

The Marxian legacy in defense of utopian thinking

Notes on Lefebvre's thought

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Abstract: In this article we aim at enquiring about the importance of the concept of «utopia» in Henri Lefebvre's thought connecting it, on one side, with urban studies and, on the other side, with Lefebvre's scope to renew and update Marx and Engels's legacy. Our goal is to demonstrate in what way Lefebvrian urban studies are traversed by a new vision of the meaning of «utopia»; in fact we'll be able to understand how the political status of the «right to city» is incomprehensible without the reflection upon the utopia. Such a research is ground-breaking, since in the current secondary bibliography on Lefebvre there still isn't a systematic contribution on this topic. Our approach highlights the concepts that were developed by the French author from a historical-critical point of view.

Key words: Henri Lefebvre; right to the city; utopia; urban studies; Marxism.

1. Introduction

Henri Lefebvre's long life (1901-1991) covers almost entirely the whole span of the Twentieth century and during that period the author intercepted the more essential debates and issues that characterized the century, committed as he was to make an assessment of the Marxist and communist experience «much too often a generator of boredom, incapable of interpreting an utopia and of making advancements on the everyday life criticism» (HESS-WEIGAND 2006). Above all, in order to highlight the crucial role of the reflection on utopia in Lefebvre's thought one needs to start from the Sixties, that is: the years in which – following his banishment from the French Communist Party (1958) – the author instructed himself in the intellectual and political *gauchiste* groups reluctant to the Stalinist orthodoxy and willing to radically renovate Marx's legacy and Marxism itself. Among the latter there's a strong friendship with the

International Situationist group and the editorial staff of the «Utopie» journal¹. It's the contact with such political avant-gardes that allows Lefebvre to improve the structure of his project and to renew the Marxian legacy in light of the new social issues caused by fordist modernity. In fact, afterwards, at the end of the Sixties, he will write that «thus Marxism, as a whole, really is a critical knowledge of everyday life» (LEFEBVRE 1991: 148).

2. The criticism of the functionalist urbanism and the «Utopie» journal

«Utopie» (1967-1973)² is a journal – partly contemporary to the «Internationale Situationniste» journal (1958-1969) with which it entertained intense relations from the political point of view – founded by Henri Lefebvre's most brilliant students, among whom one could find Hubert Tonka (Lefebvre's assistant and friend, urban planner, editor and publisher), Jean Baudrillard, René Lourau (both of them sociologists and also Lefebvre's assistants), Catherine Cot, Isabelle Auricoste (the urban planners), Jean Aubert, Jean-Paul Jungmann e Antoine Stico (all three of them architects), with whom the Nanterre's professor teams up recurrently³. What's more, Miguel Abensour (2014: 17-19), when was a young philosopher and Claude Lefort's collaborator, approaches the «Utopie» group, in addition, later will dedicate several works to the utopia theme, recapturing that concept even in the Marxist tradition.

«Utopie» proposes to give voice to urban criticism against functionalist architecture highlighting above all the capitalist and the State's alienation in the consumption devices spread all over the city. The founding idea to the publishing project is to fight the production of the fordist urban space by opposing solidly a different idea of city, eviscerating new possible ways to be pursued concerning human habitation. In this regard it is vital to understand a famous thought of Lefebvre's:

¹ The friendship with the Situationist group is recalled by Lefebvre as «a love story that didn't end well» (LEFEBVRE 1975: 89), the author repeats the same comment in Kristin Ross's interview (1997: 69-84). Regarding the relation Lefebvre-Debord the reconstruction undertaken by Gianfranco Marelli (2017: 134-227) in the monumental political-intellectual biography of the Situationist movement is also paramount.

² For a full reconstruction of the intellectual parable of the «Utopie» group see Busquet (2004: 55-58; 2007: 167-184) and Paquot-Tonka (1998: 49-52). For the English translation of the «Utopie» journal see: Buckley-Violeau (2011).

³ Lefebvre in the course of a 1975 interview, following is detachment from the group of the «Utopie», would qualify as «negative utopia» the journal's continuing studies (LEFEBVRE 1975: 182-183).

The roads of the utopian thought are confused. Utopia has also had its contradictions [...] I draw a distinction between concrete and abstract utopias, between positive and negative utopias, between technological and social utopias. I also draw a distinction between «*utopistes*» e «*utopiens*». The first abstract dreamers, while the second conceive concrete projects. (LEFEBVRE 1975: 180)

The distinction between «*utopistes*» (utopists) and «*utopiens*» (utopians) allows us to get a grasp the goals of the journal. «Utopie» is the journal of those who see themselves as «*utopiens*», meaning those who within the imagination of alternative and revolutionary urbanism desire to enact a performative reflection about reality, without letting themselves be overwhelmed by the abstractness of the utopian world of ideas⁴. Utopia opens new horizons of reflection and concrete possibilities to build other cities, outside the logics of the Fordist industry and of the market.

Hubert Tonka considers that the group feels like a testimony of an intellectual mission that should point towards a novel route to urban development by making use of a critic action and the introduction of an original re-interpretation of the concept of «urban utopia as polar star of social change» (PAQUOT-TONKA 1998: 49-52). In this regard, Thierry Paquot (1996: 75), recalls that the utopia affirms itself simultaneously as contestation of the social order and as alternative way that can be trailed. A clear example is the Lefebvrian interpretation that indicates within the Paris Commune the possibility of suspension of the space-time dimension of the Capital in order to open different insurgent fissures. This kind of discontinuity in fact is comprised in Lefebvre's idea of «utopia», and is – indeed – pointed out by the author in the space-time dimension utopia capable of shattering the cycle of the dominant regime and pave the way to a new one. Lefebvre in fact maintains that «all revolutions have some sort of prophetic quality in them» (LEFEBVRE 1965: 38), that is, they trigger a new space-time utopian dimension. Moreover, Lefebvre seizes the concept of «utopia» to indicate the suspension of the space-time of the Capital and the beginning of a new course for the «being-with in a shared world» between men. The prophetic element anticipates and attempts to build a genuinely democratic political regime, despite the tragic fate that will consecrate the end of the Commune and the extermination or exile of all of its most active partakers: «This

⁴ In this regard see Francesco Careri's works (2001, 2018) in which he draws the links between the urban thought of the Situationists and architects, namely Constant Nieuwenhuys, and Lefebvre's literature.

utopia, this pretense myth, was for a few days part of the facts and of life. In this sense, the Commune intermingles with the idea of revolution itself, seen not as abstract reality but as solid idea of liberty» (LEFEBVRE 1965: 390). The «Festival» of the Commune carves in the memory of the oppressed the option of an everyday life that would differ from that imposed by the Capital logic. The main reference is also Furio Jesi (2014); however, prior to the Germanist one should bring to mind the theoretical constellation of the «On The Concept of History» by Walter Benjamin (TOMBA 2017).

Above all, the distinction between «utopistes» and «utopiens» allows one to get a grasp of the radical rejection by those who conceive the utopian imagination as abstraction from the everyday universe, as an ideation of societal projects born without a performative connection with the social reality in which we live. The «utopien» is the one who simultaneously, on one hand, imagines a future theoretical prospective and, on the other hand, looks at such a utopian landscape in the light of the historical dialectic contradictions. The abstractness of the utopian world of ideas does not convince Lefebvre. Conversely the author imagines a utopian moment for the thought that necessarily is also a performative way of action to transform the current state of things. If the «utopien» is someone who inserts the utopian idea into reality to unlock the latent possibilities, the utopian imaginary, in other words, the utopian intervention of Man in the world is characterized by the praxis: firstly, by interrupting the linear and unidirectional time of the capitalist clock; secondly, because of its ability to open a breach that deviates the course of History and that pushes it – by means of a radical rejection– to pursue a diverse space-time plan.

An anecdote evoked by Benjamin reaches us in order to help us understand the concept of «suspension» of the ruling temporality. During the revolutionary riots of July 1830 the French revolutionaries – as recalled by Benjamin in his fifteenth thesis «On the concept of History» – as night fell down started to shoot all the clock towers in Paris. What was compelling them to pursue such an action? Why had the clock become a target? Benjamin perceives in that action the symbolic value of the clock which in that moment stood for the time of oppression. The clock towers stood as symbol of repetitive and unvarying time of progress, ruled by the rhythms of the capitalist economy. The rebel workers shot the image of that system that had assured their subjection, excluding the entire Parisian population from a dignified existence. Destroying the clocks meant creating a fracture in the only time that had been possible until then, opening new

temporal dimensions for everyday life. One can imagine, thus, how the concerted political action was indeed a «miracle»⁵ to those laborers who until then had been divided and who had bent their heads enduring so many aggravations from their bosses. Therefore, such is in Lefebvre the historical declension of utopia; a meaning that recaptures partially the trails strolled by Benjamin, Jesi and more radical readings on Arendt (ABENSOUR 2006). The utopia to Lefebvre is concurrently a braking device to the capitalist progress and a new beginning for an alternative political project. This utopia declensions itself in the concreteness of the praxis, avoiding any risk of abstractness, as follows:

[...] for reflection necessarily involves a form of utopia if it is not content to reflect and ratify compulsions, blindly accept authority and acknowledge circumstances; it implies an attempt to interfere with existing conditions and an awareness of other policies than those in force. Utopia? Yes indeed; we are all utopians. (LEFEBVRE 1971: 74-75)

3. The experimental utopia: projecting a new conception of urbanism

The philosophical-political thought that reflects on the present of the social praxis is, as a result, the theoretical frame in which the author founds the concept of utopia. Thought and action are strongly connected, tied by a common intersection that opens history to a new path. In Lefebvre's eyes social change can't be detached from a process of utopian expansion of its premises. In one of his last interviews prior to his death, in January 1991, he declares:

Thinking the change in this day and age forces you to reason utopically, that is, it means to envisage a lot of fates for possible futures and to choose among them. Utopia has been discredited, it should be rehabilitated. [...] This is the function of Marxism in the contemporary thought. (LEFEBVRE, LATOUR, COMBES, 1991: 18-19)

Such utopian function developed simultaneously in the thought and in the concrete praxis is one of the responsibilities that Lefebvre leaves in legacy to Marxism at the time of the

⁵ I explicitly refer to Hannah Arendt's political thought (1990, 2003) who understands the concerted action in public space as an act similar to a miracle, to the point she ends up referring to revolutions and to the political forms of the Consiliarist tradition as a «lost treasure».

neoliberal counter-revolution. Thus the utopia configures itself as a pole of resistant thought that in times of historical trouble, notwithstanding the pervasiveness of the dominant ideology, allows new emancipation fissures to shimmer⁶.

For such purpose, in «Engels et l'utopie», an article published in «Espace et politique. Le droit à la ville II», Lefebvre (2000: 81-98) highlights how Marx's faithful friend based his thesis upon «The Housing Question» (ENGELS 1872) and «Anti-Dühring» (ENGELS 1877) by recapturing Fourier's intellectual legacy. Lefebvre will demonstrate, by reviewing both texts step by step, how Engels fought the «abstract utopia» and the orthodox systematization of a given theory because his scope was to anchor the philosophical analyses in the practical reality (LEFEBVRE 2000: 90). Lefebvre maintains that on one hand Düring is an «ante-litteram» structuralist (LEFEBVRE 2000: 87) and Engels is fighting an intellectual battle against the obsession to systematize a thought within a predefined theoretical matrix. On the other hand Engels fights the «utopists» systems created in the abstractness of an idea which is disconnected from everyday life, but not the utopia itself. To Fourier he concedes the merit of having been one of the first theoreticians to have brought to light the effects of industrial labor division and the need to overcome the antithesis between city and countryside. In Lefebvre's eyes, Engels re-elaborates the socialist utopianism driving it into becoming a revolutionary utopia, in other words, a «concrete utopia» (LEFEBVRE 2000: 96; BLOCH 2000). The latent possibilities in the present aren't thus predefined in determinism, and it isn't licit to build a society system to be enacted *ex-ante* based on them; on the contrary, they should be considered as «trends» and all probabilities should be submitted to theoretical examination.

According to Lefebvre «concrete utopia is grounded on the motion of a reality of which the utopia unveils the possibilities» (LEFEBVRE 2000: 90). The utopia that Engels fights against is in fact an abstract utopia of one who «prescribe the form in which this or any other of the antitheses of present-day society is to be solved» (ENGELS, 1872). Engels's target is the prescriptive act, performed «ex-ante» of certain utopias; however the German philosopher, in order to fight Proudhon, doesn't hesitate in recalling Fourier since praising the «power and charm» of his works (ENGELS 1877). This original

⁶ I would like to highlight the connections between Lefebvre and Benjamin by means of the emblematic title that Tomba (2017) used for his last work on Benjamin. Benjamin's «The Small Door» (La piccola porta) is a concept similar to the cracks, inside which the «breach of the utopia» as imagined by Lefebvre penetrates the linear time of progress.

interpretation of Engels's urban studies allows Lefebvre to place the utopia at the core of the revolutionary trail drawn by Marx and Engels.

Since we've already clarified the background on which the Lefebvrian utopia is highlighted we are now to pursue our next step: the definition of the meaning of «urban utopia».

In «Utopie expérimentale: pour un nouvel urbanisme» Lefebvre (1961: 191-198) draws a distinction between the «abstract utopia» that is built *ex-ante* and the «experimental utopia» that is the kind of urban studies that establish as prime goal the «exploitation of the human possibility, helped by the imaginary» that is accompanied by «a continuous criticism and continuous reference to the problematic of the relationship between real and reality». Along the way the author hypothesizes the creation of a «polycentric model of city» (LEFEBVRE 1961: 191-198) based on the example of the ancient Greek city that organized the urban time and space around diverse nodes of activity: from the *agorà* to the stadium, from the temple or from the acropolis to the theater. A city, therefore, that develops common social spaces grounded on everyday practice and on human needs, and not one made from an urban model submitted to economic laws. It is precisely in this reflection that Lefebvre – keeping close track of Debord and the Situationist movement – recaptures the concepts of «playing» and «ludic leisure» as theorized by Fourier. With such a concept the French sociologist wishes to point to the ludic practice as alternative to the free time» of the consumerist society. In fact the imaginary of «free time» comprises the fact that there is a «non-free time» subjected to the fordist productive labor. The concept of «playing», as being «multiform and multiple» (LEFEBVRE 1961: 191-198), would instead overturn the «time of labor» and «free time» dichotomy eliminating the debris of instrumental reason in favor of a harmonic dimension not just of the times of labor but as well of the moments of leisure and rest.

Lefebvre suggests the «transduction» method as a means to avoid the risk of falling into the «abstract utopia». The transduction is a method that «cannot be reduced to deduction and induction, that builds a virtual project from gathered information on the reality of a preset problem. [...] The experimental utopia goes beyond the customary usage of the hypothesis on the social sciences domain» (LEFEBVRE 1961: 191-198). However we rediscover a definition of «transduction», that is more understandable regarding the relation that it has with the notion of «utopia», in «The Right to the City»:

Transduction elaborates and constructs a theoretical object, a possible object from information related to reality and a problematic posed by this reality. Transduction assumes an incessant feedback between the conceptual framework used and empirical observations. Its theory (methodology), gives shape to certain spontaneous mental operations of the planner, the architect, the sociologist, the politician and the philosopher. It introduces rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia. (LEFEBVRE 1996: 151; see also 1968: 22-26)

Therefore the transduction offers a method to the utopian thought so that it doesn't run ashore in the universe of abstract dimension, outside the reality of urban life. Adding to this no particular knowledge holds more merit than any other within the study of the space and of the city anymore; and all the intellectual power arises from the meta-philosophic method that is a knowledge that goes way beyond philosophy and that breaks the disciplinary boundaries in order to perform it in the coherent analysis of practical life. The «urban utopia» in its «experimental» form invests in fact «in appropriation of time, space, psychological life and desire» (LEFEBVRE 1996: 155). The utopian foresight is also the tool that allows a way-out of the stingy urban functionalism of the Le Corbusier's Fordism (LEFEBVRE 1967: 14-16). Instead of the functionalist «strength jacket» Lefebvre suggests a radical break and a radical liberation for the urban life fates: «the utopic in this sense has nothing in common with an abstract imaginary. It is real» (LEFEBVRE 2003: 38). Such is the open sea to be crossed with the compass of meta-philosophical transduction toward the polar star of the utopian thought.

4. Right to the city and urban utopia

Following the path partially trailed by Peter Marcuse, Christian Schmid opposes the Lefebvrian concept of «right to the city» to the nowadays economic-political rhetoric of urban gentrification and valuation. In fact, the «right to the city» according to Schmid becomes an instrument of «concrete utopia» that guides the political praxis of all the political subjects who fight against the circuits of speculative valuation (SCHIMID 2011: 42-62; BUTLER 2012: 133-140, 143-146). In that regard Lefebvre will articulately clarify in «Espace et politique. Le droit à la ville II» (chapter six: «Le bourgeoisie et l'espace») the meaning of the famous formula of the «right to the city». Four years

following the first volume («Le droit à la ville», 1968) Lefebvre clarifies in more precise terms the topics he had started examining since the Sixties and he even explicitly declares to whom his work was addressed:

This expansion of the city is accompanied by decay in the architecture and in the urban frame. People, mainly laborers, are forced to scatter, away from urban centers. Economic, social and cultural segregation is what has dominated the process of expansion of the city. [...] The urbanization of society is accompanied by a deterioration of urban life [...] It's because I have in mind these inhabitants of the peripheries, because I think about their segregation, their isolation, that I talk in a book of «right to the city». (LEFEBVRE 2000: 144-145)

Firstly, it is possible to notice how the «right to city» stands in continuity with the Marxian legacy. Lefebvre remains coherent to the aim of testing under the urban analysis Marx's categories, aiming at renewing and updating Marxism itself. His original intuition resides in the problematization of the Marxian «proletariat» as social subject (that was clearly connected to the state of things of the nineteenth century working class), beholding all those workers and peripheral residents who concretely live the social segregation of the big buildings designed upon the functionalist model as used in the reorganization of the fordist «banlieue». Therefore, reflecting upon the «right to the city» in an urban context that is produced by the spatial politics of the fordist capitalism he succeeds in including, in his emancipation theory contained in the volume «Le droit à la ville», all of those social subjects who live in precarious conditions at the margins of markets and consumption. Particularly in light of what happened in what was then the Parisian periphery of Nanterre: jam-packed by the precarious lodgings of immigrant laborers.

Secondly, it's paramount to stress the accent on the meaning of «right». As Lefebvre wrote: «It's not about a right in the lawful sense of the term [...] these rights are never literally enacted, but they are always referred to in order to define the society's situation» (LEFEBVRE 2000: 144). The French philosopher doesn't wish to add a new right to the long list of innovative «human rights», but point to a concrete and performative course of combat and of social conflict. The right to the city in fact presents itself as a social and political «cry and demand» (LEFEBVRE 1996: 158), and as demand it's is a possible utopia, attainable, that is, concrete: without a radical criticism on the capitalist system there's no room for its genuine enactment, such is the peculiarity of the experimental utopia.

Thirdly, we aren't standing before a juridical issue, but a philosophical-political one. With the concept of «right to the city» Lefebvre imagines a political theory of emancipation within the spatial context, which propelling force however clashes against the predatory will of capitalist economical-political logics. Thus, the city is interpreted as the scenario where social conflicts are expressed and, in this regard, Lefebvre recaptures the conflict theory by Niccolò Machiavelli:

In the urban context [...] Political confrontations between the «minuto popolo» [small people] the «popolo grasso» [fat people], the aristocracy and the oligarchy, have the city as their battle ground, their stake. These groups are rivals in their love of the city. As for the rich and powerful, they always feel threatened. They justify their privilege in the community by somptuously spending their fortune: buildings, foundations, palaces, embellishments, festivities. (LEFEBVRE 1996: 67)

As is widely known the «small people» and the «fat people» that fight against each other the political fate of the *polis* evoke the Machiavellian political philosophy, that republican and libertarian Machiavelli – rediscovered by Claude Lefort – who pretended to give lessons to monarchs, but instead gave them to oppressed people⁷. The space of the city is the playing field of a antagonism among those who can be visible and have a voice and those who instead must remain invisible and without any possibility of uttering a word. Identity, social and political recognition is determined in democratizing and emancipating the space that is lived by subaltern groups. The politician status, in its spatial dimension, is necessarily crossed by partition, by the disagreement of those who are excluded and those who exclude: «the urban presents itself – thus to Lefebvre – as a place of conflict» (LEFEBVRE 2003: 175). This is the reason why I maintain that one can talk of a conflictive conception of the right to the city. Such a clash pertains to the urban space and its organization.

5. Conclusion

The radical interrogative that Lefebvre reflects upon is: Who makes decisions about the planning of space? Who decides how men should live and dwell in? In other

⁷ Most probably Lefebvre knew Claude Lefort's works (1972) on Machiavelli since he had entertained amicable relations with the group of «Socialisme ou Barbarie». Such an interpretation is recaptured by the author without referring to a specific quote.

words, deciding «about the city» is deciding «about politics». Is it possible then to read Lefebvre as a philosopher and sociologist of conflict and, particularly, of the conflict that occurs in the spatial dimension of urban life. The right to the city materializes itself essentially through political action which purpose is to attain genuine democracy, even in what pertains to managing and organizing space. It is the overturning of the city as «merchandize» by those excluded and oppressed, and the dialectic reconstruction of an actual state of «being-with in a shared world» in the context of the «city as work» of those who reside in it. The definition of the concept «right to the city» remains accordingly an open field to the happening. Lefebvre doesn't hypostatize a meaning or a system, but offers the reader some clues that should be followed to formulate a theory that always derives from action and from what happens in society in an attempt to open new utopian possibilities to attain full emancipated and free human social interaction. Finally, the Lefebvrian utopian approach is intrinsically connected to the conflictive scenario opened by the notion of right to the city: the utopia guides the political action that devises and builds new scenarios for the «being-with in a shared world» towards a possible city liberated from capitalistic logics.

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