

BOOK REVIEW

Henri Lefebvre on space. Architecture, urban research, and the production of theory, by Lukasz Stanek, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 369 pp., US\$81.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0816666164/US\$26.36 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8166-6617-1

Stanek's book is a profound analysis of Lefebvre's production of theory. In a historical and empirical assessment, Stanek investigates Henri Lefebvre's development of theory and relates it to urban space and architecture. Using extensive archival materials, including photographs, maps and handwritten sketches, he provides a rich and unique interpretation of Lefebvre's thinking and the evolution of his theory. With this archival material, he reconstructs the intellectual and institutional events mainly of the French society that surrounded Lefebvre's formulation of *The Production of Space*. Thus, Stanek helps to make use of Lefebvre's thought that—due to its open nature and complexity—represents many challenges to urban researchers.

The analysis is divided into four major parts. The first part develops the emergence and evolution of Henry Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, starting with his conceptual shift from the rural to the urban, the first urban studies he advocated when he moved from Strasbourg to Nanterre, and his relation to architects as he came to embrace and refine Marxism. With this analysis of Lefebvre's sequence of collaborative studies, the author teases out nicely how this ongoing work came to center urban space to understand the likes of how social inequalities and conflicts are produced. Here is an essential introduction into the understanding of Lefebvre's theory that provides grounds for three investigative "voices" (p. XIV), through which Lefebvre's transdisciplinary research on space can be understood: *Research*, *Critique*, and *Project*.

In *Research* (part two), Stanek rethinks Lefebvre's work from the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine days of the 1960s and 1970s. He argues that at this time, Lefebvre formulated the three "moments of space" that form his core theory of the production of space: the triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space which were translated into spatial terms: spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation. In this section, turning to architecture, Lefebvre is seen to vibrantly contrast the French *pavillon*—private detached houses, mostly stigmatized as anti-modern, individualistic, and petit-bourgeois—to the collective estates (*grand ensembles*) with the former leading to an appropriation of time and space through the social practices of the dwellers. Here, to Stanek, Lefebvre retheorizes time and space—as an open-ended, social, and spontaneous set of practices—that was to anchor so much of his work thereafter. The case study of new town of Mournex, illuminated by Stanek, illustrates nicely Lefebvre's line of argument.

Critique (part three) offers a critical reflection of the production of space in capitalist societies by analyzing Lefebvre's reconstruction of the Marxist debate. It is, compared to the other parts, rather short (30 pages), and uses no illustrative material or sources. However, it functions as a summary and recirculation of Lefebvre's empirical studies within his specific understanding of space as a "concrete abstraction". With this, Stanek argues that Lefebvre's theory of space opens new prospects for a transdisciplinary theory of space that would "discover or construct a theoretical unity between the 'fields' which are apprehended separately" (Lefebvre quoted in Stanek, p. 134), even though they are—at the same time—related

to the realms of the space perceived, conceived, and lived. Thus, the chapter is a central device for the development of a unitary or transdisciplinary theory of space.

The last chapter (*Projects*)—at 90 pages the most comprehensive part of the book—focusses again on architecture, discussing the concept of centrality by analyzing the “concrete utopia” using specific architectural case studies such as the *City in Space* by the architect Ricardo Bofill, the *New Babylon* by Constant Nieuwenhuys, and the *New Belgrad* by Serge Renaudies. The chapter’s main term is “centrality”, being defined as the most general relationship among locations at the same time as it is socially produced. Stanek highlights the dialectics of centrality, since the practices that produce centralities are contradictory between inclusion and exclusion, dispersal and gathering. With this emphasis on projects, on architecture itself, Stanek again sharpens his special approach to analyze Lefebvre: the relevance of his theory for urban space and architecture, and beyond. He underlines Lefebvre’s

programmatic position of this “concrete utopia” beyond both a “realistic architecture” that fulfills the “demands and desires of the clientele” (...) and a “utopian architecture” that disagrees with current practices and creates images of a future city without breaking from the conceptions of urbanism. (p. 213)

In this thoughtful section, Stanek sheds light on Lefebvre’s discussion of the question of scale for social place, that is the global level of concrete abstraction, the mixed or intermediary level of the “urban” and the private level, the level of dwelling, that is a modulation of everyday life.

Of course, one can also be critical of certain features in this book. For example, the book does not engage so much the epistemology of different theories that Lefebvre was arguing with and it does not discuss Lefebvre’s different books and contributions to theory entirely. Yet, I believe, this would be a daunting task. What makes this book so special is its profound and detailed investigation, the so far undetected array of sources and historical material and illustrations, and the direct and creative application of Lefebvre’s theory to architecture and urban space. With this emphasis, it is—from my perspective—the first authentically *geographic* approach to both understand and apply Lefebvre to urban theory and planning. Thus, I highly recommend this book to researchers who look for evidence and arguments of Lefebvre’s theory aside from the populist discussion and citation hype of Lefebvre’s name and theory, especially the *Right to the City* discourse, and those who like to indulge in the theorization of urban space with the help of Lefebvre’s Marxist thinking. This book demolishes simplistic dismissals of Lefebvre’s thought and provides arguments and empirical evidence for his theory. Also, newcomers to Lefebvre’s thought will get an understanding of the importance of theorizing urban space in order to understand recent processes and debates. In sum, I regard this book as highly relevant to advanced (geography) students who want to learn about urban theory in general and the specifics of a distinctive notion of urban space. After reading this book, most will understand that theory is an open-ended undertaking that even philosophers or theorists such as Lefebvre will never fully solve, leaving central questions open to future urban scholars. Overall, the book is a perfect addition to the ongoing debate about the relevance of Lefebvre to understand recent urban processes and the modern, post-modern, or other theoretical reflections on urban space.

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