Right(s) to the City in Hanoi

The Emergence of Civil Society and its Multiple Aspirations

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Over the past decade, urban change has accelerated and transformed the physical, social and symbolic landscapes of Hanoi. Taking as her starting point a survey in the Vietnamese capital, Divya Leducq identifies three key means in which residents express their right to the city which, in a context of multiple aspirations, reflect a shared desire for high-quality urban planning.

In recent years, urban transformation processes advocated by proponents of "top-down" planning built around neoliberal practices have, somewhat paradoxically, led to the production of new spaces for everyday living and diverse forms of expression of the "right to the city" (RTTC) (Lefebvre 1968; Harvey 2011; Soya 2010). This article presents some of the different strategies, struggles, and contradictions of RTTC in Hanoi, through the lens of citizen-led approaches (Mitchell 2003) that seek to take over (or take back) and (re)appropriate social space. Evoking the right to the city in this way, in an authoritarian context where civil society is weak and any sort of challenge to the established order restricted, may seem perilous; it is difficult to use the concept of RTTC to describe a "communist" country in transition, where enrichment and the market economy seem to promise everyone the opportunity to improve their situation. In Vietnam, there is no legal codification of such a right, nor even a ministry of the city, but simply a ministry of construction that oversees urban planning agencies such as the Hanoi Urban Planning Institute. Public meetings to inform residents about ongoing projects are not arenas for confrontation; exceptions to this general rule are extremely rare.

And yet the unprecedented urban growth and reorganization of the Vietnamese capital has led to the development of new spontaneous and informal social relations that have come about during protests against development projects or when such projects have been implemented. These new forms of participation no longer seem to come from the traditional neighborhood associations closely linked to the People's Committee (an administrative body, elected at the level of the city-province of Hanoi, in charge of public policies and projects). As Morange and Spire (2014) have shown, the emergence of civil society in "a post-colonial urban context specific to the Global South" (*op. cit.*) raises the question of a "polysemic RTTC," commensurate with urban diversity. This article is based on field data collected in Hanoi between 2012 and 2018, through site observations, semi-directive interviews, urban planning workshops, and two completed doctoral research projects (Tran Hai 2016; Tran Dinh 2015) that collected a complete range of material from residents, planners and architects, activists, and public and private decision-makers. The urban experiences of RTTC in Hanoi can be understood not as a revolutionary act but as a progressive awareness of the right to enjoy and act for a dignified urban space, accessible to all, and in favour of high-quality urban planning reflecting a "right to urban life" as proposed by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968).

In this article, I do not therefore consider RTTC as a stable notion that is actively sought by its protagonists, but rather as an analytical instrument that might be used describe the various mobilizations of city dwellers that aims to guarantee their access to the city as a collective framework.

Urban tensions

Vietnam reflects increasingly urbanized global societies: the proportion of its population considered urban for statistical purposes has increased from 19% to 35% in 30 years. Over this period, the size and importance of the country's two major cities—Ho Chi Minh City (population 13 million) and Hanoi (population 7.5 million) has increased accordingly (World Bank 2018). The growth of the city-province of Hanoi illustrates two processes underlying urbanization identified by Lefebvre (1968): on the one hand, the accumulation of capital related to the establishment of industries and services in the city after the country was opened up to the market economy (1986); on the other, the joint production of the city by many local real-estate groups (both state-owned and private) and international private groups, mainly from Japan, Singapore and Malaysia.

In this way, the city of Hanoi is gradually transforming itself into a monetary value, which presents multiple challenges for planners, and just as many problems for its inhabitants: anomic sprawl and a fragmentation of the population towards new urban developments still lacking basic infrastructure; the eviction of poor populations from the historic center of the city, to make way for the more affluent classes; an implosion of the urban forms of the traditional Vietnamese city; and land-related tensions in a context of strategic planning and urban development that is still very largely functionalist. At the same time, the new "urban conditions"—to use a Lefebvrian term—of the Vietnamese capital, which is being transformed "as events unfold and reconfigure," reveal the limits of this urbanization and the need for the demands of a RTTC shared by all (Harvey 2011).

Multiple, complex and evolving claims to the right to the city

Our fieldwork identified three types of expression of RTTC in Hanoi, which fluctuate between avoidance, transformation, and resilience. These multiple mobilizations occur in day-to-day life, calling for "rights to the city" with varied political content, and sometimes come up against new contradictions.

Mobilization. Hanoi is being rapidly transformed, in accordance with a functionalist model that gives priority to urban development built around vast infrastructures. For example, the construction of the city's first three metro lines is profoundly changing the urban landscape, leading residents and activists to protest regularly against the destruction of the city's traditional elements, including trees. Indeed, the protection of the natural environment was one of the demands of the first large-scale citizen demonstration (in 2015) against government plans to arbitrarily cut down 6,700 trees for the construction of an elevated metro line (Ngoc 2017). This demonstration led the urban authorities to rethink the initial project and slightly modify the route of the metro line, so that as many existing trees as possible would be preseved and those unavoidably felled would be replaced by new plantings.

Other forms of mobilization also exist. We considered the example of working-class and lower-income populations, who, if they are able to access homeownership, can often only afford properties in large, low-cost housing developments plagued by problems related to noncompliance with existing planning laws. The case of HH, a public–private complex in Linh Đàm Lake, located in the first ring of suburbs south of Hanoi (25,000 inhabitants in 8,000 housing units), is a good illustration of this (Figure 1). Inhabitants have come together to form a residents'-rights association in order to present a united front against the company that developed and manages the complex, HUD, and demand a right to safe housing (compliance with fire standards) and access to running

drinking water, green spaces (14 m² per resident was planned, but in practice less than 3 m² per resident was delivered), and local shops and services (which were supposed to occupy the lower four floors of each of the 12 residential towers, but were ultimately sacrificed to enable the development of more housing). No positive solutions appear to have been provided in response to these requests. The impossibility of gaining access to the promises of a spectacular and attractive metropolitan project merely accentuates the disappointment of the populations who are excluded from it.

Figure 1. Residential public space sacrificed for power-grid handling facilities (Linh Đàm, Hanoi)

Source: Divya Leducq, March 2018.

Adaptation. In this way, metropolization brings its share of disillusionment and discontent to Hanoi. First, small-scale street traders, whose ordinary practices are part of urban life (Gibert 2014), are being evicted from the "revitalized" spaces of downtown Hanoi, from major thoroughfares, and from areas in the process of becoming heritage neighborhoods, residential zones or "tourist districts." These evictions deprive street vendors of their already low incomes. Moreover, the regulation of itinerant trade by local authorities is excludeing them from public spaces. As a result, Hanoians are witnessing the sidelining of the street as a fundamental element in the constitution of urban sociability linked to spontaneous forms of consumption that are, to a greater or lesser degree, itinerant (tea vendors, barbers, shoeshiners).

Figure 2. Street traders in front of signs promoting new real-estate projects (Giảng Võ, Hanoi)

Source: Divya Leducq, modified by Quoc Dat Nguyen, March 2018.

Poor tenants and landowners in the central districts of Hoàn Kiếm, Hai Bà Trưng, and Đống Đa constitute another population group that is increasingly being excluded from a metropolis undergoing reconfiguration. The Hanoi People's Committee has the dual objective of reducing urban density and improving living conditions, while making room for the construction of new housing and infrastructure projects in the downtown area. This policy is reflected in major demolition-and-rebuilding operations, made possible by buyout, pre-emption, and expropriation processes. Whether such moves are voluntary or forced, residents are relocated to monofunctional residential areas on the outer edges of the metropolis, without access to the city owing to the lack of public transportation and with a consequent decrease in their remaining income. The adaptation of these new residents to their spatial and functional marginalization is expressed in a variety of ways. In Việt Hưng, new residents aggrieved by the lack of accessible and affordable food shops have begun to cultivate their own vegetable gardens on public spaces whose landscaping has yet to be completed, 36 months after their arrival.

Negotiation. Far from being homogeneous, Hanoi is a city where new contradictions are expressed and where negotiations between the private, public and voluntary sectors, depending on different social groups' goals, can be interpreted in terms of RTTC. For example, the upper middle classes who aspire to live according to international standards embrace "Hanoi 2030 Vision 2050," a political project to transform Hanoi into a global city that encourages the development of quasi-gated private residential condominiums (e.g. Times City, Ciputra, Ecopark) for the privileged classes, in a break with the co-spatiality that formerly characterized the city. These urban projects promoting separation and self-segregation form part of the dynamics opposed to RTTC, as defined by Lefebvre. However, the rationalist and homogeneous forms of urban development provided for by "Hanoi 2030 Vision 2050" have not proved fully satisfactory for the privileged residents of these new residential complexes either, who complain of a dilution of social ties. They have therefore adapted them to foster more collective practices—for example, by creating informal shared spaces (gardens) or by obtaining a common room for collective celebrations, informal meetings, and family events, after having made the request at a meeting of the homeowners who co-manage their building. This type of mobilization can be interpreted as an aspiration to a shared urban collective.

Figure 3. When local agriculture once again becomes a necessity (Việt Hưng, Hanoi)

Source: Dung Tien Nguyen, modified by Divya Leducq, March 2018.

Accordingly, a number of negotiations under way in Hanoi can be understood within the analytical framework of RTTC—for example, those between city dwellers calling for more free, secure, and open public spaces and urban authorities anxious that their urban transformation projects be approved. A negotiated RTTC, between urban authorities, developers and urban dwellers, has resulted, for example, in the assertion of a right to play outside, and led to a search for suitable spaces, as reflected in the initiatives of the association Thinkplayground (Laurent-Allard and Labbé 2017). It is also illustrated in the expression of a right to walk in the context of using public amenities. For instance, the pedestrianization of Hoàn Kiếm Lake at weekends, from Friday evening to Sunday evening, implemented by the Hanoi People's Committee in September 2016, reflects a successful form of top-down planning that corresponds to the wishes and needs expressed by residents. However, the Hanoi People's Committee sometimes implements contradictory projects: on the one hand it seeks to create a recreational urban atmosphere for all in downtown areas, while on the other it encourages investors to build large shopping malls in the more or less distant suburbs (e.g. Big C, Savico, Royal City Vincom Megamall, Aeon Mall Long Biên).

Concrete aspects of RTTC and the allegory of another means of producing the city

Beyond the variety of its forms, RTTC as it is in the process of "manifesting itself" in Hanoi invites us to rethink notions of urban and everyday life (Carlos 2012). First of all, bringing the concept of RTTC to the Vietnamese capital confirms how important it is to apprehend dynamic processes in order to understand how inequalities of access and ownership of the city are increasing: the contradiction between downtown and outlying areas, the lack of suitable infrastructure, and so on. Second, the multiple forms that RTTC takes—from resourcefulness and adaptation to street

protests—tend to demonstrate the widespread expression of a right to take the initiative to improve one's living conditions. These forms of RTTC are, in fact, quite similar to the conventional requests made of new developments: accessible urban resources—housing, mobility, and amenities—and a livable environment. Finally, these various implementations of RTTC reveal their ambition to create new, alternative, utopian urban commons at the heart of a changing urban and environmental reality. In conclusion, the right to the city in Hanoi paves the way for "two concrete fields of possibilities" that are fundamental and universal: the right to renewed dialogue between government(s), practitioner(s), and inhabitant(s), and the right to remodel space according to a shared and co-designed vision of a city in the making.

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