

## Book Reviews

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

Łukasz Stanek, 2011

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press

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Henri Lefebvre is acknowledged as one of the most influential Marxist theorists, sociologists and philosophers, and as a true personification of the intellectual spirit of the 20th century. His life work consists in a voluminous contribution to the theorisation of the State, of international flows of capital and of social space, and continues to challenge whoever attempts to approach it from a single disciplinary perspective. Stanek's project is driven by the claim that Lefebvre's work is more than pure philosophical theorising, and sets out to view it in light of his involvement in urbanism and architectural projects and debates. More precisely, the basis of his analysis is provided by the concept of production of space, which is analysed *vis-à-vis* largely forgotten or neglected aspects of Lefebvre's activities. By taking a new critical perspective on the concepts that became orientation points for urban research and design today, Stanek is both researching on and drawing upon Lefebvre's voracious interdisciplinary curiosity, ever-expanding network of professional engagements, public interventions and peripheral thematic interests.

In chapter 1, Stanek provides a detailed documentation of Lefebvre's early empirical studies in rural and urban sociology,

including his research on the peasant communities in the Pyrenees and the extensive collaboration with both the Centre d'études sociologiques (CES) and the Institut de Sociologie urbaine (ISU). Moreover, by coupling Lefebvre's stance in Marxist debates with his research, Stanek makes apparent how the urban setting gradually became the privileged one for Lefebvre's investigation of alienation under the conditions of modernity. Stanek, in addition, stresses the importance of how Lefebvre's theory should be accounted for within both the transformations caused by the institutionalisation of urban sociology and the way it has been translated into a set of operative tools in France starting from the 1960s.

Chapter 2 focuses on the investigation of the practices of dwelling that constituted the object of the research carried out by Lefebvre and his collaborators on both the *pavillon* and the 'grands ensembles' during the 1960s and 1970s, specifically on the way its inhabitants were 'using' these two forms of housing. Stanek is particularly effective in outlining the analytical steps that brought Lefebvre to shift the focus of his spatial analysis from the scale of a milieu to that of spatial practices: from 'habitat' to 'inhabit'. In this way, Lefebvre's theory is not only presented as the outcome of his rethinking of ISU's research on dwelling; rather, it is additionally contextualised in Lefebvre's critique of functionalism, structuralism and French state urbanism (1950s and 1960s). Moreover, what is accurately foregrounded in this section is how the concept of consumption of space and the practice of appropriation can be delineated as two paradigmatic practices for theorising the production of urban space today, with both

being considered as a direct source for Lefebvre's understanding of space as perceived, conceived and lived.

In chapter 3, Stanek relates Lefebvre's theorising of space to German idealist philosophy, a framework that, together with Marxist debates on labour, commodity and money, informed Lefebvre's understanding of space as a 'concrete abstraction'. In Stanek's view, this framework allowed Lefebvre to generalise the outcome of his studies. Stanek's intention, however, goes beyond a hermeneutical analysis of his texts and aims at offering a new perspective on how the core concepts of the theory of production of space were developed, especially in terms of the research perspectives that opened up for Lefebvre by adopting an understanding of space as a concrete abstraction. In other words, in spite of the recurrent philosophical references, Stanek simultaneously aims at grounding the position of Lefebvre's empirical studies within his specific understanding of space, and at highlighting a possible path for transdisciplinary research on the limitations of thinking space.

In the last and fourth chapter of the book, Stanek casts light on Lefebvre's analyses of historical utopian planning and on his encounters/exchanges with architects and planners that occurred over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. This section foregrounds Lefebvre's participation and reading of 'utopian projects', such as his re-evaluation of Fourier's *phalanstère* as a historical architectural dream fostering communal solidarity, 'The City In Space' by Ricardo Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura, 'New Babylon' by Constant Nieuwenhuys and the project for New Belgrade. Through a reading of Lefebvre's concepts of 'dwelling', 'differential space' and 'centrality' in relation to these projects, Stanek attempts to show how Lefebvre viewed the potential of architectural designs in bridging the practices of architecture and urbanism with the processes of urbanisation.

It is important to note that Stanek chooses to name the three last chapters, yet without

addressing them to distinct parts of Lefebvre's theory, after what he considers to be the voices of Lefebvre's writing: those of 'critique', of 'research' and of 'project'. In fact, by unfolding Lefebvre's critical reflections on the general condition of modernity, his research on the processes of urbanisation and his considerations on the projects of spaces for a transforming society, the structure of the book discloses a new perspective for exploring how Lefebvre's theory came into being. In this special genealogy of the concept of the production of space, Stanek particularly values the empirical roots of Lefebvre's concepts, and yet refers to the very issues that were not answered in an empirical manner. While he warns that to read Lefebvre requires accounting for both the historical conditions of the processes of urbanisation, as Lefebvre himself analysed them, and the current conditions of production of space, Stanek establishes the premises for a critical approach toward the applicability of Lefebvre's theory today. Stanek's language reflects the influences from several disciplinary fields and is at the same time accurate and hybrid; it both implies differing degrees of accessibility according to the background of the reader and reproduces the challenge entailed by Lefebvre's disciplinary nomadism. In spite of the fact that they are only partially integrated with the text, a rich range of tables, illustrations, maps, pictures of models, diagrams and charts, complement a vast body of research.

By following the scheme outlined by the editors of *Space, Difference, Everyday Life* (2008), and owing to its focus on empirical urban research, Stanek's work can be inscribed within the third and current 'constellation' of Lefebvre's reading (in distinction to two previous ones in Anglo-American scholarship—i.e. the urban political economic readings of David Harvey and the introduction to Lefebvre's work by Edward Soja). In broad terms, this richly documented and outstanding analysis can be seen as

addressed to three groups of readers. Scholars familiar with Henri Lefebvre will not only find a new perspective on his work, but also new anecdotes and material on his intellectual and personal life to refresh their interest, such as, for example, a review of his unpublished manuscript “Vers une architecture de la jouissance” (Toward an architecture of jouissance). Scholars unfamiliar with Lefebvre will find a well-researched account on the production of his theory, which can serve as a good starting point for an engagement with it, and, to conclude, those who are sceptical of Lefebvre’s theorisations will have the opportunity to approach the object of their skepticism from a new angle.

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## Reference

Goonewardena, K., Kipfer, S., Milgrom, R. and Schmid, C. (2008) *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*. Hoboken: Taylor & Francis.

### **Accumulation by Dispossession: Transformative Cities in the New Global Order**

Swapna Banerjee-Guha (Ed.), 2010  
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 268 pp. £37.50/  
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Most social scientists are by now very familiar with the ways in which neo-liberalisation has transformed the matrix of city spaces, entailing intensified differentiation, displacement of the poor and a significant degree of conflict and contestation. In this way, Swapna Banerjee-Guha’s recent edited volume *Accumulation by Dispossession: Transformative Cities in the New Global Order* does not entail a lot of new material on the

theoretical side of things. I also found the title of the book to be somewhat misleading for a few different reasons. First, while chapters from David Harvey and Saskia Sassen provide some interesting insights that are no doubt worthy of consideration by scholars interested in neo-liberalisation and changing urban dynamics, I had hoped for a greater theoretical extension of the ideas that Karl Marx (1867/1976) first put forward in the first volume of *Capital* and that Harvey (2003) himself later expanded upon in *The New Imperialism*. In other words, a title like *Accumulation by Dispossession* to me promises a rigorous discussion of the historical origins of primitive accumulation as the underpinning principle of capitalism itself (see Perelman, 2000) and, more importantly, an exposition of primitive accumulation as a continuing tenet of a capitalist mode of production, ingrained within its very logic (see Glassman, 2006). It is for this very reason that Harvey (2003) redubbed primitive accumulation as ‘accumulation by dispossession’, which ultimately serves to reflect the continuity of capitalism’s most enduring feature: violence. Unfortunately, these important facets appear to be missed opportunities even as Banerjee-Guha seemed obliged to attend to them, given the actual title that was chosen.

Secondly, we are not offered a clear indication of what is meant by ‘accumulation by dispossession’ in the introductory chapter and, while this can be inferred from the chapters that follow, offering some clarification from the outset would have really benefited the presentation of the arguments throughout. Again, following Harvey’s (2003) own work could have provided some substantial insights here, as he refers to accumulation by dispossession as specifically those practices that operate and evolve through the violent expulsion of peasants through land privatisation, the conversion of common property rights into exclusive property rights, the commodification of labour, the suppression of alternative and indigenous forms of