Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*; a Unitary Approach to the City.

Space and Time Social Theory
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Lefebvre explains the *production of space* as a process shaped by multiple spheres of action, whose result is a space that is multilayered and contested (1991). His rethinking of space revolutionized the conceptualization of the urban and has had a huge impact on many fields and disciplines, a reflection of the multifaceted nature of his theoretical exploration of space. "We are thus confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on" (Lefebvre 1991: 8). Understanding the implications of this multifaceted definition of space is fundamental for the development of epistemologies of space and place in the urban sphere today. This work examines Lefebvre's work to see how his conceptualization of space may shed light on new studies of the urban. Here, I reference mostly *The Production of Space* (1991), although I have relied on other works by Lefebvre, as well as some works by the Situationist International[1] to situate Lefebvre's theory within the surrounding critique of architecture and urban planning.

Lefebvre argues that existing approximations to a science of space have been only partial. Philosophical thinking has failed to provide the foundations for a science of space because addressed it exclusively as a 'mental thing,' dismissing its social and physical spheres (1991). Additionally, a lack of theoretical continuity between different fields or disciplines has produced only partial descriptions of what *exists in space* or has generated only *discourses on space*, without achieving a comprehensive body of knowledge.

[1] The S.I. intended to transform everyday life in the modern world through a series of approaches, most recurrently through the construction of "Situations "– moments of life deliberatively created for the subversion of philosophy, politics, and the fall of the "spectacle-commodity economy." The group collectively published 12 numbers between 1958 and 1969 (McDonough: 2009).

Knowledge emerging in the capitalist world is integrated into the forces of production and the social relations of production; consequently, the science of space we have is determined by the capitalist mode of production; "Under this mode of production, intellectual labour, like material labour, is subject to endless division. In addition, spatial practice consists in a projection onto a (spatial) field of all aspects, elements and moments of social practice…society as a whole continues in subjection to political practice – that is, to state power" (8). The domination of the political sphere and a lack of overlap between different domains do not allow for common projects nor theoretical continuity between different fields and scales to exist (1991). Different scales of the territory are handed to different entities; while architects are concerned about the habitat, urbanists focus on the metropolitan and regional scales.

For this reason, a unitary theory is necessary to address the multiple layers and contradictions arising from the production of space; "…the aim is to discover or construct a theoretical unity between 'fields' which are apprehended separately, just as molecular, electromagnetic and gravitational forces are in physics. The fields we are concerned with are, first, the *physical* – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the *mental*, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the *social*." (11). Because of the inextricable relationship between material forces, social processes and the production of knowledge, for a *unitary theory of space* to be produced, critical and transformative historical moment is necessary (1991).

Space in abstract, Lefebvre argues, does not have any meaning or significance; it needs to be understood in relation to particular history and context. Similarly, urban phenomena need to be understood as part of a whole, in relationship within their social,

economic, and political contexts because the transformations of the productive forces have an impact on the production of space in the city. There is a mutual relationship between space and the mode of production; on one hand, the kind of space created and knowledge production on space are reflections of the this mode of production and, simultaneously, the construction of space has been essential for the development of Western capitalism. Space is real in the same sense that commodities and money are real since "*(Social) space is a (social) product"* (1991: 26). Space also embodies the commodity's desire for "self-exhibition", since both space and commodity needs to be spent in order to have a value (1991). Since space is the locus of production (2003) and an articulator of commodities, it needs to be in constant expansion.

Every society and mode of production produces its own space; therefore, urbanization is defined by the capitalist mode of production; "[if] there is such a thing as the history of space, if space may indeed be said to be specified on the basis of historical periods, societies, modes of production and relations of production, then there is such a thing as a space characteristic of capitalism – that is, characteristic of that society which is run and dominated by the bourgeoisie" (126). In the capitalist world the production of space is ruled by the bourgeoisie and reproduces class differences. Under this conditions, space becomes a means of control, power, and domination (1991); "the influence of capitalism in the practical matters related to space, the construction of buildings and distribution of investments in the global division of labor is evident; still, only partial views of capitalism exist, as opposed to capitalism as many facets: landed capital, commercial, finance, etc. working together, defined by the hegemony of one class (1991: 10).

Lefebvre brings Gramsci's definition of hegemony to analyze the action of the bourgeoisie in relation to space and to describe the future of the working class in the creation of a new society (and new space); "[hegemony] implies more than an influence, more even than the permanent use of repressive violence. It is exercised over society as a whole, culture and knowledge included, and generally via human mediation: Policies, political leaders, parties, as also a good many intellectual and experts. It is exercised, therefore, over both institutions and ideas. The ruling class seeks to maintain its hegemony by all available means, and knowledge is one such means" (1991: 10). This definition implies a tight relationship between knowledge and power, in which knowledge seeks power but refuses to acknowledge such power. Space has an instrumental role as knowledge and action in the existing mode of production and the preservation of hegemony. Hegemony utilizes space with the help of the knowledge produced and the technical expertise of the capitalist system (1991).

Philosophers have contributed to the establishment of the Cartesian logic of abstract representations of space; with it space has lost its relation to the senses and has entered the realm of the absolute (1991). Consequently, the *science of the city* has conceived the city as an object, borrowing the methods and epistemologies from the fragmentary sciences (Lefebvre in Lefebvre et al. 2006). This rationality implies an ideology to conceal the political orientation of the knowledge produced and all the conflicts arising from this *supposedly disinterested knowledge* (1991). The scientific method has concealed ideology behind neutrality and achieved controlled over the production of knowledge. While rejecting the empiricist order, Lefebvre does not deny that a 'truth of space' exists, but this truth is achieved through analysis and clarification,

not because it is possible to construct true space like scientists of a specific discipline intend to do. Instead, a dialectic approach generates knowledge created upon successive approximations to reality; every reality contains *elements* that can be uncovered by analysis (2003). Historical form must be understood as in continuous movement and transformation; therefore, the city constructed throughout cannot be grasped or perceived. History may be aestheticized as a spectacle; but the real lived space cannot be captured because the city historically constructed loses its ability to reveal its language (Lefebvre in Lefebvre et al. 2006).

Social space can be visualized once it becomes distinct from physical space and the mental space of philosophers and mathematicians. In modern capitalism, social space contains and assigns places to three inseparable practices or "levels": *biological reproduction*, *the reproduction of labor power*, and *the reproduction of the social relations of production*. The later are the imposed relations that make capitalism possible. Space contains *representations of the relations of production* in the form of buildings, monuments, and works of art (1991). Since power relations are embedded into these representations, forms of policing and law enforcement take place in the urban sphere. Because the built space represents the power of institutions, spaces organized around buildings and monuments are subject to power and oppression (2003). Representations of the relations of production and power relations take place in space; therefore, social space is fundamentally *ideological.*

Social space is constituted by social actions, individual or collective, hence it may be employed as a tool for the analysis of society (1991). Social actions turn social space into a medium for speech and writing, the realm of language and subjective signification

processes. The production of space is outlined by the interpretation and intervention of individuals inhabiting space; since space may be read or decoded. The displacement of bodies in space fills space with endless gestures and movements. Bodies generate space while moving; space, time and energy are inseparable. The body can create space, but not in the sense of "manufacturing" spatiality. It can create space through an immediate relationship between the body and space; between its positioning in space and by occupying space (1991). Before producing effects in the material world, before producing itself (nourishing the body), before reproducing itself (other bodies), the body is space and has a space (1991).

Societies both experience and presuppose their own spatial practice. In a capitalist society, spatial practice is connected to urbanization; therefore, experiencing space articulates daily life and the urban reality. Spatial practice embodies the *perception* of the environment and a close association with those networks that connect work, private life and leisure, which paradoxically separate those activities, that are simultaneously linked together. Spatial practice is also connected to the work of planners, technocrats, architects, and scientists, who create representations of space, *conceptualizing* what is lived, perceived and conceived by the people who will inhabit those spaces. The last component of spatial practice, Lefebvre affirms, are *representational spaces*, spaces as directly lived; therefore, the spaces of the inhabitant, which the imaginations seek to study, change and appropriate (1991). Lefebvre describes a dialectical relationship within the space as directly lived, perceived space, and conceptualized space. The imagination becomes an essential medium for understanding the real, since it is part of our lived experience. But conceptualized space, the creation of politicians, architects, planners, and

economists dismisses the role of the imagination or relegates it to a secondary realm. Since both occupy the same social space, the interactions among these different spheres engender new contradictions (1991).

If specific codes have existed for spatial and social practice, and these codes have been produced along with the space corresponding to such a code, then theory's role is to expose their emergence, purpose, and disappearance (1991). Lefebvre proposes to emphasize the dialectical character of codes over their formal quality. These codes constitute spatial relationships between 'subjects' and their surrounding spaces; "my aim will be to highlight contents – i.e. the social (spatial) practices inherent to the forms under considerations" (1991: 18). The recognition of a *code of space* and social practice has direct effects on the way the city is understood; it has turned the urban sphere into a medium for the development of social life and a fundamental catalyzer of human imagination. "We are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imaginations such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias" (1991: 11-12).

This spatial code Lefebvre describes is brilliantly explored in Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *2 or 3 things I know about her* (*2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*). The film portrays the Parisian Region under transformation, illustrates how the conceptualized space – the planned city – contributes to the construction of social space. While shedding light on the contradictions arising from the imposition of a conceptualized space, it reveales architecture and urban planning's ideological character.

2 or 3 things I know about her follows the life of a housewife-prostitute who lives in the modernist suburbs of Paris. Breathtaking images depict Paris under construction;

concrete highways irrupting into a working-class neighborhood; an infinite concrete esplanade connecting dispersed, anonymous building blocks; a rationalized landscape defined by alienation. The characters' voices are interweaved with Godard's: "I infer that the Gaullist government poses as a reformer and modernizer, though it only normalizes the natural tendencies of capitalism…I examine the city, its inhabitants, and the bonds between them as closely as a biologist examines the relations between an individual and a race in evolution. Only thus can I tackle problems of social pathology and formulate the hope for a genuine new city."

Godard presents the viewer with a series of *lessons on industrial society*, portraying class conflict, the emergence of consumer culture, and the banalization of everyday life: "The mere fact of suddenly enjoying an new appliance spurs power consumption without regards for the bill. It's the same old story: either no money for rent or no TV, or else TV but no car, or else a washer but no vacation…" The critique implicit in this film resonates with Lefebvre's thinking about the city: "Urban society is gestating in and through the 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption'" (2003: 4).

The postwar years in France were a period of fast urbanization. This process engendered a reorganization of the nation's social structure, defined by a spatial strategy of class segregation. In a massive process of rehabilitation, the last working-class neighborhoods of Paris were cleared out of the city center while suburbs spread with extensive residential complexes, characterized by their repetitive architecture and their rupture with the existing urban fabric (McDonough 2009). The 1950s to 1970s were the period of a new 'Haussmannization,' recalling the mid 19th century renovation of Paris that sought to displace the city's working class to open space for the bourgeoisie. The urban

renewal plan was a political move aimed to the reinforcement of class structure and social order: "[Haussmann] tore down unhealthy quarters in so far as they were the haunts of rebels. He created roads that were straight and wide, so that the cavalry could more easily charge down them and the regular troops could make use of their long-range weapons."[2]

Many questioned modernism and urbanism's favoritism towards solving the circulation of a rapidly increasing amount of motor vehicles efficiently, the result of an interrupted propaganda through which capitalist production persuades the masses that the possession of a car is an advantage for privileged members of society.[3] The increasingly rationalized environment reflected the predominance of efficiency over quality of life and a lack of valorization of leisure time. Circulation spaces acquired a primordial importance, since cities became flows of people and commodities. The idea that the exterior appearance of buildings and objects had a function independent of their practical utility was challenged: the exterior of a house should not reflect the interior; it should instead be a source of poetic feeling for the viewer.[4] The critique towards functionalism and how this paradigm affected concrete space was explored by some of the works of the Situationist International:

> "The functionalists created a rational analysis of structure and functions, they reduced form to the aspect most economical for the satisfaction of our needs, and to this end they created an entirely new way of understanding the object and the tool. Beyond this objective functionalism, they lay claim to a humanist analysis of the social and ethical functions of our surrounding milieu, issuing from belief in democracy and supported by and 'urbanistic concept' that stipulated humanity's right to housing that ensured a healthy and peaceable existence"[5]

[2] Henri Lefebvre, "Introduction to Modernity" (1962) In *The Situationist City*.
[3] Guy Debord, "Introduction to a critique of urban geography" (1955). *The Situationist City*.
[4] Asger Jorn, Excerpts from *Image and Form* (1954). *The Situationist City* [54].
[5] Asger Jorn, Excerpts from *Image and Form* (1954). *The Situationist City* [54].

Modernism and its vision of the city as an efficient machine became focus of forceful critique because its dismissal of the psychological function of the environment since, according to some, it did not offer a space for the individual to develop his creative needs. Functionalism had been criticized because of its reductionism when attempting to understand reality and societies. What was not properly recognized, Lefebvre affirms, is that structuralism and formalism's logic is equally reductive. They introduce reduced models and abstractions in the built space imposing their abstract order. "The working class, in particular, suffer the effects of such 'reduced models,' including models of space, of consumption and so-called culture" (1991: 107). Reductionism pretends to be non-critical knowledge but in reality this is pure scientific ideology; it is a homogenizing practice disguised as science. Urbanism as ideology can produce oppressive spaces, represented as objective, scientific, and neutral (2003).

Lefebvre saw in the functionalist order of the modernist city a binary code, telling its residents "do this, don't do that," a text laid out in the form of abstract "machines for living in" disconnected from location in place and time (Lefebvre in Mc Donough year: 25). At the time, there was widespread discontent with functionalism and its impact on the urban sphere; "The street is where movement takes place, the interaction without which urban life would not exist, leaving only separation, a forced and fixed segregation. And there are consequences to eliminating the street (ever since Le Corbusier and his *nouveaux ensembles*): the extinction of life, the reduction of the city to a dormitory, the aberrant functionalization of existence" (Lefebvre 2003: 18). Contemporary architecture and urbanism were defined by displacement and alienation of the poor; the capitalist remaking

of space "into its own décor."[6] The fragmentation and rationalization of everyday life was criticized by many theorists and to many, a revolution seemed to be inevitable[7]. Lefebvre envisioned a ludic city in which everyday life would be transformed and people would be free and become directors of their own lives (Kofman and Lebas in Lefebvre et al. 2006).

Modernism was the "triumph of homogeneity, " Lefebvre affirmed (1991: 337). The need for comparability has been solved through the creation of identical cells, which attempt to seem the natural order of things. Going from one cell to the other might mean going 'home' from the vantage point of the user; "…space is produced *as* reproducible" (337). Le Corbusier turned built volumes into abstraction, separating them from the land with columns, treating volumes as surfaces without any consideration the passing of time. Standardization and exchangeability require normalization and constraint, which apply not only to the built space but also to the paths that direct the movement of bodies to and from them (1991). "Bodies – deployments of energy – produce space and produce themselves, along with their motions, according to the laws of space" (171).

Not only space and movements are normalized, but also lifestyle. The drawings architects produce *reduce* the reality they are claiming to represent, a type of 'lifestyle' represented and imposed by a particular type of housing (building block, suburban townhouse, etc.); "[a] normal lifestyle means a normalized lifestyle. Meanwhile, the reference to the body (the 'modulor'[8]), along with the figures and the promotional patter, serve literally to 'naturalize' the space thus produced, as artificial as it may be" (1991: 38). Architectural discourse pretends that "'objective' knowledge of 'reality' can be attained by

[6] Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle" (1967). *The Situationist City*.
[7] Asger Jorn, "Excerpts from *Image and Form"* (1954). *The Situationist City* [53].
[8] Anthropometric scale of proportions devised to bridge the Imperial and metric systems. It normalizes the standard dimension of objects and architectural elements according to the proportions of an imaginary universal being.

means of graphic representations" (361). Le Corbusier creates a moral discourse using straight lines and angles. The drawings created by the architect are representations of his conceived space, which attempts to be true space despite the fact that it is geometrical (1991). The making of representations of space, Lefebvre argues, has inclined towards the quantitative, towards homogeneity, and towards the elimination of the body (111).

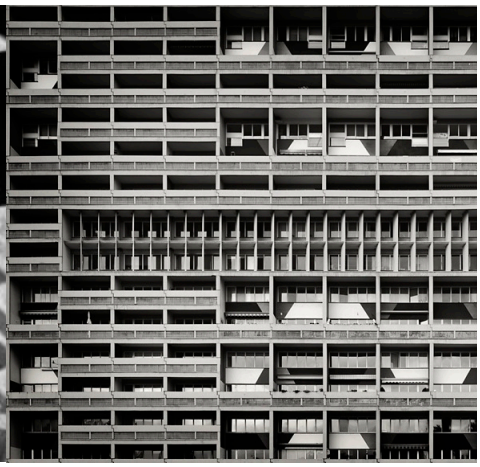
Reductionism has turned space into merely mental space, but there is an implicit ideology underneath; "Architects seem to have established and dogmatized an ensemble of significations, as such poorly developed and variously labeled as 'function', 'form', 'structure'…[they] elaborate them not from the significations perceived and lived by those who inhabit, but from their interpretation of inhabiting. It is graphic and visual, tending towards metalanguage" (Lefebvre in Lefebvre et al. 2006). Architects and urban planners represent powerful institutions, becoming an instrument of the dominant ideology, that which possesses the means of production.

Contradictions arise when conceived space is imposed over lived experience. "The user's space is *lived* – not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one which is to say, subjective. As a space of 'subjects' rather than of calculations, as a representational space, it has an origin, and that origin is childhood…" (1991: 362). Abstract space erases history and memories associated to past experiences in space; lived space is no longer recognizable.

When space is treated as an abstract, it infuses substance with political content and unifies knowledge with power; "[the] outcome has been an authoritarian and brutal spatial practice, whether Haussmann's or the later, codified versions of the Bauhaus or Le

Corbusier; what is involved in all cases is the effective application of the analytic spirit in and through dispersion, division and segregation (Lefebvre 1991: 308). Le Corbusier claimed to seek for freedom but instead he was fracturing space (1991); "the homogeneity of an architectural ensemble conceived of as a 'machine for living in', and as the appropriate habitat for a man-machine, corresponds to a disordering of elements wrenched from each other in such a way that the urban fabric itself – the streets, the city – is also torn apart" (303). Le Corbusier's work is defending plans that are realistic, quantifiable, and profitable; these goals define the ideology of modern architecture rational aesthetic. Projects must relate in some way to the environment and address the relation between the public and the private; these articulations also imply ideology (1991).

Le Corbusier, the *Voisin Plan* for Paris.



Le Corbusier, Unité d'Habitation, Marseilles, France. Completed in 1952.

> "…Le Corbusier longs to abolish the street, the prison becomes the model for housing and Christian morality triumphs without rejoinder…Here's the program: life definitively divided up into closed blocks, into communities under observation; the end of opportunities for insurrections and encounters; automatic resignation…With Le Corbusier, the games and forms of knowledge that we have a right to expect from a truly surprising architecture – daily disorientation – have

> been sacrificed to the garbage disposal that will never be used for the prescribed Bible, already in place in hotels across the U.S.A."[9]

When defining the role of the nation-state on space, Lefebvre envisions two different instances where they interact: firstly in a world market - a complex organization of commercial relations and communication networks – and secondly, the imposition of political power that a nation implies. Lefebvre was aware that urban transformations were interweaved with ideology and social processes. Architecture and urban space reference, contain, and contribute to create people's everyday lives; behind urban space there is an implicit political discourse targeting individuals. Ideologies embedded in architecture and urban planning shape social life and experiences; thus, the production of space in capitalist society incorporates the emergence consumer society and culture. The new commercial and cultural infrastructures and spaces conceived by planners do not take into account the individuals' creative needs. Fundamental human desires – knowledge, play, sexuality, imagination, and art – do not find a space to exist within modern architecture and urban planning.

[9] Lettrist International. *The Situationist City.*

Jean-Luc Godard. *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*). 1967.

"Ensemble is a word I like," – says Juliette – "an ensemble is thousands of people. Maybe even a city. Nobody knows what the city of tomorrow will look like. Some of its past semantic richness will be lost, undoubtedly. Maybe, the city's creative and formative role will be taken over by other systems of communication. Maybe. Vocabulary and syntax." – After an image of the suburbs of Paris under construction, Godard introduces an image of a city model made out of consumer product boxes (detergents, soaps, etc.) dispersed over a grass esplanade; a representation of the city of tomorrow. Similarly to Lefebvre's argument, Godard shows clearly how urban planning is inseparable from social life and how different forms representations take over the urban landscape. Because of this relationship, a revolutionary society needs to re-conceptualize space in order to transform other spheres of life (1991).

Today the urban surprises us by its scale and its constantly intensifying complexity (2003). This condition requires the questioning of knowledge-seeking processes addressing space. The urban phenomenon, Lefebvre argues, cannot be understood by any specialized science (2003); its tendency towards *complexification* makes interdisciplinary cooperation essential. "A theory is therefore called for, one which would transcend

representational space on the one hand and representations of space on the other, and which would be able properly to articulate contradictions…spatial contradictions 'express' conflicts between socio-political interests and forces; it is only in space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions of space" (1991:365). This science of space should contain the ability to dialogue with different fields.

Urban phenomena need to be understood as part of a whole, in relationship within their social, economic, and political contexts. By looking at the urban, we can better understand the contradictions of a society and the kind of space one envisions reflects what kind of society one desires. Since subjective significations and interpretations project meanings onto a space, any intent to construct a foundation for a science of space must contemplate the human imagination. In order to visualize *true space*, Lefebvre argues, society needs to overcome its tendency towards fragmentation, separation and disintegration characteristic of the current mode of production and the knowledge production within this framework (1991). Lefebvre sees that in order to build a genuine socialist society power relations must be fundamentally changed and politics of everyday life need to be reformulated. Time and space must be revolutionized. In order for society to undertake a profound transformation, not only the economy, politics and ideology must be transformed. It is also essential to end the way everyday life itself is conceived and conducted; "the revolution of the future will put and end to the everyday, it will usher in prodigality and lavishes and break our fetter, violently or peaceably as the case may be" (Lefebvre quoted by McDonough 2009: 26).

The urban is not an accomplished reality but the possible; it is a space defined by a direction *towards the urban*. In order to grasp the urban, society must overcome the obstacles that currently make the urban we envision and desire an impossible (2003). The urban represents an opportunity for social transformation; cities have had an essential role in the development of social movements and the articulation of these movements across the world. The right to the city emerges as the possible impossible (Lefebvre et al. 2006), the representation of individualization in socialization, as an instance to claim the right to the environment and everyday life in the urban sphere.

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