

BOOK REVIEW

Łukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research and the Production of Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8166-6617-1

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This lengthy volume arises out of almost ten years of research by Łukasz Stanek. In it the author builds on a steady output of essays published in distinguished journals such as *Log* and *Hunch* situated at the crossroads of intellectual and architectural worlds, where Stanek is well at ease—whether at TU Delft, JVA Maastricht or ETH Zürich, where he currently teaches and researches. (One of these journals, *Footprint*, he launched himself with Tahl Kaminer at the Delft Institute of Technology in October 2007.) The book traces Stanek's travels throughout Europe, from his days as a young polyglot in Poland, to Switzerland by way of the Netherlands, providing important clues about the kinds of research he would eventually pursue. Its bibliography confirms his remarkable knowledge of different works that mobilised architectural (and sociological) research in France during the fertile 1970s. This material is refracted and mediated through the prism of the author's own concerns. The work is situated, like its tutelary figure Henri Lefebvre, at an intersection of “disciplines”, between sociology, urbanism and philosophy, following a clearly Marxist orientation.

We all know the recollections of adolescents who have grown up under a centrally planned economy (*économie planifiée*): “I too lived the reality of this system and made efforts to

extricate myself from it”. Nothing of the sort with Stanek: he unceasingly returns to it, notably around the Lefebvrian idea of a paradoxical space, lived and perceived as a “concrete abstraction”. The “Marxist crisis” is, as Stanek rightly points out, a recurrent if not pivotal theme in Lefebvre. The latter never lost direct contact with what was going on behind the Iron Curtain—in Yugoslavia; in Hungary with Lukács who he met in 1947; and in Poland with the geographer Bohdan Jalowiecki, who visited him at the ISU (Institute of Urban Sociology) at Nanterre during the 1970s.

Equally, Lefebvre came to know architects well as he worked on ideas of space in the 1960s and 1970s. He was close to Pierre Riboulet and Paul Chemetov, Claude Parent and Paul Virilio. Through the intervention of sociologist Henri Raymond, his spiritual son, he came to know Bernard Huet, and Henri Ciriani. And Fernand Pouillon! He collaborated with the contractor Jean-Pierre Lefebvre. He was attracted to Óscar Tusquets and Giancarlo de Carlo, as well as Ricardo Bofill, for whom he held much hope. By turns fascinated and deceived, he would always show interest in the architects of his time. Yet, in *The Production of Space*, a work that appeared at the end of the “68 years”, in 1974, Henri Lefebvre juxtaposed painters (today we would say, in

French, *plasticiens*) and architects: painters will have unveiled the social and political transformation of space; architecture will have shown itself to be at the service of state power; thus reformist and conformist on a global scale. What might this harsh assessment be worth today and what was its value at the time?

This is the fundamental question put by Stanek, following Lefebvre, who pioneered an interest in the two major motifs of the glorious Thirties: the “pavilion” and the “large housing estate developments” (*Grands Ensembles*). Henri Lefebvre became well aware, toward the end of the 1950s when he worked on the “*Grand Ensemble*” at Mourenx, that spatial proximity did not necessarily enable social proximity. The aporias and implied questions for the sociology of urbanism by the accelerated development of these two modes of residential spatial organisation were ultimately never clearly resolved. In any case, Lefebvre’s trajectory illustrates the complex relations French sociologists maintained with Gaullist State planning: both against the State and intimate with it (*contre l’Etat, mais tout contre l’Etat*).

The first appearance of Lefebvre’s work coincided, almost to the year, with the death of Le Corbusier (1965), coinciding again at its end with the petrol crisis, the advent of a return to the city and an architectural post-modernism “*à-la-française*” (1973–1974). A curious but fundamental sequence: we are still living with the compromises made at the time. Lefebvre argued with the sociologists of his day—Serge Mallet or Alain Touraine. In most respects the context seems little changed since, except perhaps for a growing realisation that the increase in urbanisation results from a (Fordist) mode of socio-economic development, rather than from a kind of pathology co-extensive with life itself (though this would

have been of no great concern to Lefebvre, an active partisan of urban revolution, since the time of revolution is always yet to come.) Countering his contemporary Lewis Mumford, who was concurrently developing his ideas about the city (his overview, *The City in History*, appeared in French in 1964), Lefebvre did not doubt the advent of the megalopolis; for Mumford, once the limits of a city like Manhattan were crossed, the city disturbed him, especially Los Angeles. Certainly Lefebvre realised that a “dis-urbanised urbanity” was emerging, stripped of its traditional urbanity; but at the same he imagined so many theatres of urban revolution to come. He was utopian in the strongest sense of the term—and it is worth noting in this regard that an anthology of the journal *Utopie*, in whose beginnings he was involved from 1966 to 1969, has just been published by Semiotext(e) in the summer of 2011.

Henri Lefebvre on Space, liberally interspersed with original images and documents, is a pleasure to read. Stanek has seen and conversed with everyone in recent years—disciples, friends, and companions still living. It is certainly true that we can understand nothing of Lefebvre if we neglect his encounters, liaisons and friendships. Equally, Stanek has exhaustively and impressively profiled and catalogued Lefebvre’s contributions to radio and television—which were very frequent around the 1960s and 1970s. The images are valuable. One encounters the slum and campus of Nanterre, astonishing scenes of daily life at Mourenx, photographs taken by Jean Dieuzaide, other touching and personal photographs from the archives of Norbert Guterman, a Club Med postcard from Palinuro—aphorised by Henri Raymond as the “concrete utopia” of the French consumerist society. An unexpected inclusion is the valley of Campan mapped by

Henri Lefebvre's own hand, part of the draft of a research project on the socio-spatial organisation of this same valley submitted on 26 January 1944 to the *Département des Arts et Traditions Populaires*. There are in addition images of the juries at Cannes in 1969, at Les Halles in Paris in 1980, as well as others. One also finds unknown projects such as one for "new Belgrade", devised in 1986 with Serge Renaudie and Pierre Guilbaud.

In this way Stanek felicitously marries thoroughly researched intellectual biography with a general survey of the periods crossed by Lefebvre: successive states of knowledge on the urban, relationship(s) to the political, doctrinal debates around architecture on one side and sociology on the other. It was the golden age of a "French Marxism" that was being developed in the margins of, and always marginal to, the Communist Party, with Kostas

Axelos, Cornelius Castoriadis, François Châtelet, Lucien Goldmann, André Gorz, Claude Lefort, Edgar Morin ... and Lefebvre was there. Hence his influence as much on the debates of the PFC (French Communist Party) on the occasion of the colloquium *For an Urbanism (Pour un urbanisme)* held in Grenoble in 1974, as on those of the PSU (Unified Socialist Party), responsive as it was to notions of the collective governance and critique of everyday life, or again on those in the PSU who were directly inspired by the notion "change the city, change life" ("*changer la ville, changer la vie*"). The more Lefebvre was plagiarised, the less he was cited. However, Stanek's work on the period reactivates the stakes and gives it a lively reading, notwithstanding the endnotes—always a little tedious to chase: and the author is a great reader, hence he cites profusely!

Translated by Michael Tawa