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Reading and applying Lefebvre as an urban social anthropologist

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Introduction

Urban anthropology has been around for a long time, although there is the ongoing debate as to whether much of anthropological research in cities is actually anthropology of the city, or if it is merely anthropology in the city (Fox 1977; Low 1996; Pardo and Prato 2012). If Aronowitz (2007) felt that Lefebvre had been ignored as a philosopher and social theorist, his absence from anthropology is even more pronounced. Though Lefebvre is beginning to feature in recent anthropological work, particularly in research with a reference to social space (Heer 2015; Zeng 2009; Maguire and Saris 2007) and rhythms (Jalas et al. 2016), there is still a lot of his work that has yet to be fully translated, examined and appropriated by anthropologists.

This chapter will explore why and how anthropologists might benefit from the use of conceptual systems and methods proposed by Lefebvre. The first section that follows examines the current state of urban anthropology to identify some of its shortcomings and the possible reasons for the noticeable absence of Lefebvre in anthropology. I then examine some of his writings on the city to highlight how relevant they are in designing and theorising anthropological research, relating them back to the issues raised in the first section. Finally I consider how Lefebvre may have some answers to how we might develop an anthropology of the city.

To many people, sociology is the study of urban industrial society, often using quantitative methods, while anthropology concentrates on rural and non-industrial society with the emphasis on qualitative research. My own background was in philosophy and sociology, followed by a postgraduate research degree in sociology (in Singapore) before I embarked, after several years outside academia, on a doctoral degree in social anthropology (in London) where I researched elderly Chinese migrants living in sheltered housing in a northern English city. As such, my view is that there is a lot of overlap between sociology and anthropology, not least in their intellectual roots, although there are certain areas in which these disciplines are clearly distinct, and these distinctions will be noted as and when necessary.
The state of urban anthropology

A brief survey

Fox (1977) has been quoted often in highlighting how what purports to be ‘urban anthropology’ is nothing more than anthropological research conducted in city or urban settings. Low (1996) undertook a survey of post-1989 urban research, and one of the conclusions was such research tended to be particularistic (that is, not embedded in the larger context; not holistic in research and analysis) and was essentially research in the city. There has not been any major development in terms of theorising the city from an anthropological perspective. Nas (2011) edited a volume which concentrated on ‘urban symbolic ecology’. While there was a huge emphasis on symbolism, which is the territory of anthropologists, it again falls short of theorising urban space and culture. A similar criticism was levelled at the next, and possibly most recent, compilation of urban research by Pardo and Prato (2012). While reviewers agree that this volume clearly shows that the ethnographic methods of anthropology translate very well into the urban context, the chapters were still lacking in any advancement of theory as proclaimed in the title.

It is worth scrutinising some of these criticisms. McDonogh (2013: 794) questioned why Pardo and Prato needed to allude to the rejection of urban anthropology as a valid sub-discipline in contrast to what ‘real anthropologists’ do. Sanchez (2014: 379) described this volume as a ‘riposte to the perceived disciplinary hostility to urban anthropology’. Toulson (2015) suggested that this hostility is because the respondents are usually not ‘Other’ enough and therefore the research is not ‘proper’ anthropology. This may be so, but I will suggest that this perceived hostility is due in part to the massive ‘pure-applied’ divide within certain British anthropology departments. As an outsider I had observed the huge chasm between those who conduct traditional fieldwork and engage in theoretical debate versus those who also seek to apply their research data through whatever institutional means possible (for instance in advising government agencies, NGOs and corporations). As urban anthropology tends to focus on ‘problems’ (for instance ghettos and drunks) to understand urban civilisation and contemporary society ‘as a whole’ (Wirth 1940: 743), it appears to belong more naturally in the ‘applied’ corner. Note, though, that urban anthropologists had in fact been reluctant to participate in ‘urban public policy debates’ (Low 1996: 384). Jones and Rodgers (2016), who examined the origins of urban anthropology, argued that such particularism was not always the case. They credited the Chicago School (Department of Anthropology and Sociology till 1929) for the prolific output of ethnographic studies between 1917 and 1940 which provided a more ‘embedded analysis’ and were considerably more holistic compared to later (particularistic) studies which became ‘intellectually disengaged’ from their epistemological roots (Jones and Rodgers 2016: 21–2).

Perhaps this particularism is a ‘design fault’ in that anthropological research is usually conducted by lone individuals and therefore must be limited to small-scale studies or specific aspects (such as gender) as part of a larger-scale project, and thus leave us none the wiser as to how, anthropologically, a city is a city. Toulson, who reviewed Pardo and Prato (2012) and two other volumes together, noted how such research ‘ignores both human agencies and the complexities of causality’ (2015: 29) when it presumes that it is the city that shapes lives. She goes on to suggest that ‘if the anthropology of the city is to be something distinctive, it should study urbanism as process rather than as fact’ (Toulson 2015: 34, emphasis added). This chimes with what Lefebvre said about the creation or production of social space as not being ‘the work of a moment’, but is ‘in fact, a process’ ([1974] 1991: 34, emphasis in the original). We will return to this point later.
Missing in anthropological action?

I offer two reasons as to why Lefebvre has been overlooked by anthropologists. The first might be that Lefebvre is often described as ‘a French Marxist sociologist’. For those students in university departments where sociology and anthropology are the fraternal twins separated at birth and never yearned to meet each other again, there is little impetus to pick up a book by sociologists, akin to what Tett calls the ‘silo effect’ (Stein 2016: 29). It does not help that Lefebvre seemed to have expressed some disdain for anthropologists (and ethnologists), describing their writing as ‘long, circuitous meanderings’ ([1968] 2016: 24), and in their focus on describing ‘representational spaces’ have ignored other properties of socially-produced space ([1974] 1991: 41). In contrast, he addresses sociologists directly, giving the sub-title ‘Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday’ to the second volume of A Critique of Everyday Life.

A possible second reason for Lefebvre’s absence in anthropological research could be his emphasis on triadic dialectics. I must confess that I did not entirely grasp the full meaning and significance of Lefebvre’s exposition on the social space triad (spatial practices–representations of space–representational spaces) when I first read it as an anthropology PhD student. It was only through reading Rhythmanalysis ([1992] 2004) more than a decade after that PhD that I became enthralled by how the triadic dialectic of space–time–energy could resolve some of the fundamental issues I had in the analysis of my data. There was a ‘light-bulb’ moment when I realised that I could finally try to publish the paper that had been rejected so many times (Lee 2014); I had found an analytical framework that was theoretically acceptable to other anthropologists and social gerontologists.

As I revisited my research data, this time ‘superimposing’ rhythmanalysis over them, I came to realise how anthropologists, like many other social scientists, are prone to ‘reductionistic schemata based on a binary opposition’ (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 123). I struggled with the issue of how time was defined: sacred versus profane, physical versus metaphysical (Hall 1983); public–private, work–free, women’s–men’s, individual–global and cyclical–linear (Novotny 1994). Durkheim, an influential figure in both sociology and anthropology, had bequeathed us with the sacred-profane dichotomy (and normal-pathological) upon which a lot of subsequent structuralist thinking was based. Lévi-Strauss also wrote of hot and cold societies, and of food being raw and cooked, fresh and rotten, moist and parched (1969). He believed that it is in understanding these binary oppositions that one might be able to find the ‘mediator’ to resolve these oppositions, or to ‘unite’ these oppositions in the ‘thesis-antithesis-synthesis’ dialectic. Somehow, many of us seemed to have been stuck at the binary state (for instance, culture-nature) and have failed to proceed to the triadic to resolve such tensions. In contrast, Lefebvre was convinced that a ‘dialectic of opposites’ always ‘ends abortively’ ([1947] 2014: 128).

Applying Lefebvre in anthropology

In this section I highlight those aspects of Lefebvre’s writing that might be of interest to anthropologists, particularly in terms of methodology and analysis, and relate them back to the issues facing urban anthropology as stated above and its possible applications in conceptualising urban questions.

The theory of ground rent and rural sociology

The reason for Lefebvre’s popularity in urban research is itself due to a process: the process of translating his works from its original French. In their commentary Elden and Morton rightly
warn that this ‘predominantly urban focus’ risks ‘marginalising another of Lefebvre’s interests, which is the question of the rural’ (2016: 57). Many anthropologists work in rural communities. The issue of ground rent ‘as a socially determined category’ (Elden and Morton 2016: 60) is not something I have encountered in anthropological literature. Perhaps this is because there are other (dyadic) relationships that preoccupy anthropologists (such as patron-client, gift exchange, gender, kinship) that have obscured the need to examine this ‘social relation of production’ and the process by which it has conferred landownership and the ‘demand of a payment for their use’ (Elden and Morton 2016: 60). Wherever a rural agrarian community comes into contact with capitalists, there is the need to elucidate the power relations between the various parties involved. It is possible that this power shift (imbalance?) is at the core of environmental ‘hotspots’ such as Indonesia where the burning of huge areas of forest causes misery not only to the humans and animals that draw life from the forest, but also to neighbouring countries.

In his exposition on ground rent Lefebvre observed how rural sociologists (and if I may add, anthropologists) must deal with very complex sets of structures originating from ‘different historical Epochs’ which means having to confront structures that are disintegrating as well as ‘mixed with new forms and structures’, and must therefore ‘double as a historian’ ([1956] 2016: 67, 68). Contact with capitalists does not only lead to a uni-directional depopulation of villages, there is also an opposite inflow of workers who ‘replace the older population of peasants and artisans’ (Lefebvre [1956] 2016: 71). As such a ‘complex and contradictory process’ (Lefebvre [1956] 2016: 72) that affects both the rural and urban contexts, it needs to be given focus. The theory of ground rent – or its urban contemporary equivalent in non-European contexts, together with this complex rural-urban dialectic – is possibly integral to finding the answer to the question as to what makes urban anthropological research of the city and not just in it.

Critique of Everyday Life

It will seem logical, if not at least superficially, that what Lefebvre has to say about the ‘everyday life’ must surely resonate with anthropologists who are ardent students of the mundane, the everyday. What exactly does Lefebvre mean by ‘everyday life’? Why did he take three volumes over several decades (1947, 1961, 1981) to write a critique of something that seems so ordinary and taken-for-granted? I interpret these volumes as Lefebvre explicating the importance of separating the authentic everyday life from that which has been masked by the encumbrances of capitalism. Right from Volume I he works from the basis that alienation, as defined by Marx, has imprisoned us in a state of ‘mystified consciousness’ such that we are not able to live lives as our true selves. It is only in separating what is truly human from ‘bourgeois decadence’ that we can achieve the ‘rehabilitation of everyday life’ (Lefebvre [1947] 2014:147). He goes on to elucidate the futility in trying to find reality in art and philosophy, religion, festivals, communal meals and so forth. He asserts that we can only arrive at the ‘truth’ through the Marxist dialectical method which allows us to ‘re-establish order and reason in ideas’ ([1947] 2014: 244); alienation cannot be resolved by ‘inventing new rituals’ ([1947] 2014: 245) but through a critique of life in its most mundane and everyday detail ([1947] 2014: 246–7). This requires a ‘methodical confrontation’ between ‘“modern” life’ and ‘the possible’ and an investigation of the ‘exact relations’ between everyday life and festival, triviality and splendour, reality, dreams and so forth. ([1947] 2014: 271). Only then can we achieve unity, the ‘realization of the total man’ ([1947] 2014: 272).

Reading Lefebvre has caused me to raise questions, but I do not yet have the answers. It will be safe to say that anthropologists work very much within the realm of everyday life. We
participate in activities amongst the people we observe and then draw conclusions about their lives. How much of what we observe is the ‘authentic’ everyday life, free from the mystified consciousness that has been imposed by capitalism? We observe rituals and postulate reasons behind its genesis and evolution, but seldom relate this to the Marxist idea of alienation. Perhaps what anthropologists observe in their field does not (yet?) amount to a sense of the ‘modern’ (and capitalist), but is there any mileage in adopting Lefebvre’s stance that we need to investigate the exact relations between everyday life and festivals? Were these rituals and festivals designed so that those who are usually oppressed have the chance for a day or two in the year to ‘rebel’ and act out their otherwise unspoken frustrations? Is the modern ‘paid annual leave’ of employees, or ‘corporate fun days’ (dinner and dance, Christmas parties) where hierarchy in the company is (temporarily) turned on its head, the corporate and urban equivalent to festival? To what extent do such rituals and festivals reproduce the society with its inherent hierarchies? What happens when these normal routines are disrupted?

Michel Trebitsch, who wrote its preface, said that Volume II can be read ‘as a veritable “dis- course on method” in sociology’ ([1961] 2014: 278). As usual Lefebvre was meticulous in setting out his argument – and the ‘implements’ he uses – in a way reminiscent of a philosophical treatise. He is also consistent in giving a summary of his argument at the end of every chapter. In the first chapter he reiterates: There can be no knowledge of society (as a whole) without critical knowledge of everyday life and, conversely, there can be no knowledge of everyday life without critical knowledge of society. Knowledge also ‘encompasses an agenda for transformation’ ([1961] 2014: 392); praxis is at the heart of knowledge. Towards the end of this volume he presents a ‘theory of moments’ in which moments present themselves as ‘duplicates of everyday life, magnified to tragic dimensions’ ([1961] 2014: 650).

If there can be no knowledge of society (as a whole) without critical knowledge of everyday life, and vice-versa, then how valid is anthropological analysis on research that focuses on ‘moments’: political events and natural disasters? Where might the ‘everyday’ be situated, and more crucially, to what extent is what anthropologists observed mere ‘duplicates’ (imitations) of everyday life, overlaid by the spectre of mystified consciousness? With urban regeneration, who decides which aspects of ‘everyday’ are to be regenerated? Moreover, does Lefebvre’s emphasis on praxis provide robust justification for British academic anthropologists to abandon the ‘pure-applied’ divide?

Volume III was published 20 years after Volume II. Noting that because there had been so much change in the world, the problem had also changed, and the question had become whether daily life is a shelter from, or ‘a fortress of resistance’ to, change, in whatever form it might take (Lefebvre [1981] 2014: 717). Noting how capital is the same everywhere and which both ‘prescribes and imposes’ homogeneity, fragmentation and hierarchisation in everyday life, he mulls over the continuities and discontinuities of Marxist thinking ([1981] 2014: 757–8). Intriguingly, though history had travelled much the way predicted by Marx, capitalism – far from disappearing – had persisted. Lefebvre attributes this to ‘recuperation’, which targets deliberately ‘what might have changed, in order to prevent change’ ([1981] 2014: 776). Lefebvre gives examples of how an idea that was ‘regarded as irredeemably revolutionary… is normalized, reintegrated into the existing order, and even revives it’ ([1981] 2014: 777). Take the ethical, fair trade and organic movement as a contemporary example. Whether it be in skincare, coffee or chocolate it started as being pro-worker, pro-environment and anti-capitalist to serve a niche but enlightened market. Soon its profitability led to huge international conglomerates buying out and taking over this sector. The subversive had become acceptable, is normalised again, and goes mainstream, with an even greater impact. Capitalism thrives once more. Technology also played a part in changing the face of capitalism, leaving us subject to the daily relentless grind of
clock-time. Meanwhile the state intrudes into even more areas of our daily life (Lefebvre [1981] 2014: 794–800). With our lives thus regulated round-the-clock, he moves the discussion to space and time and introduces *rhythmanalysis*.

Such insight might apply in at least two areas of anthropological research. In a globalised world, migration is a frequent interest in urban research. To what extent are groups of migrants ‘homogenised’ by social forces such as immigration services, the border police and even people traffickers? How are these groups of migrants, at the same time, fragmented along lines of ethnicity, gender and labour leading to ghettos in their destination or transitional locations? On the other hand, how might the original and new hierarchies within these (simultaneously homogenised and fragmented) groups become hierarchised again at this new locus? How does one theorise, for example, the way foreign domestic workers ‘gravitate towards the different parts within a public park according to the “map of the Philippines” which reinforces their regional differences’ (Lee 2016: 15)?

Another aspect of modern and urban life that anthropologists do not usually address is the impact of the welfare state on individuals even though it can be construed as a form of gift exchange, not unlike the concept of *kula*. In my special interest area of ageing, not just anthropologists, but social scientists in general, seldom elucidate how welfare provisions affect how, when and why people choose to retire from paid work, where they live afterwards, and how they organise long-term care at the end of life, even though these issues are all tied in with state-sponsored welfare (and health) benefits in much of the developed, urban and capitalist world. My elderly respondents were keen to convince me that they were truly much happier living apart from their adult children. How different might their answers be if – as we confront the possible – there was not a welfare system that provided them with a sizeable weekly pension and generous housing benefit, courtesy of a capitalistic economy? How will their answers differ from individuals who also live in cities but do not receive comprehensive health and welfare benefits? Where the state – via the benefits and healthcare structure – has intruded into every area of our everyday life, can researchers afford to ignore its influence? Do we simply accept this as a ‘given’ or should we evaluate how welfare provision, as a component of neo-capitalism, alienates us from our authentic selves?

### The Production of Space

The spatial triad in this volume derives from Lefebvre’s conviction that space is not nothingness, ‘free of traps or secret places’ ([1974] 1991: 28). Capital and capitalism have an influence on ‘practical matters relating to space, from the construction of buildings to the distribution of investments and the worldwide division of labour’ ([1974] 1991: 9–10). This leads inevitably to a discussion on how hegemony 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 intellectuals and experts’ ([1974] 1991: 10). Space is not only either real or mental, it is also imbued with a package of social relations that dictate how that space is used or abused, and has limitations on how those social relations might be reproduced.

In the unity of the spatial triad ‘spatial practices–representations of space–and representational spaces’, Lefebvre unpacked how these social relations relate to the way space is (respectively) perceived, conceived and lived. He lists these distinctions in different ways. My own distinctions are summarised as:

- **Spatial practice**: as the perceived normative practice for that space (for instance room, school, hospital).
• Representation of space: as conceived by the professionals including those who design the space (architects, town planners) and those who use them (teachers, social workers).

• Representational space: as lived by the users (inhabitants) in their everyday life according to how it has been conceived and perceived.

Lefebvre gives the example of the part of the Mediterranean as a locus of leisure and ‘vast wastefulness’ which could be perceived as an ‘intense and gigantic potlatch of surplus objects, symbols and energies’, a huge expanse of useless (purposeless) holiday space. In fact this ‘seemingly non-productive expense is planned… to the nth degree’ to serve ‘the interests of the tour-operators, bankers and entrepreneurs’ ([1974] 1991: 59). Translating this into the terminology of his spatial triad: in a neo-capitalist economy that requires leisure space and time (spatial practice, perceived), holiday centres have been planned and designed (conceived) to perform the functions of sport, relaxation and other rituals (representations of space) in order to allow the users to enjoy (live) in a seemingly purposeless manner (representational space) for the few days in the year that they are not working to an otherwise tight clock-time schedule.

Lefebvre seems convinced that anthropologists tend only to provide ‘a purely descriptive understanding’ ([1974] 1991: 122), are interested only in specific representational spaces (‘childhood memories, dreams, or uterine images and symbols’) and often neglect to see these alongside co-existing representations of space and social practices ([1974] 1991: 41). Looking back at my own research I see that I had, as Lefebvre accused, made detailed descriptions of the ‘representational spaces’: how the tenants lived and how they use their private and public spaces within and even outside the buildings, their routines or refusal to follow a set routine, their resistance to change in the way the night-warden system was run, and so forth. I might have ventured into pondering the ‘representations of space’ in trying to understand and explain the rationale for locating the buildings right smack in the middle of Chinatown but I had not paid too much attention to the ‘social practices’ of providing sheltered housing for older people as perceived by social workers and social housing providers. In fact, I was so embarrassed by my ignorance in the area of welfare benefits, and assuming – erroneously – that there had been some fraudulent benefits claims, I avoided confronting the issue of welfare entitlement.

Rhythmanalysis

Based on the triad of ‘space–time–energy’ Lefebvre explains that ‘everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm’ ([1992] 2004: 15). Rhythmanalysis begins with physiological rhythms. A body in working order is an example of a rhythm in perfect harmony or isorhythmia ([1992] 2004: 68). While every rhythm takes a cue from nature and society, the rhythms are at the same time individually ‘owned’ (Lee 2016: 9). We do not notice this steady state until there is a breakdown resulting in arrhythmia (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 67). However, just as with recuperation (above), the system strives towards returning to isorhythmia. During this process, several rhythms – polyrhythmia – might be called into play (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 67). Sometimes two or more different rhythms are meshed together to create eurhythmia (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 67). There are few true isorhythmias but many more eurhythmias (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 67).

In Lee (2014) I give examples of how my respondents seemed to always find a new ‘equilibrium’ in what they do, eat and sleep, and they professed to be happy in the freedom to make those decisions. What was crucial here is that rhythmanalysis takes its cue from the individuals or groups of individuals involved. There is a very clear sense of agency. People
adjust their level of dis/engagement in various activities depending on the (physical, social, mental, other) resources they have. Hence the more intellectual respondents chose to remain socially and physically active because they could not cope with the idea of idleness, while those who had engaged in physically laborious work were pleased to be able to stop working altogether. With its emphasis on human agency, *rhythmanalysis* is a good candidate to counter Toulson’s criticism (2015) that human agencies had been ignored in the theorising of urban anthropology.

In evaluating the triads in *Rhythmanalysis* we might also find the answer to the question as to why, following Lévi-Strauss, anthropologists have difficulty in establishing the mediating factors between structuralist oppositions. I will suggest that we have been using the ‘wrong’ dialectic. Instead of a Hegelian dialectic that pits a ‘synthesis’ against the oppositional forces of a thesis and anti-thesis, ‘mediators’ might be more easily found if the third component is found to relate *equally* to the other two components (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 12). In a footnote (Lee 2016) I proposed that an intractable opposition between nature and nurture/culture could be made triadic by the addition of ‘opportunities’. Imagine an innately talented footballer, poet or physicist who, without the opportunities of encountering the resources (ball, pen, education) needed to nurture these talents, might never get to fulfil their natural potential. Conversely less talented persons who are given these resources (opportunities) could mitigate their lack of natural talent to some extent. Nature/nurture is never ‘either/or’; children who are given the opportunities, whatever their (lack in) natural talents, are more likely to reach their greatest potential.

I noted that *rhythmanalysis* can be used both as a conceptual framework (theory) in understanding social phenomena as well as a toolkit (method) (Lee 2016). It is easy to confuse or conflate the two. How does one ‘do’ *rhythmanalysis*? Lefebvre was not clear. I suspect that the meticulous recording of rhythms, or even the categorisation of these rhythms, *on their own*, does not constitute *rhythmanalysis*, which would otherwise be spelt as ‘rhythm analysis’. Given Lefebvre’s emphasis in his other expositions, for the paradigm to be useful in analysis (as distinct from method) there must be a *process* of disruption (arrhythmia) and return to isorhythmia (or a slightly different isorhythmia/new eurhythmia) via recuperation (Lee 2016: 11). Anthropologists who study events (moments), therefore, must first establish the point of isorhythmia or at least adopt a theoretical point of isorhythmia before their analysis can even begin. Similarly, in urban regeneration, there must be an agreement amongst those affected as to what the end-goal (the point of isorhythmia) might be. This gives rise to the question as to whose perspective are we to adopt to define ‘success’? Enmeshed somewhere in this equation is the need to explain the spatial triad of ‘spatial practices–representations of space–and representational spaces’ as ‘conceived–perceived–lived’.

Lefebvre intended *rhythmanalysis* to be a transdisciplinary concept, capable of theorising everyday life ‘from the most natural (physiological, biological) to the most sophisticated’ ([1992] 2004: 18). Anthropologists might find it useful to question whether some of the traditional theories in analysing society, pre-capitalist and otherwise, could be interrogated using *rhythmanalysis* as I had begun to do with ageing theories (Lee 2014). Take Van Gennep’s (1960) ‘rites of passage’, which is often misused by writers who neglect the constituent concepts of separation, liminality and re/incorporation in the original paradigm. Could we superimpose ‘isorhythmia–arrhythmia–return to isorhythmia/eurhythmia’ over these? Are there instances where a *rhythmanalysis* paradigm is a much better fit, particularly when there is no original group into which individuals are re/incorporated, such as old people moving into retirement housing (compare Barrett et al. 2012), or migrants adjusting to a new country being prime candidates in an urban context?
Conclusions

This chapter has only managed to consider a very small proportion of Lefebvre’s prolific output, concentrating on insights that might be of special interest to urban anthropologists to address the question ‘what makes anthropology truly of the city and not just in the city’?

In much of his writing, Lefebvre had stressed ‘process’: if social space is produced, then there is a process; if there is a process, there is also history. To avoid particularism, a criticism levelled at recent urban research, anthropologists must also, apart from researching the current static position of the research sample, elucidate the process/es by which individuals came to be in that particular urban context (such as analyse the multi-directional flow of migrants in the rural-urban dialectic). Whether it be the explication of ground rent (or its contemporary equivalent in a non-European context) to embedding the research in a wider rural/urban context, whether it be in isolating data according to the spatial practices–representations of space–representational spaces triad, whether it be overlaying rhythmanalysis over an event or a cycle of events, anthropologists must move away from the focus on the near and present – the moment – but view their respondents and their everyday life within the context of a much larger spatial and temporal canvas. In practice, this is an onerous task for lone researchers. Urban anthropologists might need to consider working more frequently as part of a team with expertise drawn from outside their discipline.

Lefebvre’s starting point in his writings was capitalism and its faithful ‘sidekick’: alienation, as defined by Marx. This is not a concept that usually occupies the minds of traditional anthropologists. Perhaps anthropologists, particularly those working in areas where capitalism has taken hold, however tenuously, need to start looking at these (lived) ‘representational spaces’ differently, to separate the ‘real’ from the ‘mystified’. Anthropologists will also do well to elucidate how people make decisions that might have been clouded by the all-encompassing influence of a welfare system within an urban capitalist context. With hindsight, I can see how some of my methodology, data and interpretation might be quite different had I also scrutinised those considerations that Lefebvre had termed (conceived) ‘spatial practices’ and (perceived) ‘representations of space’. In view of Lefebvre’s objective to set people free from the shackles of alienation, transformation is part of the agenda. Therefore, an anthropology of the city must also challenge its practitioners to use their research data to liberate their respondents from their bondage (of whatever kind), making engagement with policy discussion a necessity.

In summary, it is in learning to view space with the spatial triad (spatial practices–representations of space–representational spaces) and time in the space–time–energy triad that we can begin to understand, perhaps through rhythmanalysis and/or theory of ground rent, how, anthropologically, the urban differs from the rural. Perhaps it is only in adopting the analytical frameworks of a sociologist steeped in Marxist thinking that anthropologists can finally be able to attempt an anthropology of the city rather than one that is merely in it.

References

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