

Pre-figuring Seattle? Direct action movements of the 1990s as “moments in a possible future”¹

INURA (ed), *Possible Urban Worlds: Urban Strategies at the End of the 20th Century*. Basel: Berkhauser, 1998. 268 pp

In June 1997, the International Network of Urban Research and Action (INURA) held its 7th conference in Zurich. Even by INURA standards, this was an unusual conference, focused on “direct action” movements, enquiring into their meaning and incorporating movement practitioners as participants, speakers and writers. This book is a compilation of the conference presentations, an eclectic mix of articles, ranging from theoretically rich contributions by academic heavyweights like David Harvey and Saskia Sassen to thick descriptions of actually existing activist initiatives by those who constructed them. While a book like this is inevitably uneven, there are many gems combining historicized description with profound and theoretically informed reflection. Recommended reads include Renate Berg’s “Wagenburgen in Berlin”, Dave Featherstone’s “The ‘pure genius’ land occupation” and Stefan Kipfer’s “Urban politics in the 1990s: notes on Toronto”.

Linking theoretical and practical knowledge of urban planners, social activists and urban theorists, and explicitly grounded in and committed to progressive urban movements, INURA is a uniquely rich and appropriate space for documenting and theorizing the grassroots social practices that are transforming cities and suggesting alternative futures. This book is most definitely a rich and unique contribution to the literature on European/urban movements, of interest to social movement scholars more generally, and to those theorists and activists now seeking to understand the eruption of the “anti-globalization” movement at the turn of the century.

There is a major challenge here though. The focus and logic of the book remain opaque, especially to the dogged linear reader (reviewer!). We don’t know that place-based social movements, specifically “do-it-yourself” direct action movements, are at the centre of the conference until Margit Mayer tells us on page 69. The book suffers badly from the lack of a good introduction that clarifies this and proposes some threads or debates running through the very diverse accounts that could lend coherence to the book.

Admittedly, the book is the fruit of a conference, but the editors seem to want to offer us more than conference proceedings. They are reaching for a more coherent intellectual and political agenda, but they hesitate both to make broader claims about what they’re offering and to make hard editorial choices about cutting contributions that just don’t fit. They seem caught between representing the diversity within INURA, especially in terms of geography and academic/professional practice, and exploring the range and meaning of do-it-yourself, direct action movements for urban studies and politics.

The book is organized in seven thematic sections. Leaving aside the first, which introduces INURA, and the last, which is a panel discussion, each section is very briefly introduced and overviewed. The overview is followed by a relatively longer, more theoretically developed piece generally ranging from eight to ten pages. This is then followed by a series of short articles, each focused

on a specific initiative in a specific city. One of the great strengths of the book is the space devoted to describing these practices in the terms of their activist architects. The initiatives are drawn largely from cities of Western Europe (Zurich, Amsterdam, Berlin) with some from Italy (Rome, Florence), a couple from the UK and several Toronto-based contributions. Despite pieces on Havana and Mexico City whose inclusion seem rather forced, this is a very first world, indeed European, discussion, albeit brilliantly unsettled at the very end by a provocative piece on Medellin, Columbia, as “the capital of the 21st century”.

Bound in soft cover and in an unusually large size, printed on glossy paper and with 200 black and white photos, the book presents as a cross between a weighty magazine and a coffee table book. Its form suggests a reading strategy. It is best read selectively, in small doses and in a good light.

But for those interested in antecedents to the anti-globalization movement in Europe at the turn of the century, more systematic mining does pay off. The last substantive section of the book, “The city as contested terrain”, is especially satisfying. It is superbly introduced and framed by Christian Schmid. There is an organizing intelligence at work here in the ordering and obvious relationship among the contributions. A wonderful duo on the politics of public space and struggles for “socio-spatial justice” combines Ute Lehrer’s conceptualization of public space as produced and reproduced through social practices, including the insurgent practices of social movements, with a contribution detailing “Inner! City! Action!” as a campaign contesting the repressive regulation of public space in Berlin. There are two other such pairings in this section. Schmid makes another great contribution in his piece on urban movements in Zurich, which effectively situates Richard Wolfe’s detailed example of a Zurich-based cultural centre. Highly recommended also is the piece by Marvi Maggio discussing urban movements in Italy coupled with a detailed discussion of a Rome-based politico-cultural project by Alessandra Romano.

These accounts and others like them sprinkled through this collection document numerous and diverse initiatives taking root in the cities of Europe through the 1990s. These initiatives both drew on the radical traditions of their places going back to the 1960s and recreated them in response to the new political, economic and cultural conditions of the 1990s. The initiatives documented here did not spring forth whole from nothing. Likewise, conditions for the upsurges of the late 1990s and early years of the new century were being incubated long before the shut-down of the WTO in Seattle gave the emergent “anti-globalization” movement its name.

The movements which are given visibility and voice in this collection are all ranged against neoliberalism and its rapacious commodification of life, space, time, land. These activist initiatives all testify to struggles for space—bodily, territorial, regulatory, cultural, ideological—to experiment with new forms of urban life. For some groups, it involves squatting vacant buildings for housing, vacant lots to park their house-wagons, vacant land to grow food and community. In various ways, they attest to people’s engaging in self-organized and self-managed activity to experiment with ways to combine living and working, cultural creativity and economic subsistence, at the margins of the formal economy. These initiatives involve not only voluntary counter-cultural communities but coalition

and community building with the involuntarily excluded: the homeless, the addicted, the sex workers, the migrants. A number of contributions reflect on the continuities with earlier counter-cultures and articulate the new questions and challenges posed by the intensified social polarizations in neoliberal cities of the 1990s. Some activists represent their projects as “opting out”. Others understand their initiatives as spaces producing alternative socialities that contest the dominant logic(s). More often than not, direct action is required to claim, hold and stretch open spaces, real and imagined, in the fabric of hegemonic relations.

Many of the initiatives reflect consciousness of deep and destructive economic, ecological and cultural disruption. To varying degrees, the activisms here testify to attempts to construct new modes of life/survival predicated on ecological sustainability, social solidarity, democratic participation and self-management. All are small scale and localized, although some involve networking among similar-scale initiatives in other cities. Some interface with various levels of government, negotiating with planners, politicians and funders, but for most, interaction with states is through their conflictual relations with the police.

There are countless points of continuity here with the subsequent culture and practices of the “anti-globalization” movement, especially as it has taken shape in the North, in the mass demonstrations, and in the youth movements. Note, especially, the strong anti-authoritarian currents coupled with emphasis on self-activity, direct democracy and direct action. In the worldwide movement, as evidenced in globalized spaces like the World Social Forum, emphasis on celebrating and cultivating actually existing alternatives to neoliberalism has foregrounded discourses and practices of the “social economy”. In different places in the world, a wide range of alternative economic projects interact in different (and politically contradictory) ways with states and formal markets and operate at a variety of scales. Often derided by the left as failing to contest state power or confront capitalism writ large, these projects involve real-life experiments involving hundreds of thousands of people and directly address the twin crises of subsistence and ecological sustainability. Proponents argue that such initiatives are quietly undermining neoliberal ways of doing things and stretching open spaces for further agency. Advocates of the social economy are animated by the possibility of building a new kind of economy within the spaces of the old, rather than aiming to “take over” or re-direct the existing economic relations. Many of the accounts in this book represent small-scale, distinctly urban and European expressions of this now more visible and growing global phenomenon for re-localization, subsistence and *l'économie solidaire*.

This collection, then, offers a diverse array of accounts by activist practitioners of “direct action” movements emergent in European cities through the 1990s. The accounts are enriched by more scholarly pieces historicizing and theorizing them. These activisms helped create the conditions and, indeed, constitute the movement that erupted so powerfully in Birmingham, Cologne, Prague, Goteberg, Genoa, and (what most in North America first recognized) in Seattle. The reflection begun by INURA in this book should also provoke us to think about the “anti-globalization” movement itself, especially in its Northern expressions, as an urban phenomenon of global proportion.

JANET CONWAY

*Department of Politics and School of Public Administration**Ryerson University**Toronto**Canada**jconway@arts.ryerson.ca*

Endnote

¹ See Kipfer, p 177.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, translated by Robert Bononno, introduced by Neil Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. ISBN 0816641609 (paperback), 0816641595 (hardback)

Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*, which after *The Production of Space* is one of his most obviously important works for geographers, has, 33 years after its initial publication, at last appeared in an English translation. It is a book which has been known to English readers second-hand for a long time: Manuel Castells' critique of it in *The Urban Question* (1972), David Harvey's comments at the end of *Social Justice and the City* (1973), and more recent appropriations or analyses in the work of Soja, Shields and others. Only a small part of it has appeared in translation before, in *Key Writings* (2003), although many of its themes will be familiar to readers of *Writings on Cities* (1996). The translation is accurate, readable, and has some useful notes from Bononno. While some choices are contentious—*l'habiter* as "habiting", for instance—the notes usually explain and allow readers to make up their own minds. A minor gripe is that the French distinction between *global* and *mondial*—global and worldwide—is not respected in the text. It is sure to be welcomed across the discipline of geography, but also more widely in sociology, political theory and cultural studies.

Despite the time at which it was written, the book is much more sombre and measured than its title would suggest. This is not a book about revolution in the urban—such as might be expected following 1968—but revolution of the urban, urbanization as a revolution in life, politics and thought. Lefebvre's analysis of the shift from the rural to the urban is pronounced here, along with a collection of essays which appeared in the same year, *Du rural à l'urbain* (1970). For a geographical audience this is another particularly important work, setting out both methodological issues that are applied here; treating issues such as class which Lefebvre seemingly neglects elsewhere; and analysing the rural and nature in depth, a facet of his work which is largely unknown in the Anglophone world. This is worth underlining: despite *The Urban Revolution* being only his second book explicitly on the urban, after *La droit à la ville* in 1968, it was the product of over 20 years of research on rural France. This work, begun while he was in the Pyrenees working for the resistance, led to his doctoral dissertation on rural communities, his initial work for the CNRS Research Institute, and, as the building of new towns and the exploitation of natural resources of this area increased, a growing concern with the urbanization of France. The urban revolution,

therefore, despite stretching across a long period of history, was something he saw played out in his own backyard.

This long period of history is one that encompasses Greek notions of the *polis*; the Roman *urbs*, the oriental or medieval town, and a whole range of modern forms from the town to the industrial city or megalopolis. But Lefebvre's term of "urban society" or "the urban" is one that results from comprehensive urbanization. While this is a theoretical model rather than an empirical analysis, he thinks it better describes a society that is born of industrialization, a society which dominates and absorbed agricultural production. The urban society refers "to tendencies, orientations, and virtualities, rather than any preordained reality" (p 2). There are some important analyses of technocracy, particularly related to the debates in France at the time—*urbanisme* means both urbanism and town planning. There are some useful and contentious discussions of Marxist categories such as base and superstructure and their relation to urban and spatial issues. In addition, Lefebvre provides some thought-provoking yet (seen outside the context of his more philosophical writings) abstruse references to ancient, classical and modern theory.

Methodologically there is much going on here, Lefebvre's analysis being both geographical and historical, making use of an early version of his theory of the production of space. However, it is in the historical work that perhaps the most interesting issues are found. Lefebvre notes that the book does not follow "the historical method as it is generally understood". Rather he uses the future to illuminate the past, the breakdown of existing urban forms to understand how they came to be in the first place. This is indebted to Marx, as he notes, who saw that the adult was the key to the child, that bourgeois society allows us to understand ancient and medieval society, and, as Lefebvre states, "not the opposite" (p 23). This is what he calls the regressive and progressive method, outlined at length in *Du rural à l'urbain*, and employed in numerous works including *The Production of Space* (1974) and *De l'État* (1976–78). Equally, this work discusses issues from structuralism and linguistics, two major concerns of Lefebvre's around this time, which he had treated at length in *Le langage et la société* (1966) and *Au-delà du structuralisme* (1971).

It is in such areas that an introduction can really help, because Lefebvre's writings are both so extensive and so interlinked that to read one work, torn from its context and situation in his own intellectual trajectory, can be both confusing and misleading. The English language reception of *The Production of Space* has demonstrated this in a number of ways. Neil Smith's foreword to this volume is therefore to be welcomed, as it will provide a way in for the uninitiated. It provides some useful pointers—particularly in relation to the Castells and Harvey engagement, and the link between this work and *The Production of Space*. However, to suggest Lefebvre's discussion of heterotopias is "clearly engaging Foucault" (p xii) is to credit him with knowledge that he would have been unlikely to have had, as Foucault's 1967 lecture only appeared in print in 1984. Conversely, Lefebvre criticises "Postindustrial society" not merely long before it "became popularised in the 1970s" (p xi), but in direct confrontation with Alain Touraine (1969) who was a colleague at the time. Finally, and this addresses one of Smith's own concerns, Lefebvre's analysis of "levels" in this work is much more than "a halting effort at what might now be called 'politics of scale'" (p xiv). Smith

neglects the way in which Lefebvre distinguishes between levels [*niveaux*] and dimensions in this text and scales [*échelles*] here and elsewhere.

Perhaps what is demonstrated here, and in the lament “it is not at all clear how we are to fit together the victory of urbanization over industrialization, the production of space, and the globalization of the state” (p xix), is that we are in need of a translation of Lefebvre’s last great work, the four volume *De l’État*, published between 1976 and 1978. *Pace* Smith, this is a work that does talk of urbanization, continues the work on the production of space, but in a more political context, and talks not of the *globalization* of the state, but of the world scale [*l’échelle mondiale*] and *mondialisation*, which can only be loosely translated as globalization. Discussions are underway concerning an English translation, an event that would be of considerable importance to radical Anglophone geography.

References

- Castells M (1972) *La question urbaine*. Paris: François Maspero. Translated by A Sheridan (1977) *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*. London: Edward Arnold
- Foucault M (1984) Des espaces autres. *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* (5):46–49. Translated by J Miskowicz (1986) Of other spaces. *Diacritics* 16(1):22–27
- Harvey D (1973) *Social Justice and the City*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Lefebvre H (1966) *Le langage et la société*. Paris: Gallimard
- Lefebvre H (1968) *La droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos. Translated by E Kofman and E Lebas (1996) The right to the city. In *Writings on Cities* (pp 63–181). Oxford: Blackwell
- Lefebvre H (1970) *Du rural à l’urbain*. Paris: Anthropos
- Lefebvre H (1971) *Au-delà du structuralisme*. Paris: Anthropos
- Lefebvre H (1974) *La production de l’espace*. Paris: Anthropos. Translated by D Nicholson-Smith (1991) *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Lefebvre H (1976–78) *De l’État*. Four volumes. Paris: UGE
- Lefebvre H (1996) *Writings on Cities*. Translated and edited by E Kofman and E Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell
- Lefebvre H (2003) *Key Writings*. Edited by S Elden, E Lebas and E Kofman. London: Continuum
- Touraine A (1969) *La société post-industrielle*. Paris: Éditions Denoël. Translated by L F X Mayhew (1971) *The Post-Industrial Society: Tomorrow’s Social History, Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society*. New York: Random House

STUART ELDEN
 Department of Geography
 University of Durham
 UK
 stuart.elden@durham.ac.uk