



FORUM: RIGHTS

Abolition, Community Control, and the Right to the City

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Some years ago, writing as the embers of the Great Recession still burned, Marxist geographer and social theorist David Harvey penned an essay in *New Left Review* titled “The Right to the City.” In it, Harvey, the primary exponent of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” thesis (initially published as *Le Droit à la ville* in 1968), argued that “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.”¹

Broadly speaking, Harvey’s most urgent points were twofold. The first was that historically (as now), managers of urbanization across the world had repeatedly manipulated infrastructural development in ways that did violence to the public good, working instead to sate the endless hunger of capitalist accumulation and expansion: ruthlessly dispossessing people of their home spaces and resources, immiserating and further marginalizing already marginalized people and communities. Harvey’s foremost examples of such managers were Georges-Eugène Haussmann (in mid-nineteenth-century Paris) and Robert Moses (in post-World-War II New York), but he also noted more contemporary examples in Seoul, Delhi, and Mumbai, among many others. In a nod to the late Mike Davis, Harvey noted that these processes were what had wrought what Davis described as a “planet of slums” and had “dispossessed the masses of any right to the city whatsoever.”²

If such was the diagnosis, Harvey’s second point was the prescription. In a call for a response to the more recent conjuncture of global urban neoliberalization, Harvey argued that what was needed was a collectivized adoption of “the right to the city as both working slogan and political ideal.” “The democratization of that right,” he continued, “and the construction of a broad social movement to enforce its will is imperative if the dispossessed are to take back control which they have for so long been denied, and if they are to institute new modes of urbanization.”³

My first book, *Occupied Territory*, traced the structural development and awful consequences of Chicago’s anti-Black, racist police machinery during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. In writing the introduction to it (and with apologies for self-quoting), I referred briefly to Lefebvre, Harvey, and Harvey’s *NLR* essay:

For black people to have their rights to equitable, fair, and nonracist policing undermined in the ways etched on these pages ... was not simply another form of racism. It was the social compact, undone. It was a derogation of their very rights as citizens—a particular violation of what the social theorist Henri Lefebvre famously called *the right to the city* (*le droit à la ville*). Having a right to the city implies that one can make claims on the city’s public resources, since they are nominally for everyone. (David Harvey is correct

¹David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53 (Sept.–Oct. 2008): 2323. See also Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, transl. Elenore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (New York, 1996).

²Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 37; Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York, 2006).

³Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 40.

in saying that the right to the city is “far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources,” but that liberty is nevertheless a core part of it.) Black people saw this right removed when it applied to the police, a fact that lays bare their circumscribed access to the public infrastructure generally, and to one of its key precepts—safety—more particularly.⁴

“The right to the city” thesis as applied to questions of resources was important for me intellectually as I was writing that book; it directly informed how I thought about the stakes and injustices of a simultaneously repressive and neglectful police system that furthered and actively caused harm to generations of Black Chicagoans. But in revisiting Harvey’s essay recently, I was drawn to the other piece of what he says in the quoted sentence: that the right to the city is “a right to change ourselves by changing the city.”

What I am especially drawn to here is the applicability of this frame to radical movements surrounding “public safety” both now and across history. Even if they have not explicitly cited the right to the city as a concept, it is inarguable that modern abolitionists and participants in the movement to defund the police are invoking such a right. After all, calls to divert money away from structures of punishment (police and prisons) and toward ones of repair and that serve the public good (schools, clinics, housing, etc.)—the intellectual duality that sits at the heart of abolition and defunding—are calls to also utterly reimagine the urban environment, to change how the people who govern and inhabit cities establish their priorities, and ultimately to alter how they relate to one another.

I am also struck in my work as a historian by the assorted precedents for such a reimagining. The clearest example coming out of my own work involves the political activism of the Black Panther Party in Chicago during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In 1969 alone, under the leadership of Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton, the Chicago Panthers established a free breakfast program to feed hungry children, a free medical clinic to treat people without healthcare access, and a free busing program to shuttle families from Chicago to downstate prisons to visit incarcerated loved ones, among other initiatives. Billed, as in Panther outposts elsewhere in the country, as “survival programs,” such initiatives were intended to salve the wounds of dispossession and immiseration that urban life heaped upon countless thousands of people across the city.

At the same time, they challenged the political ordering of the city that created such conditions in the first place. Stitching together a “Rainbow Coalition” alongside the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the white Young Patriots, and at points working with the American Indian Movement and Students for a Democratic Society, among others, the Panthers sought to cultivate a broad social movement that could stand up to Chicago’s infamous political machine. Collectively, they cared for community members while relentlessly criticizing political leaders, and the larger systems of capitalism and racism such leaders served, for making it necessary that they do so. While not a fully articulated claiming of rights to the city, the movement they built angled in that direction, offering what we might call a usable past when it comes to coalitional politics and urban solidarities in the face of a shared (if racially uneven) denial of those rights.

In response, in December of 1969, Chicago city police, in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cook County State’s Attorney’s office, murdered Fred Hampton in his sleep at the age of twenty-one. The coalitional movement of which he had sat at the heart largely collapsed in the wake of the assassination.

However, a more precise manifestation of the right to the city *in the form of the right to change it* emerged three years after Hampton’s death, with remaining Panther leadership

⁴Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019), 9.

announcing the formation of the Chicago Campaign for Community Control of Police (CCCCP). First introduced in December 1972 in commemoration of the anniversary of Hampton's murder, and in the midst of a period of simultaneous catastrophic police violence against Black Chicagoans and police failure to perform a function of "public safety" adequately within Black communities, the project largely unfolded over the summer of 1973. The campaign built a coalition of dozens of community organizations from across the city, with the ultimate goal being to turn control of the Chicago Police Department (CPD) over to neighborhood-based community boards who would have the power to determine police policies for people who lived there. (A similar referendum effort had been launched in Berkeley a few years earlier, though it had failed in the face of withering opposition from police, corporate interests, some liberals, and many conservative politicians and political thinkers—tellingly, future "broken windows" architect James Q. Wilson among them—all of whom painted community control as an entry point for upward-spiraling crime and, in the words of one Berkeley city manager, "a return to the Dark Ages."⁵)

It is important to be clear about what activists were fighting for. While the specific call was for community control of police (a decentralized, neighborhood-based police force governed by elected neighborhood community members, vested with policy making, hiring, and firing privileges), the vision was more capacious than that. Very much akin to modern calls to defund the police, the CCCCCP imagined not just a transformation of policing in the city, but a transformation of ethical priorities and resource distribution within it. Citing a city budgetary allotment to the CPD that had in recent years spiraled upward over \$300 million annually (it is roughly \$2 billion today), the coalition called for a radical reduction of that budget and a redistribution of those funds toward job creation and training that could support the economic rebuilding of communities of all colors that had been racked by divestment, displacement, and dispossession. (Bobby Rush did not mince words on this matter. In the pamphlet for a conference convened at the University of Illinois–Chicago in support of the movement, he wrote that "[t]he annual budget for the Chicago Police Department is over 300 million dollars. That is too much money.... Community control of the Police will reduce the annual police budget and will free some of our tax money to come back to our communities to provide jobs which will establish an economic base for our community existence."⁶) In other words, while the specific fate of the institution of policing in Chicago was the movement's fulcrum, the larger arc of the fight was over the fates and futures of the people living in the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods. There was a movement to claim a right to the city by seeking to change it, and to change it in a way that would divest from institutions such as policing and instead provide Chicagoans the resources to live nourished and fulfilling lives.⁷

Chicago's movement for community control of the police ultimately failed in the face of reactionary headwinds similar to those that Berkeley's movement had confronted, coupled with the enormity of the task of collecting enough signatures to bring the vision to the ballot. That loss, fifty years ago this year, stings with a particular sharpness given what we know about the ways that the CPD continued to careen along a deeply violent, repressive, and ineffective path that has done enormous harm to recent generations of Black and Brown Chicagoans, especially. It is indeed a cruel twist of history that precisely as the movement for community control of Chicago's police was first mounting and then floundering, CPD Detective Jon Burge—a supremely racist and violent white Chicago native and Vietnam veteran—was embarking upon a nearly two-decade-long reign of terror on the city's South Side in which he and the men at his command (with tacit support from colleagues at and above his rank) brutally

⁵Robert M. Fogelson, *Big-City Police* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 296–300.

⁶"City-Wide Conference for Community Control of Police, June 1 and 2, 1973" pamphlet, box 89, folder 18, Timuel D. Black Papers, Vivian Harsh Collection, Carter G. Woodson Branch, Chicago Public Library, Chicago, IL.

⁷For more on the history of the CCCCCP, see *Occupied Territory*, chapter 7.

tortured more than one hundred Black men, inducing from some of them false confessions that landed them in prison for decades.⁸

Nevertheless, it strikes me as important to think about histories such as that of the CCCCP through Harvey's arguments about the right to the city, in particular because such a history speaks passionately to our present realities and potential futures. The readers of this essay who live in the United States live in an ever-urbanizing nation. In 1950, 64 percent of Americans lived in metropolitan areas. According to the Center for Sustainable Systems at Michigan, that figure sits around 83 percent today, and it is estimated that by 2050, almost nine in ten Americans will be metropolitan dwellers.⁹ Organizers who in 1973 fought (however unsuccessfully) for a transformation of city investment, which is forever and always an expression of the ethical priorities of those with the political or social capital to control such investment, sought to transform the city itself. Much like activists who since 2020 have called to defund the police did and continue to do, they sought to lay claim to the urban landscape by seeking to change it—by arguing in favor of the public good and advocating for the social and economic nourishment of the people whom city managers left behind.

With metropolitan areas being where the vast majority of Americans live, the urgency that undergirds questions about the right to the city—of which *the right to change our collective selves* by changing the city—is paramount. As Harvey noted in his 2013 book *Rebel Cities*, the Great Recession ushered in a new momentum for social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the participants of which sought the right to the city by seeking to change it via a challenge to the foundational ethics and investments that structured it.¹⁰ The current movement to divest in carceral institutions and to invest in communities does the same. As histories like that of the CCCCP show us, fights such as these are not wholly new. As more and more of us reside in metropolitan areas, however, the struggles become ever more important. Indeed, the right to the city—to access its resources; to challenge its logics, ethics, and investments; as well as to change it and our collective selves, including by refusing to accept that the way the city is is the way it must be—is among the most critical issues of the recent American past, of its present, and of its future.

⁸On the Burge torture cases, see Andrew S. Baer, *Beyond the Usual Beating: The Jon Burge Police Torture Scandal and Social Movements for Police Accountability in Chicago* (Chicago, 2020); Laurence Ralph, *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence* (Chicago, 2020); and Flint Taylor, *The Torture Machine: Racism and Police Violence in Chicago* (Chicago, 2019).

⁹Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan, "U.S. Cities Factsheet," 2022, Pub. No. CSS09-06, https://css.umich.edu/sites/default/files/2022-09/U.S.%20Cities_CSS09-06.pdf (accessed Jan. 12, 2023).

¹⁰David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York, 2013).