



Henri Lefebvre, *Marxist Thought and the City* (translated by Robert Bononno), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780816698745 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816698752 (paper)

When agreeing to review Robert Bononno's excellent new translation of Lefebvre's *Marxist Thought and the City*, I frankly anticipated an easier task than the one before me now. I imagined that this new text might be a somewhat more straightforward book to read than Lefebvre's essential but deeply challenging *The Production of Space* (1991a). There is some truth to this premonition: the book is indeed an easier, more linear read than *Production*, and I expect that there are many advanced undergraduates or early-career graduate students who would find it a less alienating point of entry into Lefebvre's thinking. Yet this new-to-English book does not, as a contemporary text, stand on its own. In my view it would be irresponsible to offer this book to students without demanding that they immediately move on to struggle with *Production*. Worse still, I am not at all convinced that reading this new translation first would do much to avoid the bewilderment that many first-time readers of *Production* often experience. Precisely what, then, is the utility of this excellent new book? I find myself in need of some historical context.

Henri Lefebvre was a prolific author, extensively cited in his native French for decades before any of his major works were available in English translation. *Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1* (1991b), a wide-ranging book which has never really received its full due in Anglophone scholarship, was originally published in French in 1947(!) and in English translation in 1991. Also in 1991 came Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation of 1974's *The Production of Space*, which was an epochal event in Anglophone urban theory; and of course, 1991 was the year of Lefebvre's death. These events were followed in 1996 by the publication of Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas' translation of "The Right to the City" (originally published in 1968) as part of their book *Writings on Cities* (1996). These works are key outputs from a period

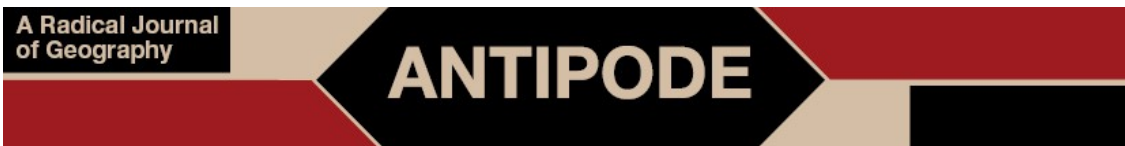
when Lefebvre seemed to put all the pieces of his critical vision of urbanism and urban theory together.

As I have attempted to trace elsewhere (Pierce and Martin 2015), by the early 1990s the task of reading Lefebvre's key works from the late 1960s and early 1970s was already complicated by the tremendous epistemological movement in Anglophone critical theory between the 1970s and the 1990s. *Production* in its English translation is a work out of time. It seems to offer a bridge between structural/materialist and more post-structural epistemological stances, between explanatory holism and standpoint theory's demands of partial and contingent knowledge. But the scholarly conversation about critical epistemology proceeded in English, for the most part, without Lefebvre into the late 1990s; even after *Production* was available, it took at least a decade for many urban scholars to really absorb and adequately position his work in their ongoing intellectual trajectories.

Now another 25 years have passed, and here we have a lucid and transparent translation of Lefebvre finding his intellectual footing in 1972 as he prepares the ground on which to build *Production*, his most daring and far-reaching manuscript. *Marxist Thought and the City* is built around close, historicized readings of Marx's and Engels' writing (read together but mostly as individual authors) about cities and the urban process. I cannot praise Bononno's fine work highly enough, and Stuart Elden's excellent Foreword situates the text in Lefebvre's *oeuvre* better and at much greater length than I do here. Furthermore—and here is where you may expect faint praise but instead will find it strong—Lefebvre's exploration of Engels and Marx makes for fascinating reading. He gives Engels his fair due in the historical production of “Marxist” thought, and draws out key moments when each of the two thinkers implicate the urban in the historical production of modern capitalism. Lefebvre's discussion is, as he insists in the author's Introductory Note, thematic rather than selective: he is working to find the theme of urbanism woven throughout Marx and Engels rather than the specific passages where they reference cities.

Chapters 1 and 4, “The Situation of the Working Class in England” and “Engels and Utopia”, which chiefly explore Engels’ work, I find cogent and perhaps most fresh and salient to my own thinking, particularly Chapter 4’s discussion of the inevitable role of a shortage of housing in urban capitalism. Chapters 2 and 5, “The City and the Division of Labor” and “Capital and Land Ownership”, are equally interesting and somewhat denser. Chapter 2 reflects on the essential character of urban processes in Marx’ historical accounts of the division of labor and the progression from medieval to modern political economies, while Chapter 5 explores the central role of land ownership in both urban development and the development of capitalism. Really, all of the book is both engaging and genuinely interesting. There are some provocations here which I have seen nowhere else so clearly stated, particularly with regard to the nature of labor under conditions of urban production. The text is also much easier to read than *Production*, published just two years later.

And yet: what exactly are we to *do* with this book emerging today as though today were 1972? Elden gives the game away near the end of his Foreword, when he writes that “nobody today would write a book titled ‘Marxist Thought and the City’” without including analyses of figures such as Manuel Castells and David Harvey (p.xii). A huge phalanx of intervening work has not only built upon Lefebvre but also upon urban theory authored during the complex slipstream period between 1970 and the 1990s when Anglophone readers first encountered Lefebvre directly. Urban theorists have done much to situate Lefebvre and build upon him, and to make him continuously relevant to contemporary debates (Kipfer et al. 2008, 2013; Merrifield 2013; Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2002, 2013; Soja 1989, 1996; Stanek 2011). What we do with Lefebvre today—how we read him and deploy his thinking—is incomprehensible without these intervening thinkers. I would argue that one must read many of these scholars first in order to responsibly make use of *Production* today; as engaging and interesting as this new volume is, *Marxist Thought and the City* really requires similar situating rather than doing much to help in the task of framing *Production* for contemporary use.



I think, then, that this excellent volume is most useful (as its back cover honestly suggests) in providing “background and supplementary material to Lefebvre’s other works”. I cannot in good conscience recommend it to students who will read nothing else of Lefebvre; it is neither as immediate and visceral as “The Right to the City” (Lefebvre 1996) nor as groundbreaking and essential as *The Production of Space*. There are important themes here which are clarified and extended in 1974’s *Production*, but none which are sufficiently treated in this new translation to be considered adequately addressed on their own terms. Frankly, in a world that produces more and more text to read than ever before, it is only a completist fetish—one I admit that I myself am compelled by—which would truly *require* this book be read.

So, then: my high praise goes to Elden and, especially, Bononno for producing this lovely book, which I am glad to have read. For those who have already done their extensive homework, it will be stimulating and resonant, suggesting new ways of attending to some classics of urban theory. For those who have yet to do their homework, sadly, this book can—and probably should—wait until those other tasks are complete. Reading it first will not, I think, do much to ease the burden of your more pressing assignments.

References

- Kipfer S, Goonawardena K, Schmid C and Milgrom R (2008) On the production of Henri Lefebvre. In K Goonewardena, S Kipfer, R Milgrom and C Schmid (eds) *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Lefebvre* (pp1-24). New York: Routledge
- Kipfer S, Saberi P and Wieditz E (2013) Henri Lefebvre: Debates and controversies. *Progress in Human Geography* 37(1):115–134
- Kofman E and Lebas E (eds) (1996) *Henri Lefebvre: Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Lefebvre H (1991a [1974]) *The Production of Space* (trans D Nicholson-Smith). Oxford: Blackwell



- Lefebvre H (1991b [1947]) *Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1* (trans J Moore). London: Verso
- Lefebvre H (1996 [1968]) The right to the city. In E Kofman and E Lebas (eds) *Henri Lefebvre: Writings on Cities* (pp147-159). Oxford: Blackwell
- Merrifield A (2013) The urban question under planetary urbanization. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37(3):909–922
- Mitchell D (2003) *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: Guilford Press
- Pierce J and Martin D G (2015) Placing Lefebvre. *Antipode* 47(5):1279-1299
- Purcell M (2002) Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *GeoJournal* 58(2):99-108
- Purcell M (2013) Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the right to the city. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36(1):141–154
- Soja E (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso
- Soja E (1996) *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Stanek L (2011) *Henri Lefebvre on Space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Joseph Pierce
Department of Geography
Florida State University
jpierce3@fsu.edu

February 2017