

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Lukasz Stanek**, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780816666164 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816666171 (paper)

As Scott Kirsch (2012: 1042) underlined in a recent book review for *Antipode*, if “it is no longer remarkable to speak of space, nature, and landscapes as socially *produced*, it is largely a reflection of the extent to which contemporary spatial and geographical thought has been transformed ... in particular with the ideas—or at least the language—of the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre”. To the extent that Lefebvre’s contemporary influence is usually (certainly, in Anglophone geography) defined by his writings on the production of space originally published between 1968 and 1974, Lukasz Stanek’s *Henri Lefebvre on Space* (hereafter *HLOS*) has to be *the* definitive book on how and why Lefebvre came to make the production of space the locus of his intellectual endeavours in this period.

An overview of the 1968-74 writings might go something like this: Lefebvre argues that capitalism produces its own “abstract space”—materially and in ideological, representational terms—and, in so doing, creates the permissive conditions for the reproduction of the relations of production according to their own immanent requirements and not simply those pertaining to the production of surplus-value. For Lefebvre, the problem of time—around which Marx’s critique of political economy revolved—had by the 1960s been reduced to constraints of space; circumscribed and suppressed within the abstract space of the urban form. The process of mediation that re-produces the relations of production in a contradictory form, according to Lefebvre, is therefore that of urbanisation—the production of (urban) space. As Stanek puts it (p.xii), Lefebvre therefore proposes “an understanding of space as perceived, conceived, lived, and produced by material practices, practices of representation, and everyday practices of appropriation”. This understanding of the *production* of space opens the way to the critique of space as such, and therefore to the recognition that

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contemporary, urbanised life is saturated with contradiction, politics, and revolutionary possibility.

The value of Stanek's (beautifully presented) book lies not only in the author's meticulous approach to the archival and interview-based research process and his attention to detail, but also in challenging the prevailing view of "the theory of the production of space as a projection of [Lefebvre's] philosophical positions" (p.vii). As Stanek persuasively shows, the theory was developed in the course of Lefebvre's hitherto largely unacknowledged concrete research: "a number of empirical studies he carried out and supervised within a range of French research institutions, as well as his intense exchanges with architects, urbanists, and planners" (p.viii). In dividing his account into three relational themes or "voices"—"research, critique, and project"—Stanek delivers on an ambitious objective: to show how the theory of the production of space *was itself produced* in the course of Lefebvre's own immersion in practical and collective research into changing patterns of urbanisation and dwelling in and beyond France during the so-called *trente glorieuses* (roughly 1944-73), and also as he continuously reflected upon the (in-)adequacies of his own philosophy—and his debt to Marxism in particular—as a form of critique and a means of "projecting" possible, dis-alienated socio-spatialities.

The result of Stanek's efforts is a book which casts fresh light on Lefebvre's writings on space, whose intellectual origins, Stanek explains, lie at least as far back as his empirical work on rural life in the Pyrenees conducted in the 1940s. *HLOS* provides a detailed overview of the development of Lefebvre's ideas in the decades preceding the 1960s through to his research on Nanterre as the events of May '68 gathered steam, explaining in fascinating detail how Lefebvre always tried to creatively and reflexively engage his anti-reductive take on Marxism with the dramatic changes he witnessed first-hand—from his research on the Pyrenees, through his work on the *pavillon* as a form of dwelling, to his later collaborations and confrontations with architects, planners, urbanists, and radicals within and outside

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France. We already know from the existing biographical accounts of Lefebvre that his eventful life took several twists and turns in this period, and Stanek's account adds much detail to the story. For instance, I learnt for the first time of Lefebvre's profile as an architecture competition jurist and regular guest on French TV in the 1960s; and, more crucially, of the extent to which Lefebvre engaged with architecture and not just philosophy and sociology—fields with which he is usually associated.<sup>1</sup> Add to such detail Stanek's impressive command of Lefebvre's main philosophical influences—including Hegel, Heidegger, and Marx—and the book succeeds in drawing together the threads that bind over three decades of research and writing, while putting the development of Lefebvre's ideas about space in particular into social and personal context—even to the point of raising a series of questions about the context-bound limitations of those ideas.

I personally found *HLOS* a rewarding read, since, to the best of my knowledge, it provides hitherto unavailable insight into how Lefebvre became increasingly convinced that the urban problematique had superseded that of industrialisation—necessarily rendering, in his view, the Marxian critique of political economy insufficient and outmoded by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. In numerous instances throughout his writings on space, Lefebvre asserts but never really substantively explains the grounds for this claim (as also noted by David Harvey 1974: 239). What Stanek shows is that Lefebvre's commitment to this new problematique was a product not of some intuitive theoretical leap in the dark but, rather, of his confronting issues and problems of immediate, practical importance, and of him testing the limits of his own theoretical knowledge and critique along the way. The jury is still out as to whether Lefebvre was ultimately right to propose a critique of space as such (on this,

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<sup>1</sup> A brief afterword to the book informs of Stanek's discovery of a hitherto unpublished manuscript on architecture by Lefebvre in a private archive. Stanek reports that the text would appear to corroborate and cast fresh light on many of the themes covered in *HLOS*. This manuscript was recently published, edited by Stanek himself (see Lefebvre 2014).

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see Charnock 2014), but, thanks to Stanek's research, there is now much greater clarity regarding the bases upon which Lefebvre came to make such claims.

Stanek's book is mandatory reading for anyone interested in Lefebvre's contribution to the theory of the production of space—a contribution to which geography and, increasingly, other academic disciplines owe such a huge debt. Other books have performed commendably in terms of reviewing Lefebvre's prolific output thematically—his work on space included—and putting it into some biographical and broader intellectual context (see, for example, Butler 2012; Elden 2004; Merrifield 2006; Shields 1999). In their own way, each one of these is a worthwhile read. But none of these, I think it is fair to say, have focused in on Lefebvre's signal contribution on space with the same depth of background research undertaken for *HLOS*—research necessary to deliver on Stanek's unique and ambitious promise of providing an account of Lefebvre's theorising as a production process in itself. In my view, Stanek has produced *the* authoritative account of Lefebvre and the production of space, and I've no doubt it will be the must-read resource on this subject for many years to come.

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