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Lefebvre and contemporary urbanism

The enduring influence and critical power of his writing on cities

Pierre Filion

Introduction

It is unusual for the influence of writers in fields related to the social sciences and humanities to outlast their own generation. Not so with Henri Lefebvre. More than 25 years after his death, his influence shows no sign of decline (Elden 2001; 2004a). Not only has he been a predominant intellectual figure during much of his long and productive life, but the impact of his work is still widely felt. The chapter examines reasons for this lasting influence. While the chapter considers the overall intellectual contribution of Lefebvre, its primary focus is, consistent with the objective of the book, on his main urban writing (Lefebvre 1968; 1992 [1974]; 1996; 2003 [1970]; 2004 [1992]).

The chapter maintains that Lefebvre owes his enduring influence to five factors. There is first the relatively recent translation of his urban books into English. For many English-speaking urban academics, exposure to the thinking of Lefebvre, therefore, dates mostly from the 2000s. And given the prolific output of Lefebvre over his lifetime, we can expect many more English translations of his work to follow. Second, because of the tendency of Lefebvre to think by association, his writing proliferates with ideas. The books of Lefebvre can thus be mined by urban researchers for ideas at different stages of their development, which they can further pursue in their own research. Third, given the embryonic nature of many ideas present in the writing of Lefebvre, they can be interpreted in different ways by researchers and thus be adapted to their own purpose. The large number of ideas and the multiple ways in which they can be understood make it possible for researchers to project their own perspectives on the work of Lefebvre. The fourth reason for the persistent influence of Lefebvre is his foresight regarding societal and urban circumstances to come.

The fifth and final reason for his lasting impact concerns the capacity of the perspectives he advanced to interpret contemporary urban issues and critique responses to these issues. Among the numerous themes that can be identified by interconnecting related ideas in the writing of Lefebvre, the chapter relates enduring interest in his work to the framing of arguments weaving together a concern for the alienation of the individual, a critique of both capitalism and
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technocratic state arrangements, adherence to a post-scarcity hedonistic vision, urban centrality and the right to the city. Although in a characteristic abstract fashion, his writing proposes a form of urbanism that promotes human fulfilment and thereby counters the alienating features of contemporary society. It would be an urban form where everyone can enjoy the rich multifunctionality, diversity, social interaction, creativity and festive atmosphere afforded by urban centrality. In such a place, use values, which cater to the necessities of life and to human fulfilment, would predominate over purely economically driven exchange values.

The chapter closes by opposing this liberating vision of the city to the present urban reality, in order to verify the relevance of the ideas of Lefebvre for late 2010s urbanism. Cities have become more oriented towards culture, art, leisure and overall human self-realisation, as evidenced by the transformation of downtown areas from purely functional central business districts to tourist attractions, cultural and recreational centres and high-density residential areas. But this transition remains driven by market processes and hence use values in an increasingly neoliberal economic and social climate. Moreover, the appeal of transformed city centres fuels gentrification, a factor of social segregation contradicting Lefebvre’s calls for a right to the city. In a contemporary context, the conceptual instrumentation advanced by Lefebvre serves to evaluate the evolution of present forms of urbanism from a human fulfilment and social justice perspective, and to confront current urban trajectories to his humanist vision of the city.

The intellectual foundations of Lefebvre

Critical evaluations of the work of Lefebvre as well as a biography have charted the course of his intellectual pathway through most of the 20th century (Butler 2012; Elden 2004b; Hess 1988; Kipfer et al. 2008; Merrifield 2006; Shields 1999). They show how a long life and intellectual eclecticism have exposed him to the main intellectual currents of the century. Few intellectual figures, if any, synthesised as well as he did the thinking of the past century. His intellectual journey begins with the surrealists, the French successors to the Dada movement. He was close to core surrealist poets and like some of them converged on the French Communist Party. His adherence to Marxism had a lifelong influence on his thinking and his work. His was not, however, the official version of Marxism broadcast by the French Communist Party and its intellectual apologists.

The Lefebvre variant of Marxism emphasised the philosophically oriented young Marx and his concern for human alienation and the achievement of the fulfilled ‘total person’ over the more economically minded older Marx, whose vision constituted the official ideology of communist regimes. Lefebvre was also averse to the state technocratic apparatus, both in its Western capitalist and Eastern communist variants. Little wonder that, in these circumstances, his affiliation with the French Communist Party came to an end in 1958, albeit after 30 years of membership. He found himself more at home with the free-thinking Situationists, who inspired the French May 1968 movement (Lefebvre 1998). In France, May 1968 values represented a victory on the left for less dogmatic thinkers like Lefebvre over the communist doctrine of the time. There is a strong utopian flavour to the urban visions of Lefebvre, which while sympathetic to Marxist thinking, break with the then prevailing economist interpretations of Marxism (Ajzenberg 2001). His attention was instead on how use values could substitute themselves to exchange values and technocratic state intervention. Lefèbvre proposed self-management (autogestion) as a way of achieving his urban vision (Bitter, Derksen and Weber 2009).

As his work demonstrates, Lefebvre was also influenced by the main schools of thought of his time. His writing on the city is filled with references to urban theorists from mid-20th-century decades (1920s to 1970s), such as Le Corbusier, Jane Jacobs and those belonging to the Bauhaus
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He also supplemented his urban reflections with contributions from geographers, political scientists and sociologists. What is more, in a fashion that underscores his syncretism, he drew from disciplines that are not normally associated with the study of cities. Structuralism, linguistics and semiology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, the work of Michel Foucault, all bore on his reflection on the city.

Henri Lefebvre can be defined as both a sociologist and a philosopher (Shields 1999). The numerous allusions to philosophers in his urban work are therefore not surprising. He referred extensively to the ancient Greeks, but he devoted most of his attention to Marx. His work was also inspired by Nietzsche, who was used by Lefebvre to validate the prevalence of the lived urban reality over representations of the city – a perspective that is central to the urban work of Lefebvre. Heidegger, along with Sartre, also figure in this work.

As we will see in more detail in the next section, there is an accretive dimension to the influence the schools of thought to which Lefebvre had been exposed exerted on his thinking. These different intellectual outlooks have left an imprint on his writing. His urban work is largely about relying on numerous schools of thought, many not normally tied to the city, to extend the understanding of the urban phenomenon. It is of course legitimate to question the enduring relevance of an intellectual endeavour that relies so heavily on forms of thinking from the middle decades of the past century.

The thinking of Lefebvre was not only shaped by different schools of thought. The societal reality prevailing when he was writing his urban books also had an influence on him. He was writing this work during les trente glorieuses, the French Fordist-driven prosperity that spans broadly the three post-Second World War decades. This was a time of robust economic expansion and growing state intervention in the economy and civil society (Fourastié 1971). The full-employment prosperity of the time may explain the shift in the thinking of Lefebvre from conflicts stemming from the production sphere, the key concern of Marxists, to tensions within cities deriving in large part from technocratic interventions of the state.

The thinking and writing style of Lefebvre

Hegel and Marx have impacted the thinking and writing of Henri Lefebvre. Many of his positions are advanced in a dialectical fashion, involving a proposition and a counter-proposition and the exposition of how the tension between the two results in an outcome that transcends the two original propositions (Soja 1980). There is also a Socratic flavour to Lefebvre’s written expression, which accounts for the interspersion of the text with a profusion of questions.

Lefebvre thought by association. Instead of concentrating on the elaboration of a few core ideas, he tended to jump from one idea to another, leaving many of them in an embryonic stage. Such a tendency was consistent with his general reliance on short sentences, which contrasts with philosophers’ predilection for long compounded sentences. The writing style of Lefebvre involves skipping from one idea to another, steered by associations between these ideas. In the writing of Lefebvre, one idea leads to another on the basis of similarities in themes and historical or geographical contexts. This associative approach has the advantage of delivering wide perspectives on the urban phenomenon, exposing it to the interpretations of a multitude of ideas. Meanwhile, the downside is a scarcity of ideas sufficiently described by Lefebvre to lend themselves to an empirical investigative agenda, without further development. The wide range of ideas appearing in four pages taken at random from The Urban Revolution ([1971] 2003) illustrate the ease with which Lefebvre moved from one idea to another and the resulting abundance of ideas in his urban books: writing and the city, early urban plans, depictions of cities in paintings, commercial capital, passage to the industrial city and the history of this type of cities, city and
anti-city, dialectical thinking, signs in the city, implosion-explosion of cities, different types of exchanges, the world-scale nature of urban systems and cities becoming a transformative force (Lefebvre 2003: 12–15).

I have already alluded to the cumulative and syncretic nature of the thinking of Lefebvre. His writing reflects the numerous schools of thought he was exposed to over his long career. Even the influence of his surrealist phase could be seen, without exaggerating too much, in his associative writing style. While obviously not as manifest as in the case of stream-of-consciousness surrealist poets, one can nonetheless detect a hint of resemblance with surrealist free-association in the frequency with which Lefebvre moved between ideas.

Consistent with his associative style of thinking and writing, Lefebvre does not generally integrate the different perspectives on the city (stemming from the schools of thought he adduces) into his urban books. In his writing, the urban phenomenon is exposed to these schools of thought one at a time. Sometimes, this leads to new ways of conceiving the city, while in other instances it serves to make a case against the theoretical perspectives that are raised. Targeted in this fashion as objects of his criticism are mainstream economics, economistic interpretations of Marxism and ideologies linked to technocratic statism, which include, in the view of Lefebvre, structuralism (Lefebvre 1971). While one can justifiably deplore insufficient conceptual integration in the work of Lefebvre, he can, at the same time, be praised for his ability to address the urban phenomenon from different perspectives. In doing so, he exposed this phenomenon to a uniquely broad range of interpretations and thus expanded the scope of the understanding of the city. It is indeed unusual to consider the city through a linguistic or psychoanalytic lens as he does, and of course, the use of such uncommon interpretive tools has the potential of yielding fresh perspectives on the city. Herein lies a major explanation for the breadth and originality of the perspectives advanced by Lefebvre. Reliance on these schools of thought to address the city in unexpected ways also underscores the unorthodoxy of Lefebvre in his use of conceptual approaches, in other words, his capacity to stretch the applicability range of these schools of thought.

Just as concepts are often summarily presented in the urban books of Lefebvre, so are, to an even greater degree, empirical references. He offered the minimum of information required for empirical references to serve as examples illustrating the concepts he introduces. These examples can be historical, such as those from the Greek and Roman antiquity, the European middle ages, the Renaissance or late 19th-century Paris, as in the case of the Haussmann reconstruction of Paris. Or they can originate from the 1960s and 1970s when Lefebvre wrote most of his urban books. Among examples he repeatedly made use of are: Les Halles redevelopment in Paris, the construction of public housing projects (les grands ensembles) in Paris suburbs, the gentrification of inner Paris, the dispersed urbanisation of the US. The critic Manuel Castells’ focus on Lefebvre’s scant concern for empiricism was justified (Castells 1997; Elden 2004b: 142). References to empirical reality were insufficiently developed to provide a systematic validation of the ideas that were advanced by Lefebvre. There was no case study or quantitative data that could grant empirical validity to the ideas advanced in his books.

The urban books of Lefebvre have much in common. They put forth similar ideas about cities, albeit with differences in emphasis. His latest urban book, *Rhythmanalysis*, a posthumous work, is an exception (Lefebvre 2004 [1992]). Although drawing heavily on the previous urban books, it does have a strong focus of its own – the importance of rhythms in the organisation of cities and daily life.

The thinking style of Lefebvre plays an important role in the enduring popularity of his urban writing. The profusion of ideas present in this work makes it possible for numerous researchers to latch onto these ideas and thereby claim a lineage between their own investigations and
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the reflections of Lefebvre. It is possible for them to build a research agenda around an idea that came from Lefebvre, even if the description of this idea occupied only a few paragraphs in his books. There is also the fact that the often summarily developed ideas in the writing of Lefebvre lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Researchers can assign different meanings to these ideas and operationalise them accordingly in their empirical investigations. Hence the ‘Rorschach’ test (whereby people reveal inner thoughts when interpreting ink spots) quality of the writing of Lefebvre. The urban books of Lefebvre could be likened to a supermarket of ideas for left-leaning urban researchers, were the concept of supermarket not so alien to his vision of the city.

Alienation and the Right to the City

With the worldwide proliferation of cities and their concentration of economic activity, social interaction and creativity, it is easy to understand the importance Lefebvre gave to the urban phenomenon. Not only do cities reflect present societal tendencies but they also point to the future trajectory of modern societies. And they can play a leading role in the fulfilment of the human potential of individuals, as this is where daily life for a majority (a large majority in economically advanced societies in the global North) of the population unfolds.

For Lefebvre, space is the dominant force driving the evolution of modern society. He applies the Marxist dialectic, resulting from the dynamic between the mode of production and the contradictions it generates, to an understanding of transformative forces centred on space and urbanism. For Lefebvre, such a view reflects the colonisation by capitalism and state technocracy of virtually all aspects of urban life, causing the city to become the sphere where daily life meets with most intensity the capitalist and state modes of production.

One can find connections between multiplicities of ideas appearing in the urban writing of Lefebvre, making it possible to identify overarching themes. Lefebvre rarely pulled these ideas together himself, so it is largely left to the reader to interweave compatible ideas into broad themes. I identify one such theme, chosen for its relevance to the present evolution of the city discussed in the next section.

A major theme that runs through the urban books of Lefebvre ties human alienation with the right to the city. It blends philosophical reflections on alienation with ways of achieving the total person, in a fashion that optimises human potential, well-being and happiness. From the perspective of Lefebvre, human alienation is the result of exploitation inherent in the capitalist mode of production and, increasingly, of an organisation of urban life that contributes to profit-making and reflects the technocratic control of the state on society (Brenner 2008). Planning is described in medical terms as a means of dealing with urban ailments (Lefebvre 1961). But, within the prevailing societal context, it is depicted as only capable of providing partial and temporary relief and unable to address the source of problems. Ultimately, as an instrument of the state, planning belongs to its ideological and societal control apparatus and thereby contributes to the reproduction of the capitalist/technocratic city and of the human alienation it causes. At the same time, however, Lefebvre saw conditions for human fulfilment in the essence of the urban phenomenon. But it is only by shifting from the predominance of exchange values to that of use values that the city, corrupted by the capitalist and state modes of production, can reconnect with its essence. According to Lefebvre, to promote human fulfilment, cities must provide universal accessibility to centres, which are diversified, festive, and multi-functional, and which encourage social interaction and creativity, all conditions for the realisation of human potential. In the Lefebvrian view, the right to the city corresponds to the right to such centrality.
Consistent with the tendency for Lefebvre to downplay empirical evidence and the practical implications of his ideas, his urban books offer scant evidence of the concrete form a city promoting human fulfilment would take. Proposals of such a transformed city remain at a philosophical utopia stage. Nevertheless, Lefebvre highlighted the need for such a city to stress the lived experience, in contrast to market-driven capitalist space and to abstract models put forth by the technocratic state. The emphasis on the lived environment reflects the influence of Nietzsche's Dionysian streak on Lefebvre. Both Nietzsche and Lefebvre indeed focused on the rich complexity of the lived experience rather than on simplifications inherent in rational explanations.

There is wide appeal to such a broadly defined alternative vision of the city. Its lack of precision makes it applicable to a multitude of contemporary urban situations, hence the popularity of the right to the city concept. The many interpretations of this concept are mirrored in its adoption in varying circumstances. Critiques of cities based on the right to the city can pertain, for example, to the social consequences of gentrification, the lack of services in self-built settlements, the high cost of housing, and splintered access to urban infrastructure and services (see for instance Graham and Marvin 2001; Newman and Wyly 2006; Weinstein and Ren 2009).

The Right to the City in the contemporary urban context

The passage of time makes it possible to verify the anticipatory capacity of the urban writing of Lefebvre, which has for the most part taken place four to five decades ago. Have the world and cities evolved in the directions foreseen in these books?

The predictive record of Lefebvre is far from perfect. For example, although he mentioned neoliberalism, which was pointing its head in the 1970s, he did not foresee the extent to which this ideology would alter economic and social policymaking across the world. As a result, his critiques of state power, especially of the technocratic interventions of governments, do not resonate as loudly as they did several decades ago. Indeed, with the retrenchment of the state and resulting direct exposure of individuals to economic volatility, many would welcome a return to Fordist redistributive programs, regardless of their technocratic proclivities. Likewise, his vision of a post-scarcity economy, which promotes human fulfilment, is confronted with uneven and overall sluggish growth in global North industrial nations. The post-scarcity vision was more credible in an era of rapid Fordist expansion than it is in the present slow-growth economy. Sputtering economic performance breeds social polarisation and marginalisation. The possibility of advancing social disparity was not an important object of discussion in the urban work of Lefebvre, which may have been due to the favourable economic and redistributive conditions prevailing when writing his urban books. Moreover, Lefebvre did not grasp the economic and social consequences of globalisation, especially in industrial nations in the global North, the main focus of his reflections. In a similar vein, while he acknowledged the environmental damage inflicted by an all-out exploitation of nature, he did not project these consequences at a planetary scale, as is currently done. The absence of planetary environmental vision is not, however, inconsistent with the fact that most of his urban writing preceded awareness of global warming. He also failed to predict the importance of global population flows, mirrored by the place minorities now occupy in cities and their predominant role in urban conflicts. The class-based urban struggles depicted in the writing of Lefebvre now intersect closely with ethnic and racial categories. Furthermore, as Shields (1999) noted, Lefebvre was curiously silent on women's movements.

Nevertheless, many expectations aired by Lefebvre did materialise. Lefebvre can be credited for anticipating the present age of universal urbanisation. Not only does most of the planet's
population live in urban areas, the vast majority of the global economy is based in cities. What is more, urban settlements across the world are interconnected by intensely used transportation and communication networks, giving rise to a worldwide urban system. While in the past, the main population movements were from the countryside to the city, increasingly, migration is from city to city. It is true, however, that in the 1960s and 1970s the worldwide urbanisation process was already in motion and its present advanced stage could therefore be extrapolated. Lefebvre was also right in predicting, contrary to the Marxist orthodoxy of the time, a decline in the importance of production-based conflicts relative to those affecting other spheres of society, especially the urban sphere. The present reality in global North societies indeed points to an apparent demobilisation of production-based forces, while agitation around issues of social equity and identity, along with space-based conflicts, are gaining momentum. It is, however, important not to associate a lesser visibility of conflicts with reduced tensions in the production sphere. It may well be that diminished worker reaction to increasingly precarious employment conditions in the wake of globalisation, de-regulation and automation are a consequence of growing obstacles to mobilisation within the production sphere.

Seemingly aligned with the thinking of Lefebvre is the present celebration of urban life in general and more specifically of urban amenities and hedonistic lifestyles. On the surface, these transformations can indeed be interpreted as compatible with the Lefebvrian utopian vision of the city as an agent of human fulfilment, the vision at the heart of the right to the city concept. The proliferation of urban festivals can be interpreted as the expression of a hedonistic urban turn. The same can be said of the change in the vocation of downtowns of large North American metropolitan regions. Traditionally, these sectors were confined to a strict central business district role, consisting for the most part of office employment and retailing. These were nine-to-five downtowns. Over the last decades, however, downtowns have undergone a major transformation by attracting recreational and cultural activities. Downtowns are now populated around the clock by a much-expanded residential population along with masses of visitors including tourists. Such a transformation gives rise to a downtown lifestyle emphasising social interaction, recreation, diversity, culture, the arts and festive events (Filion and Gad 2006). Thus depicted, downtowns could be seen as corresponding to the centrality imagined by Lefebvre and therefore to the human fulfilment features of the vision of the city he put forth.

This form of downtown has become the symbol of the adaptation of the city to contemporary self-fulfilment values. If smokestacks represented the industrial city and high-rise office towers, the technocratic city, cafés, art galleries, running and cycling trails and condo towers symbolise a consumerist city promoting self-realisation. This is the new people-oriented depiction of the city.

Although these images of the contemporary downtown seem to mirror the utopian inter-connection Lefebvre proposed between the total person and human fulfilment, on the one hand, and a form of centrality promoting social interaction, physical well-being, arts, culture and social interaction, on the other hand, the contemporary downtown reality (and indeed the urban reality) is different. For Lefebvre, an actual transformation of the city that would make it more respectful of human needs and wants (while sustaining the fulfilment of individuals) cannot take place without a deep societal transition. Otherwise, in his view, the city remains an instrument reproducing the inequality and alienation embedded in the capitalist and state modes of production. Not only has such a societal transformation not happened, but in global North industrial countries exploitation and polarisation have intensified with the advances of neoliberalism. Even if it plays for some a human fulfilment role of sorts, the contemporary transformation of urban reality is deeply ingrained in the economic tendencies of the current neoliberal phase and contributes to the entrenchment of its defining features. The connection between
the reorientation of large-city downtowns in North America and neoliberal economic features reveals the thinness of the utopian veneer of this reorientation. First, the transformation of these sectors has been economically motivated, not driven by the vision of places that allow persons to become more fulfilled. In the Lefebvre terminology, it reflects the predominance of exchange over use value. Facilities and activities targeted at downtown residents and visitors are either meant to generate profits or improve the image of an urban area and, thereby, its economic competitiveness. The economic development purpose of an apparent reorientation of urban sectors towards human fulfilment has been most blatantly conveyed by the creative class perspective. For Richard Florida (2002; 2007), cities must create an urban environment that corresponds to the tastes of young professionals belonging to the creative class in order to attract them. In this view, the interest of cities in this social category relates to its capacity to generate economic growth. We encounter here an approach that shares features of the urban vision advanced by Lefebvre, insofar as the means to attract the creative class involve art, culture, physical activity and an overall festive atmosphere. But, contrary to the vision of Lefebvre, these urban amenities are motivated by an economic development objective and targeted narrowly at the social category with the potential to achieve this development.

Second, even if the centrality that has emerged in North American downtowns did fully conform to the Lefebvrian understanding of the term, it still could be easily accessible only to a minority because of the existence of only one downtown per metropolitan region. Centrality has indeed proven to be notoriously difficult to reproduce, as illustrated by the absence of multifunctional centres in the North American suburban realm. As we well know, in a market system scarce goods go to the highest bidders. Hence the tendency for the rich to monopolise the advantages of centrality as evidenced by ever-advancing gentrification. Thus, in a capitalist society, and one could equally argue that in a technocratic state regime where the distribution of rare goods and services mirrors political influence, centrality is a factor of social division in blatant opposition with the right to the city upheld by Lefebvre.

Conclusion

The chapter has identified reasons for the enduring interest in the urban writing of Lefebvre. There is first the relatively recent nature of the English translation of his books. Enduring interest is also a function of the profusion of ideas present in his writing and of the possibility of interpreting them in different fashions due to their frequent embryonic state. One can also raise the fact that Lefebvre was able to foresee some contemporary societal and urban outcomes. And, finally, we have noted the relevance to the present urban reality of the right to the city theme, focusing on the connection between human fulfilment and centrality.

In its last section, the chapter has demonstrated the critical potential relative to the current urban reality of themes emerging from the writing of Lefebvre. Themes raised in his work indeed make it possible to see beyond the ideology serving to justify prevailing urban trends and policies. The enduring impact of the urban books of Lefebvre has benefitted from their concentration on big fundamental urban ideas rather than on the specific circumstances prevailing at the time of their writing.

References

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