relevant aspects of the new technology? Or when, as in Barman’s work, valuation of an organization’s social impact produces not a number but a binary yes/no, are we still talking about quantification? Maybe not, and yet the process of producing that binary seems quite similar to that of calculating the social return on investment.

Following Barman, then, we see promise in distinguishing more explicitly among the intended uses of numbers—their “communicative goals” (or, we would add, “performative goals”). Law school rankings have both an explicit purpose and an intended audience; these shape the process of quantification and its effects. So do human rights indicators, and CBO scores, and activity trackers. Though numbers in the wild may certainly be used in ways their creators never anticipated, clearer and more explicit attention to the purposes of both producers and consumers would help us think more clearly about variation in the quantification process across contexts.

There is also plenty of room for more comparative work that explores how numbers are produced (the same number in different organizational or social contexts, or different numbers in similar contexts) and on when and how they have effects (including comparisons of failure and success, as well as variation across successful cases). And there is certainly more space for synthetic work and theory to give us a common way of talking about these diverse phenomena and to build insights across a broad range of quantification processes. The qualitative study of quantification may, at the moment, be producing a significant body of new work. But for producing a coherent sociology of quantification, we have a long way to go.

**References**


Who Owns Lefebvre? The Forgotten Sociological Contribution to the New Urban Sociology

MARK GOTTDIENER

University at Buffalo-SUNY

mgott@buffalo.edu

“Edward W. Soja, Fredric Jameson and Mark Gottdiener played a key role in introducing Lefebvre’s thinking about space into the United States” (Trebitsch 2005:xxiv).

Who owns the intellectual commodity “Henri Lefebvre”? I ask this question because of the disconcerting way his work has been disseminated, absorbed, and commented on in the Anglophone sphere of academia. He is hardly mentioned in established social science. He has been called a critical geographer or a Marxist philosopher, but he was all his life a professional

sociologist who once was the chair of the department at Nanterre. With rare exceptions, U.S. sociologists ignore him. As geographers discovered him, beginning with David Harvey in the 1970s, the few members of that discipline interested in critical urban thought entered the vacuum and began filling it in earnest by the 1990s after his books appeared in English translation. Before that time, there were only one or two sociologists who were familiar with Lefebvre’s work in French and published commentaries on it.¹

Now, urbanists can easily get the impression that American and British geographers own Lefebvre because they cite sociologists so infrequently that it appears something like a disciplinary conspiracy of silence.² A select group of geographers has even arrogantly announced that they form an “LA School” based on Lefebvrian insights that replaces the sociological approach of the 1930s Chicago School, as if urban sociologists writing since the 1930s who have contributed research that progresses beyond and abandons the Chicago School tradition did not even exist (Gottdiener 2002). Most ironically, their writings on the city of Los Angeles as an ideal type of the contemporary metropolis are clearly sociological in content.

Or, perhaps Stuart Elden, an English political scientist, believes he owns Lefebvre. He mentions many scholars in the preface to the book at hand, Lefebvre’s Marxist Thought and the City, but fails to cite sociologists. He certainly thinks of himself as some kind of authority, because he doesn’t just cite Lefebvrian academic research. He tells the reader definitively what books are important to read in a select list, leaving many other authors out. Furthermore, most of his references to others are ones from the twenty-first century, giving the impression that Lefebvrian scholarship is newly arrived on the academic scene. While this is false, translations into English of Lefebvre’s work published recently may account for this misconception. Lefebvre’s urban oeuvre of the 1960s and early 1970s has appeared now in translation because of the University of Minnesota Press. I applaud this project and am most pleased to see that this excellent translation of La pensée Marxiste et la ville is finally in print. Furthermore, this book, ignored by urban sociologists, is critically important to that field precisely because of the way its content about city development under capitalism and urban social problems is so clearly articulated.³

Reading the first pages of Marxist Thought and the City, for a sociologist, is something of a revelation. Lefebvre is the only contemporary Marxist urbanist from France worth knowing (but see the urban sociologist Raymond Ledrut [1973]). Castells’s early essays critique Lefebvre and, especially, have specified a better way of theorizing research on strictly “urban” politics than the currently popular Lefebvrian approach of “the right to the city”; see Gottdiener (1985), also Pickvance (op. cit.) and other work inspired by Castells’s approach to urban social movements and the phenomenon of collective consumption, however more powerful has been Lefebvre’s argument about the “production of space.”

¹ While hardly commented on, Manuel Castells’s first English-language book (1977) is actually a rejoinder to Lefebvre’s books published in the late 1960s from an Althusserian perspective. Chris Pickvance (1976) was the sociologist who provided the first translations of the new French critical urbanists before Harvey; also see Gottdiener (1985). Other important and early Lefebvrian-inspired works by sociologists include Gottdiener and Feagin (1988) as well as several published articles on “the new urban sociology,” as the critical approach to urbanism, inspired by the French, was known (Walton 1993).

² As an example, in Merrifield’s (2006) book on Lefebvre, he makes the absurd claim (p. 102) that David Harvey’s brief “cameo” of Lefebvre (1977) alone “brought Lefebvre to the attention of Anglophone audiences” without reference to other writers who did so earlier (Pickvance 1976) or in more detail during the 1980s (see Trebitsch 2005). In fact, with its preface by David Harvey and subsequent glorification of his work, Merrifield’s text clearly disqualifies itself from being a “critical” contribution.

Geographers, like Harvey, ignore Castells and create the impression that Lefebvre is the only contemporary Marxist urbanist from France worth knowing (but see the urban sociologist Raymond Ledrut [1973]). Castells’s early essays critique Lefebvre and, especially, have specified a better way of theorizing research on strictly “urban” politics than the currently popular Lefebvrian approach of “the right to the city”; see Gottdiener (1985), also Pickvance (op. cit.) and other work inspired by Castells’s approach to urban social movements and the phenomenon of collective consumption, however more powerful has been Lefebvre’s argument about the “production of space.”

³ For another useful sociological text by Lefebvre, see his The Sociology of Karl Marx (1968).
English cities. Engels documents that, under capitalism, the city grows in density as population is stripped from the rural areas by offering wage labor. In turn, all manner of social problems emerge: the lack of affordable housing, squalid rental housing, children and adults reduced to begging in the street (fondly thought of by the Danish poet Hans Christian Andersen as “the little match girl”), public health crises due to sorrowful sanitation, and the brutal effects on people, such as urban isolation amid the crowd (a foreshadowing of Simmel), the popularity of alcohol leading to public drunkenness, and the failure of the social fabric to protect the family.

Indeed, Engels’s urban field research uncovers the pathologies that are still with us to this day: a veritable curriculum of social ills found in sociology undergraduate courses. However, as Lefebvre brilliantly points out, Engels linked all of these negative effects to the larger context, to the harnessing by capitalism of the industrial “revolution” and its machinery for acquiring wealth through the exploitation of the urban working class. It is precisely the way Engels ties the micro and macro levels together through systemic thinking that Marx would later call “modes of production” and “political economy” that makes this book a better representation of sociological reasoning than most studies of urban problems today.

Lefebvre’s second chapter, “The City and the Division of Labor,” is really about so much more. It is a primer on Marx’s early thinking about capitalism that ultimately went into his Capital (1967). Rather than a commentary on the division of labor, it is about the utter transformation of feudal society by capitalism, piece by piece, spatially organized by monetary exchange in the market and production in the factory. Under the logic of capital, the noble’s estate becomes real estate and is stripped of any connection to inheritance or historical tradition. Serfs become workers, free from bondage to the aristocracy but bounded by their ability to sell their bodies for a wage in the “Satanic mills” of industry. The home becomes “a cave,” “a mortuary,” rented out not by nobles, but by “landlords” who can evict residents at any time for failure to pay rent. The once-free city of guilds and tradespeople, as pointed out by Weber (1966), becomes nothing more than the space where both capital and labor are concentrated. Density’s sole purpose becomes profit. As Lefebvre explains:

The categories of population, classes, and class segments do not know that they are participating in the production of surplus value, in its realization, its distribution. They continue to see themselves as distinct; the worker believes he received the price of his labor (salary), the owner withdraws the rent from the ground that belongs to him, and the capitalist the fruit (profit) of his productive capital. (p. 24)

Thus, the city, as a spatial form, filled to the brim with the content of capitalism, becomes the spatial engine organizing historical transformation. At the same time, pieces of this new mode of production become a puzzle in the urban milieu that alienates one from the other both by illusion (through culture or ideology) and reality operating simultaneously at the street level. For Lefebvre, the latter aspect shows the influence on Marx by Engels, especially when Marx turns to concrete examples of everyday life under capitalism. Nevertheless, Lefebvre points out that Marx turns away from field research examples to focus his work on the phenomenon of capitalist ideology.

At this point in the narrative, the core imperfection of this book becomes absolutely apparent. There are, in fact, two books here. On the one hand, Lefebvre has been working on a series of publications about urbanism that, ultimately, he believed transcended the contradictions of Marx’s historical materialism. This project culminates, in 1974 (1991), with his most influential writing on the subject, La production de l’espace. On the other hand, Lefebvre revered both Marx and Engels and sought to explain the concepts of Marxism yet again (he did this several times in his books), only this time by relating them to his work on urbanism. Because Marx wrote very little on the city and, as this book shows, principally used the contradiction between the country and the city as a means of explaining the emergence of capitalism from feudalism,
Lefebvre is often left with little to say about Marxism and urbanism in each chapter, especially when he deals with hegemonic capitalism in the industrial city. This is why he elevated Engels’s writings on the city as being more pertinent. For this reason, this chapter’s narrative devolves into fragments on various aspects of Marxism—ideology as an impediment to the scientific analysis of capitalism, that is, historical materialism, and then the first examples of Lefebvre’s tour through the entire corpus of Marx/Engels writings establishing their revolutionary political agenda through critiques of other socialists. This survey of writings is continued in the remaining chapters of the book. However, these two separate interests never meld, and the reader is quite often left wondering where exactly the author is going in his narrative.

While the working class is famously the “subject” of history for Marx, Lefebvre instructs the reader that the city is the “subject” of capitalist socio-spatial development in the transcendence of feudalism as a mode of production. In Lefebvre’s most mature formulation of this observation, in The Production of Space, each mode of production creates and correlates with a particular urban form. The best understanding of why Lefebvre treats space as a “force of production” follows from this foundational insight (Gottdiener 1985).

In Chapter Two, this yet-undeveloped thesis is focused specifically on capitalism. In Chapter Three, Lefebvre turns his attention to Marx’s magnum opus, Capital. Here Lefebvre generalizes the relation between mode of production and urban form as he discusses Marx’s use of political economy to critique the analysis of capitalism. Commenting for the first time in this book on the most important Marxian concepts of “relations of production,” the “reproduction of the relations of production,” the evolution of modes of production as historical formations—first the Asiatic, then the feudal, and, penultimately before socialism, capitalism—Lefebvre explains what Marx meant by “political economy.” All aspects of capitalism previously discussed by Marx become generalized in Capital. According to Lefebvre, this movement from the particular to things in general—capital in general, labor in general, rent in general—reveals the meaning behind Marx’s subtitle of Capital, that is, as a Critique of Political Economy, because that discipline, as practiced by others, particularizes phenomena and, thereby, fails to understand that economic relations are social relations and economic facts are actually social facts or social constructions produced by those same social relations.

Despite providing both insights into Marx’s thought and ideas that were later to become Lefebvre’s own contributions to Marxism and urbanism, this chapter is the weakest in the book. Lefebvre’s uncharacteristically verbose writing here lacks clarity. The confusion produced by his writing two books instead of one becomes more evident. Although at the beginning it seems he will go on to explain Capital and its contribution to further ideas about the city, he gets bogged down by wrestling with how Marx worked out certain dilemmas in the lead-up to writing that book. Lefebvre’s turgid musings regarding how Marx struggled dialectically with some conflicting concepts, such as “town/country,” the general versus the particular, subject versus system, and the theory of historical materialism, sound as if Lefebvre is thinking out loud. Pages into the chapter the reader can be forgiven for failing to understand what Lefebvre is writing about. We are also left wanting more exposition on the relationship between Marxism and the city, which never actually comes.

Chapter Four is a different matter. We are immediately transported back to the feet of the last great teacher of Marxism, whose writings are brilliantly insightful and also entertaining. Lefebvre returns with relish to Engels, as if he grew tired of Marx in the previous two chapters, specifically by discussing Engels’s essays collectively known as The Housing Question (1975). As he states, “It has become customary to present this work as the last word on Marxist thought concerning urban questions. Apparently, merely citing The Housing Question frees us from the need to read it or understand its theoretical structure” (p. 95).

However, if readers expect more sociological discussion on urban problems, they will
be disappointed. After the preceding chapter, Lefebvre has already established his main area of exposition—namely, the mature phase of Marxian political economy and the role that the partnership of Engels and Marx played in its dual nature. Thus, the two-book dilemma mentioned earlier gets resolved when Lefebvre chooses to write mainly on the collaboration between Marx and Engels, with thoughts about the city fading into the background except for an occasional reprise of the one contradiction examined by Marx: the opposition between the city and the country that was pertinent to the rise of capitalism but not relevant to the city of capitalism once that mode of production achieved hegemony.

Lefebvre writes about Engels’s role in the series of pamphlets and books where he and Marx attacked other socialist revolutionaries, and he also discusses the pair’s writings aimed at the working class and the creation of a communist party. Thus the deep meaning behind Engels’s concern with housing is not that, under capitalism, the production of an adequate supply of affordable housing is an impossibility, but that, as a revolutionary strategy, it is wrong to call for the state to publicly provide for what capital cannot. For this reason, Engels attacks the utopian socialists of the time for believing they can create a just society through a reformist state without also calling for and implementing the total destruction of capitalism. This chapter no longer advances the discussion of urbanism or the city, to the benefit of showing how much Engels has become a Marxist.

Chapter Five continues in this vein as a further conversation about political economy and, mainly, the writings of Marx in which there is little mention of the city. Within a span of a few years from the late 1960s to 1972, Lefebvre wrote a number of books on the urban condition. Why is this book, *Marxist Thought and the City*, more important than the others? It is here that he confirms that he has been inspired through all those previous years publishing his thought pieces to start a new mega-project to follow his *magnum opus*, the trilogy on everyday life. As he states: “It can be demonstrated, however, [this “demonstration” is already under way and will be continued elsewhere] that the contradictions of space and its production have intensified” (p. 148).

He concludes the book by listing ten observations about space and the contemporary development of capitalism that require further study. Without question, this is the kernel of ideas that eventually became his most influential book, *The Production of Space*. Among this list, bringing the phenomenon of “space” into the discussion of capitalism and urban development, are insights no other Marxist thinker since Marx has ever articulated. These include the key idea that capitalism leads to the fragmentation of society through the commodification of everything, including space, and the exchange relation of the market, including real estate; the brilliant idea that, as this “disassociation” proceeds, the contradictions are temporarily resolved by a “repressive” state apparatus that includes urban planning and other bureaucratic socio-spatial management of all territory in all its chopped-up reality; the contradiction created when the city, as some kind of unity, is superseded through its own success by real estate expansion that penetrates the once-rural oppositional milieu through suburbanization and exurbanization; the way capitalism creates a “second nature” that destroys the natural environment; the idea that despite fragmentation and spatial segregation, capital concentrates wealth and power in a few hands; the subordination of leisure time to consumerism that, among its multiple manifestations, produces leisure spaces (he wrote this before theme parks appeared); the individually lived paradox of people existing in a space integrated by capital and the state yet segregated and

---

4 I call this the dual processes of “decentralization” and “recentralization,” which produce a new form of urban space: the Multi-Centered Metro Region (Gottdiener and Budd, 2005:90). The significance of the MMR is that it conforms to Lefebvre’s basic theoretical assertion—the form of space is a correlate of the form that the mode of production takes. The MMR is the correlate of global capitalism; and ever since the nineteenth-century observations of Engels, the city had been increasingly giving way as a bounded spatial form to regional development outside its own limits. See also Gottdiener, Hohle, and King, forthcoming.
isolated from others, “which is reflected in anxiety, frustration and rebellion” (p. 150), written when U.S. cities already had riots produced by racial segregation and repression.

In his final comment, Lefebvre boldly states that, through the study of the relation between space and capitalism, which early on was only an emphasis on the capitalist city, we go beyond Marx in our societal analysis and revolutionary thought, since the contradictions exhibited in space “cannot be resolved by the organized (planned) growth of productive forces.” Hence the critical importance of his later book, The Production of Space, whose influence is still with us: Marx believed that the subject of history under capitalism, the working class, would revolt against the system precisely and solely because of the contradictions inherent in its relations of production (p. 151).

References
