

Tomorrow: What, How, Where is Self-Management?

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When in 1986 Henri Lefebvre, along with architects Pierre Guilbaud and Serge Renaudie took part in the Competition for the Urban Restructuring of New Belgrade in Yugoslavia, he based the theoretical exposé of their proposal around the notion of self-management [*samoupravljajnje*], which had been the determining trait of Yugoslav socialism ever since the 1948 break between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. As someone who had, at the time the Competition took place, been writing on and researching self-management [*autogestion*] for at least twenty years, Lefebvre, who had high hopes for it in the sixties, was well aware of the contradictions and inconsistencies Yugoslav *samoupravljajnje* had shown in the meantime. Indeed, already in a 1978 interview, he said: “I am talking about the failure of centralized planning in the Soviet Union as well as the failures of autogestion in Yugoslavia [...] The movement comes from below or it does not come at all. The example of Yugoslavia leads us [as well to that] conclusion. A state that proclaims autogestion from above paralyzes it by this mere fact and converts it into its opposite.”¹ Still, in the competition proposal, he bases the potentiality for the urban revolution and of New Belgrade in the very concept of self-management. This, of course, was not due to some naïveté, but rather, because Lefebvre recognized that, even though often employed as a top-down tool by instances of power, *samoupravljajnje* still, at some scale, existed as a truly lived (everyday) practice.

This theoretical basis of the proposal, detailed in the introduction of the submission, is one of Lefebvre’s many writings on self-management. Anchored in his previous writings on space—especially *The Right to The City*—this detailed essay is considered

to be one of the most concrete instances of making his theory viable to architectural design. In it, with the concept of ‘new citizenship,’ Lefebvre reiterates and expands on aspects of the right to the city he conceptualized in the late sixties and in the aftermath of the Paris 1968 protests. This text envisions the right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit, to the *œuvre*, to participation and appropriation, and the right to urban life, to be continuously transformed and renewed.² Furthermore, it establishes an understanding of the urban life and the urban society which to a great extent connects with Lefebvre’s concurrent writings on *autogestion*. This connection goes well beyond and much deeper than his direct call for *autogestion* and an urbanism oriented towards social needs³ as part of an economic, political, and cultural revolution in the final chapter of *The Right to the City*. Just before that call, Lefebvre writes that “the right to the city represents at one and the same time a means and an end, a way and a horizon: but this virtual action of the working class also represents the general interests of civilization and the particular interests of all social groups of ‘inhabitants’...”⁴

This comes very close to Lefebvre’s writings about *autogestion* just some years earlier, in *Theoretical Problems*, where he describes it as a means of struggle and a means of reorganization of society, i.e. the goal of that very struggle.⁵ If for Lefebvre the right to the city — both a cry and a demand — wasn’t a right to the basic needs, but rather a specific urban quality, encompassing access to the resources of the city for all of population, and the possibility of experimenting with and realizing alternative ways of life, it was very closely connected to his conceptualizations of *au-*



Self-management is inseparable from space—as perpetual struggle, it questions, reappropriates, and ultimately does away with the reproductions of space coming from Power.
Photo courtesy Srdan Mitrović, mid-1970s, via Stare Slike Novog Beograda.

togestion, even though the latter was, in his texts of 1966 and 1968, still almost exclusively pertinent to socio-economic principles. Indeed, Lefebvre would soon, in *The Urban Revolution* (1970), reiterate the revolutionary potentiality of this intertwining of the struggle for the right to the city and the principle of *autogestion*, describing a political strategy based around a generalized self-management [*autogestion generalisée*], and examining the conditions of its possible translation into the sphere of urban space, from that of the industrial. In 1986, with the Proposal for New Belgrade, he would go on to further expand on such a potentiality: in the project proposal, Lefebvre, via *autogestion*, extends the concept of right to the city towards not only a restructuring of the urban tissue of New Belgrade, but also the society as a whole. He does this through a juxtaposition with the concept of *citizen-citadin* [*citoyen-citadin*], to whom he assigns the potentiality for a New Urban: while the English term “citizen,” corresponding to the French “*citoyen*,” pertains to belonging or admission to a conceived community (a representation: nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc.), the term

citadin, on the contrary, describes every inhabitant with the capability and the right to use (as opposed to: consume) and produce space, therefore continually directly affecting it. *Citadins* are not ‘given’ a right to the city, but constantly engage in a struggle to achieve it and keep it. *Citadins* should be capable—through a perpetual struggle—to debunk and change the paradigms that reproduce space to the liking of varied instances of power.

Likewise, with the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974, which introduced self-management into all levels of society, the country’s population was divided into three groups: the ‘working class’ (the carriers of power in socialism, in accordance with Marxist theory), the ‘working people’ (employees in state-owned companies and institutions) and everyone else, labeled ‘citizens’ (*zpařanu/građani*).⁷ In order to be able to actively take part in the self-management system, writes historian Zoran Erić, “the citizen[-*građanin*] could act only on the level of their local territorial unit, while the other ‘sociopolitical’ organizations were reserved for working people only.”⁸

There are several factors explaining why this, smallest

territorial level of self-management is where we actually encounter the most immediate, truly felt implementation of the theoretical implications of samoupravljanje. Firstly, the affected inhabitants and their interests were present, rather than represented; secondly, all strata of Yugoslav society were implied and involved in this level of self-management; thirdly, there was arguably less interest from the ruling apparatus to assert its control over them. The 'local territorial units' in the narrowest sense were called *platial*⁹ communities (*месне заједнице/месне заједнице*). According to the law, these were associations of people (working class, working people, and *citizen-gradanin* alike) living in the same area, who made decisions regarding the area they inhabited. Conceived as the basic constitutive units of a self-managed society, they reflected the reality of self-management in working organizations in Yugoslavia, as well as the problems symptomatic of the Yugoslav self-management in general — roughly, increased bureaucratization of the practice, the positioning of the workers' organizations, internal distribution, and deviation from limits on the role of the League of Communists.¹¹

The question thus rises before us: is the Yugoslav *citizen-gradanin* a lived form of Lefebvre's theoretical *citizen-citadin*? And, is the *platial* community the carrier-unit of autogestion territoriale (spatial self-management) Lefebvre writes about in the competition proposal? To both questions, the answer is *yes* as much as *no*. In his 1966 "Theoretical Problems of *Autogestion*," Lefebvre writes that autogestion appears "in the *weak* points of existing society."¹² In this sense, yes: the *citizen-gradanin* in Yugoslavia is the non-member of the Party, the unemployed, the student, the minority; the individual whose space, time, and city are predominantly those of struggle and of the everyday. Furthermore, the *citizen-gradanin* employs self-management within that everyday, as a means of that struggle and, in its true instances, towards an entirely self-managed society. On the other hand, the *citizen-gradanin*'s possibility to take part in decision-making in *platial* communities was high compared to other levels of society in Yugoslavia; trapped in the ouroboric paradox of a top-down self-man-

agement, the *citizen-gradanin*, in a way, doesn't face the same kind of challenges as the *citizen-citadin*. In other words, when the right to self-management is proclaimed from the center of power, it might lose a crucial aspect: it might disappear from the horizon of the struggle, thus leaving self-management at the brink of devolving into mere self-organization, and endangering the perseverance of the concept—and the struggle—altogether. Exactly this happened in Yugoslavia, making it possible for *samoupravljanje* to be transformed, by instances of power, into its almost opposite; for nationalistic tendencies to replace and extinguish class struggle and questions of labor; and, ultimately, for the very concept of self-management to not be able to survive the dissolution of the country in virtually any form.

There is a dual trap to avoid when looking at historical concepts, and especially so when they're related to or embedded in socialist histories — on one hand, the *a priori* refusal of any and all socialist principles due to the inability to observe the history of socialism past its failures, and for what it is — a manifold entity of different modalities, each with its own set of paradigms; on the other, the pink-glasses nostalgia for times past, which sets aside critical thought and aims at longing for (and even, bringing back) times past, instead of learning from them for the changed conditions of today. Keeping self-management in mind, and understanding 'urban' not just as related to cities, but, in Lefebvrian terms, also as the mediator between the state, the ideological, the powerful, and the everyday, the common, the lived, as well as applying this understanding, as well as Lefebvre's concept of right to the city to self-management in its many instances, we should understand its most prominent (and pertinent) features in order to begin reestablishing the horizons of (everyday) struggle it is set on.

Self-management is—at the same time—a form, a means, and a goal of sociopolitical struggle, where the power of decision-making and control over resources and means of production are brought back to the subject of that struggle. As a form of struggle, it is a way of organizing which, within the contemporary political landscape, transforms the principles of communities

across society from self-organization into a politically much more potent self-management. As a means of struggle, it is never predefined, or prescribed; it is employed and experienced, developed and defined during that struggle, at different scales, and towards a reorganization of society based on that struggle. As a goal of struggle, it is, during every instance of self-managed action, constantly the horizon of struggle; a vision of an entirely self-managed society, which isn't a sum of units managing themselves, but an ensemble of overlapping and interconnected self-managed instances.

Self-management is not about erasing and forgetting the existing modes of everyday life and gathering, the mechanisms of community, the architectural and urbanistic practices, but about adjoining to them, about enriching them — transforming them to include the principles of self-management, completing them for the given, contemporary conditions, and maintaining them throughout time, constantly reexamining and improving its principles.

Self-management is not the management of self! It is only through such constant reworking, questioning, and interaction of instances of self-management that a self-managed society is preserved. Never predefined, or prescribed, true self-management can only be lived if born and established—"happened"—in the low, bottom, everyday, or, to quote Lefebvre, weak points of society, and then brought to the top, encompassing all conditions and spheres of life. True self-management is never "top-down" because it must have previously 'climbed' "bottom-up."

Self-management is inseparable from space—as perpetual struggle, it questions, reappropriates, and ultimately does away with the reproductions of space coming from Power; simultaneously, it supports and follows closely the production of social space. Disrupting principles of self-management—access to recourses, decision-making, self-production, solidarity and inspiration, and more—leads to the destruction of social space. Consequently, self-management is embedded in *platiality*, understood both as a way to read and reappropriate concepts throughout time and as a quality of *platial* communities, which are the vessels of the struggle of and for self-management.

Self-management, therefore, applies to any and all points of society and assumes various forms accordingly, but always to (re)appropriate—or reclaim—alienated space. •

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Notes:

¹ Samoupravljanje as the main principle of industrial and social organization was de-signed as a system of relations that were based on social, rather than state-owned means of production. In other words, samoupravljanje was a mode of production in which the means of production and the management thereof were returned to the subjects of labor — the workers themselves. Furthermore, besides control over the means of production, another crucial aspect of self-management as an official paradigm (though only reached later, and not to a full extent) was control over decision-making, or, in more proverbial terms: presence over representation, which meant worker's collectives were to become sovereign bodies within factories (enterprises), able to vote and debate crucial issues regarding the operations of the enterprises employing them and their own conditions of labor. Here, first among the contradictions of self-management in Yugoslavia: in itself and in the way it was conceptually envisioned in Yugoslavia, samoupravljanje presupposes the withering away of the State (in the Marxist sense), albeit the very State that proclaims it.

² English translation by Helen Ferguson in Klaus Ronneberger, "Henri Lefebvre and the Question of Autogestion," Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber, *Henri Lefebvre in New Belgrade* (Vancouver; Berlin and New York: Filip Editions; Sternberg Press, 2009), 98.

³ Lukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 234.

⁴ "Opposed and complimentary, they include the need for security and opening, the need for certainty and adventure, that of organization of work and play, the needs for the predictable and the unpredictable, of similarity and difference, of isolation and encounter, exchange and investments, of independence (even solitude) and communication, of immediate and long-term prospects. [...] The need for creative activity, for the oeuvre (not only of products and consumable material goods), the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play." Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (eds), *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), 147.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, "Theoretical Problems of Autogestion," in Neil Brenner and Stuart Elen (eds.), *State, Space, World: Selected Essays by Henri Lefebvre* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 149.

⁷ Zoran Erić, "The Third Way: The Experiment of Workers' Self-Management in Yugoslavia," in Bitter and Weber, *Lefebvre in New Belgrade*, 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Platial* representing an adjective derived from place, similarly as spatial from space.

¹⁰ Encyclopedia of Self-Management, 813.

¹¹ Erić, "The Third Way," 142.

¹² Lefebvre, "Theoretical Problems of Autogestion," 144.

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