

# Struggle, Urban Appropriation, and Cities of the Future

Journal of Urban History

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Sean Dinces (2018). *Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 225 + ix pp., illustrations, appendix, notes, \$45.00 (cloth).

Miriam Greenberg and Penny Lewis, eds (2017). *The City is the Factory: New Solidarities and Spatial Strategies in an Urban Age*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 267 + xiv pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$29.95 (paper).

Margaret Kohn (2016). *The Death and Life of the Urban Commonwealth*. New York: Oxford University Press. 200 + ix pp., notes, bibliography, index, \$30.95 paper, 102.46 (cloth).

**Reviewed by:** Jill Jensen, *University of Redlands, Redlands, CA, USA*

DOI: 10.1177/00961442211004906

## Keywords

right to the city, urban appropriation, capitalism, identity, class struggle

The year 2020 was one of contrasts, and cities around the world have been changed as a result. In place of stability, coherence, and predictability (for whom these existed), inhabitants faced disruption, but amidst an eerie calm. In a world facing the unknown, however, came the rumblings of participation, appropriation, and empowerment—through marches, protests, and, in the United States, the removal of artifacts as representations of past injustices. Centering that appropriation in the process of struggle helps us see the radical side to the ideas, and the scholarship, focused on the right to the city. Urban appropriation is admittedly an ambiguous term. It could point to the act of making something private, and this is part of the story here. Yet, the urban appropriation essential in this evaluation lies in the assignment of purpose or identity, as consequence of contrasting needs, understandings, and memories. Through this experience this type of rights claiming takes place. Surrounding the process are discourses that install meaning. The books under review deal with ideas surrounding the right to the city, as will be explained, but also the struggles of appropriation within urban landscapes that are ever alive in growth and destruction. This urban flux means an ongoing envisioning of social, economic, and ecological dimensions of space. It is a wide-ranging endeavor, including the rich and the poor, the powerful and the vulnerable.

In *Barrio Boy* (1971), writer and labor activist Ernesto Galarza referred to everyday life in the mixed-race barrios of early twentieth-century Sacramento as the *hacer la lucha*. This was the never-ending “daily match,” as Galarza defined it, of balancing work, income, “rent, groceries, and the seasons.”<sup>1</sup> It was an ongoing obligation of “the fight,” or struggle, so to maintain the resources to perpetuate self and family. Described in each case a bit differently, this is nonetheless what the authors of three distinct publications evaluate—the perpetual action of groups of city dweller to maintain their own social reproduction in the shadow of the capitalist, now the “neoliberal,” state. It is a struggle between commodification and the private, on one hand, and the

unearned increment from the contribution of all. Sean Dinces's monograph is on the history of capitalism involving the conquering of space by the National Basketball Association (NBA) Chicago Bulls's owner in building and benefiting from the United Center arena. Meanwhile, this is a story of dispossession of living spaces, but also the true publicness of the area surrounding that arena. The edited volume of Miriam Greenberg and Penny Lewis focuses on "the city as a factory" and "right to the city" themes and examines urban case studies from around the world. Margaret Kohn presents a critical assessment of social property, framing debates around the theories of rights, or alternatives to these, in relation to urban space and human life. I reflect on these three books through the lens of urban struggles and suggest ways they might inform our imagining of the urban flux of the present or the future.

Beyond offering attention to the working class as a designation for those who struggle in this way, I expand upon a term used by Kathleen Dunn in *The City is the Factory*. She describes "the constructive class [as] those who create the work of the city from the street up" (Dunn, p. 28). As well as workers as a class, this concept makes room for sets of urban dwellers, including informal and day laborers, and street vendors, but also the unemployed and the unemployable. Every day, they too set off on their "daily march" in cities that remain spaces of inequalities. The description of constructive class also fits well with my interpretation of Henri Lefebvre's reasoning in *Le Droit à la Ville*, yet through the lens of the reviewed books. Lefebvre centralized participation and appropriation as a reaction to the process under capitalism wherein urban space is unjustly apportioned and distributed.<sup>2</sup> To evaluate what might be done in response, I assess embedded capitalist rationalities that legitimize disparities, even alongside rights-claims—including the right to the city.

Sean Dinces considers one incredibly lucrative but also spatially situated business enterprise in the form of franchise sports. *Bulls Market* recounts the recent history of the Chicago Bulls under the ownership of Jerry Reinsdorf since 1985. Dinces offers a critique of Chicago's urban policies, brokered within a city that has been particularly susceptible to urban flux since the 1980s. The story centers on urban redevelopment schemes during and after mayor Richard M. Daley's administration, 1989 to 2011. Chicago residents experienced readjustments based upon two seismic shifts. Following both the retrenchment of federal aid to cities since the 1980s and urban deindustrialization, there was a push for new forms of commodification of core urban areas. Daley sought to build a city of tourism, of entertainment, and shopping with the new construction of office and retail space in the central Loop, so to recoup local government resources. Such shifts in public finance were accompanied by a more aggressive business investment environment and an ever-widening gap between the rich and poor. The trends led to what Dinces names "exclusionary capitalism" and the New Gilded Age. Even today, the Chicago Loop Alliance highlights shopping and dining, theater and art, and public transportation and lodging, but for the visitors who populate the hotels and benefit from these amenities. Where did the former residents go, either in the Loop or the adjacent Near West Side? We learn of their fate.

Dinces debunks myths about the restorative nature of professional sports for struggling areas by those who argue that they stimulate broader redevelopment beyond benefit to the owners of stadiums or arenas themselves. One myth revolves around the idea that the Bulls and their success served to break down social, economic, and racial barriers through pride of place. This claim was related to the idea that the Bulls's six NBA championships in the 1990s led to a form of togetherness, a "source of civic cohesion [that] offered an alternate conception of community: Equality of fandom" (p. 39). But the Reinsdorf form of exclusionary capitalism meant that most Chicagoans could not afford to see the games after a commercialization surge propped ticket prices up so high that only wealthy fans could afford entry to the United Center. Inside and out, the area remained an exclusive private space, even if we tend to think of sporting events as public. Reinsdorf and his partner William Wirtz, owner of the National Hockey League's Chicago Blackhawks, built a veritable empire as they pushed forth redevelopment that marginalized, not

only the area's low-income residents, but also local business and the general quality of neighborhood urban life.

While the rich fans cheered the Bulls on to six championships, the constructive class, many of them living in public housing in the shadow of the sports facility, struggled to hold onto the neighborhood they had resided in for decades. Why was this "exclusionary" and not just capitalism itself, though? One point, a spatial one, related to the "massive parking lot whose concrete surrounded the United Center in a massive empty space . . . disrupted limited nearby business [and] investment" (p. 221). It led to the destruction of public housing units, with some rebuilt but few former residents ending up in occupation. The team owners also managed to sway local government to pass an exclusionary ordinance to keep petty vendors from their enterprises in the shadow of the arena and lobbied for significant tax breaks. In the end, they catered to rich clientele who drove, parked, and spent their money in the arena exclusively. The shocking part of the story is that we take it for granted that capitalist developers have the right to wield this control in a locale, so not only is this exclusionary capitalism but also exclusionary citizenship and opportunity. Tactics like this have come to seem predictable and unremarkable, since wealthy actors can afford to purchase and rent urban spaces as well as control "the fora where acceptable uses of putatively public space are adjudicated," a key point to Lefebvre's analysis.<sup>3</sup>

What would neighborhoods look like if a community of residents and not outside developers had a say (even in part)? How would a city where the constructive class reaped part of the economic rewards of development function? On the surface, the urban appropriation in Near West Side Chicago was controlled by the owners, and United Airlines demarked the Center with its own label in corporate sponsorship. If not a victory, but a partial success, however, a coalition of residents had drafted *The Better Alternative* plan. A grouping of church leaders, members, and residents formed the Interfaith Organizing Project (IOP) and envisioned this as a blueprint for "a neighborhood-controlled revitalization option" (p. 90). With 72 percent of residents living under the poverty line, their slogan became, "If you want my land you have to give me something" (p. 93). An eventually brokered deal with the teams' enterprise called for replacement housing for homeowners asked to relocate, moving expenses for renters whose buildings would be demolished, and a limit to the sport franchises' acquisitions geographically. They also negotiated resources for the renovation of a neighborhood park, a new library, and funds for trades programs at the local Malcolm X Community College (pp. 93-96). The residents did not so much win, since many were relocated, but the struggle for public neighborhood projects stood up against that embedded form of privatized capital.

Miriam Greenberg's and Penny Lewis's edited volume highlights the mobilization of urban residents in defense of the right to the city in multiple localities. Various authors recount activism for change, as those in the constructive class use creativity and what they could control to struggle toward urban appropriation to satisfy basic needs. *The City is the Factory* includes evaluation of "new" urban social movements and a theoretical summary by geographer Andrew Herod. The case studies offer descriptions of street protests, advocacy campaigns, and other forms of spatial social politics—informal or formal. Activist methods targeted the acquisition of resources for those in hardship, but also control of the urban dialogue. They represent forms of "neighborhood ethics," according to Alejandro Grimson writing on territorialization of politics in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Grimson's examples include the movement of the unemployed who sought action in "recuperating" empty factories left idle due to widespread bankruptcies; *caceroleros*, or protest with pots and pans as a form of public outrage to hostile policies; and *piqueteros*, or protest road blockades (Grimson, pp. 188-191). In each case, action brought to light need and poverty in this polarized city. The struggles involved the appropriation of space—either on highways normally used for driving, on streets with a sound protest, or within the actual buildings where the unemployed may have historically worked before wave after wave of economic

downturn. These spaces become centers for organizing. Other examples show how urban locations serve as places for coalition building and mobilization.

Over and again “‘the urban’ [became] the emblematic site and scale of contentious politics among workers and precariously employed people in the twenty-first century, much as the shop floor was for the twentieth,” the authors argue (Greenberg, Lewis, p. 5) The volume maps out alternative futures, as activists evaluate inequalities that, like cities, have been built, maintained, and rebuilt over generations. Urban spaces serve as protest landscapes for campaigners, immigrants, renters, and, as mentioned, the unemployed, as those groups use space itself “as a lever of power” (Greenberg, Lewis, p. 6). The struggle is apparent in the city as factory conception, yet another theme of the volume is the urban revolution, with the continuing trend of urbanization worldwide. In this, writers turned to the formulas of Lefebvre, who in the 1960s noted an ongoing process of urbanization “on a planetary scale.”<sup>4</sup> Higher urban densities led to new forms of competition and Lefebvre conceived the revolution in such a way that urbanization itself “surpassed [even] industrialization to become the primary engine of economic growth” (Greenberg, Lewis, p. 9). According to Herod in the concluding chapter, urbanization has grown to become its own form of market. Within, some city dwellers critique the distinction between use value and exchange, problematizing the property valuation claims of realtors and developers. Cities are therefore constantly generating negotiations over the right to use. “Lefebvre argued that the power to make urban spaces, which he viewed as the control points of modern capitalism,” writes Herod, “must be wrested from capital and the state and located instead in the hands of the working-class people” (Herod, p. 197).

Gretchen Purser’s account of workers caught in the trap of day labor agencies fits into the struggle as life framework, alongside Dunn’s on the street vendors. Companies like InstaLabor, Central Temps, or Hire Options exist on the fringe between day jobs and urban poverty management. As organized, they focus on the control of people rather than assisting in their aid. Dunn, in turn, demonstrates that the policing governance of public space came up against claims for the right to that space by urban vendors. If officials see these people as problematic (Dunn, p. 27), their actions are in fact self-sustaining. Vendors claim their workplaces and meanwhile provide essential services to the urban poor by offering low-cost essential goods. These workers are indeed creating and building the city “from the street up,” appropriating (if temporarily and daily) in the form of alternate urbanisms (Dunn, p. 36).

Turning to the ever more pressing topic of the impacts of climate change, Daniel Aldana Cohen notes that “right to the city struggles” must be accompanied by “a success, in democratically decarbonizing urban life” (Cohen, p. 141). His chapter illustrates the crossover between climate politics and workers activism in São Paulo, sometimes in cooperation with middle-class climate activists but also often in contrast. The tension is between “luxury ecologies,” such as privatized parks or environmentally sustainable modern buildings, and “democratic ecologies,” like more public transit options and gray projects (not green) for densification of housing near new jobs’ creation. Here one of the slogans for housing advocates became, “those who don’t struggle die” (Cohen, p. 148). As time goes on, more and more often these urban environmental struggles will indeed prove life sustaining. This dialectic of environment, need, and use will be an essential component in cities of the future.

Margaret Kohn’s *Life and Death of the Urban Commonwealth* considers the idea of social property from multiple perspectives, beginning with French solidarism as will be explained below. Kohn is intellectually challenging but also rewards readers in her reconsideration of property in the name of people “securing access to the city itself, to a common world . . .” (p. 1). She outlines both the meaning and the depth of the struggle between urban residents, thus between property holders and non-property holders, but also between the people and the state for the right to life, to mobility, and to identity. Kohn provides an excellent summary for this essay on struggle and appropriation in light its evaluation of “the public,” of democracy and deliberation, and the

strengths but also the shortcoming of rights' claims. "The right to the city is a complex and paradoxical notion," she writes (p. 4).

Kohn begins by describing formulas for the French theory of solidarism and questioning why access to the amenities of the city must be tied to the ability to acquire private property. Unlike possessions one can protect or hold onto tightly, the urban commons involve collective effort. These are layered through time in physical constructions but also cultural values. Concepts surrounding solidarism emerged during the French Third Republic as a philosophy and political formula evaluating society-wide needs. Central to its premise was that the division of labor leads to a social product, a product which does not naturally belong solely to individuals who control capital or resources (p. 172). The premise of the movement was engrained as a mid-point between individualism and collectivism, with dedication to the ideas of social welfare but with the mechanisms of its protections not well defined. In my interpretation, those outlines as such will and must be determined in an ongoing arbitration over who gets what. Urbanity necessitates some form of contract between those who exist and experience it, Kohn suggests, as direct contributors. If the constructive class in the way I am situating it ends up without property, they can also be owed a debt having "suffered loss" from their own effort (p. 25). A solidarist approach, alongside others described by Kohn, explores alternatives.

In defining "the public," we read of multiple struggles over urban space steeped in theories of occupation, and through notions of collective goods, democracy, and rights themselves. What rights do squatters have before or after displacement? How can public housing tenants maintain occupancy in built spaces in which they do not fully control? A somewhat simple struggle for the space takes on great meaning. This is one over a public soccer field after the San Francisco Parks Department renovated the Mission Playground, a place of predominately minority soccer match pick-up games with their own rules of occupancy (winner stays to play a contender). After the renovation, city authorities aimed to recoup administrative costs by charging fees with an online reservations system to be paid by credit card. Kohn describes a clash between tech professionals who followed the rules for occupancy versus the locals, Latino and black youths without the money to pay the fees. The struggle was between urban occupants fighting to determine how public space was utilized. It ended in a victory for local tradition and the retraction of the fee system. We can see this case as a making, remaking, and then reversion of urban logics.

Cities, as places where groups of unlike occupants come together to live their daily lives, become zones of debate and compromise where the publicness of space itself is negotiated. But the state is not absent, as we saw in the case against the street vendors' claims or Chicago's city government offering "goods" to the already propertied via legal and contractual rulemaking. Evaluating democracy itself unpacks a broader concept of the state, "as something produced and reconstructed through the struggle between conflicting groups" (p. 142). Kohn points to philosopher Claude Lefort and his attempt to understand the political elements of society. Lefort describes democracy as an empty space. "Democracy does not achieve the impossible; it does not secure the equal distribution of power, but it does prevent the state from closing off contestation," Kohn claims (p. 159). Leading with Lefort's distinction between politics and the political, Kohn notes the democratic paradox as both problem solution (p. 168). Through it, groups can mobilize to exclude, include, or protect others. There are the powerful, in the state or of those with wealth, but there is also the empty space for the struggle. There must be that space.

The vocabulary of rights can be misleading if grounded only in liberal legalism of the West. As a serious critique from the Left, rights within the liberal state are contradictory in that they seem to give to the people but reinforce a state's mechanism of domination. This formula for rights can well disguise social inequalities, and so a new conception of empowerment is needed. Lefebvre proposes the "contract of the citizen"—either against or outside of capitalism—as a logical way forward. He writes about what is left in the city space when you take away the private and all government-controlled locations. This is the space in the city that is experienced as a



phenomenal logicity and becomes the place of strain and definition. Again, according to Lefebvre, it is a “fantasy” believing “that you can have the public good without conflict, capitalism without exploitation” (p. 190). Kohn proposes therefore a form of “hetero-rights,” in a duality, as both inside the rulemaking system and outside it, which sets a productive tension in the struggle for what all people need.

Engaging with Lefebvrian ideas on the right to the city, urban geographer Nate Millington writes this about the struggle for space by the poor in urban South Africa.

The ongoing/unfolding process of appropriation involves an endless probing of physical and political landscapes for vulnerable disagreements between empowered actors about what the rules of the urban game really are: these disagreements constitute locations where opportunities exist for current or future acts of appropriation.

These involve, he argues, “how people (re)make the logics of urban.”<sup>5</sup> If we think about this and other statements included in this article, we can consider potential in the post-pandemic cities of the world. Will the “neo-liberal” be replaced with something else? Instead of exclusionary capitalism, could this something else be inclusionary participation, and non-monetized? Instead of glamor and grandeur in cityscapes, could residents, local leaders, civil society organization, visitors, and developers all together strategize on refashioning cities for their livability? As we recover and heal, will we reaffirm togetherness and realize that access could prove as important of a priority as control? If there are new versions of urban appropriation, will these be equitable and just, stepping away from the slow violence of the past? In 2020 we were asked worldwide to do something very unhuman—to give up our sociability. Rebuilding, spatially as well as psychologically, there will certainly be a struggle between the “fortress us” (protection in our private space) and collective, alternative visions of future potentialities. We need to be ready for it.

## Notes

1. Ernesto Galaza, *Barrio Boy*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Notre Dame, 2011), 256.
2. On the literature of urban appropriation, see the review by Jose Antonio Lara-Hernandez and Alessandro Melis, “Understanding the Temporary Appropriation in Relationship to Social Sustainability,” *Sustainable Cities and Society* 39 (May 2018): 366-74.
3. Mary Lawhon, Joseph Pierce, and Anesu Makina, “Provincializing Urban Appropriation: Agonistic Transgression as a Mode of Actually Existing Appropriation in South African Cities,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 39 (2018), 119.
4. Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la Ville* [The Right to the City] (Paris, 1968), 8.
5. Nate Millington, “Provincializing Urban Appropriation,” accessed January 5, 2021, UPE Collective (Feb., 2018) found at <http://www.situatedupe.net/provincializing-urban-appropriation/>.

## Author Biography

**Jill Jensen** teaches on the history of capitalism, ethics, and the future of work at the University of Redlands. She has published articles in *International Labor and Working-Class History* and *Global Social Policy* and has a co-edited volume, *The ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim: West Meets East* (2016). A coauthored publication appears in *The Routledge History of Human Rights* (2019). Her current book project is titled *Human Rights and Basic Needs: The United States, the ILO, and International Standards of Work*. She is the lead editor for a ProQuest/Alexander Street Press database project, “Women and Development,” which will be part of the *Women and Social Movements Library*.