

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

by Lukasz Stanek

University of Minnesota Press, 2011, pbk \$30, ISBN 978-0-8166-6617-1, pp. 392

by Gisele Eugenia O'Connell

Henri Lefebvre (1950) was adamant that philosophy should be viewed as a “critical conscience on real life.” Lukasz Stanek’s *‘Henri Lefebvre on Space’*, does justice to Lefebvre’s philosophical reasoning by arguing that his theoretical project on space emerged from lived experience in urban development, planning and architecture. According to Elden (2004) there have been three primary readings of Lefebvre, which include the political-economic accounts spearheaded by David Harvey, the post-modern geographies of the 1980’s cultural shift, and the recent attention to Lefebvre’s urban empirical work. Stanek’s account neatly falls into this third and current constellation of Lefebvorean interpretation. As an architect and former student of philosophy himself, Stanek’s account is mediated through a lens of his own empirical engagements with ‘Nowa Huta’; a Polish town constructed under the Communist regime (see Elden’s interview with Stanek, 2014). As such, he endeavours to bring certain sensibilities to the praxis which consolidated Lefebvre’s philosophical reasoning. Guided by Lefebvre’s ‘Production of Space’ as the basis of a critical analysis, Stanek’s intellectual biography is not only theoretically rigorous and conceptually grounded, but displays impressive mastery of the philosophical traditions which informed Lefebvre’s conception of space. Lefebvre’s social thought is grounded first and foremost within the French Marxist tradition, while never divorced from its passionate attachment to post-War German philosophy. The theoretical sophistication of Stanek’s work, positions it alongside other accounts which sketch a genealogy of Lefebvorean social thought (for other work see Goonerwardena, 2008; Merrifield, 2006; Elden 2004; Shields, 1999).

Stanek sets out to subvert the predominant view that Lefebvre’s “theory of a production of space” has been a “projection of his philosophical position” by arguing instead that his philosophy of space, arose from a dialectical engagement with space itself (vii). The contention that his theoretical project proceeded from the “real to the possible,” is elaborated through a series of three thematic chapters which engage the “Voice” of Lefebvre’ on “Research, Critique, and Project” (P xvii). This chosen thematic structure not only complements Lefebvre’s insistence on rhythmic and

cyclical narratives, but effectively negotiates the inter-relationships of his trans-disciplinary research. Firstly, we learn that Lefebvre's shift in intellectual focus from agrarian peasant communities in the Pyrenees, to the processes of urbanization, must account for the direction taken by institutionalised urban research, commissioned by the Centre d'études sociologiques (CES) in 1950's France. This organisation offered him not only financial assistance at a time of hardship, but a platform for scholarly outlet and academic pursuits. The point Stanek makes is both subtle and convincing; Lefebvre's theory and practice on space was influenced and guided by his engagement with architects, planners and urban institutions from the outset. Stanek develops this argumentation through Lefebvre's 'Voice' on 'Research' whereby he suggests that Lefebvre's concept of space as both "produced and productive" emerged from "concrete research" undertaken on both the practices of 'dwelling' and 'grands ensembles' while in the 'Institut de sociologie urbaine'(ISU), (p.82). These spatial forms of dwelling at the centre of his research were symptomatic not only of the post-war housing crisis in France, but what Lefebvre's regarded as the privatization of "everyday life" in the emerging consumer society. By focusing on inhabited practices and the rhythmic transformation of spaces in the Pavillon, Stanek is able to contextualise Lefebvre's theory within a critique of dominant architectural paradigms: namely structuralism and functionalism. In particular to this section, Stanek delineates between space as a commodity for consumption, and space as appropriated and transformed, as the two predominant ways in which Lefebvre came to understand space as "perceived, conceived and lived" (P.89). This, Stanek argues, provided the basis for Lefebvre's theoretical account of space as a "concrete abstraction" bearing the same paradoxical qualities of 'being', as commodity and labour held for Marx (P.134).

Stanek goes further in Lefebvre's 'Voice' on 'Critique' to argue that Lefebvre's lived engagement with urban planning, bolstered his critique of 1970's French philosophies of urban space. Although theories of space existed in 1970's French psychoanalysis, phenomenology and so on, Lefebvre was critical of the chaotic bricolage and fragmented understanding of space, which it produced. Stanek shows however, that Lefebvre offers a trans-disciplinary reading of space principally influenced by Hegelian Marxism. This was crucial for Lefebvre, Stanek argues, as it shifted the dominant discussions in the 1970's from ontologies of the spatial, to an "epistemology of the urban"; a framework which captures the radical alterity of urbanization. Thus, while although space is conceived of as an abstraction differentially experienced by class, gender, age, memory and so on, Lefebvre was eager to embrace its multiplicity, advocating the need to effectively keep

urban space “open” to all (P.127). In Lefebvre’s ‘Voice’ on ‘Project,’ Stanek emphasises how the urban ‘field’ held significant potential for Lefebvre in investigating social and spatial developments. In particular, Lefebvre’s was eager to explore the various conjunctures which ignite a revolutionary potential within and through urban space. Stanek analytically isolates specific concepts such as ‘centrality’, ‘dwelling’, ‘scale’ and ‘difference’ which Lefebvre maintained were crucial to the emergence of various urban ‘moments’ such as the Paris Commune. Central to Stanek’s argument is that a dialectical engagement with urban architecture, which Lefebvre referred to as a “formation of the senses” or a “pedagogy of the body” was not only indispensable to the lived experience of urban society, but part of the immanence of urban revolutionary potential (P.250).

One of the delicate matters both addressed and effectively defended by Stanek, is the accusation that Lefebvre’s social thought abandoned its Marxist orientation, which, as Stanek argues, “misguided much of the Anglo-American reception” of his theory (P.51). The crisis of orthodox Marxism in the 1960’s was a recurring theme in Lefebvre’s thinking and as such, is given considerable attention in the opening chapters of Stanek’s analysis. Undoubtedly, the unfolding of a theory of urban space illuminated multiple incompatibilities with a Marxist class position. Yet Stanek refuses to shy away from its resulting polemics, and successfully defends Lefebvre’s Hegelian Marxism by couching it in terms of a revisionist and dialectical approach. At the forefront of the criticisms discussed by Stanek, is the accusation by Manuel Castells that Lefebvre was nothing more than a “bourgeois ideologist” whose theory was in discord with Marxism given its emphasis on urban ecologies as opposed to capitalist industrialization. In Castells view, Lefebvre’s theory therefore “violates Marxist premises” by attributing agency and social change to the “form of the city” rather than social action itself (P.53). Conversely however, Stanek shows that despite these evident criticisms, Lefebvre’s revisionist understanding of Marxism demonstrates how social change occurs as result of lived experience in the consumption and appropriation of urban space. Thus, Stanek concludes that Lefebvre’s theoretical insight provides us with an understanding of social change which is unrestricted by notions of economy or ideology but captures the dialectical process of dwelling in everyday life.

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