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Theorising democratic space with and beyond Henri Lefebvre

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to theorise space in a way that resonates with democracy. It develops a radical understanding of democracy, as an affirmative project undertaken by people to directly manage their affairs themselves. To theorise space, the article takes up Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'differential space', which it conceives as an autonomous force that produces itself through the operation of desire. This self-production, Lefebvre argues, takes place in and through everyday acts of survival of those who inhabit space. The article then situates this abstract discussion of space, again following Lefebvre, in the context of ongoing worldwide urbanisation. The urban, Lefebvre argues, has agglomerated not only capitalist productive power but also the differences that exist outside of capitalist logic, and so it is where we should be looking for revolutionary difference in the world today. Taking all these insights together, we can see the project of democracy as an affirmative project undertaken by people to directly manage the production of urban space themselves. Lastly, the article argues that the project of democracy must extend beyond Lefebvre's thought. It thinks through one example, which is the question of the 'we' of democracy. It argues that to properly understand the question of difference in democratic community, we are very well served in turning to the work of Judith Butler.

Keywords
democracy, differential space, Henri Lefebvre, Judith Butler

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摘要

本文的目的是以一种与民主产生共鸣的方式对空间进行理论化。本文发展了对民主的激进理解，将其作为人们为直接管理自己的事务而进行的平权项目。为了对空间进行理论化，本文采用了亨利·列斐伏尔 (Henri Lefebvre) 的"差异空间"概念，将其视为一种通过欲望的运作生产自身的自主力量。列斐伏尔认为，这种自我生产发生在居住在空间中的人们的日常生存行为中，并通过其发生。然后，本文再次追随列斐伏尔，将这种对空间的抽象讨论置于全球持续城市化的背景下。列斐伏尔认为，城市不仅聚集了资本主义生产力，也聚集了存在于资本主义逻辑之外的差异，因此我们应该在城市中寻找当今世界革命性的差异。综合所有这些见解，我们可以将民主项目视为人们为使自己能直接管理城市空间生产而进行的平权项目。最后，本文认为民主项目必须超越列斐伏尔的思想。本文通过一个例子来思考，那就是民主的"我们"问题。我们认为，要正确理解民主社会的差异问题，我们应当借鉴朱迪思·巴特勒 (Judith Butler) 的研究工作。

关键词

民主、差异空间、亨利·列斐伏尔 (Henri Lefebvre)、朱迪思·巴特勒 (Judith Butler)

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Introduction

This article is an attempt to construct a theorisation of space that is appropriate to the project of democracy. I understand democracy radically, to mean that people directly manage their affairs themselves rather than allowing their affairs to be managed for them by a power that is outside them. Such radical self-management is of course very far from our current condition, and so in the article democracy is conceived of as a tendential political *project* in which people continually increase their desire to manage their affairs themselves.

To theorise space in a way that resonates with this project, the article draws inspiration from the work of Henri Lefebvre. It focuses its analysis on a specific moment in that work: the idea of 'differential space' as it appears in *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991). I develop this analysis more fully below, but in brief I argue that we should not adopt a negative, Hegelian understanding of differential space in which it is seen as a 'counter-space' that reacts to abstract space by opposing it. Instead, what is consistent with the project of democracy is an affirmative, Nietzschean understanding of differential space that understands it to be autopoietic, to ceaselessly produce itself through the operation of desire.

The article then situates this argument about differential space in the specific context of the city and the urban, which were also central to Lefebvre's (2003b) thinking. Urbanisation has been integral to the rise of capitalism, he argues, because it has agglomerated and augmented productive force to an unimaginable extent. But urbanisation has also, simultaneously, agglomerated *difference*: it has drawn together those elements of society that operate outside of capitalist logic. Thus urbanisation has produced an extraordinary congregation of the forces of desire that produce differential space. It is in cities, therefore, among urban inhabitants, that differential space is most fecund, and where the project for democracy has the potential to be the most vibrant. Seen in this context, democracy becomes the project of urban inhabitants to manage the production of urban space themselves.

This spatial-and-urban way of thinking democracy sheds important light on another central question democracy poses: when we say we want to manage our affairs ourselves, what do we mean by 'we'? What do 'we' share? How do 'we' differ? In a spatial and urban understanding of democracy, those who inhabit urban space take centre stage in any democratic community. They share a dependence on urban space for their bodily survival. But in what respect do they differ? On this question I find Lefebvre less helpful, and so in order to think through difference more fully the article turns to the political philosophy of Butler (2004, 2015), and particularly to her concept of 'precarious life'.

What is democracy?

Democracy is a political concept with a very long history, of course. I think it is tremendously useful for inspiring and guiding radical political thought and action,[1] but that usefulness only emerges if we are both very specific and a little imaginative in how we understand the idea. In our current era, the concept of democracy has been captured, corrupted and repackaged. It has come to mean the same thing as the liberal-democratic State operating in a capitalist world economy. I think we should refuse that corruption, and we should recapture a more radical meaning of democracy. Contemporary debates in urban studies (and in geography more generally) have explored such radical meanings. One strain of work on radical democracy is most closely associated with thinkers like Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. This strain argues that the 'agonism' of 'the political' has been tamed by neoliberal political culture, and pursuing democracy involves revitalising that agonism. In urban studies, this line of thinking is expressed most fully in the work of Swyngedouw (2018), it was the subject of a critical commentaries special section in *Urban Studies* (see Beveridge and Koch, 2017, and the responses) and it has even been the basis for some of my own work (Purcell, 2008). A second strain of work on radical democracy is more aligned with theorists like Cornelius Castoriadis, Lefebvre, Raoul Vaneigem, the Italian autonomists and Miguel Abensour. This work conceives of democracy in a more autonomist way, and explores the democratic potential of horizontal movements and self-managed initiatives (e.g. Holloway, 2010; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Purcell, 2021; Sitrin, 2006). Over the last 15 years, my own idea of democracy has engaged both of these ways of thinking (Purcell, 2008, 2013). I think both are valuable because they both refuse the corruption of liberal democracy. However, the reader should know that my own concept of democracy has moved distinctly away from the agonist conception and towards the autonomist one.[2] Accordingly, the concept of democracy I present in this article is autonomist: democracy means that people manage their affairs themselves.

The artificial person

What does that mean, to say that in democracy people 'manage their affairs themselves'? Who else would manage their affairs for them? To answer that question, we must learn what Thomas Hobbes has to teach us about the beating heart of the modern State. In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that people in their natural state are 'natural persons' who have control over their bodies and access to the power those bodies are capable of discharging. But, he argues, that natural condition is necessarily a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, a war of all persons against all other persons (Hobbes, 1985: Part 1, Chapter 13), because each natural person has what he calls a 'right of nature', a right to do anything they think will help them

survive. This would include harming or killing other persons (Hobbes, 1985: Part 1, Chapter 14). Therefore, any natural person has the right to attack and kill any other at any time. This condition of perpetual potential *bellum* is intolerable, he says, and natural persons do not stand for it. They decide to leave this natural condition by contracting, each natural person with every other natural person, to surrender their power (Hobbes, 1985: Part 1, Chapter 14). Hobbes is clear that the problem, the cause of the war, is that natural persons *have power*. His solution to the war, therefore, is for natural persons to *surrender* their power. But to whom? Not to another natural person, because natural persons having power is precisely the problem. They must surrender it to another *kind* of person, a person that is not natural, a person that is feigned, invented through artifice – an *artificial* person (Hobbes, 1985: Part 1, Chapter 16). The artificial person is thus created for a very specific purpose: to receive the surrendered power of natural persons and hold it apart from them, thereby ending the *bellum* and ensuring peace.

Hobbes goes to great lengths to make this point clear: the artificial person is *other than* natural persons. In the famous frontispiece to the book, it is portrayed as having a gigantic 'body' of its own, one that towers over the town below. It is a hideous, monstrous, un-real body, a disembodied body that re-presents the real bodies of natural persons. The power that this body has is specifically the power that has been alienated from the bodies of natural persons. This separation is represented clearly in the frontispiece: the artificial person is spatially distant from the town of natural persons, out beyond the hills.

What is more, this power is overwhelmingly strong. Behind its head is a terrifying quote from the Book of Job: *non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei*, there is no power on Earth that can compare to it. It is an aggregation of the surrendered power of all natural persons, and so it is a power quantitatively far larger than any natural person could have. Moreover, the *potestas* of the artificial person is also qualitatively different, a power of a different kind. It is transcendent power, rather than an immanent one, a power that exists on a different, higher plane than all other earthly power. It is, in a word, sovereign. This transcendence can be seen in the verticality of the frontispiece: the artificial person is not just spatially distant from the town; it also looms *over* the town.

And so the hideous, disembodied body of the artificial person is the answer to the question of who, other than us, would manage our affairs. Of course, in imagining the artificial person Hobbes was inventing the modern State,[3] and so the State is the quintessential example of the artificial person. But the State is not the only example. The capitalist Corporation, whose name means, etymologically, an 'embodiment', is just the same. It is an *artificial* body in which we vest very extensive power, in this case economic power. A workers' Union, for its part, is no less disembodied and artificial. It is the union of all the many actual bodies of workers into one artificial 'body' that re-presents workers and wields their power on their behalf. A political Party, I hope it is clear, works exactly the same way.

What democracy is, then, is a way of conceiving of our lives together that does not assume this foundational alienation of power. In democracy, *demos*, people, remain joined to their *kratia*, their power. In democracy, *kratia* is not vested in an artificial body but remains located in the real bodies of natural persons, available to them. Thus democracy's *kratia* is a qualitatively different kind of power from the *potestas* of the artificial person. *Kratia* is the power – or force, or strength – that the bodies of natural persons are able to discharge into the

world in order to create something new. It is what Spinoza calls *potentia*,[4] Nietzsche (1989) calls 'strength' and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), heavily influenced by both, call *puissance*. In democracy, *potestas*, the terrifying power of the artificial person, is unknown because natural persons retain their *kratia* and use it to manage their affairs themselves.

Given that understanding of democracy, we are now in a position to see how wrong it is to use the term 'democracy' as a synonym for the liberal-democratic State.[5] All States, liberal-democratic or otherwise, are artificial persons in whom we vest power that has been alienated from natural persons. In Lockean liberal States, that power is limited. In totalitarian States, it aspires to be total. I want to be clear here: the former is vastly preferable to the latter. But, at the same time, I also want to be clear that in both States the political relation remains precisely the same. People are separated from their *kratia*, which is then vested in an artificial person. The liberal-democratic State is an oxymoron. It is not a democracy. It is instead, as Castoriadis (1991: 139, 221) helped us see, properly an *oligarchy*: an arrangement in which the *few* (State officials) rule the *many* (people).

What is to be done?

It is tempting to think that since our natural condition is one in which natural persons are joined with their power, all we need to do is to void or cancel the agreement by which we created the artificial person. We just need to throw an artificial molotov cocktail through its artificial windows, and we will fall back into our original – natural – condition of democracy. Hobbes would argue passionately that such an action would cast us back into the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Of course we could just flip that argument, and say instead that it would be paradise, that we are naturally peaceful and communal and cooperative rather than warlike. It is the monstrous, disembodied body of the State that produces war, and so without the State our condition would be one of prevailing peace.

Neither of these positions gets it right, I think. We are neither wholly warlike nor wholly peaceful. We are fully capable of both war and peace. So our natural condition must be a condition of *both* permanent potential war and permanent potential peace. There is no way to predict what would happen if we cancelled the artificial person. However, what I think we can be confident of is that if we did so quickly, through what we often approvingly call a 'revolution', we would only cast ourselves, often literally overnight, into a condition of having power that we are not used to having, power we have not practised using. In addition, as I will discuss shortly, such a smash-and-cancel imagination is a negative political philosophy that is not consonant with the affirmative political philosophy I think democracy demands.

So I would urge us not to think of democracy as a return to an imagined condition of primordial innocence, one we only need to cancel the artificial person to regain. Nor should we imagine democracy to be a perfect future community at the end of history that we will eventually reach. Rather I think democracy is best imagined as an intentional, productive and perpetual *project* into the future. Democracy is an ongoing political practice, a set of habits, actions, routines, assumptions and norms whose goal is to nurture democracy.

Our desire (and only our desire)

To be more specific, I argue that we should conceive of the project for democracy as a

project to train our *desire* in a particular way. From the perspective of real democracy, our present condition is one of pervading oligarchy because we are subjected to the *potestas* of the State, the Corporation, the Union and so on. But we should not think that we have somehow been thrown into this condition against our will, by an alien, autonomous power that descended from the heavens and started using its own power to control us. Instead, as Hobbes so meticulously shows, we are subjected to the rule of an artificial person that *we created*. We used *our own* artifice to invent it. We contracted with each other. In that contract, we agreed to surrender our power to the artificial person (Hobbes, 1985: Part 1, Chapter 17). It is the product, in other words, of our own desire. We desire to be ruled. We want the artificial person to exist, and we want it to manage our affairs for us. Hobbes is right that we agreed to the artificial person, that we *chose* to surrender our power to it. But he thinks we did so on the horns of a dilemma, because the other alternative was unendurable *bellum*. No. We agreed to be ruled because we desire to be ruled.[6]

This argument sits inside a more general one, the materialist ontological argument that there exists no transcendent, metaphysical realm beyond the concrete, material, experiential world. This was Hobbes' (1985: Part 1, Chapter 1) argument, but it was taken up by Spinoza, then much later by Nietzsche and eventually by Deleuze and Guattari. The political implication of this position is that *we* are the source of all power. All of society is generated by us, by our desire. We are the creators of the artificial person, the State, the Corporation. We desire to be ruled. But we need only to follow this line of thinking just a little further to understand that we also desire democracy. We also desire to retain our power in our own bodies and use it to manage our affairs ourselves. Evidence of this desire is all around us. Even if many aspects of our lives are managed by an artificial person, many more are managed directly by us. There are all sorts of rules, norms, relations and organisations that we work out on our own, without surrendering our power to an artificial person. We desire democracy, even if we also desire to be ruled. Both desires are entirely native to us, appropriate to our bodies. If this is true, then the project of democracy must be a project within our own psyche, a project in which we work on our desire. The project of democracy must declare that the desire for democracy is good for us, the desire that nourishes us, that helps us thrive. Our project must be to affirm and actively nurture our desire for democracy.

The way we do this is by practising democracy. We train our body to become better able to use its power. When we begin our practice, we will quickly realise how inexpert we are, how atrophied our democratic skills are. But our inexpertise should not cause us to think we are incapable of democracy. We should understand, instead, that we need to practise. That practice will quickly develop our skills. We will get steadily better at using our power. Moreover, we will become increasingly aware of what we are capable of, what strengths we have at our disposal. But we must practise. Our powers will only grow strong, and remain strong, if we use them. If we stop using our power, it will atrophy, along with our desire. Democracy urges us to develop the daily habit of managing our affairs for ourselves.

Of course, in democracy this practice is always undertaken together with others. Understanding democracy as a project of our psyche should not tempt us to think it is an individual project, one best undertaken by a Zarathustra who retreats into the hills to increase their excellence. Democracy is always collective. In practising democracy,

we are continually forming a functioning democratic community, a 'we' that is coherent and understands what it shares in common. And, equally, this 'we' understands the ineradicable differences that make it up, and it understands that those differences are just as vital to the community's thriving as its commonalities. I will say more about this question of the 'we' as we proceed.

The collective project of democracy, I argue, must be an affirmative project, a project that says 'yes' to our desire for democracy. That is the only task. This may seem awkward to many, because we are trained – most particularly by Marxism but by much 'critical' thought beyond Marxism – to think in terms of saying 'no'. We are in the habit of thinking that what it means to be politically active – and to be truly radical – is to resist, oppose, negate, cancel, subvert and destroy what we are against. This habit of saying 'no', I argue, is a bad habit. It is what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*, and tried, unsuccessfully, to warn us away from. Negation has only one mode: destruction. It cannot create. It cannot produce the life we want. It can only destroy.

What is more, we cannot destroy our desire to be ruled. It is fully a part of us. We cannot march against it, oppose it, demand it abdicate its authority over our psyche. We cannot deny its existence, and we cannot repress it. All we can do is ignore it. And, more specifically, what we need to do is to pay attention, instead, to our desire for democracy. Occupy ourselves with the project of nourishing and developing that desire. Practise democracy, develop the habit of saying 'yes' to democracy. If we are steadfast in this project, our desire to be ruled will be neglected. It will fall into disuse, atrophy and wither. It will never wither *away*, because it will always be a part of our psyche. But if we are successful in our democratic project, we will look up one day, after years working away diligently at our practice, and realise our desire for democracy is incredibly strong, robust, exercised, capable and healthy. On that day we might also notice, if it occurs to us, that our desire to be ruled is faint, withered and hardly noticeable.[7] At that point, we will be justified in taking a moment to rejoice, because we will have come very far in our project for democracy. And then we will need to get back to work.

Lefebvre's differential space

So, given that way of understanding democracy, how can we think about space, and specifically the production of space, in a way that resonates with democracy? How can democracy be conceived of spatially, and how can space be conceived of democratically? There are many ways to explore those questions, and in what follows I pursue one that I think is particularly fruitful: a close examination of the concept of *differential space* as it appears in the work of Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre does not develop the idea at very great length, and it has not been examined extensively in the secondary literature (although see Andres, 2013; Butler, 2014; Dhaliwal, 2012; Wilson, 2013, and to a lesser extent Leary-Owhin, 2016). Even one of the foremost interpreters of Lefebvre, Edward Soja, in developing his idea of 'the spaces that difference makes' (Soja, 1996: 83–105) does not really engage with the idea. There is definitely a need in the Lefebvre scholarship, therefore, for work that fleshes out this concept more fully. I hope this article makes some contribution in that direction. However, it is not my main aim to explicate the concept of differential space for its own sake. To be sure, I have read Lefebvre's texts closely and make every effort to represent them fairly. But Lefebvre enthusiasts will be disappointed to learn that my main purpose is not to offer an exegesis of Lefebvre's work. It is, instead, to draw out of his work – and from one particular

phase of that work – a concept called differential space, and to interpret that concept in a way that is useful to my project for democracy. I will be rigorous in my interpretation, hewing closely to the text, and, at the same time, I will take his concept some way down a path Lefebvre did not travel himself. It is a path, I hope, that he would have liked.

The project of abstract space

In his well-known work *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) develops an extensive analysis of what he calls 'abstract space', the spatial project that is imposed on society by the dominant powers. During the course of this discussion he also poses, only fleetingly and mostly after page 353, the figure of 'differential space'. In order to grasp his concept of differential space, it is necessary to begin with his idea of abstract space. He wrote the book in France in the 1970s, and so his idea of 'dominant powers' does not merely comprise capitalist class interests, but also what he calls the 'State Mode of Production', or SMP, a regime of control that married a capitalist economy to an interventionist and centralised State, especially in France.[8] In order to establish control over society, he says, the SMP must necessarily impose a spatial order in addition to a social one (Lefebvre, 2009: 186–191). 'Abstract space' is that spatial order, and it manifests as a quantified, rationalised, homogenised space, a space that is oriented towards maximising both the exchange value of space and the production of exchange value in space (Lefebvre, 1991: 296, 306–307).

Lefebvre argues that abstract space is the dominant way we imagine and use space. However, he is also clear that its dominance can never be total. He thinks we should understand abstract space, instead, as a totalising spatial *project* (Lefebvre, 1991: 55, 64, 287; 2003b: 167–168), one that tries to increasingly abstract, quantify and homogenise space in an effort to totalise itself, and totalise the SMP's control over society. If the project can never be complete, of course, then in society there will always remain what he calls 'differences' (Lefebvre, 1991: 370–371), elements that have not been incorporated into the SMP's project of abstract space. He summarises the situation this way:

> [Abstract] space tends towards a unique code, an absolute system, that of exchange and exchange value, of the logical thing and the logic of things. At the same time, it is filled with subsystems, partial codes, messages, and signifiers that do not become part of the unitary procedure that the space stipulates, prescribes, and inscribes in various ways. (Lefebvre, 2003b: 167–168)[9]

Hegelian negation: Counter-space

And so it is against this background of the SMP's totalising project of abstract space, and the differences that escape it, that Lefebvre proposes the figure of 'differential space'. For the most part, differential space is conceived of in the book as an after-effect of the project of abstract space. It is what emerges when abstract space breaks down. This breakdown is the result of abstract space's own internal contradictions. According to this way of thinking, abstract space constitutes the main productive force at work in the production of space. Only abstract space is capable of producing itself. Differential space is produced only in the wake of the failures of abstract space. 'Abstract space carries within itself', he says (Lefebvre, 1991: 52):

> the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space 'differential space', because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards … the elimination of existing differences or

> peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences.

When Lefebvre thinks of differential space in this way, as the negative image of abstract space, he often calls it 'counter-space'. It is the space that opposes abstract space. Any action on the part of people, in this way of thinking, must be negative: they must counter abstract space. If they are successful in their opposition, and abstract space breaks down, differential space can then emerge in the ruins. Lefebvre sketches this agenda on page 383: the State's 'ability to intervene in space can and must be turned back *against* it, by grass-roots *opposition*, in the form of *counter*-plans and *counter*-projects designed to *thwart* strategies, plans and programmes imposed from above' (Lefebvre, 1991: 383; emphasis mine). Lefebvre is an extraordinarily heterodox Marxist, but this way of thinking about differential space is the product of a very orthodox and very Hegelian habit of thought that lingers in Lefebvre's political imagination. This Hegelianism leads him to assign all creativity, production and agency to the SMP and its project. It assumes that the only way to create something other than abstract space is to *cancel* abstract space.[10] It believes in a kind of alchemy: creation by means of destruction. We can only create political change if we counter and destroy the SMP. We can only produce differential space by destroying abstract space.

In this way of thinking, our intellectual and political resources are trained on the act of destruction. Little remains for the project of imagining and producing our own life-in-common. But that latter project is precisely the project of democracy. Democracy is an affirmative political project that starts from the assumption that we are the source of all power, and it affirms that we are fully capable of producing our own life-in-common according to our desire. It turns all energy and attention towards that production. Democracy is not misled by the fantasy of creation-through-destruction. It knows that people are entirely capable of creating new lives on their own, and it urges them to become entirely absorbed in that activity.

Nietzschean production: Differential space

And so the project of democracy has little use for the negative, Hegelian conception of differential space that occupies much of *The Production of Space*. However, another idea of differential space lurks in the book, and it seems to grow stronger as the book progresses. This other idea is inspired much more by Nietzsche than by Hegel, and it is generative of the kind of affirmative political thought that democracy needs.

To understand this differential space well, we have to consider Lefebvre's conception of desire. He argues that we typically conceive of desire as lack, or want, or need. However, he thinks we should understand it as a productive force, a creative power that is able to produce something new, to significantly alter the world as we know it.[11] He distinguishes needs from desire on page 395, arguing that desire 'precedes needs and goes beyond them, [it] is the yeast that causes this rather lifeless dough to rise. The resulting movement prevents stagnation and cannot help but produce differences' (Lefebvre, 1991: 395). Four years earlier, in *The Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre, 2003b: 69), he offered a very similar conception, in which he argued that 'impulse, elan, will, desire, vital energy, drive' are different from and prior to 'needs'.

In this way of thinking, differences are not produced by the breakdown of the SMP. They are produced directly by desire. It is in these later pages that Lefebvre also examines the idea of difference more fully. He argues that difference takes at least three forms: produced, induced and reduced.

Produced differences are differences that are produced directly by desire. These are, he says, the most profound and transformational form of difference (Lefebvre, 1991: 250). Induced differences, on the other hand, are differences generated within the logic of a system of control like abstract space. Induced differences are made to fit within and reinforce the logic of the system. And there are also what he calls reduced differences – differences that have arisen beyond the system of control but have subsequently been 'forced back into the system by constraint and violence' (Lefebvre, 1991: 382), where they are transformed into pseudo-differences that cannot destabilise the system. For Lefebvre, it is only *produced* differences, the differences that are produced directly by desire, that are profoundly dangerous for the system. Because they are a manifestation of the autonomous production of desire, their mere existence necessarily 'presupposes the shattering of a system' (Lefebvre, 1991: 372).[12]

Imagined in this way, in league with an affirmative political philosophy in the manner of Nietzsche, differential space is no longer what results from the cancellation of abstract space. It becomes, instead, space that is properly differential, space that produces differences and produces itself according to its own desire. Differential space understood this way possesses its own *conatus*, its own inner drive to persist and to spread itself into the world. This drive never ceases working. It never ceases generating new spaces. It does not wait for abstract space to contradict itself. It has no need of abstract space. It is a productive, creative and self-generating force that is constantly producing space according to its own desire.

It does so, Lefebvre says, in and through the bodies of those who inhabit space. These inhabitants, or 'users of space' as he often calls them (Lefebvre, 1991: 51, 233, 369, 386), by the very act of living, by persisting in space, are the medium through which differential space produces itself. Their bodies and their lives will never cease producing differences. 'The fleshly body[13] of the living being', he says (Lefebvre, 1991: 396), 'cannot live without generating, without producing, without creating differences. To deny them this is to kill them.' It is precisely among the users of space that 'genuine differences exist, and who at the deepest (unconscious) level seek difference' (Lefebvre, 1991: 380). In this context, we can fully grasp the significance of 'the right to difference' that he advocates here (Lefebvre, 1991: 396), in *The Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre, 2003b: 96, 133) and most fully in 'the new contract of citizenship' (Lefebvre, 2003a). At its core, we can see, a claim to difference is a claim to be able to survive, to persist in space, because in order to survive, inhabitants of space must produce difference. The everyday survival of urban inhabitants is inextricably bound up with the production of differential space.

Of course, once differential space produces differences through the everyday activity of inhabitants, the homogenising project of abstract space will seek to capture these produced differences and turn them into reduced differences. So there is a need for us to understand abstract space and how it works. But that task is secondary. It need not be so lengthy, and so Hegelian, as the one Lefebvre provides in the book. In this way of thinking, the Nietzschean way, abstract space cannot create itself. It cannot create anything at all. It can only *react* to the productive power of differential space. It can only try to channel and control the strength that differential space is constantly discharging into the world. Our relation to abstract space need be only a rearguard action, a periodic warding off of the attempts by abstract space to homogenise and systematise what differential space produces (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This warding off is always secondary, always an afterthought to the

primary activity, which is the self-production of differential space.

The project of democracy, the affirmative project of encouraging our desire to manage our affairs ourselves, resonates strongly with this idea of a self-produced differential space. A properly spatial understanding of the democratic project would urge us to attend very closely to this self-production of differential space. How is differential space being produced in and through the lives and bodies of inhabitants? How are they appropriating that space and seeking to manage it themselves? How are they warding off abstract space in order to allow differential space to flourish?

The production of a particularly urban space

So far, my discussion of democratic space has been about space in general, but readers of *Urban Studies* will rightly ask what role the urban, and urban space, play in democracy. Something like this question has been taken up by many authors in the journal, including Purcell (2006), Heynen (2010), Routledge (2010), Allegra et al. (2013), Caldeira and Holston (2015), Legacy (2016) and Charnock et al. (2021). This work is diverse, but I think what it shares is a conviction that, on some level, the city and the urban are integral to the practice of radical democracy. Here again, I think we are well served by turning to Lefebvre. His analysis of abstract and differential space that we saw above was published in *The Production of Space* (1974), but in *The Urban Revolution* (1970) he makes clear that, for him, the question of the city and the urban is absolutely central to inhabitants' self-production of differential space.

In that book, Lefebvre locates his discussion in the 16th–18th centuries in Europe when the rise of capitalism initiated a very important shift in human settlement patterns: a move away from feudalism, which was a thoroughly *rural* way of life, and towards capitalism, which is a thoroughly *urban* way of life (Lefebvre, 2003b: 11–15). In feudalism, not only did most people live in rural places, but the dominant mode of production was agricultural, and it depended on rural places as productive engines. As capitalism became the dominant economic system in Europe, it changed the productive engine of society away from value produced through agriculture in rural places and towards value produced by large-factory manufacturing in urban places. Just as the rural was integral to the production of value in feudalism, the urban was integral to industrial capitalist accumulation. Capitalism became the dominant productive system in Europe, in short, by urbanising itself and society as a whole.

We might assume that this shift from rural feudalism to urban capitalism is what Lefebvre means by 'the urban revolution', but that is not quite right. In line with most Marxists, he understands capitalism as just one phase in a broad human-historical process. Just as the rural-feudal phase gave way to the urban-industrial-capitalist phase, so too will the urban-industrial-capitalist phase give way to what he conceives as a properly *urban* phase. He thinks this last transformation is already underway, and it is this transformation that comprises, for him, 'the urban revolution' (Lefebvre, 2003b: 5, 28, 89).

Lefebvre never fully discusses the content of this last, post-capitalist-industrial, urban phase. Like Marx, he rarely describes very directly what is to come. He intimates here and there that it will have qualities that Marxists typically imagine to come after capitalism: some form of socialism or communism in which the means of production are held in common, the State is no longer needed, there is broad material equality and so on (Lefebvre, 2003b: 15–19, 142, 169,

179–180). But why does he choose 'the urban' as the name for this phase? Recall that for Lefebvre the SMP can only maintain its power if it can successfully implement the project of abstract space. It must overcode space with forms and content that are appropriate to its logic (Lefebvre, 2003b: 94, 125, 176, 183). 'The urban' makes this project incredibly difficult, Lefebvre thinks, because at its heart the urban is a machine for agglomerating. Its core function is to draw together, assemble and amass (Lefebvre, 2003b: 116, 171). To be sure, it agglomerates capitalist productive power, but it also congregates *desire* and *difference* (Lefebvre, 2003b: 92, 123–131). It draws together inhabitants, bodies, lives, creation and production that are not already part of the regime of abstract space. These bodies are precisely the raw material through which differential space produces itself, and so this drawing together of difference poses a profound threat to the SMP. It creates giant congregations of produced differences, each one of which by its very existence 'presupposes the shattering of a system'. So abstract space is faced with the Herculean task of integrating those amassed differences into its logic. Today, we might think of informal settlements in the global South as an example of such differences, and indeed Lefebvre very much has these in mind in 1970 as well (Lefebvre, 2003b: 32, 146). What is more, Lefebvre (2003b: 117) says, when the urban draws elements of produced difference together in this way, it *amplifies* their force. As they are brought into proximity, they encounter each other, engage with each other, exchange with each other flows of energy and information and strength (Lefebvre, 2003b: 18, 40, 96, 119). As these flows circulate among bodies, they grow stronger in their ability to produce still more difference. As a result, he says, the urban revolution grows increasingly imminent.

In the big picture, then, Lefebvre argues that industrial capitalism's relentless and comprehensive urbanisation simultaneously made it successful *and* sowed the seeds for its own destruction by means of the urban revolution to come. With respect to this article's more specific focus on differential space, what the urban does, according to Lefebvre, is to magnify exponentially the ability of differential space to produce itself. It therefore poses an ever-growing existential threat to the SMP's project of abstract space. The massive and ongoing urbanisation of the industrial-capitalist period has made it almost impossible for abstract space to process, encode and integrate into its schema these great congregations of difference. Moreover, their power to produce themselves grows ever greater as urbanisation continues.

So we can see how the analysis of the urban in *The Urban Revolution* is woven into the discussion of abstract and differential space in *The Production of Space*. The project of attending to and nurturing differential space that I advocate above takes place in the context of a larger historical transition whereby the urban is intensifying the power of differential space by drawing together differences on a massive scale. If the spatial project of democracy is bound up with the production of differential space, then it must also be bound up with the question of the urban and urban space. Democracy becomes, then, the project of urban inhabitants in particular using their power to produce and manage urban space themselves.

Returning to the question of democracy helps us see an important strength of Lefebvre's analysis, as well as an important weakness. The strength is that Lefebvre himself explicitly recognised the radical democratic potential of the city and urban space. He long advocated what he called '*autogestion*', or 'self-management'. Initially this

referred to workers in a factory managing production for themselves, but Lefebvre was keen to broaden the movement beyond the factory and the proletariat to other sites and other oppressed groups, a programme that was often called 'generalised *autogestion*'.[14] In Lefebvre's mind, the city and its inhabitants were a particularly important realm into which *autogestion* should be extended. In *The Urban Revolution*, he calls explicitly for '*autogestion urbaine*' or 'urban self-management' (Lefebvre, 2003b: 150) in which the users of urban space would produce and manage that space themselves. This idea resonates fully with the urban democracy I outline in the previous paragraph.

On the other hand, a weakness of Lefebvre's analysis with respect to democracy is that it runs the risk of seeing the urban agglomeration of differential space as a panacea. Reading Lefebvre, we can be seduced into believing that the urban revolution is already taking place, already coming – on its own – to overwhelm capitalism and institute a new form of life in common. The project of democracy does not think in these terms. It does not point itself towards 'a revolutionary reversal of the upside-down world' (Lefebvre, 2003b: 99, see also 101). It does not expect we will reach, through a long march of historical progress, a breaking point at which our desire to be ruled will collapse and our desire to rule ourselves will take charge. Nothing so dramatic; nothing so historically inevitable. Instead, the project of democracy imagines that we undertake a long-term project to practise democracy in order to augment our desire for democracy. Our desire to be ruled will not collapse in a revolution. It will not be progressively eroded by the forces of history. It will remain very much there, part of us. If our project is successful, our desire to be ruled will atrophy in the very long term, and only as a result of our own efforts.

The project of democracy understands that desire, difference, differential space and the urban to be undetermined. They are other than abstract space, and that is a good thing. But beyond that very low bar, we cannot assume these forces are necessarily good for us (or bad for us). Our desire produces both democracy and the artificial person. Produced differences can be democratic, and they can be non-democratic.[15] The same is true for the urban: it doesn't just draw together the good desires we have, the desires that nourish us. It also draws together our bad desires, the desires that destroy us. Even if an urban revolution were to upend the regime of abstract space in the way Lefebvre envisions, and desire and differential space were able to operate freely, we would still have the same work to do. We would still need to develop our desire for democracy and leave aside our desire to be ruled. We would still need to practise producing and managing urban space ourselves, and refuse to let an artificial person manage urban space on our behalf.

Opening a new horizon: Judith Butler's precarious life

So we have come some way down the path, having constructed a detailed conception of the project of democracy, and also a robust spatial-and-urban sensibility through which we can undertake that project. But that statement immediately raises a question, one that lies at the very heart of the democratic project: who are 'we'? And who, by contrast, are 'they'? Having read our Hobbes, we can say that at the most abstract level 'we' is comprised of all natural persons, and it excludes the artificial person. This distinction is important, but it is not enough. Lefebvre helps us to go a bit further. If we imagine democracy to be the project of an urban-and-spatial democracy, we understand the 'we' to

be comprised of urban inhabitants, the users of urban space. Inhabitants live in space, and so their bodies and lives are at stake in the production of urban space. It is their everyday acts of survival in and through which differential space is produced. Inhabitants are, then, the subjects of urban democracy. They are the 'we' who engages in the project of managing the production of urban space.

But that specification doesn't close the question. The democratic 'we' must remain perpetually open and subject to negotiation. As the bodies and lives of inhabitants are drawn together by the urban into increasingly intensive encounters, exchanges and engagements, they will find themselves continually re-asking the question of the 'we', and continually proposing answers. They might understand that they share a dependence on urban space for their survival, and share a desire to manage it themselves. But they will quickly realise that despite that shared dependence, they also differ distinctly, that they do not all inhabit urban space in the same way. It is at this point, I think, that Lefebvre becomes less useful. He offers less insight on how inhabitants are differentiated. Although he writes extensively about difference, he understands it to be primarily a condition of differing from the homogenising plan of abstract space. In his work, inhabitants themselves are largely non-specific 'users of space'. They differ from the *owners* of space, but they appear largely indistinct among themselves. When they make their appearance in his texts, they are usually seen as a mass, 'the masses', homogeneous (Lefebvre, 1991: 380).

One easy objection would be to say that in Lefebvre's mind inhabitants are all French-and-male-Parisians, and nowadays, we know, cities are more diverse. Maybe. But I think there is a more trenchant way to think difference among inhabitants, one that is provided by the political philosophy of Judith Butler (especially 2004, 2015). Butler's thought resonates greatly with Lefebvre's, because like him she puts the question of the persistence and survival of bodies at the centre of her politics. But she develops this argument much more fully. She begins by establishing something that is irrevocably common among bodies: they are all exposed to harm and death. Our bodily exposure to violence and death is, philosophically speaking, the *presupposed* condition of our lives (Butler, 2004: xvii, 19, 31, 42; 2015: 21, 150). This condition is unavoidable, permanent and universal. In order to deal with it, she says, we develop a complex web of relationships with others in order to support our survival (Butler, 2004: 45). She calls this web an 'infrastructure', an unseen structure of relations that lies underneath our lives and supports them so that they can continue (Butler, 2015: 21, 150). The bodily survival of each one of us, in other words, is dependent on this web of relations with others. This is another, related condition we all share and which we cannot escape: we *need* others. We literally cannot live without them (Butler, 2004: 23).

Butler does not explore the question of space extensively in her work,[16] and so Lefebvre can offer value to her thinking because he allows us to understand her 'infrastructure' as an explicitly urban and spatial entity. Since bodily survival is bound up with the production of differential urban space, as Lefebvre shows, Butler's infrastructure is necessarily shot through with the politics of the production of differential space, and the two phenomena need to be understood to be always in relation. But still more urgent, I think, is to grasp the value that Butler adds to Lefebvre, which is her understanding of the foundational importance of difference in the relations between inhabitants. Even though they share a presupposed vulnerability to death, she argues, the bodies of inhabitants are not all exposed to death to the same degree. In any given

society, some bodies are more vulnerable to harm and death than others. Some lives, in other words, are more 'precarious' than others (Butler, 2004: 20, 30, 32). Therefore, even though all inhabitants depend on the production of differential urban space for their survival, that dependence differs meaningfully within the community because some inhabitants' lives are more precarious.

Butler is a political philosopher who poses these questions in the abstract. But of course there are many ways to think concretely about how the precariousness of lives differs. In the foreground of her book, published in 2005, is the acute exposure to harm and death faced by inhabitants of countries where the United States waged its 'war on terror' most fiercely. Another example always in Butler's mind is the greater precariousness of the lives of women and LGBTQ + people (Butler, 2004: 20, 35). Women are exposed to violent harm that men are not. Queer people are exposed to violent harm that straight people are not. And the difference is even more trenchant than that: women are exposed to that violence *because they are women*. Queer people are exposed to that violence *because they are queer*. Those in the United States, particularly in 2020 as I write, might think of the greater precarity of Black bodies and lives because of their far greater exposure to State violence.[17] And just one last example: in post-industrial capitalist societies, some are far more exposed to unemployment, debt, hunger and homelessness than others. This differential exposure has become so acute that critical scholars have widely adopted the new term 'precariat' to describe those so exposed.

Butler's intervention improves tremendously our ability to navigate the question of the democratic 'we'. Every democratic 'we', every community of inhabitants that undertake the urban-and-spatial project of democracy, must necessarily assemble into a shared-and-differentiated 'we'. They must share an exposure to bodily harm and death, and therefore an utter dependence on each other for their bodily survival. But they will also be significantly differentiated with respect to the precariousness of that survival (Butler, 2004: 23–27). How then should the 'we' negotiate this situation? How should inhabitants imagine, produce and practise a democratic 'we'? How should members of the 'we' engage with each other in their project of democracy?

Butler argues that we should understand these engagements in terms of a Levinasian ethics of interpellation (Butler, 2004: 128–151). For Levinas, she says, the foundational moment of ethics is an interpellation from the Other. An interpellation is a call, or plea, or even a demand made by one person to another.[18] 'The Other' in Levinas is a representation of a non-specific other person. In its interpellation, the Other says to me 'don't kill me' or 'I am dying'. The Other calls on me, in other words, to help it survive. Butler emphasises that we do not invite this interpellation. It does not come to us in response to something we have said. It comes to us, as far as we can tell, from out of the blue (Butler, 2004: 30–31, 139). We cannot control whether or when it comes, and in fact for Levinas we have no right, ethically speaking, to control it. Any of us can be interpellated at any time by any other person with whom we are in community – others on whom we are dependent and who are dependent on us. What we *can* control is how we respond to this interpellation. In Levinas' baseline example, I am asked by the Other to *not kill* the Other. I must choose, therefore, whether or not to kill the Other. Levinas says I will want both to kill the Other and to preserve the Other's life, and I must choose which of these conflicting desires I will act on (Butler, 2004: 136–138).

And so the basic relation to others, for Butler (2004: 129), is 'a mode of response

that follows upon having been addressed, a comportment towards the Other only after the Other has made a demand on me'. This philosophical abstraction of interpellation can take many concrete forms. Because all lives are precarious and we are thus dependent on others for our survival, such interpellations, such appeals to others, happen continually. Again, I am writing in the United States in 2020, and so at the front of my mind is the movement whose name is a Levinasian interpellation: Black Lives Matter. The movement is complex, but at its root is an interpellation to American society, but particularly to White Americans: 'black lives do not currently matter as much as white lives in this country as it is currently and historically structured, and we need to change our society, quite radically, such that black lives come to be valued – to matter – just as much as white lives'. White America cannot choose whether or not to be interpellated by this appeal. However, as evidenced by the range of responses to it, each person, and White Americans as a group, can choose to respond in different ways to the interpellation: accept it, deride it, redirect it and so on.

So this Levinasian relation of interpellation-and-ethical-response, though intended as a model for ethics strictly speaking, is also a model for the relations we have in any community. We are not free to choose *whether* we are in community with others, and we are not free to choose whether we will be interpellated by others in that community. We are free, however, to choose how we will respond. In the project of democracy, when 'we' take our affairs into our own hands, we are entering into a shared community that is made up of differences. The project of democracy will always involve forming, negotiating and caring for this community. There is no sovereign authority that will force this to happen. We must do it. We must voice the interpellations, and we must choose how to respond to them.

The uncertain road ahead

And, more generally, that is the challenge of democracy: there are no guarantees. There is no authority that will enforce a particular set of relations between the 'we', or ensure particular outcomes like equality, or peace, or justice. When inhabitants take up the project of managing the production of urban space themselves, and they necessarily also begin forming and re-forming an urban-democratic 'we', they must decide themselves what kind of a life in common they want, and they must construct that life through their own efforts. It is understandable to object here, with Hobbes, that we are incapable of creating a successful community on our own, that we need a State to make us do it. But the democratic response to this objection is that we are not necessarily either capable or incapable of managing our affairs ourselves. We are, instead, more or less out of practice, more or less in the habit of managing our affairs. The more we practise democracy, the more capable we become. We need to practise. When we do, we will encounter each other, meet each other body-to-body and engage with each other meaningfully with important questions at stake. This practice is precisely the kind of activity that fosters the relations of interpellation-and-response that Butler calls for. Moreover, those same relations are what the urban accelerates through its primary activity of drawing together difference in space.

Democracy is not a panacea; it is a project. This article has conceived of that project as one in which we develop our desire for democracy by practising democracy, a practice that necessarily involves the production

of differential urban space by inhabitants, in the context of worldwide urbanisation, with the relations between inhabitants in community guided by an ethics of interpellation-and-response. I think that understanding is a good beginning. It points to a way forward. But we need to start practising, start moving along the path, because we still have very far to go.

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Notes

1. I am using this term quite broadly to mean a wide range of traditions of radical political thought and action, including communism, feminism, queer theory, black radicalism, anarchism and maybe also some Marxism.
2. Those few readers who are really interested in the details of this shift could see Purcell (2019).
3. Always with its capital 'S', to remind us of the figure of the Leviathan, looming over the town.
4. On which, see Holland (1998).
5. There are so many examples. Here is one: *The Economist* (2019) recently asked, for example: 'Are Western democracies becoming ungovernable?' The article is in fact about liberal-democratic States in Europe, like Spain, France and Italy.
6. In his Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault (1977: xiii) calls this desire 'the fascism in us all'.
7. I hope it is clear how very different this project is from one that starts by smashing the State and falling back down into a state of nature without having done any of this work. We would be left Stateless, but with a very strong desire to be ruled, and a very weak desire for democracy. That path would be very short, almost certainly bloody, and it would end with us clamouring to have our State back.
8. He works this concept out most fully in his *De L'Etat* series (Lefebvre, 1976), and also in 'The State in the Modern World' (Lefebvre, 2009: 95–123). See also Brenner and Elden's excellent exegesis in Lefebvre (2009: 1–48). He does not name the SMP as such in *The Production of Space*, but his thinking in that book, published just before *De L'Etat*, is virtually identical.
9. The quote is taken from *The Urban Revolution*, published four years earlier in 1970, but it nicely captures the dynamic as he presents it in *The Production of Space*.
10. Hegel's word is *Aufheben*, which is famously complex. Marx (1994: 69), in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, uses the form *aufgehoben* to describe communism as the state that results from private property *having been overcome*.
11. Readers of Deleuze and Guattari's (1977) *Anti-Oedipus* will certainly recognise this way of thinking about desire.
12. On the question of difference in Lefebvre, see also Butler (2014: 152–156).
13. This odd term 'fleshly body' is a nod to Nietzsche's concerted attack on Kant's metaphysics, wherein Nietzsche insists that we stop theorising an 'intellectual world' that does not exist, and turn our attention instead to the 'sensible world', the world of concrete experiences of the 'fleshly' body, because that is the only world that exists. In Kant's intellectual world, we seek to know the abstracted form of a thing, the thing-in-itself. In the sensible world, we must understand a thing by its attributes, by the concrete ways that thing is used. It is this concrete *use* that Agamben, also mining a

Nietzschean vein of thought, identifies as a source of hope, as a property of a body that can never be abstracted, and so cannot be appropriated and monetised by capital. This use is the particular focus of his *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben, 2015) but it is, in the end, what the whole *Homo Sacer* series is trying to make it possible to imagine.

14. Vaneigem (1974) was another major thinker along these lines, as were the Italian autonomists in the 1970s.
15. Here I would point out that in 2020, all over the world, many were expressing a strong desire to surrender their power to authoritarian demagogues, in a way that both loudly rejects the established logic of the capitalist world order and is nevertheless entirely opposed to the project of democracy.
16. Although see Butler (2015: 126–127)!
17. Among other harm.
18. Probably better to put down the Althusser and just listen to the Latin: an interpellation is a call or appeal (*appellare*) that runs in between (*inter*) two people.

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