

Henri Lefebvre and the spatial revolution that never ends

Towards the reconciliation of anarchist and Marxist approaches in geography?

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that Henri Lefebvre's Marxism had anarchistic traits, but few have tried to specify what these traits are, or what they mean. This paper argues that Lefebvre's work should be seen as first and foremost an anti-authoritarian theory that uses space, rather than a spatial theory. Written from a position that refuses to be either just 'Marxist' or just 'anarchist', this paper makes a claim to the possibility of a radical geography that can engage with and beyond both.

KEYWORDS anarchism, Henri Lefebvre, Marxism, radical geography, right to the city

[T]he purpose of the struggle is to go beyond democracy and beyond the democratic state, to build a society without state power.

Henri Lefebvre, 1973, p. 138

Away with all bosses, leaders, and those apostles of language who turn words into Sacred Scripture. Avoid idolatry and value the words even of your closest friend or the wisest professor only for the truth that you find in them.

Élisée Reclus, 2013, p. 235

1. Introduction

G. M. Horner (1978, p. 42) once noted that the link between Henri Lefebvre's concept of the urban and anarchist ideas deserved 'more than the passing acknowledgement it has so far received'. In the intervening decades, Lefebvre has become one of the foundational thinkers of critical urban studies and radical geography, but Horner's call remains largely unanswered. Several scholars of Lefebvre have pointed out that his Marxism always seemed to contain an ambiguous proximity to anarchism, but few have really substantiated this claim. Stefan Kipfer et al. (2013, p. 126) tell us that Lefebvre's '*marxisme anarchisant*' (left in French because it sounds so counterintuitive in English?) was 'sympathetic to but not synonymous with autonomism (or anarchism)'. Łukasz Stanek (2011, p. 240) notes that Lefebvre gave us an 'anarchistic reading of Marx'. Mark Purcell (2013, p. 13) takes this further: 'Lefebvre was very much a Marxist', he declares. 'He was also very much an anarchist. But he was not only one or the other, and the terms are not at all mutually exclusive'. Andy Merrifield (2011, p. 62) goes further still, suggesting that Lefebvre 'told us long ago [that] there's essentially no distinction between anarchism and Marxism ... that precludes one practically identifying with the other'. These are intriguing assertions, doubly so because they are not put into conversation with any explicitly anarchist thinkers, nor is the implication of this confluence of *isms* really considered. What follows is an attempt to take these claims a little further, to try and clarify what it is specifically about Lefebvre's work that gives it its anarchistic qualities. As I hope to show, the anarchist elements of the right to the city are crucial to its continued relevance, more so than Lefebvre was ever willing or able to comprehend.

Allow me a brief autobiographical interlude, for whilst this is not an autobiographical paper, it is one I have been chewing on for far too long, a hidden and impossible muse of sorts, held in my computer's back pocket. I am a Marxist, and I hope this never changes. I read Marx, I take his work seriously. I use it, teach it, think with it, and write with it, and (most of) my published work reflects this. Capital, class and labour are fundamental to how I understand the world. I am also an anarchist. My teenage politicisation was anarchist (thanks largely to my dad, whose beautiful old hardback copy of *The Conquest of Bread* seemed to arrive from another planet), and I have never stopped reading anarchist literature, and being inspired by anarchist ideas, outside of work, behind the façade of the Marxist urban studies scholar. To some (of either tribe), that sounds foolish, as if I'm too naïve to really understand either of the traditions that I hold dear. I'm willing to admit that perhaps I am a little foolish, but I also want to try and articulate the desire for a radical geography that has space for work which draws (sincerely, respectfully, critically) from anarchism *and* Marxism, without pitting one against the other. You could call that position anarchist communist, libertarian Marxist, libertarian communist, some new label, or nothing at all, but there is precious little work in geography that explicitly signifies that this is where it stands. So one aim of this paper, which might seem grandiose but to me feels quite personal, is to re-frame Lefebvre as one (of many) figures who can show us this is not only possible, but perhaps a desirable confluence. When Löwy and Besancenot (2023, p. 159) try to ground their hope that 'the future emancipatory battles of our century will ... see this convergence, in both action and thought, of the two great revolutionary currents of the past', they provide portraits of figures (including Rosa Luxemburg, Louise Michel and Buenaventura Durruti, among others) in the history of Marxism and anarchism who have, to varying degrees, blurred the lines between the two through their ideas or their actions. They do not mention Lefebvre, but as I hope to demonstrate, they should have done.

This is a paper that seeks to emphasise Marcelo Lopes de Souza's (2012a) assertion that dialogue between Marxists and libertarians in relation to the city is essential, but it is also a paper that seeks to challenge the distinction he sets up between Henri Lefebvre as 'a Marxist' in opposition to 'a libertarian approach' (de Souza, 2012b). In Lefebvre's 'wayward and renegade' (Ross, 2008, p. 8) hands, this dichotomy begins to leak a lot of conceptual water. This is not to suggest that Lefebvre *was* an anarchist (clearly, this is not the case), but rather to highlight how these demarcations are sometimes so fluid they become 'remarkably indistinct' (Bower, 2016, p. 93). It is up to us whether we reaffirm this thin distinction or tease it apart. Lefebvre's work cannot transcend the sometimes-bloody animosities between Marxists and anarchists. My claim is simpler: that to fully explore the political possibilities of his work, it makes no sense to ignore anarchist ideas. I should also note that I am not suggesting that between them anarchism and Marxism lay claim to all the ingredients necessary for an effective radicalism, but as several others have pointed out, a pluralist radical geography is far healthier than one characterised by internecine squabbling (Gibson, 2014; Pickerill, 2017; Purcell, 2012).

It is widely acknowledged that geography has an anarchist streak to its *past*, epitomised most clearly in the transnational lives of Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, who managed to be respected professional geographers in the nineteenth century whilst being (far more internationally and enduringly) respected anarchist revolutionaries (Ferretti, 2019). It is, however, much easier to trace the impact of their geographical thinking on anarchism than it is to see the legacy of their anarchist thinking on geography, which remained steadfastly statist in its imaginaries and institutions (Hewitt, 2000). In Henri Lefebvre, we have a thinker whose impact on critical

human geography is immense, but whose work can easily get siphoned off into the abstract, watered down into the reformist, or deradicalised to such an extent that it becomes merely a signifier of intellectual nous, emptied of any imperative to action. I imagine, at times, what it would be like to chart an inverse map between these fates: the revolutionary anarchists, written out of geography's intellectual story except as curious counter-facts, versus the revolutionary Marxist, written into geography's intellectual story as validator of 'we who think spatially'. What if there were connections here that could be unearthed, to use anarchism to re-think the radicalism of Lefebvre, and use Lefebvre to re-think the radicalism of geography? I cannot make any reckless promises of salvation in this leap, but I do believe that re-situating Lefebvre in this way may open up opportunities for 'thinking as anarchists' (Kallin & Gioli, 2022) within geography without being tribalistic about such labels, with and against the work of a Marxist whose imperative to think politically about space is as vital as it ever was.

2. Waiting for the Revolution

It might be tempting to ground an argument about Lefebvre's anarchistic tendencies through a reflection on what we might call his *poetic individualism*. The Henri Lefebvre that Andy Merrifield (2006, 2008) portrays was subversive and excessive, living a wine-and-conversation fuelled life to the rhythms of a masculine libertarianism. Through his connection to the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and the Situationists, he no doubt rubbed shoulders with those who were closely connected to anarchism. Even if these movements remained limited in their political potential (Bonnett, 1992), there is no doubt that the fusion of revolutionary idealism and artistic practice helped to cultivate the seeds of a radicalism that would emphasise culture, everyday life and autonomy for both Lefebvre and the anarchists (Biagi, 2020; Papanikolas, 2016).

Despite this, Lefebvre often sought to explain why he was *not* an anarchist; demarcations that invite some scrutiny, for they are simultaneously confident, flawed and familiar. The most often quoted expression of this comes in the form of a joke:

In my first meeting with Lefebvre in 1978 I clumsily asked him, 'Are you an anarchist?' He responded politely, 'No. Not now.' 'Well then,' I said, 'what are you now?' He smiled, 'A Marxist, of course...so that we can all be anarchists some time in the future'.

Soja, 1996, p. 33

Simon Springer (2014, p. 263) considers this as 'an attitude that resides in the decomposing body of vanguardism', but I think that is unnecessarily dismissive. The smile is important to me—let's take it seriously, as ideological flirtation. What recurs in these claims of distinction is a fixation on *time*, and revolutionary time more specifically. In *The Sociology of Marx* (Lefebvre, 1973, p. 129), for example, he suggests that:

Marx's objective wasn't necessarily opposed to that of the anarchists: the end of the state, the end of hierarchies and political instances, with an attendant abolition of private ownership of the means of production. Nonetheless, anarchists like Bakunin abridge and even jump over the period of transition.

Almost identical words can be found in his 1966 paper on *Theoretical problems of autogestion* (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 139). In all these instances, Lefebvre offers his critique in sympathetic terms, but the lines are clear: if ‘anarchists like Bakunin’ abridge and jump over the period of transition, they are foolish—moreover, they are wrong—to do so.

The use of ‘Bakunin’ as a fixed marker of the anarchist position is always slightly frustrating, for his inconsistency on the idea of revolution opened up a debate within the movement rather than foreclosing one (Day, 2005). By the time Lefebvre was old enough to read them, key anarchist thinkers had explored the virtues of a radical ‘gradualism’, which opened up a far more interesting sense of what revolution meant, both strategically and intellectually (Turcato, 2015). As many accounts of Lefebvre enthusiastically attest, his Marxism was wonderfully heterodox, his sense of history never teleological (Alvarez, 2007; Elden, 2004; Merrifield, 2006), and yet his representation of anarchism (as they so often are) remained ahistorical, fixed and so reductive it frequently reads like a parody. Excavating an anarchic trait in his work therefore requires a certain sardonic distance. I do not read these rebukes with bitterness, but with half a smile in return, for what emerges is an increasingly farcical distinction, albeit stubbornly embellished. In his 1964 paper on *The withering away of the state*, Lefebvre (2009, p. 89) reiterates this:

Marx reproaches the anarchists for wanting to go too fast, for leaping ahead of the historical era that is the era of transition, the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but he would declare himself in agreement with the anarchist tendency on the point that there is no freedom so long as there is a state.

Encountered as such, what makes you ‘an anarchist’ as opposed to ‘a Marxist’ appears to be little more than a matter of patience. Whilst ostensibly all about timing, this is itself a timeless accusation, replayed in Marxist discourse since the split of the First International. It misconstrues its target (though that has never harmed its effectiveness as an accusation). The anarchist conception of revolutionary timing might appear to match this caricature because it is immediate in a *practical* sense: start now, in your daily life, in your workplace, without waiting for the saviour of a grand revolution, a merciful state, or the teleological crises of capital reaching their mythical endpoint. But it is not immediate in an *ideological* sense: capitalism, racism, patriarchy, the state, and so on, are not forms of oppression that can be thrown off in one grandiose sweep, they must be reconquered continuously (Vodovnik, 2013). Insofar as it is possible to pin down the (singular) anarchist position on the timing of revolution, it blows itself wide open, led by the desire for means to emulate ends. *Prefiguration* is not the sole preserve of anarchists avowedly identified as such, as work within geography on contemporary activism demonstrates (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021), but it remains a fundamental tenet of anarchism, and one that distinguishes it sharply from other forms of revolutionary praxis (Franks, 2012). In this sense, the anarchist conception of revolution posits a permanent period of transition: revolution in the anarchist imagination is not a temporally, spatially, singular event. It is not, to quote Horrox (2010, p. 197), ‘a final state of development or a static form of society, but rather becomes permanent, an infinite and perpetual process in which ends and means are one and the same’.

To reduce the distinction between anarchism and Marxism to a caricature of timing is to miss (intentionally or not) the critique of *power* that lies at the heart of anarchism’s suspicion of ‘the Marxist approach’. As Bookchin (1986) reminds us, far too often the unflattering representation of anarchism borne from the animosity of the Marx/Bakunin rift is still taken as a somehow insightful comment on anarchism itself. It isn’t, and we should stop replicating it uncritically. What

are we to make of Stuart Elden's (2004, p. 227) bizarre claim in *Understanding Henri Lefebvre* that 'the anarchist aim of the end of the state and with it the abolition of private property is laudable, but this cannot be achieved overnight'? Find me a (sober) anarchist who thinks it can! Moreover, as Löwy and Besancenot (2023, p. 87) suggest, fixating on the debate between Marx and Bakunin as somehow determinant of all revolutionary history from that moment onwards is pointless: 'reduced to this single aspect, the discussion quickly becomes a dialogue of the deaf'. The variegated histories of anarchism and Marxism are so much richer (and more challenging) than this simple distinction. Lefebvre rests on it because it was received wisdom, easily regurgitated, but I discard it. It is not useful because it is not accurate.

What makes Lefebvre's rejection of anarchism beguiling as well as frustrating (from an anarchist perspective) is the way in which he then begins to pose anarchist principles against his own definition of anarchism, creating in the process a kind of tautological dog that chases its own tail.

In the transitional period, the objective is not simply to destroy the state (that is the anarchist position) but to let society as a whole—the transitional society—take over the functions previously performed by the state.

Lefebvre, cited in Merrifield, 2006, p. 129

Expressed as such, I begin to see this distinction as more identarian than intellectual. It does not require much by way of digging to identify a strong and prominent vein in anarchist thought and action that makes this dismissal, expressed as such, seem unfit for purpose. Take Alexander Berkman's (2003, p. 179) *What is Anarchism?* Initially serialised in Yiddish, published in book form in 1929 and reprinted countless times since, it informs us in no uncertain terms that '[t]he social revolution is not an accident, not a sudden happening. There is nothing sudden about it, for ideas don't change suddenly. They grow slowly, gradually, like the plant or flower'. If anything, Berkman's endearing treatise is weakest for its belief in progress (which is partly what makes it so appealing). For Errico Malatesta (1892), revolution was never—and could never be—just an 'event'. Revolution was ongoing, and realised only through the lived reality of the changes it entailed. For Élisée Reclus, revolutions were the 'forced consequences of the evolutions that preceded them' (quoted in Toscano, 2013, p. 169). Peter Kropotkin's (1970) vision for a 'social revolution' involved spontaneous acts of appropriation (this is what Lefebvre often seems to be mean by 'anarchism', bearing heavily the influence of the Paris Commune), but these become a *revolution* only through their agglomeration, and they would mean nothing unless underpinned by what might rather clumsily be called an ongoing culture shift. This is even clearer in Emma Goldman's (1979) idea of revolution as the utter transformation of what Lefebvre would later call everyday life. This could never be enacted through the abolition of the state alone, because authority and domination were never solely derived from state power, as she well knew from her own experience within the anarchist movement (Goldman, 1970). As Gustav Landauer (2010, p. 214) put it, somewhat opaquely, '[t]he state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships'.

These are not niche thinkers within the broad history of anarchism (with the exception, perhaps, of Landauer), but some of its most famous proponents, whose work was circulated around the world in cheap editions in multiple languages and has been in continuous print ever since, all of which Lefebvre could have read if he had wanted to, but I can only conclude he didn't. Their

ideals were insurrectionary and militant, expressed in urgent terms, with varying opinions on the efficacy and ethics of violence-as-method. But whatever one may think of them as strategists, or the chances of the movements they were embedded in, it is *rationaly impossible* to read their work and find a sustained belief in ‘simply’ or ‘immediately’ destroying the state ‘overnight’, after which all would presumably be well. The history of anarchism—whether among the Jewish tailors in London’s East End (Fishman, 2004), the farmers’ collectives in rural Spain (Dolgoﬀ, 1990), the rent strikers in Buenos Aires (Cappelletti, 2017), etc. etc.—is characterised by long-term community activism, union militancy, direct action, education, mutual aid and internationalism. We do not need to agree with those tactics or ideals to admit that they existed. Within those ranks there were of course impatient revolutionaries (as exemplified by the lone ‘terrorists’ that so eﬀectively haunted the bourgeois imagination at the turn of the twentieth century, fictionalised in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*), but the straw-man of ‘Bakunin the Immediate’ cannot withstand a genuine investigation of the debates over tactics, ideals and strategies within the broader anarchist movement(s) in the decades before and during which Lefebvre was writing.

This is strikingly evident in Daniel Guérin’s (1970) *Anarchism*, which became a best-seller in France during ‘those weeks of regeneration’ (p. 159) now known by the shorthand May ’68. Guérin himself was a fascinating figure on the French radical left, who shifted over his lifetime between variations of Trotskyism and anarchism, never fully denying the insights of either, culminating in a composite libertarian communism that sought to overcome the divisions between the two (Berry, 2014; Löwy & Besancenot, 2023). In *Anarchism*, he dedicates significant space to ‘the need for organisation’, with workers’ self-management as the ideal form of that organisation, reflecting the long association between anarchism and forms of revolutionary syndicalism, especially in France (Nettlau, 1996; Rocker, 2004). Noting that Henri Lefebvre found this to be ‘a rather surprising contradiction’, Guérin (1970, p. 43) points out that this could only ‘astonish’ (Lefebvre’s word) those who had never seriously engaged with the history or ideas of anarchism; those who were, in other words, ignorant of the idea they defined themselves against. Perhaps membership of the French Communist Party, in this instance, came with a set of blinkers that Lefebvre railed against but never fully took off? If the British anarchist Colin Ward had ever read Lefebvre, he may well have returned the astonishment: he spent a lifetime dedicated to the idea that anarchism was society taking over the functions previously performed by the state (Scott-Brown, 2022; Ward, 1982). Lefebvre’s claim negates itself.

Insisting on the necessity of a temporally bound era of transition is a theoretical division that (in Spain, and the USSR in particular) was brutally hardened in dried blood. It bears the murderous and reactionary shadow of a doctrinaire ‘communism’ that was terrified of genuine workers’ power and did all it could to eradicate it. This was a doctrine that Lefebvre concertedly, consistently and passionately disavowed (Biagi, 2020).¹ But if, as Guérin (1989) suggests, we imagine ‘transition’ as one in which the building blocks of a future society are enacted, then this ‘era’ is imagined very differently from the political programme that positions it in hostile opposition to anarchism. It is temporally unbound, for it can logically have no beginning and no end. It is here, I believe, that Lefebvre’s thought in relation to anarchism proves so interesting.

¹ See Franks (2012) for an interesting discussion on the role of the Soviet Union (through both discourse and bloodshed) in maintaining and hardening the sense of distinction between anarchism and Marxism as revolutionary traditions that had previously co-existed. This becomes important when Lefebvre’s intellectual project as an anti-Stalinist (in its complete sense, i.e., against the possibility rather than the individual) is born in mind.

So far, I have largely been critiquing Lefebvre's dismissals of anarchism from an anarchist perspective. Admittedly, this is a fairly long-winded way of casting aside the division put forward in these claims of distinction, especially as this is all somewhat superficial: it is not time that matters—in any worthwhile conception of revolution there is clearly time (however unbound) between society as it is and any desired future—but what is *done* in that time that matters. Now we need to fill that time, to think about what was supposed to be done, what was done, and what we might want to do.

3. Marxism and the State

[T]here is no abuse of power, for always and everywhere power abuses ... The idea of complete *subversion*, that of *revolution*, aims at the destruction of politics, because all state power is destructive.

Henri Lefebvre, 1996, p. 187

One of the oddities of Lefebvre's work is its rapid rise to citational fame since the turn of the millennium, broadly mapping on to the time-lapse between when he wrote and when (some of) his writing was translated into English. This means that the work of the Marxist revolutionary has largely come of age in a post-Marxist intellectual climate, and this in turn means that its revolutionary intent sometimes gets a bit lost. Lefebvre's Marxism may have been playful and irreverent in ways that allow it to slip easily into the production lines of contemporary academia, but he held fast to the necessity of pursuing 'a project that has been abandoned: the dictatorship of the proletariat' (Lefebvre, cited in Purcell, 2014, p. 146). It is curious indeed that a figure so routinely cited by geographers and urbanists as an almost paint-by-numbers assertion of moderate criticality (Blomley, 2006), who can be encountered as the grandfather of 'everyday life' devoid of class struggle, held firm to what is arguably the most brutal, tragic, authoritarian and counterrevolutionary epithet in actually existing socialist history.

In Lefebvre's (2009, p. 85) words, the era of transition is a period of time in which 'the previous State, the State of the bourgeoisie, must be fragmented and replaced with a new type of State, but this State must wither away'. This sounds like straight-up Marxist-Leninism, and surely it creates an unbridgeable chasm between Lefebvrian thought and anarchism? Anarchists avowedly and famously reject this idea of an interim period in which a new state—a 'workers' state'—must oversee its own dissolution. This is not due to juvenile impatience, but a fairly rational (and continuously vindicated) fear that any centralised state authority retained as a system for organising all of society will not wither of its own accord, and hence the 'period of transition' is itself naïve (Cook, 1989; Kropotkin, 1970; Newman, 2004). Moreover, as Rudolf Rocker (1998) noted in the 1930s, the transitional model was anathema to anarchists not only because of the totalitarianism it went on to legitimise, but because it sapped the European workers' movement of its will to extra-parliamentary action by instilling something close to a *faith* in the stages of a history yet to unfold. Resuscitating the anarchic tendency in Lefebvre's work requires an engagement with this contradiction. It masquerades as the Marxist anchor that keeps his vision safely in ideological order. I'm not so sure.

To put it mildly, Marxism has a somewhat ambiguous relation to state power. This ambiguity remains absent (astonishingly so, to my mind) from many of the mainstream accounts of state

theory, even those that pay substantial attention to the Marxist critique (see, for example, Bartleson, 2001; Held, 1989; Jessop, 2008; Marinetto, 2007; Pierson, 2004). There is an ahistoricism in these accounts which makes little sense, given that it is ‘history’ (specifically, Stalinism) that so dramatically reshaped Marxist intellectual thought on the state in the twentieth century. If, ‘in short, Marxian thought is fundamentally anti-state’ (Lefebvre, 1973, p. 136), then that totemic cry and demand for the proletariat to ‘centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class’ (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 243) is one of the most fateful contradictions in political ideology. Lenin’s (1992) *The State and Revolution* remains an exhilarating expression of this contradiction, and one that had a profound effect on Lefebvre’s thinking. Lenin notes that between the *Communist Manifesto* and *The Civil War in France*, there was one significant shift in Marx’s thought. The latter represents the only ‘correction’ Marx made to the former, for through his veneration of the Paris Commune, the gap (politically and temporally) between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the withering away of the state seemed to disappear. The two became one and the same.

Lenin took the lessons of the Commune seriously, as of course did Kropotkin and the other Swiss emigres (Ross, 2015). The resulting treatise was greeted by senior Bolsheviks as thoroughly mad (Žižek, 2002) because it appeared to advocate ‘unmediated class rule, a notion much more closely associated with anarchism than Marxism’ (Miliband, 1970, p. 311). But it is a text that remained blind to the possibility that the state—or more broadly, oppression, authority and domination—might not be entirely reducible to the relations of capital. It sought to wipe away capitalism and the state ‘with subordination, with control’ (Lenin, 1992, p. 44), through ‘establishing strict, iron discipline’ (p. 45). *The State and Revolution* is thus radically libertarian and radically authoritarian at the same time (Zurbrugg, 2014). It was a proclamation which seemed to incorporate a heavy dose of anarchist ideas (whether by strategic calculation or not, we shall likely never know). This did not go unnoticed, and its publication led to a surge of support for the Bolsheviks from the more libertarian groupings of the international labour movement, particularly within France (Berry, 2009; Patsouras, 2003). Needless to say, Lenin’s statement of desire for a society free from bureaucracy and centralised power was rapidly overtaken by what actually occurred. What actually occurred was, in turn, the catalyst for a generation of Marxist thinkers to begin a serious critique of bureaucracy and centralised power (Lefebvre included). This was arguably too late, one might add: Kropotkin’s (1970, p. 337) sombre warning to Lenin that ‘the very word socialism will turn into a curse’ had already come to pass for many.

Broadly speaking, the trajectory of leftist intellectual thought since the calcifying failure of the Bolshevik revolution has been an attempt to come to terms with this. Thus when Eagleton (1995) asserts that post-structuralism emerged out of ideological *defeat* (the collapse of revolutionary fervour in the aftermath of 1968), he might be looking at the wrong defeat. The revolutionary potential of the Bolshevik Revolution dissipated quickly, though exactly how quickly is not something I will attempt to specify. What matters is that in returning to this moment of ‘madness’ at its genesis, in taking from Lenin the desire for ‘groups of associated workers, freely managing and directing their interests’, Lefebvre (2009, p. 145) articulates a vision that attempts to recapture the anti-authoritarian promise of Bolshevism. It does so by leaping back to the point at which it was still possible to articulate such a vision because Bolshevism was not the authority—in other words, Lefebvre responded to that nightmare which ‘permit[ted] the compulsory teaching of *State and Revolution* to students while maintaining the most oppressive and rigid state structure known to history’ (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 79) by wishing it away in a

time-machine. A determinedly ahistorical reading of Lenin is not, however, that intellectually or politically exciting: what rescues Lefebvre's thought is how he chose to apply this idea, and more specifically, the importance of space. To put that another way, what rescues his thought is *also* what makes his thought so appealing to geographers. His spatial theory becomes revolutionary because it had to: the revolution was to be urban, or nothing at all (Goonewardena, 2012).

4. Autogestion or Dictatorship

In 1965, Lefebvre (2021) penned an influential reflection on the Paris Commune, just shy of its centenary. Here he talks explicitly of unity between the various revolutionary factions. As Biagi (2020) notes, this is crucial to the evolution of his thinking precisely because it is *urban space* that becomes the unifying field of struggle, and the state which becomes the target. A vehement criticism of state power runs as a leitmotif through Lefebvre's subsequent work (Ronneberger, 2009), and we can trace this all the way through to the mid-1980s, towards the end of his life.

By this point, the trajectory of 'communist' politics granted no small number of reasons to be heartbroken, but Lefebvre was still dreaming of an urban form fearless in its imagination. His co-authored entry for the competition to design the New Belgrade, capital of the then-communist state of Yugoslavia (Lefebvre et al., 2009) remains, as Neil Smith (2009) notes, remarkable for two reasons. First, it is an example of Lefebvre's rare interaction with making plans. This was, however, a plan that refused to do what is expected of respectable plans (namely, proscribe a pre-determined future), and was thus rejected at the first stage of the competition (Stanek, 2011). Second, herein his political priority is rendered with unusual clarity: *autogestion*. The right to the city was to be autogestion urbanised. And what is autogestion? As Lefebvre encountered and recounted it, it is a strategic reaction to the horrors of authoritarian communism, an attempt to wrestle the future of the left back from the future of the state.²

The New Belgrade plan, submitted in 1986, could easily be dismissed as an addendum to the state-sanctioned plans for socialism in Yugoslavia, but the vision it expounds was far more radical. In his controversial 1958 book on the *Problèmes actuels du marxisme*—fiercely critiqued in various communist journals (Kelly, 1982)—Lefebvre notes that there are two types of socialism: 'one, administrative or state socialism, has—sometimes in a dreadful fashion—demonstrated its effectiveness. The other, socialism without a state, is still in search of its path and its formulation' (cited in Ronneberger, 2009, p. 95). The Yugoslav experiments in autogestion promised to be both path and formulation but failed to live up to the promise of either.

Translating somewhat awkwardly into English as self-management (but invoking specific connotations of workers' control), autogestion has a contested history in France. It emerged from the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group in the late 1950s as a project of de-Stalinisation that in many ways was much bolder than Lefebvre's, for its members began to unravel the bureaucratic tendency inherent in Marx's work itself. This put them much closer to an anarchist position, but the flavour of their radicalism remained distinctly grounded in a Marxism they rebelled within/against (Anonymous., 2018; Castoriadis, 2002). As Mudu (2012) notes, the idea of autogestion brought the theory and praxis of anarchism and autonomist forms of Marxism close to each other, even whilst conversation between the two remained minimal. By the 1960s, however, the idea was gaining attention within sections of the mainstream French and Italian communist parties as

² Mark Purcell (2013, 2014) comes closest to excavating the anarchic tendency in this formulation.

a resuscitation of the challenge to ‘finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men [sic], working with the means of production held in common’ (Marx, 1990, p. 171). This multiplicity leads Brenner (2008) to suggest that autogestion is too vague—deployed as both a statist and anti-statist ideal—but Lefebvre was quite explicit about this: what he advocated bore little relation to the ‘autogestion’ which was tentatively (and, as it turned out, temporarily) written into policy by both the French Communist Party and its Socialist counterpart. This was not because they were doing it wrong, but because they could not do it; those ‘worshippers of full state economic control’, as he would describe them, ‘are playing with words’ (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 85).

The hope for a more democratic communism in Yugoslavia was rapidly fading away by the early 1970s. Power was recentralised to regional elites, with nationalisation subsuming the project of democratisation. Observing this, Lefebvre restated his priority with even greater clarity. ‘A state that proclaims autogestion from above’, he wrote in 1978, ‘paralyses it by this mere fact and converts it into its opposite’ (cited in Ronneberger, 2009, p. 98). ‘The movement comes from below’, he went on to argue, ‘or it does not come at all’. Daniel Guérin, reflecting on Yugoslavia at the same time, reached a very similar conclusion (Dolgo, 1990).

5. An Anti-Authoritarian Theory of Space

The following year, in his 1979 *Comments on a new state form*, Lefebvre (2001) outlined a vision of the state that bears striking similarities to that put forward by anarchist thinkers. He notes that the state reproduces itself through relations of domination; that a strong state will never wither, no matter who is in control of it; that nationalisation consolidates the state, and should be replaced with truly democratic control. In his introduction to the English translation, Brenner (2001, p. 796) suggests that this is not speculation on the ‘erosion or disappearance of state power as such’, but rather its ‘qualitative transformation into a nonproductivistic, radically decentralized, and participatory institutional framework’. I do not disagree with this entirely, but it strikes me as a very specific way of expressing what can be said in words much closer to the spirit of Lefebvre’s own, where we wither the capitalist state away (actively) through an ongoing project of democratisation achieved through the generalisation of the principle of workers’ control. Such a formulation is closer to a libertarian-Marxist position and closer to an anarchist position at the same time, precisely for the reasons that Brenner highlights, but in words that are perhaps more threatening and less academic. As Merrifield (2011, p. 47) puts it, autogestion ‘introduces its own antitheses of the state’ through direct action, and seen in this light, to organise society in such a way that was truly (forever striving to be) decentralised and participatory would be to live in a world in which the state as we know it had already ceased to exist.

Lefebvre would no doubt argue that a *real* reading of Marx would reveal that anti-statism was part of the project all along (sometimes I agree), but this is where your definitions of the era of transition and the dictatorship of the proletariat become crucial. If the former begins now and never ends, and the latter is always to be democratic, never dominated by a state-form, then the defining line that separates this vision from anarchism is remarkably hard to distinguish except for biographically. It is in this sense that Merrifield’s (2013, p. 33) bold assertion that ‘there’s essentially no distinction between anarchism and Marxism ... that precludes one practically identifying with the other’ begins to make some sense. As Purcell (2014) notes, Lefebvre’s formulation

of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is key both to his identity as a Marxist *and* highlights his proximity to an anarchist approach. It leaves him stuck somewhere in between.

Lefebvre’s political project was to try and find a way of re-animating the era of transition in such a way that it lived up to its anti-authoritarian promise and, perhaps more pressingly, lived up to the political and intellectual demands of a post-war radical left that, broadly speaking, was still beholden to Marx but increasingly disavowed authoritarianism. His answer was the right to the city, a vision of spatial democracy that tried to expand the concept of workers’ control into urban space itself, into everyday life, into realms that orthodox Marxism tended to ignore. There are parallels with the Situationists, whose ideas he either inspired or stole, depending on who you believe (Ross, 1997); with the Italian autonomists, whose reconceptualisation of class also coalesced around a vision of urban revolution (Gray, 2018); and, less obviously perhaps, with those anarchists whose search for a new approach to radical change increasingly focused on the ‘quotidian’ and the spatial around the same time (Ward, 1987).

Lefebvre’s emphasis on space as a mode of theorisation cannot possibly be detached from this anti-authoritarian impulse. The right to the city was a rejection not only of capitalist urbanisation, but also statist urbanisation, reaching its horrifying extremity in the dead hand of Stalinism and its ubiquity in the stultifying bureaucracy of the tightly managed city. It was a rejection of the mentality that saw space as empty, exchangeable, measured by its potential for development, space as seen through the distant eyes of the state, the planner, the speculator, whose schemes would be enacted on and never by the people they effected. That famous tension between space as it is conceived and space as it is lived (Lefebvre, 1991b), which has become one of the sacred tenets of left-leaning urban studies, can be seen not as a ‘spatial’ theory but first and foremost an anti-authoritarian theory that uses space. To put this into an admittedly slightly cryptic formulation, *it is space that allowed Lefebvre to overcome the problem of revolutionary time*, where the ‘problem’ I am alluding to was the not insignificant historical fact that the state in a communist society did not wither away, and usually did the opposite, with unimaginably brutal consequences. (This perhaps implies that the anarchist critique of power was a bit more relevant than impatience, but never mind.) As Purcell (2013, p. 39) puts it, Lefebvre ‘envision[s] an ongoing process whereby people take up responsibility for governing themselves’. It is at this point that the anarchist reader might smile back at Lefebvre, and whisper *but, of course...*

6. Conclusion?

If it is true that you yearned for Revolution as a thirsty man yearns for water why has your work been accepted, assimilated, integrated? Does it bear witness to the Revolution or rather to its failure?

(Henri Lefebvre, 1971, p. 131)

In the words above, Lefebvre was addressing Picasso. Half a century later, you could hold up a mirror and reflect them right back at him. Shorn of the radicalism that holds its constituent parts together, so much of his vision—the importance of art, festival, diversity, centrality, the everyday, places that are somehow more lived than abstract, and so on—fits so easily into the marketing-talk of a speculative urbanism that relentlessly profits from ‘authenticity’, ‘experience’ and ‘diversity’ (Goonewardena, 2005). These ideas are, and have been, so easily co-opted (Mayer, 2012). There

remains significant ambiguity about the radical potential of ‘rights’ themselves (Attoh, 2011), whilst the right to the city has been adopted in multiple contexts as the label for reformist, state-led projects that have involved little more than minor acts of redistribution (Fricaudet, 2020). As geographers, we have become experts at ‘excavating the possible’ (Gibson-Graham, 1996) of small everyday rebellions but connecting those dots is crucial.

It is in this light that I consider the ‘anarchic’ elements of Lefebvre’s Marxism to be important rather than merely intriguing. It invites us, *inter alia*, to combine a study of the ‘everyday’ with a yearning for revolutionary change; to connect scales in such a way that does not depoliticise or fetishise the ‘small’; to centre a critique of state power in our understanding of capitalist urbanisation; to amplify the anti-authoritarian impulse of spatial theory in this moment of widespread revanchism and surveillance; and to learn from a much broader history of radical activism. This does not mean that radical geography ‘must be’ anarchist (contra Springer, 2014), but perhaps it needs to take seriously the ways in which it already is.

For those engaged in the revivification of an explicitly anarchist geography of the past and the future (Ferretti, 2019; Ince, 2012), this provides a bridge to creatively use and shape spatial theory. For scholars of the right to the city, recentring autogestion clarifies what makes this elusive ‘right’ actually radical (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2022). Lefebvre’s work has been endlessly generative for geographers over recent decades. Acknowledging its anarchic elements may allow us to hold onto the creativity and everydayness that are such appealing parts of his legacy, without deradicalising these into ideas that are obsessed only with themselves or the minutiae of the quotidian, isolated from the revolutionary dream that created them, and which they may in turn create. Can anarchism save Lefebvre from the fate of Picasso? No, probably not. But it might help.

The weakness of Lefebvre’s argument against anarchism does not make him an anarchist, but his refutation is not sufficient to obscure the myriad points of overlap between his vision and an anarchist vision. Nor is it sufficient to act as an intellectual barrier now, for us, between these revolutionary traditions. Taking this seriously illustrates one small way in which the broad lessons of Marxism and anarchism can be used together, if not in continuity, then in a tension that is itself, I hope, of interest. In a characteristically flamboyant turn of phrase, Lefebvre (1991a, p. 56) once argued that ‘dogmatism is a great evil which comes in many forms. If we are to exterminate it we must hunt it down in every nook and cranny and drag it from its hiding place by the tail like a rat’. This entails a move beyond ‘ideological posturing’ (Pickerill, 2017) to avoid the inertia that is found in the comforting ‘security of tradition’ (Bookchin, 2002). For if Lefebvre is the ‘Marxist urban studies godfather’ (Merrifield, 2013, p. 1), he left behind a restless Marxism that is constantly teasing its own limits. In doing so, he was far from alone. The defining characteristic of many of the twentieth century’s most interesting radical thinkers is that they started firmly but critically within the frame of Marx’s work, and end up dragging the boundaries of that work out with them, breaching it with holes, reinforcing it with patches, destroying and rebuilding it simultaneously. To do so is in some ways quintessentially ‘Marxist’, for to stand still, stuck in received wisdom, is to violate ‘one of the essential principles enunciated by Marx himself’ (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 77). The spectre of Marxism as an homogenous lump (dogmatic, dominant and abstract, the disgraced ‘Other’ to so many currents of contemporary academic thought) disappears when you look directly at it. But it does so in part by transcending itself, no longer containable on that part of the bookshelf neatly labelled ‘Marxism’.

Anarchism inspires me. It has done for a long time. The idea that ‘every state protects the privileges of the powerful’ (Ward, 2004, p. 2) is invigorating because it is such a simple observation but one that is so vital. It still prompts me to consider those multiple ways in which subjectification, authority, governance, discipline, categorisation, expertise, and so on, continuously re-make the world. Rules uphold inequality; hierarchy perpetuates individualism; mutual aid stands as a necessary utopia that we are all, to some degree, practising already. ‘Freedom’ is too vital an idea to be surrendered to the ideologues of capital. When I first encountered Lefebvre, I was struck by an unexpected sense of familiarity. I do not mean this in a hubristic sense, as if he taught me nothing new. I simply mean that these ideas felt enticingly compatible with this ‘other’ revolutionary tradition that it so steadfastly positioned itself against. Years later, what convinced me to try and publish this isn’t because I believe it to be finished or watertight or even particularly necessary, but when I was an undergraduate student of geography I was searching for something that articulated the (or a) possibility of working with both Marx and anarchism, and I never really found it: so here, have it. At its simplest, Lefebvre’s work serves as an invitation to think with the Marxist critique of capital (which remains vital) *and* the anarchist critique of power (which remains vital). This is not a smooth reconciliation, nor can it be, but it is live in Lefebvre’s work, within which there is a fierce tension between the ideals of freedom and equality. It is this tension (rather than a sense of contentment with one or the other) that imbues his work with its anarchic traits, for it is this tension that creates the idea of anarchism itself (Berti, 2022; Chomsky, 2005).

In its historical context, Lefebvre’s anti-authoritarian turn was not particularly unique, but the reason we still obsess over it is that it turned to space and to everyday life as its route to a revolution that could be enacted against the state and capital simultaneously. In doing so, it crept closer and closer to an anarchist vision of revolution, for *the right to the city is prefigurative or it is impossible*. As Kalb (2014) notes, even David Harvey’s work on the right to the city is often prefigurative in its vision, and it is not difficult to wonder why. What else could it be? Whether we like it or not, there is no Party, no Winter Palace to be stormed, no Orthodoxy to hold onto. That is either terrifying, or a liberation, depending on your point of view.

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