What Is Lived Space?

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review of: S. Elden (2004) *Understanding Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*. London: Continuum. (PB, pp. 288, £19.99, ISBN: 0-8264-7003-3)

Introduction

In his lifetime, Henri Lefebvre wrote 72 books, yet were it not for one of these books, his influence in organisational studies would not be the same as what it is today. *The Production of Space* (1974/1991), generally considered to be his *magnum opus*, has exerted a strong fascination on organisational researchers with its critical tenet that space should be seen as the site of ongoing interactions of social relations rather than the mere result of such interactions – a process of production, in Lefebvre's words, rather than a product. Consequently, Lefebvre's triad spatial model – the perceived, conceived space and lived space (1991: 33, 38-9) – which he proposes as an analytical tool for the process, has been an important source of inspiration for recent discussions on, or related to, organisational space (Dobers and Strannegard, 2004; Hernes, 2004; Spicer and Taylor, 2004; Dale, 2005; Surman, 2005; Watkins, 2005).

This academic enthusiasm, however, is not unblended with a modicum of unease. On the one hand, Lefebvre's book, with many little elaborated nuances and references, is by no means a self-evident reading, as some researchers confess (Hernes, 2004; Dale, 2005). On the other hand, there seems to be a serious danger of reduction if one approaches *The Production of Space* in isolation from the rest of Lefebvre's corpus. We do not have to know the whole world in order to know that "John is the father of James", says Russell (1961: 714); true, but Lefebvre's work requires understanding, not mere knowing.

Understanding Lefebvre traces up the development of Lefebvre's scholarly career on the basis of all his published works in association with the writer's life events, and the book thus provides researchers of organisational studies with a rare access to a panoramic view of the extended landscape of Lefebvre's thoughts, an access made more precious due to the fact that few of Lefebvre's books are now available in English

translations. In the introduction of the book, Elden states that his aim is to widen the 'narrowness' of the reading of Lefebvre in the English-speaking world in order to show that Lefebvre's work can be "conceptualized as a whole" (2004: 6-7). This he has achieved with great success.

The book begins with an exploration of Lefebvre's reading of Marx, presenting Lefebvre as a loyal yet radical Marxist thinker who defends dialectic materialism as an open-ended way of social investigations, distinguished from, for instance, Althusser's structuralistic reading of Marx, on the one hand, and Sartre's naive subjectivism, on the other. The book then associates Lefebvre's thinking with other philosophers with whom Lefebvre professes heritage, in particular Hegel's dialectic method, Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world, and Nietzsche's insights on rhythm, space and body. These two opening chapters consists the backbones of the rest of the book. Chapters three to six summarize Lefebvre's major contributions to sociological studies in four areas of enquiry: everyday life, rural and urban studies, time and space, and politics and the state. These chapters are arranged in a chronological order so as to demonstrate the course of development in Lefebvre's mature thinking, but Elden also makes great effort to highlight the recurrence of certain themes throughout Lefebvre's entire body of work – such as the non-linearity of time, the everyday life, the politicality of space, the time/space affinity – all of which are then related back to Lefebvre's political engagement and philosophical complexity elaborated in the first two chapters. The conclusion is very short, but by then, the book has clearly fulfilled what it sets out to promise in the title: an *understanding* of Henri Lefebvre.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to demonstrate through an example how Elden's book might benefit organisational studies. The example I choose to discuss is 'lived space', the central and perhaps the most ambiguous element of Lefebvre's often quoted spatial model (1991: 33, 38-9). Elden's book provides important clarifications to the idea of 'lived space' on two levels.

Space and Dialectics

The first ambiguity arises concerning the relationship between lived space (or, 'representational spaces'), on the one hand, and conceived space ('representations of space') and perceived space (spatial practices), on the other. Shields (1999: 161), for instance, notices that lived space is easily confused with perceived space. Similarly, Hernes (2004) suggests that the triad model itself is not tidily drawn. Such confusion could readily be solved if we perform a two-step reduction of Lefebvre's thinking, by first tracing back to the original starting point of his spatial critique, and secondly, linking the spatial model to Lefebvre's favourite method of dialectics. In the first step, Elden directs our attention to an early critique of Lefebvre on Descartes, published in 1947. Here, Elden suggests, Lefebvre may have first formulated the notions of conceived space and perceived space as direct correspondences of Descartes' *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (2004: 186-8). Just as the Cartesian dualism, conceived and perceived spaces seem to be engaged in a deadlock of opposition without the slightest possibility of reconciliation. It is not until many years later, when Lefebvre has

accumulated abundant knowledge of rural and urban everyday life, does he begin to see lived space as a bridging concept capable of solving the conflict. Lefebvre's analysis here is backed up by his dialectic method – the second step of our reduction. The third term of lived space is balanced carefully between the two poles of conceived space (purely idealism) and perceived space (pure materialism). It embodies both elements without being reducible to either. It is the space of *connaissance* – here Elden reminds us of the nuance of the French word – "less formal or more *local* forms of knowledge" (2004: 190, my emphasis).

Following Elden's interpretation, let me try to concretize the triad model within an organisational scenario. On the one hand, we have an abstract space of pure mathematical figures and verbal messages – manifested in the design of offices, organisational rules and symbols, and so on (Spicer and Taylor, 2004); and, on the other, an all-too-material, and therefore *indifferent* space, consisting of the flows of labour, money, information (Harvey, 1990) and every physical movement of employees: their opening doors, sipping coffee, and etc. In between of these two poles, there is the lived space, a space of pure subjectivity, of human experiences (Watkins, 2005), of people's sense-making, imagination, and feeling – that is, their local knowledge – of the organisational space as they encounter it. In so far that our experiences always take place in pre-fabricated physical spaces, and that what we think may not coincide with what we do, the lived space embodies both conceived and perceived spaces without being reducible to either.

Elden's clarification on the concept of lived space, therefore, corroborates Watkins' (2005) call for multi-dimensional enquiries on organisational space, but in particular, it paves way for further attentions into the subjective experiences – the *lived* life, as Lefebvre's magic word suggests – of organisational members' spatial engagements

Space and Perspectives

A second ambiguity concerns the position of lived space in terms of its relation with space as a totality. Most current literatures (Harvey, 1990; Hernes, 2004; Spicer and Taylor, 2004; Watkins, 2005) remind me of the slicing of a pie: the socially produced space is divided into three parts, with conceived, perceived and lived spaces each occupying a piece. This conceptualization, while effective in explaining the interactions among the three elements, seems to be a bit positivist: it quantifies space. If we take a specific spatial event, say a man walks into his office as such-and-such a time, with such-and-such a gesture and in such-and-such a mood, can we easily settle it within any of the three pieces of jigsaw puzzle? Furthermore, the method may carry a deterministic overtone, as Watkins concludes in his article: "it is necessary for the interactions between the triadic elements to be appropriate and in balance if an [spatial] event was to be persuasive and effective" (2005: 220). What he tries to say, it seems to me, is "the understanding of an event" rather than an event by itself.

Again, Elden's reading of Lefebvre sheds insights. Elden notices Lefebvre's interest in the cubist artist, Pignon, whose work Lefebvre has commented, in a 1956 book, as "a

means of challenging the geometric representation of space". Space, as Lefebvre writes in that book, may not change, but "our perceptions of [it] does – they become more fine, more subtle, more profound, more differentiated" (2004: 182). The important thing to notice here is that Lefebvre has always associated the diversity of space – which he later develops into his triad model – with the changing of perspectives of onlookers. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre specifically defines the triad as "the three *moments* of social space" (1991: 40, my emphasis). And if we relates this back to Lefebvre's habitual use of 'moment', noticed by Elden, as "the attempt to achieve the *total* realization of a possibility" (2004: 172, my emphasis), it is quite clear that Lefebvre does not understand the three elements of the triad model in the sense of spatial fragmentation, as in the slicing of a pie.

It could thus be suggested that the existing way of understanding Lefebvre's model can be supplemented with the notion of 'shifting perspectives'. We might compare conceived space, perceived space and lived space as three cameras projecting simultaneously onto any organisational event. Coming back to the previous example, through the first camera we read mathematical data, the height of the man, the length of a corridor, and so on; through the second we see the body movement of the man, his walking about, his gestures; and through the third, we reach into his inner subjectivity, his feeling about the stupid doorknob which wouldn't turn, for instance. Each camera generates different data – that much in agreement with existing literatures – yet each, at the same time, refers to, *as a whole*, the organisational space that they come to represent. In other words, conceived, perceived and lived spaces overlap, not juxtapose, one another.

With this notion in mind, the task of researchers, in their efforts to understand organisational space, is to hop constantly from one camera to another. This hopping will not be easy, and its successful execution requires exactly what Mills (1959) calls almost half a century ago 'the sociological imagination'.

To sum up briefly, I have tried to show that Elden's reading of Lefebvre has helped to clarify the concept of lived space as, first, a balanced and balancing element of Lefebvre's triad model, consisting of subjective spatial experiences, and second, an integrated moment of social space, derived through a particular spatial perspective. This, I believe, is only one example of many possible benefits that Elden's book may bring to organisational studies – for instance, Lefebvre's treatment of the politicality of space and the rupturing moments in cyclical time, two themes repeatedly integrated throughout Elden's book, may prove applicable in the study of organisational resistance – but these are without the scope of this short review. In short, as long as organisational studies continue to draw inspirations from Lefebvre, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre* will be an indispensable commentary as well as general guide to the ideas of the French thinker.

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