



The Urban Revolution

Foreword by Neil Smith
Translated by Robert Bononno

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The Urban Revolution Henri Lefebvre , Robert Bononno (Translator) , Neil Smith (Foreword by) Originally published in 1970, *The Urban Revolution* marked Henri Lefebvre's first sustained critique of urban society, a work in which he pioneered the use of semiotic, structuralist, and poststructuralist methodologies in analyzing the development of the urban environment. Although it is widely considered a foundational book in contemporary thinking about the city, *The Urban Revolution* has never been translated into English—until now. This first English edition, deftly translated by Robert Bononno, makes available to a broad audience Lefebvre's sophisticated insights into the urban dimensions of modern life. Lefebvre begins with the premise that the total urbanization of society is an inevitable process that demands of its critics new interpretive and perceptual approaches that recognize the urban as a complex field of inquiry. Dismissive of cold, modernist visions of the city, particularly those embodied by rationalist architects and urban planners like Le Corbusier, Lefebvre instead articulates the lived experiences of individual inhabitants of the city. In contrast to the ideology of urbanism and its reliance on commodification and bureaucratization—the capitalist logic of market and state—Lefebvre conceives of an urban utopia characterized by self-determination, individual creativity, and authentic social relationships. A brilliantly conceived and theoretically rigorous investigation into the realities and possibilities of urban space, *The Urban Revolution* remains an essential analysis of and guide to the nature of the city. Henri Lefebvre (d. 1991) was one of the most significant European thinkers of the twentieth century. His many books include *The Production of Space* (1991), *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1994), *Introduction to Modernity* (1995), and *Writings on Cities* (1995). Robert Bononno is a full-time translator who lives in New York. His recent translations include *The Singular Objects of Architecture* by Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel (Minnesota, 2002) and *Cyberculture* by Pierre Lévy (Minnesota, 2001).

The Urban Revolution Details

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From Reader Review The Urban Revolution for online ebook

Jeremy says

I really wanted to enjoy this book or find it enlightening in some way as I explore a career in Urban Planning. Unfortunately, I simply found it way too philosophical to really understand what Lefebvre was talking about most of the time. Lefebvre's philosophies of urbanism underpin many of the theories I am currently learning but I just really found this text extremely difficult to see those philosophies as they were presented here.

Irina says

The fourth star is only for being important.

Andrew says

A good intro to Lefebvre. Some of the writing is obscure. I still don't know what a "blind field" is, seems unnecessary to put that chapter (2) so early in the work. But I am sure someone has built their career on unpacking that concept, accurately or not. I recommend Chapters 1, 3 and 4.

Mills College Library says

307.76 L489 2003

Sovatha says

The book deconstructs the myths and legends of urban society and explains some of the major concepts such as urbanization and urbanism. The understanding of these important concepts should be a must read for anyone doing urban research.

Sencer Turunç says

Kitap kent sorunsalını ele alıyor ve çerçeveselendiriyor. Bunu yaparken, bu sorunsalın tam olarak içindeki insanların sessizliğini de sorguluyor. İnsanlar, özlemleri hakkında biçimsiz miraslanmalardan fazlasını yapamıyorlar. Bu tuhaf bir durum...

Bu sorunsalın ele alınmasında, pratik aklın ötesinde araçların iye koyulması gerekmektedir. Sadece teknik yaklaşımlar bu sorunsalı daha berbat bir hale getirmektedir. Böyle olduğunda, kentsel söylemin merkezinde

yar??an bir vasatl?k bulunmaktad?r.

Di?er taraftan, kentsel i?leyi?in ger?ekle?ti?i zamanda olup biten bir a??nma, öl?p dirilme söz konusu oldu?u için insan?n her?eyi bozan, kirleten, mahveden bir canl? olmas?n?n neden oldu?u tiksinti hafifliyor...

Alix says

The Urban Revolution offers both an account of the way that the urban dominates the organization of life and production beyond cities themselves, and a methodology for studying this process. This was not the easiest read and it doesn't subscribe to the norms of an academic text. However, the basic insight that the urban goes beyond the city itself is easy enough to grasp.

Julian Hartman says

Dense.

Andrea says

Lefebvre...a great deal of difficult high-philosophy meandering that you plough through and I confess I put this book down three times before finally finishing it. But finish it I did, and thing with Lefebvre is, the gems of insight you find here and there are worth it. I think. But I can't always follow how he gets there, and I've decided that it isn't so important.

Neil Smith's intro does a great job of situating Lefebvre in the intellectual ferment of France post WWI and WWII -- along with his history as a resistance fighter. He notes the critiques of one of Lefebvre's primary arguments -- that urbanization has replaced industrialization as the 'motor of capital accumulation' (xviii) The connection between these, however, is clearly a key one, and not fully thought out here by Lefebvre -- or indeed anywhere. Smith seems to have agreed with me as well regarding the meandering, judging from his final caveats about style and content.

So, to focus on the insights: Society has been completely urbanized, where urban society is that which 'results from industrialization, which is a process of domination that absorbs agricultural production' (2). Perhaps this is not entirely global, but close.

He has a lovely thing about streets -- that sort of exemplifies him thinking out loud:

Revolutionary events generally take place in the street. Doesn't this show that disorder of the street engenders anotehr kind of order? The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become 'savage' and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls.

Against the street. A meeting place? Maybe, but such meetings are superficial. In the street, we merely brush shoulders with others, we don't interact with them. It's the 'we' that's important. The street prevents the constitution of a group, as subject; it is populated by a congeries of

people in search of...of what exactly? (19)

This chapter is a series of 'for' and 'against'. There is another nice phrase on monuments:

Monuments project onto the land a conception of the world, whereas the city projected (and continues to project) social life (globality)...monuments embody a sense of transcendence, a sense of being *elsewhere*. They have always been u-topic. Throughout their height and depth, along a dimension that was alien to urban trajectories, they proclaimed duty, power, knowledge, joy, hope. (22)

Another insight on the conflicts of the industrial city created by its spatiality:

Several *logics* meet head-on and sometimes clash: the logic of commodities (stretched so far as to attempt to organize production on the basis of consumption), the logic of the state and the law, the organization of space (town and country planning and urbanism), the logic of the object, of daily life, language, information, communication. Because each logic wants to be restrictive and complete, eliminating anything that is felt to be unsuitable, claiming to govern the remainder of the world, it becomes an empty tautology. In this way, communication only transmits the communicable. But all these logics and all these tautologies confront one another at some point. They share a common space: the logic of surplus value. The city, or what remains of it or what it will become, is better suited than it has ever been before for the accumulation of capital; that is, the accumulation, realization, and distribution of surplus value (35).

Here a definition of the urban that I love -- yet that fails completely to describe many an urban area, like L.A. for example

The urban is defined as the place where people walk around, find themselves standing before and inside piles of objects, experience the intertwining of the threads of their activities until they become unrecognizable, entangle situations in such a way that they engender unexpected situations (39).

This is the irrepressible nature of it:

In spite of any efforts at homogenization through technology, in spite of the constitution of arbitrary isotopies, that is, separation and segregation, no urban place is identical to another the urban is a highly complex field of tensions, a virtuality, a possible-impossible that attracts the accomplished, an ever-renewed and always demanding presence-absence. Blindness consists in the fact that we cannot see the shape of the urban, the vectors and tensions inherent in this field, its logic and dialectic movement, its immanent demands. We see only things, operations, objects...(40)

In opposition to a beautiful complexity:

Separation and segregation break this relationship [in which difference thrives]. They constitute a totalitarian order, whose strategic goal is to break down concrete totality, to break the urban.

Segregation complicates and destroys complexity (133)

Thus L.A. may be a city, even one striving for complexity, yet it is struggling against great odds to be urban, to contain difference. I think maybe that this explains a few things on the level of feeling really, I am still trying to get my head around it.

Theres this lovely sentence:

Urban reform, which would clear the soil of the servitude that results from private property (and consequently from speculation), already has a revolutionary component...The period of urban revolutions has begun (43).

Perhaps my favourite thing in the whole book is unexpectedly and unaccountably drawn from the philosophy of Heidegger (which I find so compromised) and the poetry of Holderlin (which I find fairly sickly mawkish).

The human being cannot build and dwell, that is to say, possess a dwelling in which he lives, without also possessing something more (or less) than himself: his relation to the possible and the imaginary...The relation resides in the dwelling and in habiting...A home and language are two complementary aspects of the human being'...the 'human being' cannot do anything but inhabit as poet. If we do not provide him with (as an offering and a gift) the possibility of inhabiting poetically or of inventing a poetry, he will create it as best he can. (82)

I find this an amazing way to think about the meaning of home, how we try to shape and craft it to suit ourselves no matter our circumstances. I struggle to put all of these things together of course, but relish them individually. And then put them together as I want, which perhaps is no bad thing.

From power over home to power over cities:

The working class never had any space other than that of its expropriation, its deportation: segregation.

...there is a remarkable isotopy in the spaces created by state rationalism: long straight lines, broad avenues, voids, empty perspectives, an occupation of the soil that makes a clean break with its antecedents, without regard for wither the rights and interests of the lower classes or cost (128).

As a novelist I like this idea of

...u-topia, the non-place, the place for that which doesn't occur, for that which has no place of its own, that is always elsewhere? On a map of Paris (the so-called Turgot map of approximately 1735), u-topia can be neither read nor seen, and yet it is there in all its glory. It is where the gaze that overlooks the large city is situated, a vaguely determined place, but one that is carefully conceived and imagined (imaged), a place of consciousness; that is, a consciousness of totality. In general, this place, imagined and real, is found near the borders of verticality, the dimension of desire, power, and thought. Sometimes it is found deep within the subterranean city imagined by the novelist or poet, the underside of the city given over to conspiracy and crime. U-topia combines near and distant orders (129-30).

I mean, what is he really trying to say there, academically speaking? Hell if I know, but it is awesome and makes me think great things.

You get to chapter 8 and there's loads of stuff, though when he says he's provided the conceptual tools for it all you may, like me, wonder when exactly that happened. But 8 is cool. Keep reading until you get there.

There are several urbanisms: the urbanism of humanists, of developers, of the state and its technocrats. the first group proposes abstract utopias; the second sells urbanism--that is, happiness, a lifestyle, a certain social standing. The activity of the last group dissociates, like the activity of the state, into will and representation, institutions and ideologies (151)

The deployment of the world of commodities now affects not only objects but their containers, it is no longer limited to content, to objects in space. More recently, space itself has begun to be bought and sold. Not the earth, the soil, but *social space*, produced as such, with this purpose, this finality (so to speak). Space is no longer only an indifferent medium, the sum of places where surplus value is created, realized, and distributed. It becomes the product of social labor, the very general object of production, and consequently of the formation of surplus value. This is how production becomes social within the very framework of neocapitalism.

Here's where he argues that the nature of production has changed:

Capitalism, to ensure its survival, took the initiative in this. The strategy goes far beyond simply selling space, bit by bit. not only does it incorporate space in the production of surplus value, it attempts to completely reorganize production as something subordinate to the centers of information and decision making (155)

He argues that urbanism is not objective, but incorporates a class strategy. Today's urbanism 'lives off the compromise between neoliberalism (which participates in planning and in activities that are referred to as 'voluntary' or 'consensual') and neo-dirigisme (which leaves a field open for 'free enterprise')' (158). He discusses to some extent real estate's function as a second circuit of capital parallel to that of industrial production, a buffer where capital can go in case of depression. And then, of course, he argues that capital shifts entirely, 'It can even happen that real-estate speculation becomes the principle source for the formation of capital, that is, the realization of surplus value' (160). But he doesn't look in any depth at how this surplus value is actually created in a Marxist understanding -- you have to look to Harvey for that. But he sees today's urbanism as a shutting down of possibilities, a reduction to a society of controlled consumption, a repressive space (164).

Andrew says

Writing in the heady days of 1970, Lefebvre was making an impressive contribution to the urban imagination. By rejecting the market-driven and state-driven urbanism of the official account of the city,

while also rejecting mainline French Marxist interpretations as structuralist obfuscation, he was pushing into new terrain.

But, unfortunately, I have to conclude that a lot of his recommendations have been gleefully co-opted by the neoliberal ideologues-- something you get the sense he was probably terrified would happen. Still, as a program for how to do urban studies, this remains an impressive if rather primitive step towards something interesting. He's still bogged down in a lot of the godawful structuralism, and, of course, being a French intellectual, he writes like a rabbit chasing a carrot, but there's still something valuable to be gleaned here.

Katherine says

A must-read for anyone who thinks spatially, or wants to learn about the importance of space in the city. Lefebvre is stellar and hopeful. His concept of habiting (an idea he later expands upon to call lived space) is so necessary.
