



Henri Lefebvre in Contexts: An Introduction

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Commenting on the long history of interpretations of Marx, Henri Lefebvre (1980:23) wrote that “The correct line of thought is to situate the works and the theoretical or political propositions within the global movement of the transformation of the modern world.” It seems appropriate to view Lefebvre’s own intellectual and political legacy—whether in France, in the English-speaking world or beyond—in directly analogous terms. Since the early 1970s, when Anglo-American urbanists and geographers first began to discuss Lefebvre’s approach to urban spatiality, his many post-1968 writings have inspired considerable discussion and any number of critical appropriations in the English language. From the early discussions of his urban theory in the 1970s (Castells 1972, 1977; Harvey 1973) through the critical engagements with his approach to sociospatial theory during the 1980s (Gottdiener 1985; Martins 1982; Shields 1991; Soja 1980) to the more recent appropriations of his work in the context of debates on the condition of postmodernity (Gregory 1994; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991; Soja 1989), the body and sexuality (Blum and Nast 1996; Stewart 1995), everyday life (Featherstone 1992; Kaplan and Ross 1987; Ross 1988, 1995; Silverstone 1994), the production of scale (Brenner 1998, 2000; Smith 1990), urban struggles (Keil 1998; Kipfer 1998; McCann 1999; Schmid 1998; Soja 2000) and the transformation of urban citizenship (Boudreau 2000; Purcell 2001), Lefebvre’s writings have served as central reference points within a broad range of theoretical and

political projects. Clearly, this diversity of readings and appropriations reflects not only the extraordinary richness of Lefebvre's ideas, but also the changing intellectual, political and social contexts in which his work has been read and debated during the last three decades.

As Lefebvre's strategy for interpreting Marx underscores, two central questions must be considered in any critical evaluation of the many divergent approaches to his own work that have emerged during the last three decades. First, to what degree have readings and appropriations of Lefebvre reflected a breadth of theoretical understanding, an attention to exegetical detail and a sensitivity to his own political-historical context? Second, and relatedly, to what extent have these engagements with Lefebvre succeeded in excavating intellectual and political impulses within his writings that resonate productively with contemporary questions, concerns and projects? A hermeneutic process encompassing both of the aforementioned issues inevitably accompanies the interpretation of any major philosopher or social theorist; it demands both a diligent study of the texts under scrutiny and a creative reappropriation of contextually embedded ideas in very different intellectual and political contexts. At its best, based on a sound knowledge of the material at hand and clearly articulated intellectual and political concerns, it can entail a highly dynamic shaking-up of a theoretical framework in which certain elements may be "exploded" (Lefebvre 1980), others may be discarded and still other aspects may be refracted in new ways, bringing to light previously unnoticed contours, hues and nuances.

It is with these latter goals in mind that each of us has embarked upon a project to revisit and reappropriate some of Lefebvre's key ideas in light of our own specific theoretical and political concerns. The papers included in this theme section of *Antipode* report on these ongoing intellectual engagements with Lefebvre's work. While each of our papers articulates determinate claims regarding the interpretation and redeployment of some of Lefebvre's major ideas, they are in no way intended to foreclose the many other readings and appropriations which might be elaborated. Rather, our goal is to encourage broader discussions and debates regarding some of the new refractions of Lefebvre's theories that might be relevant to the present decade.

The first paper is a translation of a heretofore ignored but nonetheless extremely suggestive essay of Lefebvre's from 1979, "Comments on a New State Form" (originally published in the Parisian journal *Dialectiques* under the title "A propos d'un nouveau modèle étatique"). The translation is intended to provide English-language readers with an initial impression of Lefebvre's neglected but fundamental writings

of the late 1970s on state theory, developed at much greater length in his as-yet-untranslated four-volume work *De l'État* (1976–1978). Wide-ranging and meandering though it is, *De l'État* is a text which is central to understanding Lefebvre's philosophical concerns; it also situates his earlier work on the urban, the production of everyday life, and space within a more explicitly political context. The short essay translated here gives no more than a fleeting glimpse into the complex arguments of *De l'État*, but it does provide a rather unique window onto Lefebvre's complex and highly critical relation to the dominant political organizations of the left, in both France and western Europe, during the highpoint of Eurocommunism. While the essay is certainly very much bound to its own time and place, the problems discussed and the solutions proposed therein resonate with contemporary concerns in intriguing ways.

The translation is, therefore, followed by a detailed commentary by Neil Brenner, which situates Lefebvre's essay in its political context and assesses the relevance of its arguments for addressing contemporary theoretical and political dilemmas, particularly with regard to questions of state restructuring in an age of neoliberal globalization. In order to provide readers with a fresh impression of Lefebvre's text, the commentary has been placed after the translation. However, some readers may wish to consult the commentary first, since it provides a number of important background details regarding the specific political field in which Lefebvre's essay was written. More generally, the commentary suggests that a greater appreciation of the contextually specific political-economic and ideological conditions under which Lefebvre developed many of his major ideas provides an essential methodological precondition for exploring their possible applications under the very different conditions that prevail in the contemporary period. In other words, Lefebvre's ideas need to be understood in their own historical-political context before they can be appropriated for other purposes, in other times and places.

The subsequent article by Stuart Elden is a first step in exploring the philosophical lineage of some of Lefebvre's major concepts. Through a critical discussion of recent Anglo-American scholarship on Lefebvre—in particular the important writings of Rob Shields and Edward Soja—this paper argues for a more systematic consideration of Lefebvre's relation to Marxism, as well as to other major European philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche and particularly Heidegger. Like the preceding commentary, this article underscores the degree to which the politics of Lefebvre's work has been neglected in many Anglo-American discussions. By means of a critical examination of

some of the dominant Anglo-American interpretations of Lefebvre's key concepts such as dialectics, space and alienation, the paper points towards a more philosophically nuanced and politically aware reading of Lefebvre. However, the point is not to subsume Lefebvre's ideas within the "disciplines" of politics or philosophy instead of that of geography (or, for that matter, any other specialized subdivision within academia), but rather to argue for a much broader, cross-disciplinary engagement with Lefebvre's many contributions to contemporary social and political theory. A future piece by Elden for *Antipode* will explore in more detail the relation of Heidegger and Marx in shaping Lefebvre's work both politically and philosophically.

Lefebvre's French biographer Rémi Hess (1988:14) once remarked that "writing about Lefebvre is particularly difficult, and for a number of reasons." Spanning over seventy years and almost as many books, Lefebvre's career saw him engage with a vast range of topics, intellectual movements and political events. "During that time," as Andy Merrifield (2000:168) explains,

he had lived through two World Wars, drunk wine and coffee with the Surrealists, joined and left and joined again the French Communist Party, fought for the Resistance Movement in the early '40s, driven a cab in Paris, taught sociology and philosophy at numerous French universities, been one of the intellectual godfathers of the 1968 generation. Meanwhile, he'd authored and introduced France into a whole body of Marxism, and written prolifically on urbanism, on everyday life, and on space. Throughout the twentieth century ... Henri Lefebvre has done and seen and heard a lot.

Clearly, readings of Lefebvre that divorce his thought from these multifarious intellectual and political engagements, or attempt to subsume it within specialized categories or academic disciplines, risk losing sight of the complex whole. We must remember that Lefebvre was a distinct and major theorist in his own right long before he wrote the works that have proved so influential in recent debates within geography. The difficulty of grasping the many dimensions of Lefebvre's work is exacerbated considerably in the Anglo-American context: in contrast to the writings of other major 20th-century theorists such as Sartre, Althusser, Foucault and Bourdieu, Lefebvre's most explicitly political and philosophical texts have not yet been translated. Consequently, the embeddedness of Lefebvre's work within a complex intellectual, social and political milieu has generally been much more

opaque to English-language readers. In addition, Lefebvre's writing style—with its dense theoretical argumentation, its many implicit references, its elusive organizational structure and its frequent digressions—can prove extremely challenging, and at times downright frustrating, even to French-language readers of his texts.

Despite these difficulties, however, the exploration of Lefebvre's key ideas continues today to pose many interesting and exciting methodological challenges. As indicated above, the hermeneutics of reading any major social theorist links past, present and future contexts in a complex dialectic of continual interpretation and appropriation. This dialectic prevails, albeit always in contextually specific forms, whether Lefebvre's texts are read in the original French or in translation. As English translations of Lefebvre's writings become more readily available, and as critical scholarship on Lefebvre continues to mature, it is to be hoped that this dialectic of (re)interpretation and (re)appropriation will take on new forms which reflect a more complex, contextually sensitive understanding of his intellectual and political projects. With these goals in mind, we hope, through this theme section, to encourage further discussion and debate regarding Lefebvre's complex, contested and multifaceted legacies for contemporary times.

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