From a/topia to toopia: Towards a gendered right to the city for migrant volunteers in London

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A B S T R A C T

The paper makes use of an un-orthodox Lefebvrian formulation of the ‘right to the city’ as it adds the gender dimension which was absent from Lefebvre's work. The lens of ‘gendered right to the city’ (Doderer, 2003; Fenster, 2005; Vacchelli, 2014) is used in order to understand the experiences of volunteers working in the women's community and voluntary sector in London. We look specifically at the role of migrant organisations both as places of co-option of migrant labour, as places that enable the integration of migrants and make their participation in the urban fabrics possible, and as places that are appropriated by migrant volunteers in London as a means of enacting active citizenship.

London's governance, policy discourses and practices seek to impose a top-down idea of civic participation. In this vision, the role of migrant groups and organisations can only be valued in the context of an active civil society, able to replace the vacuum left by the progressive erosion of the welfare state, leading to a crisis of social reproduction. Lefebvre's theoretical framework of ‘space appropriation’ serves as a way to explore these questions and we propose a further spatial reading which is specific to a gendered right to the city, i.e. the shift from a/topia (not having a space or being denied access to public spaces broadly conceived) to toopia. We speculate on what this newly found space looks like and what is its potential for the subversion of top-down policy discourses on civic participation in the neoliberal city.

1. Introduction

This paper offers a reading of everyday citizenship enacted by migrant women who work in the voluntary and community sector in London, based on secondary research and our experience of conducting work in this field in the last few years (Vacchelli, 2015; Vacchelli, Kathrecha, & Gyte, 2015).1 It interrogates bottom-up civic participation of migrant women volunteering in third sector organisations in the context of London's governance and discourses. Our reading is based on the work on urban space by the French scholar Henri Lefebvre. One of the central tenets of his theorisation on space is that (social) space is a (social) product. The Production of Space constitutes an attempt to combine all possible forms of space production and appropriation, from abstract to material ones, and represents Lefebvre's effort to theorise space by adopting a western European perspective situated in (and critical of) capitalism. David Harvey (2012), for instance, ascribes the 'Right to the city' to the kind of 'collective rights' opposed to individualistic rights and those based on private property. He does that in the frame of a renewed interest for the work on Henri Lefebvre and the emergence of social movements all over the world which claim a 'right to the city'. Harvey (2012) argues that the right to the city is much more than an individual access to a given set of urban resources: it is a right to change and re-invent the city as exemplified by the collective endeavours of activist groups trying to resist to neoliberal urbanisation processes.

The notion of the right to participation is strictly interconnected with appropriation as this is the right to make decisions concerning the production of urban space at different governmental scales and along different intensities of the privatised market and public provisions. Appropriation does not only refer to a natural occupation of goods in a Marxian sense but to an activity which is first and foremost spatial, taking place in space and with space. Appropriation is key to Lefebvre's theorisation given the fact that the right to the city is not grounded in normative notions of citizenship but rather in 'inhabitation', so that any

1 From a methodological point of view, this paper o...
urban dweller, strangers and citizens, can enjoy such a right. Appropriation therefore refers to the right of any city dwellers to use, live in, play, consume, work and occupy urban space as they deem appropriate (Purcell, 2002). We use Lefebvre's theoretical framework of ‘space appropriation’ as a starting point to propose a further spatial reading which is specific to a gendered right to the city, i.e. the shift from a/to/posia (not having a space or being denied access to public spaces broadly conceived) to topos (having a space in the public domain). As it will become evident in the paper, this describes a specifically gendered process of space appropriation given the fact that women’s work has often been traditionally linked to the private sphere and particularly to care work.

Social relations that are created by production forces, everyday social practices, different technologies and products of knowledge, as well as social structures and institutions need to take into account issues of difference including ethnic, gender and cultural diversity and the role these differences play in the active articulation of different forms of belonging (Fenster, 2005). In particular, Yuval-Davis (2007) stresses the saliency of looking at the ‘effects of intersecting social divisions on constructions of multi-layered citizenships (…)’ (Yuval-Davis, 2007: 7), multi-layered citizenship being defined by Yuval-Davis as a layering of positionalities in ‘local, ethnic, national, state, cross- or trans-state and supra-state’ locations (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 119). This intersectional perspective of a gendered citizenship, analysed in relation to identity and related emotions, notably allows her to further problematise politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2007). We argue that an intersectional approach to gendering citizenship is necessary in order to understand migrant and refugee women experiences of bottom-up civic participation in London and aim at considering ethnicity and culture as further layers to our understanding of the right to the city.

The gendered right to the city is a call for radical restructuring of social, political and economic relations, both in the city and beyond. It cries for a shift of control away from state and capital and towards urban inhabitants. This paper aims at unpacking the question ‘how would the right to the city challenge, complement or replace current rights or lack thereof?’ It makes use of an un-orthodox Lefebvrian formulation of the ‘right to the city’ as it adds the gender dimension which was absent from Lefebvre’s original work. The first part of the article proposes a specifically gendered and feminist idea of the right to the city. The second part of the article discusses the top-down governance discourse on the role of migrant and refugee organisations in London. It highlights how migrant women working within the voluntary and community sector fall below the radar of public provisions and policy guidelines yet can be understood as an applied example of bottom-up space appropriation for a specifically gendered right to the city.

2. Where is gender in the ‘right to the city’?

The right to the city in a gendered perspective tends to be conceptualised in terms of safety in urban environments in relation to the dangers some urban spaces present to the personal safety of women. This includes public infrastructures and transportation which again the dangers some urban spaces present to the personal safety of women.

Kye Askins (2016) develops the idea of ‘emotional citizenry’ by looking at the role of emotions during intercultural encounters in the context of befriending services in the North East of England. She argues for an open and inclusive idea of citizenship where social justice for asylum seekers and refugees is not depoliticised. On the contrary, she contends that everyday and personal relations need to be re-politicised and understood as broader state politics taking place at the local scale of the neighbourhood.

Other scholars used the work of Lefebvre (1968, 1991) to engage with daily practices that produce space (Doderer, 2003; Marston & Smith, 2001; Simonsen, 2005; Vacchelli, 2014) despite the fact that Lefebvre himself had neglected a specifically gendered perspective in his theorisations. However the fascination with the work of Lefebvre stems from the fact that his work demonstrates how the production of space serves as a power base for certain actions and is principally a means of control and domination that inevitably contributes to exclude some citizens to the advantage of others (Soja, 1996).

In this paper we understand migrant organisations where refugee and migrant women are trying to gain access to paid work as a/to/posia spaces. As highlighted by Martin (2014) looking at the case of Chicago, organisations where migrant women volunteers work on a daily basis are ‘spaces of hidden labour’. Their invisibility lies in the fact that migrant women’s work as volunteers does not figure in official statistics, it is not valued by funders and to some extent only employers directly benefit from it. Given the resonance of this fact with decades of feminist debate about private versus public space as respectively feminine and masculine spaces (Barrett & Phillips, 1992; Landes, 1998; McDowell, 1983, 1999; Moller-Okin, 1998; Rose, 1993; Spain, 1992; Terlinden, 2003; Vacchelli, 2008; Watson, 2002), adding a specific definition such as ‘a/toposa’ to illustrate the lack of access to the public space for migrant women working in the voluntary and community sector seems particularly appropriate in order to gender the debate on space appropriating in the neoliberal city.

3. Migrant women volunteering in third sector organisations: a crisis of social reproduction?

The volunteer work of migrant and refugee women in community organisations, that we explore in the context of London can also be inscribed in the broader debate of the current crisis of social reproduction (Brown, Dowling, Harvie, & Millburn, 2013; Kofman, 2012; Martin, 2010, 2014) where gaps in reproductive labour have been created in the last few decades by a combination of parallel processes that have involved changes in the way family and work-life balance are organised and women’s increased mobility in the workforce (Truong, 1996; Kofman, 2012). In this context, the changes in reproductive labour of healthier professional women have in turn shaped the ability for different categories of migrants to reproduce their own families and have created an increased interdependence between the social reproduction needs of global middle class women and usually racialized, poorer migrant women whose ability to migrate as low-skilled migrants is increasingly restricted.

A number of studies looking at the issue of migrant women in the UK have paid particular attention to domestic labour, care work and family migration (Anderson, 2015; Kofman, 2012; Reynolds & Zontini, 2013; Zontini, 2012). Beyond reproductive labour in the household, the private and the volunteer and community sector have been identified as other key sites of social reproduction. The prevalence of women’s migrant labour in these sites varies according to different welfare regimes (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015). Migrant women’s reproductive activities play an increasing role in the provision of care within European countries’ so called ‘care-regimes’, specifically with regards to childcare and eldercare in both the private and public sector (Da Roit & Weicht, 2013). The key contribution of this paper to the existing literature of social reproduction and women migrant labour is our
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