his thinking evolved. It was refined, but it was kept very consistent at the same time.

But, from what we can put together, he was in Peru and Brazil in 1972 and possibly there were other Latin American trips. To Mexico possibly. I'd like to find out when that was. With the assistance of Fernando Maldonado and yourself, I got in conversation with some professors in Brazil. They think the impact was much less Lefèbvre's impact on Brazil, but Brazil's impact on Lefèbvre. As he visited favelas, he became aware of how intense that social life is and how there might be a possibility for what he calls 'the urban' not to be destroyed. That made me look very specifically at how he writes and how he uses shantytowns in the *Production of Space*, published in 1974 (Lefèbvre, 1991/1974). There he writes very differently than he does in the earlier works in which he mentioned shantytowns and suburbs as part of the forces of segregation, very much implying that this is just induced difference. It's my hypothesis that it was because of his visit to Brazil that he changed his approach. One would have to get hold of his diaries. And, it's not easy to find out how to go about doing this.

**Erick Omena de Melo: Do you have any other initial findings that you would like to share?**

Marie Huchzermeyer: My finding is that in the passage that he writes about shantytowns in Latin America, towards the end of 'The Production of Space', he employs all his concepts in this short passage and applies them to informal settlements; he makes the point that it seems like they represent a possibility of a political opening. But also that, in fact, the dominated space is so repressive that informal settlements can't be read as a political opening. So, that would have been his reading from that very particular context, the dictatorship. At the time, there must have been already ecclesiastic base communities<sup>2</sup> in those favelas. There must have been intense debates and so on. I think one can't directly transfer that to informal settlements in any other country or time. But, on the other hand, there's

a lot of his conceptual thinking that one can apply, one can transfer and apply to the different contexts.

I think he was interested in difference in space, in urban space, not only in society. He was interested in particular types of differences. And in informal settlements, that's the one thing that we all agree on, that informal settlements are different and that's why we notice them and the state notices them. Lefèbvre looks at them not as a problem. He looks at dominated space as the problem. Yes, he acknowledges that there's poverty in the favelas, but there's something else, too. Something very different that is happening there, that is worth noting, and that has to be understood.

Lefèbvre is interested in political opening. And for informal settlements and shantytowns in Latin America, he made this connection only after he'd been to Brazil. In his work before 1972, he didn't mention the informal settlements and shantytowns in this way, but after visiting Brazil he makes a few comments. One comment is about Mexican shantytowns, in which the self-management (auto-gestion) is remarkable. He talks about one example of 2 thousand households organizing their own space, in a massive shantytown in Mexico, and I still want to find out whether he actually visited that. But about the Latin American shantytowns, he talks of intense social life and about the high level of self-management or self-ordering of the space. He uses that as an example to say that there is something that looks like it could be a political opening, because it's so intense, it's so active, it's in such a duality with the formal, dominated space, which is the space created by the urbanists and the state.

But he says that actually that is misleading. I suppose it was an assessment of the dictatorships of that time in Latin America; the repression and the ideology were such that they could 'manage' this kind of difference. He seems to be saying that the working class and shantytowns and all of their actions on their own can't break through. So he talks about other openings and one that he talks about is the right to the city.

His proposal for an urban strategy consists of three things. One is self-management, in which self-management of space seems to be more prominent than the self-management happening in the industry. Second is that the urban has to move into the forefront of the political, and that has to be intense. There has to be a political struggle over

urban issues. And third is that the right to the city has to be concretized and expanded. And so there is a question about rights, what did he mean by using this term. He recognises the desire for rights and the awakening about the awareness that there need to be rights, through to the actual enacting, and subsequent social acceptance of those rights. And he sees that as a political opening as well. He sees it as a very important process. And he assumes it comes also from people, from the grassroots, but has to be supported by the makers of codes and laws.

While there has been mobilization and advocacy before adoption of most human rights, there is a sense of them being imposed from above. So when the UN accepts that we need a right to the city, it is experts that says it should be this and this, which isn't necessarily what Lefèbvre intended. What he meant was a groundswell demand for rights, turning those rights into codes. And then the ongoing struggle to have those rights realized. And yet my analysis of Lefèbvre's writings about rights is that rights in his mind, including the right to the city, are something transitional. Eventually, when the state is withered away and makes place for more and more base-democracy, rights will be something very different from what we perceive of them now, therefore they have a transitional role. With this interpretation one is countering the Anglophone Lefebvrian scholars who implying that Lefèbvre never wanted 'right' to be understood in a legal way when he coined the 'right to the city'. They emphasise it as a cry and demand, and don't accept that for Lefèbvre that was merely the beginning. In my view, this is a misinterpretation and if one doesn't think carefully about what legal rights Lefèbvre meant, one is missing the path, missing the pathway that he is directing us towards. Yes, indeed, eventually there would not be rights of that kind, but concrete rights are important on the pathway. I think one might as well forget about Lefèbvre, if one doesn't acknowledge that aspect.

**Erick Omena de Melo: Did you find anything particularly historically relevant about the relationship between urban social movements and the right to the city in South Africa and Brazil?**

**Marie Huchzermeyer:** Yes. The Movimento Sem Teto and the Movimento dos Sem Terra were an inspiration in South Africa for the Landless People's movement, formed around 2002 or even a bit earlier. But that has more or less faded away. And in a way I think that NGOs were behind creating the movement

here. And it was never as sustained as Abahlali baseMjondolo. Abahlali has a shorter history, it only started in 2005. But there was no NGO behind it, there was no funding element. Initially even there was no international kind of impetus to it. The movement emerged out of eviction threats and struggles with a bad experience with the state and ruling party.

It's interesting that Abahlali invokes the phrase 'right to the city' in quite a few public statements. In the past few years, they have been saying very profound things, for instance, if there is a right to the city it's very hard, very difficult to get, very difficult to achieve, which is an honest assessment of the reality. And in my own analysis I have found quite a few Lefebvrian approaches within Abahlali. For instance, they insist on representing themselves; that question about who should have the right to represent the reality. Lefèbvre presents us with an extensive critique of urbanists, urbanists being planners, architects, all those technocrats who operate in the service of the State. Abahlali definitely doesn't want itself represented by those urbanists, doesn't want its own reality represented by them, and is insisting that Abahlali as a movement speaks for itself.

Considering all the sort of contradictions in many different interpretations of the right to the city, at least when Abahlali invokes the right to the city, it invokes it from its own actual experience. And it invokes it mostly in opposition to the state. It invokes it in a way that the state doesn't like, and the state retaliates, and in a way it really fits with Lefèbvre's thought. If we go to Lefèbvre's concepts of whether informal settlements form differences in the urban space, and the question of whether that is produced or induced difference, the answer depends on whether or not that difference is resulting in a challenge against the state or not. Also an informal settlement can only join Abahlali if it agrees to adhere to a democratic process, if a certain number of people agree to a very particular, very democratic way of organizing. One could probably say that those settlements are beginning to form produced difference. And that they are actively struggling against the State and the system. But they don't yet hold the potential of a political opening in this particular context, because the ANC is incredibly strong, and can be very repressive. And, particularly in the Durban area, the local ANC politics are very violent and at times quite underhand. Abahlali experience this very directly. They

have had members assassinated, killed. You talked about insurgency ... for those informal settlements to continue to exist, it really requires a struggle. But then you have other informal settlements that are more strongly aligned to the SDI – Slum Dwellers International,<sup>3</sup> whose philosophy is to develop a peaceful relationship with the state, a cooperation nicely termed ‘co-production’, the big new buzz-word, which really means making sure informal settlements remain induced difference, which is the difference that the state controls.

Although Abhalali remains apolitical and is open to anybody, they definitely have learnt that they can’t work with the ANC in their areas. And so I think for informal settlements to really produce differences that can challenge the state, the relationship with professionals is an interesting one. Lefèbvre often refers to the working class, he doesn’t refer to people living in informal settlements as such, in his theory. But he does say that working class action is critical, is very important. It is important that the working class takes over the planning, takes over key things, and all of that is in his bigger philosophy of the state needing to be reduced. And democracy for him is never in an end state. It is always a progression, in which the state becomes weaker and weaker and other participatory process take. So, Lefèbvre was saying the working class plays a very important role but that it is not sufficient.

In South Africa, on the right to the city specifically, there’s been a few NGOs, that have thought about the right to the city, inspired either by donors or the Global Platform for the Right to the City. They receive funding to do something on the right to the city, so they do something on the right to the city. And to my frustration, these NGOs began working on the ‘right to the city’ with the SDI, with its committee structures, which are, and one has to say this, not democratic. SDI appoints community leaders, chooses them ... there is not base-democracy. There’s no culture of base democracy, and this was not being challenged through this ‘right to the city’ work.

The interesting thing is that a part of SDI’s philosophical basis, and this has been written about, is the situationists. The Situationist International were a small group of people who at one point actually had close contact with Lefèbvre. Lefèbvre writes about them as chaotic, perhaps somewhat subversive. They had an influence on Lefèbvre’s work and his thought about the urban, particularly about the spectacle, but

ultimately they parted ways. I find the SDI being a strangely subversive organization, very difficult to understand. They are very big in South Africa.

In this comparison of South Africa-Brazil, I think SDI is really worth mentioning, especially in the way that they are getting on the ‘right to the city’ bandwagon, without actually practicing its fundamentals; and while actually stating that they disagree with rights-based work. They have said derogatory things in public about human rights lawyers, about rights-based activism, always presenting their approach and themselves as being much better, because they appease the poor and get them to work constructively with governments. It is very problematic when the right to the city becomes a kind of a slogan that anybody can use.

**Erick Omena de Melo: What has motivated your interest in Lefèbvre’s relationship with the Latin American context?**

Marie Huchzermeyer: I think Brazil is relevant for the reading of Lefèbvre from the ‘Global South’. Because, in the 70’s and 80’s, there was an active movement in Brazil to realize concepts that Lefèbvre was writing about, such as ‘auto-gestão’ and ‘base-democracy’. I was wondering whether they got these concepts from Lefèbvre. They might not, I think. There were other theoreticians and even Lefèbvre probably worked with these concepts as existing ideas. It’s not as if Lefèbvre invented the idea of ‘auto-gestão’. But it’s something he thought was very important and he gave it prominence in his work and he worked it into his political philosophy. And the same with base-democracy. I don’t know of other regions than Latin America where this kind of thinking was so prominent in the 70’s and 80’s. Even when I went to Brazil for the first time, in 1997, those were the conversations that people were having. People working in informal settlements, in the favelas, with the ecclesiastic base communities. And the conversations they were having were about conscientising against patronage, against clientelism, against those kinds of politics.

And the fact is that Lefèbvre was in Brazil and actually seems to have reflected on that experience, as he does mention it. Maybe there’s still unpublished manuscripts of Lefèbvre to be discovered. While the right to the city gained momentum as a concept in Brazil through the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre over a long period, and through other sorts of gatherings, it really had its long and deep roots in the urban reform movement.

Brazilian scholars, Edesio Fernandes in particular, make the claim that Brazil has realized the right to the

city in an institutional way through the City Statute. From his perspective, that is not where the road ends, it's not an easy road at all. He makes it clear that the Brazilian state is very contradictory at the moment. But Anglophone scholars see the claim that Brazil institutionalized a right to the city as something one should be very cautious of. They politely dismiss it. That's a tension that one needs to grapple with if one wants to use Lefèbvre in the so-called Global South; that is, if one wants a better understanding of Brazil and Brazil's engagement with Lefèbvre. And Lefèbvre's engagement with Brazil is relevant.

So the one interest I had was understanding what he was saying about rights. And my reading is that in fact he was quite serious about legal rights, but in a very particular way. That's been far too much dismissed in the Anglophone literature. And the other one was to look at informal settlements through Lefèbvre's lens, and understand how he saw what he calls the shantytowns in Latin America. But as I've said, he also talked about shantytowns in France, on the periphery of French cities.

Some lawyers here in South Africa are working from a legal perspective on the right to the city. Although the dominant Anglophone scholars would say 'don't even think about a legal interpretation of the right to the city', one is finding it in the South. It's something that is possible to do here in South Africa, as my legal colleagues Marius Pieterse and Thomas Coggin have explained, because of the way rights are structured in our Constitution, and our Constitutional Court has in fact interpreted those rights. That's something really fascinating.

**Erick Omena de Melo: Would you say it is a new field of Lefèbvre's studies?**

Marie Huchzermeyer: Yes, it depends on how it gets received. You have to insert this kind of thinking into the Anglophone scholarly world. And it ruffles some feathers I think. So we would have to see if there is an opening for this kind of reading from the periphery so to speak.

## Notes

1. The ANC has been the ruling party in South Africa since the end of the apartheid regime in 1994.
2. The ecclesiastic base communities are grassroots groups associated with the catholic church, which were originally influenced by the liberation theology movement and

fought the military dictatorships of different Latin American countries in the 1960s and 1970s, including Brazil.

3. The SDI describes itself as 'a network of community-based organisations of the urban poor in 32 countries and hundreds of cities and towns across Africa, Asia and Latin America', which develops projects that are 'geared towards catalyzing change processes at all levels, from informal community-based institutions to formal institutions of the state and the market'. See more at <http://knowyourcity.info/who-is-sdi/about-us/>.

## Notes on contributor

*Erick Omena de Melo* is a PhD candidate in Spatial Planning at Oxford Brookes University. His research interests focus on the interface of social movements, urban governance, urban theory and mega events. He has worked at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro as a member of the project "Metropolization and mega-events", which carried out research about the urban impacts of the Olympics and the World Cup in Brazil with a particular emphasis on the relationship between universities and civil society. Erick has also collaborated with social movements such as the Popular Committee for the World Cup and the Olympics and the Brazilian National Fans Association. He has recently undertaken research on the origins of the 2013 Brazilian uprisings and on the changes brought to Brazilian urban governance by sports mega-events (Melo, 2014).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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