‘In a group you feel OK, but outside there you are ready to die’
Right to the city or to the planet?

Why Henri Lefebvre’s vision is useful and too narrow at the same time

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Introduction: a brilliant thinker and his contradictions

The Henri Lefebvre whom so many people today admire emerged only in the second half of the 1960s. Lefebvre was for almost half of his adult life affiliated to a Stalinist party – the French Communist Party (PCF); he only moved away from that party because he was suspended after three decades of belonging to it. Born in 1901, he joined PCF in 1928, at a time when it was already showing a clearly Stalinist line and a tendency to be subservient to Moscow’s orientation, both aspects consolidated at the beginning of the following decade. It was only in 1958, when he was finally suspended, that Lefebvre definitely broke with the party. Even the late Lefebvre – the celebrated author of important works such as The Right to the City, Everyday Life in the Modern World, The Urban Revolution, Marxist Thought and the City and The Production of Space – however, was not free from contradictions and ambiguities.

Henri Lefebvre, it is important to stress, was a philosopher who at the same time as he began to speak (in a rather vague way) of ‘(generalised) self-management’ (autogestion or généralisée) (Lefebvre 1983; 1998; 2009) from the 1960s onwards, disdained – as a typical heir of the Marxist tradition – Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the anarchists in general, the first and most notable practitioners and promoters of the principle behind the word self-management; moreover, he seems to have spared the so-called ‘self-management’ in Yugoslavia of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, who for three decades and a half commanded a light version of ‘bureaucratic socialism’, from any severe objection. Furthermore, Lefebvre is also the thinker who after criticising the working class for the anachronism of their organisations and discourse, found it difficult to value praxis and popular creations without great reservations because of Leninist/vanguardistic remnants which made him believe that only the critical intellectuals would have a vision of totality and ‘œuvre’ (as opposed to mere ‘product’), which would escape the mass (Lefebvre 1991: 144; see also Lefebvre 1971 and 1983). As we see, from a political-ideological point of view, there is no shortage of problems in his body of work.

Apart from Lefebvre’s hesitations and political concessions during the three decades of his membership in the PCF (and to some extent even later), there are a whole set of more subtle and philosophical problems. One of the gaps in Lefebvre’s work, and which will serve here as the central axis for discussion, is the relative neglect or underestimation of nature. This relative
neglect, however, is neither accidental nor the sign of a pure idiosyncrasy. This kind of gap is closely related to Lefebvre’s closeness to Marxist mainstream in some sense, in spite of his proverbial (late) heterodoxy in some other senses.

Interestingly, in the 1980s and even in the 1990s, Henri Lefebvre and his work were not much more than objects of academic reflection (and sometimes of worship). And then, at the beginning of the 21st century, there was an explosion of interest: protests and various movements – against gentrification, for more and better public spaces, against obscure business and real estate deals, against mega-sporting events and their consequences for residential segregation and waste of public resources and so on – in Europe and the United States, and soon thereafter in a number of other continents and many other countries – began to have in the right to the city a convenient slogan. As it could have been easily expected, this debate has fed back into academic curiosity and interest. But it also encouraged the willingness of governments and non-governmental organisations (often states’ charming appendages within ‘civil society’) to use the same expression to embellish the discourse of official programs and ‘social inclusion’ projects. In other words, a wave of co-optation and banalisation has accompanied the worldwide diffusion of the ‘right to the city’ motto. Increasingly distant from its origins as a radical demand (the right to the city as the right to full enjoyment of the wealth and culture socially generated and concentrated in the cities, which presupposes, according to Lefebvre, another society), that slogan has been appropriated in a politically debilitating way by disparate agents – from the partnership called ‘Cities Alliance’, formed jointly by the World Bank and UN-Habitat, to the Brazilian Ministry of Cities – not infrequently for purposes of legitimising the state apparatus and parastatal policies and interventions.

Regardless of the misrepresentations of the idea of the right to the city, my thesis is that it is a valid but insufficient one – and if taken as possessing absolute value, also a limiting one. It surely deserves to be rescued from attempts to politically emasculate and impoverish it, but on the condition that it is radically recontextualised and treated as an aspect of a broader and deeper political-social project. Although it is to a large extent valid and daring, its own daringness also has intrinsic limits within the theoretical and political-philosophical framework of the Lefebvrian body of work. If we look carefully at the body of work in question, we shall see, if we are open to this possibility of interpretation, that the great French philosopher thematised less profoundly or strikingly than it would be desirable a whole range of subjects, such as the problematic nature of capitalist technology, the specific political-organisational forms of the post-revolutionary society of the future and hence the questionable meaningfulness of a ‘socialist state’ and of political parties – which are formidable challenges and ultimately impasses for any consequent Marxist state. The right to the city is a perspective that brings with it a nucleus of indisputable validity, but that ends up being limited and limiting, and this limitation is expressed in the shape of an underestimation of the scope of the problematic of nature and of the anti-ecological character not only of capitalism but indeed also of typical Marxism itself. This will be manifested in the weaknesses of Lefebvre in relation to his critique of the spatiality and technology of ‘bureaucratic socialism’, and even regarding his critique of capitalism, not to mention the vagueness in terms of sketching out alternatives.

Emancipatory socio-spatial change can be by no means only a matter of a ‘right to the city’ – not even within the interpretive framework of the Lefebvrian concept of the ‘urban’ (l’urbain), whose scope goes beyond the geographical entity called ‘city’. What is at stake here is the path to a renewed radical theory, as well as to more effective forms of struggle against the capitalist system at the global level. What is at stake, therefore, is the need for a questioning and a practical confrontation of the capitalist (anti)civilisatory model on a planetary scale, which, in my conviction, implies facing up to the challenge of thinking and overcoming: 1) the state apparatus and statism (capitalist or ‘socialist’) as well as political parties and actually all hierarchical, bureaucratic
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and vertical modes of collective organisation; 2) the capitalist technological matrix and spatiality; 3) the capitalist ideology of ‘economic development’ and ‘domination of nature’, with its economistic/productivistic, Eurocentric, teleological and rationalist premises (somehow shared, albeit in a distinctive and recontextualised way, by typical Marxism). Clearly, at least from a perspective nurtured by the reality from the second half of the 20th century onwards, a critique against the technological matrix and the spatiality inherited from capitalism necessarily includes a radical critique of the anti-ecological aspects of the capitalist mode of production (i.e. its inherent drive for capital accumulation).

It is thus necessary to rethink a whole series of questions regarding spatial organisation (pointing to radical economic–spatial deconcentration and territorial decentralisation, but without slipping to localisms and insularisations), exploitation, alienation and the social division of labour (in which trends of precariousness and ‘hyper-precariousness’ in the world of labour must be highlighted), ethnocentrism (whose renewed facets in terms of xenophobia, nationalism and racism must be vehemently denounced), the various types of oppression (class, gender, etc.) and heteronomy in general. In order to meet these intellectual and political requirements, a ‘right to the city’ and an ‘urban revolution’ are not enough, as inspiring as these ideas undoubtedly can be. Lefebvre’s relative neglect of nature is inextricably connected with his ambiguities and vagueness in terms of crucial discussions related to spatial deconcentration and territorial decentralisation, and ultimately to the specific politico-organisational forms of the future – or in other words, to the relationship between a post-revolutionary mode of production and post-revolutionary decision-making processes.

Beyond (but by no means against) the ‘right to the city’: Lefebvre’s limits from a left-libertarian and politico-ecological perspective

Geographer Neil Smith drew attention in a brilliant text to several shortcomings of Lefebvre’s formulations, analysing the book *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1981 [Smith used the 1991 English edition]). Among the problems detected by Smith is an underestimation and sub-systematisation of what he called the ‘(social) production of nature’. He argues, after commenting that ‘an unresolved contradiction between ontology and history drives much of Lefebvre’s vision’ (Smith 1998: 51–52) – adding further that, ‘[t]his is undoubtedly reaffirmed by a sometimes quixotic resort to a philosophism that he himself, in other contexts, would critique’ – and that, ‘it leads to an uncharacteristically simple dismissal of an unreconstructed nature’ (Smith 1998: 52). A few pages later, he mercilessly states:

Lefebvre’s rethinking of nature is poor – far less original than his radical repolitization of space which, in fact, carries along his conceptualization of nature. He leaves nature largely unreconstructed, and with it the relationship between space and nature.

*(Smith 1998: 59)*

According to Neil Smith, ‘[n]ature for Lefebvre is on the verge of becoming a corpse at the behest of abstract space’. Or, as he immediately adds, for Lefebvre nature, unlike space, ‘retains virtually no initiative to and for itself’ (Smith 1998: 59). For Smith, such a reading would attribute ‘a surprisingly undialectical negativity to the treatment of nature’; actually ‘[n]ature is reduced to little more than a substratum’:

He [Lefebvre] even adopts the Frankfurt School argument that it is ‘domination’ of nature and not simply its appropriation, as Marx usually put it, that we witness today. But there is
little hint of the more active political initiative that the Frankfurt School attributes to nature via the ‘revenge of nature’, or, in place of that admittedly nostalgic construction, some other sense of a politics of nature. Quite the opposite. Nature is increasingly the raw material of mimetic productions of space in which ‘what are produced are the signs of nature or of the natural realm’; ‘nature is left, as it were, in a no-man’s land’.

(Smith 1998: 60)

It seems, however, that Neil Smith’s premises and Marxist formation acted as a brake here and there, preventing him from going even further in his criticism – which would beyond a certain point necessarily become reservations about Marxism itself.

Smith is quite right in objecting to natural scientists’ insistence on a convenient fiction, one that disconnects the study of nature from the cultural-social-historical (and psychological) conditions of the generation of this knowledge. As we know, many natural scientists even commonly perform an ‘epistemological and methodological imperialism’, by presuming that the study of society should not differ essentially from the study of non-human nature – or if and when it differs, it differs because it is still ‘backward’ and ‘immature’ (in the face, of course, of the canons established by sciences such as physics). On the other hand, Marxism (and indeed a large part of the social sciences tradition, albeit in varying ways) tends to convince us that the picture must be completely reversed: ‘nature’ is itself a kind of chimera, unattainable and not knowable in itself, since everything, all the time, is already mediated by human perception, culture and history. There would be no observed object that would not always bring in its description and explanation the marks of perception by human observers, who are always historically and culturally situated; the very language we use to express any idea connected with nature would already demonstrate it. There would be a ‘first nature’, yes, but since it is knowable by us only through the mediation of culture and history, it would never appear before us properly as ‘first’, but always as ‘second’, even if in some places nature gives us the impression of being very little altered, not significantly artificial or even pristine. Hence this ‘first nature’ is, for the typical Marxist, of little interest – or even no interest at all. Be that as it may, Neil Smith criticises Lefebvre, and rightly so; but he would have been much more precise if he had realised that in this regard (as in several others too) the ‘heretic’ Lefebvre was simply being a coherent Marxist.

For Lefebvre, ‘first nature’ is little more than a residue, as Neil Smith acknowledged. For the former, the production of space is, in the end, ceaseless reproduction of space – incessant reproduction and retransformation of the ‘second nature’. ‘First nature’ would be linear and uninteresting in itself. (Lefebvre here, incidentally, follows especially the tradition of ‘Western Marxism’.) This neglect and contemptuous treatment of nature resembles a kind of ‘revenge’ against the arrogance and prepotency of the natural sciences; but how productive and balanced could such an epistemological and ontological retaliation be? Despite all dialectics, this view is simplistic; it restores a dichotomy ‘society/nature’ whose overcoming was already glimpsed over a century ago by anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus under the sign of the maxim ‘l’Homme est la nature prenant conscience d’elle-même’ (Reclus 1905–1908).

Lefebvre’s view – which is intertwined with his difficulty to move beyond a right to the city towards a broader ‘planetary’ approach – is flawed for three main reasons:

1) Ontological: ‘first nature’ is ineliminable and can never be reduced to a kind of ‘residue’; what is necessary is to verify how it is constantly historically recontextualised, politically reassessed, materially reworked/impacted and culturally-symbolically re-signified, often to the point of posing threats to the well-being and even health of entire population groups within the framework of its instrumentalisation to heteronomous purposes, or on the
basis of heteronomous social relations (in the sense systematically explored by Bookchin (2005)).

2) *Existential:* global climate change shows how the ecological problem (or rather the ecological-metabolic dimension of the social crisis generated by capitalism) should not be underestimated by anti-systemic forces. Marxist productivism, as tributary of the capitalist imaginary, needs to be challenged – and this requires more than a simple criticism of Lefebvre, something Neil Smith certainly was not willing to admit. It is necessary to see that taking this challenge seriously has nothing to do with reviving Malthusianism or throwing oneself into the arms of a socially regressive ecocentrism compatible with conservative and even reactionary ideologies.

3) *Ethical-political:* ignoring the socio-environmental struggles of social groups and sometimes whole peoples (especially in the ‘Global South’, but not only) reveals a lack of political and ethical-cultural sensitivity. It is, strictly speaking, a Eurocentric stance, it matters little whether through ignorance or choice.

Having as place of enunciation invariably the big city, many simplifications have already been committed by many Marxist urban researchers, with biases not only exaggeratedly ‘rural-phobic’ but also Eurocentric. The process of economic, political and cultural domination of the countryside by the (large) city under industrial capitalism, brilliantly described and controversially exalted by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1982), reflects both the ‘colonisation’ of the countryside by the city in the wake of the rise of capitalism and the colonisation imposed by the Christian and urban-industrial West, even before industrialisation, (from the 16th century) on other peoples and cultural matrices – and with this the coloniality of hegemonic knowledge itself. It is worth recalling how, in the *Communist Manifesto*, the most emblematic passages about the domination of the countryside by the city and the domination of nature by the triumphant bourgeoisie are separated from each other by only one paragraph, showing, when they are uttered in one breath, that they are two aspects of the same process (Marx and Engels 1982: 111).

At this juncture, we have reached the point where it is necessary to focus, although succinctly, on one of the most controversial questions for current critical theorisation, especially for political ecology: was Marx insensitive to environmental degradation or, on the contrary, was he an ecologist *avant la lettre*? Authors such as Massimo Quaini (1982) and Alfred Schmidt (2016) tried to convince us that there was an ‘ecological Marx’ that has been underestimated (Schmidt even makes a self-criticism in this regard), while superficial critiques on the contrary seek to demonstrate that Marx ignored the theme of ‘environmental protection’ altogether. Both approaches to the matter are severely biased and therefore wrong. Authors such as Quaini and Schmidt, in fact, only demonstrate that Marx did have some conservationist concerns, although Schmidt himself admits that these appear only sparsely in his work. As a shrewd observer of ‘man’s and nature’s metabolism’ (*Stoffwechsel von Mensch und Natur*), Marx revealed ‘ecological’ concerns at times when he observed phenomena of devastation caused by irrational uses of the soil or by the sheer logic of capital. However, this does not invalidate or neutralise what sets the tone for his work: productivism-economism, ‘domination of nature’, rationalism and finally relatively uncritical urban-philia and a somewhat exaggerated rural-phobic (on these problems, Cornelius Castoriadis provided abundant material, full of evidence and backed by solid argument: (see, for example, Castoriadis 1975; 1978a; 1978b and Souza 2006; 2012). As for this discussion, the relevant question is not ‘did Marx pay attention to specific environmental problems?’ but rather ‘what place do environmental problems generated by capitalism occupy in Marx’s work?’ Considering that Marx, as a 19th-century author, was a son of the European
Enlightenment and of the industrial revolution, the fact that he did not extensively deal with environmental problems or cultivate ‘ecological’ concerns is somewhat understandable, just as it is not difficult to understand the ambiguous ideological relationship he maintained with the productive forces inherited from capitalism in the midst of a teleological scheme based on a supposed ‘dialectic’ between productive forces and production relations. Far less understandable, however, is Lefebvre being unclear or reticent about these points.

The classical ‘city–countryside opposition’ should not be oversimplified, since the interdependence between activities and the interpenetration of types of space have always been real and complex. It cannot be denied, however, that at the dawn of capitalism the differences between countryside and city were evident (to begin with, as regards the typical social classes: in the countryside, traditional landowners and peasantry; in the large cities, the nascent proletariat and industrial bourgeoisie, with the latter eclipsing the merely commercial bourgeoisie and the former very often replacing the artisans).

On the basis of Marxian historical materialism, Henri Lefebvre sought to reflect on the late tendencies of the process initially described by Marx and Engels at the dawn of modern capitalism, showing the contours that it presented in the second half of the 20th century: according to him, a process of becoming an urban and no longer only an industrial society. As he says in *Space and Politics*, ‘[t]he whole society becomes urban’ (Lefebvre 1976: 67). It is the thesis of a complete urbanisation of society as a tendency, in which the countryside becomes a kind of less dense version of the city, but completely urbanised from the point of view of culture, social relations (in terms of production relations and social classes) and technology. The contrast between the city and the non–city (the ‘countryside’) would be much more quantitative than qualitative.

Nevertheless, although the differences between the countryside and the (big) city suffer a leap in quality, first with the advent of industrial capitalism, and in the 20th century with the gradual emergence of what Lefebvre calls ‘urban society’, many nuances and complexities remain. Yes, it is true that, on the one hand, a growing percentage of humanity lives in cities – according to UN data, more than half (54% in 2014; see United Nations 2015). But it is also true, on the other hand, that a probably small but not insignificant portion of that population lives – especially at the (semi)periphery of global capitalism – in cities whose strict and strongly urban character is debatable. This seems to suggest that data like those of the UN are probably exaggerated. In Brazil, for example, where official data show more than 80% of urban population, several scholars began to draw attention to the underestimation of the presence of rurality in the Brazilian socio-spatial fabric (see, for example, Bitoun et al. 2015).

This brings us to an interesting review of the Lefebvrian analysis: if on one hand, in general, and especially in the Global North socio-spatial contexts, the countryside has undoubtedly increasingly urbanised. On the other hand, there are also ‘cities’, especially in the ‘Global South’, which still bring strong brands of rurality and pre–capitalist traditions. It is not a question of proposing a disqualification of the analyses (by Lefebvre and others) that indicate an ‘urbanisation of humankind’. It is a question of relativising the Lefebvrian thesis of an ‘urban society’ and of a ‘complete urbanisation of society’. We see the persistence and reproduction of phenomena which, despite the presence of globalised capitalism in all corners of the world (penetrating and transforming the countryside and the villages, as well as small and medium-sized cities), continue to exist and challenge the complete economic and cultural pasteurisation of humankind and planetary space. Lefebvre himself had already conceded that in the countries of the periphery and semi-periphery of capitalism there would be a very special complexity, due to the coexistence of distinct spaces–times (the urban, industrial and agrarian eras) (Lefebvre 1983). But the Lefebvrian reading itself induces some over-simplification; it invites a Eurocentric look, which has influenced academia even in the countries of the Global South.


Neither urban-philic nor urban-phobic

Lefebvre’s thought, though committed to a utopian vision (utopia in a positive sense, namely of seeking a tomorrow that is radically different and better from today, but without underestimating existing constraints), is timid in several respects, however. It is characteristically urban-philic, and this urban-philia is none other than an expression of how even the Lefebvre that emerged in the 1960s, although detached from the French Communist Party, remained close to various aspects of the Marxist mainstream. Lefebvre continued to belong to the Marxist tradition, with all its merits but also with its limitations and vices. And it is to this tradition, of which Lefebvre was a representative, that we must address our reservations in the first place if we are to have greater political and intellectual confidence in the objections we raise. Actually, one of the factors that makes Lefebvre interesting in this context is precisely the fact that he was a brilliant thinker and that he was seen by other Marxists as a remarkable heterodox.

Prisoners of the dichotomy ‘city/countryside’ for a long time (a dichotomy that is the sister of ‘society/nature’), we do not realise that the thesis of the ‘urbanisation of society’, although largely valid, is somewhat Eurocentric; moreover, it does not solve the problem of cultivating as a politico-social goal a spatially radically different society from the capitalist one. Marxists – beginning with Marx himself, in the spirit so clearly announced by the Communist Manifesto – have accepted and admired the material and technological achievements embedded in capitalist urbanisation rather than systematically reflected on socio-spatial formats that promise their surpassing. Sure, already Marx’s closest friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels, addressed this problem in a clear way, as in the Anti-Dühring (Engels 1990), but his message was almost forgotten among subsequent Marxists. Symptomatically, Engels was sharply criticised by Lefebvre himself in Marxist Thought and the City (Lefebvre 1972). Taking heed of problems – such as the petty-bourgeois moralism of young Engels in The Condition of the Working Class in England, where large cities are seen (sometimes in a simplistic way) as places of a supposed ‘moral degradation’ of the working class (prostitution, alcoholism), and also considering Engels’ tendency (sometimes poorly conducted, but also at times productive) to value the ‘philosophy of nature’ and to insist on the challenge of reflecting on an spatial organisation alternative to capitalism – Lefebvre violently attacked the Anti-Dühring as well as The Condition of the Working Class in England and even The Housing Question.

Among the left-libertarians, the approaches were not homogeneous either, but there were at least no traces of that kind of self-censorship and lack of interest in thinking about the themes of ‘environmental protection’ and overcoming the capitalist spatial organisation that until at least the mid-20th century were still so characteristic of Marxist thought. Anarchist geographer Piotr Kropotkin, for example, offered us precious insights about economic-spatial deconcentration and territorial decentralisation (see, for instance, Kropotkin 2002), which constitute a formidable source of inspiration. If Kropotkin took a slightly ‘urban-phobic’ stance at times, the same cannot be said about his friend and comrade Élisée Reclus, who examined and deplored the miseries of an unjust society, spatially condensed in large cities (e.g. segregation, poverty and insalubrity) (Reclus 1905–1908), and pioneered a kind of dialectical and critical conservationist approach (Reclus 1864; 1898); at the same time, however, he was by no means simplistically ‘urban-phobic’: without turning to ‘urban-philia’ in a Marxist style, he nevertheless was unimpressed by the formation of metropolises and sought to open our eyes to pragmatically (even if critically) dealing with this circumstance (Reclus 1895; 1905–1908). These classical contributions by Kropotkin and Reclus were systematically enriched in the second half of the 20th century by neo-anarchist Murray Bookchin (see, for instance, Bookchin 1974; 1992; 2004; 2005; 2007), among others.
In spite of all the classical and contemporary contributions, much remains to be done – and in this regard Lefebvre’s contribution is ultimately more a curb than a stimulus. It is contradictory and insufficient: it opposes capitalism, but its somewhat ambiguous rejection of bureaucratic ‘socialism’ leaves us without a clear and operational view on alternative technology, spatial deconcentration/territorial decentralisation and the need to reduce eco-stress (‘entropy’) – themes on which the left-libertarians have made a significant contribution. Without intending to provide any blueprint or recipe, but rather indications and orientations, Bookchin’s contributions on social ecology in general (Bookchin 2004; 2005; 2007) and on the topic of ‘urbanisation without cities’ in particular (Bookchin 1992; see also Bookchin 1974) offer a background that seems especially rich and stimulating, against which alternatives can be thought and tested. He also made advances in the task of (re)thinking the problem of technology (Bookchin 2004; see also Castoriadis 1978a) and also reflected on the possibilities of emancipatory action and organisation in the contemporary world. This is important considering the challenging room of manoeuvre provided by the spatiality of today’s large cities, such as the strategy of ‘libertarian municipalism’ (Bookchin 1992; 2007), which despite controversial aspects, should not be underestimated, much less ignored.

When we compare this rich debate, developed over a century and a half, with certain discussions of the last decades, it is quite embarrassing to see how we have been able to ignore information, arguments and warnings already well-known. What current ‘sustainable development’ enthusiasts typically aim at is something similar to squaring the circle: ecologically and socially unsustainable capitalism. But capitalism is by its own premises (imperative of growth/accumulation, exploitation of labour, heteronomy) ecologically and socially unsustainable. Or rather, it is only made sustainable on the basis of huge doses of alienation and repression, in varying combinations according to country and moment. As far as ‘real socialism’ is concerned, in which heterodox Marxists insist on seeing only a ‘misrepresentation’ of the ‘true Marx’ (and not the realisation, albeit caricatured, of certain problems embedded from the beginning in Marxian thought), it has never been a real alternative, and academic Marxism (Lefebvre included) has always had great difficulties in reaching the ultimate consequences of rejecting the authoritarian and productivist aspects of the Marxian legacy.

A new socio-spatial order (which includes, of course, the political-ecological dimension) requires much more than a right to the city: it demands a right to the planet. This right to the planet, it is worth adding, must be based on individual and collective autonomy (Castoriadis 1975; 1983; 1990; 1996; see also Souza 2006) as a principle, rather on premises such as ‘democratic centralism’, ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and the building of a ‘socialist state’ which resulted in Stalinist totalitarianism but were already present in Bolshevism and at least in the ‘authoritarian’ facets of Marx’s thought itself (see, on the ‘authoritarian’-heteronomous component of Marxian thought, Castoriadis 1983, among other works; also the objections raised by Bakunin amidst his struggles with Marx in the context of the First International, as well as Proudhon’s premonitory critiques). This right to the planet, on the other hand, presupposes more than an ‘urban revolution’, it presupposes a socio-spatial revolution founded on the rejection of Ethnocentrism, exploitation and all types of oppression (in short, of heteronomy). Several of the main components of the socio-political project of a ‘right to the planet’ were explicitly explored in Souza (2015), but they are also implicitly present on the previous pages: a deep and balanced concern with what we could call ecological prudence, with social rights and with socio-spatial inequalities, all this implying a radically anti-capitalist reorganisation of space. A much more visceral questioning, therefore, of the model of socio-spatial organisation inherited from capitalism than the one promised by the project of the right to the city. The details, it goes without saying, cannot be discussed in a brief chapter such as this; furthermore, it is necessary to emphasise that such
an effort of imagining a radically alternative scenario will be essentially collective (also at the intellectual level, not to mention the praxical one) – that is – it cannot be a purely theoretical and individual exercise.

Conclusions: an overestimated legacy?

It was only several years after the death of Henri Lefebvre and a few decades after the publication of books such as *The Right to the City* and *The Urban Revolution* that Lefebvre’s ideas (or rather interpretations supposedly inspired by Lefebvre’s ideas, starting with the ‘right to the city’) began to be massively publicised at the beginning of the 21st century. This occurred many years after they had already been intensely discussed not only in the Francophone intellectual environment but also in a semi-peripheral country such as Brazil, where some circles have focused on Lefebvre’s work since the early 1980s. Typically, for the last four decades, something only happens (or exists) truly if it happens (or exists) in English, the *lingua franca* of the *Pax Americana.* And so, after the translation of Henri Lefebvre’s major books into English, the English-speaking academic world sanctioned and opened space for the diffusion of certain debates to finally take place. At the same time, the diffusion of Lefebvrian ideas has been accompanied by an annoying and often embarrassing dilution of the original critical message. From institutions of the state apparatus to non-government organisations to multilateral organisations, everyone feels able to invoke, in an authoritative manner, a motto like the ‘right to the city’ – usually to reduce it, in the best of all cases, to a reformist perspective based on obtaining specific material improvements and some ‘popular participation’. In this context, actions and even discourse show only a pale resemblance with the radicality of Lefebvre’s critique. In contrast to that, Lefebvre left no doubt in questioning capitalist society itself, and not only some of its aspects and derivations (neoliberalism and lack of genuine popular participation).

However, Lefebvre was to some extent co-responsible for the seeming ease with which his formulations have been co-opted by the status quo, or transformed into an object of uncritical reproduction by a large part of the progressive academic world. After all, to a considerable degree his analyses remained vague, allowing therefore, various interpretations according to the ‘customer’s’ taste. Above all, demands such as ‘generalised self-management’, the critique of the working class and the critique of the state remained superficial and very incomplete at an operational (and more explicitly political) level. This vagueness serves to foster both fruitful debates and illusions and self-deception about what the ‘master’ really meant. In this sense, Lefebvre’s work, both for its virtues and for its defects, is potentially inexhaustible, since it can continue to feed layers and more layers of reinterpretations, glosses and re-readings (as it is also the case with Marx’s body of work).

Although almost inexhaustible in the above sense, I venture to say that, in a way, the Lefebvrian message, on the other hand, could also be regarded as having reached its limits. As I have tried to show in this chapter, this is so not because it has become totally useless or because it no longer has anything relevant to communicate or inspire, but because it falls short of the needs of the present moment. I even venture to say that when it was formulated, between the 1960s and 1980s, this message already bore the germ of a certain anachronism, though mixed with a keen awareness of new trends. But it is now, when Lefebvre’s contributions have proved highly influential and to a large extent fertile, even though they are excessively unilateral and somewhat Eurocentric, that it is necessary to know how to advance beyond Lefebvre. Concretely, that means moving beyond the assumptions and arguments proposed by him – or in some cases beyond the mental schemes of which he never knew how (or wanted to) get rid of completely. This advancement must benefit from the help of authors that the hegemony of Marxist thought
and the ‘Lefebvre cult’ has left in the shadows, such as Murray Bookchin and his social ecology. Similarly useful are the left-libertarian contributions, which long before and after Lefebvre represent deeper and more consequential criticisms and indicate alternatives to capitalism and heteronomy in general in a more coherent and systematic way than the great French thinker did.

References


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