Suddenly I saw a town being built with amazing rapidity, the decision for it being taken at a high level, the bulldozers arrived, leaving the peasants traumatised. It was a period of high drama in the Mourenx area. It was then that I began to study the urban phenomenon.

*(Lefebvre in Burgel et al. 1987: 32)*

From a less pessimistic standpoint, it can be shown that abstract space harbours specific contradictions... Thus, despite -- or rather because of -- its negativity, abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space ‘differential space’, because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences.

*(Lefebvre 1991: 52)*

**Introduction**

Two places stand out in the intellectual and research development of Henri Lefebvre: Navarrenx in the Pyrenees where he was raised and Mourenx where he witnessed the state imposition of a modernist new town in the late 1950s. I travelled to both towns in April 2017 to see and feel the places that so influenced Lefebvre and by proxy generations of scholars, researchers and activists thereafter. Driving from Toulouse and exploring Lefebvre’s terrain was part spring road trip, part research reconnoitre. Time is the major difference between the two places. Navarrenx evolved slowly over two millennia, while Mourenx erupted across the rural landscape at bewildering speed. Lefebvre’s intellectual and research trajectory is full of interesting shifts and patterns:

We can easily divide Lefebvre’s work into periods and map out zones in his wide ranging intellectual geography. There is an abiding interest in emancipation and the condition of the human. If early on his interest is focused on the self-liberation of the individual, this later shifts to his commitment to Communism and socialist forms of autonomous management. He develops an interest first in his mother’s birthplace in the Pyrenees. From this
‘motherland’ he moves to a focus on rural and peasant life, later to become best known for his work on urban space.

(Shields 1999: 2)

The year 1968 is replete with contested revolutionary meaning in France and is often flagged as the temporal marker for the rural-urban swing in Lefebvre’s work. Lefebvre confirms this shift was triggered by the Mourenx new town as the first epigraph at the head of this chapter indicates. It is evident that Lefebvre’s Mourenx moment and his involvement in the May 1968 ‘revolution’ were crucial points in the evolution of his ideas about cities, the urban, the production of space and everyday life. I argue here that we need to understand Lefebvre’s utopianism in the context of his Marxist approach to the world and the development of key ideas principally: planetary urbanisation, urban society, right to the city and differential space.

**Lefebvre: reader and researcher**

Lefebvre is most associated with his prodigious written output, but he was also a prolific reader and researcher. While based in the Pyrenees during World War Two (WW2) Lefebvre used his copious spare time to carry out empirical rural sociological research. He engaged in ethnographic participant observation and scoured local archives for relevant data concerning the Occitanian peasant way of life, asking what persists and what is mutable and why? This body of research eventually became his doctoral thesis, *Doctor d’État*, awarded by the University of Paris in 1954. His doctorate documented the decline of the Pyrenean peasant way of life brought about by the increasing modernisation, accentuated by the industrialisation and urbanisation of the Béarn countryside. In 1965 he was appointed professor of sociology at the new modernist extension to the Sorbonne at Nanterre to the west of Paris and retained this position until ‘retirement’ in 1973. Lefebvre the worker continued to labour in various roles including doctoral supervision until his untimely death in 1991.

Lefebvre was an ‘unstintingly industrious’ writer, covering a ‘belief-beggaring range of subjects’ (Alvarez 2007: 51). He authored hundreds of publications including: about 70 books (depending on what counts as a book and a ‘new’ book), hundreds of academic and popular articles and research reports. Relatively few are translated into English and other languages. His whole canon is now dwarfed, in quantity rather than status, by the thousands of texts that constitute the secondary literature. He founded with Anatole Kopp in 1970 the prestigious academic journal *Espace et Societes*. It is still in print and remains true to its original objective, to synthesise diverse knowledge concerning the relationships of societies with their spaces. Much of his colossal output depended on equally massive amount of reading and his grasp of ideas and detail across many disciplines is evident in his writing. His work is full of references to those who influenced and inspired him. And holding the strong views that he did, it is also replete with criticisms notably of Louis Althusser, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) and Jean-Paul Sartre, but there is also mutual respect.

He published his most significant and influential works on cities and the urban after his 60th year. Notably, his prodigious written output tended to arrive in bursts. One such burst, critical for his city and urban literature, was the period 1968 to 1974: a literary flurry book-ended by *The Right to the City* (1968) and *The Production of Space* (TPOS) (1974). In between, he penned his account of the May 1968 French ‘revolution’ in the book *The Explosion, Marxism and the French Upheaval* (1969) and *The Urban Revolution* (1970). It is generally agreed that TPOS is his most comprehensive and influential intervention (translated into English) in the broad field of urban theory: the pinnacle of his theoretical and intellectual achievements regarding the city and
the urban, and its importance is rightly recognised in this volume. In a less well-known book, *Introduction to Modernity* (1962), Lefebvre charts the analysis of a new town that would become a key moment in the life of his research and theorising.

**The Mourenx moment**

We cannot understand Lefebvre’s reaction to Mourenx without thinking about its comparison with Navarrenx. Lefebvre lived his childhood and formative years in this historic medieval town. It evolved slowly, receiving renaissance, 18th- and 19th-century additions and adaptations. Lefebvre likens its unhurried development to that of a seashell. In subtle ways Lefebvre clearly understands Navarrenx as an open urban constellation of: houses, streets, courtyards, gardens and businesses that blur smoothly into the countryside in ways which developed organically over the centuries. This openness pertains despite the town’s medieval ramparts. Ironically though, Lefebvre is not afraid to admit that Navarrenx actually became a fully planned new town, albeit a pre-modern and pre-capitalist one.

In the 20th century, only a few necessary holes were punched through Navarrenx’s medieval ramparts to allow vehicular access, despite the disdain of post-WW2 modernist architecture and town planning for the historic environment. This example of historic conservation is due mainly to the work of the French planning system. In France the protection of the historic built environment and heritage, *patrimoine*, is taken seriously, with strict regimes operating in conservation areas overseen by the formidable *Architectes des Bâtiments de France* (ABF), specialist planning officials based in the *prefecture*. Since WW2 the town has benefitted from historic area protection that prevents unsympathetic demolition and redevelopment. It is now designated a conservation area, *Zone de Protection du Patrimoine Architectural, Urbain et Paysager* (ZPPAUP), including the whole of the ramparts. My research visit to Navarrenx was positive and enjoyable, people were helpful and friendly and the town is full of pleasant intimate public spaces, historic gems and surprises. In contrast, Merrifield (2006: xxvi) found little more than a swarm of hungry mosquitos and ‘the odd melancholy café’. What is noticeable though and something ignored by Merrifield and Lefebvre, is that Navarrenx in the 1960s and still today has predominantly an ethnically homogenous, White French population and I comment on matters of ethnicity below.

A keen observer of the everyday, Lefebvre perceived the rhythms of small town and rural life as he grew into manhood. His thoughts and feelings about the rural and urban were to be impacted dramatically by events millions of years in the making through geological time and by the creation of a French state planning organisation. Geological accident led to the formation of petroleum deposits in southern France. A huge natural gas field was discovered in 1951 in the Lacq commune near the historic hamlet of Mourenx, a few miles east of Navarrenx, by the French petroleum company Total. A large-scale industrial complex was planned to include petro-chemicals and an alumina refinery for the production of aluminium powered by the natural gas. To accommodate the workforce of about 10,000, French government planners entered into partnership with Total to build a new town to be called Mourenx. Modernist architecture and planning principles underpinned the masterplan, by the architects and urban planners René-André Coulon, Philippe Douillet and Jean-Benjamin Maneval. A national public financial institution and provider of public housing, *Société civile immobilière de la caisse de dépôts et consignations* (SCIC), was the lead developer, and indeed most of the original housing was in today’s terms affordable, secure, social rent tenure. Mourenx was constructed between the late 1950s and mid-60s.

For several years Lefebvre studied Mourenx in great detail, writing a series of accounts, most notably, *Seventh Prelude: Notes on the New Town* (Lefebvre 1995) – an essay mostly ignored in
the literature (but see Stanek 2011; Wilson 2011). One of the hills overlooking Mourenx was adopted by Lefebvre as a favourite vantage point. He remarks that as an intellectual of the Left, he would sit on this hill to meditate on the destiny of Mourenx, knowing this may be regarded as ‘ridiculous’ by some people (Lefebvre 1995: 122). Sitting on that same hill looking down on Mourenx, I could appreciate the impact the urbanisation of Béarn must have had on Lefebvre (see Figure 43.1). Modernism produced a uniformity of form and function across Europe and North America. When I visited Mourenx in April 2017, it reminded me of many public housing estates in England such as the Aylesbury Estate in London and parts of new towns in England such as: Corby, Crawley and Hatfield. It reminded me also of modernist civic centres of Wythenshawe, Manchester and Gaborone, Botswana, designed in the 1950s by British architects and planners.

Mourenx’s modernist planning was a major impetus for Lefebvre’s refocus on the urban in the early 1960s. He critiqued the rationalist approach of the Délégation à l’Aménagement du Territoire et à l’Action Régionale (Delegation for Regional Planning and Regional Action, DATAR), the state agency that among other things designated the first modernist French new towns, an initiative Lefebvre:

followed very closely and which was not solely a descriptive scientific project but one that involved accurate prediction. Something new was happening; an idea of spatial planning and practice was born… However, my initiation was neither from the point of view of philosophy, nor sociology, though these were present implicitly, nor was it historical or geographical. Rather it was the emergence of a new social and political practice. DATAR aimed to reorganise France from questionable, sometimes catastrophic, perspectives.

(Lefebvre in Burgel et al. 1987: 28)

He compared Mourenx unfavourably with historic Navarrenx and was hypercritical, saying, ‘Whenever I step foot in Mourenx I am filled with dread’ (Lefebvre 1995: 118). The key trope
of abstract space is alluded to, as are: segregation of land uses, disregard of everyday life and the masking of the possible; themes to which he would return continuously in the following decades:

Yet every time I see these ‘machines for living in’ I feel terrified… In Mourenx, modernity opens its pages to me. It is just like a ‘novel of objects’ (no, I must ask contemporary novelists to excuse me, that is not right – I mean just like a propaganda leaflet). Here I cannot read the centuries, not time, nor the past, nor what is possible. Instead I read the fears modernity can arouse: the abstraction which rides roughshod over everyday life – the debilitating analysis which divides, cuts up, separates – the illusory synthesis which has lost all ability to reconstruct anything active – the fossilized structures, powerless to produce or reproduce anything living, but still capable of suppressing it.

(Lefebvre 1995: 119–120)

The ‘machines for living’ phrase is an oblique reference to Le Corbusier, of whom Lefebvre was critical, but he was more critical of the Bauhaus School of architecture and city planning (Maycroft 2002). It is also a reference to the emerging approach of the French state-led new town movement of the 1950s, influenced greatly by Le Corbusier’s modernist ideas. Rather like in the UK and elsewhere, modernist planning ideals were applied in France to public housing. The French result was the building of collective housing, grands ensembles or banlieues at the peripheries of many cities.

In Mourenx the urban form reproduced the social hierarchy of industrial production: workers lived in large tower blocks (see Figure 43.2), their managers in houses (pavillons) This concretisation in urban form of socio-productive relations was a feature of previous new towns such as Saltaire in Yorkshire, England – a company new town built by the ‘philanthropic’ textile magnate, Titus Salt, in the 1850s. Lefebvre’s assessment highlights the fact, perhaps following Engels, that ‘he was there’ and was able to draw on first-hand knowledge of his research subject.

Lefebvre’s Marxism made him suspicious of state involvement, in direct provision of social housing, due to its complicity in the production of abstract space but also in the reproduction

Figure 43.2 Workers’ residential tower blocks, Mourenx, French New Town. Source: © Michael Leary-Owhin (2017).
of labour. His direct experience of the speed of planning and construction of Mourenx and the devastating impact on rural communities and environment had a decisive impact on his thinking about the urban. Lefebvre’s subsequent analysis of Mourenx was a ‘pivotal moment’ in the development of his urban and production of space theories (Moore in Lefebvre 1995: 391). It may well be the first time he engaged in an exposition of the production of urban space. Providing workers with decent housing, at a reasonable cost, close to their workplace and at a time when many citizens were living in terrible housing conditions, are things Lefebvre would not criticise; on the contrary he offers praise for the modernist planners:

Yet the new town has a lot going for it. The overall plan (the master blueprint) has a certain attractiveness: the lines of the tower blocks alternate horizontals and verticals. The break between the landscape – wooded hills, moorland, vineyards – and the city may be rather abrupt, but it is bearable; it is relatively easy on the eye. The blocks of flats look well planned and properly built; we know that they are very inexpensive, and offer their residents bathrooms or showers, drying rooms, well-lit accommodation where they can sit with their radios and television sets and contemplate the world from the comfort of their own homes… Over here, state capitalism does things rather well. Our technicists and technocrats have their hearts in the right place, even if it is what they have in their minds which is given priority. It is difficult to see where or how state socialism could do any differently and any better. (Lefebvre 1995: 118)

At times there is a subtlety and balance in the analysis, and Lefebvre was prepared to acknowledge the potential for positive outcomes through the French new towns initiative. He does though weight the essay toward damning critique:

[In Mourenx] Everything is trivial. Everything is closure and materialized system. The text of the town is totally legible, as impoverished as it is clear, despite the architects’ efforts to vary the lines. Surprise? Possibilities? From this place, which should have been the home of all that is possible, they have vanished without trace. (Lefebvre 1995: 119)

Lefebvre’s research approach saw him generating original data through interviews, which strangely he mentions only in passing, not letting us hear the voices of local residents. We know that some of them were unhappy and thought that Mourenx was less new town and more public housing estate or grand ensemble (quoted in Stanek 2011: 116).

Nowadays, faced with rampant neoliberal hollowing out of state social provision, it would be easy to lambast Lefebvre for this critique of high-quality social housing, but context is crucial and the context for Lefebvre was the transition from industrial society to urban society. The 1950s was a time in France, the UK and many parts of the Global North when many working-class people still lived in appalling housing conditions in (often high-rent) properties dating from the 19th century. State housing intervention did in the 1960s achieve improvements, but it brought problems in Mourenx to which Lefebvre draws attention:

functionalist ensembles [public housing development] were expressing the paternalism of the state and they were anachronistic, since they did not account for the society moving beyond Fordism, in which the urban space was about to replace the factory as the place of socialization, exploitation, and struggle. (Stanek 2014: xxvii–xxviii)
Lefebvre goes further, after he ‘poured unending scorn’ on Mourenx (Wakeman 2016: 296) he muses that paradoxically, the town’s boredom is pregnant with unrealised possibilities and freedoms and, ‘a magnificent life is waiting’, nearby yet ‘far far away’ (Lefebvre 1995: 124). Another example of Lefebvre the Utopian? Definitely. So did Lefebvre answer the housing question? No and yes. He did not offer any retro-design solutions, but he did focus attention on how to make the best of what Mourenx had to offer. The task (then and now) is ‘to construct everyday life, to produce it, consciously to create it’ (ibid.).

Lefebvre’s theoretically grounded and empirically informed critique of Mourenx grew out of his everyday life experiences and heterodox Marxism. It is an example of how his research methodology, ethnographic observations and powerful intellect combined to produce new insights. He argues often that his work is his life. Of course his life was much more than his work, ‘but in his case, perhaps more legitimately than with many other writers, the work and the life were closely interrelated’ (Elden 2004: 2). He published other research about Mourenx documented in Stanek (2011). Most notable is his analysis of the rent strike of 1962, which saw local residents organise themselves to oppose various housing management requirements of the SCIC. They appropriated Mourenx public space for demonstrations and protests. They achieved a measure of victory. So the new town abstract space of state and big capital was not totally dominant.

Lefebvre was researching Mourenx at the start of the long French modernist new town programme. And while he railed against French town planning, ironically it was the historic conservation arm of the system, the ABF, using the ZPPAUP that protected the character of Navarrenx, the town he cherished. The issue of when to evaluate the outcomes of the production of space is always a moot point. Those outcomes are in ceaseless dialectical flux. At the time of his Mourenx research, construction work was still in progress. He accepts pragmatically that he cannot give a definitive verdict on the new town. He ponders whether we are on the threshold of socialism ‘or supercapitalism?’ Will it be the ‘city of joy or the world of unredeemable boredom?’ (Lefebvre 1995: 119). One wonders what Lefebvre would make of the more diverse Mourenx population today, now it is home to various minority ethnic and religious communities, especially those originating in North Africa? Putting that aside, it is important to consider his critique of Mourenx, which offered no cogent suggestions for improvement, with his observations of May 1968, which resulted in his explication of heterogeneity, concrete utopianism and differential space.

From Nanterre to urban society

Lefebvre apparently despised ivory tower philosophers who ruminate on social issues but do not act politically. His Marxism required him to try to transform, not just think about the world. For Lefebvre history is punctuated by key events that have the power to bring change, but they must be analysed and understood:

Events are always original, but they become reabsorbed into the general situation; and their particularities in no way exclude analyses, references, repetitions, and fresh starts… Although they are belittled during stagnant periods for the benefit of those who preserve stagnation – those who show contempt for history and are preoccupied with stability – events reactivate the movement of both thought and practice. They pull thinkers out of their comfortable seats and plunge them headlong into a wave of contradictions. Those who are obsessed with stability lose their smiling confidence and good humour. Good and bad conscience, ideological labels, and scraps of obsolete practices are swept
up like refuse. Under the impact of events, people and ideas are revealed for what they are.

(Lefebvre 1969: 7–8)

The event he has in mind is the ‘urban revolution’, signified by Paris, May 1968. This event provoked in Lefebvre the realisation that a different kind of society was possible, an urban society – different from that produced under conditions of state-regulated and supported neo-capitalism, ‘state capitalism’ – different from Mourenx.

Lefebvre witnessed first-hand the events of May 1968 which started at Nanterre University. Rather incongruously, the campus was parachuted into a peripheral area of industry, working-class housing and (mainly North African immigrant) shanty towns. It is hard to appreciate now that such areas of extreme poverty existed in Paris in the 1960s. Lefebvre witnessed the brutal removal of these housing areas to make way for the new university campus: another example of modernist state planning. According to Lefebvre, French state modernist planning produced an abstract regimented space of social and functional segregation. Tucked away from the bustling street life and excitement of central Paris, the mainly middle-class students suffered intense boredom. Their campus was an implanted student ‘ghetto’, replete with alienation and hopelessness that sowed the seeds of urban rebellion.

It was on this problematic campus enclave in late March that the civil disturbances now labelled May 1968 began, prompted partly by Professor Lefebvre’s provocative Marxist sociology lectures. Lefebvre documents his interpretation of these momentous events in the book The Explosion. Marxism and the French Upheaval (1969). Nanterre university campus occupied an area that ‘contains misery, shantytowns and excavations for an express subway line’, cheek by jowl with ‘low-income housing projects for workers, and industrial enterprises: it is a ‘desolate and strange landscape’ (Lefebvre 1969: 104). With the modernist campus came multiple segregation, ‘functional and social, and industrial and urban’ (Lefebvre 1969: 105). Lefebvre sees ghettos. Ghettos of abandoned working-class and marginalised immigrant populations. In the midst of these are ghettos of students and teachers. An absurd modernist planning ideology created the sterile campus, ‘utterly devoid of character’ (ibid.). Students reject the slightest university prohibition or regulation, which become intolerable: they are rejected because they symbolise repression. Malaise, boredom and hostility to authority coalesce into political rebellion with students in the vanguard (Lefebvre 1969: 106).

In late March student unrest boiled over and, joined by a hotchpotch of political activists, they occupied a Nanterre University administrative building. Their grievances targeted: bourgeois university management, capitalism, class discrimination, rampant consumerism, urban poverty and American imperialism – all the subject of Lefebvre’s lectures. Anger was expressed in emotive anti-authority slogans and graffiti. Following increasing confrontation, Nanterre University was shut down by the authorities. Protests then spread to the Sorbonne in central Paris; many workers left their factories and joined students in dissent on the streets. Dialectical struggle saw the periphery challenge the centre. A large demonstration on 6 May in the university Latin Quarter of Paris was broken up viciously by the notorious riot police, the CRS (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité). Further mass demonstrations followed in Paris and other cities. Later the protestors were joined spontaneously by French workers, eventually 10 million, from many sectors, and by French North Africans. Lefebvre wonders if there was ‘Mixing of classes? Fusion?’ but decides that ‘Interaction would be a better word’ (Lefebvre 1969: 106). There was some harmony between diverse groups, but relationships were complex and at times strained (Bracke 2009). On 13 May there was an unofficial general strike, nationwide occupations, widespread civil disorder and further strikes that lasted for several weeks.
A diverse political coalition of protest emerged. Lefebvre calls it ‘the movement’, it was ‘profoundly political from the outset’ (Lefebvre 1969: 112). It sought to challenge the state and all manifestations of officialdom. Workers occupied factories and declared industrial self-management (autogestion) would replace capitalist production. Streets were blockaded; cars and the Stock Exchange, a controversial symbol of capitalism, were torched. Students and workers occupied Les Halles, the site of Paris’ fresh produce market, and Lefebvre saw in this appropriation the production of differential space (discussed below). But with conflagration and conflict came parties, festivals and celebrations. Workers and students revelled in the freedom from routine work. Paris exploded with violence but also with short-lived laughter, unfettered speech, humour, art and song. Previously hidden contradictions were revealed. Organising committees, or communes, were established by protestors to negotiate with the authorities. Economic and educational demands were voiced. Concessions were made by employers, universities and the government regarding wages, working conditions and educational management. Was a Lefebvrian urban society glimpsed? Momentarily perhaps, but it brought its own problems and requirements. By mid-June, however, support for the strikes and protests had peaked. The trade unions and French Communist Party helped the police and government restore order. Striking workers returned to work in July.

We can divine elements of the regressive-progressive method (see Leary-Owhin in Part 1) in Lefebvre’s ensuing analysis of May ’68. After description, he draws historical comparisons with the ‘French Revolution’ of March 1871. He then provides evaluation and explanation of current events. In Paris (1968) and other cities, art met politics through the creation of street murals. Formerly, dead streets became alive with effervescences, sparking animation and playfulness but always for a political purpose (Lefebvre 1995: 116). Lefebvre is careful though to set his ethnographic and observational details of May ’68 and the modernist planning that preceded it in a broad Marxist political, geographical, colonial and historical context that infers explanation:

A country which oppresses other countries cannot be free. The ignorant or passive accomplices of oppression are themselves bound by chains with which they bind the oppressed… The population in the metropolis is regrouped into ghettos (suburbs, foreigners, factories, students), and the new cities are to some extent reminiscent of colonial cities.

(Lefebvre 1969: 92–93)

For a flickering hopeful moment, cracks in homogenised abstract space are exploited to reveal unexpected possibilities. Out of dialectical interaction between the marginality and heterotopia of the Nanterre campus and centrality of Paris, a temporary concrete utopia emerged (Lefebvre 1969: 118). It was a heterotopia of non-work and cultural diversity, a coming together of social difference for political dissent. Heterotopia is mentioned briefly in the analysis of May 1968. For Smith (in Lefebvre 2003: xii), heterotopia is rooted ‘in a sense of political and historical deviance from social norms’. But Lefebvre’s interest in heterotopia seems to fade, and ideas of utopia and differential space take precedence and continue to be developed in The Production of Space (Smith in Lefebvre 2003: xiii). When it emerges, temporary concrete utopia is precious and needs to be celebrated, protected and documented. Lefebvre’s critiques related to ghettos and alienation appear today more prescient, given the continuing social crisis of the banlieues (Smith 2005; Chrisafis 2015). On the 50th anniversary, French historian Éric Alary agreed with Lefebvre that possibilities materialised, ‘May 68 is seen as a period when audacious moves seemed possible’ and ‘society profoundly changed’ (in Smith 2018). Possible futures occupied much of Lefebvre’s thinking after May 1968. Differential space is rather neglected in Lefebvrian literature but is
nevertheless of crucial importance. Lefebvre associates it with the production of space, and the concept is developed through the related ideas of heterotopia, utopia and urban society.

**Differential space or spaces of difference?**

One of the reasons for the confusion regarding Lefebvre’s ideas about space is that he is ambivalent about the outcome(s) of the production of space. Kipfer et al. (2008: 9) criticise Soja and Harvey’s interpretation of the spatial triad, asking, ‘How did Soja get so lost looking for Lefebvre in the prison-house of spatial ontology?’ Their answer is that Soja tried too hard to see Lefebvre as postmodern. I argue that none of the three spatial moments of the triad can be the outcome of the production of space because together in dialectical tension they produce space. So what is the outcome? Lefebvre is insistent over many decades that social struggle against unpleasant aspects of neo-capitalism can produce a fairer, more inclusive space: an urban society brought about through the production of differential space. Lefebvre imbues differential space with at least two temporal meanings. Firstly, it is a distant utopian alternative to oppressive state-supported neo-capitalism:

> On the horizon, then, at the furthest edge of the possible… a planet-wide space as the social foundation of a transformed everyday life open to myriad possibilities – such is the dawn now beginning to break on the far horizon.  
> (Lefebvre 1991: 422)

Secondly, it is also the ‘here-and-now’ utopian space of the favela or Paris ‘68. Lefebvre regards both these utopias as types of differential space. Like urban society, differential space results from contradiction, it is transition and is both process and outcome. Lefebvre provides sufficient insights as to what it is, might be and how it may be produced, but he was not precise or dogmatic about it. This has led to a variety of legitimate interpretations of differential space.

Shields perceives duality: post-capitalist society and transformed everyday space (1999: 183). Smith posits that differential space was Lefebvre’s code for socialism (in Lefebvre 2003: xiv). Kofman and Lebas claim ‘the production of differential space and plural times, have direct resonances in Nietzschean thought’ (1996: 5). Only half-jokingly, Merrifield (2006: 120) postulates that the project of differential space can ‘begin this afternoon’ through academics ‘reclaiming our own workspace’, by giving a nod to disruption rather than co-optation, a nod ‘to real difference rather than cowering conformity’. It is the possibility of unorthodox, experimental urban politics, despite the apparent failures of multiculturalism (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005). Lefebvre’s differential space is a fundamental concept: it is the hard-won space of social use value, it contradicts neo-capitalist exchange value and homogeneity:

> Our present approach is also based on an analysis of the overall process and its negative aspects, on an analysis that is tied to practice. The transition here considered is characterized first of all by its contradictions: contradictions between (economic) growth and (social) development, between the social and the political, between power and knowledge (*connaissance*), and between abstract and differential space.  
> (Lefebvre 1991: 408)

Differential space is therefore one of the desired outcomes of the production of space for its immediate societal benefits and its propulsive role in the transition to an urban society. For Lefebvre, leisure and non-work time were crucial for combatting the alienation of capitalist production, allowing for the emergence of differential space and a concrete utopia.
One of the most significant challenges Lefebvre posed in his urban research and writing was to identify, analyse and produce this alternative possibility. He called this alternative ‘urban society’ and associated it with differential space. Throughout his metaphorical life journey from the rural to the urban, he never actually left the rural behind. This is most noticeable in his ideas about the production of space, urbanisation and urban society where the rural constitutes an integral part of the story and the ‘city is simultaneously ruralized’ (Lefebvre 2016: 149). Lefebvre is careful not to posit a smooth linear historicist transition from one era to the next, especially capitalism to urban society. He is careful also to stress the need for struggle and the uncertainty of immediate outcome, emphasising rhythms and cycles. However, the teleological aspects of Lefebvre’s historical dialectic in which an inevitable transition unfolds, from the absolute space of nature to capitalist abstract space, finally reaching utopian differential space and urban society, is imputed (e.g. Keith and Pile 1993: 24–25). I agree with Elden (2004: 7), who detects no such teleological naivety in Lefebvre.

Lefebvre uses the term ‘differential’ in a variety of contexts including architecture and semiotics, but I contend it is a surprising way for a philosopher critical of Cartesian mathematics to describe space. Lefebvre is less than helpful; since in the TPOS chapter entitled ‘From the contradictions of space to differential space’, the latter term does not appear. In English the term differential space (or espace différentiel) has strong mathematical overtones. I contend that the term differential space has something of the weakness of the term representational space – its meaning is rather opaque. Some translation background is useful here. Remarkably perhaps, although the term ‘spaces of representation’ is used widely, it does not appear in TPOS. Nicholson-Smith translated ‘les spaces de représentation’ as ‘representational spaces’. The term spaces of representation is used instead and first appeared in English in Frank Bryant’s translation of Lefebvre’s The Survival of Capitalism (Lefebvre 1976: 26). The term spaces of representation is preferable because the Nicholson-Smith translation makes the triad ‘more difficult to comprehend’ (Shields 1999: 161).

Lefebvre is not definitive regarding how differential space is produced but leaves a variety of clues. Principally, it can be brought about by spatial coalitions or social movements through counter-projects. So an appreciation of social and spatial diversity is critical for the production of space and urban society. A defining feature of Lefebvre’s urban theories is the importance of power relationships and the dialectical tensions between civil society, the private sector and the state. And over recent decades the importance of civil society has become increasingly apparent. For Lefebvre the production of a new space, a counter-space, can never be brought about by any one particular social group and must necessarily result from relationships between diverse groups which may include: ‘reactionaries’, ‘liberals’, ‘democrats’ and ‘radicals’ so:

There should therefore be no cause for surprise when a space-related issue spurs collaboration… between very different kinds of people… Such coalitions around some particular counter-project or counter-plan, promoting a counter-space in opposition to the one embodied in the strategies of power, occur all over the world.

(Lefebvre 1991: 380–381)

Here Lefebvre seems to be drawing on his Nanterre analysis. It is strange that his thoughts on the importance of coalitions in the production of space are largely overlooked in the literature. Despite this, spatial coalitions are not unlike the well-known idea of counter-publics and the impact of coalitions’ pursuit of counter-projects is documented in Leary-Owhin (2016) and McFarlane (2018).

Spaces of difference of the utopian kind herald the urban society, the possible–impossible on the ‘far horizon’ (Lefebvre 1991: 422). Lefebvre sees this potential as contested everyday present reality ‘at the margins of the homogenized realm’ (Lefebvre 1991: 373) in the self-managed
Brazilian favelas (ibid., and see Huchzermeyer in this part of the book). Albeit that favela self-management today includes organised crime drug cartels and the direction is towards the production of abstract space (Lacerda 2018). Lefebvre sees this potential in Les Halles in May 1968, which became for a while an alternative space: a space of use value, ‘a scene of permanent festival’ (Lefebvre 1991: 167). Harvey helps bring Lefebvre up to date but prefers the related term heterotopia and relates it to the ‘transgressive social practices’ and ‘oppositional movements’ (2012: 110). He announces heterotopia to be simultaneously a utopian post-revolutionary space and a prosaic space of everyday life. It can be produced through what people feel, sense and do in the lived space of everyday life. Heterotopic spaces can and do pop up across various realms of urban space (Harvey 2012: xvii).

Lefebvre sees the potential to contradict abstract space when land and property is abandoned by capital interests or the state. This withdrawal from space occurs continually in urban areas even in city centres. From his Marxist perspective, Lefebvre highlights the potential for ordinary inhabitants to seize new rights and produce differential space from abandoned abstract space:

An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the raison d’être which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a purpose quite different from its initial use.

(Lefebvre 1991: 167)

Diverted purposes may well, I argue, produce differential space. In spite of the definitional issues, differential space has proved useful conceptually and as a springboard for research in differing contexts (e.g. Groth and Corijn 2005; Andres 2013; McFarlane 2018). Even though I have deployed the term in recent research (Leary-Owhin 2016), I suggest moving beyond Lefebvre – the term spaces of difference seems more compatible with his explanation of differing types of differential space. I show in Figure 43.3 how we might venture beyond Lefebvre and suggest

![Figure 43.3 Suggestions for a ‘spaces of difference triad’. Source: © Michael Leary-Owhin.](image-url)
how spaces of difference could be produced through the dialectical production of space (based on Leary-Owhin 2016: 306). Figure 43.3 tries to convey the production of spaces of difference as being: non-hierarchical, non-linear, non-chaotic, uncertain, unpredictable with the ‘traditional’ spatial triad symbolised by the arrow triplets.

The right to difference

Lefebvre encourages us to see differential space or spaces of difference and associated social relations as critiques and examples of everyday life. Differential space is related intimately to his concept of the right to the city. He identifies a range of rights which are not necessarily legal rights (Lefebvre 1996). There is a large amount of literature affirming and critiquing the right to the city (see Aalbers and Gibb 2014; Purcell 2014). Merrifield wonders if its co-optation by elites and conservative interests means it should be abandoned as a radical idea (2011). I focus here on its relationship with differential space. I argue the three fundamental aspects of the right to the city are: 1) the right to an urban life (presumably within the emerging urban society), 2) the right to geographical and other forms of centrality and 3) the right to difference. Lefebvre distinguishes this last right to the city from the capitalist right to property (presumably real estate):

The ‘right to difference’ is a formal designation for something that may be achieved through practical action, through effective struggle – namely, concrete differences. The right to difference implies no entitlements that do not have to be bitterly fought for. This is a ‘right’ whose only justification lies in its content; it is thus diametrically opposed to the right of property.

(Lefebvre 1991: 396)

Patently, difference and the claiming of rights to the city can be a source of solidarity and/or conflict in any society. Lefebvre stressed that protest based on particularities should not be confused with opposition to repression or exploitation or with an awareness and acknowledgement of difference. Urban difference can include ethnic, linguistic, local and regional particularities. Despite the potential for conflict, the urban and urban society ‘can be defined as a place where differences know one another and, through their mutual recognition, test one another, and in this way are strengthened or weakened’ (Lefebvre 2003: 96).

Right to difference should be understood in the context of strong French universalism since the First Republic and its testing relation to the particular, which resonates today (Samuels 2016). This collection of Lefebvrian rights inherent in the right to difference needs to be grabbed through the appropriation of urban space. We see it in the appropriation by spatial coalitions of abandoned and underused space for its use value. We see it in the appropriation and transformation of space for the purposes of overt political expression from the small-scale spontaneous to the large-scale organised demonstration (Leary-Owhin 2016). We see it in the concept of autogestion. Literally this translates as self-management and was used to describe workers taking control of factory production. Lefebvre extended this concept and linked it theoretically and politically to Marx and Lenin’s idea of the withering away of the state. Workers and communities take control of their everyday lives and decide the organisation of work and urban space. (Lefebvre 2009; Purcell 2014: 147–148). It may at some time in the future provoke a seismic shift in neo-capitalism, the possible-impossible utopian horizon may be reached. For now though, total transformation is not necessary for genuine everyday spaces of difference to be produced; they are here and now.
Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the importance of Lefebvre’s life experiences, his research during WWII and his analysis of Mourenx and May ’68 for the development of key theoretical ideas. His assessment of Mourenx is mostly critical, but he also praised the French modernist new town planners. Overall there is ambivalence. He was not so dogmatic as to reject French modernist new town planning entirely. Lefebvre is shown in this chapter to have used his analysis of May 1968 to develop ideas about post-capitalist urban society. Spaces of representation and the right to the city dominate Lefebvrian research attention, but everyday political action can produce, and research can reveal, the production of differential space. Once created, differential space is simultaneously robust and fragile. It shares those characteristics with abstract space. A host of processes are involved in the production of what I call spaces of difference: centrality, marginality, celebration, urban guerrilla warfare, everyday existence and the counter-projects of coalitions. Concrete utopia, or urban society, as a core transition within the abstract space of neo-capitalism, is revealed in this chapter as a major dialectical contradiction in Lefebvre’s urban theorising stimulated by May 1968. But post-capitalist urban society will emerge through struggle rather than through a teleological process. I conclude that several kinds of differential space or spaces of difference seem possible with different temporal characteristics, from the enduring to the transient. There are always opportunities for the production of spaces of difference and urban society. They inhere, especially in the fraught functioning of neoliberal state neo-capitalism.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Catherine and Léa Régulier-Lefebvre for their generous hospitality and for their assistance with this research, when I visited Navarrenx during Easter 2017. Thanks also to Vincent Berdoulay, Stuart Elden, Andy Merrifield and Rob Shields for their advice regarding this trip.

References

From Mourenx to spaces of difference


