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From Mourenx to spaces of difference

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**Introduction**

Informal settlements, or in Lefebvre’s translators’ words, ‘shantytowns’, form a continuity of as well as a contradiction to the planned urban order. In Lefebvre’s (1970; 2003) dialectic analysis, this planned urban order aides a combination of state control and neoliberal agenda. In certain instances, informal settlements or ‘shantytowns’ serve this same purpose. The idea of informal settlements forming part of the planned order, thus being willed by the state, resonates with Roy’s (2009) concept, based on work in India, of informality as a ‘strategy’ or an ‘idiom’ of planning, and her earlier observation that states may deliberately suspend order (Roy 2005). Roy (2009) also writes about insurgence and in that sense touches on aspects of a highly nuanced lens that Lefebvre developed over time and which he offers for an understanding of informal settlements.

In his critique of French urban development, Lefebvre sees informal settlements arising from displacements and intentions to segregate by those determining the planned order. This applies to the repressive use of spatial strategies in colonialism and apartheid South Africa (Lemon 1991) and their incomplete dismantling in the post-colonial era. But informal settlements also wilfully transgress. They contravene building regulations, minimum space standards and layout requirements. In South Africa today, from where this chapter is written, informal settlements may insert themselves, if only temporarily, in areas legally designated for non-residential uses or for which protracted planning is underway. Some occupy areas which are designated for middle-class residence, contravening and frustrating spatial regulations governing subdivision in anticipation of economic growth through a property market (Huchzermeyer 2011). This tension between abstract space and space that of necessity is inserted and produced from below is included in what Lefebvre calls ‘contradictions of space’, which are ‘added to and superimposed on the entrenched contradictions of the capitalist mode of production’ (Lefebvre 2009a: 235). Lefebvre begins to acknowledge this directly after visiting Latin America in 1972.

The dominant urban discourse internationally frames informal settlements as a problem, to be solved, undone or eradicated. The United Nations (UN) (1997) defines informal settlements as unplanned and illegal occupation of land, not complying with building and planning regulations. Since 2000, the term ‘slum’ has taken precedence within the UN. ‘Slum’ is likewise
defined officially through inadequacies, be they in safety, access to basic services or tenure security (UN-Habitat 2003) and carries the unintended burden of legitimising ‘slum’ clearance (Huchzermeyer 2014).

Notwithstanding the limitations of the term ‘informal settlement’, I use it throughout this chapter due to its more neutral meaning than that of ‘slum’, and given the derogatory connotation that the apartheid state in South Africa lent alternative terms such as shantytown and squatter settlement. With this choice, I do not align with technocratic discourse and expertise which sets out merely to correct the in-formality through relocation or at best adjustment and formalisation, most recently captured in the United Nation’s New Urban Agenda (NUA). Adopted in Quito in 2016, NUA commits signatories to retrofit, integrate and upgrade informal settlements to ideals of accessibility, safety, quality of space, inclusivity and affordability through conventional approaches (Habitat III 2016: S77, 97, 109).

Lefebvre would term this the imposition of ‘quantitative space’, simultaneously homogenous (in its parcelling into equivalent portions for the purpose of exchange or speculation) and fractured (through the individualisation) (Lefebvre 2009a: 233, 234). Given a persistent state tendency, not only in South Africa, to aim for eradication or complete removal of informal settlements, necessary advocacy has sought to promote less disruptive and more poverty-responsive approaches to upgrading. In South Africa, this requires demands for a redefinition of what is technically considered possible in terms of in situ interventions (Huchzermeyer 2011). In limited ways reference to global consensus captured in the New Urban Agenda strengthens this endeavour. But this does not go beyond identifying a different way of solving the ‘problem’ posed by informal settlements, and is often accompanied by a superficial though not unimportant slogan inspired by a simplification of the work of John F.C. Turner and his contemporaries (Mangin 1967; Turner 1968) that informal settlements should be seen not as a problem but as part of the solution.

Lefebvre is concerned with the way urban phenomena are understood, and the effects of these understandings. He notes that ‘the state and political power seek to become, and indeed succeed in becoming, reducers of contradictions’ (Lefebvre 1991: 106). This is possible only ‘via the mediation of knowledge, and this means a strategy based on an admixture of science and ideology’ (ibid.). The approach that his work offers requires ‘a reversal of the conventional way of looking at things’ (ibid.: 139). It critically analyses the thought that informs formal spatial decision-making. It understands informal settlements as a contrast to what emerges from this thought. It affords informal settlements attributes of what he deems urban, imbued with the political potential, though constrained, for achieving a different future.

This chapter examines Lefebvre’s critique of urbanism, which encompasses the approach of ‘state-bound specialists’, namely architects, planners and developers, and his critique of the dominant space which urbanism plays a role in realising. It examines the contrasting approach that Lefebvre puts forward for the understanding of and strategising for urban space, and within this the way he treats spatial difference. His reference to informal settlements or ‘shantytowns’ in this analysis shifts from a treatment of these spaces as part of the dominant segregation, to a recognition of their potential for political opening. This latter approach is brought into focus in a passage in The Production of Space, following his mission to Latin America. Here he employs concepts that are attributes of the urban, but qualified through the repressive consequence of dominant space and spatial doctrine.

Lefebvre’s conceptual work is extensive, interlinked and circular. Any attempt at addressing or applying it to a particular topic or phenomenon necessitates clarification. As the urban phenomenon of informal settlements has not received attention by Anglophone Lefebvrian scholars, this clarification is to a large extent not mediated by ‘critical commentaries’ or the ‘secondary route’, instead it draws largely on Lefebvre’s original writing.
From the critique of urbanism to the affirmation of difference through a political strategy

Lefebvre’s theory of the urban informs his recommendations on urban strategy. Lefebvre calls for a ‘radical critique’ to ‘define a strategy’ – both strategy of knowledge and political strategy, without these being separate (182003: 141). Consequently he elaborates an extensive critique of urbanism which he refers to as a ‘body of doctrine’ (ibid.: 165–166). Urbanism is ‘an activity that claims to control the process of urbanization and urban practice and to subject it to its order’ (ibid.: 151). It takes the form of humanist urbanism which ‘proposes abstract utopias’, developer urbanism which seeks to sell ‘happiness, a lifestyle [and] a certain social standing’ and state urbanism which separates into two aspects, institutions and ideology; despite claiming order, this results in incoherence and ‘chaos’ (ibid.). Lefebvre understands chaos also as inherent in the spatial contradiction between the ‘goals of individual property developers’, who produce space and the ‘general (strategic) goals of the State’ (Lefebvre 2009a: 238, 239).

Seen through Lefebvre’s critical lens, mainstream urbanism as a doctrine lacks ‘dialectical thought’, ignoring the internal contradictions of urbanism as manifested in space (Lefebvre 2003: 171) and mirroring the contradictions inherent in the state (Lefebvre 2009a). Indeed, the urban order and the segregation that urbanism imposes are closely related to state power (2003: 92). This involves a ‘sophisticated exploitation and carefully controlled passivity’ (ibid.: 140) and the organisation of inhabited space, controlling ‘consumption of space and the habitat’ (ibid.: 164).

Lefebvre (2003: 163–164) defines urbanism as a superstructure distinct from practice, from social relations and from society, of neo-capitalist society, ‘a bureaucratic society of controlled consumption’. It ‘establishes a repressive space that is represented as objective, scientific, and neutral’ (ibid.: 181). Urbanism produces dominant space, a concept that ‘attains its full meaning only when it is contrasted with the opposite and inseparable concept of appropriation’ (Lefebvre 1991: 165). As I show below, Lefebvre deems appropriation key to understanding informal settlements. Dominant space in turn ‘forbids the transgressions that tend to produce a different space (whatever that may be)’ (Lefebvre 2009a: 240). Lefebvre makes this point in a discussion about the necessary decline of the state, which cannot overcome its contradictions (ibid.).

This decline can only come about through ‘control by the base’, territorial self-management, subduing ‘state logic through a spatial dialectic’, direct democracy and democratic control and ‘affirmation of the differences produced in and through that struggle’ (Lefebvre 2009a: 250, 251). Lefebvre builds this into a ‘political strategy’ in which self-management does not stand on its own. Alongside it, he includes the foregrounding of the ‘urban problematic’ in ‘political life’ or the ‘politicization of urban issues’ and the introduction of a ‘right to the city’ into ‘the enlarged, transformed, concretized contractual system’ (Lefebvre 2003: 148, 150). Thus the right to the city, as concretised through a particular type of policy, programme and legislation, must be seen as tied to a political discourse as well as a recognition of self-management practices, including those in informal settlements.

Towards the political possibility inherent in produced difference

Methodologically, Lefebvre promotes an integration or political economy approach which examines an element in its wider context, allowing understanding and reasoning, and moving between scales (Lefebvre 2009b: 114–115, 165). He requires that as a ‘starting point philosophy, ideology and institutional discourse’ be abandoned, as they make up the ‘customary scientificity that limits thought to an existing framework and prevents it from exploring possibilities through form’
(Lefebvre 2003: 122). Lefebvre’s interest in possibilities or the possible, often expressed as the ‘impossible-possible future’ (ibid.: 105) or how the impossible may become possible, noting the dialectic between the two (Lefebvre 1991: 60). This drives his concern for ‘premature closure’ (ibid.: 84) in urban space, and through this in the growth of the individual person inhabiting urban space. Lefebvre expresses ‘a sense of loss for an urban reality that is slipping away’ (ibid.: 166). With ‘ideology, consumption, and the predominance of the rational’ and with everything needing to ‘be part of an order’, Lefebvre points to the exception of ‘a residue of disorder and freedom, which is sometimes tolerated, sometimes hunted down with overwhelming repressive force’ (ibid.: 36). This would be a residue of ‘the urban’, which Lefebvre defines (throughout time) as ‘place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable’ (Lefebvre 1996: 129). He challenges those wishing to ‘strengthen the kernel, the urban, which survives in the fissures of planned and programmed order’ to go beyond liberal humanism (one could add humanist urbanism) and beyond Marx’s ‘incomplete teachings’ on the urban, to understand how the ‘socialization of society… has urbanization as its essence’ but has turned the ‘signs… of urban life… over to consumption’ (ibid.: 129, 130).

Lefebvre extends this to the political: ‘the social holds the secret of the political’ (Lefebvre 2009c: 60). He places the social at a level between the economic and the political. The choices ‘between political possibilities’ therefore depend ‘on the social forces that are mobilized or mobilizing, and the intensity of their action’. Thus ‘if social forces stagnate’ or ‘neutralize each other’, the state ‘remains a bloc’ with ‘no fissures… no crack in the State apparatus’ (ibid.). In such periods, the only possibilities are actions from within the state, ‘through the acceptance of its structures’ (ibid.). However, these structures serve also ‘to structure social forces and economic life, practical life, and society as a whole’ (ibid.):

> once social forces begin moving, everything happens, as if under this house, under this edifice that seemed solid and balanced, the earth begins to move. And there promptly appear fissures where we once saw a vertical rock face. And what appeared to be a simple crack in the walls promptly becomes a crevasse and deepens. Everything immediately shifts in this gigantic edifice, in this State apparatus, and the bloc begins to move. And so there appears the possibility of changing something in this bloc, though not without difficulty, not without danger.

(Lefebvre 2009c: 60–61)

Lefebvre (2009c: 61) underlines the constant need, within democracy, for a struggle against the state. Democracy is never an end state, and therefore democracy at various depths is revolution at those same depths (ibid.). Lefebvre adds urban revolution to peasant and workers’ revolutions (Lefebvre 2009d: 291) and defines it as ‘the transformations that affect contemporary society’, sudden or gradual, nonviolent or possibly violent (Lefebvre 1970/2003: 5). Pinder (2015: 42) refers to Lefebvre’s ‘attempts to engage with the possible-impossible through understanding urban revolution as a mutual transformation of space and social life, combined with efforts to explore possibilities through interventions in the present’. This captures Lefebvre’s ‘dialectic utopianism’ (ibid.). Pinder explains Lefebvre’s thinking on utopia mainly in relation to the proliferation of urban utopias within France and Western Europe’ at the time of Lefebvre’s writing (ibid.). Pinder hints only at ‘the visions of urban worlds embodied in current… landscapes’ which Lefebvre mentions in his work (ibid.), and which could include landscapes of constrained informality.

Emancipatory futures, whether European utopian experiments or informal settlements, represent difference in urban space. This interests Lefebvre precisely because of the potential of
certain difference for wider change and indeed for revolution. He contrasts actual difference with the seeming difference of segregation and separation induced by urbanism in the service of the state:

Difference is incompatible with segregation, which caricatures it. When we speak of difference, we speak of relationships, and therefore proximity relations that are conceived and perceived, and inserted in a twofold space-time order: near and distant. Separation and segregation break this relationship. They constitute a totalitarian order, whose strategic goal is to break down concrete totality, to break the urban. Segregation complicates and destroys complexity.

(Lefebvre 2003: 133)

Lefebvre calls for a methodological approach that understands ‘the urban as a differential field’ (Lefebvre 2003: 53), breaking with a reductive representation that ‘is based on a logistics of restricted rationality and motivates a strategy that destroys the differential space of the urban and “habiting” by reducing them’ (ibid.: 48). Lefebvre (1991: 371) draws on ‘still incomplete theory of difference’ to distinguish between differences in two ways. First, through the extent of the difference, a simple logic with two categories: ‘minimal’ difference and ‘maximal’ difference (ibid.: 372). Second, through ‘the theory of dialectical movement’, which distinguishes whether the difference is within or beyond ‘a set or system generated according to a particular law’ (ibid.). Thus ‘induced’ difference remains within, whereas ‘produced difference presupposes the shattering of a system; it is born of an explosion; it emerges from the chasm opened up when a closed universe ruptures’ (ibid.). The distinction between induced and produced difference is distinct from Lefebvre’s concepts of isotopy and heterotopy. Isotopy (sameness) and heterotopy (otherness) are always relative to one another. Heterotopy can be difference in the form of ‘a highly marked contrast’ (this would be maximal difference) ‘all the way to conflict’ (this could be produced difference) (Lefebvre 2003: 38).

Critical theory texts on Lefebvre’s work on difference, e.g. Kipfer (2008), conflate the distinction between minimal/maximal and induced/produced, using them instead as synonyms. For a reading from South Africa and the Global South more broadly, where informal settlements mark the urban landscape in constant, if tolerated, tension with the normative spatial aspirations and manifestations of the state, the question as to whether the difference is merely large or small (minimal or maximal) or in fact induced or produced and therefore whether it holds a revolutionary-transformative potential is critical.

A shift in Lefebvre’s understanding of informal settlements: from induced to produced difference

In the late 1960s, Lefebvre sees the ‘shantytowns’, whether in France or beyond, as forming part of the process of segregation and peripheralisation, involving no more than induced difference. In Right to the City, Lefebvre (1996: 70–71) frames shantytowns as an implication of industrialisation, which is ‘unable to employ and fix available labour’, resulting in cities, for instance in Latin America, being ‘encircled by shanty towns’ (ibid.). In the same book, he likens shantytowns in ‘poor countries’ with peripheralised suburbs in ‘highly industrialised countries’ (ibid.: 125), shantytowns and peripheral suburbs, both resulting from segregationist tendencies (ibid.: 140), thus representing induced difference. Of interest to Lefebvre at this stage of his work is when ‘workers, chased from the centre of the city to its outskirts, returned to the centre occupied by the bourgeoisie’ during the Paris Commune of 1871, ‘with its myth and ideology, its utopia’
Marie Huchzermeyer


Lefebvre develops his theory on difference in a publication in 1970 and on induced and produced difference in 1971 (Lefebvre 1974/1991: 373). Thus he approaches his first-hand experience of life in Latin American shantytowns in the following year with different theoretical insight. According to Shields (1999: 183), he stayed in Brazilian favelas. Information on Lefebvre’s Latin American travels is scant in published biographies, but a footnote in Hess (1988: 274–275) mentions an official mission to Peru and Brazil in November and December of 1972. This experience evidently leads Lefebvre to treat shantytowns explicitly as struggles against the state. Shields (1999: 183), though providing no detail of Lefebvre’s engagements in Brazil, notes that Lefebvre ‘detected’ a ‘reawakening of a “politics of difference”’. Brazilian scholars at Rio de Janeiro’s Federal University, with whom I enquired about the Brazilian recollection if any of Lefebvre’s visit to that country, observed that having visited shantytowns in Latin America, Lefebvre ‘had the intuition that slums would be like an embryo of a new society, a new form of sociability, thus breaking with the “destruction of urbanity”’ (Fridman 2015 personal communication). In The Production of Space (Lefebvre 1991), published two years after his visit to Brazil, Lefebvre provides his longest and perhaps most impassioned passage about informal settlements. He first emphasises the threat of this produced difference being ‘absorbed’ into the dominant homogenised space as induced difference (Lefebvre 1991: 373). He then demonstrates in more detail how the theory of difference applies, and this is worth quoting at length:

The vast shantytowns of Latin America (favelas, barrios, ranchos) manifest a social life far more intense than the bourgeois districts of the cities. This social life is transposed [or transferred] onto the level of urban morphology but it only survives inasmuch as it fights in self-defence and goes on the attack in the course of class struggle in its modern forms. Their poverty notwithstanding, these districts sometimes so effectively order their space – houses, walls, public spaces – as to elicit a nervous admiration. Appropriation of a remarkably high order is to be found here. The spontaneous architecture and planning (‘wild’ forms, according to a would-be elegant terminology) prove greatly superior to the organization of space by specialists who effectively translate the social order into territorial reality with or without direct orders from economic and political authorities. The result – on the ground – is an extraordinary spatial duality. And the duality in space itself creates the strong impression that there exists a duality of political power: an equilibrium so threatened that an explosion is inevitable – and in short order. This impression is nonetheless mistaken – a measure, precisely, of the repressive and assimilative capacity of the dominant space. The duality will persist, certainly; and, failing any reversal of the situation, dominated space will simply be weakened. ‘Duality’ means contradiction and conflict; a conflict of this kind eventuates either in the emergence of unforeseen differences or in its own absorption, in which case only induced differences arise (i.e. differences internal to the dominant form of space). A conflictual duality, which is a transitional state between opposition (induced difference) and contradiction/ transcendence (produced difference), cannot last forever; it can sustain itself, however, around an ‘equilibrium’ deemed optimal by a particular ideology. 

(Lefebvre 1991: 373–374)

While relatively short in a book of over 400 pages, this text may be read as a prism which focuses Lefebvre’s thought and in turn refracts. Whereas Pinder (2015: 42) warns that at times, Lefebvre’s writing has been ‘prone to being decontextualized and romanticized’, Lefebvre’s passage on the shantytowns of Latin America provides a bridge between his urban theory and the pervasive
Lefebvre’s understanding of informal settlements, and its political meaning

In the passage quoted above, Lefebvre employs attributes of the urban alongside induced and produced difference: social life, urban morphology, the effective ordering of space, appropriation and spontaneity. Lefebvre shows their tension with dominated space. But he also points to a tension internal to informal settlements between produced and induced space, and the ideology that keeps these two in balance, holding back the real possibility for a different future.

Lefebvre refers to the intensity of ‘social life’ in these settlements. While providing no straight-forward definition for social life, the concept features throughout his urban texts, pointing to its significance in the passage about informal settlements. He associates ‘social life’ with ‘relationships’, distinct from ‘individual and private life’ (Lefebvre 1991: 154). Social life is where people are brought together (Lefebvre 2003: 21). This can be achieved in a controlled way, by monuments, which merely project ‘a conception of the world’ or ‘a sense of being elsewhere’, whereas cities project ‘social life’ (ibid.: 22). Lefebvre likens this with ‘globality’, meaning the entire or whole (ibid.). Participation in social life, similar to ‘community’, is closely linked to the concept of ‘to inhabit’ (Lefebvre 1968/1996: 76), that is ‘the plasticity of space, its modelling and the appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence’ (ibid.: 79). Social life is situated in ‘social space’ and also has a ‘clandestine or underground side’ (Lefebvre 1991: 33, 35). This relates to informal settlements – the benign escape from an exclusionary regime, but also the non-benign exploitation of informality through criminal networks, drug trafficking in the case of contemporary Brazilian favelas. The New Urban Agenda document, perhaps excessively and in response to dominant urban paranoia in the Global North, goes as far as to link ‘slums and informal settlements’ to the potential harbouring of terrorism (Habitat III 2016: S103), by implication excluding any positive embrace of the clandestine.

Lefebvre (2003: 175) contrasts social life with ‘material’ life, noting that the disaggregation between social and material is produced by segregation in order to ‘resolve conflicts’. Social life is poorly represented by urbanists (ibid.: 153, 188). Urbanist doctrine tends to assume that architects or urbanists create ‘social life and social relations’, but Lefebvre points out that this is not the case (ibid.: 156), ‘although under certain conditions’ architects and sociologists ‘can help trends to be formulated (to take shape). Only social life (praxis) in its global capacity possesses such powers’ (Lefebvre 1991: 151).

Lefebvre’s passage on Latin American shantytowns refers to social life being ‘transposed to the level of urban morphology’ but without explanation. However, in The Urban Revolution, he associates ‘morphology’ with the ‘urban practice of groups and classes – that is, their way of life’ (Lefebvre 2003: 137). Here, as in his concept of social life, the collective comes to the fore. His emphasis on ‘urban’ morphology relates to urban life and, associated to this, inhabiting.

Linked to morphology is Lefebvre’s observation about the effective ordering of space in informal settlements. This relates to his interest in self-management or autogestion, which has direct relevance for political opening, or ‘opening towards the possible’ (Lefebvre 2009e: 150; see also Elden 2004: 229). Lefebvre (2009e: 147) notes that ‘[o]nce aimed at ground level, in a fissure, this humble plant [namely autogestion] comes to threaten the huge state edifice’. Lefebvre (2003: 150) places hope in self-management of industry and of urban life, though not in isolation of
one another. He takes particular interest in the self-organisation of space. In an interview with Autogestion et Socialisme two years after the publication of the text on informal settlements, Lefebvre alludes to ‘some extraordinary examples’ of the organisation of space (rather than enterprise), ‘like in a Mexican shantytown, where two hundred thousand inhabitants are under complete autogestion’ (Lefebvre 1976/2009e: 160). He uses this example to illustrate that self-management had possibly become more significant in the ordering of space than the ordering of enterprise (ibid.). This adds political significance to informal settlements, but also explains severe repression of self-management in informal settlements, for instance in contemporary South Africa (see Pithouse 2014).

While Lefebvre applauds effective ordering of space in informal settlements, he also highlights the spontaneity. He treats these two concepts as distinct. Lefebvre takes interest in the ‘spontaneous city’, and the decline thereof through urbanism (2003: 160). He acknowledges in particular that the theory and methodology of ‘transduction’, which involves an ‘incessant feed back between the conceptual framework used and empirical observations’, can achieve ‘certain spontaneous mental operations of the planner, the architect’ and others (1996: 151). But he argues that ‘it is by no means a simple matter of return to spontaneism’; rather, self-management holds the key to taking ‘over development, to orient growth (recognised and controlled as such) towards social needs’ (1976: 40).

Lefebvre refers to a ‘remarkably high order of appropriation’ in informal settlements. Kofman and Lebas (1996: 20) explain that Lefebvre associates appropriation closely with use value, in contrast to property and exchange value. Lefebvre (1974/1991: 166) expands the meaning of appropriation in a further dimension that has relevance for understanding informal settlements: ‘appropriation cannot be understood apart from the rhythms of time and of life’. Lefebvre (e.g. 1968/1996: 131) frequently uses the term ‘space-time’ or ‘time-space’ to emphasise the importance of past and future and of rhythms and moments, for a dynamic and spatialised understanding of the urban present, thus understanding space and time in relation to one another. ‘Urban time-space’ is distinct from the cyclical and locally specific agrarian time-space, and the homogenous, rational, planned and constrained industrial time-space (Lefebvre 2003: 37). Lefebvre calls for urban time-space not to be defined by ‘industrial rationality’ (ibid.), which would be linear and homogenised, but rather as ‘differential’, with ‘contrasts and oppositions’ connecting to ‘a whole’, thus at the same time ‘dualistic’ and ‘unitary’ (Lefebvre 2003: 37). Lefebvre notes that during societal transformation, whether industrialisation or urbanisation, the ‘true nature’ of space is revealed as:

(1) a political space, the site and object of various strategies, and (2) a projection of time, reacting against and enabling us to dominate time, and consequently to exploit it to death, as it does today – which presages [or forebodes] the liberation of time-space.

(Lefebvre 2003: 37)

We can therefore read into Lefebvre’s understanding of informal settlements a particular, liberated time-space, which has political significance which should inform strategy.

 Appropriation is explained also by its opposite, dominated space, ‘closed, sterilized, emptied out’ (Lefebvre 1991: 165). But these two, though opposites, are ‘inseparable’; with direct relevance for strategy for informal settlements, Lefebvre adds ‘ideally…, they ought to be combined’ (ibid.: 166). However, with the rise of military, state and political power, ‘dominated space has subjugated appropriation’ (ibid.). Can state intervention in informal settlements represent the ideal of a combination of dominant space and appropriation, or does it lead to what Lefebvre (1991: 319) terms ‘negative appropriation’, prohibitions (‘the negative basis, so to speak, of the
social order’) (Lefebvre 1991: 319) inscribed in space? ‘Prohibition is the reverse side and the carapace [or hard shell] of property, of the negative appropriation of space under the reign of private property’ (ibid.). Prohibitions induce the transgressions that result in informal settlements in the first place. Transgressions ‘reveal tendencies’, and ‘tensions and the direction taken by these tensions’ (Lefebvre 1976: 35). Lefebvre places transgressions in ‘the realm of desire’ – ‘transgressions can point towards… a project that expressly proposes a radically different way of living… but they cannot realise it’ (ibid.: 34). Yet transgressions ‘disclose… the possible and the impossible… in order to extend the possible, it is necessary to proclaim and desire the impossible. Action and strategy consist in making possible tomorrow what is impossible today’ (ibid.: 36).

The use of the term ‘informal’ in dominant urban discourse implies a focus on transgression but ignores the political significance and possibility that Lefebvre associates with transgression. Transgressions toward making the impossible possible occur in everyday practices. Of direct relevance to an understanding of informal settlements, Lefebvre emphasises the importance of everyday life as ‘the inevitable starting point for the realization of the possible’ (Lefebvre 1968 in Pinder 2015: 42). Lefebvre notes that ‘above all it is urban life and the everyday where the project takes the form of practical elaborations and attempts at a radical change’, giving ‘priority to social needs, not individual needs’ (Lefebvre 1976: 36). Social needs are ‘above all urban needs… producing and managing a space that will correspond to the possibilities and technology and knowledge, and also to the demands made on social life by and for the “masses”’ (ibid.: 37).

Conclusions

Informal settlements or shantytowns represent a varied condition. Lefebvre provides the conceptual vocabulary with which to recognise this as different intensities and forms of social life, appropriation, spontaneity, time-space, transgression, ordering of space and self-management. In their varied manifestations, these exist in tension with dominated space, resisting spatial domination. In that sense, they form contradictions in space. Far from recommending a reduction in this contradiction, Lefebvre places hope in the liberated time-space that such urban formations represent. Thus Lefebvre does not only offer his concepts for a nuanced understanding of informal settlements. By framing informal settlements or shantytowns as the possible-impossible and as potential for political opening, he directs engagement with strategy towards overcoming the constraints to such opening, particularly in professional doctrine, codes and legislation and in political ideology that shuns self-management and ignores the importance of the urban for social life. Any endeavour to address informal settlements through the right to the city must follow these leads.

References


