

Book, exhibition and film reviews

Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory

By Łukasz Stanek

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The study of the concepts and work of Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), the French philosopher, professor of sociology and theorist on social and urban space, gains an important momentum with this exceptional new book written by Łukasz Stanek. During his lifetime, the actuality of Lefebvre's work in French culture and politics, as well as in social studies and research in architecture and urbanism, stretched over a period of more than fifty years. His activities ranged from adherence to Surrealism and Dadaism in his youth, allegiance to Marxism and the thirty-years-long membership of the French Communist Party (PCF) until the late 1950s, to the post-PCF period of dissidence and critique of dogmatism followed by May, 1968 activism, involvement with the *Utopie* group and the Situationist International, wide and far-ranging academic and research work and, finally, to the post-1968 critique and reform of contemporary capitalist society in the process of globalisation. Yet, his activism and most prolific writing which paralleled it were little known in the wider English-speaking academia until the year of his death when his magisterial theoretical work *The Production of Space* and the first volume of his

Critique of Everyday Life were translated into English.¹

Actually, as Stanek's book now begins to show, it was in the other part of the world behind the Iron Curtain where Lefebvre's work at the time represented a beacon of Western Marxist thought and was translated, analysed and discussed in that context, as well as in relation to socialist urbanisation and his writings on space and urbanism. As Stanek tells us, Lefebvre cultivated contacts with Marxists in Hungary and in Poland where he published his first open anti-PCF-line text in 1957 (p. 63). Even as the translation of his writings into the Central and East European languages of the Warsaw Pact countries came to an abrupt end after his suspension from the PCF, his concepts on space and urbanisation resonated well into the late 1980s (pp. 52, 63–68). The event of dissidence, on the other hand, triggered contacts with critical Marxist philosophers of the nonaligned and self-managed socialist Yugoslavia, who gathered around the journal *Praxis* and organised the philosophical-political summer school on the Adriatic island of Korčula in which Lefebvre took an active part in the early 1960s. The *Praxis* meetings, which also involved other known Western philosophers of the critical orientation, such as Ernst Bloch, Lucien Goldmann, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas and Erich Fromm to name but a few, were followed by comprehensive translation and publication of their writings in the languages of the Yugoslav nations.² Discussing Lefebvre's understanding of the political concept of self-management, which owed much

to his intense contacts and exchanges with the *Praxis* circle, Stanek also shows the divergences as they developed over the time of disenchantment through his rigorous theorisation of the concept in the 1970s and insistence on its de-institutionalisation (pp. 240–244).

This book, thus, begins to unearth some important layers of the often-neglected history of Eastern European intellectual critical engagement and to shift the focus of research to a comparative critical perspective of politically charged twentieth-century debates (pp. xi–xii). Capturing, if only laterally, the parallel attention and resonances on both sides of the bipolar world throughout the book, Stanek shows how Lefebvre's work can be seen as a telling indicator of the shifting politics of the twentieth century and its contemporary reflections. I would argue this aspect, even if lateral, to be of particular significance and this book timely in relation to cooling of passions following the collapse of socialism/communism and subsequent opening of a much-needed de-ideologised debate on contemporary society and its changing global space. While the growing number of Lefebvre's works translated into English in the last twenty years resulted in a surge of new critical and empirical research globally,³ in most post-socialist countries much of the history of heterodox and liberal Marxist thought seems to have been relegated to the dumping ground of history in the obsessive anti-communist discourse. In his well-balanced research, Stanek starts to cast light on some of the largely unknown complementarities across the political divide and demonstrates that the complexity of the emancipatory project reached beyond real and imaginary ideological borders.

Rather like its object of research, that is Henri Lefebvre's *science of space*, the book positions itself between disciplines of philosophy, theory, sociology, spatial and social research, and architecture and urbanism. Spanning over seventy years and as many authored and edited books, as Brenner and Elden noted, Lefebvre's exceptionally complex opus and multifarious intellectual engagement cannot be subsumed within any one academic discipline without the risk of a severe reductionism.⁴ Fully aware of this, Stanek engages in both wide-ranging and thorough research of the complexity of Lefebvre's work itself and interprets it in relation to the equally well-researched complexity of the wide range of intellectual contexts and collaborations. Still, this is the first systematic and synthetic study on Lefebvre coming from the camp of architectural research, aiming at an interrogation of the position of empirical work, especially that of architectural and urban study and design, within Lefebvre's general theory of space. In disciplinary terms, Stanek argues that the theoretical, historical and empirical studies developed within specific disciplinary fields and methodologies, such as sociology or specifically in this case architecture and urbanism, are indispensable for advancing a theory of space beyond disciplinary boundaries, that is a transdisciplinary theory of space as proposed by Lefebvre (p. 134). In this sense, the book presents a welcome extension of the discipline of history and theory of architecture and urbanism beyond its all-too-introverted disciplinary self-reflectivity.

The structure of the book in three central chapters formally reflects the dialectic of triads which is key to understanding Lefebvre's unitary theory of space.

The three chapters' main titles Research-Critique-Project can be read as the main features of the author's thesis or his dialectically related key-words triad. The plot, however, develops from the voluminous opening chapter 'Henri Lefebvre: The Production of Theory', which is added to the triad as a broadly situated historical and social narrative setting the thematic and research *topoi*. It is conceived as a kind of sequence-shot of Lefebvre the man and his life's work, its scenes and episodes, characters and extras, all set against the changing landscape of shifting research interests, ideas and concepts. Speaking of Lefebvre the man, the biographical details are boiled down to a short summary including a questionnaire which seems to say it all on the main character aged forty two, in but a few lines: 'divorced and remarried, a father of four, university graduate, staff officer, fluent in German, unemployed' (p. 6).

It is from that very moment in life in an equally precarious historical time in 1943 that, as Stanek argues, the production of theory on space begins. More importantly, that moment defines the beginning point of the structural cycle defined as Lefebvre's path from the rural to the urban. The cycle extends from the largely archival and empirical study in rural sociology of the Campan Valley in the Pyrenees leading to studies on the city, through a critique of everyday life, inquiries into space and practices of dwelling and setting the key concepts of the 'appropriation of space', 'right to the city', 'urban revolution' and, finally, to 'production of space'. Curiously, missing from the book entirely is an analysis of Lefebvre's ultimate concept and method of 'rhythmanalysis',⁵ as is in point of fact the synthetic

conclusion to the book's rather centrifugal narrative. It makes me wonder if the two missing parts, the rhythm and conclusive points and moments, could have brought an extra sense to a somewhat fragmented structure of the narrative, which takes after Lefebvre's own 'anti-systematic way of thinking' (p. 4).

Instead, two themes—research on *dwelling* and the concept of *concrete abstraction*—are extracted from the broad-brush scenario to be focused in the two more condensed middle chapters. One of Stanek's recurring themes and main propositions argues the paramount significance of the research of the Parisian Institute of Urban Sociology that Lefebvre co-founded in 1962 and presided over until 1973 (*Institut de sociologie urbaine*, ISU) and in particular the ISU study *L'habitat pavillonnaire* (1966). This theme is taken up by the chapter entitled 'Research: from practices of dwelling to the production of space', which explores the conceptualisation of Lefebvre's philosophy on space from the critique of the concepts of 'need' and 'function' to the study of modes of dwelling as a set of everyday practices (pp. 83; 100–104). As one quotation from Lefebvre reads here, for an individual or small group, such as a family, but also for a big social group inhabiting a city or a region, to inhabit is to appropriate space in the midst of constraints, 'that is to say, to be in conflict—often acute—between the constraining powers and the forces of appropriation' (p. 87). Diverging from the methods of quantitative sociology of the ISU, thus, Lefebvre developed the theoretical concept of 'appropriation of space' and by linking it to his earlier analysis of the new industrial town of

Mourenx, he saw its relevance not only to the dwelling itself but to urban scale, rather 'on the level of private life as well as in public life, agglomeration, and landscape' (p. 118).

The most theoretical chapter follows, with an inquiry into Lefebvre's main philosophical category of 'concrete abstraction', somewhat puzzlingly entitled not theory but 'Critique'. Space is for Lefebvre, as commodity and labour are in the analysis of Marx, one of the universal forms of social practice (p. 133). In other words, space is at once and in many ways both abstract and concrete, it is simultaneously a product of social practices and their facilitator, that is to say space is 'both produced and productive' (p. 141). This leads the Author to his principal thesis of seeing the concept of 'concrete abstraction' as the theoretical mediation between the universal concepts of space, a transdisciplinary science of space and the concrete socio-spatial realities. The consequent understanding of the contradictory essence of the 'urban' as at the same time an 'abstraction' and a 'utopia', leads to the proposition of understanding the urban 'as much as an instrument of capitalist production and reproduction as it is a social resource for a different—"differential"—space'. (p. 164).

This proposition is brought to full consequence in what I see as the book's *tour de force*, that is the closing chapter 'Project: Urban Society and Its Architecture' where a number of carefully selected and well-researched spatial constructs, moments and situations, historical and contemporary, such as the Parisian *Palais-Royal* or southern Italian *Club Méditerranée* in Palinuro, are refracted through Lefebvre's astute commentary. It opens with an

insightful reflection on Lefebvre's reading of the actuality of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier and the idea of a city and its architecture as a 'collective luxury', related to the central importance of contemporary spaces of leisure, the privileged moments at the beach, the park or the garden of the *l'habitat pavillonnaire* (pp. 170–179). And, of course, the moments of revolutionary impulse producing centralities such as during the Paris Commune in March, 1871, or within Lefebvre's own experience of May, 1968 at Nanterre university campus in the periphery of Paris, which is specifically discussed here.

In contrast to the late modern 'space of catastrophe' as he called Nanterre (p. 180), Lefebvre recognised in the architectural culture of the 1970s two projects pointing to a possibility of 'specifying a new unity that bridges architecture and urbanism and offers a scale on which one can work and produce' (p. 205), namely Ricardo Bofill's 'City in Space' and Constant Nieuwenhuys's 'New Babylon.' While Bofill's and Nieuwenhuys's projects presented Lefebvre with opportunities for interpretation and theorisation of urban society and its space at different scales, the case of the modern socialist city of New Belgrade offered him the chance of direct involvement, that is a hands-on approach at a concrete problem posed by the international competition in 1986. Relatively recently published for the first time,⁶ the project is largely unknown and thus presents a fitting case for Stanek to end effectively not only the chapter but, in the absence of conclusion, the book itself (pp. 233–244). In this project, carried out in collaboration with the architects Serge Renaudie and

Pierre Guilbaud, Lefebvre reasserts the 'right to the city', but some twenty years after this concept was introduced, here it is set in relation to the notion of *new citizenship*.

Stanek deepens the inquiry into the research of context and precisely situates the concept for the urban design of New Belgrade to have evolved from the discussions of the Group de Navarrenx, a transdisciplinary circle co-founded by Lefebvre in 1985, which also included Serge Renaudie. Besides 'many trips they made together to visit new architecture' (p. 49), the Group theorised new citizenship as part of the condition of complete urbanisation of society and thought of citizen as *citadin*: the urban citizen, and Lefebvre himself, inspired by Jean Jacques Rousseau, manifestly wrote 'From the Social Contract to Contract of Citizenship' (p. 234). In addition, Stanek points out that the New Belgrade project clearly affirms Lefebvre's long fascination with the political concept of self-management, less so as a specifically Yugoslav model, with which he was rather disenchanted by the time of the competition, and more so as a utopian understanding of the concept and a possibility of a differential space in spite of a failed modern city.

Throughout the book, the complex workings of the production of theory is situated in the context of collaborations, dialogues, seminars, discussions, critiques and networks, thus presenting the process as an interdependence between moments and long-term engagements with different people and projects. What comes out of the book is a fully rendered portrait of Lefebvre through his work and collaborations. In excerpts of interviews

conducted with former students, friends, collaborators, colleagues and companions, we learn that 'contacts with people were Lefebvre's essential source of information' (p. 47). In the words of the former student and collaborator, Mario Gaviria: 'This was his way of learning about the world: through the people he worked with—and he worked with people whom he liked.' (p. 48). A glimpse into the schedule of his working day is recounted in the interview with Nicole Beaurain: 'getting up before 7:00 A.M., Lefebvre used to read and write until lunch and then go out to meet people, to lecture, and to engage in discussions', or to have dinner with friends and meet new people with whom he engaged in new collaborations, as recounted by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre (p. 48). His effervescent character shines from Lefebvre's own exclamation about his working relationship with the engineer Abraham Moles: 'He is the number, I am the drama' (p. 21). The lasting impression, however, of his 'living with ideas' (n. 87, p. 261) is of a man who perceives himself as peripheral, 'within and outside the society' (p. 79), situated 'in the lineage of heretics considered peripheral' (n. 354, p. 276), a Marxist philosopher, a Communist with doubts.

It is this notion of heresy that I read in between the lines of the concluding reflections on the position of architecture with regard to the question of *reform or revolution*, which has haunted the Left all through the twentieth century (p. 245). This book adds a significant new dimension to this alternative: it positions the project of architecture and urbanism beyond both heresy and utopia and, rather like Lefebvre himself, it rejects the

contradiction between reform and revolution with full conviction that, as Stanek says, 'the possibility of changing society as a whole must be sought within this very society' (p. 246). Therein, also, lies the promise which marks the end of the book with an *architecture of jouissance*.

Ljiljana Blagojević
Faculty of Architecture
University of Belgrade
Serbia

Notes and references

1. H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 1974, D. Nicholson Smith, trsl. (London, Blackwell, 1991); H. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume I: Introduction* 1st edition in French, 1947; 2nd edition with Preface, 1958 J. Moore, trsl. (London, Verso, 1991).
2. Up to the collapse of socialism and break up of Yugoslavia in 1991, some fifteen books and numerous articles and essays by H. Lefebvre were published in the Serbo-Croat language, from the first in 1957 (*Contribution à l'esthétique*, 1953), to *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, vol. 1 [*Introduction*, 1947] in 1959 and integral with vol. 2 [*Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté*, 1961] and vol. 3 [*De la modernité au modernisme: Pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien*, 1981] in 1988, including *La révolution urbaine* (1970) in 1974 that preceded its translation into English by some thirty years.
3. See, for example, K. Goonewardena, S. Kipfer, R. Milgrom, C. Schmid, eds, *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre* (London, Routledge, 2008); A. Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: a critical introduction* (New York, Routledge, 2006); S. Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: theory and the possible* (London and New York, Continuum, 2004); R. Shields, *Lefebvre, Love & Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (London, Routledge, 1999).
4. N. Brenner and S. Elden, 'Henri Lefebvre in Contexts: An Introduction', *Antipode*, vol. 33, no. 5 (2001), pp. 763–768.
5. H. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, S. Elden, G. Moore, trs. (London, New York, Continuum, 2004).
6. In the course of research for my doctorate in 2004, I found the original booklet submitted to the International Competition for New Belgrade by Lefebvre and his team in the private archive of the Belgrade sociologist Ksenija Petovar, to whom I extend my thanks. The booklet has subsequently been published in facsimile as: P. Guilbaud, H. Lefebvre, S. Renaudie, 'International Competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure Improvement' (1986), in S. Bitter, H. Weber, eds, *Autogestion, or Henri Lefebvre in New Belgrade* (Vancouver, Fillip Editions and Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2009), pp. 1–71. This book also covers the Competition and Lefebvre's team entry: see Lj. Blagojević, 'The Problematic of a "New Urban": The Right to New Belgrade', pp. 119–133.