

SPACE AND POLITICS: ASPECTS OF LEFEBVRE'S DISCUSSION¹

ESPAÇO E POLÍTICA: ASPETOS DA PROBLEMATIZAÇÃO DE LEFEBVRE

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Abstract: The aim of this contribution is to give an outline of Henri Lefebvre's project to articulate thinking on space with critical sociopolitical theory, and more specifically with the critique of the neo-capitalist society. Foundational to this project is the idea of the production of (social) space, which is premised upon Lefebvre's opposition to an understanding of space as a "container", in favour of its conception as a relational phenomenon, grounded on an ontological bond with the human body, as well as indissolubly linked to time. The analysis of this idea shows that space is not a mere stage for what takes place in the social realm, but constitutes instead an important part of it, and thus possesses an inherent political dimension. This importance and dimension, though, has significantly increased within contemporary society and the space that it has produced, "abstract space", because of the fact that space has been rendered an instrument of control at all levels: economic, political, ideological. However, this control of space and through it, though unprecedented in history, cannot be total, since "abstract space" itself creates new contradictions which escape the controlling forces.

Keywords: Lefebvre, production of space, abstract space, body, politics, ideology.

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Resumé: L'objectif de cette contribution est de donner un aperçu du projet d'Henri Lefebvre, d'articuler la réflexion sur l'espace avec la théorie sociopolitique critique, et plus spécifiquement avec la critique de la société néo-capitaliste. L'idée de la production de l'espace (social) est à la base de ce projet, qui repose sur l'opposition de Lefebvre à une compréhension de l'espace comme « contenant », en faveur de sa conception comme phénomène relationnel, fondé sur un lien ontologique avec le corps humain, ainsi qu'indissolublement lié au temps. L'analyse de cette idée montre que l'espace n'est pas une simple scène pour ce qui se passe dans le domaine social, mais qu'il en constitue au contraire une partie importante et qu'il possède donc une dimension politique inhérente. Cette importance et cette dimension se sont toutefois considérablement accrues dans la société contemporaine et dans l'espace qu'elle a produit, « l'espace abstrait », parce que l'espace est devenu un instrument de contrôle à tous les niveaux : économique, politique, idéologique. Cependant, ce contrôle de l'espace et à travers lui, bien que sans précédent dans l'histoire, ne peut être total, car l'« espace abstrait » crée lui-même de nouvelles contradictions qui échappent aux forces de contrôle.

Mots-clés: Lefebvre, production de l'espace, espace abstrait, corps, politique, idéologie.

Resumo: Procuram apresentar-se, neste artigo, os contornos do projeto de Henri Lefebvre no ponto em que o autor articula o pensamento sobre o espaço com uma visão crítica da teoria sociopolítica, mais especificamente com a crítica da sociedade neo-capitalista. Afigura-se fundamental, neste projeto, a ideia de produção do espaço social, que, de acordo com Lefebvre, opõe à compreensão do espaço como um “recipiente” a conceção do espaço como fenómeno relacional, ancorado num laço ontológico estabelecido não só com o corpo humano, mas também indissolivelmente ligado ao tempo. A nossa análise mostra que, para o autor, o espaço não é um mero palco do que ocorre no domínio social. Pelo contrário, ele desempenha um papel importante, que acarreta uma dimensão política, particularmente premente na sociedade contemporânea e no espaço que ela gera – um espaço abstracto –, uma vez que este se tornou, a todos os níveis, um instrumento de controlo económico, político e ideológico. Com efeito, tal controlo do (e através do) espaço não tem precedentes na história, porque o «espaço abstracto» se permeia de novas contradições que escapam às forças de controlo.

Palavras-chave: Lefebvre, espaço abstrato, corpo, política, ideologia.

“There is a politics of space because space is political”. This statement of Henri Lefebvre³ summarizes a rich discussion, which has justly established him as a pioneer and major figure regarding the relevance of space for sociopolitical theory.

My article here will address certain basic aspects of this discussion. In the first section I will present the cardinal ideas of his theorizing on space. More specifically, I will discuss three guidelines I draw from his work regarding the treatment of the problem of space, which demonstrate its inherently sociopolitical character.

In the second section I will focus on the articulation of his theorizing on space with a critical understanding of contemporary society. This involves the analysis of his idea of “abstract space” as a stage in the history of space linked to contemporary capitalism; and this analysis, furthermore, will try to show why this stage is connected to a particularly enhanced political importance of space, and to its reinforced role in the service of the reproduction of dominant social relations. In the final, concluding, section, I will also point out that Lefebvre, while stressing the enhanced sociopolitical function of space in terms of contemporary society, is far from sketching a society wherein the control on the part of the dominant powers is absolutely assured.

But as a preliminary remark, I consider it necessary to portray the theoretical figure of Lefebvre: within the huge and multifarious theoretical production of this French thinker, who has been registered as a “humanist Marxist” – but his contribution to the history of Marxist thought has been rather underestimated – what prevails is, already since the thirties, the conceptualization of everyday life. Although this is a subject he never abandons, it has acted as a vehicle that led him to other directions: to the subject of the city and urbanization, in the sixties, which in turn opened up his thought to the broader subject of space; his top work here, his *magnus opus* for many, is *The production of space*, published in 1974. My discussion here will mainly draw upon this work.

1. On (social) space

We are not posing the question “what is space?”, a question that would preoccupy a mathematician or a metaphysician. There shouldn't be any misunderstanding on this matter. At first [au départ] it is about lived space in relation to social practice.⁴

³ Henri Lefebvre, “Reflections on the Politics of Space”, in *State, Space, World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 174.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Espace et Politique: le Droit à la Ville II* (Paris: Anthropos, 2000), 20.

This programmatic statement of Lefebvre, in a seminar he gave shortly before the publication of his major work on space, needs some commentary, which gets us to a fundamental difficulty in the understanding of his whole project.

I find this statement rather modest under the light of his major work. For, there, although Lefebvre indeed does not attempt a theoretical analysis of the concept of space, on the other hand he definitely does not restrict his discussion to some limited aspect of it, as it might be expected from the above statement. Thus, although he does not confront in a systematic way the philosophical debates on the conception of space, he offers critical comments on philosophical theories of space— comments which are evidently related, as we shall see, to the *problématique* he himself develops. And above all, definitely his elaborations, as he declares explicitly, aspire to a “unitary” theory of space which would articulate its various forms.⁵

A scholar of Lefebvre argues that he “did not want to create a spatial theory or a spatial concept— he wanted to analyze the process of the production of space itself”,⁶ referring to the term figuring in the title of his major work. However, my comment above means to say that, in undertaking this latter enterprise, Lefebvre cannot escape making some steps regarding the former.

To my mind, the question of the theoretical *status* of the *problématique* he develops has to do with a tenacious and thorny problem arising in trying to understand his approach, which has been pointed out in the relevant literature: what is exactly the meaning and scope of what he calls “social space”?⁷ I must note that “social” is the leading qualifier of space among various others found in his work, and indeed it is the qualifier that carries the load of his own intervention on the theorization of space; for, it is bound up with its cardinal idea we have already seen: that space is not something given, but produced. This is an idea he himself admits that “sounds bizarre” from the viewpoint of its mainstream conception,⁸ while being essential to the programmatic critical intent of his project.⁹

⁵ See e.g. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 11.

⁶ Christian Schmid, *Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space* (London: Verso, 2022), 12.

⁷ See e.g. Schmid, *Henri Lefebvre*, 268-9; Edward S. Casey, “The Production of Space or the Heterogeneity of Place”, in *The Production of Public Space* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 72.

⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 15. Thus, he would readily agree with Casey’s comment that to speak of “the production of space” is “an oxymoron of major magnitude” in the face of the idea “of the givenness of space” which “is itself a given of Western thought” (Casey, “The Production”, 71).

⁹ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 404.

A point of utmost significance here is the exact way in which we should understand the distinction he draws between “social” and “natural” space—an issue linked to the way he understands the relation between nature and space. This distinction definitely does not refer to a dichotomy between the mental and the material, nor is it close to what we mean when we commonly distinguish between the “natural” and the “anthropogenic” environment. One thing here is that Lefebvre would not want us to confuse the idea of space with that of the environment.¹⁰ Another, and even more important, is that, to the extent that this distinction between “natural” and “social” space refers to two areas or forms of space, these are not meant to lie one next to the other, distinguished by the degree to which their constituents are either given by nature or are human made—although there are some formulations of Lefebvre that might lend support to such an interpretation. What is certain is that, for him, nature is “the ultimate foundation” of the “qualities of space”, and, nature, or natural/physical space, constitutes the “initial basis” and the “raw material” for the production of space;¹¹ and, furthermore, this is a process wherein natural space continuously gets restricted and recedes, even gets destroyed, without though, as he repeatedly insists, disappearing altogether.¹² However, and this is the crucial point, this process, more accurately “practice” as he says in another work, “‘really’ chang[es] the nature of space and the space of nature [espace-nature] ”;¹³ it indeed leads up to a “second nature”¹⁴ of space as a whole.

Therefore, it seems that he would not want us to understand the distinction he draws in terms of areas or subdivisions of space, but he rather means that *space, as a whole, is social*. In short, there is also a very broad sense of the concept of “social space” very active and perhaps dominant in his work, wherein the qualifier “social” comes not to identify an area or form of space, but says something about the nature of space *in toto*. Besides, this is indicated by the fact that in some strong statements about space he puts forth, he just places the term “social” within brackets. If this is so, then there remains the question: why exactly he keeps the concept of “natural space” and what function it has in his work?

¹⁰ On this issue, see more analytically Chryssoula Mitsopoulou, “Henri Lefebvre’s Theory of Space: Critical Points on the Idea of the Environment”, in *Extending the Idea of Environment. New Perspectives and Tools for a New Knowledge* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2025).

¹¹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 230-231, 402, 84.

¹² See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 30.

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, “Space and the State”, in *State, Space, World*, 229.

¹⁴ Lefebvre refers to the idea of “second nature” many times; see e.g. *The Production*, 409.

Although there are no clear answers to the questions I posed, I think that we could safely say that Lefebvre retained the idea of “natural space” in order to imply that the social has always a so to speak “other”, which constitutes its origin and root, as well as its limit; and this in the sense that it sets limitations and restrictions to the social. And furthermore, he wants to state that this “other”, however affected by social practice, even retreating or “defeated”,¹⁵ and however being difficult to identify accurately,¹⁶ survives and persists within the “second nature” which has been created and solidified by social practice. And, as we will see, indeed this survival is effective, since it plays an active role with respect to what happens in “social space”, one major aspect of this role being that it can generate or activate contradictions.

I will return to the difficulty of this distinction in Lefebvre. For the present moment I just note that this difficulty is part of a thought that in some ways eventually enters into the highly difficult question “what is space?”. And this is a question that can be said to recall the famous dictum of St Augustine on the concept mentally associated¹⁷ to that of space, that is time: “What is time then? If nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I do not know.”

Lefebvre’s remarks that look more like an attempt to define the concept of space have rather the character of preliminary guidelines that seek to clarify the landscape for its approaching. I suggest that we can detect three such guidelines.

The first, of a rather negative character, is to pinpoint the “initial error” that must be avoided in any thought on space whatsoever, although we will later see that here he detects something stronger than a mere error. This is to “picture space as a ‘frame’ or container” the sole qualitative property of which is that it is something bigger than whatever can fit in it.¹⁸ Lefebvre connects this fundamental error to the geometrical Euclidean space as well as to the Cartesian thought.¹⁹ This thought allows for “a notion of space as absolute, infinite, *res extensa*”, which has a “homogeneous (isotropic) character”,²⁰ and which is juxtaposed to thought and stands opposite to it. He repeatedly emphasizes that in this framework space is conceived as inert,

¹⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 31.

¹⁶ Cf. his addendum when he states that nature is the “ultimate foundation” of the “qualities of space”: “though nature is hard to define in this role as the absolute within and at the root of- the relative” (*The Production*, 230-231).

¹⁷ In due course, we shall see that for Lefebvre here it is not a matter of a mere mental association.

¹⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 94.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 296-7.

²⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 14.

passive or neutral; its sole force or effectivity consists in that it constitutes something that has the capacity to contain, and therefore, and the most important, its relationship to its contents is purely external: the one is indifferent to the other.²¹

Thus, the first step that Lefebvre makes is to question decisively this externality. Insofar we have to parallel space to something that resembles a container, we must think that this interacts with whatever it contains. And as regards the basic question he acknowledges that underlies his project, that is “what is the mode of existence of social relations?”,²² the above mean that definitely space does not stand *vis-à-vis* them as their “passive locus”, “the milieu in which their combination takes on body”.²³

Famous is his quotation regarding the way we should understand the presuppositions for the effectivity of any ideology:

What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies? [...] What would remain of the Church if there were no churches? [...] More generally speaking, what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production, and by thus taking body therein.²⁴

Thus we could say more generally that what constitutes the social realm cannot really exist, and more than this be effective, if it does not obtain spatial existence; in his words, if it does not “project itself into a space” and “become inscribed there”.²⁵ Space constitutes, so to speak, a sediment and ark of social practice, and, also the other way around, it constitutes “a support of social relations”;²⁶ and this means that, if it does not determine absolutely these relations, however it affords possibilities, directions, or, conversely, it sets limitations.

The above entail that one should speak of a history of space; space is not an issue of being but of becoming. To the extent that its production arises from its interaction with some historically specific social contents, the result of this interaction cannot be something static and immutable. In brief, space is a historical product, but a product which is always a co-producer in its production. A comprehensive statement of Lefebvre here is the following: “Space is at once result and cause, product and producer; it

²¹ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 94,170.

²² Lefebvre, *The Production*, 401.

²³ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 11.

²⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 44.

²⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 129.

²⁶ Lefebvre, “State and Mode of Production”, in *State, Space, World*, 215.

is also a *stake*, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies [...].”²⁷

To return to the difficulty I have identified, in speaking of production of space Lefebvre seems to refer specifically only to “social space”, whereas “natural space” in this framework plays merely, as we said, the role of the “raw material” in the process of this production.²⁸ It is characteristic that at a certain instance he remarks that it looks like tautological to say that social space is a social product, placing here the epithet “social” in brackets.²⁹ On the other hand, however, he also wants to take distance from the idea, which indeed he characterizes as “ideology” – and we will see later the exact meaning in which he uses this term – of an initially apparently purely natural space, which at a certain point starts to get socialized.³⁰ This is why in the history of space he sketches, he refers to a “beginning”, a “prehistory of space” regarding which perhaps it is significant that he does not speak of “natural space” as such, but of “nature dominating social space”.³¹

Whatever is the difficulty in understanding this distinction between “social” and “natural” space in Lefebvre, I think that one can safely claim the following: what underlies his denial to speak of an initial purely natural space, which comes at a certain point to be occupied and comprehended, as well as transformed by society, is the second guideline that can be deduced from his thought regarding the approaching of the concept of space; and this guideline complements the first one. This consists in that it does not suffice to see space as something interacting with whatever it is filled with. We need to go further than this and question the idea of a something, an entity, awaiting to contain, to be occupied by contents with which it will interact. The category of *res extensa* is illusory, deceptive and disorienting as a basis to see space, but this not only because it implies the idea of its supposed externality,

²⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 142-3.

²⁸ This is not a clear point though. Cf., for instance, the contrasting interpretations of Dimendberg and Smith (Edward Dimendberg, “Henri Lefebvre on Abstract Space in *The Production of Public Space*, ed. A. Light, J. Smith. Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998, 20; and in the same volume, Neil Smith, “Antinomies of Space and Nature in Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*”, 53). In any case, I think that we can retain the comment of another scholar that Lefebvre criticizes the “idea of a social space created *ex nihilo*” (Mário Rui Martins, “The Theory of Social Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre”, in *Urban Political Economy and Social Theory*, ed. R. Forrest, J. Henderson, P. Williams, Aldershot: Gower, 1982), 173. Whatever are the problems of the concept of a “natural space” in Lefebvre’s work, what one can see clearly through it is that, as I implied above, this concept purports to sustain precisely this criticism.

²⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 26.

³⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 190.

³¹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 120.

or indifference to its contents; to put it this way, the problem in conceiving space in terms of a *res extensa* or a *tabula rasa* is not only with the second respective words, *extensa* or *rasa*, but with the first ones: *res* or *tabula*. For, in the framework of such a conception space is understood as a substance and not a relationship. Instead, Lefebvre asserts, “a space is not a thing, but a set of relations between things”.³² The concept of space, that is, refers to an “entity” of a relational nature, and here he clearly allies with Leibniz in his debate with Descartes, Spinoza and Newton.³³ He states that “what Leibniz means to say is that it is necessary for space to be *occupied*”.³⁴ And he goes on to specify this, so to speak, always-already occupation as a constitutive condition of space, by identifying its occupants: these are the living bodies.

For Lefebvre, the living body is “the core and foundation of space”,³⁵ and “there is an immediate relationship between [...] the body’s deployment in space and its occupation of space” since the body “*is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space”.³⁶ To put it thus, the movement of the living bodies does not exactly *take place in space*; it is *space that takes place* through this movement. And it is characteristic that here he discusses the example of the spider, which “spins the web as an extension of its body”.³⁷

His relevant analysis is not very extensive, it is sometimes difficult to understand as well as discontinuous. I will sum up the basic points I think that underlie his argument; to reformulate it, a fundamental ontological presupposition for the existence of space and for the comprehension of its concept are the living bodies – “not bodies in general, nor corporeality, but a specific body”, as he clarifies.³⁸ These bodies are characterized by the capability to move, to indicate direction by gestures, to leave traces, as well as to accumu-

³² Lefebvre, *The Production*, 83.

³³ See Schmid, *Henri Lefebvre*, 252-7.

³⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 169.

³⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 200.

³⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 170. We should note that here we have perhaps the most important point of convergence between Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty. As Schmid notes, although Lefebvre “had studied Merleau-Ponty intensively”, “did not disclose this relationship between his own concepts and [Merleau-Ponty’s] theory” (*Henri Lefebvre*, 305). One instance of the effort to articulate a critical dialogue between the two thinkers, is Eden Kinkaid, “Re-encountering Lefebvre: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Social Space”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38(1) (2020).

³⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 173.

³⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 170. As a scholar comments, here “Lefebvre makes both an ontological claim and establishes a material basis for the production of space” (Lynn Stewart, “Bodies, Visions and Spatial Politics”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13(5) (1995), 612).

late a surplus of energy before being discharged.³⁹ Above all, these bodies are constituted by,⁴⁰ and at the same time generate, duality. This is why he discusses the object and the image of the mirror, to conclude that “the mirror is an object in space which informs us about space, which speaks of space”.⁴¹

Thus, I suggest we could extrapolate from this analysis that space might owe its constitutive qualities, or perhaps underpinnings, to material, natural entities such as physical elements, dimensions, forms –Lefebvre speaks for example of “formal elements” of space such as the curved and straight lines or volume *versus* area;⁴² nevertheless, in the strict sense of the word there is no space if there are no entities of the kind of the living bodies. To put it a bit bluntly, and to return to his distinction between “social” and “natural space”, the very phrase “natural space” is problematic I think from Lefebvre’s standpoint if it allows for the acceptance of an “objective” existence of space –objective in the sense that we could think of it as something occupied only by, say, stones. This could be thought of perhaps as *nature* but not as *space* –and again it is telling that in many cases he does not use the phrase “natural space”, but the phrase “space-nature” (*espace-nature*).

Furthermore, the phrase “natural space” is additionally problematic insofar we speak of living human bodies. In this case, he seems to say, we could not speak of a “natural space”, with the problematic term here being not the second, space, but the first, natural. We should note that referring to the beginnings of the history of space, or its “pre-history”, we saw above, he speaks of a “biomorphic” and “anthropological” space;⁴³ there the relationship between space and the body is very close and direct, reminding perhaps one a bit of the spider.⁴⁴ However, even in this case it seems that, according to him, we could not speak of a purely *natural* space because the human body itself does not constitute such a space, for the conditions determining its movement are not purely natural either.

I cannot expand here on the effort of Lefebvre to bring forth the human body as an issue for theory. I’m just remarking that this, which is evident already in his earlier production, culminates in his writings succeeding the *Production of Space*, wherein he aims to articulate a theory of

³⁹ See especially Lefebvre, *The Production*, 170-1, 176-80.

⁴⁰ See especially Lefebvre, *The Production*, 175.

⁴¹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 186.

⁴² Lefebvre, *The Production*, 148.

⁴³ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 229.

⁴⁴ As he says, “space, along with the way it was measured and spoken of, still held up to all the members of a society an image and a living reflection of their own bodies” (*The Production*, 111).

“rhythmanalysis”.⁴⁵ And I’m adding briefly a few points: that, as a conclusion of the above remarks, for him clearly there is a history of the body indissolubly related to the history of space. However, within this history, the type and degree of closeness or immediacy of the relation between body and space dramatically changes. In fact, it pervades his whole project to investigate critically how this closeness is gradually lost, resulting to what Gregory calls the “decorporealization of space”.⁴⁶ And this issue stamps his critique to what he calls “abstract space” and he clearly connects to modern, capitalist and mainly “neo-capitalist”, society, that is the society developing in the 20th century.

The concept of “abstract space” will be the object of my discussion below, but here it suffices to say that this is a space where he detects a reduction adding to the reduction characterizing the Euclidean space; he asserts that it is “a space literally flattened out, confined to a surface, to a single plane”.⁴⁷ And in accordance to what has been noted above, this is a space not only matching, but also produced, secreted by, and at the same time generating, a reduction in the body itself, its reduction to the sense of seeing. Furthermore, this dual reduction, regarding both the space and the body, implies a relation between the two which is pervaded by abstraction, and is definitely mediated by signs and images, to the point that these “oust and supplant” materiality or thingness itself.⁴⁸ In effect, this process regarding the relation between body and space and the corresponding reduction, even “mutilation”, of both, is best illustrated in the image of a driver of a motor vehicle, where the body is reduced to an eye and space to a purely “visual field”.⁴⁹

The last point I want to make in this respect, which confirms the importance he ascribes to the issue of the body, is that for him the “reappropriation of the body”, which definitely means also the reappropriation of space, must become “a non-negotiable part of [the] agenda” of “any revolutionary project today”.⁵⁰ At the same time, it must be noted, such a project is nurtured by this mutilation of the body, since, as he says, the body “calls for revenge”;

⁴⁵ See Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004). Stuart Elden’s introduction in this work gives a comprehensive account of Lefebvre’s “rhythmanalytical project”. For accounts of Lefebvre’s theoretical elaborations on the topic of the body, see, among else, Stewart, “Bodies”- an article which points also to his convergences with other thinkers, such as Foucault; Neil Maycroft, “Henri Lefebvre: Alienation and the Ethics of Bodily Appropriation”, in *Marxism’s Ethical Thinkers*, ed. L. Wilde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁴⁶ Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 382-95.

⁴⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 313.

⁴⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 311.

⁴⁹ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 313.

⁵⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 166.

and this is most clearly manifest in the “space of leisure”, however “alienated and alienating”, “controlled and managed”,⁵¹ this might be. I will return to this point at the end of my presentation.

I now proceed to present briefly the third guideline I suggest we can draw from his thought regarding the approach of space: this is that space is not something external to time -so we return to what I noted above on the occasion of Augustine’s dictum. “Real knowledge of the production of space” “may be expected to rediscover time [...] in and through space”, states Lefebvre.⁵² As it has been aptly remarked, his whole discussion of space cannot be separated from his thinking of temporality, which precedes the former. Indeed, time is the issue that prevails in his theory of everyday life, and his project of a “rhythmanalysis” can be said to be a “contribution” to his attempt to “think space and time *differently*, and to think them *together*”.⁵³ Even more, perhaps one could speak of an evaluative prioritization of the issue of time in his thought, since he repeatedly remarks that time is the “greatest good of all goods”,⁵⁴ which however, as we will see immediately below, suffers highly within contemporary society.

Lefebvre illustrates the unity between space and time by giving examples drawn from nature, or natural space, returning several times to the most characteristic of them: the concentric rings of a tree trunk.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the major idea that one can draw from his relevant remarks is that there is a historically changing social time insofar there is a historically changing social space;⁵⁶ and that, if it can be deduced from what we have seen already that space is produced by social practices and at the same time underpins certain

⁵¹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 384, 383.

⁵² Lefebvre, *The Production*, 91; cf. his self-reflective statement: “I have tried to demonstrate that a social space is always an employment of time, and that time is the usage of space” (Henri Lefebvre and Claude Glayman, *Les temps des méprises* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 240).

⁵³ Elden, “Introduction”, ix; the scholar, here as well as in his monograph on Lefebvre, correctly puts in question the widespread interpretation that Lefebvre’s thinking on space came to somehow replace that of time (Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 169 and see more generally 169-211).

⁵⁴ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 95.

⁵⁵ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 175.

⁵⁶ In concluding his presentation of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of social space, Martins refers to the notion of distance as a characteristic example showing this production, hence also the sociohistorical changes regarding space and its “mental representations”. This is an illuminating example as well for the unity of space and time we are discussing here, because as he aptly notes, this notion “differs according to the social formation in which it is analysed. This difference stems from both a diverse notion of time and from a dissimilar rhythm of life” (Martins, “The Theory”, 184).

of their aspects and directions, a major stake here is a direction regarding time, its apprehension and its use. Thus, it is a fundamental aspect of his critique to the “abstract space” of modern society that here time “has vanished from social space. It is recorded solely on measuring instruments, on clocks”, having been subjected to the imperatives of the “economic space”.⁵⁷

By “vanishing” we can understand that this space “conceals” time,⁵⁸ it does not let it be shown. And this has various aspects: one, which is implicit in his remarks, and is rather undertheorized in his work, has to do with the problem of memory, since here space does not demonstrate the passage of time and supports forgetting. Another aspect is that it does not demonstrate time as something that underlies and propels the question of the use value, the meaning, of activities and things. With respect to this last point we should pay attention to his argument in support of the idea that even in the context of “abstract space” the unity of time and space does not disappear entirely, but can be seen in many actions, like that of buying a house. He says that when one buys a house, what she buys –notwithstanding the various signs with which this is invested by the promotional discourse on the part of the commodity forces, such as “signs of status” or “signs of happiness” – is ultimately “a daily schedule”, that is time; and, for him, this means that the logic of exchange value cannot prevail without a remainder, in other words use value does not disappear, and indeed its appearance goes hand in hand with the disclosure of time and its importance.⁵⁹ We will return to this point later.

2. “Abstract space” and politics

I hope that the guidelines I have drawn from Lefebvre's analysis as to the way which is appropriate to approach the concept of space already indicate that space is not something neutral above all because it is not something *politically* neutral or innocent.

But a clarification is necessary here: “space has no power in itself”, Lefebvre stresses,⁶⁰ and hence, we understand, it does not on its own possess a political power. Indeed, he believes that thinking space in such terms would fetishize it, and that – and *prima facie* paradoxically I would comment– this would eventually signify a return to conceiving space as something neutral.⁶¹ This shows that for him the gist of the matter is not just to oppose an idea of

⁵⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 95.

⁵⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 96.

⁵⁹ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 339.

⁶⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 358.

⁶¹ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 320.

space that likens it to a *tabula rasa*, but to recognize that the powerful writings it always-already carries are imprints of social practice; in other words, the neutrality of space to which one must object consists in its apprehension as something that could exist and operate before, and independently of, social practice. Therefore, to stay in the parallel with writing, space could be said to be like palimpsest where whatever is written always leaves traces and this is what empowers it to qualify, to condition the subsequent writings. If it is not politically neutral, then, this is because it is always -already socially laden, filled, written, and because politics cannot be carried out without such a writing, as we saw above in the excerpt referring to the presuppositions of the effectivity of ideologies.

I would like to give an example here. On several occasions Lefebvre discusses verticality, height, the straight line, and links them to masculinism, the militarist spirit, the will to power, as well the logic of visualization⁶² – and I’m adding in passing that these are properties he especially attributes to “abstract space”.⁶³ What he means is that, first, the social practices that have been reproducing these meanings could have never been carried out so to speak on the air, but they needed spatial underpinnings. He also means that these specific underpinnings – namely verticality, height, the straight line – do not carry in and by themselves, as if it were a physical property of their own, the power to support these specific meanings; they have got to obtain this power within the historical process. And, last, his idea is that, within this process, the meanings, as carried by these spatial elements, are not explicitly told. In ending his discussion of verticality, he states:

Nothing can be taken for granted in space, because what are involved are real or possible acts, and not mental states or more or less well-told stories. In produced space, acts reproduce ‘meanings’ even if no ‘one’ gives an account of them.⁶⁴

This last remark brings up the idea that space has an *ideological* character. But this, not only in the broad sense that it reproduces certain meanings, or particular ideologies; we have to take it in a stronger, and rather critical, sense that there is a concealment involved in the mode of this reproduction, serving a politically conservative function. That is, I’m using here, as Lefebvre himself by and large does, “ideology” – this so discussed, polysemous, as well as “abused”, as he stresses recurrently,⁶⁵ term of sociopolitical theory–

⁶² See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 144.

⁶³ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 285-7.

⁶⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 144.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 44.

in the Marxian sense; in this sense, the term denotes, as Lefebvre summarizes it, “any representation if it contributes either immediately or ‘mediately’ to the reproduction of the relations of production”,⁶⁶ having as a major mechanism mystification, transposition, concealing.

Thus, we should pay attention also to his statement:

That space signifies is incontestable. But what it signifies is dos and don'ts—and this brings us back to power. Power's message is invariably confused—deliberately so; dissimulation is necessary part of any message from power. Thus space indeed ‘speaks’ – but it does not tell all.⁶⁷

What we can draw from such passages is that, for Lefebvre, politics of and through space is *a fortiori* politics, exactly because it does not declare itself as such, which at the same time far from means that it is not imbued by ideology. On the contrary, if ideology is to carry out its political function in the service of the reproduction of the *status quo*, inasmuch as it contains a concealment, a displacement, then space and the way it “signifies” is more apt to implement this *modus operandi* of ideology.

But this ideological function of space does not concern only the mode in which various particular meanings are conveyed, or transmitted through it; it concerns in the first place the very conception of space itself, the meaning or understanding of space as transmitted through itself. Thus, we can return to the point made above that the “initial error” in this conception that Lefebvre identifies is something stronger than an error for him; what he underlines is that the conception of space as a container is linked to a “complex of illusions”, hence also to an ideological complex.⁶⁸

Behind this central for his whole enterprise position lies the connection he sees between this conception and “abstract space”, that is the pertinent to modern society stage in the history of space. At a certain point he asserts that there is “an analogical affinity” between “modern space” and the “space of the philosophical, and more specifically the Cartesian tradition”.⁶⁹

In trying to reconstruct his argument, which is not sufficiently elaborated and clear, I would say that it revolves around the following points:

First, the “representation of space” as a container entails that space is conceived as “neutral, objective, fixed, transparent, innocent or indifferent”;⁷⁰ and this conception in turn makes it possible to ascribe these properties also to the

⁶⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1976), 29.

⁶⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 142.

⁶⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 94.

⁶⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 200.

⁷⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 94.

intervention upon it, or to the “spatial practices” concerning it.⁷¹ But this is exactly the case regarding “abstract space”, where the spatial practices that have produced and reproduce it are carried out under the auspices, as well as the shield, of a technocratic discourse. In brief, space has anymore its specialists, its “doctors”, as he says ironically,⁷² all those he continually decries as the major agents of an ideology of space. These are mainly the urbanists and architects, and they are such agents exactly because they are far from understanding themselves as such. Those specialists, in brief, Lefebvre implies, draw their self-conception from the aforementioned conception of space.

Second, what is overlooked or concealed here is that “abstract space” is indeed a space similar or congenial to that of its theoretical representation, in the sense that it seems homogenized and isotropic; namely, it possesses the attributes we saw in the quotation where he speaks of space as conceived in terms of the category of *res extensa*. However, it is such, not by virtue of the supposed nature or essence of space, but because it has been produced as such. As a scholar puts it, Lefebvre means to say that “the Cartesian system of representation became ‘practically true’ in capitalism”,⁷³ and as Lefebvre adds, this system “over time became the stuff of ‘common sense’ and ‘culture’”.⁷⁴ Lefebvre says elsewhere:

If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be “purely” formal, the essence of rational abstraction, it is precisely because this space has already been occupied and planned, already the focus of past strategies, of which we cannot always find traces [...] There is an ideology of space. Why? Because space, which seems homogeneous, which appears given as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product.⁷⁵

⁷¹ I’m noting that in speaking of “representations of space” and “spatial practices” I’m referring to two terms of the famous triadic distinction he makes between the “moments of social space” (Lefebvre, *The Production*, 40), but I’m leaving this point here. Among the many efforts to account for this distinction, see Schmid, *Henri Lefebvre*, 266-312.

⁷² Lefebvre, *The Production*, 99.

⁷³ Łukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 152.

⁷⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 297. As Smith comments here, in the same vein with Stanek’s comment, “[i]ncluded in abstract space is the space that the populations of most Western societies take for granted, the space of infinite expansion [...] and emptiness [...] The space of Descartes and Newton became the space of capital, and vice versa” (Smith, “Antinomies”, 57).

⁷⁵ Lefebvre, “Reflections”, in *State, Space, World*, 170; cf. his statement: “Thus to look upon abstract space as homogeneous is to embrace a representation that takes the effect for the cause, and the goal for the reason why that goal is pursued” (Lefebvre, *The Production*, 287).

Besides, this is why he connects his analysis of “social space” as produced within contemporary society to what Marx says on “concrete abstractions” such as commodities and money.⁷⁶ Part of what he means in this respect is that the abstract character of this space is not only a matter of the intellect, of representations, but it exists in a real form within social practices.

Furthermore, and this adds to the “analogical affinity” that he has in mind, we have also the following point: according to him, a crucial implication of the conception of space as a container is not only its supposed externality to its contents, but also the supposed externality of these contents among themselves.⁷⁷ The idea of the container, to put it thus, underpins also the idea of its contents as isolated, self-contained items. But this again is a major issue on which he dwells in his analysis of “abstract space”: this is homogenized and at the same time “broken up”, fragmented. Here we have an only *prima facie* paradoxical co-existence of two “formally irreconcilable”⁷⁸ properties: homogenization and fragmentation. This co-existence is central to his understanding of neo-capitalist society as a whole, and of course also of the space pertinent to it, and Lefebvre returns many times, and in many writings, in the effort to resolve the problems involved in its analysis. On this, I will say more later.

A plausible and important question that arises at this point, is: do the above entail that Lefebvre's whole discussion regarding the ideological function of space, as well as its articulation with politics, is restricted to contemporary capitalist society? Does what we saw him saying on the “message of power”, which counts on “dissimulation” through space, hold solely for this society? Although his discussion, generally speaking, is far from meticulous in giving specifications of this kind, I think that all in all he definitely answers this question in the negative. However, there is the crucial qualification that this function and articulation holds much more, and for deeper reasons, in the capitalist and chiefly neo-capitalist society; in other words, this, in an unprecedented degree in history, *invisible* and *implicit, undeclared*, politics characterizes *this* specific society.

In order to probe into this crucial for his whole argument issue, we need first to go back to the meaning and the importance of the term “production” when it comes to space. This is not an innocent term, purporting to mean just that space gets shaped or transformed, but it is clearly a direct reference to Marx and his conception of production. With this conception Lefebvre is preoccupied in many regions of his thought,⁷⁹ trying to pinpoint its exact me-

⁷⁶ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 26-27.

⁷⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 91; see also 170, 308.

⁷⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 320.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the concept of production in the work under discussion, see especially Lefebvre, *The Production*, 68-77.

aning, and purporting to understand it in a sense broader than that of Marx, that is as production of material goods; in brief, he strives for an expansion of this concept, claiming that Marx himself gives rise to this. Thus, although he admits that there are differences between the production of goods *in* space and the production *of* space, he nevertheless thinks that it is legitimate and necessary to enlarge the concept of production; and he furthermore holds that this, not only does not deny the cardinal Marxian concept of the “mode of production”, but on the contrary it enriches that concept and poses the problems that this involves at a more total, global level.⁸⁰ Therefore, the “production of space” is a phrase that purports to imply the position that “space has a history that is linked to that of modes of production in Marx’s sense [...]”.⁸¹ And furthermore, it purports to insinuate something stronger: that it is necessary to proceed to this enlargement of the concept with respect to space, because within the history of the modes of production there is a break regarding the production of space.

Thus, he asserts: “The production of space is not new in itself [...] What is new is the global and total production of social space”;⁸² and this is why this production can anymore be “recognized”.⁸³ Besides, it is also for this reason why he connects the concept of social space to the way he understands the Marxian “concrete abstraction”; this concept has emerged for historical reasons, in parallel with the concept of labour, according to Marx’s analysis.⁸⁴

It is certain that this position about the historical break in the production of space underlies the other one: that the political significance and the ideological function of space are generalized and decisively reinforced in capitalism. And this is after all summed up in his assertion that “today, *more than ever*, the class struggle is inscribed in space”,⁸⁵ and has space as its stake; in another instance, he shows that, while not talking of a radically new phenomenon when he speaks of a politics of space, he definitely means to emphasize its growing significance: the “role” of space “is less and less neutral, more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end”.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ As he says, his theory does not forget “the problem of the possession and the management of the means of production”, and in general does not “abolish the concepts elaborated by Marx [...] nor his method”, but “transforms them and transfers them on a larger scale, on a different level” (Lefebvre, *Espace*, 83); cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 334.

⁸¹ Lefebvre, “Space and Mode of Production”, in *State, Space, World*, 217; cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 46.

⁸² Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 155; cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 412.

⁸³ Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product and Use Value”, in: *State, Space, World*, 187.

⁸⁴ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 100-101.

⁸⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 55, emphasis added.

⁸⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 411.

The argument that substantiates these positions is in brief that it is a specific characteristic of capitalism that space is instrumentalized on many levels,⁸⁷ to the effect of playing an active role in the reproduction of the relations of production. Indeed, Lefebvre poses explicitly his theory of the production of space in the service of the investigation of the question that haunts his overall thought: how could one explain the strength of capitalism,⁸⁸ notwithstanding the predictions of the founders of Marxism. We could see briefly the basic points of this argument.

First, within capitalism, space acquires a decisive importance for economy, the planning of which tends to become “spatial planning”.⁸⁹ This is why he underlines the need to elaborate a “political economy of space”. More concretely, space has come to play an important role among the forces of production. Lefebvre says that

[...] capitalism, and more generally development, have demonstrated that their survival depends on their being able to extend their reach to space in its entirety: to the *land* [...]; to the *underground* resources [...]; and lastly to what might be called the *above-ground* sphere.⁹⁰

And this extensive expansion, which indeed supersedes the limits of the planet, goes alongside the growing significance of “an economy of flow: the flow of energy, the flow of raw materials, the flow of labor, the flow of information, and so forth”.⁹¹ He also argues that space has become a means of production insofar it is used like a machine that can facilitate this economy of flows. An example he gives here is that of the city – which of course is not an accidental example, granted his repeated remark that generalized urbanization is the basic vehicle for the production of space in capitalism;⁹² besides, as I noted initially, the theorization of the city and the urban led him to open up the *problématique* of space. Thus, the city “centralizes creation”⁹³

⁸⁷ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 26.

⁸⁸ In fact, in one of his last texts, he writes that in his whole *oeuvre* he has “tried to continue [the] line of thought” which has been initiated by Rosa Luxemburg, that is he has tried “to answer not only how capitalism survives, but also how it is able to grow” (Henri Lefebvre, “Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics”, in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson, L. Groosberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 80.

⁸⁹ Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product”, in *State, Space, World*, 186.

⁹⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 325.

⁹¹ Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product”, in: *State, Space, World*, 186. I note in passing here that Lefebvre is considered to be one of the thinkers to have prefigured themes we currently discuss under the term “globalization”; see e.g. Elden, *Understanding*, 232.

⁹² See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 327.

⁹³ Lefebvre, *The Urban*, 117.

and hence it can be thought of as a means of production; in fact, it can be paralleled, up to a point, to a “vast machine, an automaton, capturing natural energies and consuming them productively”.⁹⁴ In the summarizing account of Schmid,

[i]n Lefebvre’s line of argument, space itself becomes a decisive aspect of the production process: the material arrangement and spatial organization of elements of the production process, the flow of materials and energy, the networks of transport and information are essential components of the productivity of this production process.⁹⁵

Furthermore, space becomes a source of profiting, of extracting surplus value, through real estate which “functions as a second sector, a circuit that runs parallel to that of industrial production”, a sector that “serves as a buffer” whenever the first one slows down.⁹⁶

All this process presupposes a “mobilization” of the land,⁹⁷ since “the immobile” –as we still call it –gets mobilized, which means that it becomes mobile wealth, swept away in the flux of exchanges [...].⁹⁸ “And subsequently this mobilization extends to the whole of space”.⁹⁹

It is absolutely clear that the motivating force behind this “mobilization” is the transformation of space into a commodity, the fact that it can and must be bought and sold, like the objects existing and moving within it, and like the labour power that produces them.

As commodity, space, finally, is also consumed, as manifested in the growing tourist industry – which Lefebvre discusses on many occasions, connecting it to the broader leisure industry. This industry goes along with that of constructions, expanding over spaces which previously were not yet occupied, and at the same time acting as a vehicle for urbanization.¹⁰⁰

One palpable effect of this overall process are “useless constructions and destructions”.¹⁰¹ Another one is an issue on which he insists in various writings, and he thinks it has not received due theoretical and political attention: that one should question the boasting of this society –chiefly in his own time, and not so much in ours, I would comment –that it is a society of material well-being and abundance. For, one should point out the “new shortages”

⁹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 345.

⁹⁵ Schmid, *Henri Lefebvre*, 413.

⁹⁶ Lefebvre, *The Urban*, 159-60.

⁹⁷ See Lefebvre, *The Production*, 335.

⁹⁸ Lefebvre, *Espace*, 97-8.

⁹⁹ Lefebvre, *Espace*, 79.

¹⁰⁰ See Lefebvre, *Espace*, 100.

¹⁰¹ Lefebvre, *Espace*, 75.

arising in it: shortages of natural “elements” such as air, water, light, which have got to “lose their naturalness” and “have increasingly to be produced”, as well as to “enter the exchange circuit”, that is become commodities. Lefebvre sees this phenomenon, which he finds blurred in terms of the common ecological discourse, as an outcome and indication of the process described earlier, because what characterizes specifically these “new shortages” is the fact that they

do not resemble the ancient scarcities, because their origin and their location within space are far more important than what happened with the ‘raw materials’ in past times. Less narrowly localized, they are positioned in the whole of space [...].

Besides, he remarks that one of these “new shortages” is the shortage of space itself, which is more visible than anywhere else in the urban centres.¹⁰²

In sum, Lefebvre means to say that the growing economic instrumentalization of space provides the capitalist mode of production with “new inspiration”¹⁰³ to get reproduced. This is one reason why space “makes it possible”, as he says, “for the economic to be integrated into the political”; in this way the reproduction of social relations of production is secured –social relations for which “[political power] is responsible”.¹⁰⁴

The theme of political power drives us to the other reason that substantiates the contemporary intensified relation between space and politics. Lefebvre discusses the state and its role in the production of space in a four volume work on the state, which he will publish a bit later. But also in *The Production of Space*, he speaks about the relation between the state and space, which “is becoming tighter” than ever in history and “more patent”;¹⁰⁵ and he points out that the production of space, though not carried out by “political power *per se*”,¹⁰⁶ is all the same implemented through its constant and multidimensional intervention, as it is evident, among else, in the “unity of codes, ordinances and institutions for construction and architecture, urbanism, and the development

¹⁰² Lefebvre, *Espace*, 76-7; cf. *The Production*, 330-1. It does not escape him -how could it be otherwise, since in modern times everybody speaks of it?- that another “new shortage” is that of time. Cf. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 52; and this is again an indication of the indissoluble link between space and time.

¹⁰³ Lefebvre, *The Urban*, 155.

¹⁰⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 321.

¹⁰⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 378.

¹⁰⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 321.

of territory”.¹⁰⁷ And, as he adds, “[t]he production of space is carried out with the state’s intervention, and the state naturally acts in accordance with the aims of capital” [...].¹⁰⁸

It could be said that here we have what happened in the Haussmanization of Paris, which Lefebvre castigates as an “authoritarian and brutal spatial practice”,¹⁰⁹ but on a much greater and complex scale.

This issue gets us back to the paradoxical co-existence of homogenization and fragmentation.

According to Lefebvre, “abstract space” is a homogenized space, or more accurately a space that *seems* homogeneous and is *homogenizing*, tends to homogeneity,¹¹⁰ to the extent that “it negates all differences, those that come from nature and history, as well as those that come from the body [...]”; being connected to a “strategy of the repetitive”,¹¹¹ it has as its exemplary manifestation the new cities and the suburbs of the old ones. It is absolutely clear that this homogenizing tendency of space is an outcome of its commodification, since here “all the elements are exchangeable and thus interchangeable”.¹¹² On the other hand, though, we can also speak of a fragmentation, a fracturing of space, and an aspect of this, again principally manifest outside the more or less preserved historical cores of the old cities, are the spaces specialized for functions which are separated among themselves; they constitute “ghetto[s] in space and ghetto[s] in time”.¹¹³

But, from his viewpoint, only a reductionist or mechanistic logic would see just a contradiction here, for he insistently points out that these two aspects, homogenization and fragmentation, are “mutually inherent”.¹¹⁴ In his work on the state he will say that

these aspects of capitalistic space are shaped both within the realm of the commodity, in which everything is equivalent, and within the realm of the State, in which everything is controlled.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ These are the summarizing words of Elden, *Understanding*, 238.

¹⁰⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 375.

¹⁰⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 308.

¹¹⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 308.

¹¹¹ Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product”, in *State, Space, World*, 189; cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 285-8.

¹¹² Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product”, in: *State, Space, World*, 192; cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 337.

¹¹³ Henri Lefebvre, “Right to the City”, in: *Writings on Cities* ed. E. Kofman, E. Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 144.

¹¹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 355. Stanek summarizes his argument in the following way: “homogeneity results in fragmentation, and fragmentation determines homogeneity” (Henri Lefebvre, 153).

¹¹⁵ Lefebvre, “Space and the State”, in *State, Space, World*, 233.

At the same time, he remarks that both these realms, that of the commodity and that of the state, generate fragmentation. On the one hand, the commodification of space entails that space is “sold off in ‘lots’ or ‘parcels’”,¹¹⁶ but this exactly presupposes, and also leads up to, its interchangeability, hence also its homogenization. Political power, on the other hand, as he says, “divides and separates in order to rule”,¹¹⁷ thus also in order to homogenize under its rule.

It is exactly this “disjointed unity”,¹¹⁸ as we shall see again below, that bears upon the issue that interests us here: the political and ideological instrumentalization of space. It lies, that is, behind his remark, which concerns specifically “abstract space”, that it is “the locus and medium of the generation (or production) of false consciousness”, i.e. ideology. And it is such because it is “simultaneously limpid and deceptive”.¹¹⁹ What he clearly means to say is that it is deceptive because it is, or rather it *seems*, limpid, and what he rather implies is that this spurious limpidity goes along with a spurious coherence; and this further means that it relies on the co-existence of homogenization and fragmentation.

Lefebvre indeed states that “abstract space”, among else, is “the means whereby” [contradictions] are smothered and replaced by an appearance of consistency. This gives space a function, practically speaking [...], which was formerly filled by ideology, and which is still to some extent felt to require an ideology.¹²⁰

These words, as well as several other formulations that can be found in his work, and above all his whole attack against the technocrats- “doctors of space”, show that he clearly attributes to “abstract space” a stronger ideological-political dimension and function compared to what happened in earlier stages of the history of space; and this is due to the fact that here holds *a fortiori* what I noted earlier: that the politics of space and through it is concealed, it does not profess and does not appear to be such .

I suggest that, more concretely, Lefebvre means to say that in contemporary society it is, on the one hand, more than ever necessary for the politics and the ideological role of space to be such, and, on the other, this politics and this role are more than ever *capable* of being such.

¹¹⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 334.

¹¹⁷ Lefebvre, “State and Mode of Production”, in *State, Space, World*, 215.

¹¹⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 388.

¹¹⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 310.

¹²⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 363-364.

The first point, that of *necessity*, is linked to the term “limpidity” that we have already encountered. This is central to the whole effort of Lefebvre to understand contemporary society, and it is summarized in an assertion that recurs in his writings: “The rule of this world is founded [...] on transparency”.¹²¹ Above all, this assertion underlies his urging for the need to update the concept of ideology, when he speaks of a novel kind of ideologies that “parade as ‘non -ideologies’”;¹²² as well as when he states that

[d]irect justification of the regime, of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, tends to discredit rather than sustain it. It has never convinced anybody. The justifications which work are those which in themselves are indirect, invisible or illegible.¹²³

We can elaborate upon this adding that space is a privileged locus and means to accomplish this mode of justification. For, as I have pointed out, although Lefebvre is not absolutely clear on this, he allows for the idea that space *in general* signifies in a way that is not direct, a way that “dissimulates” the “message of power”, and hence power itself.

The second point, of the enhanced *capacity* of “abstract space” to play this ideological role, is linked to fragmentation and its strange co-existence with homogeneity. Lefebvre alludes to this link between a seeming clarity and fragmentation in many cases, and perhaps more clearly in statements such as the following:

The illusory clarity of space is in the last analysis the illusory clarity of a power that may be glimpsed in the reality it governs, but which at the same time uses that reality as a veil. Such is the action of political power, which creates fragmentation and so controls it –which creates it, indeed, *in order to control it*.¹²⁴

The substantiation of this link needs further argumentation, which he himself does not provide. It can be said that it rests on the position that “abstract space” can signify more effectively in an indirect and power-concealing way, in a way wherein seemingly there is no message of power and, on behalf of it, to be carried; for, its fragmentation itself seems to spring from some supposed eternal and neutral rationality. As he says, [z]oning, for example, which is responsible –precisely– for fragmentation, break-up and separation under the umbrella of a bureaucratically decreed unity, is conflated with the

¹²¹ See e.g. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 389.

¹²² Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*, 72.

¹²³ Lefebvre, *The Survival*, 11.

¹²⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 320-321.

rational capacity to discriminate. [...] What is being covered up here is a moral and political order: the specific power that organizes these conditions, with its specific socio- economic allegiance, *seems* to flow directly from the Logos – that is, from a ‘consensual’ embrace of the rational.¹²⁵

Furthermore, this consecrated fragmentation reinforces the fact that space does not (have to) say the whole “message” or “story” of power, or even that there is not such a message or story to be told in order for it to secure its reproduction. It suffices for this power, and its homogenizing force, to control precisely this fragmentation; telling here are his words: “The basis and foundation of the ‘whole’ is dissociation and separation, maintained as such by the will above”.¹²⁶

In concluding, the political dimension of space under capitalism is highly corroborated due to its economic instrumentalization to the greatest extent ever reached in history; also, due to the fact that this instrumentalization is mediated by the intervention of the state; and last, and even more important, because *at the same time* that the economic-political control of space is growing, rendering it increasingly a medium and means for the reproduction of economic- political power, this control and this power can *also* be more than ever veiled as such, and can be veiled additionally through the space they produce. For, space, as produced in and by this society, “abstract space” that is, *is ascribed*, and *can play*, an ideological role to an extent that was not that necessary in the past, as well as a role it could not play with the same effectivity in the past.

Final remarks: could there be an absolute control of and *via* space?

Although the status and scope of Lefebvre's theorizing on space is not always clear, and definitely his theory leaves open various questions revolving mainly around the exact meaning of his central concept of “social space”, there is a fundamental position that pervades this theorizing and underlies this concept: space is not something like a stage upon which whatever constitutes the sociopolitical drama (relations, institutions, ideas) takes place, but constitutes in itself a part of this drama.

This position is tightly linked to the idea of the *production* of space, which Lefebvre sees as indispensable for a *critical* understanding of space, and, on his own grounds, *eo ipso*, for a critical understanding of society.

¹²⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 317.

¹²⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 366; cf. also his phrase: “a cohesion grounded in scission and disjointedness”, *The Production*, 308.

Therefore, I think that his effort to articulate the thinking on space with sociopolitical theory, indeed to say that “nothing”, hence also no such theory, “can avoid *trial by space*”,¹²⁷ is paramount for any theory that purports to criticize modern society. This is all the clearer in his analyses around “abstract space” and its multidimensional bonds to contemporary, “neo-capitalist” in Lefebvre’s vocabulary, society.

But the significance of his effort is greater granted his constant concern, manifest throughout the whole of his *oeuvre*, to demonstrate that there could not exist an absolute control to the point of securing the unhindered reproduction of the dominant social relations; in other words, to show that contradictions always arise which generate possibilities for their overturning.

With a few words on this issue I will close my presentation.

Lefebvre indeed insists that “abstract space” might be an instrument of effective control and exercise of power, but “it escapes in part from those who could make use of it”.¹²⁸ In the same vein, he speaks of “contradictions of space”, that “envelop historical [ones]”, “namely contradictions *in space*”, “and superimpose themselves upon them, carry them to a higher level”.¹²⁹

Principal among these spatial contradictions is one related to that seemingly paradoxical co-existence of homogenization and fragmentation. Thus, he notes that there is a “*pulverization of space* by private property, the demand for interchangeable fragments”, contradicting “*the scientific and technological (informational) capacity to treat space on ever more vast levels*”.¹³⁰

I will say a bit more on the other contradiction he highlights, which will bring us back to ideas and concerns behind his notion of “natural space”: the contradiction between space “appearing to be the milieu par excellence of quantification”, in a process stemming from its commodification and congruous to its homogenization, and the fact that all the same space contains qualities that cannot be erased.¹³¹ These qualities he seems to connect principally to “natural space”, the concept we saw that he wants to maintain in order to refer to a moving, retreating but inextinguishable limit and at the same an irreducible matrix of contradictions. Now we can see that it functions as such a matrix insofar it is a locus, a cradle of qualities, of properties that cannot be reduced to quantification.

¹²⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 416.

¹²⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 26.

¹²⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 334.

¹³⁰ Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product”, in *State, Space, World*, 189; cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 335.

¹³¹ Henri Lefebvre, “The Worldwide and the Planetary”, in *State, Space, World*, 204; cf. Lefebvre, *The Production*, 352-5.

An instance of this contradiction is manifest in the very reasons underpinning the gigantic growth of tourist industry. This, a major vehicle, as we saw, for the “colonization” of space,¹³² in fact ends up in a space split into two kinds of regions: regions exploited for the purpose of and by means of *production* (of consumer goods), and regions exploited for the purpose of and by means of the *consumption of space*.¹³³

This type of consumption stamps leisure spaces –with the Mediterranean region being a major case in point here. Lefebvre of course remarks what is an indubitable fact nowadays, much more than in his own time: that this entails first of all the destruction of places. On the other hand, though, he highlights the fact that this industry which is based upon selling experience of space, is nurtured by, and at the same time organizes and manipulates, a need which however in itself contradicts the spirit of the forces manipulating it; and this is why he detects in this need, so to speak, reasons for hope. This is a need for a certain “quality of space”, that is a space where one can experience qualities, connected to nature, and along with it to the “reinstatement of the body’s rights”.¹³⁴ This, for him, is a major indication that could substantiate the assertion: “And yet in the end the qualitative successfully resists resorption by the quantitative –just as use resists resorption by value”.¹³⁵

The discussion of these points prevails towards the closing of his work, where he means to demonstrate that there are contradictions arising from within “abstract space” itself, to the effect of rendering it a potential generator of a space different, more accurately a “differential space”; this is the label for space which he links to the overcoming of the capitalist relations of production.

Lefebvre does not tell us much about the characteristics of this space, admitting that his “project” does not provide “‘concrete’ proposals”, or rather that it cannot provide them granted the absence of “an active and massive intervention” on the part of those who would aspire to a different space.¹³⁶ He gives though a few significant, as well as vague, orienting lines, among which we could retain the following: that a presupposition, and outcome, of such a space would be to “accentuate differences” against homogenization and to “restore unity to what abstract space breaks up”; he also states that it would be a “collectively managed” space.¹³⁷

¹³² Lefebvre, *The Production*, 58.

¹³³ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 353.

¹³⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 353.

¹³⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 352.

¹³⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 419.

¹³⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production*, 52, 103.

In any case, additionally to the merits of his contribution identified above, we could also credit him with the following merit: at the same time he can point insightfully to the highly reinforced political significance of space within contemporary society, and the most effective politics of, and through, space this society can carry out, still his concern is to detect objective, palpable bases and resources within this society that a politics against it could be nurtured by.

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