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*The Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, the City and Urban Society*

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# **URBAN CREATIVITY THROUGH DISPLACEMENT AND SPATIAL DISRUPTION**

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## **Summary**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century's conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Afghanistan have led to an unprecedented rise in the numbers of displaced people: the United Nations Refugee Agency (2015) records that approximately 34,000 people were forcibly displaced each day in 2015. This figure has driven the largest forced migration crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Spatial disruption to mobility has become the main concern of more than a million people who have embarked on arduous journeys, 'drifting' to Europe by land and sea. As they make multiple attempts to traverse the borders, what 'right to drift' have they? Can protracted urban displacement generate what Lefebvre terms the 'blind field'? This Chapter explores the creative potential for spatial navigation that emerges from denial of the right to drift

and obstructed mobility. The links between frustration and creativity, particularly in art and science, have long been acknowledged, but their connection in terms of their impact on spatial mobility has rarely been examined. This Chapter offers a theoretical exploration of the potential of the Lefebvrian concepts of the ‘right to the city’ and the ‘blind field’ to act as catalysts for creative drifting and navigation of the urban in space and time.

### **Introduction: Urban displacement**

This Chapter takes Henri Lefebvre’s (1968) concept, the ‘right to the city’ (RTC), as a theoretical guide in its critique of the current understanding of the meaning of the term ‘right’, particularly in relation to the ‘right to drift’. It questions and contests the relevance of the territorial and spatial dimensions of the notions of ‘rights’ and the ‘city’ in the context of mass displacement, which poses an immanent challenge to the meanings of these important concepts. Alongside this, it extends Lefebvre’s (2003 [1970]) concept of the ‘blind field’ to encompass a more holistic view of the meaning of ‘urban’, with particular reference to the sites that emerge out of displacement and spatial disruption. The incessant process of drifting and displacement prompts the question: can the constant frustrations provoked by disruptions to the mobility of the displaced result in spatial creativity?

The increase in armed conflict, natural disasters, famine and poor economic prospects at the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century triggered a resurgent academic interest in migration, displacement and refugee studies in recent years. This is due to the fact that these conditions have collectively contributed to the soaring figures of mass displacement and had a profound impact on the spatial locatedness, sense of belonging and the right to space of many millions of displaced people. The UHNCR has pronounced 2015 and 2016

as the years of ‘refugee and migrant crises’, with a staggering 12,400,000 people internally or externally displaced in 2015 alone, culminating in a total of 65,300,000 forcibly displaced by the end of that year (UNHCR 2015).

Displacement, as a condition, arises from the forced movement of people from their locality and carries negative connotations both socially and spatially. As a product of social change, urban displacement also refers to the morphological and collective social impact of human displacement on a given context. It manifests itself in such conditions of urban change as gentrification, mass urbanisation and urban sprawl – the direct results of globalisation and the associated politics of neoliberalism. These conditions engender a slow process of displacement, where both the causes and the effects develop over a long period of time.

The work of Ipsita Chatterjee (2014) on the urban exploitation and territorialisation of an almost-dry river bed in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, by displaced communities provides an insight into entrenched attitudes to urban gentrification within the developing world. Meanwhile, *Cities for People, Not for Profit*, edited by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (2012), has helped to position urban displacement as a condition that sits at the heart of current debates in urban theory, human geography, urban planning and anthropology. In this volume, scholars from these fields address the necessity to reposition what they refer to as ‘capitalist cities’, prioritising the construction of cities that respond to social needs rather than the spatial imperatives of the capitalist pursuit of profit (Brenner *et al.* 2012).

The type of urban displacement that this Chapter focuses on, however, is of the sudden (yet protracted), violent and forced kind. While acknowledging

the inevitably negative nature of this condition, I would argue that it is essential to also harness constructive and positive interpretations of this highly disruptive social and spatial predicament. Hence, I particularly focus on the creativity displaced people display in navigating their way to places of safety. The majority of the public debate (as communicated by various media channels) and research on policymaking concerning the refugee crisis has understandably focused on the disturbing facts of devastation and death, and the loss of livelihoods, heritage and culture. By contrast, there has been scant research into the effect of their obstructed journeys (including the negotiation of intermediate destinations) on the creative spatial and navigational abilities of the displaced.

There is an inherent complexity in the disrupted spatial mobility of displaced people. A recent study of the protracted and fragmented journeys taken by refugees arriving in Italy, Greece, Turkey and Malta uses a series of maps to reveal the intricate and decentralised networks of mobility and routes (Crawley *et al.* 2016). These maps offer a glimpse into the complexity of the nonlinear drifts of protracted mobility: they do not follow a single flow of movement from places of conflict and human rights abuses to places of safety (in this case, Europe); rather, they include a number of ‘sub-flows’ involving different countries and different timescales (Crawley *et al.* 2016).

This drifting to and fro in a constant state of migrancy has become one of the main characteristics of the lives of the displaced as they struggle with what this represents in terms of becoming uprooted from place and identity. Stephen Cairns (2004), however, explores the potential synergies emerging from an unorthodox reading of two seemingly diametrically opposed terms: ‘architecture’, which delineates rootedness and the groundedness of place, and ‘migrancy’, which represents displacement in both the spatial and social

dimensions. Cairns (2004: 42) establishes that the architecture of migrancy overlaps with the traditional rootedness and locatedness of architecture and place through the act of ‘drifting’, “a particular kind of movement that carries ongoing, multiple, intermittent and intensified investments in place”.

Despite a recognition of the challenges the current refugee and migrant crisis poses in terms of the human rights of those seeking refuge at the borders of Europe (and elsewhere), their freedom to cross these borders, to leave or enter different states, does not exist (Miller 2016). It is in the context of this lack of rights and the notion of perpetual drifting, in social and spatial terms, that we can begin to understand ‘displacement’ and ‘emplacement’ as ideas that permanently negotiate their locatedness, rootedness and positioning within space, place and time. A number of studies have considered the initiatives of marginalised and displaced people to attempt to situate and re-root themselves within their host countries (Coleman *et al.* 2012). Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed (2012) has identified, through her studies of projects with refugee women who have suffered trauma, a connection between creativity and building resilience, using the theories of ‘being as event’ and ‘dialectic imagination’ developed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin portrays creativity as a projection and manifestation of our agency, past and present, cultural and social, in space and time (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 2012: 220-1).

We can thus see two distinct processes emerging from the literature: one which relates to drifting, mobility and the right, or the lack of it, to traverse borders, and another that asserts the ambiguity and perpetual negotiation of that right. The Lefebvrian concepts of ‘the right to the city’ and the ‘blind field’ are vital ingredients in the emergence of the creative agency of urban society.

### **The right to drift**

The word ‘drift’ replaces ‘city’ in the conceptual term, ‘the right to the city’, as it offers a flexible dimension that crosses and meanders between multiple fields, including the three identified by Lefebvre (the rural, the industrial and the urban). This meandering enables a much more malleable reading of the relationship between these fields. Lefebvre first introduced the idea of RTC in his work, *Le Droit à la ville*, during the revolutionary protests of 1968. RTC, therefore, has both theoretical and practical dimensions: Lefebvre (1996: 63) asserts its conceptual relevance as an ideology and a practice that opens up existing social, economic, political and spatial systems and structures to new creative possibilities and an ‘urban society’. Fundamentally, Lefebvre’s original concern, as expressed in RTC, is with two types of rights to urban space: the right to ‘appropriate’ urban space (that is, the right to its complete use) and the right to ‘participate’, not just peripherally but centrally, in its ‘production’. He calls for cities to be creative centres for the production of the everyday lives of their inhabitants – cities as ‘*oeuvres*’, rather than simply sites of commerce or consumption (Lefebvre 1996: 149).

At this point, it is important to digress in order to consider an earlier idea Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 32) established in which he defines the aforementioned three types of fields (or layers of theories and social practices) through which RTC is articulated: the rural or agrarian (encompassing nature – a place of limited production); the industrial (places of fetishised productivity); and the urban (the field of enjoyment, where history meets society and the production of urban society emerges). These fields are not morphologically or spatially distinct, they can enclose or morph into each other. Accordingly, the ‘right’ referred to in the ‘right to the city’ meanders and drifts through and between the three fields, not in a

nostalgic and traditional sense (as in the desire to return to what is natural and rural), but rather in a newly formulated way, or as Lefebvre (1996: 158) postulates, “as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*”.

Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2010) argues that Lefebvre’s idea of RTC does not only mean the right to a better life on the basis of an improved and/or reformed democracy, it also means the existence of new possibilities and new worlds, which are constantly negotiated, reinvented and articulated. For example, strategies such as mutual aid, free association and the formation of networks and confederations are seen as tools with which to overcome class exploitation and oppression – local actions with a potentially global impact.

Emphasising the urgent need to interpret the concept of RTC as it was put forward by Lefebvre, Marcuse (2009: 190) eloquently sums up its collective, multiple nature: “Lefebvre’s right is both a cry and a demand, a cry out of necessity and a demand for something more.” It does not merely signify a single individual’s right to multiple services, neither is it simply a right to information or to the use of city centres, but rather it encompasses a much more collective meaning: “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). David Harvey (2008) echoes Marcuse’s interpretation, stating that Lefebvre was not referring to the individual’s right to urban existence, but to the collective right to urbanisation in relation to the production and use of space, which Harvey identifies as the true urban revolution.

It is perhaps apposite here to give a brief historical account of the current state of displacement, since it has been fuelled predominantly by attempts to claim these collective urban rights. This is particularly the case across the Middle East, the region from which the vast majority of refugees and

migrants currently emerge. The political unrest that erupted in the West during the 1950s and 1960s is well documented, but the contemporaneous revolutions in the Middle East are less widely acknowledged. The attraction of socialism as a political ideal and a way of life spread across the region during this time. However, these movements were not without pitfalls; they often led to brutal oppression and coup d'états (in 1952 in Egypt and 1963 in Iraq), civil war (in 1970 in Jordan/Palestine and 1982 in Lebanon), decades of wars and invasions (between Israel and Palestine in 1967, Iraq and Iran in 1980, followed by the two Gulf Wars in Iraq in 1990/1 and 2003), and finally in 2011, the eruption of the Arab Spring and its suppression, the rise of so-called Islamic State in the region, and the current war in Syria. Socialism has failed the Middle East; capitalism is now manifest across the region in many different ways, but is mainly experienced through oppression (Al-Ali 2014). Displacement has become a choice, as well as a force in the pursuit of urban social rights (Murrani 2016: 197).

Concurrently, urban social movements in Latin and North America and across Europe are involved in practical interpretations of the RTC concept. These social movements have emerged in response to the global rise of neoliberal urban development in the current era: in some areas they seek to secure and protect the right of all to participate in the city, while elsewhere they attempt to create the right to more open and democratic cities through social and political agency (Mayer 2012: 64). Besides these urban social movements, Lefebvre's RTC concept increasingly features on the agendas of governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations across the world – in 2016 it appeared at the heart of the United Nations' HABITAT III report on the *New Urban Agenda* (2016: 2), in which it shares its vision of 'cities for all'. However, this ideal of the right to participate in, and openly and democratically appropriate, urban

social life can only hold true for those inhabitants who are situated and rooted in a given city; how can RTC and its related concepts reach out to the marginalised, the displaced and the uprooted?

In order to address this question it is necessary to unpack a very important yet convoluted concept in Lefebvre's thought: his reference to the third field, the urban, which implicitly explains the concept of the city. Each of these notions has equivocal characteristics. In certain contexts, this ambiguous idiosyncrasy could be seen as a challenge to the appropriateness of Lefebvre's RTC, yet the concept's very ambiguity simultaneously allows new interpretations to emerge.

Prior to 2015, over 60 per cent of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons were living in urban environments (UNHCR 2001). However, this percentage has now been superseded by external displacement, with people residing in refugee camps and on the borders of states. These spaces are mainly peripheral in a spatial and morphological sense, located on the edges and borders of nations, in deserts or across the sea. Can such spatial elements be regarded as features of the urban? What, in fact, is the urban?

Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 116) asserts that the plasticity of the term 'urban' is embedded in its characteristic of being located at the conjuncture of networks of production of space and society, thus inferring that any point in this network can become the centre of urban space-time. He emphasises this plasticity in several definitions of the term: "[T]he urban is a highly complex field of tensions, a virtuality, a possible-impossible that attracts the accomplished, an ever-renewed and always demanding presence-absence" (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 40).

Lefebvre puts forward the idea of the city in association with the concept of the urban as a dialectic relationship, in which the city is the creative hub of activity, consumption and production of urban society. This is predominantly why cities are always associated with the concept and application of the urban. Nonetheless, the idiosyncratic plasticity of the urban as a concept allows for other centres to emerge from the fissures and cracks generated by the misdistribution of wealth, consumption and power, not only within cities but also on their margins and elsewhere (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 118). This confirms that the production of the urban as a concept is bound, in a spatial and morphological sense, not only to cities but also to new societal centres and networks existing on the peripheries – at borders, in camps and deserts, across the sea or in the virtual world. The urban is everywhere.

Lefebvre's notions of RTC and the urban are made manifest in Edward Soja's (1996) 'thirdspace' ('a space of radical openness') and bell hooks's (1990) 'margin' (real and imagined spaces on the margins), thus revealing themselves to be malleable concepts. This plasticity disrupts urban and social centres in pursuit of a 'radical creative space', where consciousness is rooted in identity and the experience of everyday life (Soja 1996: 99), and which, as hooks (1990: 153) eloquently asserts, "gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world". The conditions of protracted drifting and displacement impose an element of openness and continuous disruption on space and social existence, yielding the potential for new creative possibilities.

### **Urban creativity through the concept of the 'blind field'**

According to Lefebvre, 'blindness' as an ideology is situated between the 'presentation' of facts as they appear to us and their 're-presentation' (the

interpretation of the facts). These moments do not follow each other smoothly; there are ruptures and conflicts between the presented and the re-presented. The blindness or the blind field occurs during these moments of misinterpretation and misunderstanding (leading to a failure of recognition, and mental and social false consciousness) as our consciousness oscillates between the presentation and the re-presentation (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 30). Rob Shields (2014) explains that, for Lefebvre, the blind field is a manifestation within the urban of ‘enigmatic and excessive’ forces of knowledge that cannot be fully perceived or comprehended from any one viewpoint. He further asserts that the blindness or dark moments are attempts at actualising the virtuality of the urban (Shields 2014: 53).

Since its introduction in 1970, the Lefebvrian notion of the blind field has featured in academic literature concerned with spatial practice, place-making, mapping and urban studies. However, while acknowledging Lefebvre’s influence on spatial theories, Les Roberts (2012: 16) critiques the limitations and rigidity of the bonds between the Lefebvrian concepts and their spatial grounding – in particular, between manifestations of the concept of the blind field and the urban. Lefebvre himself insists that the urban field is new and still unknown; hence, its association with the blind field is due to its embrace and signification of ‘difference’. He asserts that the urban field is a manifestation of urban thought; it is a ‘reflection of urban society’, not urbanism (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 36-7).

This challenge to earlier perspectives on urban thought has contributed to the eruption within the field of urban theory of what Neil Brenner (2013: 92) describes as the critique of “every imaginable issue – from the conceptualization of *what* urbanists are (or should be) trying to study to the justification for *why* they are (or should be) doing so and the elaboration of *how* best to pursue their agendas’. Brenner (2013: 109) elaborates on nine

different conceptualisations for the mapping of the planetary urban condition, favouring the identification of a ‘unit-like’ urban character, which this Chapter infers to comprise the creative agency of urban society.

Philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and artists have all been captivated by the idea of creativity and its association with individual and collective consciousness. However, the study of creativity as a phenomenon did not encompass the spatial dimension until geographers in the late-twentieth century became more interested in the impact of spatial situations and the environment on the emergence of creativity, as opposed to the prevailing theories (Meusburger *et al.* 2009: 2). Until that point, creativity had been defined as the by-product of a mind lacking a pre-ordered plan or formulated goal (Bohm 2004: 32), or alternatively, as a network of organisation and interaction between the consciousness of a number of individuals and their environment (Csikszentmihalyi 1998).

The mid-twentieth century brought with it the first theoretical insight into the origins of creativity, manifested in the psychodynamic approach. At its centre was the earlier notion propounded by Sigmund Freud (1908) that the unfolding of creativity is rooted in the tensions between conscious reality and unconscious drivers in the environment. Ernst Kris (1952) subsequently put forward a theory of psychoanalysis in which he connected creativity to frustration, or what he termed the ‘adaptive regression’ to unmodulated thoughts that can occur during problem-solving activities. This theory was later abandoned due to its over-reliance on evidence from case studies of highly creative individuals and the uncontrolled nature of the environments in which these case studies were conducted – the field of psychology at the time placed greater value on replicable, measured and strictly controlled scientific experiments (Sternberg 1998: 6).

Later research and experiments, however, further developed the link between creativity and frustration, showing that sudden and unexpected disruptions to everyday routines could lead to creative outcomes. When a strike recently affected London's underground system, for example, commuters quickly responded by collectively finding alternative ways to reach their workplaces or homes. Economists examined the data generated by the use of travel cards during and after the strike and realised that not only had commuters found alternative ways to navigate their city, but also one in 20 went on using their new commuting routes for various reasons after the dispute was resolved (Harford 2016: 15).

Tim Harford (2016) writes of the intrinsic nature of human beings to seek to improve a particular condition, especially in situations where daily routines are subject to constant disruptions. He suggests that creativity cannot exist in isolation from external stimuli, both social and spatial, but is fundamentally triggered by the process of problem-solving, in which failed attempts in one area add to the collective accumulation of fresh insights and the generation of new tools that might work elsewhere (Harford 2016: 25). Harford was not referring to the spatial disruption experienced by refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean or walk across the borders of mainland Europe, but if the concept is transferable, then these displaced people arriving in Europe potentially have developed a heightened sense of spatial creativity. This hypothesis, which I term 'urban creativity', is not to be confused with street art (Neves 2016); also, it is 'urban', not in the sense of inhabiting a city, but rather in the social and spatial, open-network sense of the concept established in the previous section.

It is important to note that creativity, which was originally thought to be an innate characteristic of a single individual's consciousness (Boden 1994), arises from complex and lengthy dialogues and dynamic interactions

between creators/actors and their environment (Simonton 2000). Peter Meusburger (2009: 111) emphasises that spatiality and locatedness are both equally crucial in triggering creativity. This idea has led to ethnographic explorations of creativity in makeshift refugee camps (Agier 2002), as well as collaborative research with refugees and displaced people in their host countries. Recent initiatives such as Counterpoints Arts, a London-based cultural arts programme, and Chatterbox, a social enterprise based at SOAS, University of London, provide a platform whereby migrants and refugees can connect with local communities through practicing the arts and participating in cultural enrichment programmes.

Such initiatives require systematic development, but once they gain momentum, they can be instrumental in helping the integration of refugees within local communities. However, although there have been similar studies of displacement and creativity within situated spatial environments such as camps and cities (Betts *et al.* 2015), research on displaced persons' creativity while they are mobile – that is, during their journeys – has been scarce. However, one such piece of research conducted by the Open University in the UK, in collaboration with France Médias Monde, has focused on mapping refugees' media journeys to Europe through an analysis of their creative use of smartphones and social media (Gillespie *et al.* 2016). *En route*, refugees rely on mobile technologies and social media to navigate their way across Europe and to stay abreast of the latest news on border controls and route diversions (Gillespie *et al.* 2016: 11).

At this point, I return to the concept of drifting in relation to mobility. Cairns (2004: 40) believes that drifting “signifies a discomfort that arises when the bonds between proper being and place are denaturalized”. This precise discomfort, and the associated frustration of dis-locatedness, situates migrants and refugees in a space of contingent mobility, riddled with

disruptions. Studies have shown that disruptions to everyday spatial mobility have been proven to increase and stimulate new patterns of creative thinking (Meusburger 2009: 140), yet the intensity of any form of disruption to everyday life, which affects emotion and memory, has a profound nonlinear influence on the levels of creativity generated (Byron *et al.* 2010). It is, however, suggested that in focused situations of spatial problem-solving, where the individuals are subjected to high levels of negative emotions and stress, they are likely to experience an increase in the production of creative thought that is persistently directed towards finding solutions (De Dreu *et al.* 2008). This finding confirms the validity of exploring creativity in the context outlined in this Chapter.

The continuous implementation of increasingly rigorous border controls, such as fencing, policing and camps, overlooks the needs of people in favour of ‘border politics’ (Andersson 2014) and exacerbates the problems facing migrants by making their paths to safety even more treacherous. Simultaneously, the altered state of disruption to their spatial existence contributes to a heightened creative sense of the social navigation of space. This protracted oscillation between the camp and the journey, the node and the network, the point and the field is precisely how Lefebvre’s concept of the blind field manifests itself within urban displacement.

Policymakers and nations have been blind to the wider impact of knee-jerk border policies on protracted displacement, while aid agencies, depending on their focus, have assisted some and alienated others, and by doing so, have been blind to the larger network of support existing in the countries of origin and those *en route*, and in the nations of arrival. This is in addition to the deliberate moral blindness of people traffickers who routinely place vulnerable lives in danger. As the displaced are distracted by this blindness, they search for other, more illuminated paths to explore, for new

possibilities where such blindness, as Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 31) asserts, represents “an enclosure to break out of, a consecration to transgress”. The creativity of the displaced lies within the slippages and gaps between such blind fields.

### **Conclusion**

The perpetual drifting of the displaced, in spatial and social terms, drives a contingent negotiation between notions of displacement and emplacement through the acts of positioning, rootedness and locatedness in place and time. While the right to drift is a contested concept for many who are uprooted and displaced, drifting and meandering as forms of mobility allow a flexible and malleable conjuncture that is ambiguous, both spatially and socially. At the same time, protracted displacement as a condition impacts the spatial locality and social rootedness of the displaced and disturbs their ecologies, their networks and their way of life. On the one hand, then, this disturbance clearly obstructs their sense of locatedness and belonging; yet on the other, it creates places of renewal, experimentation and opportunity, where new creative directions emerge out of the plasticity of this condition.

This plasticity is the essence of the urban, a conceptual thought that this Chapter has argued also applies to the contested spaces of the marginalised. Similarly, the notion of rights, as in the right to the city, shares with the urban those flexible characteristics that enable it to encompass the total collection of rights of representation, as well as the creative production of space and society through the right to drift between the camp and the journey, between the point and the field.

To drift is to flow to and fro, and to drift amid displacement is to continuously flow in space and time. The challenges faced by the displaced

through protracted drifting and the spatial disruption to their daily lives stimulate the emergence of new patterns of creative thinking that are specific to spatial problem-solving. Thus, drifting becomes the essence of the renewal and re-emergence of their creative agency, an urban creativity amongst the blind fields. By focusing on this specific creative agency, an argument emerges in which spatial disruptions to the mobility of the displaced generate new urban centres through the process of protracted drifting. Therefore, migration, mobility and drifting are processes that are instrumental for urban renewal, future planning and urban policy; these disciplines could be facilitated and enhanced by a greater understanding of the creative drifting of refugees and migrants. Likewise, policymakers, governments and host communities would benefit greatly from this alternative insight into the creative agency of the displaced.

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