

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
Seminar für Ethnologie
Seminar: Lektürekurs, Henri Lefebvre „The Production of Space“
Leitung: Prof. Dr. Andrea Behrends
Sommersemester 2015

**Making sense of Lefebvre's
"The Production of Space" in 2015**
A review and personal account

Jasmin Weinert

Jasmin Weinert
Martha-Brautzsch-Str. 1
06108 Halle (Saale)
Email: jasmin.weinert@student.uni-halle.de

14. Fachsemester
Ethnologie (MA 120 LP)
Matrikelnummer: 208206330

Contents

I	Into the space	3
II	Lefebvre in French critical thinking	4
III	Space and power	6
IV	The 'body frontier'	10
V	Spacing out	12
	Bibliographie	14

Making sense of Lefebvre's „The Production of Space" in 2015

A review and personal account

[I]ch bin zuweilen damit beschäftigt, mir in meinem Kopf drin etwas Schönes vorzustellen, Bäume oder Ozeane oder Luft oder Liebe, weil es da, wo ich wohne, irgendwie nicht immer schön genug ist, zuwenig Bäume und Ozeane und Luft und Liebe.

Widmer, Urs (1977)

I - Into the space

In my last university semester in 2015 at the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle (Saale), I visited a course on a book written by an author whose name I had never heard of before (which is rather unsurprising in a Master's course in social anthropology): "The production of space" by French multi-intellectualist Henri Lefebvre. This read was the cause for a weekly headache me and my fellow students faced trying to decipher Lefebvre's oh so many matters that were supposed to give us an insight into a 1974 French philosophical-critical perspective on how (social) space has been produced – and all the more, on how it is us civilians that are called upon to produce it *our* way – the latter being the cause for why the dizzy feeling sporadically turned into a skeptical excitement for action as well as into astonishment about how early Lefebvre attempted to bring about 'awakenings' and environmentally-aware societal changes.

Right from the beginning of the book it became clear to me that this is not one of your clearly structured science books that takes you 'logically' from A to B – but rather a "cyclical, repititious"¹ ride across time and space. Without the usual empirical material found in anthropological excursus the grand critic of the 'abstract' in modernity himself throws his readers into a world of constructs and meta-philosophical clouds hovering and mixing up in the air so that few ideas seem possible for us to fully grasp. However, once the mind accepts

¹ NOT BORED! 2010: "Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*". www.notbored.org/space.html. (31.7.2015). On their website, *NOT BORED!* say about themselves: "NOT BORED! is an autonomous, situationist-inspired, low-budget, irregularly published journal."

that what you read is really like taking an inspiring walk through the brain convolutions of some genius' mind you already tap into one of Lefebvre's main approaches and goals: a movement away from (artificially) linear time and thinking, and a synchronous allowing of things to 'naturally' flow.

This review is a personal account on the perception of "The production of space" a rough 40 years after its initial publication in French, and about 14 years after its first English edition. It is *not* an attempt to detangle what Lefebvre has beautifully interwoven but a summarized insight into the perspective of a female master student of social anthropology in central Germany in the year 2015 A.D.

II - Lefebvre in French critical thinking

When I first read Lefebvre's "The production of space", I was reminded of other French philosophers and scholars of social studies that had popped up throughout my studies: Foucault, Latour, Boltanski et cetera – without being exactly sure what it was that reminded me of them. Yet indeed, Goonewardena et al. write that Lefebvre's "increasing popularity, especially in the New World, was undoubtedly part and parcel of the prestige enjoyed by 'French theory' (liberal adaptations of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Lyotard, Guattari) in the English-speaking academy and its transnational outposts" (2008:5).²

What strikes me about the French philosophical writers I have encountered (and this is certainly true for Lefebvre), is their bridging and connecting of various fields and thus the avoidance of thinking and writing in determined academic boxes. In fact, there seems to be a clear vision of what needs to be brought to the light, a consciousness that the words written will have an impact on the readers and, by implication, society in the long run. In other words, there is a purpose beyond mere academic endeavors of factual truth seeking and it is

² At the same time however, Lefebvre remained unpopular in France itself until the mid 1990s (cf. Goonewardena et al. 2008:5).

this purpose with which the dialogue is started. Let's take a look at how broad a range of topics and fields Lefebvre covered during his lifetime (1901-1991):

[Lefebvre] wrote over sixty books and numerous other publications, covering an astonishingly wide range of subjects including philosophy, political theory, sociology, literature, music, linguistics, and urban studies, in formats that vary from popular tomes on marxism to difficult, meandering writings that escape conventional academic protocols. Having helped introduce Hegel and Marx's early work in to French debates, he developed his original heterodox marxism through a series of critical engagement with French phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and the surrealist, dadaist, and situationist avant-garde. His most striking contributions include a critique of everyday life and studies of urbanization, space, and state – alongside studies of various prominent strands of French left intellectual discourse and a series of conjunctural meditations on such vital political moments as May 1968 (ib.:2).

Impressively, in "The production of space" the reader gets a taste of all of these elements together with a flavor of history on top. Looking at ongoing efforts in universities that aim at establishing an increase of interdisciplinary studies, Lefebvre makes current attempts faced with the stubbornness of each discipline's methodology look more than foolish. However, Lefebvre had one important advantage: he dared to be political, indeed politically opinionated. He wrote because he was convinced that viewing his current times in their historical context with special regard to 'space', he could unravel the increasingly hideous power structures of capitalism and its effect on the working masses whose personalized, or 'appropriated' space was stripped away by various mechanisms he is describing in detail throughout the book.

Of course, Lefebvre has neither been the first nor the last working to be a signpost for future possibilities directing people away from the 'neo-capitalist grip', but he added a new element that might until the 1970s not yet have had been taken seriously enough: space.

III - Space and power

Looking through contemporary writings on Lefebvre, what appears now to be the most cited and used element for subsequent research from "The production of space" is that Lefebvre, when regarding space, was not interested in simply opposing "structure and agency, discourse and practice" (Ronneberger 2008:137) but instead suggested a triadic division of space into: 1) "perceived space"³, 2) "conceived space"⁴, and 3) "lived and endured space", or "spaces of representation"⁵. That means, that in Lefebvre's construct

the schism between subjects' perceived and lived spaces of activity and "objective" scientific-technological spatial structures is bridged by "ideologies of space". [...] [T]hese ideologies articulate science with everyday life, render spatial practices coherent, guarantee the functioning of everyday life and prescribe modes of life (id.).

So far, so good. When reading the book however, it became apparent to me that next to this insightful but rather technical three-point scheme there are far more interesting things to discover and absorb, albeit the difficulties one faces when trying to summarize them.

What possibly made it easier for me (at times) to follow Lefebvre's intentions, might have been my growing engagement with the revolution in Egypt of 2011 eventually culminating in transformations in my own personal life: I started skating and creating streetart. Both these activities brought about a whole different street experience of the city I had been living in for seven years. Next to that, in 2014 I had conducted my own research about alternative Egyptian youth in Cairo's downtown as a social non-movement – reclaiming the streets in their own way, facing yet overpowering large social restrictions on

³ "[...] *perceived space* refers to collective production of urban reality, rhythms of work, residential and leisure activities through which society develops and reproduces its spatiality" (Ronneberger 2008:137).

⁴ „*Conceived space* is formed through knowledge, signs and codes. Conceived space refers to "representations of space" by planners, architects and other specialists who divide space into separate elements that can be recombined at will. The discourse of these specialists is oriented toward valorizing, quantifying and administering space, thereby supporting and legitimating the modes of operation of state and capital" (id).

⁵ „Users of space experience lived space every day, through the mediation of images and symbols. Lived space offers possibility of resistance" (ib.).

their (modern) appearance and mannerism. The more I tried to understand the revolution through their eyes, their concerns and wishes, the more I understood the intermingling of state and economical control and its reproduction through ordinary people interacting with each other – a chain of mutual constraints. For many, the Egyptian revolution failed and the question that remains is: What is it that really needs to be changed?

Lefebvre himself was a revolutionist. For him, space is all about power. In "The production of space" he shows how in the past after the alienation from "natural space", "social space" was created and increasingly connected to human labor that in its urban environment led to an overall estrangement from the more or less 'organic' space people created in accordance with their naturally developing environment over time.

What is crucial to understand is that space is *not* a container that simply needs to be filled but itself an active designer of our social relations. With time passing, the reign was given to "abstract space", together with the new means of quantification, and to those who determine it. We learn from Lefebvre, that what needs to be criticized is the reductionism of abstract logic bringing about (fake) homogeneity and fragmentation in our everyday lives. Intrinsicly we know and feel that our urban environment is fabricated around us in a fashion to serve a certain order, we are guided by an architecture of centuries of a male dominated governance slowly but surely eradicating the last bits and pieces of subjectivity, creativity and fun.

This is how *NOT BORED!* (in my eyes congruously) summarizes and answers Lefebvre's claims:

It is abstract space (the space of bureaucratic politics) that produces, imposes and reinforces social homogeneity. In order to destroy the society of abstract space, Lefebvre prepared *The Production of Space*, which attempts to define and develop some of the necessary concepts ("the production of space," "the political economy of space," and "the science of space" among them). The space produced by Lefebvre is big, almost too big, for it is easy to get lost in it or confused by the return to the same points. Voices echo (off the

walls?). Lefebvre himself hears them, and answers back. "Change life!" and "Change society!" the voices call out; they are the voices of situationists. "The precepts mean nothing without the production of an appropriate space," he answers back. "Seize the time!" and "History's not made by great men" other voices call out. And we answer back that these precepts should be detoured so that they say "Seize the space" and "Space is not made by great man!" (2010).

Space for Lefebvre is a politically contested field. Space is everything, it determines who we are as humans. And yet, he tells us, we handed over control to a world of endless reproductions, in which everything seems within our reach (since 'transparency' is the motto of our times), but is in fact completely regulated. An illusionary reality was created which makes it hard for us to even understand that the reins are held by capitalist production companies, advertising agencies and heavy bureaucratic state procedures. Lefebvre's marxist inclinations shine through thoroughly.

Interestingly enough, every now and then I found an uncertain resistance and uneasiness towards Lefebvre's claims in my colleagues reception of the book. The main source of suspicion was that his arguments usually seemed fat-fetched, not sufficiently substantiated or backed up by facts. While it is true that Lefebvre appears sitting on a comfortable throne of meta-philosophical critique together with his French colleagues that seemed to have silently approved of 'what is already known', I myself felt that finding distrust in what Lefebvre is trying to show us – addressing our intuition more than our logically trained minds, – proofs his point all the more: in our daily lives we are lured into believing that everything is 'okay' and conducted for our own wellbeing. Facing to be unknowingly suppressed is something we would rather not choose to believe.

Yet, if we look closely enough, we might find enough evidence of how our economically driven urban lives make us face many issues formerly unknown

on a mass scale: depression⁶, confusion over a sensed 'loss of time'⁷, attention deficit disorders in children⁸, compensation strategies through drug abuse⁹ etc. on the one side, and the 're-discovery' of nature, the opening of yoga centers in each street corner, the selling for self-help books and much more on the other – all frequently covered topics in magazines all over the world. Each problem systematically caused comes with its own industry of again standardized products, keeping the machine going.

As Lefebvre argues, space is now created according to certain functions, it is ushering us from A to B, governing our behavior according to specific times and places, even in our spare time, at home or on holidays. What used to be a "work", a natural creation either in biological or creativity terms is now purposely made and often endlessly reproduced in the same fashion. This applies to all kinds of products we are made believe we are in need of. Everything, as it seems, comes in a series. Only the rich seem to be able to afford and insist on the 'uniqueness' of their living environment, especially art is used to compensate the boredom of repetition. For Lefebvre it has been the only thing that, in limitations, is able to escape homogenization because it always produces something new, albeit making use of the existing.¹⁰

Putting all of this and much more into consideration, he reaches the conclusion that real social change can only be brought about if the space we live in allows us the freedom to create, appropriate and play with. Power over space is power over life.

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/13/manufacturing-depression-gary-greenberg-wolpert> (31.7.2015)

⁷ <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=pb&dig=2012%2F09%2F08%2Fa0047&cHash=7e8c5fea6a85dd6269f58026238f78f4> (31.7.2015)

⁸ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-tangled-wing/201009/is-adhd-disease-civilization> (31.7.2015)

⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/15/students-smart-drugs-higher-grades-adderall-modafinil> (31.7.2015)

¹⁰ A new movie "Time is art" seems to embrace Lefebvre's approach in its own way. So far only the trailer is available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9v4OWWxHqFk> (5.8.2015).

IV - The 'body frontier'

One of the elements that were most appealing to me in "The production of space" was Lefebvre's conclusion that the human body is the key to a revolt against modernity's straitjacket. Without the body, he explains, there would be no space, or in other words, we would not be able to experience it.¹¹

As modern physics has taught us: "If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency and vibration."¹² If you look at the body in energy terms it becomes apparent that it is in constant communication with the other energies existing around it. Everything affects everything else and is thus in a relation with each other. Time becomes a factor of creation, bound to the movements of the planets that determine how much sun light we receive, which has an impact on cellular growth etc. This natural flow of inter-relating processes, Lefebvre explains, was interrupted by a certain purposefulness of creation. Time and space were separated. Things can now be produced without regard of natural circumstances. This brought about a life in which we tend to act as though nature was merely a decorative element, nice to look at on postcards and documentaries of The National Geographic, or simply a provider of all our beloved goods.

Yet, the body has (luckily) not become one of those 'things' we produce in factories – disregarding its diverse commodification, or the numerous efforts in current genetic studies attempting to alter traits at 'customers option' and create "designer babies".¹³ No, the human body for Lefebvre is seen as the last frontier capable of fighting back the separation of time and space since it is ultimately connected to nature. Philosophy in the West, he says, has discarded the body and then forgotten about it. Today, without Lefebvre's knowledge, social

¹¹ An interesting perspective on the crucial role of 'movement' in order to create space is given by Tim Ingold in his book chapter "Against space. Place, movement, knowledge". (In Kirby, Peter Wynn (Hrsg.) 2009: Boundless worlds. An anthropological approach to movement. New York: Berghahn Books.)

¹² It is Nikola Tesla (1856-1943) who is supposed to have made this statement, however nobody seems to be able to find its original source. Finding the quote all over the internet at least confirms a large interest towards this suggested mode of existence. Today it is definitely the 'New Age movement' that is mostly interested in that way of thinking.

¹³ <http://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/genetic-inequality-human-genetic-engineering-768> (31.7.2015)

anthropology among others is bringing it back into the picture¹⁴, leaning strongly on the excellent groundwork of (again French thinker) Pierre Bourdieu, especially known for his concept of the "habitus".

Since Lefebvre argues that the body is what perceives space first (with all its sensory organs, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, feeling hot or cold, energetic or tired and so on) we become what we are, as social beings, through our bodies's reaction to our environment. And since our environment is now ultimately created for the sake of abstract ideas and the functioning of society with dedicated places for what is considered necessary, we ultimately need to realize that we become a product of that space. Yet, that is not to say, the space we live in and co-create is fit to our bodily and emotional needs.

In "III - Space and power" I describe several 'modern diseases'. All of them suggest that our current mode of existence is lacking certain crucial elements, the most prevalent presumably time and whatever comes with that. In my eyes, what is lost before anything else is love. A loving environment is a healthy environment. Time is important to be invested into family, friendship, but also respect and help for strangers and own expression of emotions. This is something Lefebvre refrained from talking about, but is surely of utmost importance. The more the body is restricted (by space) the more our needs to connect are suppressed.

When riding my longboard in public places (especially as a girl) I get to *feel* that in that moment I am taking a freedom that I am not supposed to take. I suddenly realize that the streets I am using are not made for people to hang out, play and enjoy. When I pass by pedestrians I am perceived as an obstacle. That is neither mine nor their fault but that of the architects and those who engaged them.

When I reclaim the street by spraying a through-provoking or merely playful piece on a wall, bystanders call the police or threaten me. Yet when

¹⁴ <http://somatosphere.net/2009/03/teaching-anthropology-of-body.html> (5.8.2015)

advertising boards appear around us wherever we are nobody is asked for consent either, yet we have come to accept that kind of visual pollution which is, as we by now all now, designed to convince us of spending money on products that might redeem us for long unnerving office hours but don't really make us happy.

By overcoming my fear however, I am taking back what is not willingly given to me. Since we are a predominantly visual culture (again an element Lefebvre is highly critiquing) simply *seeing* people acting in deviating but not harmful ways becomes a means of social change and makes the act a rebellious one. In that moment me and my body are creating space and regaining power.

V - Spacing out

Nevertheless, the observable trend of life taking place 'online' makes the body disappear to a hitherto unknown degree. Lefebvre's and other people's warnings were ignored and the disconnection from 'real life' is ever increasing. As much as alternative information and ongoing wake up calls¹⁵ are now widely accessible, what we are lacking is an application. Whilst the body has been used in the past years for protest movements, mass revolts and sometimes revolutions met with military violence, the sacrifices made did not necessarily show the desired outcomes.

Much is indicating that Lefebvre's theory was right: "To change life, however, we must first change space. Absolute revolution is our self-image and our mirage – as seen through the mirror of absolute (political) space" (2001:190). What he had in mind was „[a] project of a different society, a different mode of production, where social practice would be governed by different conceptual determinations“ (id.:419). Socialism failed, he says.

The transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and management of space founded on the permanent participation

¹⁵ <http://themindunleashed.org/2015/07/the-top-100-documentaries-we-can-use-to-change-the-world.html>

of the 'interested parties', with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests (id.:422).

Living in a 'democracy' wouldn't we think that this is exactly the kind of reality we have already created? Apparently not.

Much the same conclusion was drawn in the documentary "The Economics of Happiness" (2011). Subject of the film is the juxtaposition of the evils of globalization – waste of natural resources, violent conflicts, acceleration of climate change, insecurity of people's (cultural) self-identification due to a lost sense of a community-based belonging that is replaced by the need to 'belong' through the owning of marketed products, just to name a few – and its solution: localization.

Hence, space needs to be *thought of* as and *envisioned* to be governed locally and self-autonomously. We should understand – and this is from my vantage point what Lefebvre means with "absolute revolution is our self-image" – that a participatory kind of governance is our *right* as citizens of this planet and that we are worth living meaningful, healthy and thus happy lives together. We should establish *behavior* according to those thoughts which will ultimately lead to the creating of facilities suitable to our respective needs. We in the Global West learn day by day that what we need is more spiritual cosmology¹⁶ and emotional connection in order not to feel depressed, meaningless and lonely. So, I say, let's *create* that space! Let's be brave enough to fight against what we think are our own convictions but largely shaped by a selfish and profit oriented rationale! Let's make love¹⁷ and care for each other the 'top priority', also in our architecture: do away with cold and isolating retirement homes, non-interactive shopping places and parks that are 'only to look at', and instead build multigenerational houses, local farmers markets as meeting points, and 'open-to-use' city space.

¹⁶ Something Latour reminds us from graciously in his chapter "Reinstituting the beings of metamorphosis". In ders. 2013: An inquiry into modes of existence. An anthropology of the moderns. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ Pun intended.

And maybe it is time (again) to draw conclusions from thousands of anthropological studies all over the globe analyzing how the intrusion of capitalism in the Global South and elsewhere effects local and 'traditional' modes of existence.¹⁸ It is not only 'the other people's lives' that are concerned with modernity's side effects but ours just the same. As long as we still predominantly white and male anthropologists consider it legitimate to gather information about other people's suffering and the solutions they develop, when we remain unexplored and seated on our golden thrones of white supremacy¹⁹, we might as well make the effort and look into the metaphorical mirror and ask ourselves: what is this space I am a result of, what would I like it to be and how can I contribute to that?

In my humble opinion, the space we should live in, before anything else, should be one that eradicates fear. As long as we live surrounded with belongings we worked hard for, but never will have worked for enough since everything constantly requires an 'upgrade', we will fear to lose them and pay insurances to get refunded for things we never lose.

Bibliography

- Kipfer** et al 2008: On the production of Henri Lefebvre. In Goonewardena et al (eds.) *Space, Difference, Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Lefebvre**, Henri 2001: *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- notbored** 2010 „Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*". www.notbored.org/space.html
- Ronneberger**, Klaus 2008: Henri Lefebvre and urban everyday life. In search of the possible. In Goonewardena et al (eds.) *Space, Difference, Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Widmer**, Urs 1977: Das Schöne im Kopf oder Rückzug mit Drohgesten. *DIE ZEIT* (1.7.1977), Nr. 27.

¹⁸ Latour's "An inquiry into modes of existence" (2013) was a welcome kick-off.

¹⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/dark-skin-india-prejudice-whitening>