



## La pensée marxiste et la ville

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*La pensée marxiste et la ville*

By Henri Lefebvre

Paris, Casterman, 1972 (and forthcoming in translation from the University of Minnesota Press)

At first glance, *La pensée marxiste et la ville* ('Marxist thinking and the city', 1972) is the odd one out among Henri Lefebvre's writings on space and urbanisation from around 1968.<sup>1</sup> Developing a close reading of Marx and Engels, the book seems to contrast with such visionary texts as *The Right to the City* (1968; 1996), *The Urban Revolution* (1970; 2003), and *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (1973; 2014). However, if these books are understood as radicalising Lefebvre's regressive-progressive approach and examine the past in order to understand the present 'as a function of the realization of the possibilities objectively implied in this past',<sup>2</sup> *La pensée* can be read as doing precisely that, now on the level of theory: consolidating Marxist theoretical apparatus in order to reveal its explanatory potential to be deployed, and extended, in *The Production of Space* (1974; 1991).

The broad perspective on space, developed in the latter, was announced in *La pensée*. Lefebvre revisited what Marx and Engels had to say about the city in their writings from the 1840s to the 1870s in order to map concepts and categories which inform a Marxist understanding of the 'urban question' and to link them to fundamental themes in Marxism, such as the division of labour, the historical emergence of capitalism and the vision of a socialist society. In particular, as in *The*

*Production of Space*, Lefebvre argued in *La pensée* that the urban question in the writings of Marx and Engels was not reduced to political economy of space, but included a range of other topics, such as the question of the lived experience of the city, or the relationships between urbanity and the socialist project. One of the stated aims of *La pensée* was the demonstration of the diversity and differentiation of Marxist thinking on the city, in this way offering new impulses for rethinking the processes of urbanisation in those phases of capitalist urbanisation which followed what Marx witnessed and described. This is why particular attention in the book was paid to debates about and around socialism since the early nineteenth century (Proudhon, Dühring, Fourier, Owen, Lenin, Luxemburg). In so doing, like most other writings of Lefebvre from that period, *La pensée* was an attempt to redefine his own position within the Marxist discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s in France, by taking issue with the structuralist reading of Marx and by addressing more general theoretical challenges to post-war Marxism, such as questions of everyday life, consumption, technocracy and state socialism.

*La pensée* reveals Lefebvre as a precise and attentive, polemical and, sometimes, witty reader of Marx and Engels. While some parts of the book include rather lengthy summaries of Marx's texts, others demonstrate their original and critical reading, and attempts at speculating beyond them. Lefebvre develops Marx's concepts and tests them in the face of the ongoing processes of urbanisation as he and his collaborators at the *Institut de sociologie*

*urbaine* studied them in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This concerns, in particular, the discussions of the contradictions of post-war space in *La pensée*: the simultaneity of homogenisation and fragmentation of space; the contradiction between the urbanisation of the countryside and the 'ruralisation' of the city; the paradoxical dependence of capitalism on the exploitation of nature which it destroys in the course of this exploitation; and the contradictions captured by the concept of the 'urban'—at same time an 'abstraction' and 'an elsewhere, a utopia'.<sup>3</sup>

*La pensée* was a conceptual construction site for Lefebvre's theory of production of space. In particular, the book discusses the role of the city in the development of capitalism or, as Lefebvre put it, the city and urban life as the 'milieu, means, mediation, intermediary' of historical transformation and the 'subject of history'.<sup>4</sup> These ideas were developed in the genealogical exposition of the history of space in *The Production of Space*. Somewhat disappointingly, and in contrast to Lefebvre's earlier PhD thesis, the book does not confront the specifically historical arguments of Marx with the subsequent work of historians writing on the early modern period, including the Annales School.<sup>5</sup>

However, as is generally true about Lefebvre's writings, the weight of the argument in *La pensée* is theoretical, not historical. The argument about the 'fusion' between society and the city as the increasingly dominant productive force in capitalism, sketched in *La pensée*, feeds into what in *The Urban Revolution* he called the 'complete urbanization of society': Lefebvre's strategic hypothesis, formulated in the course of the shift in his research, both thematically

and conceptually, 'from the rural to the urban'.<sup>6</sup> Not unlike the operaist argument about 'the great shift of the frontline from the factory to the metropolis', as it was put by Antonio Negri, Lefebvre saw the complete urbanisation of society defining a new stage of the worldwide development of capitalism beyond post-war Fordism.<sup>7</sup>

In *La pensée*, Lefebvre characterised this new stage of capitalist development by the generalisation of the processes of space production: 'the productive forces, stimulated by the two world wars, have grown to such extent that they produce space'.<sup>8</sup> He argued that the investments in space—both urban and rural—allow thwarting the law of the decrease of the average rate of profit;<sup>9</sup> and thus capital rushed into the production of space rather than limiting itself to classical forms of production.<sup>10</sup> This argument inspired other Marxist theorists, including David Harvey, who, however, did not see this secondary circuit of capital as becoming more influential than its primary, industrial, circuit, but as a cyclical process of expansion and contraction synchronised with the pattern of capitalist growth and crisis.<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre's argument about the production of space was further elaborated in *La pensée* by means of a more conceptual discussion of 'production' whose two meanings are presented to unfold in the history of the European city:<sup>12</sup> as a creative act (the production of *oeuvres* and desires) and as an economic one (the production of commodities and needs). It is this double meaning of 'production' which informs, and complicates, this concept in *The Production of Space*.

In this sense, *La pensée* was for Lefebvre an important step in his theorising of space as socially pro-

duced and made productive by a multiplicity of, often contradictory, social practices. This understanding of space was inspired by Lefebvre's close reading of Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) which reveals not only Engels' attention to the individual experience of the city of the industrial revolution, but also his attempts to link the appearance of the capitalist city as 'chaotic' with the underlying political and economic order which results in the urban form. Describing early industrial Manchester, Engels analysed its morphology as structurally determined by socio-economic causes and aims: while the old centre was dissolved, the city was divided into dilapidated workers' districts, factories and villa neighbourhoods. Lefebvre reads Engels's account of Manchester as a double movement of disclosure and concealment: while the misery of the workers' districts was shrouded from the view of the upper class, the spatial segregation manifested the social relationships in the city—above all the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Examining the city as a social phenomenon—a manifestation of the hidden structures of the society—Engels understood it as a revolutionary place, allowing the workers to reflect on their situation.<sup>13</sup> Not unlike Marx's description of abstract labour as emerging in economic practices, theoretical reflection and the lived experience of the worker, as developed in the methodological chapter of the *Grundrisse*, Engels read the city as at the same time a material artefact, a manifestation of the deep structure of the society and a vehicle of revolutionary experience. This differentiation announced Lefebvre's own understanding of the

social production of space as perceived, conceived and lived: the spatial 'triad' coined in *The Production of Space*.

Even more fundamentally, in *La pensée* Lefebvre points at the concept which became the guiding line for his theory of space production: that of 'concrete abstraction'. It is the city, he argued, which was the stage on which labour and capital had emerged—the two concrete abstractions which drove the historical development of capitalism and the paradigms for Lefebvre's theorising of space. As I have shown in *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, the argument that space is a concrete abstraction is the main philosophical contribution of *The Production of Space*, which allowed Lefebvre to generalise the results of his previous studies in rural and urban sociology within an account of the historical development of capitalism. In so doing, Lefebvre was able to examine space as the general form of social practice in capitalist modernity, characterised by distinctive features, such as its simultaneous homogenisation and fragmentation, and a (fetishist) blend between illusion and reality. Lefebvre's take on concrete abstraction staked out his research programme about space and opened up its two perspectives: a deductive account of the most general principle of social space unfolding in history; and an historical and empirical study about specific conjunctures of practices of space production.<sup>14</sup>

Besides such overarching discussions, in *La pensée* Lefebvre contributed to more of a specific theoretical task which, however, was indispensable for *The Production of Space*: the 'completion' of the Marxist theory of land rent and surplus value. In particular, Lefebvre developed the argument about the city as

a force of production by analysing the productive roles of urban space in the creation of surplus value (by labour); the realisation of surplus value (ie, the generation of capital by sale of commodities and services); and the distribution of surplus value (by private institutions and those of the state). The latter was related to the satisfaction of the needs of the population. Lefebvre noticed that among 'social needs', already sketched by Marx in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, a new need is emerging: 'that of the urban life [*vie urbaine*], of the city', which can be satisfied neither by the market nor by state institutions.<sup>15</sup> As explained in *The Right to the City*, the need for urban life includes the need for places (and times) of simultaneity and encounter ('places where exchange would not pass through exchange value'): it is in these needs that 'the right to the city' seeks its legitimisation.<sup>16</sup>

This is where, in the pages of *La pensée*, Lefebvre starts to unravel the relationship between Marxist thinking about the city and the project of socialism. For Marx and others, the city as they saw it became the starting point to address a society to come—even if this new society would leave the capitalist city behind. This pertains, in particular, to the concept of social needs which were argued to be essentially 'urban needs'; and the collective character of socialism was imagined according to communal urban facilities. (In subsequent texts, including *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, Lefebvre would revise these statements, probably in view of the research about the role of the *équipements* in modern biopolitics, developed at that time by the *Centre*

*d'études, de recherches et de formation institutionnelles* (CERFI), an extra-academic network of researchers and political activists, during its most active phase between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s led by Félix Guattari and in exchange with Michel Foucault.)<sup>17</sup>

This projective aspect of *La pensée* comes to the fore in Lefebvre's reading of the concepts of 'concrete' and 'abstract' utopia. They go back to Ernst Bloch and the Hegelian understanding of 'concrete' as embedded in the world of related and interacting things, and opposed to 'abstract' as impoverished, one-sided and isolated.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to 'abstract utopias' extrapolating the status quo, 'concrete utopias' are 'models' of possible development: operative ways of testing hypotheses which account for the complex and aleatory reality, and thus are never exhaustive and requiring a confrontation with other models.<sup>19</sup> This distinction between 'concrete' and 'abstract' utopia guided Lefebvre's argument in *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, where they were used to distinguish between architecture and urbanism, understood as modes of imagination rather than as disciplinary practices. While abstract utopia is a 'positive' extrapolation of the status quo, concrete utopia is 'negative', that is to say it contradicts the premises of the current social order: the everyday defined by the division of labour, exchange economy and the state as the primary agent of economic regulation and political subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> Concrete utopia refers to an investigation of possible futures from within the affordances and limitations of the given situation—a task which, for Lefebvre, was that of an architectural imagination.<sup>21</sup>

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