

Comprehensive Exam, Field 1 Proposal

Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja:  
From Spaces of Representation to Thirdspace

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This comprehensive exam will investigate the role of cultural practice and representation in the social production of space, as articulated within the spatial dialectic formulated by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* and further developed through the tradition of postmodern geographies advanced by Edward Soja. Lefebvre's work marks a departure from historical materialism in that he spatializes the abstract categories within marxist political economy (relations and forces of production of a given mode of production) in such a way that emphasizes struggle over the meaning of space and allows for spontaneous and creative acts to intervene in what might otherwise be the unreflexive codification of (disciplining/governmental/capital-driven) space. Dominating *The Production of Space* is a historical periodization of spatialities (one that maps against Marx's historical periodization of predominant modes of production), but despite this, Lefebvre's spatialization of marxism is key to the tradition of postmodern geographies led by Edward Soja, which aimed to reinstate spatiality as a corrective to the historicist tendencies in modernist critical thought. Soja takes up Lefebvre's triadic dialectic, with particular attention to level of spaces of representation, and extends the potential of radical intervention through the notion of the Thirdspace: "thirding produces what might best be called a cumulative trialectics that it radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge" (1996, p.61).

Keeping in mind the crucial 'unity' of this triadic dialectic (a unity amongst the physical, mental and social, which requires the cultural realm be understood through their complex interrelatedness across these realms), this comprehensive will approach the problematic of cultural practice and intervention in the production of space in three moves: 1. I will investigate the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of what Christian Schmid calls Lefebvre's 'triadic dialectical' production of space (2008), largely ascribed to a combination of the works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, in order to closely understand 2. the relationship between moments of creative, situated (everyday) practices and the structured ideal and material production of space in Lefebvre's triadic dialectic, through a particular focus on his formulation of 'representational spaces' (1991) or, the translation preferred by the likes of Rob Shields (1999) and Christian Schmid (2008), 'spaces of representation.' 3. Lastly, I will explore how Lefebvre's triadic dialectic, and specifically the level of 'spaces of representation,' encompassing both ideal and material aspects of the production of space, has been extended by Edward Soja into the postmodern analysis of cultural hybridization and what he calls Thirdspace. The transformation of Lefebvre's 'spaces of representation' into Soja's 'Thirdspace' demonstrates tensions within this wider tradition, particularly in regards to the relative position of culture within a broadly marxist framework. The above problematic is one piece in my larger project to understand the changing significance, status and meaning accorded to culture in relation to critical theories on the production of space; this, in combination with my second comprehensive exam, provides a foundation from which to think through cultural policies as articulations of conceived and perceived space that significantly shape neighbourhood formations, but also to understand the transformation of policies as they are actuated through specific cultural practices.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*: A triadic dialectic

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991) works toward an analysis of (social) space, achieved by means of a 'unitary theory' that accounts for the physical, mental and social aspects of space. His intention for this combinatory practice is to achieve a full (or less partial)

and dialectical understanding of space. By his assessment this had yet to be accomplished in previous theoretical traditions, which have led to disciplinary fragmentations and/or materialist or idealist tendencies. In the initial sections of *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre traces out the broad traditions into which he inserts his analysis of (social) space, as a corrective and conduit for new theoretical interactions, reaching back to Aristotle, Descartes and Kant; of particular importance for Lefebvre's purposes is the Hegelian historical tradition, as it was materialized by Marx, and the Nietzschean notions of cyclical space-time and eruptive, creative energy.

Lefebvre's engagements with Hegel in *The Production of Space* are general, in that they are not rooted in any particular text (none of Hegel's works are cited in *The Production of Space*), and are immediately suffused with Marx's materialist critiques and inversions of Hegel's idealist dialectic. That historical time is spatialized and reified within the Hegelian dialectical system, and that this dialectical system operates at the level of concept were the bases for Lefebvre's criticisms of Hegel (Schmid, 2008). Writes Lefebvre (1991),

In clarifying the philosophical (Hegelian) concept of production, and calling for this purpose upon the economists and political economy, Marx was seeking a rationality immanent to that concept and to its content (i.e. activity). A rationality so conceived would release him from any need to evoke a pre-existing reason of divine or 'ideal' (hence theological and metaphysical) origin. It would also eliminate any suggestion of a goal governing productive activity and conceived of as preceding and outlasting that activity. Production in the Marxist sense transcends the philosophical opposition between 'subject' and 'object,' along with all the relationships constructed by the philosophers on the basis of that opposition. (p.71)

Social production is not reduced to a closed, temporal order, but moves toward a goal or objective through the "incessant to-and-fro between temporality (succession, concatenation) and spatiality (simultaneity, synchronicity)... The formal relationships which allow separate actions to form a coherent whole cannot be detached from the material preconditions of individual and collective activity" (p.72). Thus, Marx frees Hegelian historical time from the purely ideal (the concept, located in the rationality of state and organizing institutions) by identifying activity/social production (content) as forces contingent of the historical dialectic. However, Derek Gregory points out that Lefebvre's interest in *Gundrisse*, a work by Marx that retains "the spectre of Hegel," (1994, p. 358) is telling of his resistance to a purely materialist approach, and his insistence on a unitary theory that is inclusive of symbolic processes and idealizations. Lefebvre also points to *The economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, as a moment when Marx calls for the "senses to become theoreticians in their own right" (1991, p.400).

Lefebvre advances also a critique of Hegelian rationalism via Nietzsche, who Lefebvre draws on to introduce the potential for eruptive and creative energies. The systemic rationality inherent to both Hegelian and Marxist historicism cannot contain or account for vital and creative energies of 'becoming,' though neither can these be isolated from each other:

The relationships between force (energy), time and space are problematical. For example, one can neither conceive of a beginning (an origin) nor yet do without such an idea. As soon as that (albeit essential) activity which discerns and marks distinctions is removed from the picture, 'The interrupted and the successive are concordant.' An energy or force can only be identified by means of its effects in space, even if forces 'in themselves' are

distinct from their effects (and how can any ‘reality’ – energy, space or time – be grasped ‘in itself’ by intellectual analysis?). (p.22-3)

Activity, or energy, (here, Lefebvre is addressing energy in general and the category of ‘forces’ that capture the raw materials, the tools and the labour that are directed toward production) is subject to disruption as it unfolds across time and space.

Lefebvre’s combinatory philosophy, or ‘triadic dialectic’ rests largely on the work of the above three authors and can broadly be described as the “contradiction between social thought and social action, supplemented by the third factor of the creative poetic act” (Schmid, 2008, p.33). Materials for this section of the comprehensive examination will include selections from Marx’s *Gundrisse* (1993), Marx and Friedrich Engel’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (2011), and Nietzsche’s *Philosophy and truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s notebooks of the early 1820s* (1979) and *Will to Power* (1968).

The second move of this comprehensive follows from the first; I aim to understand how the above integrated philosophical traditions opens up that which is seemingly categorically limited to the realm of the ‘conceived’ (institutions, symbols and administrative mechanisms for deploying those symbols) through an analytical spatialization that offers multiple points of negotiation. Still firmly asserting his work is within a marxist tradition, Lefebvre insists on the importance of space, or as Rob Shields suggests is more accurate in English, ‘spatialisation.’ Lefebvre’s ‘three-part’ or ‘triadic’ dialectic is summarized by Shields (1999) as:

1. *Spatial practice* with all its contradictions in everyday life, space perceived (*perçu*) in the commonsensical mode – or better still, ignored one minute and over-fetishised the next.
2. *Representations of space* (which might equally be thought of as discourses *on* space); the discursive regimes of analysis, spatial and planning professions and expert knowledges that conceive of space (*l’espace conçu*).
3. *Spaces of representations* (which might best be thought of as the discourse *of* space), the third term or ‘other’ in Lefebvre’s three-part dialectic. This is space *as it might be*, fully lived space (*l’espace vécu*), which bursts forth as what I have called ‘moments’ of presence ... It is derived from both historical sediments within the everyday environment and from utopian elements that shock one into a new conception of the spatialisation of social life. (p.160-1)

In regards to the first level, the level of spatial practice, spatial ensembles or zones, such as spaces of grieving (cemeteries) or spaces of commerce (malls) anticipate and influence spatial movements. The second level is space conceptualized and is inclusive of abstract “knowledge and claims of truth made in the social sciences, which (today) in turn ground the rational/professional power structure of the capitalist state” (p.164). The third level, spaces of representation (taking up Shield’s translation of the term, rather than Donald Nicholson-Smith’s ‘representational spaces’), is the terrain of potential, of the identification of problems and criticisms, and the struggle toward alternatives. Keeping in mind the triadic and contingent formation put forward by Lefebvre, within the context of this comprehensive, I will concentrate on Lefebvre’s construction of the last level, spaces of representation, in *The Production of Space*. Supplemental readings include Eleonor Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (1996), Kristen Ross (1988),

Rob Shields (1995, 1999), Stuart Elden (2001, 2004), Kanishka Goodewardena (2008) and Andrew Shmuelly (2008).

### Henri Lefebvre: Legacy

In *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle*, Rob Shields repeatedly refers to Lefebvre as a ‘conduit’ or “‘conducting wire’ of motivating ideas and sentiments” (1999, p.4) that crosses generations and disciplinary fields. In the final move of this comprehensive, I will explore the influence of Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, on the development of a discourse around global, post-modern geographies, insofar as they identify new points of entry for social and political engagement. Of Lefebvre’s contribution to this area, Shields writes

In *The Production of Space*, the spatiality of society and political action is examined. Not only are places produced through naming, but they are interrelated with each other in a series of ‘historical modes of production of space’. Furthermore, they are interrelated with political and economic processes in that the activities associated with each place form its identity and exclude other activities... Everyday routines, the conventions of debate and interaction, all take place at one or another spatial scale and in space, making their spatial characteristics a crucial issue for utopian thought and for any attempt to change society. ... What was required... was a comprehensive study of this ‘spatial dialectic’ of identities, activity and images associated with any given place. This work made Lefebvre a crucial theorist of critical strands of postmodernism and studies of globalisation. (p.145)

Toward this critical strand, Edward Soja objects to

an overdeveloped historical contextualization of social life and social theory that actively submerges and peripheralizes the geographical or spatial imagination. This definition does not deny the extraordinary power and importance of historiography as a mode of emancipatory insight, but identifies historicism with the creation of a critical silence, an implicit subordination of space to time that obscures geographical interpretations of the changeability of the social world and intrudes upon every level of theoretical discourse, from the most abstract ontological concepts of being to the most detailed explanations of empirical events...it is the dominance of a historicism of critical thought that is being challenged, not the importance of history. (Soja in Gregory, 1994, p.282).

In this final ‘move’ of the comprehensive exam, I will engage with the works of Soja (1985, 1989, 1996), who put forward a depth model of analysis, by which attentiveness to spatiality would reveal a global logic within late capitalism (Gregory, 1994). Soja considers Lefebvre to be part of a French spatial tradition and his part of his assault against what he views as a silence toward and omission of space that is endemic to modernist thought (though Soja’s assertion that space and spatiality were the hidden narrative of modernism is thoroughly critiqued by Gregory). Soja transforms Lefebvre’s trialectics into three levels of space: the physical, mental and social, the latter, Thirdspace, being “a comprehensive space, a lived space of representation,” which Soja sees “as a place from where all spaces can be grasped, understood, and transformed at one and the same time” (Schmid, 2008, p.42). For Soja, the endless expansion of what he calls Thirdspace creates the potential for social and cultural reconfigurations: “Thirling decomposes the dialectic through an intrusive disruption that explicitly spatialises dialectical reasoning... Thirling

produces what might be called a cumulative *trialectics* that is radically open to additional otherness, to a continued expansion of spatial knowledge” (Soja quoted in Shields, 1999, p. 152). Remaining mindful of the considerable objections made to Soja’s re-interpretation of Lefebvre (Shields, 1999; Elden, 2004; Schmid, 2008), the intention here is to grasp the transformation from the trialectics of Lefebvre, to a Thirdspace dominated by landscapes that has been so central to the postmodern geographic tradition. Toward this end, in addition to the above-cited works by Soja, I will draw from support material by Michael Dear (2000), Derek Gregory (1994), Fredric Jameson (1984), Michael Keith and Steve Pile (1993), Andrew Sayer (1995) and Rob Shields (1991).

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