

# Book Review: Urban Revolution Now: Henri Lefebvre in Social Research and Architecture

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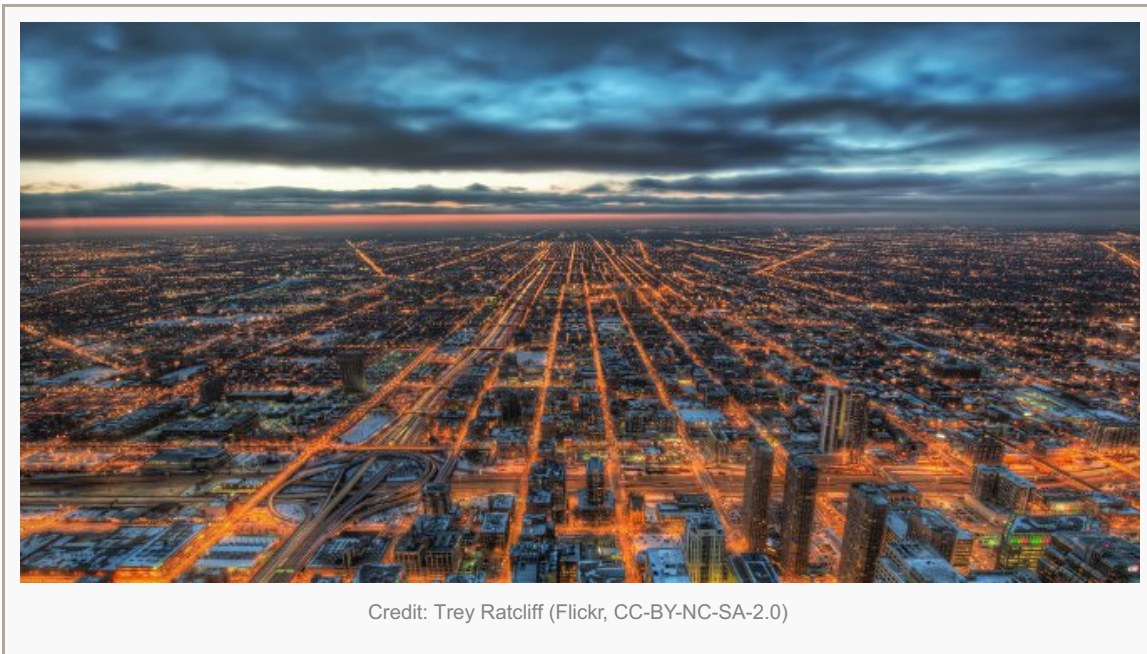
*More than half of the world's population now live in cities – but how has this transformation in how we live occurred? **Urban Revolution Now: Henri Lefebvre in Social Research and Architecture** uses the work of Lefebvre to critically understand the process of urbanisation and to offer practical answers to the problems facing urbanised society. Do Young Oh praises the book's collection of case studies as being useful for showing how Lefebvrian ideas can be used for research and practice across the disciplines of the social sciences.*

**Urban Revolution Now: Henri Lefebvre in Social Research and Architecture.** Łukasz Stanek, Christian Schmid, and Ákos Moravánszky (eds). Ashgate. 2014

'Urban' is being celebrated everywhere. Cities are perceived as a powerhouse of global economy among academics, professionals, and international organisations. On the other hand, others are arguing that we are entering the age of urban: that more than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas and this population trend has accelerated. We see an increasing general interest in urban nowadays. However, such a widespread interest in urban can be problematic because it lacks an understanding of urbanisation as a process explaining how and why such a transformation has occurred. Moreover, such arguments cannot offer a more integrated view about the general transformation of society, covering both urban and rural living; which is closely related with urbanisation processes.

Łukasz Stanek, Christian Schmid, and Ákos Moravánszky, who have been keen explorers of Henri Lefebvre over decades, have published a new edited volume: *Urban Revolution Now: Henri Lefebvre in Social Research and Architecture*. This book aims to offer diverse ideas and methods for critically understanding urbanisation as a process by developing ideas of Henri Lefebvre, who was a French Marxist philosopher and sociologist who authored several prominent books and writings including *La Production de l'espace* (1974) [the Production of Space], *La Révolution urbaine* (1970) [the Urban Revolution], and *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947, 1961, 1981) [the Critique of Everyday Life]. The writings of Lefebvre have been read by many scholars from various disciplines including geography, sociology, and cultural anthropology. However, as the editors point out, the ideas of Lefebvre have not been fully developed and utilised, despite their potential as a tool for analysis of urbanisation and to offer practical answers to problems we are facing in this urbanised society.

Their volume is composed of four sections. Each section tries to provide an answer to a different question derived from core concepts of Lefebvre, but not exclusively. The first section investigates the concept of complete urbanisation. Lefebvre predicted that society would be completely urbanised. Chapters in this section show how different urbanisation processes from different spatial and historical contexts can be understood by developing the concept of complete urbanisation. In the second section, each chapter investigates how the 'right to the city' is threatened in contemporary urbanisation processes led by the state. The third section focuses on the theory of the production of space. Authors in this section utilise the concept of the three different dimensions of space and their dialectical relationships (as defined by Lefebvre) to analyse different kinds of urban space. The last section of this book is entitled 'urban society and its projects'. How various urban spaces have been produced through various relationships is examined, with a focus on their dialectical processes (based on Lefebvre's ideas about urban society).



Credit: Trey Ratcliff (Flickr, CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0)

This book particularly draws attention from readers because it offers an opportunity to bridge the epistemological and cultural divide between the global North and South as well as the East and the West by developing Lefebvre's theories. As Jennifer Robinson argues, current urban theories cannot offer a sufficiently balanced view of cities from different contexts, despite the fact that cities are closely intertwined more than ever before in this era of globalisation.

The chapter 'During the Urban Revolution – Conjunctures on the Streets of Dhaka' authored by Elisa T. Bertuzzo is one example of how a case in a non-Western context can be analysed through Lefebvre's ideas. The author investigates the urbanisation processes of Dhaka by developing the idea of differential space and time. Dhaka, the capital and the largest city in Bangladesh, is experiencing different stages of urbanisation at the same time, which is hardly possible to be conceptualised by applying existing urban theories from the West. Various actors – from local to global – have been involved in these processes. Different actors – based on different time and space – blur the conventional distinction between urban and rural. In this regard, for Bertuzzo, urban *per se* is not important but the urbanisation process is because it shapes the everyday life in both urban and rural areas.

This chapter convincingly tackles the concept of urbanisation derived from the West, but leaves questions about everyday life in urbanising Dhaka. As Lefebvre predicted, globalised urbanisation tends to be violent and unequal processes. The capitalist mode of production is one of key drivers of urbanisation processes in Dhaka from this aspect. In this regard, it is not surprising that exploitation of garment workers has prevailed in Dhaka (a major global clothes supplier). The 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory collapse tragedy, which killed more than 1,000 people, is one case that shows how capitalist exploitation has affected the everyday life of workers in the city. This is also closely related to urbanisation processes. Bertuzzo could have pushed the chapter further by investigating how the space and time of garment workers in Dhaka differs from others and by showing their everyday life in parallel with the historical development of the textile industry in Dhaka (which the author already mentioned in the chapter).

The chapter 'Where Lefebvre Meets the East: Urbanization in Hong Kong' written by Wing-Shing Tang exhibits an interesting case of how British colonialism interacted with the Chinese Empire and thereafter Communist China to produce urban Hong Kong. This follows the previous chapter about Dhaka, and tries to develop the Lefebvre's concept of complete urbanisation in order to offer a better understanding of urbanisation in a non-Western context. This is a valuable attempt because Lefebvre even admitted himself that China has a different context, and that his theory cannot be easily used to understand urbanisation processes in China. By taking on this challenge, the author focuses on the development of urban-rural relationships in Hong Kong. The author argues that urban and rural areas in Hong Kong have closely contributed together towards an urbanised Hong Kong. In this process, political

conditions and land relations were major factors affecting the urbanisation of Hong Kong.

Despite a common imagination about fully urbanised Hong Kong, this chapter offers a unique view of continuously existing rurality in Hong Kong and its relation to urbanisation in Hong Kong. It also argues that colonialism cannot be simplified, but needs to be understood as a complicated concept that wide varieties are existed. However, this chapter only examines urbanisation in Hong Kong as a two-way interaction, such as China versus the British Empire as well as urban versus rural. The argument could have been elaborated on further, if Tang had discussed relations between Hong Kong and other influences such as cities located in Asian 'tiger economies' which have experienced rapid economic growth around the same time.

Overall, *Urban Revolution Now* is a collection of rich case studies displaying how Lefebvrian ideas can be utilised for research and practice of various disciplines of social sciences – not just as theory but also as method. One issue that readers may have is how authors have examined existing critiques of Lefebvre from Manuel Castells and David Harvey; such as that there is too much romanticism on the concepts of 'urban' and dissolution of industrial capitalism. Schmid suggested developing Lefebvrian ideas by combining them with other theories in order to produce more powerful ways of critically understanding urbanisation processes. However, chapters in this volume focus on Lefebvre's original arguments instead of doing so. Despite such criticism, the theories of Lefebvre are still powerful and give us a room to develop them further. At the moment, the theories of Lefebvre have become more relevant for understanding recent changes in our society. This book offers great guidance on how we can understand urbanisation processes and, by extension, our society; by giving a multi-dimensional interpretation of Lefebvre's theories.

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#### **Do Young Oh – LSE Geography**

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