Not so many years ago, the word ‘space’ had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply of an empty area... and the general feeling was that the concept of space was ultimately a mathematical one. To speak of ‘social space’, therefore, would have sounded strange.

_Lefebvre 1991a: 1_

The urban (an abbreviated form of urban society) can therefore be defined not as an accomplished reality, situated behind the actual in time, but, on the contrary, as a horizon, an illuminating virtuality. It is the possible, defined by a direction, that moves toward the urban as the culmination of its journey. To reach it – in other words, to realize it – we must first overcome or break through the obstacles that currently make it impossible.

_Lefebvre 2003: 16–17_

**Introduction**

Breaking through the obstacles, referred to by Lefebvre in the second epigraph above, means in part, I argue in this chapter, seeking to overcome the more pernicious aspects of the production of urban space inherent in presently existing neoliberalism. Henri Lefebvre is associated with a range of fascinating but challenging ideas related to cities and the urban. His ideas have endured severe criticism and fierce changes in academic and political fashion over the last five decades. They endure partly because they rest on a solid Humanist Marxist foundation and partly because Lefebvre tended to eschew the detailed prescription of ready-made solutions. That said, I argue he does provide guidance for empirical research – the spatial triad being an obvious point of entry. His ideas about space and a possible urban society were informed by his upbringing and later by his sociological empirical research. The chapter charts briefly how his Marxism influenced his approach to urban research. These issues are examined in new ways that challenge the critiques asserting Lefebvre’s paucity of utility for empirical research. The chapter closes with a focus on Lefebvre’s grand urban project, facilitated by transduction and his concrete utopian thoughts on cities and urban society.
Enigmatic, constant, mutable

Throughout his life there was not one Henri Lefebvre but many. At various times he was: a precocious Sorbonne student, surrealist, poet, Parisian taxi driver, schoolteacher, municipal councillor (in Montargis), Resistance fighter, champion of peasants and proletarians, contract researcher, university professor, art critic, government advisor, utopian thinker, media pundit, world traveller and bonne vivante retiree. We can add, in his own words: tormented youth, rebellious anarchist, militant thinker and balanced 30-something Marxist philosopher-sociologist (Lefebvre 1950 in Elden 2004: 1). Despite the superabundance of words written about him, Henri Lefebvre remains an enigma. This only adds to his charm and attraction. He is enigmatic not just because of his challenging, some would say inscrutable ideas, but also because of his unique Humanist Neo-Marxism, baffling for some scholars. Even his birthdate is shrouded in mystery. Anglophone readers of his work can be forgiven for thinking he was born in 1905, since this date appears in the copyright page of his most famous book, *The Production of Space* (TPOS), and several others. This date also appears in many library catalogues. Why the mystery? Opinions differ, as discussed below. During World War Two (WW2) he may have carried out daring acts of sabotage against the occupying Nazis, or he may have been more of an armchair Resistance strategist. I return to these points below. He was certainly hostile to Fascism, and his 1938 book, *Hitler au pouvoir*, criticising Adolf Hitler and National Socialism, marked him as a subversive and copies were burned by the Nazis during the occupation of France.

Lefebvre’s protracted life and his extended metaphorical and actual journey from the rural to the urban provides too much fascinating detail to document in full here. Insights can be gained from the biographical-style authors of the third wave mentioned in the Introduction to this volume. Indeed, the journey from the rural to the urban is a key theme in much of the literature. Lefebvre was not just an accomplished philosopher and writer, he was a skilful archival researcher, who augmented archival data with his own observations of the impact of capitalism and industrialisation on rural and urban everyday life. Notwithstanding this, he became Professor of Sociology in his 60s, and he is endowed with a mutable range of identities and claimed by a variety of academic factions, especially since the 1990s. To some he was an adventurous dialectician or: a Marxist political scientist, Marxist geographer, professional sociologist, political geographer, postmodern geographer or oppositional heretic. Gottdiener (2018) is perhaps the most strident in asserting the unfairness of some disciplinary claiming of Lefebvre. He is especially scathing about the claims of geographers. It is apparent that Lefebvre was not a uni-disciplinary dogmatist, and he advocates the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of cities and the urban. And he was aware his spatial ideas would make some disciplinary specialists feel threatened because they ‘view social space through the optic of their methodology and their reductionistic schemata’ (Lefebvre 1991a: 108). For me, he is the academic provocateur par excellence.

Lefebvre liked to refer to himself as a ‘political thinker’, and it is not for me to try to adjudicate matters of his identity. On the contrary, I prefer to complicate them. It seems to me that from the age of 60, Lefebvre’s sustained critique of urban planning qualifies him as ‘honorary planning critic’. In recent research I suggest it is rather unfortunate that planning theorists and practitioners have, with a few noteworthy exceptions, ignored the potential contributions that Lefebvre’s ideas can make to planning theory and practice (Leary-Owhin 2018). Given his constant engagement with planning since the 1960s, it is surprising that a leading Anglophone planning theory book, *Readings in Planning Theory* (2015), did not mention him until its fourth edition and then only in passing. This is despite one of the first Anglophone articles on Lefebvre and planning being published over two decades ago (Allen and Pryke 1994) and a steady trickle...
of publications since then (e.g. Carp 2008; Leary 2009; Buser 2012; Leary 2013; Holgersen 2015; Honeck 2017). Similarly, Lefebvre is ignored in recent leading urban regeneration textbooks (e.g. Tallon 2013 but see Leary and McCarthy 2013). Perhaps this is partly because Lefebvre is regarded by many, including urban policymakers and practitioners, as a tough and enigmatic read leading to ‘bewilderment’ for many first-time readers (Pierce 2017: 1).

It was not until Lefebvre was in his 70s that he started to become famous in the Anglophone academic world for his startling ideas about the production of space. He was aware that the proposition at first sight may have appeared strange, as the first epigraph to this chapter illustrates. Representations of space are at the heart of the production of space and notably also such disciplines as architecture, geography and planning. His writing encourages us to think differently about cities and the urban. Its power lies partially in the ways cities and the urban are represented in his various texts and his spoken word. That his words are, in his own terms, representations, is so obvious it is usually overlooked. Why? Perhaps because he rarely if ever presents them in this way. It is worth reminding ourselves of what Stuart Hall says about representations:

In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them.

(Hall 1997: 3)

Hall draws our attention usefully to visual representations about which, in the context of representations of space, Lefebvre unfortunately has little to say, although he is complementary about some fine art painters but disparaging about guidebooks, photographs and some architectural representations of space (Lefebvre 1991a). Hall also indicates how emotions and values are important in how we interpret representations, and this is something of which Lefebvre was keenly aware. With these ideas in mind, I now turn to Lefebvre’s early years, picking out moments in his life journey to elucidate his approach to cities and the urban.

Glory, money and women

Unlike some other French philosophers, Lefebvre was conscious that he made the study of and attempts to change cities and the urban his life’s work, saying in an oblique jab at his rival Jean-Paul Sartre that he gave up ‘the ideas of the Manifesto’ and ‘glory, money and women, for a hard and mediocre life, for militant thought working on real problems’ (Lefebvre 1945 in Elden 2004: 20). Lefebvre was born in the town of Hagetmau just outside the French Pyrénées but grew up nearby in the Pyrenean town of Navarrenx. This town acquired great importance for the development of his ideas about space (see Leary-Owhin in Part 6). The town is located on the eastern bank of the River Oloron, where a large stone bridge was built in the 13th century, making Navarrenx more accessible but also of more strategic military importance (see Figure 1.1). Enlargement and fortification in the 1300s rendered Navarrenx an orthogonal medieval ‘new town’ (see Figure 1.2). Due to wars between the pre-French city states, it was remodelled and the fortifications reinforced in the 1500s to form encircling defensive Italianate ramparts. Thus historic Navarrenx became one of the first Bastide towns in what later became France. The ramparts are a treasured heritage feature of the town, now classified as historic monuments by the French planning system.

Navarrenx lies in the Department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques (the former traditional province of Béarn) in the French Basque area. It is close to the Lacq commune where the ‘new town’ of Mourenx is located. Historically, Béarn enjoyed a bucolic, organic landscape dominated by
Figure 1.1 The 13th-century bridge over the River Oloron at Navarrenx. Source: © Michael Leary-Owhin (2017).

Figure 1.2 Medieval fortifications for Navarrenx ‘New Town’. Source: © Michael Leary-Owhin (2017).
agriculture, dotted with traditional farmhouses and buildings (see Figure 1.3). This socio-geography of Lefebvre’s early years proved instrumental for his intellectual development and attitudes to the rural and urban. Lefebvre’s family was relatively affluent and middle class, his mother being a staunch Catholic, his father, secular. This religious divide may well have encouraged him to embrace dialectical contradiction. Lefebvre grew up in a large, comfortable 18th-century family house in the centre of Navarrenx. When I visited in spring 2017 to meet Catherine Régulier-Lefebvre, it looked resplendent, swathed in flowering wisteria (see Figure 1.4). Lefebvre left

![Figure 1.3](image1.jpg)

*Figure 1.3* The Béarn countryside features many historic buildings constructed of stone and red clay roofs in the traditional vernacular design. *Source: © Michael Leary-Owhin (2017).*

![Figure 1.4](image2.jpg)

*Figure 1.4* Lefebvre’s family home in Navarrenx, enveloped in wisteria. *Source: © Michael Leary-Owhin (2017).*
Navarrenx in his early teens, eventually travelling extensively in France and worldwide, but he spent a large part of his working life in Paris. Importantly, for his research, he returned regularly for extended stays at the family home. It became a kind of summer retreat where he entertained academic friends. In his 70s he retired there, living with his last wife, Catherine Régulier-Lefebvre.

At the age of 18 he went to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. There he encountered the writings of Karl Marx, but he may well have been a surrealist before a Marxist and he certainly read and met the leading French surrealists of the day. Evidently, any surrealist nihilism did not survive his multifaceted Neo-Marxism nor his opposition to Fascism. In his 20s while studying at the Sorbonne, he also discovered the writings of Hegel, Nietzsche, Engels and Lenin, developing over the decades his unique heterodox Neo-Marxism with its strong Humanist constituent. For Lefebvre, Marxism was less a blueprint for state communism and more an approach to knowledge and a set of ideas for political action by ordinary citizens rather than political parties. He rejected orthodox Marxist doctrine (and Stalinism), saying, ‘Marxism is, above all, a method of analysing social practices; it is not a series of assumptions, postulates, or dogmatic propositions’ (Lefebvre in Burgel et al. 1987). Gravitating to the political left, he joined the French Communist Party in 1928, becoming a leading theorist over the next 30 years. He was expelled from the Party in 1958 for his opposition to the Party’s ‘unrepentant Stalinism’ (Elden in Lefebvre 2016 [1972]: xiii).

During WW2 we can be sure he joined the French Resistance, to oppose the Nazi puppet Vichy government, rising to the rank of captain. His fluent German was no doubt extremely useful then, as it was for reading original versions of Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, Hegel and Kant. During the war he spent some time in Marseille but mostly he was cloaked by the Pyrenean mountains. What he did there is somewhat shrouded in mystery. For Merrifield (2006: 3) he was a daring saboteur, derailing enemy trains, tracking down collaborators. While Elden (in Lefebvre 2016 [1972]: x) is more circumspect, venturing only as far as to suggest his exact involvement is unclear; roles as active agent or theoretician appearing feasible. Does Lefebvre himself help? Only a little. He says that during his time with the Resistance he had conspiratorial meetings including with railwaymen in the area of Aix–en-Provence. He says there were train derailments and collaborators were executed. But he also says, we worked to provide the Resistance with an ideology to counter the powerful Vichy ideological offensive (Lefebvre 1991 in Latour and Combes 1991). We know that wartime combatants, even decades later, can find it difficult to talk about their experiences. So, for now, his precise role continues to be enigmatic. Even so, this wartime episode is important because, although war is punctuated with short periods of frenetic danger laced with violence, there are also protracted phases of inactivity. It was during these times that Lefebvre was able to conduct empirical research that facilitated the development of his dialectical research methodology.

Opinions differ about Lefebvre’s age and his attitude to it (Gottdiener 1993). For some ‘He did not like to be reminded of his date of birth’ (Shields 1999: 8). Apparently, he ‘was always playful about his age’ and enjoyed ‘teasing his chroniclers’ with different lived timelines. While visiting the University of California in the 1980s, he would ‘correct’ the date of his birth in the library catalogue to 1905 (Soja 1996: 28). Elden affirms that Lefebvre’s birth date is disputed and that ‘by 1965 he could have been 60, 64 or even 67’ (Elden in Lefebvre 2016 [1972]: xiii). Without the benefit of contrary documentary evidence, I accept the consensus that Lefebvre was born in June 1901 and passed away in June 1991. Whatever his age, his extended life allows for much thinking, reading, writing and controversy. Chief among controversies are, how can we do and what does it mean to do Lefebvrian urban research?
Being Lefebvrian: research theory and practice

From his Marxist philosophical position, Lefebvre was concerned with persuading his students and readers of the primacy of the Marxist approach to investigating the past in order to understand the present and create a fairer future. Alongside this, he occasionally provided detailed research methods guidance before this was de rigueur. Even though he does so in his own imitable style, few students of cities and the urban find the study of methodology stimulating per se. His philosophy was a springboard for empirical research and political action. This is evident from 1947, for example, in the first edition of the Critique of Everyday Life, in which:

‘philosophy no longer scorns the concrete and the everyday’. By making alienation ‘the key concept in the analysis of human situations since Marx’, Lefebvre was opening philosophy to action: taken in its Kantian sense, critique was not simply knowledge of everyday life, but knowledge of the means to transform it.

(Trebitsch in Lefebvre 1991b [1947]: x)

Transformation required knowledge and understanding of the theoretical and the empirical. Lefebvre was therefore, along with his students and colleagues, concerned intensely with the issue of how to conduct rural and urban sociological research based on sound theory, methodology and methods. He appreciated that the ‘facts’ of empirical reality can of course be interpreted differently. Long before Castells’ 1970s criticisms of a lack of an empirical base, Lefebvre was aware of this danger, asserting that the second volume of Everyday Life ‘ran the risk of becoming a work of philosophy rather than a piece of concrete sociological research’ (Lefebvre 1991b [1947]: 98–99). He realised there was a vast archive of popular literature that could inform his analysis of everyday life, ‘Moreover, this press represents an extraordinary sociological fact, which cries out to be analysed’. (Ibid.). So Lefebvre was a philosopher and a data-conscious researcher of grounded everyday life.

The Introduction to this Handbook outlines how Lefebvre’s ideas are often regarded as confused, confusing, unfinished and therefore not useful as frameworks for empirical research. Such comments and criticisms relate in particular to theories of the spatial triad in TPOS. Some are more generalised (Schmid et al. 2014). Paradoxically, it is the triad that has stimulated the largest volume of empirical research worldwide. Schmid’s (2014: 35) observations typify comments about the challenges of doing Lefebvrian-inspired empirical research:

This brings us to the next source of possible trouble: while his theory has gradually found better understanding in recent years, and many of his concepts have been debated and clarified, the question of empirical application has long remained opaque. Lefebvre did not really offer clarification here, as his books remain elusive when it comes to this question, and examples he gives are often more illustrative in character than exact in presenting detailed results of concrete field research.

Schmid, who acknowledges Stanek’s 2011 book for the voluminous and meticulous revelations regarding Lefebvre’s empirical research (see also Stanek 2017), nevertheless asserts:

However, Lefebvre did not develop any sophisticated methodology. He and his colleagues and assistants used the existing methods that were available at the time, based mainly on qualitative methodologies. It follows that there are no simple recipes or models that would allow us to apply his concepts.

(Schmid’s 2014: 35)
There is some credence to Schmid’s position on this, but it is not the full story. Schmid is correct as far as Lefebvre may not have developed new research methods, but he did appreciate the importance of qualitative and quantitative research and contribute greatly to methodology and research theory, as explained below. The point is that these aspects of his work are largely ignored in the Anglophone academy. One consequence is that most production of space researchers seek empirical contrasts between representations of space and spaces of representation (see e.g. Fyfe 1996; Lapina 2017; Harwood et al. 2018).

If Lefebvre’s urban ideas are so confused and confusing, how could they have been adopted for rigorous and high-quality empirical research by so many academics? Perhaps his intricate philosophy and written style overshadowed his guidance for researchers. Paradoxically, Unwin (2000) offers severe criticism of Lefebvre but accepts that the production of space idea engendered a trove of empirical research. Researchers from the early 1990s had to divine in Lefebvre an appropriate methodological approach. One would hope it involves more than citing Lefebvre early on, then leaving methodological issues implicit in the published research. That said, there is little consensus about how to do Lefebvrian research, which creates headaches but conveniently allows scope for a range of intriguing approaches and interpretations.

A range of Lefebvrian scholars offer insights into how to do research inspired by his ideas. Merrifield (1993: 522) thinks Lefebvre’s framework provides a flexible device which can illuminate the nature of space and its relations with a broader social whole. Soja sees in Lefebvre the potential for a method based on ‘trialectics’ that stresses the interweaving of the three spatial elements (1996: 10) and the history of representations. Kofman and Lebas (1996: 8–10) maintain that being Lefebvrian ‘is more a sensibility, rather than a closed system’, but also many find his theoretical insights difficult to apply due to the fluidity and openness of his thought. Kofman and Lebas are still able though to deduce a Lefebvrian approach to production of space research based on observation, investigation of concrete reality and historical analyses. Borden (2001: 11–12) was one of the first Anglophone academics to articulate Lefebvrian guidance for empirical research and postulates eight tenets which, although useful, are more conceptual than concrete. They do not constitute a patented system but are an approximation of a method that provides a theoretical and methodological compass and helps keep researchers on the right track. Borden seems inspired by Lefebvre’s claim that:

> The theoretical conception we are trying to work out in no way aspires to the status of a completed ‘totality’, and even less to that of a ‘system’ or ‘synthesis’. It implies discrimination between ‘factors’, elements or moments. To reiterate a fundamental theoretical and methodological principle, this approach aims both to reconnect elements that have been separated and to replace confusion by clear distinctions; to rejoin the severed and reanalyse the commingled.

*(Lefebvre 1991a [1974]: 413)*

Lefebvre left sufficient signs, scattered liberally throughout his major works, for how to research the urban, especially but not exclusively in TPOS. It is this sprinkling, rather than a complete lack, that creates problems for the researcher. I contend he provides guidance for how to do research at four differing levels ranging from the particular to the general: 1) specific research methods; 2) his heterodox Marxism; 3) a regressive-progressive theoretical model; 4) the theory of transduction. The last two are crucial for research regarding the RTC, production of space, planetary urbanisation and rhythmanalysis.
Specific research methods

Contrary to what several commentators say, Lefebvre does provide specific guidance for doing empirical research related to urban issues. In considering the issue of housing or habitat in the 1960s, he criticised the functionalist approach of Le Corbusier and others on epistemological and methodological grounds. In an introduction to a piece of research called *Preface to the Study of the Habitat of the ‘Pavillon’* (1953) he critiques sociological positivism that rejects in-depth analysis and takes a superficial quantitative approach to ‘the study of man, the city or society in general’ (Lefebvre 1966 in Elden et al. 2003: 121). This empirical research project was carried out under his supervision while he was director of the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine. In this *Preface* Lefebvre presents philosophical and methodological justification for what we would now call semi-structured in-depth research interviews. He argues that although the sociologist’s questionnaire is frequently used for researching housing issues, it is rarely sufficient. It produces numbers, percentages and correlations, it is ‘precise but narrow, and may also be suspect’ (Ibid.: 127). Questionnaires are sometimes used to match pseudo-concepts to pseudo-facts. Alternatively, the non-directive or semi-structured interview is indispensable because it gives a voice to research subjects through free expression. Unfortunately, it seeks to collect that which lies psychologically deep and puzzlingly ‘cannot be collected’ (Ibid.: 128).

Lefebvre then faces up to the methodological research bind between quantitative and qualitative approaches or ‘the problems of steering a course between metaphysics and positivist triviality’ (Ibid.). He concludes there is merit in both approaches. His way out of the bind is to advocate a twofold system, or what is now called mixed method research. In doing so Lefebvre was ahead of the time. Mixed method research approaches are now well established, although they remain controversial for some and the debate continues (Creswell and Creswell 2018). In the 1953 *Preface*, Lefebvre reveals an academic intellect and methodological astuteness and is adept at guiding the empirical researcher through the epistemological and methodology challenges of designing and implementing urban field research. We should not be surprised since such qualities were and are an absolute requirement for the director of a sociological research institute. But it was precisely because he was a Marxist philosopher that he was able to switch gears smoothly to provide powerful ontological and philosophical underpinning for researching the urban.

Marxism, dialectical research and transduction

By the mid-1980s Lefebvre was aware the 19th century, laissez-faire capitalism analysed by Marx had transmuted, due partly to the growth of the state, into neoliberalism, i.e. a tightening of bonds between state and big capital, especially regarding urban development:

> The official [French] planning body responsible for regional development, a powerful centralized organisation, lacked neither resources nor ambitions: to *produce* a harmonious national space – to bring a little order to ‘wild’ urban development, which answers only to the pursuit of profit. Today nobody is unaware that this innovative planning initiative… was wreaked, reduced to practically nothing by neo-liberalism and since put clumsily back together again.

(*Lefebvre 1985 in Elden et al. 2003: 207*)

Neoliberalism in the Global North and South tilts power away from local government, local inhabitants and small business towards big business and the state. For Lefebvre, the locus of
Michael E. Leary-Owhin

Political power was a key factor in his Marxism. For example, regarding aspects of political power he provides this high-level and particular guidance for empirical research:

Inasmuch as the quest for the relevant productive capacity or creative process leads us in many cases to political power, there arises the question of how such power is exercised. Does it merely command, or does it ‘demand’ also? What is the nature of its relationship to the groups subordinate to it, which are themselves ‘demanders’, sometimes also ‘commanders’, and invariably ‘participants’? This is a historical problem — that of all cities, all monuments, all landscapes. The analysis of any space brings us up against the dialectical relationship between demand and command, along with its attendant questions: ‘Who?’, ‘For whom?’, ‘By whose agency?’, ‘Why and how?’

(Lefebvre 1991a [1974]: 116)

At the philosophical level, Lefebvre’s research was guided by his heterodox Marxism, foregrounding the dialectical approach which shaped his ontology and epistemology, but it did not exist in isolation and was always in dialectical tension with the mass of phenomenological detail regarding neo-capitalism, institutions, everyday life and understanding of cities and the urban. Therefore, Lefebvre explored the ‘urban problematic within the theoretical framework of historical materialism’ (Elden in Lefebvre 2016 [1972]: viii). From the 1960s Lefebvre turned his research attention from the rural to the industrial and the urban. In the post-WW2 period, sociology in France and elsewhere was vying with established subjects, such as history, to become recognised as a university discipline. Lefebvre appreciated the tensions between these two ways of knowing the world but accepted the importance of history for sociology. In TPOS he is adamant a historical approach is essential for revealing the production of space. The history of space ‘but also the history of representations along with that of their relationships’ would need to be studied along with ‘their links with the spatial practice of the particular society’ (Lefebvre 1991a [1974]: 42).

This is one reason why time must be at the core of our appreciation of the production of space and why history is important for appreciation of the present in order to instigate change. Accordingly, Lefebvre builds time into what he calls a manual of sociology and ‘a very simple method’ (Lefebvre 1953 in Elden et al. 2003: 116). This simple empirical research manual appears in a paper called ‘Perspectives on rural sociology’ published in an academic journal called Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie (International Sociological Notebooks). Publication in this prestigious journal is important because it was founded in 1946 to promote the study of post-WW2 French society and to create new research instruments and to do so through an international dimension.

‘Perspectives on rural sociology’ is a kind of research manual with precise instructions, but it is also more general and complex than that, so the term ‘theoretical model’ is more appropriate (Elden 2004: 38). Lefebvre’s Marxism informs the model especially where it stresses the importance of historical analysis and social ‘reality’, and in the to-and-fro between the past and the present. It throws light on possible–impossible futures, or in today’s parlance, socially just futures:

a) Descriptive. Observation, but with an eye informed by experience and a general theory. In the foreground: participant observation of the field. Careful use of survey techniques (interviews, questionnaires, statistics).

b) Analytico-regressive. Analysis of reality as described. Attempt to give it a precise date (so as not to be limited to an account turning on undated ‘archaisms’ that are not compared with one another).
c) Historical-genetic. Studies of changes in this or that previously dated structure, by further (internal or external) development and by its subordination to overall structures. Attempt to reach a genetic classification of formations and structures, in the framework of the overall structure. Thus an attempt to return to the contemporary as previously described, in order to rediscover the present, but elucidated, understood: explained.

(Lefebvre in Elden et al. 2003: 116–117)

The model encompasses some well-established research approaches such as: induction, the observation stage, quantitative and qualitative research. It is another example of an analytical triad: description, regression-progression, explanation. Merrifield notes shrewdly that the model ‘became a methodology and political credo’, privileging the quotidian (2006: 5–6). This regressive-progressive method or theory has the power to show history in a new light and in so doing present alternative understandings of the present and possible futures (Stanek 2011: 159). Lefebvre is clear that ‘We can also say that transduction goes from the (given) real to the possible’ (Lefebvre 2002: 117–118). In studying the past, especially from the time of the modern era, archives and archival methods become essential. It is the space of Navarrenx and the history of its production which ‘embodies the forms and actions of a thousand-year-old community’ (Lefebvre 1995: 116). Interestingly, archival research has been pursued by a number of researchers inspired by Lefebvre (e.g. Fyfe 1996; Hubbard et al. 2003; Leary 2009). It is salient to note how Lefebvre accepts, in non-dogmatic fashion, a range of research methods and data as being useful for rural and urban research, and his mixed method approach is now part of research orthodoxy.

Far from being simply the thought experiments of a detached philosopher, Lefebvre was driven to ensure that his research was founded on ‘empirical reality’ – a range of data sources constructed through what we now call a mixed methods approach. Moreover, this concrete research and associated methods were underpinned by his profound transduction model, so much so that one of Lefebvre’s strongest critics, Jean-Paul Sartre, explained graciously regarding the regressive-progressive method:

we have nothing to add to this passage, so clear and so rich, except that we believe that this method, with its phase of phenomenological description and its double movement of regression followed by progress is valid – with the modifications which its objects may impose upon it – in all the domains of anthropology.

(Sartre 1960 in Elden 2004: 38)

Lefebvre elaborates how this approach can work in the 1968 essay ‘Right to the city’ (in Kofman and Lebas 1996: 113). He considers the methodological tools and research focus required to undertake urban analysis are: ‘form, function, structure, levels, dimensions, text, context, field and whole, writing and reading, system, signified and signifier, language and metalanguage, institutions’. And in the context of the RTC he argues two approaches are needed. The first goes from the general to the most specific, ‘and then uncovers the city as specific and (relatively) privileged mediation’. The second ‘constructs the general by identifying the elements and significations of what is observable in the urban’. It is possible thereby to reach ‘the concealed daily life: its rhythms, its occupations, its spatiotemporal organization, its clandestine “culture”, its underground life’ (Ibid.).

When the research regression-progression model is applied to exploring the potential for the production of utopia or urban society, Lefebvre understands this as an imaginative process that challenges the neo-capitalist status quo and the ways in which it elides desirable futures by what
he called a blind field (Lefebvre 2003: 41). This mask leads people away from a search for radical alternatives, an urban society, because at present they seem unattainable, impossible. Urban society is developed conceptually mainly in his book The Urban Revolution (2003), and its potential arises from the contradictions inherent in neoliberal capitalism and the abstract space of emerging planetary urbanisation. His Marxism had two consequences for Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of urban society. First, it rendered him suspicious of collusion between big business and government. He favoured the idea of the withering away of the state in positive processes that would allow the emergence of community self-determination, autogestion or self-management (Harvey 2012; Purcell 2014).

Lefebvre calls his regression-progression approach to knowing, reasoning and researching ‘transduction’. In fact, he had developed this concept by 1961 and refers to it in the second volume of Everyday Life. The need for transduction lies partly in Lefebvre’s dissatisfaction with overly quantitative empiricist, trivialised approaches to urban research:

Unlike a fact-filled empiricism with its risky extrapolations and fragments of indigestible knowledge, we can build a theory from a theoretical hypothesis. The development of such a theory is associated with a methodology. For example, research involving a virtual object, which attempts to define and realize that object as part of an ongoing project, already has a name: transduction. The term reflects an intellectual approach toward a possible object, which we can employ alongside the more conventional activities of deduction and induction. The concept of an urban society, which I introduced above, thus implies a hypothesis and a definition.

(Lefebvre 2003: 5)

His focus on theory and methodology, rather than the detail of research methods, is a major strength because it is too easy to become wedded to particular methods that either go out of fashion or provoke acrimonious exchanges between rival research method camps. His term ‘virtual object’ predates the computing era and refers to that which does not yet exist fully. It is inchoate but is discernible, on the horizon. Transduction as research practice is difficult to execute and concrete utopias difficult to identify. Lefebvre added that transduction is a serious challenge partly because neo-capitalism veils using homogeneity and technology, ‘the utopian part of urbanist projects’ (Lefebvre 2003: 161). An urban society is one where difference is tolerated and celebrated, but it is also one where people and communities are able to realise they have more in common than they may think (Merrifield 2018). Furthermore, it is a society where the right to be different is a fundamental RTC (Leary-Owhin 2016). However, Lefebvre warned against expecting an immediate epistemology to develop that could bring forth research, practice and political action for an urban society:

the argument I have developed would claim the contrary. For the moment, for a long time into the future, the problematic will outweigh our understanding. What is most needed is that we categorize, that we prepare concepts (categories) we can verify, that we explore the possible-impossible, and that we do so through transduction.

(Lefebvre 2003: 162)

Purcell is one of several researchers to grasp the centrality of transduction for Lefebvrian research, which begins:

by closely examining actual-but-inchoate practices that are currently taking place in the city, and then we extrapolate them using theoretical reflection to produce, in thought,
more fully developed version of them, a virtual idea (which he [Lefebvre] calls ‘urban soci-
ety’) that shows us what kind of world they would produce if they were allowed to flourish
and pervade the city. Once we have extrapolated this concept in thought, we then use it as
a lens to help us better see those actual practices as they exist today, struggling to emerge
and flourish. We need this lens, he says, because the fledgling urban society is difficult to see
in the blinding light of the industrial city.

(2013: 319)

Lefebvre admits his approach to research theory and practice does not aspire to the status of
a completed totality but seeks to ‘reconnect elements that have been separated and to replace
confusion by clear distinctions’ (Lefebvre 1991a [1974]: 413). Nevertheless, at the philosophical
level Lefebvre signals a project, and it is this lifelong project to which he directs research effort
and encourages others to do likewise. It is a grand project, the purpose of which is no less than
conceptualising and striving to bring about a different kind of society, an urban society predi-
cated on difference, on differential space, from that inherent in neo-capitalism:

By seeking to point the way towards a different space, towards the space of a different
(social) life and of a different mode of production, this project straddles the breach between
science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived. It aspires to surmount these
oppositions by exploring the dialectical relationship between ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’, and
this both objectively and subjectively.

(Lefebvre 1991a [1974]: 60)

An urban society is therefore a paradoxical characteristic of neo-capitalist abstract space, inher-
ent in its contradictions. So we arrive at the ultimate contradiction – the possible-impossible.
This is the root of and the route to Lefebvre’s utopianism. Like all political activists, Marxist or
otherwise, Lefebvre understood its attainment requires: patience; principles; pragmatism; wis-
dom; courage; humour; and, above all, protracted struggle through political action.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have argued that part of Lefebvre’s enduring attraction and charm are the
enigmas that shroud his persona. Even something as mundane, to many of us, as his date of
birth is enveloped in mystery and a sense of Lefebvrian fun. He appears to have resented the
criticism that he was only a detached philosopher, however accomplished. This chapter eluci-
dates research ideas regarding the importance for Lefebvre of research theory and practice. It
links the development of Lefebvre’s understanding of theoretical and empirical research issues
to his Marxism and to his wartime and post-WW2 experiences. So following that route, this
chapter outlines some of his important interventions regarding not just ontology and episte-
mology but also methodology and research methods. The chapter demonstrates that Lefebvre
provides a range of signs and clues for research theory and practice, and of paramount impor-
tance is the regressive-progressive transduction model. The chapter closes with an explana-
tion of the salience of transduction, RTC, urban society and the necessary challenges to the
capitalist status quo. Lefebvre’s intellectual and political struggle, agonism, is important per se
but the chapter asserts they are more imperative for their contribution to his grand project,
a project that is more relevant in today’s hyper-neoliberal context. His struggles and those of
many other academics, politicians and activists offer hope in venturing from the real towards
the possible-impossible.
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References


