

## REVIEW ESSAY

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### Metropolitan birth pangs: reflections on Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*

Henri Lefebvre 1970: *La Révolution Urbaine*. Paris: Gallimard.

Henri Lefebvre 2003: *The Urban Revolution*. Translated by Robert Bononno, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

*The Urban Revolution* represented an arrival as well as a point of departure for Henri Lefebvre and the world, just as its long-awaited English translation does for us today. Here was a book rooted and incubated in the tumult of 1968, yet anticipating much more a new era ahead, a post-1968 age, replete with its cynicism and promises, its possibilities and impossibilities. *The Urban Revolution* marked a new beginning, the dawn of a thoroughly *urbanized society*; 'the urban' entered the fray like the Nietzschean 'death of God' or the Marxian 'loss of halo': all hitherto accepted values and morals had been drowned in economic and political ecstasies, in postwar exigencies threatening everybody. By 1970, Lefebvre recognized the hopes of those street-fighting years were dashed and knew a sober reconceptualization was warranted. At the same time, he couldn't quite give up the ghost. The moment engendered new opportunities, fresh chances to revalue all values, to invent a 'new humanism'. Such is Lefebvre's wish-image of a future awaiting its metropolitan birth pangs. The urban became his *metaphilosophical* stomping ground, the contorted arena of new contestation and reinvented Marxist practice.

The notion of 'revolution', of course, has a 1960s swing about it, and Lefebvre knows his explosive little title will stir the left as much as the right. In fact, his book sought to lodge itself within each flank, just as it intended to detonate both. 'The words "urban revolution"', he writes, playfully, 'don't in themselves denote actions that are violent. Nor do they exclude them. But how can we decide in advance between the effects of violent action and the product of rational action? Isn't violence characterized by its ability to spin out of control? Shouldn't thought minimize violence, beginning by destroying the chains that bind that thought?' (Lefebvre, 1970: 13; 2003: 5–6).<sup>1</sup> The revolution Lefebvre simultaneously comprehends and aims to incite is a *process* as well as *praxis*, a theoretical and a practical problematic. What he wants to comprehend is a revolution that his Marxist bedfellow, Antonio Gramsci, might have labeled 'passive' — a revolt instigated from above, a counter-revolution. What he wants to incite is an urban revolution more akin to the Paris Commune, what Gramsci might have called a 'war of position', a popular and historical assault from below. The *process* Lefebvre reveals comprised immanent contradictions festering within global capitalism, those about to blow on the cusp of Keynesian collapse. Meanwhile, this *praxis* had its own ideological thrust and institutional base — both free-market and left-wing-technocratic, which, in the decades to follow, would congeal into a single neoliberal orthodoxy. Thus, Lefebvre's key urban text has prescient subtext: it identifies the structural collapse of industrialism and state-managerialism, wherein urban revolution symbolizes a 'post-

Views expressed in this section are independent and do not represent the opinion of the editors.

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will cite parenthetically page numbers from the 1970 and 2003 editions respectively.

industrial' revolution, a society no longer organized by planners but speculated on by entrepreneurs, a society we know to be our own.

We must grasp the whole and take this new reality by the root, Lefebvre says. Neither analytical fragmentation nor disciplinary compartmentalization will do. A new order is evident, which knows no restrictions and breaks through all frontiers, overflowing everywhere, seeping out across the world and into everyday life. Critical theory and left politics must respond in kind, thinking big and aiming high, or else it will aim too low and give up on getting even that far. We need to be 'revolutionary', Lefebvre insists, because what we have before us is revolutionary. Like Marx inverting Hegel to discover the 'rational kernel' within the 'mystical shell', Lefebvre stands mainstream economic and sociological wisdom on its head: 'we can consider industrialization as a stage of urbanization, as a moment, an intermediary, an instrument. In the double process (industrialization-urbanization), after a certain period the latter term becomes dominant, taking over from the former' (p. 185; p. 139). As the mainstay of a capitalist economy, urbanization has supplanted industrialization, he reckons. The capitalist epoch reigns because it now orchestrates and manufactures a very special commodity, an abundant source of surplus value as well as massive means of production, a launch pad and rocket in a stratospheric global market: urban space itself.

We must no longer talk of *cities* as such, Lefebvre urges; all that is old hat. Rather, we must speak of *urban society*, of a society born of industrialization, a society that shattered the internal intimacy of the traditional city, that gave rise to the giant industrial city Engels documented, yet has itself been superseded, been killed off by its own progeny. Industrialization, in a word, has negated itself, bitten off its own tail, advanced quantitatively to such a point that qualitatively it has bequeathed something new, something dialectically novel, something economically and politically *necessary*. 'Economic growth and industrialization', Lefebvre writes, 'have become at once causes and crucial reasons, extending their effects to entire territories, regions, nations and continents'. Absorbed and obliterated by vaster units, rural places have become an integral part of industrial production, swallowed up by an 'urban fabric' continually extending its borders, ceaselessly corroding the residue of agrarian life, gobbling up everything and everywhere that will increase surplus value and accumulate capital. 'This term, "urban fabric"', he qualifies, 'doesn't narrowly define the built environment of cities, but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the countryside. In this sense, a vacation home, a highway and a rural supermarket are all part of the urban tissue' (p. 10; pp. 3-4).

What's fascinating here is how *The Urban Revolution* appeared only a year before US President Richard Nixon devalued the dollar, wrenching it from its gold standard mooring to herald the unilateral abandonment by the US of the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement. Gone, almost overnight, was the system of financial and economic regulation that spearheaded a quarter of a century of capitalist expansion. As the US economy bore the brunt of a costly and nonsensical war in Vietnam, 1971 ushered in an American balance of trade deficit. Nixon knew fixed exchange rates couldn't be sustained, not without overvaluing the dollar, not without losing competitive ground. So he let the dollar drift, devalued it, and loosened Bretton Woods' grip. World currency hereafter oscillated; capital could now more easily slosh back and forth across national frontiers. A deregulated, unstable capitalism became rampant, without restraint, and Lefebvre sensed its coming, saw how it facilitated what he'd call the 'secondary circuit of capital', a siphoning off of loose money set on speculation in real estate and financial assets, liquid loot yearning to become concrete in space.

'It's vital', says Lefebvre, 'to underline the role of urbanism and more generally "real estate" (speculation, construction) in neocapitalist society. "Real estate", as one calls it, plays a role of a secondary sector, of a circuit parallel to that of industrial production, which serves a market for "goods" nondurable or less durable than "buildings"'. 'This secondary sector', he believes, 'absorbs shocks' (p. 211; p. 159). In a depression, capital flows toward it, resulting in fabulous profits at first, profits that soon get fixed and tied

down in the built environment, literally imprisoned in space. Thereafter, investment flows tend to slow to trickle (p. 211; p. 159). Capital fixates itself in real estate, and soon the general economy begins to suffer. Yet the secondary circuit of capital expands all the same. Speculation assumes a life of its own, becoming at once enabling and destabilizing, a facilitator as well as a fetter for economic growth over the long-term. 'Inasmuch as the principal circuit, that of industrial production, backs off from expansion and flows into "property"', Lefebvre cautions (p. 212; p. 159), 'capital invests in the secondary sector of real estate. Speculation henceforth becomes the principal source, the almost-exclusive arena of formation and realization of surplus value. Whereas the proportion of global surplus value amassed and realized in industry declines, the amount of surplus value created and realized in speculation and property construction increases. The secondary circuit thus supplants the primary circuit and perforce becomes essential'.

Lefebvre, as ever, never backs up this hypothesis with empirical data, and insists often it's a 'virtual object' he's constructing. But the speculative monomania within our own economy, kindled during the deregulated 1980s, and the emergence of the entrepreneurial city — where urban fates and fortunes are inextricably tied to the dynamics of stock markets — is all-too-evident. Banks, finance institutions, big property companies and realtors spearhead the formation of a secondary circuit. Here capital circulates in pursuit of higher rental returns and elevated land prices. If ground rents and property prices are rising and offer better rates of return than other industrial sectors, and if finance is available at affordable interest rates, capital sloshes into assorted 'portfolios' of property speculation. Cleaner and faster profits are in the offing. From capital's point of view as a class, this makes perfect bottom-line sense: the landscape gets flagged out as a pure exchange value, and activities on land conform to the 'highest', if not necessarily the 'best', land-uses. Profitable locations get pillaged as the secondary circuit flows becomes torrential, just as other sectors and places are asphyxiated through disinvestment. Willy-nilly people are forced to follow hot money, flow from the countryside into the city, from factories into services, from stability into fragility. The urban fabric wavers between devaluation and revaluation, crisis and speculative binge, a ravaged built form and a renewed built form — and a fresh basis for capital accumulation. Once, it was a gritty warehouse or a rusty wharf; now, it's a glitzy loft or a prim promenade. Once, it was an empty field on the edge; now it's core neighborhood on the up.

This tendency was, of course, likewise spotted almost around the same time by Lefebvre's Anglo-Saxon soul mate, David Harvey. Near the end of *Social Justice and the City* (1973: 302–3), in his 'Conclusions and Reflections', Harvey rues that his seminal urban text was completed before he'd had the opportunity to study Lefebvre's *La Révolution Urbaine*. 'There are parallels between his concerns and mine', Harvey admits, 'and there are similarities in interpretation in content (which is reassuring) and some differences in interpretation and emphasis (which is challenging)'. 'Lefebvre's emphasis', Harvey adds, 'is more general than my own . . . Nevertheless, I feel more confident in appealing to both Lefebvre's work and the material collected in this volume, in attempting to fashion some general conclusions concerning the nature of urbanism' (p. 303). Specifically, it was around the idea of an 'urban revolution', orbiting within a 'secondary circuit of capital', where Harvey bonded with Lefebvre. 'Lefebvre makes a simplistic but quite useful distinction between two circuits in the circulation of surplus value', says Harvey (p. 312). However, the contention that the secondary circuit *supplants* the principal circuit, 'requires', Harvey notes, 'some consideration' (p. 312).

Over the past few decades, Harvey has refined and deepened a lot of these ideas, because and in spite of Lefebvre. 'Class-Monopoly Rent, Finance and the Urban Revolution', an early, thought-provoking effort by Harvey, acknowledges its debt to Lefebvre, while turning up the analytical heat several degrees. 'Distinctions between "land" and "capital" and between "rent" and "profit"', Harvey argues there, 'have become blurred under the impact of urbanization'. 'It may be', he continues, 'that problems of "stagflation" in advanced capitalist countries are connected to the land and property boom evident since the mid-1960s'. Thus, urbanization has changed 'from an

expression of the needs of industrial producers to an expression of the power of finance capital over the totality of the production process' (1985: 111). (Harvey recently commented upon the English translation of *The Urban Revolution* in a noteworthy review essay. 'Rereading it anew', he admits, after first encountering the book in 1972, 'turned out to be much more than a trip down memory lane. The text has lost none of its freshness, its beguiling and tantalizing formulations. The questions it opens up are still with us and deserve a thorough airing. Perhaps the delay in translation . . . will prove advantageous, coming, as it does, after the rise of poststructuralist, postmodernist, and post-Marxist modes of thought' [2004: 83–4]).

In 1973, Harvey thought Lefebvre pushed things too far, argued too prematurely in favor of urbanization. 'The two circuits are fundamental to each other, but that based on industrial capitalism still dominates' (p. 313). Notwithstanding, 'to say that the thesis is not true at this juncture in history', reckons Harvey (p. 313), 'is not to say that it is not in the process of becoming true or that it cannot become true in the future'. Lefebvre himself insists that positing the urban over the industrial begets a new sort of 'urban problem', which imposes itself globally and locally — and ideologically. 'Urban reality', he says (p. 25; p. 15), 'modifies the relations of production, without sufficing to transform them. It becomes a productive force, like science. Space and the politics of space "express" social relations, but equally react back on them'. For those 'specialists' involved in urban problems, these circumstances become what Lefebvre coins a 'blind field', something out-of-sight and out-of-mind. 'Inasmuch as we look attentively at this new field, the urban, we see it with eyes, with concepts, shaped by the theory and practice of industrialization, with analytical thought fragmented and specialized in the course of an industrial epoch, thus *reductive* of the reality in formation' (p. 43; p.29).

From a Marxist perspective, a new dialectical re-evaluation was called for, a revised theory of commodity production and surplus value extraction, a new spin on questions of class and economic growth. Indeed, at a time when dominant strands of Marxism — like Althusser's structuralism — were 'formalizing' Marxism, hollowing out its content, Lefebvre was adamant that 'urban reality' wasn't 'superstructural', wasn't epiphenomenal to productive industrial forces. At the beginning of the 1970s — 'the repugnant seventies', as Guy Debord termed them — Lefebvre penned numerous diatribes contra Althusser's structural Marxism and against structuralism more generally. Texts like *L'Idéologie Structuraliste* (1975) should be read alongside *The Urban Revolution*. For, in Lefebvre's eyes, the reign of structuralism chimed nicely with the state's *structuration* of urban reality. Structuralism's preoccupation with 'system' and 'systematization', he says, 'dehydrates the lived', and ends up as an ideological apologia for a bureaucracy it often sought to critique (1975: 70).<sup>2</sup> Here Althusser is the target of Lefebvre's frontal, yet Claude Levi-Strauss and Michel Foucault are also mauled. 'In the developments of May 68', Lefebvre points out, 'the student avant-garde rejected the dogmatic arrogance of structuralist tendencies, which, with the force of "scientific" arguments, refuted the spontaneity of the insurgents . . . Afterwards, structuralist dogma regained its gravity, a cold allure baptized "serious" and "rigorous", the allure of neo-scientism. It isn't only that this scientism (which purports to be pure under the epistemological break) neglects "real" problems and processes; it also withdraws into a Fortress of Knowledge it never exits. During this same period, the bureaucratic state *structured* efficiently the whole world' (p. 11).<sup>3</sup>

For his own part, in *The Urban Revolution* Lefebvre promulgates a 'formal' schema, dialectically formulated, throwing light on complex 'levels and dimensions' of this new geographical, economic and political reality. As urbanization annihilates time and space,

2 The bulk of the essays in this collection first appeared four years earlier in *Au-delà du structuralisme*.

3 'Today', Lefebvre said, in his 1975 preface, 'where the structuralists see themselves as the object of convergent attacks, the sole regret of this author is to not have taken his polemic further and pushed it more forcefully'.

connecting hitherto unconnected parts of the globe, tearing down barriers and borders in its market intercourse, using technology to speed up production and circulation, Lefebvre, like Marx in the *Grundrisse*, mobilizes abstraction to pinpoint the various moments of this 'unity of process'. The schema operates in *four* dimensions, a device that shifts temporally while stretching out spatially, onto a global scale with height and breadth, as well as everyday depth. He distinguishes a global level (G), where power is exercised and accommodates the most abstract relations, like capital markets and spatial management; an everyday *lived* level, the private (*privée*) (P) scale of *habiter*;<sup>4</sup> and a *meso*, intermediate level, the urban scale, that incorporates and mediates between the global and the private and is hence 'mixed' (M).

The global level is the realm of abstract power and the state, whose will is exercised through some kind of representation, usually of politicians and men of means who assert themselves strategically. 'We know today', Lefebvre claims, 'that in capitalist society two principle strategies are in use: *neoliberalism* (which maximizes the amount of initiatives allowed to private enterprise and, with respect to "urbanism", to developers and bankers); and *neomanagerialism*, with its emphasis (at least superficially) on planning, and, in the urban domain, on the intervention of specialists and technocrats and state capitalism. We also know there are compromises: neoliberalism leaves a certain amount of space for the "public sector" and activities by government services, while neomanagerialism cautiously encroaches on the "private sector" ' (p. 107; p. 78). Yet it's at the meso, urban level (M) where all this comes together, where an abstract global reach attains everyday coherence. The 'specifically urban ensemble', Lefebvre notes (p. 109; p. 80), 'provides the characteristic unity of the social "real" '.

As such, the (M) level has a 'dual purpose': on the one hand, there's what happens *in* the city, within its internal relations and jurisdiction, within its built (and unbuilt) environment, within its private households (P); on the other hand, there's what happens *of* the city, its connectivity to surrounding areas, to other cities and spaces, and to its global hinterlands (G). 'Lived' reality (P) functions within a *regime* of global capital accumulation (G) and a *mode* of state regulation mediated at the *meso* urban domain (M).<sup>5</sup> This mixed urban scale becomes both the springboard for global mastery and deadweight crushing the everyday. At the same time, a new hybrid Frankenstein is at the helm: the neoliberal bureaucrat and the managerialist entrepreneur, who embrace one another on the threshold of late capitalist urban change and global transformation.<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre says these managers and strategists, bankers and bureaucrats, politicians and pinstripes project themselves onto a global canvas as they colonize the lived. And they unite around a common urban *praxis*: 'the generalized terrorism of the quantifiable' (p. 244; p. 185).

4 Lefebvre uses the term '*inhabiter*' to stamp a richer gloss on city life, evoking urban living as *becoming*, as growing, as something dynamic and progressive. The nod, duly acknowledged, is made to Martin Heidegger: 'To inhabit', Lefebvre explained a few years earlier, in *Le Droit à la Ville* (1972: 76), 'meant to take part in a social life, a community, village or city. Urban life possessed, amongst other qualities, this attribute. It bestowed dwelling, it allowed townspeople-citizens to inhabit. It is thus that "mortals inhabit while they save the earth, while they wait for gods . . . while they conduct their own being in preservation and use". Thus speaks the poet and philosopher Heidegger of the concept to inhabit'.

5 Ironically, this schema is almost proto-*regulationist* in design, a school whose intellectual roots are often associated with Althusser, Lefebvre's anti-humanist archenemy. Lefebvre's francophone interpreters, people like Jacques Guigou and Remi Hess, talk of his post '68 'Althusserian *dérive*'. The subtitle alone of *The Survival of Capital* speaks volumes: 'The Reproduction of Relations of Production'. The duo likewise claim Lefebvre's 1970s œuvre contained analysis that could be construed as 'institutional', reflecting society's (and Lefebvre's own?) loss of revolutionary momentum (see Hess, 2002 and Guigou, 2002).

6 With 20 years hindsight, David Harvey (1989) confirmed what Lefebvre here only hints at: the passage 'from managerialism to entrepreneurialism' in urban and global governance.

This motley crew is pejoratively dubbed ‘the urbanists’, who ‘cut into grids and squares’. ‘Technocrats’, Lefebvre notes (p. 208; p. 157), ‘unaware of what’s going on in their own mind and in their working concepts, profoundly misjudging in their blind field what’s going on (and what isn’t), end up meticulously organizing a repressive space’. Urbanism thus finds itself caught between the rock and the hard place, ‘between those who decide on behalf of “private” interests and those who decide on behalf of higher institutions and power’. The urban wilts under a historic compromise between neoliberalism and neomanagerialism, ‘which opens the playing field for the activity of “free enterprise”’. The urbanist duly slips into the cracks, making a career in the shady recesses between ‘developers and power structures’, a monkey to each organ grinder. A true left critique, accordingly, must attack the promoters of the urban ‘as object’, as an entity of economic expansion in which investment and growth are ends in-themselves. The agents of this mindset, meanwhile, the top-down, self-perpetuating *cybernanthropes*, must everywhere and always be refuted.

For Lefebvre, the cybernanthrope was the anti-humanist incarnate, a reviled man-cum-machine, the air-conditioned official obsessed with information systems, with scientific rationality, with classification and control. In a profoundly witty and scathing text, *Vers le Cybernanthrope* [Towards the Cybernanthrope] (1971), Lefebvre claims cybernetic culture has cut a swath for the urban revolution — like Robert Moses slicing into New York — and proliferated through urbanism as ideology. *Voici* everything Lefebvre hates. Their type, their policies, their urban programs, their very presence on planet earth, offended him; they were antithetical to all he stood for, all he desired. Their types plot in think tanks and research units, in universities and in Chambers of Commerce, discourse with PowerPoint and flipcharts in boardrooms near you, formulate spreadsheets and efficiency tables, populate government and peddle greed. They thrive off audits and evaluation exercises, love boxes and ticking off numbers. Their political remit and strategic program reaches supra-governmental status these days, in the corridors of the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO), where ‘good business’ dictates and ‘structural adjustment’ initiatives become carrots and sticks in urban and global ‘best practices’.

Yet in *Vers le Cybernanthrope*, Lefebvre is more ironic than irate. The cybernanthrope enforces himself as a ‘practical systematizer’, he says, determining those boundaries socially permissible, stipulating order and norms, conceiving ‘efficient models’, organizing equilibrium, *feedbacks* and homeostasis. ‘The cybernanthrope deplors human weakness’, Lefebvre thinks. ‘He disqualifies humanism in thinking and action. He purges the illusions of subjectivity: creativity, happiness, passion are as hollow as they are forgettable. The cybernanthrope aspires to function, to be the only function . . . He’s a man who receives promotion and lives in close proximity with the machine’, be it laptop or desktop (1971: 194). He adheres to a ‘cult of equilibrium in general and to his own in particular, protecting it intelligently. He aims to maintain stability, to defend it. The principles of economics and a minimum of action are his ethical principles. The cybernanthrope ignores desires. Or if he recognizes desire, it’s only to study it. There are only needs, clear and direct needs . . . He despises drunkenness. As an Apollonian, the Dionysian is a stranger to him. The cybernanthrope is well nourished and smartly dressed . . . He mistrusts unknown flavors, savors too rich or too surprising. Odors, they’re something incongruous, incontrollable, archaic . . . What pleases him most is to have everything pasteurized, everything hygienic and deodorized . . . He treats severely the dramatic, the historic, the dialectic, the imaginary, the possible-impossible. Anything that doesn’t reveal itself in rationality, or in his programmatic discourse, is rejected as folklore’ (1975: 196–8).<sup>7</sup>

7 *Vers le Cybernanthrope*. This little gem of a text, which screams out for close reading and English translation, given cybernanthropes are more than ever in our midst, exhibits some of Lefebvre’s liveliest prose since *La Somme et le Reste*.

Little wonder these guys followed Le Corbusier's wisdom and 'killed the street'. The cyberanthropic urbanist maintains that streets are 'traffic machines' where the 'object-king' or 'object-pilot' circulates, where vehicles imbued with surplus value shift commodities and labor-power. 'The invasion of the automobile', Lefebvre says in *The Urban Revolution* (p. 29; p. 18), 'and the pressure of this industry and its lobbyists . . . have destroyed all social and urban life'. 'When you eliminate the street, there are consequences: the extinction of all life, the reduction of the city to a dormitory, to an aberrant functionalization of existence'. But the street 'contains qualities ignored by Le Corbusier' (p. 30; p. 18). In the street, there's an informative, symbolic and ludic function. In the street, you play and you learn stuff. 'Sure, the street is full of uncertainty. All the elements of urban life, elsewhere congealed in a fixed and redundant order, liberate themselves and gush onto the street and flow towards the center, where they meet and interact, freed from fixed moorings' (p. 30; p. 19). In the street, 'disorder lives. It informs. It surprises'. However, in the street, he says, concurring with Jane Jacobs, whom he cites approvingly, this disorder constructs a superior order (p. 30; p. 19).

That other sort of revolution unfurls in the street, Lefebvre reminds his Marxist readers, in case any are listening. 'Doesn't this likewise illustrate that disorder engenders another order? Isn't the urban street a place of speech, a site of words much more than of things? Isn't it a privileged domain where speech is scripted? Where words can become "wild", daubed on walls that elude rules and institutions?' (p. 30; p. 19). In the street, everyday tongues converse in *argot* rather than discourse in jargon, the remit of cyberanthropes and specialists, who conceive in offices rather than occupy streets.<sup>8</sup> In the street, you find rough talk, raw energy, profanities that disrupt and unnerve the cyberanthrope. The impulse for revolt will come from the street, Lefebvre knows. There, a new 'style' will bloom, vanquishing the cyberanthrope, overcoming his *faux* urbanism (1975: 213). This style will affirm the *anthrope*, a humanist nemesis, armed to the teeth with weapons of irony and humor, art and literature. 'The war of anthropes contra cyberanthropes', he says, 'will be a guerrilla war. Anthropes will have to elaborate a strategy founded upon the destruction of the cyberanthrope's order and equilibrium' (p. 212). 'For vanquishing, or even for engaging in battle, anthropes should valorize imperfections: disequilibrium, troubles, oversights, gaps, excess and defects of consciousness, derailments, desires, passion and irony. The anthrope should always fight against a plan of logic, of technical perfection, of formal rigor, of functions and structures. Around rocks of equilibrium will be waves and air, elements that will erode and reclaim' (p. 213).

Revolutionary refrains emanating from below, from a street praxis, are admittedly hushed in *The Urban Revolution*. Lefebvre has given us a quieter, more reflective analytical text, more cautious in its militant musings. But the idea of 'vanquishing by style' offers clues to his revolution hopes, even if they're now dimmer. Here, for guidance, we must turn back the clocks briefly, to a pre-1968 work, *La Proclamation de la Commune*, written in 1965. It's hard to decide whether Lefebvre's subject matter here was 1871 or 1968 — whether he was excavating the past or foreseeing the future? Whether this was a historic day in March 1871, shattering the Second Empire, reclaiming Paris' center for the people, toppling the imperial mantle of Napoleon III and sidekick Baron Haussmann; or whether it was an imminent student/worker eruption that would almost smash the Fifth Republic of de Gaulle? Either way, it was the *style* of the Commune that whetted Lefebvre's political palate. The Commune's style, he says,

8 Lefebvre would develop this idea in *The Production of Space*, published four years on. There, he'd counterpoise jargon with argot, representations of space with spaces of representation. Argot's power is a power of ribald words, recalling that it is dangerous to speak: sometimes too much, sometimes too little. For one of the best scholarly treatises on argot, see *Les princes du jargon* (1994), written by Guy Debord's widow Alice Becker-Ho. Of course, the literary giant of argot, of the disorderly mind the street embodies, is a scribe Lefebvre (and Debord) both admired: Louis-Ferdinand Céline, especially his 1936 masterpiece *Mort à crédit* [Death on Credit].

‘was, first of all, an immense, grandiose festival, a festival that citizens of Paris, essence and symbol of the French people and of people in general, offered to themselves and to the world. Festival at springtime, festival of the disinherited, revolutionary festival and festival of revolution, free festival, the grandest of modern times, unfurls itself for the first time in all its dramatic magnificent joy’ (1965: 20–21).

For 73 days, loosely affiliated citizen organizations, neighborhood committees and artist associations converted Paris into a liberated zone of anarcho-socialism. It was, Lefebvre notes, ‘grandeur and folly, heroic courage and irresponsibility, delirium and reason, exaltation and illusion’ all rolled into one (1965: 26). Insurgents somehow corroborated Marx’s notion of revolutionary praxis at the same time as they refuted it. For this was as much a geographical as historical event, no worker uprising incubated in the factories; rather, it was ‘the grand and supreme attempt of a city raising itself to the measure of a human reality’ (p. 32). An urban revolution had made its glorious debut, re-energizing public spaces and transforming everyday life, touting victory while it wobbled in defeat. It was condemned to death at birth, despite the gaiety of its baptism. ‘The success of revolutionary movement’, Lefebvre says, ‘masked its failings; conversely, its failures are also victories, openings on to the future, a standard to be seized, a truth to be maintained. What was impossible for the Communards stays until this day impossible, and, by consequence, behooves us to realize its possibility’ (p. 39). ‘We are thus compelled’, he reasons, ‘to rehabilitate the dream, otherwise utopian, and put to the forefront its *poetry*, the renewed idea of a *creative praxis*. There resides the experience of the Commune and its style’ (p. 40).

This rhetorical flourish lingers in *The Urban Revolution*. But there it takes on a new twist, has an even broader message and implication. The urbanism of Haussmann tore out the heart of old medieval Paris and reinvented the concept of center, of a downtown of bright lights and new things, with conspicuous consumption galore. An erstwhile pesky proletariat would take hold of shovels, man the building sites, and stop making trouble. They’d also find themselves dispatched to a rapidly expanding *banlieue*, to new suburbs mushrooming in the distance. In one sense, Paris gained as an independent work of art, as an aesthetic experience admired to this day by every tourist and visitor. Yet it lost something as a living democratic organism, as a source of generalized liberty. Hence Haussmann patented not only what we’d now call the gentrified city, with its commodification of space; he also pioneered a new class practice, bankrolled by the state: the deportation of the working class to the periphery, a divide-and-rule policy through the urbanization itself, gutting the city according to a rational economic and political plan. The logic of the city would never quite be the same again.

While we can quibble with Lefebvre over that class practice stateside, where, aside from a few exceptions (Manhattan, Boston and San Francisco, etc.), the rich have decanted themselves to the periphery, bestowing upon the poor an abandoned core, Lefebvre’s point is more global in scope. The urban revolution is now a ‘planetary phenomenon’, he says, urbanization has conquered the whole world, left nowhere unscathed, nowhere anymore ‘pure’. To that degree, Haussmannization is now a *global class practice*, an urban strategy that peripheralizes millions and millions of people everywhere. As cities explode into mega-cities, as centers — even in the poorest countries — get glitzy and internationalized, ‘Bonapartism’ (as Lefebvre coins it) projects its urban tradition onto the twenty-first-century global space. The peripheralization the world’s least well off is apace. By 2020, 2 billion will inhabit shantytowns, *favelas* and *bidonvilles* scattered around the edge of the world’s biggest cities. By 2015, 19 of the 23 boomtowns predicted to have populations in excess of 10 million will be in ‘developing’ countries.<sup>9</sup> The vast global suburb in the making will thus be homemade, constructed from tin, cardboard and plastic, teetering in the breeze, waiting to be washed away in the next mudslide.

9 United Nations-Habitat figure, cited in *Libération* (16 September 2004).

'Can such a strategy assume that the countryside will invade the city', Lefebvre asks (p. 152; p. 113), 'that peasant guerillas will lead the assault on urban centers?' Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution* had voiced this thesis a few years earlier, in 1967, and Lefebvre seems to want to respond. The city, Debray said, put the brake on revolutionary momentum, was the hypertrophic 'head', full of abstract ideas, deaf to the plight of peasant guerillas. The rural hinterlands and mountain jungles were the 'armed fist' of the liberation front. The city, Debray thought, corrupts radicalism, made potential comrades soft, lulled by the trappings of bourgeois life. 'The mountain proletarianizes the bourgeois and peasant elements while the city bourgeoisifies proletarians' (Debray, 1967: 76–7). 'Today', Lefebvre counters, categorically, 'such a vision of class struggle on a global scale appears outdated. The revolutionary capacity of the peasantry is not on the rise' (p. 152; p. 113). In fact, it is being 'reabsorbed' within an overall colonization of space, where both peasants and proletarians occupy not rural hinterlands but urban hinterlands, each marginalized at the urban periphery, out on the world-city banlieue. A global ruling class, meanwhile, shapes out its core, at the center, Haussmannizing nodes of wealth and information, knowledge and power, creating a feudal dependency *within* urban life. 'In this case', concludes Lefebvre, 'the frontier line doesn't pass between the city and the country, but is within the interior of the phenomenon of the urban, between a dominated periphery and a dominating center' (p. 152; p. 113).<sup>10</sup> In a word, the urban revolution is as much ruralization of the city as urbanization of the countryside.

Will those 2 billion dispossessed ever want to stake a claim to the core, assert their right to centrality, demarginalize themselves, with grand style, in a giant street festival? Will globalization of communication and publicity open everything up to 'the eyes of the global poor' — adapting Baudelaire's words — inspiring indignation and organization as well as awe ('big saucer eyes'), prompting the 'world literature' Marx dreamt of in *The Communist Manifesto*? Tens of thousands of poor landless Latinos have already helped reinvent the urban labor movement in California; militancy in South African townships brought down Apartheid; millions took to streets in Jakarta, Seoul, Bangkok, Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires, when East Asian and Latin American economies went into meltdown during 1997; revolts against IMF shock therapy programs have left many developing world capitals smoldering as the most vulnerable connect the global with the local on the street. Examples abound. The fault line between the internationalization of the economy and a marginalization of everyday life scars urban space. The urban scale is the key mediator on the global scene, at once the stake and terrain of social struggle, both launch pad and lynchpin in history. The urban revolution from below, as a historic bloc — or seismic tremor — still remains the 'virtual object' Lefebvre described in 1970, a future scenario yet to be established. But if it ever becomes a 'real' object, a directly lived reality, insurgency will look a lot different from 1968 and 1871, and from 1917. The storming of the Winter Palace will now come in the monsoon season.

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10 This is a crucial passage in *The Urban Revolution*. Alas, Robert Bononno's English translation has deflected Lefebvre's original meaning.

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