

I Jornadas Internacionales de Investigación y Debate Político

(VII Jornadas de Investigación Histórico Social)

“Proletarios del mundo, uníos”

Buenos Aires, del 30/10 al 1/11 de 2008

LEFEBVRE: SPACE IN THE DIALECTIC

*The dialectic is back on the agenda. But it is no longer Marx's dialectic,
just as Marx's was no longer Hegel's.*

(Henry Lefebvre)

IVONALDO LEITE*

The dialectic is the centripetal of Henri Lefebvre's many interests. Focusing on dialectical materialism as a general method developed by Marx but applied by him only a limited number of fields, Lefebvre proposed dialectical materialism as a universal method. As Rob Shields says¹, while Althusser and “scientific Marxists” saw economics and materialism as the legacy of Marx, Lefebvre saw dialectic materialism as the rigorous core of Marx's insight. The dialectic itself thus became the cornerstone of Lefebvre's philosophical critique of the formal logic of traditional philosophies.

Like Marx and Engels, Lefebvre found the positive aspect of Hegel's dialectic in his *phenomenology*, where he was not content simply to record the content of thought but attempted to develop a method that comprehended its ongoing process of production, *autopoiesis* and change. Seizing life only in terms of logical concepts and celebrating the realisation of mind in social institutions such as the state – which act progressively against the people – is rejected as a form of alienation. This is why whole history of alienation is nothing more than the history of the production of abstract thought, of speculative, logical thought.

* Professor at Department of Education of State University of Rio Grande do Norte/Brazil.

Marx and Engels had built upon the work of Feurbach, who exposed a fatal flaw in Hegel's system: if mind becomes nature and matter, then matter becomes mind, dissolving the basis of Hegel's dialectic. Feuerbach argued that philosophy was systematic religion, and he proposed setting individuals and their relationships with each other in the core of any post-Hegelian philosophy. Marx's and Engels' addition was to reconceptualise individuals as concrete social beings in definite historical-geographic relationships. Adopting this materialism, Lefebvre argued², Marx and Engels were the first and foremost seeking to deepen humanism and their critique of alienation. Dialectical Materialism seeks to give thought back its force by linking it directly to practice, and moving Hegel's dialect into concrete social analysis and finally applying it to economic relations before moving on to nature. Lefebvre argue that we in turn must apply the method of dialectical materialism to the contemporary problems. The truth, he says, is to be found in totality. The true is the concrete. Speculation must be transcendent.

However, Lefebvre is not a thinker who only repeats Marx' and Engels' arguments about dialectical materialism. He makes an additional contribution. Lefebvre shifts the ground of dialectical materialism from time to space. After his best-known work on space, he draws back from a periodicising historical narrative of the dialectical development of modes of space and their relationship with capital and visuality, substituting an analysis of the spatial extension of capital in the present. Thus, for him, the contemporary dialectic no longer clings to historicity and historical time, or to a temporal mechanism such as *thesis-antithesis-synthesis*. This, then, is what is new and paradoxical: the dialectic is no longer attached to temporality. Therefore, refutations of... Hegelian historicity cannot function as critiques of the dialectic.

According to that, Soja proposes what he calls *third space* as a translation of, on the one hand, Lefebvre's three-part dialectics of the social production of space³. Ross also affirms: "time, said Feuerbach, is privileged category of the dialectic, because it excludes and subordinates where space tolerates and coordinates. Our tendency is to think of space as an abstract, whit physical contexts, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we helped create. The difficulty is also one of vocabulary, while words like 'Historical' and 'Political' convey a dynamic of intentionality, vitality and human motivation, 'Spatial', on the hand, connotes stasis , neutrality and passivity. But the analysis of social space, far from being reactionary or technocratic, is rather a

symptom of strategic thought... that poses space as the terrain of political practice... always entails an encounter with history of – or better, a choice of histories”⁴.

However, the claim being argued here is that a spatialised dialectic foregrounds a new form of affirmation-negation-negation of the negation found in the old forms of dialectical materialism. We are aware, of course, that neither Hegel nor Marx used the terms thesis, antitheses, syntheses (it is, rather, from Fichte) and that affirmation-negation—negation of the negation is Marx’s and Engels’ formula. The third term of negation of the negation is that alternative route which displaces or reconfigures – divides – the dualism of affirmation-negation. This is the philosophical implication of Lefebvre’s proposition that dialectics could be extended into *trialectics* in which a position is opened up for otherness within dialectical materialism. Lefebvre himself does not appear to fully grasp or exploit the importance of this shift. His description of a *dialectique de triplicité* as merely a three-way dialectic consisting of a thesis with not on, but two anti-theses is confusing.

To use the example of Lefebvre’s description of social space, it suggests that practice, thought and imagined space are elements synthesised together in a social spatialization. But this third term is in fact treated more as a negation of the negation than an equal player with the first two, and he uses language that harks back to his old work on the “total person”. Perceived, conceived and lived out are used to describe practice, thought and imagined, respectively. The three make much more sense if they are rethought as a dialectical contradiction of: everyday perception/practice versus spatial theory/concepts relativised by a transcendent, entirely other, moment: creative, fully lived space. If we still insist on counting terms and positions, any notion of a totalising synthesis lies in a fourth, transcendent term, what Lefebvre calls *l’espace*, itself - best understood as the spacialization.

Conclusively, it is possible to show two figures on the subject⁵. One demonstrates the interpretation of Lefebvre’s triple dialectic and another one focuses its implications. See them.

<p>I Affirmation (Thesis) <i>e.g everyday practice and perception</i></p>	<p>II Negation (Anti-thesis) <i>vs. analytical theory and institutions</i></p>	<p>III Negation 2 (Otherness) <i>vs. fully lived moments</i></p>
---	--	--

IV Synthesis
i.e. social totality

Figure 1: Common interpretation of Lefebvre's triple dialectic

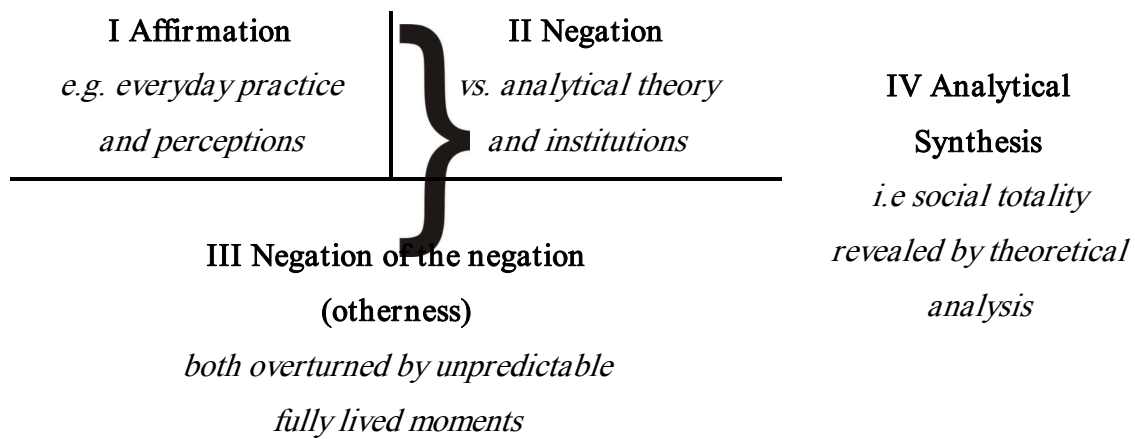


Figure 2: The implications of Lefebvre's dialectic of triplicity

NOTES

¹ - See SHIELDS, Rob (1999). *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*. London: Routledge.

² - See LEFEBVRE, Henry (1974). *Le matérialisme dialectique*. Paris: Press Universitaires de France.

³ - SOJA, Edward (1996). *Third Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

⁴ - ROSS, Kristin (1988). The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune. New York: Macmillan, page 348.

⁵ - According to SHIELDS, Rob (1999). *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*. London: Routledge.