

**Henri Lefebvre — Urbanization,
Space and Nature: Editors' Preface**

By Stefan Kipfer and Richard Milgrom

During his long life (from 1901 to 1991), the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre lived the “adventure of the century.”¹ His work, which includes in excess of 60 books and numerous other publications, spans much of 20th century philosophy. Lefebvre wrote on a wide range of subjects, including philosophy, literature, sociology, political theory, linguistics, and urban studies. He wrote in formats that vary from popular tomes on marxism to difficult, meandering reflections that escape conventional academic protocols. Lefebvre was one of the most important interpreters of marxism in France. Having introduced Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx’s early work into French debates, he developed his original heterodox marxism through a series of critical engagements with French phenomenology and existentialism, the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and Althusser, and the surrealist, dadaist, and situationist avant-gardes. His contributions include a critique of everyday life and studies of urbanization, space and the state. Lefebvre was also a proponent of left-communist politics. An often critical member of the French Communist Party from 1928 to his expulsion in 1958, Lefebvre became an important exponent within the French New Left as a professor in Nanterre (the hotbed of the 1968 student rebellion) and as a contributor to debates on self-management and dual power in the 1960s.

While Lefebvre received scant attention in Anglo-American debates on western marxism,² he has had a profound influence on the

¹Remi Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et L’Aventure du Siecle* (Paris: Metailie, 1988).

²But see Kanishka Goonewardena, “Henri Lefebvre and the Situationists: Marxism, Urbanism and the Spectacular Transformation of Everyday Life,”

development of “radical geography” in the English-speaking academic world. During the 1970s and 1980s, Lefebvre’s work, which had been rejected by the initiator of structuralist urban sociology (the early Manuel Castells), provided a key impetus for the neo-classical urban marxism developed by David Harvey. Since the late 1980s, and the publication of Edward Soja’s “postmodern geography,” Lefebvre has mostly been interpreted as a forerunner of poststructuralist and postcolonial currents in urban studies. In both cases, Lefebvre’s writings on cities, urbanization, and space have thus been a key source for the “spatial turn” in the social sciences, which informs all contributions in this symposium. Until recently, this resurgence of interest in Lefebvre in the Anglo-American world has stood in contrast to his intellectual marginalization elsewhere. As Klaus Ronneberger reports in this issue, Lefebvre’s work acquired “underground status” among the West German new left. But he largely disappeared from the radar screen after the 1970s and had only minimal influence on critical urbanism in that country. In France, too, Lefebvre was relegated to the margins of intellectual life after the early 1970s. While some of his urban concepts were taken up in French urbanist debates (albeit only in compromised form; see Dikeç and Gilbert, in this issue), Lefebvre remained unpopular in intellectual circles for refusing to follow the subsequent fashions of structuralism and the *nouvelle philosophie*.³ Now his books are being reissued in France and conferences are being organized on his work. Some even observe something of an intellectual turn to the sensibilities expressed in Lefebvre.⁴

The growing interest in Lefebvre does not in itself explain why one should bother with the complicated and systematically unsystematic works by Henri Lefebvre. According to Ronneberger (in this issue) this is in part because the shifts in everyday life after Fordism, which framed Lefebvre’s sensibilities in more than one respect, make it difficult to actualize his work for our times.⁵ In addition, the “Lefebvrian industry” that has developed in the Anglo-American world since the English language publication of *La Production de l’Espace* in 1991, has not

paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, New York City, March 2001.

³Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 27-31.

⁴Georges Labica, “Marxisme et poesie,” preface for Henri Lefebvre, *Metaphilosophie* (Paris: Syllepse, 1997), p. 6.

⁵See also Neil Brenner, “Beyond Fordist Marxism? Lefebvre’s State Theory in the Age of Neoliberalism,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, New York City, March, 2001.

necessarily clarified the current relevance of his work. Indeed, the idea of publishing a special issue on Henri Lefebvre in *CNS* is in part motivated by a certain frustration with current interpretations of Lefebvre in the Anglo-American world. Some efforts to read Lefebvre into “radical geography” — and particularly the postmodern versions of the latter — seem to have been “lost in transposition.”⁶ The difficulties of actualizing Lefebvre for our own times without reverting to eclecticism motivated some to use a close reading of Lefebvre’s writing on state, scale and territoriality to extend and reinvigorate a historical-geographical materialism.⁷ Others propose to reconstruct Lefebvre’s work to recover, with Antonio Gramsci, an open and integral urban marxist orientation (Kipfer, in this issue),⁸ or, more ambitiously, to develop a theoretical “blueprint” and analytical matrix for urban studies.⁹

If the difficulties of interpreting Lefebvre for our times are considerable, so is the task of making Lefebvre relevant for those concerned about eco-socialist projects. For in Lefebvre’s work — laced with contradictory and often problematic notions of nature — *explicit* ecological considerations were secondary.¹⁰ But in a context shaped by the original contributions of David Harvey and Mike Davis,¹¹ Lefebvre already appeared in the pages of *CNS* to frame urban contributions to ecology and left green politics. His thesis about the urbanization of society was used to suggest that the urban has become the predominant spatial form, experiential source and intellectual horizon mediating “society” and “nature.” In this light, Lefebvre’s notions of urbanization

⁶Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, “Lost in Transposition — Time, Space, and the City,” *Henri Lefebvre, Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁷Neil Brenner, “The Urban Question as a Scale Question: Reflections on Henri Lefebvre, Urban Theory and the Politics of Scale,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24, 2, 2000.

⁸See also, “The Relevance of Henri Lefebvre in the 1990s,” Notes for an Introduction to “Henri Lefebvre: Theoretical, Analytical, and Political Perspectives,” Panel at the meeting of Research Committee 21 of the International Sociological Association, World Congress of Sociology, Montreal, July 26 to August 1, 1998.

⁹Christian Schmid, *Stadt, Raum, und Gesellschaft: Henri Lefebvre und die Produktion des Raumes*, Doctoral Dissertation, Universitaet Zurich, Department of Geography, 2002, pp. 9, 12.

¹⁰See Janzen in this issue.

¹¹See David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) and Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan, 1998).

and space are central in efforts to avoid the theoretical nature-society dualism and to confront the fact that today, ecological modernization is increasingly refracted through the production of urban space.¹² In this issue, Janzen, whose theoretical contribution is based on empirical research on forest politics in British Columbia, both critiques and extends this line of argument. Rejecting Lefebvre's urban propositions, Janzen suggests nonetheless that his "problematic of the production of space provides a useful point of departure for thinking about space and nature in the politics of socialist ecology." This, he suggests, is possible because Lefebvre's notion of space is rooted in a broad conception of production/creation and provides a starting point to think about how social relationships with nature are not only produced through space but also articulated through multiple scales.

While the other papers in this issue all attempt to actualize Lefebvre for the purposes of urban research, they are not without ecological ramifications. Dikeç and Gilbert focus on a so far neglected contribution by Lefebvre to French urban policy. They suggest that Lefebvre's notion of "the right to the city" — which is closely connected to his idea of "the right to difference" — can be used productively to explore current debates about struggles of migrants against segregation and for citizenship rights. As Janzen and Milgrom point out, Lefebvre's conception of differential space is central also if one wants to read Lefebvre's work as a contribution to socialist ecology, for Lefebvre counterposes differential space to the ecologically destructive abstract space that is produced by state and capital and mediated through urbanization. In his discussion of Belgian architect Lucien Kroll, Milgrom underlines that the category of differential space can be used to assess the possible contribution of architectural projects

¹²On Lefebvre in this context, see Stefan Kipfer, Franz Hartmann, and Sara Marino, "Cities, Nature, and Socialism: Towards an Urban Agenda for Action and Research," and Erik Swyngedouw, "The City as Hybrid: On Nature, Society and Cyborg Urbanization," both appeared in *CNS*, 7, 2, 1996; Roger Keil and John Graham, "Reasserting Nature: Constructing Urban Environments after Fordism," in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1998). On critical urban ecology and/or the problem of ecological modernization through urbanization, see the contributions by Jennifer Wolch, Ute Lehrer and Richard Milgrom, Mike Davis, Ludwig Trepl and Thomas Jahn, Joan Martinez Alier, and Jouni Haekli in *CNS*, 7, 2, 1996; James Dickinson in *CNS* 7, 3, 1996; and Ted Schrecker in *CNS*, 7, 4, 1996.

to sustainable urban futures.¹³ Using differential space along ecological lines is plausible because it grows out of Lefebvre's festive, "Dionysian" sensibilities.¹⁴ In contrast to the scientist, technocratic, productivist and rationalist marxisms Lefebvre criticized, his Dionysian marxism remains open to ecological concerns. In this sense, Lefebvre's heterodox orientation remains not only an important source for a renewal of urban marxism but a key reference point to re-work socialist ecology along urban and spatial lines.

We would like to acknowledge the numerous people that made this special issue possible.

Ideas for this project were first generated in discussions among Christian Schmid, Neil Brenner, Stefan Kipfer, and Roger Keil during the annual meeting of Research Committee 21 of the International Sociological Association in Berlin, July 1997. Further explorations were carried out by Elizabeth Lebas, Julie-Anne Boudreau, Nathan Sayre, Milgrom and Kipfer during and after a panel on Henri Lefebvre at the World Congress of Sociology in Montreal, July 1998. The papers by Janzen, Kipfer, and Milgrom were first presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in New York, March 2001. Thanks to Neil Brenner, Christian Schmid, Eleonore Kofman, Rob Shields, and Kanishka Goonewardena for contributing papers and organizing the session. We hope to be able to publish their contributions in future issues of *CNS*. Ideas were finally fleshed out at "Rhubarb Pie," a "salon" organized by the Toronto Editorial Group in Toronto, May, 2001. The event was organized by Roger Keil and Harriet Friedmann and moderated by Sue Ruddick; at this time Dikeç and Gilbert's paper was first presented. We are grateful to Neil Brenner for translating the original German version of Klaus Ronneberger's contribution to this issue. Thanks to Barbara Laurence and the reviewers for the insightful comments and editorial assistance that made this special issue possible.

¹³See also Richard Milgrom, "Participatory Design, Differential Space and the Production of Sustainable Cities," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Research Committee 21 of the International Sociological Association, World Congress of Sociology, *op. cit.*

¹⁴Andy Merrifield, "Henri Lefebvre: socialist in space," in Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Thinking Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).