



## Revisiting *La production de l'espace*

Lefebvre's Engagement with Late Marx

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# Revisiting *La production de l'espace*

## Lefebvre's Engagement with Late Marx

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### Introduction

While the relationship between Marx and Lefebvre is generally recognised, it has not been sufficiently researched hitherto. His Lefebvre's engagement with Marx's Critique of Political Economy (CPE), with a few exceptions<sup>1</sup>, has received little attention within academia. Yet a wide range of supposed aspects of Lefebvre's Marxism have been broadly highlighted; Rob Shields<sup>2</sup> identified him as close to the "Latin American Left," Andy Merrifield<sup>3</sup> as "bond[ing] with [Rosa] Luxembourg" in contrast with Lenin, while others have focussed upon his "anarchistic qualities."<sup>4</sup> The lack of focus on his relationship with the CPE is especially striking given that Lefebvre developed his theory about space amid fierce debates around the intellectual development of Marx in France – primarily initiated by Althusser's *Pour Marx*<sup>5</sup> –, as well as Frankfurt School-influenced perspectives on the CPE<sup>6</sup> inspired by the second German edition and translation into several languages of the *Grundrisse* in the 1950s. Underlining the relevance of Marx's political-economic critique, Lefebvre wrote in *La production de l'espace*:

No sooner is Marx pronounced dead than Marxism experiences a resurgence. On reinspection, the classical texts emerge as far richer than had been supposed. (...) Some, such as the *Grundrisse* not many years ago have successfully revived a seemingly exhausted line of thought<sup>7</sup>.

In this piece I propose a new reading of *La production de l'espace*, deeply intertwined with the so-called problem between the historical and the logical method – a distinction originally made by Engels<sup>8</sup> to distinguish the two ways of presentation in Marx's CPE. *La production de l'espace* is not only one of the most known and remarkable works written by Lefebvre: it is also one of the least comprehensively studied and properly understood. Nevertheless, one can find there prominent insights that shed light on the role of spatial analysis in the CPE from within the very Marxist theoretical corpus. A new reading of the book would not only be of interest to Marxian scholars interested in the

CPE, but also to geographers, sociologists, etc. concerned about establishing rigorous and scientific grounds for spatial analysis.

I argue that Lefebvre attempted, through his work on the urban question, a novel response both to the inherent tensions in Marx's mature work and to the changes in modern capitalism. The very structure of *La production de l'espace*, the Marx-inspired concepts developed in there and the development of the presentation reveal a profound concern with the theoretical foundations of the CPE.

First, I offer a review of the influence of the book in Anglophone scholarship. This choice is not to suggest that Anglophone urban studies are superior to others; rather, it stems from the fact that Lefebvre is seen as a major influence in the so-called *spatial turn* in social sciences, which was mainly theorised by North American scholars at the end of the twentieth century<sup>9</sup>. An exhaustive, all-embracing review of it would take much longer than an article, so the discussion is limited to authors who have arguably produced an influential work informed by Lefebvre. The next section deals with the aim of *La production de l'espace* and with Lefebvre's method. Fourth and fifth sections present the positive outcomes of Lefebvre's research, showing their coherent relationship with the book's method. The conclusion emphasises the scarce focus on the relationship between *La production de l'espace* and the widely discussed aspects of Marx's CPE.

## The Influence of *La production de l'espace* in Anglophone Scholarship

*La production de l'espace* became known to the English-speaking public once its translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith was published in 1991.<sup>10</sup> Before that time, only a few prominent Anglophone scholars had drawn attention to Lefebvre's work. Perry Anderson considered him as the "oldest living survivor of the Western Marxist tradition" that had continued to "produce imperturbable and original work on subjects typically ignored by much of the Left."<sup>11</sup> Frederic Jameson, who described him as "probably the greatest modern French Marxist philosopher,"<sup>12</sup> was also visibly influenced by Lefebvre in developing his work on the cultural turn. He indeed showed in *Postmodernism*<sup>13</sup> an unusual knowledge of Lefebvre's multifaceted work, at a time when he was largely ignored within Anglophone scholarship. Kristin Ross's study on the Paris Commune and social space also owes much to Lefebvre. She acknowledged that her own theory was developed "through my work on a project about Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre."<sup>14</sup> She interviewed Lefebvre in 1983, bringing his thoughts on the Situationists to Anglophone readers.<sup>15</sup> David Harvey initially developed his own Marxist insights on the spatial logics of capitalism without knowing Lefebvre. But, as soon as he discovered some of his writings, he acknowledged how "confident" he felt "in appealing (...) to Lefebvre's work."<sup>16</sup> Harvey's attempt

to consider space in Marxian political economic analysis somehow parallels some of Lefebvre's own aims. In that sense, his appropriation and further development of some *Lefebvorean* concepts, such as the "second circuit [of capital],"<sup>17</sup> are essential to understand his prolific theoretical production. However, while more or less influenced by Lefebvre, neither of these authors directly discussed *La production de l'espace* as such.

In the field of geography, Edward Soja<sup>18</sup> was one of the first Anglophone scholars in popularising Lefebvre's spatial work. He even attempted to defend Lefebvre<sup>19</sup> from the critical observations David Harvey had made in the epilogue of *Social Justice and the City*.<sup>20</sup> However, Soja later acknowledged the difficulties he encountered when reading *La production de l'espace*. It gave him the impression of having an "anarchic style and structure," as "Lefebvre seemed not to be following his own plan, flying off in lateral directions and posing very different arguments from those presented earlier."<sup>21</sup> He eventually concluded that the work did not have an ordinary or linear structure, but was rather written "as a musical composition, with a multiplicity of instruments" that "could be read as a polyphonic fugue that assertively introduced its keynote themes early on and then changed them intentionally in contrapuntal variations that took radically different forms and harmonies."<sup>22</sup>

As the first Anglophone scholar who wrote a whole monograph on Lefebvre, the work of Rob Shields<sup>23</sup> undeniably played a crucial role in translating such a multifaceted and extremely long work into English readers. He did a great job in analysing all aspects of Lefebvre's complex work, bringing attention to often underestimated aspects such as his early surrealist period in the group *Philosophies* or his writings on fascism. Yet Shields' comments on Lefebvre's method and dialectics are obscure and sometimes confusing. The reader is continually reminded that Lefebvre's method was a dialectical one, through abstract phrases that present *dialectics* as a magic wand – such as "[t]he dialectic is the centripetal core [of his method]"<sup>24</sup> –, which indeed remembers the style of the dogmatic Marxism Lefebvre actually criticised. In fact, what *dialectics* actually mean is not concretely explained in his book. The reader rather finds common-place arguments such as "a logic and methodology that is a universally useful approach,"<sup>25</sup> according to which "[neither knowledge nor practical experience] could be privileged over the other."<sup>26</sup> The complexity of Hegelian dialectics is similarly simplified in an already very familiar style: "[b]y comparing different theses or propositions, one spontaneously seeks a better and higher unity."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it bears a stark similarity with a classic exposition of Marxist orthodoxy: "When the third term, negation of the negation, is achieved, the solution appears, for, at that moment, the reason for the contradiction is eliminated: obsolete."<sup>28</sup>

Shields' somehow flawed account on dialectics led him to a sharp, sometimes brute criticism of *La production de l'espace*. While he recognises some important aspects, such as the twofold meaning of *production* in

Lefebvre's theory, as well as the influence of Marx's account of the commodity-form, Shields argued that the spatial history in *La production de l'espace* is "a stereotypical, linear, Eurocentric modelling of historical progress."<sup>29</sup> He also pointed out that Lefebvre's presentation "is anti-dialectical, suggests that time is the ultimate ordering system of space, and directs attention away from struggles in everyday life to grand themes in the economic and political structure of a time," concluding that "much of the 485 pages of *Production de l'espace* is thus a failure in Lefebvre's own terms."<sup>30</sup> In other words: only because Lefebvre argued that more developed societies correspond to spaces which are more socially produced and detached from nature (i.e., just because Lefebvre draws a coherent relationship between time and space), Shields concludes his theory is another sort of historical teleology. But how is Lefebvre's spatial history to be "stereotypical, linear" considering the large number of praises he gives to many pre-capitalist spatial practices, spaces of representations and representations of space?

In fact, Lefebvre's method characterises for showing the paradoxes of geohistorical progress, arguing that higher levels of spatial unity were achieved under less developed forms of societies. The opposition between *oeuvre* and *product* is present all the time in *La Production de l'espace*, with a certain level of nostalgia included. See, for example, his comments on Venice as "just as unique and unified as a painting or a sculpture" with an "architectural and monumental unity which extends from each palazzo to the city as a whole,"<sup>31</sup> or his passionate comments on the "miracle" of Ancient Greek space and its "simple idea of unity"<sup>32</sup>, as opposed to contemporary abstract space.

Lefebvre's view therefore parallels Marx's, which was also far from being stereotypical and linear and consequently wrote about the prolific art production in Ancient Greece: "In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society."<sup>33</sup>

In the twenty first century, Łukasz Stanek has produced a very rigorous approach to the spatial theory of Lefebvre, with a particular focus on architecture. He has also the merit of discovering and editing a work by Lefebvre, written at the same time as *La production de l'espace*, that remained unpublished long after his death.<sup>34</sup> Despite his focus on architecture and urban planning, Stanek attempts to cross boundaries in order to understand the thought of an author as complex and multifaceted as Lefebvre. In the light of the popularisation of the concept of "production of space," he warns that "it becomes increasingly necessary to oppose its banalization by revealing the philosophical sources of this concept."<sup>35</sup>

He interestingly calls the attention to a fundamental concept in Lefebvre's work, often ignored by the Anglophone scholarship: that of "concrete abstraction," which is frequently used in *La production de l'espace*.

This is constantly referred to in many other writings to denote a wide range of things, from money, commodities or language<sup>36</sup> to space<sup>37</sup> or the State.<sup>38</sup> The idea of an abstraction being concrete is inspired, at least partly, by Marx's analysis of the commodity and abstract labour, which "achieves practical truth as an abstraction"<sup>39</sup> in capitalist societies. Insofar as commodities are exchanged according to the abstract labour socially necessary to produce them, and as commodity-exchange forms the "*nexus rerum*"<sup>40</sup> of capitalist societies, their common attribute – abstract labour – is not just an abstraction made in thought, but one that "govern[s] social relations."<sup>41</sup>

Conceptualising space as a concrete abstraction, Stanek asserts that "the lived practices of those inhabiting this space are themselves abstract."<sup>42</sup> He correctly points to the Cartesian system of representation as something becoming practically true, for pre-abstract space "characterized by blurred borders, and qualitatively defined by identity, natural peculiarities, topography, authority, religion, tradition, and history" is now homogenised under "three coordinates of the analytic geometry."<sup>43</sup>

Stuart Elden is arguably the Anglophone scholar who has developed the most rigorous yet cautious reading of Henri Lefebvre, due to a careful study of his main theoretical sources – identified as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>44</sup> Elden was among the first in calling attention to the gaps in the 1980/90s reception of Lefebvre, critically stating that popularisations of his work such as Soja's "does Lefebvre a great disservice."<sup>45</sup> His reading of *La production de l'espace* is incredibly well-informed as regards to Lefebvre's philosophical sources. Unlike other accounts of the book, he also noticed the twofold objective of Lefebvre's work: "an assertion of the importance of space in tandem with that of time; and an analysis of the spaces of the modern age."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, against the predominant current depicting a Lefebvre closer to the early Marx, he highlighted the relevance of *late* Marxian concepts for Lefebvre, such as "the mode of production" which "is essential to his analysis."<sup>47</sup>

## Lefebvre's Spatial Project, Marx's Critique of Political Economy

Not only was Lefebvre influenced by Marx *in general*; he discussed the ambivalences of Marx's various research plans, the different positive outcomes they produced, and drew on a particular interpretation of Marx's methods to develop his own research method and presentation of the spatial *problematic*. Whereas his engagement with the early writings of Marx is undeniable – he indeed argued, *contra* Althusser, for an integral interpretation of Marx's intellectual trajectory, as one determined by *political* breaks instead of by *epistemological* ones<sup>48</sup>, and furthermore, edited Marx's 1844 manuscripts in French language<sup>49</sup> –, his discussion of Marx's late work can shed further light on his spatial writings.

This is not to merely reduce *La production de l'espace* to a critique of the political economy of space. The aim of the book is indeed wider than that. He regarded the political economy of space as an aspect of the theory of the production of space: "The reason why such a political economy will not be further elaborated upon here is that it is an offshoot of a more powerful theory: the theory of the production of space."<sup>50</sup> His engagement with other authors like Nietzsche or Heidegger is remarkable, as shown by Elden,<sup>51</sup> and in fact Lefebvre does not develop his discussion on space in a literary style akin to Marx's, devoting many paragraphs to cultural, architectural and even psychoanalytical topics. However, I argue that whereas his work cannot be reduced to the critique of a political economy of space in a strictly Marxian sense, at the same time it cannot be understood without it. Moreover, the very plan of the book, its structure and positive findings bear clear similarities with the CPE: "Our present analysis will not attain its full meaning until political economy has been reinstated as the way to understand productive activity."<sup>52</sup>

*La production de l'espace* can be regarded as the culmination of Lefebvre's long studies on space.<sup>53</sup> It is preceded by some important works initiated around 1967, such as *Le droit a la ville*,<sup>54</sup> *La revolution urbaine*,<sup>55</sup> *Espace et politique*<sup>56</sup> or the less known but still crucial *La pensée marxiste et la ville*<sup>57</sup> – which simultaneously follow his writings on rural questions.<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that Lefebvre used to coin many terms that he would discard very soon. For example, the concept of an *urban society* tending to replace industrial society appears continually in *Le droit a la ville* and *La revolution urbaine*, whereas it disappears in subsequent writings without clear explanation. However, already in *Espace et politique* the same idea is present with different words: "the contradictions of space encompass, bring [contradictions and conflicts in space] to a higher level"<sup>59</sup>, advancing the similar notion of "a transitional period between the mode of production of things in space and the mode of production of space."<sup>60</sup> Something similar occurs with his formulation of *right to the city*, which in *La production de l'espace* appears slightly changed as *right to difference*. This lack of textual continuity and explicit self-clarification undeniably makes Lefebvre's work harder to follow.

Lefebvre wrote amid a sharply divided theoretical background that, according to him, had only produced "fragments and cross-sections of space."<sup>61</sup> He consequently aimed his project at developing a "unitary theory."<sup>62</sup> He also begins with a basic theoretical assumption, which is demonstrated alongside the work: "that (social) space is a (social) product."<sup>63</sup> This has a twofold implication for theory: if space is not only an object, but a moving, dynamic subject, then the task of theory does not only consist in describing things, but also in comprehending transformative, productive action. The very title of the book refers to a productive activity, rather than to an object of contemplation. Lefebvre consequently underlined the problems inherent in such a twofold methodological assumption:

Theory reproduces the generative process - by means of a concatenation of concepts, to be sure, but in a very strong sense of the word: from within, not just from without (descriptively), and globally - that is, moving continually back and forth between past and present.<sup>64</sup>

This is key to understanding the kernel of Lefebvre's methodology: he aimed to analyse the specific type of space in each mode of production (a method he refers to as *synchronic* or *regressive*), as well as the productive, transformative and mediative role played by space in the transition from one mode of production to another (a method he refers to as *diachronic* or *progressive*). Hence his labelling of his method as "regressive-progressive."<sup>65</sup> This theoretical concern about the role played by space in historical transitions can be seen in previous works such as *Le droit à la ville*, where he laments that the transition to capitalism has been "well studied by historians, except for what relates to the city and the 'urban system'."<sup>66</sup>

Echoing Marx's idea of the most historically developed societies as containing the keys for the understanding of the previous ones,<sup>67</sup> Lefebvre asks: "how could we come to understand a genesis, the genesis of the present, along with the preconditions and processes involved, other than by starting from that present, working our way back to the past and then retracing our steps?"<sup>68</sup> The importance of such a methodological assumption was also highlighted in *La pensée marxiste et la ville*: "we cannot invoke historical evolution to critically understand and appreciate the current form of society, bourgeois society. (...) History cannot replace political economy and the critique of political economy!"<sup>69</sup>

The combination of the progressive and regressive method applied to space was seen by Lefebvre as his particular contribution to Marxist theory. Shortly before, he had criticised Althusser's structuralism on the basis that it did not aim at updating the CPE to the capitalist societies of the second half of the twentieth century, but rather at a merely textual - and thus scholastic - reading of Marx's *Capital*.<sup>70</sup> Lefebvre believed, on the one hand, that the concepts developed by Marx in his CPE are highly important, but need to be rethought in the light of the leading role played by urbanisation and space in contemporary capitalism - which is a type of capitalism where "the [industrial] problematic is displaced and becomes that of urban development."<sup>71</sup> He consequently suggested that the categories of the CPE still have full normative meaning and sense, whenever its object is updated (i.e., when they take modern capitalism into account):

The scientific and technological changes of the modern world have now made a reconsideration of Marxist thought inevitable. The thesis presented here might be summarized as follows. Each of the concepts of Marxism may be taken up once more, and carried to a higher level, without any significant moment of the theory as a whole being lost. On the other hand, if they are considered in the setting of Marx's exposition,

these concepts and their theoretical articulation no longer have an object.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, he correctly saw a tension within Marx's own work and methodology: between the historical and logical modes of presentation in his economic works. Just in the conclusion of the first chapter of *La production de l'espace*, Lefebvre dealt straightforwardly with this problematic. He was concerned about Marx's partial abandonment of the historical exposition of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*, to which he turned back when he needs to explain, in the eighth part of his seminal work,<sup>73</sup> the real, practical agency that enabled such a mode of production – the primitive accumulation that historically led to the preponderance of capital over other modes of production in England:

witness the fact that the exposition in *Capital* by no means follows exactly the method set forth in the *Grundrisse*; Marx's great doctrinal dissertation starts off from a form, that of exchange value, and not from the concepts brought to the fore in the earlier work, namely production and labour. On the other hand, the approach adumbrated in the *Grundrisse* is taken up again apropos of the accumulation of capital: in England, studying the most advanced form of capitalism in order to understand the system in other countries and the process of its actual growth, Marx cleaved firmly to his initial methodological precepts.<sup>74</sup>

In a way, Lefebvre does not reject *Capital* at all, but seems to regret Marx's richer comments in the *Grundrisse* about the differences between the various modes of production. According to him, “[In the *Grundrisse*] one preoccupation is dominant, one that never disappeared but was subsequently attenuated: an emphasis on differences.”<sup>75</sup>

It therefore comes by no surprise that in *La production de l'espace* Lefebvre regrets the partial abandonment in *Capital* of a method that emphasises historical differences:

Whereas *Capital* stresses a homogenizing rationality founded on the quasi-'pure' form, that of (exchange) value, the *Grundrisse* insists at all levels on difference. Not that the *Grundrisse* leaves form out of the picture; rather, it goes from one content to the next and generates forms on the basis of these contents. Less rigour, less emphasis on logical consistency, and hence a less elaborate formalization or axiomatization - all leave the door open to more concrete themes, especially in connection with the (dialectical) relations between town and country, between natural reality and social reality. *Grundrisse* Marx takes all the historical mediations into consideration, including the village community, the family, and so on<sup>76</sup>.

I argue that Lefebvre, concerned about the tensions within Marx's intertwined methods, aimed to provide a novel solution to their sometimes problematic entanglement in *La production de l'espace*: he combined here the progressive

and the regressive types of presentation, focussing on space as an active process through which the transition between different modes of production can be explained (progressive), while the categorical apparatus illuminating that theoretical journey is one taken from the most developed society (regressive); the concept of the production of space, which only emerges in advanced capitalism.

### Research Outcomes of *La production de l'espace*: The Regressive

*La production de l'espace*, despite its complexity and intermittent lack of order, cannot be seen as a mere methodological dissertation. Lefebvre's methodological comments are fundamental but would lack full meaning without their subsequent application to his research on space. While the book is sometimes difficult to follow, and an important level of "meandering style"<sup>77</sup> is fairly attributable to Lefebvre, developing a more comprehensive reading is possible if his theoretical sources are seriously taken into account. According to the methodological observations made in the previous section, I propose a new understanding of its content and structure. After presenting the plan of the work in the initial chapter, Lefebvre discusses, in the second chapter (*Social Space*) the concept of *the production of space* as a historically determined one, dating his theoretical emergence back to the work of the Bauhaus in the 1920s. It is, therefore, a product of a certain stage of development: mature capitalism. According to Lefebvre, the Bauhaus understood things in space not as isolated, but as relational; moreover, space is created by human activity in a unitary sense. A historical achievement of the Bauhaus was that of binding architecture to capitalist productive activity: "all thinking about space and time was bound up with social practice more precisely, with industrial practice."<sup>78</sup>

To take a concept from the most advanced theoretical current is a further Marxian influence on Lefebvre. The former took political economists – in contrast with vulgar economists, which "deals with appearances only"<sup>79</sup> – not to draw an external critique, but rather to critically develop their own concepts in order to show their inconsistencies and gaps, as well as their scientific – albeit ultimately limited – operability. As Marx warned in a letter to Engels,

it is one thing for a critique to take a science to the point at which it admits of a dialectical presentation, and quite another to apply an abstract, ready-made system of logic to vague presentiments of just such a system.<sup>80</sup>

In that sense, Stanek<sup>81</sup> has drawn a useful comparison between the emergence of a consciousness of labour, as seen in Adam Smith's work, and the emergence of the concept of space production, as seen in the Bauhaus, both reflecting the self-understanding that capitalist society generates about itself.

In the subsequent chapter (*Spatial Architectonics*), Lefebvre criticises the notions about space held by some great philosophers, and examines the idea of space as an extension of the body. The presentation might seem to get slightly more complex here, as Lefebvre also deals with some of his contemporary currents – mainly psychoanalysis and linguistics –, but he is overall attempting to theorise his notion of *production of space* through a critique of the history of spatial thinking.

But perhaps surprisingly, in the next three and final chapters before the conclusions, Lefebvre drastically changes its exposition and turns from what seems a complex discussion of different theories to a history of space. Why such an abrupt change, with no apparent or explicit reason? And furthermore, why is his spatial history linear, beginning with Ancient Greece and ending with contemporary capitalism, if he had previously advocated for a regressive method that understands the past from the present, and not the other way around? The answer to these questions reveals the secrets of the obscurity of the book's structure, as well as the purposes motivating its writing.

The apparent inconsistency of the book's structure with his initial comments on the importance of understanding the present from the present itself can be understood as this: Lefebvre provides, after the initial chapter, a discussion of the very notion of the *production of space*, as a developed concept that can only arise when productive activity is sufficiently developed: in mature capitalism. Even though this concept arises only at a specific historical moment, it provides the means to understanding earlier spatial relationships; this is why it is discussed at the outset of the work. Because Lefebvre aims to show the differences in space throughout societies and historical transitions, he can now begin his historical explanation, given that the concept of the *production of space* – a concept arising in advanced capitalist societies, but analytically operational for previous societies – has been theoretically developed. The virtue of this spatial history is that it further develops the very concept of the *production of space*, deploying its historicity, showing space as an active subject in historical transformation. In fact, this whole idea is advanced by Lefebvre himself in the initial chapter:

A new concept, that of the production of space, appears at the start; it must 'operate' or 'work' in such a way as to shed light on processes from which it cannot separate itself because it is a product of them. (...) Ultimately, once it has illuminated and thereby validated its own coming-into-being, the production of space (as theoretical concept and practical reality in indissoluble conjunction) will become clear, and our demonstration will be over.<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, this aspect of *La production de l'espace* bears further parallelisms with *Capital's* structure and reveals a resemblance between their methodological concerns. Lefebvre, whether consciously or not, discovered and consequently put into practice an aspect of Marx's exposition, one that

the Frankfurt School enunciated around the same time and that later became widely accepted in Marxist scholarship: the fact that Marx only begins his historical explanation once the scientific concepts have been logically developed. In other words: the argument of *Capital* proceeds from the most “elementary and simple”<sup>83</sup> economic forms to progressively more complex ones. However, the transitions from one to another are logically, and not historically explained. It is only in *The So-Called Primitive Accumulation* (ultimate section of the first volume of *Capital*) when Marx explained the process by which capitalism practically came into being in England, perhaps to avoid the impression of an “idealist manner of presentation, which makes it seem as if it were a matter of conceptual determinations and of the dialectic of these concepts”,<sup>84</sup> and ultimately underscoring the importance of productive activity. As the CPE scholar Alfred Schmidt put it:

Marx would not have been successful in unfolding the content of the historical presuppositions of capital's emergence had he not first grasped the essence of capital theoretically (...). [T]he mature Marx placed the history of capital on scientific foundations by proceeding on an abstract-theoretical rather than a historiographic level.<sup>85</sup>

Is not precisely this methodological step the one Lefebvre is applying, as he first discusses the concept of the production of space, and then follows with his spatial history? But there is a further novelty in Lefebvre's regressive-progressive approach. The originality of his exposition is that transitions between societies are explained as mediated in virtue of space; this is perhaps what Lefebvre meant when he somehow obscurely enunciated that “the subject of history is unquestionably the city.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Research Outcomes of *La production de l'espace*: The Progressive**

The first of these three chapters (*From Absolute Space to Abstract Space*) comprises the development of what Lefebvre called *absolute space*, as characteristic of ancient civilizations and feudalism, and describes the emergence of *abstract space*, as characteristic of commodity production.

Absolute space arises in the origins of civilization, as a human *break* with nature which nevertheless encompasses it: while being a purely human creation, absolute space was understood as having natural properties. It reflected the human view of nature, as it “appears as transcendent, as sacred (i.e. inhabited by divine forces), as magical and cosmic. (...) [I]t continues to be perceived as part of nature.”<sup>87</sup> This coincides with the emergence of the distinction between town and country. Lefebvre, who regarded logics as indispensable – though eventually insufficient in themselves – to understand spatial relations, identifies the Greek city-states as a *centre*, whose form “seems to gather in everything which surrounds it [rural space].”<sup>88</sup> It is interesting to note that he also attributed the same form of centrality to

chronologically posterior spaces: the feudal market, the capitalist city centre, the Paris Commune<sup>89</sup>... for there are certain formal determinations common to different spaces. Space, as a relational reality, comprises this formal relationship between centre and periphery, which is historically expressed in a way or another depending on the mode of production. Whereas the ancient *agora* brought Greek citizens together as a fundamental unity for the *polis*, the capitalist city centre concentrates the means of production and consumption, political buildings and centres of decision, etc. However, *centrality* as a form remains there, albeit transformed, which accounts for the spatial continuities and discontinuities analysed by Lefebvre. Moreover, the spatial form is crucial to understand the transitions from one space to another, and fundamental for the class struggle.

From Greece, Lefebvre shifts to Ancient Rome. Whereas both can be considered as pertaining to a similar historic mode of production, and although they were broadly characterised by the same type of space, Lefebvre warns about the dangers of subsuming Ancient Greece and Rome under the same label. He was rather concerned about highlighting the differences between them:

The claim made on the basis of this fact alone by a self-proclaimedly Marxist philosophy of history which posits a specific 'mode of production' founded on slavery succeeds only, however, in rendering unintelligible the realities of that city state, of Athens or Rome, of the Logos/Cosmos, and of Roman Law.<sup>90</sup>

Roman space, mirroring the development of private property and law, harbingers the emergence of “a space with a great future in Western Europe”<sup>91</sup>. This is seen by Lefebvre not as intrinsically bad; quite the opposite, Roman’s relationship with space “put an end to the mere contemplation of nature, of the Cosmos or of the world, and pointed the way towards the mastery which transforms instead of simply interpreting.”<sup>92</sup>

Lefebvre does not explain in detail the fall of the Western Roman Empire. He does, though briefly, attribute it to transformations in space; in particular to the decadence of the Roman cities, which unlike modern capitalist cities had its “basis in the earth, in landownership.”<sup>93</sup> This particular relation between town and country under Antiquity is ultimately seen as the reason for its collapse. Marx had also expressed in very similar terms, when he wrote that “the history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but of cities founded on landed property and on agriculture,”<sup>94</sup> in contrast with modern capitalism which is “already moving on its own foundation”<sup>95</sup> and implies “the urbanization of the countryside, not ruralization of the city as in antiquity.”<sup>96</sup>

Lefebvre ironically notes that, according to most historians, in the twelfth century “history suddenly resumed after a long interruption.”<sup>97</sup> The transformations occurred after this century announced a new type of space

through the emergence of medieval cities, which had a novel kind of centrality: the marketplace. Whereas “antiquity looked upon trade and tradespeople as external to the city (...), [t]he medieval revolution brought commerce inside the town.”<sup>98</sup> Lefebvre points out that the centre-periphery relation – i.e., “[t]he form of social space”<sup>99</sup> – in medieval towns is different to that in Ancient cities. Unlike the Agora, the marketplace was “opened up on every side onto the surrounding territory”,<sup>100</sup> so as to allow the circulation of commodities. Therefore, it “was by definition a space of exchange and communications, and therefore of networks.”<sup>101</sup> In sum, the space emerged in medieval cities laid the groundwork for abstract, capitalist space. But this was not yet abstract space, nor modern capitalism, as “[r]eligious space did not disappear with the advent of commercial space.”<sup>102</sup>

Lefebvre’s hypothesis of the transitory role played by space is clearly highlighted at this respect: “[t]he historical mediation between medieval (or feudal) space and the capitalist space which was to result from accumulation was located in urban space.”<sup>103</sup> Whereas a wide range of demographic, institutional, political and even psychological factors such as “dynastic interests, ideologies, the ambitions of the mighty, the formation of nation states, demographic pressures, and so on” have been used to explain the transition to capitalism, Lefebvre asks why nobody has attempted to explain this history by means of spatial analysis: “Inasmuch as space is the locus of all such chronologies, might it not constitute a principle of explanation at least as acceptable as any other?”<sup>104</sup>

The Renaissance cities provided a new rationality, based on exchange and calculation, to administer space, thus substituting the power of feudal landlords. But the true space of accumulation in Western Europe only emerged through “the establishment of the world market, and the conquest and plunder of the oceans and continents by Europeans.”<sup>105</sup> This spatial transition coincides with a historical period when, according to Marx, for the first time, the historically created factor rules over nature “capital rules, the social, historically created element [is predominant].”<sup>106</sup> Space ceased to be absolute, as no longer needed to mirror an external reality – nature: “[i]nstead, it assumed its own identity, and began to represent itself graphically.”<sup>107</sup>

Lefebvre does not discuss the industrialisation process in detail here, perhaps because he had expounded on it in previous works such as *Le droit à la ville* or *La Pensée marxiste et la ville*. He would nevertheless discuss in the subsequent chapter the characteristics of *abstract space*, as completely developed in twentieth century capitalism. Instead, he concludes the chapter with a discussion of violence and the State, as further generators of the new, capitalist space.

In the fifth chapter, *Contradictory Space*, Lefebvre deals with contemporary capitalist space. There we find the most insightful comments on *abstract space*. This is paralleled with the commodity, as it represents a

generality – that of exchangeability – where the abstract (*product*) predominates over the concrete (*oeuvre*). The predominance of exchange value over use value in space resonates with Marx's<sup>108</sup> claim of capital tending to overcome all natural barriers. *Abstract space*, in sum, is the space “where the tendency to homogenization exercises its pressure and its repression with the means at its disposal: a semantic void abolishes former meanings.”<sup>109</sup> But *abstract space* cannot be entirely homogeneous; just like commodities always bear a concrete, use-value, abstract space is ultimately dependent on a material, concrete location. Take, for example, natural resources and its influence on space: whereas cities' location have traditionally depended on natural features, human mastery over nature has enabled a relative independence from it, which nevertheless seems to be absolute. Urbanisation provides a clear example of society becoming more and more independent from its natural origins, laying its own grounds, rhythms and space. This is achieved “by means of urbanization, (...) in accordance with the law of the reproducible and the repetitive, by abolishing spatial and temporal differences, by destroying nature and nature's time.”<sup>110</sup> Yet such a savage tendency toward decoupling from place or natural determinations display its limits at some point, as the climate emergency clearly manifests: Lefebvre related the dominance of such real abstractions with the existential threat faced by the Earth. “The finiteness of nature and of the Earth thus has the power to challenge blind (ideological) belief in the infinite power of abstraction.”<sup>111</sup>

The eventual dependency of *abstract space* to natural resources and concrete location is just one of the multiple ways of exemplifying the impossibility of a completely homogeneous space. In a similar fashion, Lefebvre also mentions the materiality of infrastructure and networks, the necessary localisation of consumption, or the very dependency of abstract space to an element which does not have a capitalist origin itself: the city. From here, Lefebvre jumps to the penultimate chapter, *From the Contradictions of Space to Differential Space*, where he analyses these concrete, qualitative aspects of *abstract space* – which he calls *differences* – as possibilities of its overcoming. In other words, what Lefebvre is attempting here – and what can be regarded as one of his primary contributions to Marxist theory – is to develop an insight of a socialist type of transformation that takes space into consideration.

The theoretical lessons of *Capital* are displayed at this point again; Lefebvre claims that everyday life and space can be explained through the contradictions between exchange value and use value, which famously lie at the heart of the beginning of *Capital*, are developed through the rest of Marx's presentation and, according to the CPE scholar Roman Rosdolsky,<sup>112</sup> allow a comprehension of the rest of the work. Paradoxically, the modern production of space, which on the one hand enables a widening of *abstract space*, entails on the other hand a reaffirmation of use-value: “[T]he qualitative successfully

resists resorption by the quantitative - just as use resists resorption by value."<sup>113</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, Lefebvre is referring to the increasing importance of tourism and leisure in contemporary capitalism, as "the body regains a certain right to use" prioritising qualitative characteristics of space: "sun, snow, sea."<sup>114</sup> Translated into geoeconomics terms, this accounts for the late twentieth century division of labour in Europe, with northern productive regions and southern touristic places.

However, Lefebvre is not ingenuously placing leisure as inherently revolutionary; he is rather very aware that leisure "is as alienated and alienating as labour; as much an agent of co-optation as it is itself co-opted; and both an assimilative and an assimilated part of the 'system'."<sup>115</sup> Conversely, leisure is "no more than a virtuality," but one that tends to "behave as a differential field" through the recognition of the body, therefore "breaking out of the temporal and spatial shell developed in response to labour."<sup>116</sup> In sum, leisure demonstrates that other spaces than that of productive growth are possible, yet it remains an integral part of contemporary capitalism.

Lefebvre thought the quantitative growth of the productive forces had reached a limit, so it had to survive through the production of space. He saw in the capitalist production of space a condition of possibility for a "conscious production of space";<sup>117</sup> socialism was no longer to be understood as "production of things in space," but as conscious production of space, which "implies a shift from domination to appropriation, and the primacy of use over exchange (the withering-away of exchange value)."<sup>118</sup> His work is thus not only a critique of capitalist space, but also a critique of orthodox, productivist Marxism, and implies a novel assessment of the revolutionary process that takes space into consideration.

*Right to difference* is the umbrella under which Lefebvre labelled his general amendment to the classic type of socialist transformation - as he similarly did with his *right to the city*.<sup>119</sup> The fact that *abstract space* tending toward homogenisation actually produces *difference* parallels, according to Lefebvre, the development of science, music, poetry or philosophy: in all these, "repetition (iteration, recurrence) generates difference,"<sup>120</sup> an argument he had presented in a book written almost three decades before.<sup>121</sup> In that sense, "[a]bstract space (...) makes the relationship between repetition and difference a more antagonistic one."<sup>122</sup> If erasing all differences is a tendency towards an impossible goal, then social transformation is possible. Lefebvre believed the richness of urban life, "the simultaneity of "everything" that is susceptible of coming together"<sup>123</sup> not only was indestructible, but also to play an important role in subverting *abstract space*. He consequently coined the term *right to difference*, to express the need of liberating from a space based upon repetitions, homogeneity and abstractions. With his emphasis on spatial differences to overcome the capitalist mode of production and its space, he therefore culminated roughly a decade of theorising about the city and the

urban experience, as “place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable” which “persists and even intensifies”<sup>124</sup> despite the efforts of the State to “devalorize, degrade, destroy, urban life.”<sup>125</sup>

In the final chapter, *Openings and Conclusions*, Lefebvre not only provided a synthesis of the whole work, but also an extension of the emancipatory proposals of the previous section, as well as a reassertion of the method used throughout the book. Furthermore, he enunciates the purpose of the book is the one underlined in this piece: theorising transitions, the role played by space in them, particularly in “a conflict-laden transition from one mode of production (that of things) to another (that of space),”<sup>126</sup> which is the topic of the previous two chapters. He therefore wrote: “The transition here considered is characterized first of all by its contradictions: (..) between abstract and differential space.”<sup>127</sup>

Lefebvre concluded the work reminding the reader about the emancipatory purposes motivating its writing. The book “has been informed from beginning to end by a project (...) of a different society.”<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in a fashion very characteristic of him to keep a distance from dogmatic Marxism, Lefebvre warns that he is not suggesting a closed plan nor a system, but rather “an orientation.”<sup>129</sup>

## Conclusion

The structure of *La production de l'espace* has a very specific order, widely underestimated by scholarship, but deeply entrenched in Lefebvre's compromise to keep up with Marx's CPE – and consequently, with his emancipatory goals.

Lefebvre's work is extraordinarily broad and multifaceted. Much of it remains untranslated into English, though some great efforts have been done in the past two decades.<sup>130</sup> As a consequence, its reception has necessarily been slow, and should proceed carefully so as to avoid drawing vague conclusions. The debates it generated are undeniably interesting and useful, as well as the empirical research it has inspired.<sup>131</sup> In general, Lefebvre somehow determined the so-called *spatial turn* in social sciences and the shape it took. However, there are evident gaps in the reception by the academia, though more rigorous approaches have been developed in the twenty first century.

Further discussion and real interest in the spatial writings of Lefebvre like *La production de l'espace* would help spatial social sciences in becoming more rigorous and well founded, especially given the strong empiricist tradition of fields like geography, for instance. In a way, Lefebvre comes from a critical yet modern intellectual tradition, concerned about dogmatism – even when this appears as *science* – but also deeply interested in searching tools to

rationally understand the world. Spatial social sciences would particularly benefit from a higher interest in the work of authors like Marx and the classic German philosophers – main sources of Lefebvre's work and implicitly omnipresent in *La production de l'espace* – who, although apparently did not develop a particular spatial theory, are quintessential to lay the groundwork for any scientific approach.

In sum, understanding Lefebvre's intellectual context, as well as paying attention to his concerns about Marxist theory as expressed in previous works renders essential to grasp the objectives of *La production de l'espace*, as well as many of the arguments developed there. While a wide range of theoretical currents are examined in the book, his reading of and novel response to the problems inherent in Marx's CPE feature a prominent role; they actually determine the very structure of the work, as this piece attempts to illustrate. With the concept of *production of space*, and the combination of the regressive and the progressive methods, Lefebvre proposed a revolutionary way of comprehending history and space, whose origins can be traced back to the writing of *Capital*.

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