



Writings on Cities

Henri Lefebvre

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The work of Henri Lefebvre - the only major French intellectual of the post-war period to give extensive consideration to the city and urban life - received considerable attention among both academics and practitioners of the built environment following the publication in English of *The Production of Space*. This new collection brings together, for the first time in English, Lefebvre's reflections on the city and urban life written over a span of some twenty years.

The selection of writings is contextualized by an introduction - itself a significant contribution to the interpretation of Henri Lefebvre's work - which places the material within the context of Lefebvre's intellectual and political life and times and raises pertinent issues as to their relevance for contemporary debates over such questions as the nature of urban reality, the production of space and modernity.

Writings on Cities is of particular relevance to architects, planners, geographers, and those interested in the philosophical and political understanding of contemporary life.

Writings on Cities Details

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From Reader Review Writings on Cities for online ebook

Rebecca Conroy says

This is a terrible translation; Its like the writers Kofman and Lebas didn't even bother getting it proof read before it went to print. Terrible.

Blair says

VEry well-done, but limited. Lefebvre's best work, so if you value urban philosophy, you should check this out.

Nabeel Ahmed says

All the stars are for the original text itself, which deserves five stars; two stars are subtracted for the poor presentation (explained at end).

The bulk of this book is a translation of The Right to the City, which was published in 1968 and transformed urban studies and sociology forever. Today, 50 years later, the right to the city seems like a common idea, but that is just a testament to the power of this text.

Lefebvre writes powerfully about how rationality and capitalism have reduced the city to the arena of consumption alone. He makes a crucial distinction about what it means "**to inhabit**" - take part in social life and community - and how the focus today is mostly limited to "**habitat**".

There are many passages that stood out to me, but here is one that shook me:

'Who can ignore that the Olympians of the new bourgeois aristocracy no longer inhabit. They go from grand hotel to grand hotel, or from castle to castle, commanding a fleet or a country from a yacht. They are everywhere and nowhere. That is how they fascinate people immersed into everyday life. They transcend everyday life, possess nature and leave it up to the cops to contrive culture. Is it essential to describe at length, besides the condition of youth, students and intellectuals, armies of workers with or without white collars, people from the provinces, the colonized and semi-colonized of all sorts, all those who endure a well-organized daily life, is it here necessary to exhibit the derisory and untragic misery of the inhabitant, of the suburban dweller and of the people who stay in residential ghettos, in the mouldering centres of old cities and in the proliferations lost beyond them? One only has to open one's eyes to understand the daily life of the one who runs from his dwelling to the station, near or far away, to the packed underground train, the office or the factory, to return the same way in the evening and come home to recuperate enough to start again the next day. The picture of this generalized misery would not go without a picture of 'satisfactions' which hides it and becomes the means to elude it and break free from it.'

*The introduction was not very effective in helping me situate the different selections; and the translation itself is clunky (although maybe the original is to blame). The book is riddled with proofreading and editing errors.

mahatmanto says

buku ini menerjemahkan seluruh teks asli "le droit a la vie" tapi hanya menyajikan introduction dan satu bab dari teks asli "espace et politique".

Susana789 says

Cíti?, že sa jedná o staršie texty, ale must-read. Podnetné, ale už trochu zaprášené ?asom (a ducha kritického marxizmu mám zažitého v jeho reálnej, nie knižnej podobe, takže tu som subjektívna).

Andrea says

I love how Lefebvre opens up the city and how we look at it, how we study it, how we create it, and most importantly how we live it. This is a good selection of texts, and the only place you can find a translation of *The Right to the City*, which is a pivotal text in so many ways, and a source of potentially revolutionary thought. It only gets 4 stars however, because the texts themselves are riven with typos, and without having read the original French, I am rather certain that the translation is not at all what it could be...and certainly seems to make an understanding of the central ideas even harder. It definitely doesn't fare well in contrast to *State, Space, World*.

Hami says

It's a great read. Today, It can be consider as a classic, and a must read for urban geographers, architects, planners, and anyone who is interested in space and politics (such as artists). Lefebvre's writing is delightful and easy to digest, this book can be a good compliment to his master piece "production of space"

Anna says

Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life has been on my to read list for many years. Unfortunately my local library doesn't have it, so I borrowed the Lefebvre book it does have in order to decide whether to buy the 912 page edition of the Critique. Having finished 'Writings on Cities', I am disinclined to buy that somewhat overwhelming volume yet. I'll keep an eye out for volume 1 in second hand book shops, though. 'Writings on Cities' was a somewhat mixed experience. As can be the case with collections of theory, the introduction is far too long (60 pages!) and dense - the most difficult part of the book to read. I also found the translation hard going at times; I'm loath to assume that Lefebvre himself was obscure without seeing the French. On the one hand I enjoyed learning some new words, on the other I disliked the use of 'nuance' and 'rhythm' as

verbs. There were also more typos than you would expect in an academic book.

The selection of pieces was nonetheless interesting. The longest at 120 pages is ‘The Right to the City’, published in 1968. This seemed insightful of its time and thus somewhat distant from the neoliberal cities of today. The most memorable element was Lefebvre’s application of Marxist distinction between use and exchange value in an urban context. I also appreciated this commentary on the consumption of signs:

In the ideology of consumption and in ‘real’ consumption (in quotations), the consumption of *signs* plays an increasing role. It does not repress the consumption of ‘pure’ spectacles, without activity and participation, without *oeuvre* or product. It adds to it and superimposes itself upon it as a determination. It is thus that advertising of consumer goods becomes the principal means of consumption; it tends to incorporate art, literature, poetry, and to supplant them by using them as rhetoric. It thus becomes itself the ideology of society; each ‘object’, each ‘good’ splits itself into reality and image, this being an essential part of consumption. One consumes signs as well as objects: signs of happiness, of satisfaction, of power, of wealth, of science, of technology, etc. [...] Consequently, he who conceives the city and urban reality as a system of signs implicitly hands them over to consumption as integrally consumable: as exchange value in its pure state.

(I think ‘thus’ is overused in initial sentences of that passage, something I’m definitely also guilty of. It makes such a nice sound!) ‘The Right to the City’ also contains thoughtful points about the contradictions of the urban, ‘between the socialisation of society and generalised segregation’. Lefebvre’s more detailed commentary on segregation seemed broadly still applicable, although neoliberalism has intensified the tendencies that he describes to febrile levels. At times the prose was quasi-poetic to the point of incomprehensibility, though: ‘Reflection emphasises articulations so that delineations do not disarticulate the real but follow articulations’. The shorter pieces, later in the book and written in subsequent decades, seemed more immediately applicable to the twenty-first century city. This paragraph is especially on the nose:

The much vaunted neo-liberalism in this case simply means submitting everything to circulation. One thinks of this plan by Le Corbusier which gets rid of the city and replaces it with giant houses where everything is given over to circulation. Le Corbusier was a good architect but a catastrophic urbanist, who prevented us from thinking about the city as a place where different groups can meet, where they may be in conflict but also form alliances, and where they can participate in a collective *oeuvre*. I fear that liberalism will be a ‘free for all’, a space abandoned to speculation and the car.

‘Writings on Cities’ was doubtless worth the effort, despite requiring more effort than I’d hoped. It ends with the charming concept of ‘rhythmanalysis’, which involves experiencing the patterns of the city like a piece of music. I would have liked to read a bit more about that and less of the rather dated discussion of bureaucracy in ‘The Right to the City’. Lefebvre strikes me as an intriguing writer, although I’m not sure that the selection and translation of material here necessarily shows him at his best.
