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# The Place of Space in Social and Cultural Theory

*Simon Susen*

## Introduction

'Space' has become an increasingly important concept in contemporary social and cultural theory (see, for example: Bourdieu 1991; Gregory and Urry 1985; Hess 1988; Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine 2004; Keith and Pile 1993b; Knowles and Sweetman 2004b; Massey 1994, 2005; Pile 1996; Pile and Thrift 1995a; Shields 1991, 1999; Soja 1989; Thrift 1996; Urry 1985, 1995; Zieleniec 2007). The diversity of empirical and theoretical studies of space is symptomatic of the multi-layered constitution that characterizes the physical structuration of social life. In light of this complexity, any attempt to provide a comprehensive account of space will be fraught with difficulties. In fact, the possibility of a general theory of space appears to be contradicted by the abundance of interactional spheres that exist in differentiated social settings. Given the variety of both spatial theories and spatial realities, it may be impossible to develop an explanatory framework capable of capturing the multifaceted dimensions underlying the territorial organization of human societies.

One of the most insightful accounts concerned with the fact that the construction of society is inextricably linked to the production of space can be found in the writings of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, notably in his influential study *The Production of Space* (1991 [1974]; see also Lefebvre 1974, 1996, 2000, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Lefebvre's theory of space has been thoroughly discussed in the literature (see, for example: Brenner 2000: 367–76; Butler 2012; Elden 2004; Goonewardena *et al.* 2008; Hess 1988; Keith and Pile 1993a: 24–6, 30, 36; Martins 1982; Merrifield 2006; Shields 1999, 2004: 211–12; Soja 1989; Stanek 2011; Urry 1995; Zieleniec 2007: 60–97), but no attempt has been undertaken to propose a Lefebvrian outline of a general theory of social space, that is, a conceptual framework capable of capturing the transcendental conditions underlying the spatial structuration of *any* society, regardless of its historical specificity. To be sure, such a framework is not meant to suggest that the construction of space can be understood independently of its social conditions of production; rather, it is aimed at shedding light on the fundamental properties that *all* social spaces share, irrespective of their context-specific idiosyncrasies. In this chapter, no attempt shall be made to do justice to the wide-ranging scope of Lefebvre's oeuvre; instead, the following analysis focuses on key insights gleaned from his acclaimed book *The Production of Space*. These insights, as shall be demonstrated in subsequent sections, permit us to develop a tentative outline of a general theory of social space.

## Historical and intellectual development

### *The concept of space in classical sociology*

Before examining Lefebvre's theoretical framework, it seems sensible to locate the concept of space in the canon of sociological discourse. In this context, two straightforward observations should be taken into account.

First, the concept of space can be considered a *marginal category* in classical sociology. 'Space has never been central to sociological thought', and therefore 'it remains fair to say that the significance of space for the discipline at large has been peripheral from the beginning' (Lechner 1991: 195). Interestingly, when examining the key works of the 'founding fathers' of sociology – that is, the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber – it becomes evident that they did not treat 'space' as an important category of social analysis or attach paradigmatic status to the study of the spatial constitution of society.

Second, space can nevertheless be conceived of as a *central component* of social life. Every human action is spatially situated, for individuals as well as 'groups and institutions have a "place"' (Lechner 1991: 195). This may appear to be a truism, but, at least in sociology, the seemingly most obvious requires critical reflection. Just as it is vital to recognize that 'time' is a fundamental constituent of social life, because individuals and societies are embedded in temporally contingent contexts, it is imperative to acknowledge that 'space' is an integral element of human existence, because individual and collective actors are situated in spatially organized realms of experience. Of course, it may be far from clear *what* exactly we mean by 'space' and *how* it influences, or in some cases even determines, our relation to the world; it is difficult to deny, however, that it *does* have a significant impact upon our daily engagement with reality in general and with society in particular.

Georg Simmel, who is now widely regarded as one of the founding figures of sociology, is an exception in the canon of early modern social thought: 'Among the classical sociologists, only Georg Simmel treated space systematically, but his main contribution was largely ignored' (Lechner 1991: 195). Given the originality of his writings, it is worth considering a number of significant insights provided by his sociology of space (see especially Simmel 1997 [1903]; see also Lechner 1991). In essence, we can identify five central presuppositions underlying Simmel's critical study of the spatial organization of human activities.

First, social spaces are unavoidably shaped by the power-laden relationship between *inclusivity* and *exclusivity* (Simmel 1997: 138–41). The emergence of social configurations is contingent upon their capacity to generate realms of interaction defined by – implicitly or explicitly recognized – rules of inclusion and exclusion. Regardless of whether we are dealing with micro-sociological spaces, which are anchored in people's lifeworlds and their experience of *Gemeinschaft* (at the local level), or with macro-sociological spaces, which come into existence through people's real, and at the same time imaginary, construction of *Gesellschaft* (at the regional, national, continental or global level), spaces composed of human actors are permeated by social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. As critical sociologists, we need to examine on what grounds human actors are either granted or denied access to a given social space. Whether particular actors are included in or excluded from specific social realms depends largely on their position in relation to other actors. Access to social positions hinges on access to material and symbolic resources, which are asymmetrically distributed and interactionally mobilized through stratifying variables, such as class, ethnicity, gender, age and ability. To the extent that social spaces constitute relationally constructed realms sustained by asymmetrical differentiations, the existence of territorial separations can contribute to, or even be the basis of, processes of demographical segregation.

Second, social spaces are constructible only in terms of the contingent relationship between *unifiability* and *separability* (Simmel 1997: 141–46). Human societies cannot exist without the partitioning of space. Boundaries contribute to both the integration and the disintegration of territorial realms. By definition, social spaces are relationally constructed unities which can be joined with, or separated from, one another. The malleable nature of social space is due to the fact that human life forms are in a constant state of flux: to the extent that social spaces can be united and divided, codified geographical arrangements can, at least in principle, always be reconstructed. As territorial realities that are at the same time unifying and separating, social spaces are sources of both facticity and validity: as sources of facticity, they exist as objective realities determining what *is* possible within a given territory; as sources of validity, they exist as normative realities determining what *ought to be* possible within a given territory. In brief, boundaries of spatial organization are both objective and normative sources of social demarcation.

Third, social spaces are marked by the relationship between *fixity* and *changeability* (Simmel 1997: 146–51). Social spaces have the power to constrain and alter human actions, just as human actions have the capacity to shape and transform social spaces. When experienced by social actors, spatial arrangements may seem natural and given: our constant immersion in spatially differentiated realities can make us blind to the fact that social arrangements are never forever. Situated in the world as embodied entities, we are prone to take space for granted, thereby forgetting that the physical organization of human life forms is socially regulated. To the extent that spaces appear to be fixed and invariable, we tend to reproduce them and thereby strengthen the power of their legitimacy. Since the territorial organization of the social world is historically variable, however, we can also transform spaces and thereby undermine their, seemingly unassailable, authority. The legitimacy of human actions is always imposed or negotiated in relation to the social spaces in which they take place. What may be considered a legitimate form of behaviour in one situation may be regarded as an illegitimate mode of conduct in another context. The grammaticality of social space can be either confirmed or challenged by the performativity of human action.

Fourth, social spaces are generated through the relationship between *proximity* and *distance* (Simmel 1997: 151–59). There is no society without lifeworlds. Only insofar as we are capable of experiencing one another in social spaces of physical proximity are we able to immerse ourselves in the coexistential realm of humanity. The most deterritorialized societies, characterized by the creation of abstract space, cannot dispense with embodied actors, situated in concrete space. Even when we mediate our social interactions through the use of communication technologies, which enable us to transcend space when engaging with others in distant localities, we cannot annihilate our deep-rooted need for the experience of face-to-face relations, which permit us to absorb space when encountering others in intersubjectively constituted realities. The human need for physical proximity can be challenged but not eliminated by the power of social technology. For the creation of society is inconceivable without the formation of community: the abstract space of *Gesellschaft* emanates from the concrete space of *Gemeinschaft*.

Fifth, social spaces are produced through the relationship between *sedentariness* and *mobility* (Simmel 1997: 160–70). High mobility – for example, of nomadic groups – tends to be associated with low degrees of social differentiation. By contrast, low mobility – for instance, of sedentary groups – tends to be accompanied by high degrees of social differentiation. As a consequence, communal forms of mobility often involve the creation of social solidarity: the more we are bound to share the process of ‘being on the move’ with others, the more likely we are to convert the collective experience of mobility into an existential source of solidarity.

Hence, it is not only the belief in primordial ties based on spatial sedentariness but also joint experience of movement that can bind people together. Both sedentary and mobile engagements with reality are fundamental to the construction of modern society.

### ***Lefebvre's contributions: outline of a general theory of social space***

Five significant insights gained from Simmel's sociology of space having been considered, the question that remains is what contemporary theories of space have added to the picture. Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, the following sections aim to provide an outline of a general theory of social space, that is, a conceptual framework capable of capturing the transcendental conditions underlying the spatial structuration of any society, regardless of its historical specificity. As the title of his influential study *The Production of Space* (1991 [1974]) suggests, Lefebvre is concerned with the fact that, far from constituting a sheer given of human life, social spaces need to be *produced* by individual and collective actors in order to assert their existence. Although heavily influenced by Marx, Lefebvre seeks to go beyond a merely economic conception of production. To this end, he distinguishes three types of production.

First, there is a *broad* meaning of production in the sense of *social* production. Lefebvre characterizes production in the wide sense as follows:

[H]umans as social beings are said to produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world. There is nothing, in history or in society, which does not have to be achieved and produced. 'Nature' itself . . . has been modified and therefore in a sense produced. Human beings have produced juridical, political, religious, artistic and philosophical forms. Thus *production in the broad sense of the term embraces a multiplicity of works and a great diversity of forms.*

(1991: 68, *emphasis added*)

As humans, we distinguish ourselves from animals in that we have brought about the material and symbolic conditions of our own existence. To be exact, both the economic and the cultural foundations of human life have enabled us to create a social world beyond our natural environment. To recognize that we are productive entities requires acknowledging that we are a socio-constructive species (see Susen 2007: 287–92, 2011: 174–75). The broad meaning of production lies at the heart of the constructivist view of reality, according to which both the material and the symbolic dimensions of the human world are constitutive elements of a socially organized universe. From this perspective, social production, in the large sense, designates any form of activity that contributes to the construction of human existence.

Second, there is a *narrow* meaning of production in the sense of *economic* production. Lefebvre makes the following critical remark on economic accounts of production:

Neither Marx nor Engels leaves the concept of production in an indeterminate state. . . . They narrow it down, but with the result that works in the broad sense are no longer part of the picture; what they have in mind is things only: *products.*

(1991: 68–9, *original emphasis*)

Lefebvre is critical of this confined – that is, economic – conception of production. For such a restricted notion of production, which focuses on the economic dimensions of social life, fails to do justice to the species-constitutive significance of the non-economic facets of

human reality. The point is not to deny that, as Marx and Engels put it, '[t]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life' (2000 [1846]: 180). Rather, the point is to recognize that both material *and* symbolic dimensions of human reality contribute to the construction of society.

Third, there is a *neglected* meaning of production in the sense of *spatial* production. It is this third form of production that Lefebvre aims to explore in his critical theory of society. The study of spatial production goes beyond both the broad notion of social production and the narrow conception of economic production; for the former is too general to account for the particularity of spatial processes, and the latter is too specific to account for the ubiquity of spatial realities. In order to obtain paradigmatic status in sociology, space needs to be regarded as a constitutive element of the social world, that is, as a fundamental component whose significance is reflected in the fact that it represents both a condition and an outcome of relations between actors. In treating space as a cornerstone of the social world, Lefebvre seeks to demonstrate that spatial production and economic production are inextricably linked: 'social space is produced and reproduced in connection with the forces of production (and with the relations of production)' (1991: 77). In other words, the construction of social relations depends, at once, on the creation of spatial relations and on the formation of economic relations. Just as comprehensive studies of social production must address the question of space, critical accounts of space need to reflect upon the conditions of social production.

In light of the above, it would be fair to suggest that, paradoxically, Lefebvre stands within the tradition of Marxist social thought, whilst seeking to overcome the economic reductionism of its orthodox variants. On the one hand, Lefebvre is firmly situated *within* the horizon of Marxist theory in that he puts forward a *productivist* conception of reality, regarding society as a collective project created by working entities. On the other hand, Lefebvre seeks to go *beyond* the parameters of orthodox Marxist frameworks in that he makes a case for a *spatialist* conception of reality, portraying society as a coexistential conglomerate composed of physically situated entities. Thus, Lefebvre's approach can be described as a *spatio-productivist* account of society. According to this view, human beings are both spatially productive and productively spatial entities: spaces of production hinge on productions of space, and productions of space cannot take place without spaces of production. In short, the production of society is unthinkable without the production of space.

Lefebvre identifies three elements necessary for the production of space: (a) spatial practices (*pratiques spatiales*), (b) representations of space (*représentations de l'espace*), and (c) spaces of representation (*espaces de représentation*) (see Lefebvre 1991: 38–9). These can be defined as follows.

*Spatial practices* refer to physical and material flows of individuals, groups or commodities: social circulations, transfers and interactions that occur in and across space. Spatial practices, which 'must have a certain cohesiveness' (Lefebvre 1991: 38), guarantee social continuity and are indispensable for the consolidation of social order. Due to their material nature, spatial practices can be termed 'spaces-in-themselves'.

*Representations of space* manifest themselves in 'conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived . . . This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production).'

(Lefebvre 1991: 38–9)

Representations of space serve the regulation of space, for ‘those who control how space is represented control how it is produced, organised and used’ (Zieleniec 2007: 74). Given their discursive nature, representations of space can be characterized as ‘spaces-for-themselves’.

*Spaces of representation* – sometimes also translated as ‘representational spaces’ (Lefebvre 1991: 39) – are directly lived and immediately experienced spaces of everyday life. Insofar as spaces of representation are shaped by social actors, and imbued with meaning in their lifeworlds, they are sources of human freedom. As relatively autonomous realms, created by the ‘inhabitants’ (Lefebvre 1991: 39) of ordinary life, spaces of representation possess an emancipatory potential in that they enable social actors to challenge the legitimacy of established spatial practices. In light of their simultaneously material and discursive nature, spaces of representation can be conceived of as ‘spaces-in-and-for-themselves’.

With Lefebvre’s tripartite conceptual framework in mind, and with the aim of illustrating the explanatory power of his spatio-productivist conception of society, it shall be the task of the following analysis to propose a tentative outline of a general theory of social space.

## 1. The humanity of social space

Social spaces are human spaces. For the emergence of social realms is contingent upon the existence of subjective, and often intersubjective, practices. Just as human beings are situated in a physically organized and symbolically mediated universe, social spaces are shaped by both the objective constraints imposed by the natural environment and the normative arrangements established in the cultural world. Aware of this existential ambiguity, Lefebvre asks the following, rather fundamental, questions: ‘Is that space natural or cultural? Is it immediate or mediated . . .? Is it a given or is it artificial?’ (1991: 83). Lefebvre is right to assert that ‘[t]he answer to such questions must be: “Both” ’ (1991: 83–4). For social spaces, which are objectively situated in a physical world and normatively regulated by meaning-creating actors, exist ‘between “nature” and “culture” ’ (1991: 84). Put differently, every social space is a product *both* of what is physically constituted, and hence objectively present, in a realm of facticity, *and* of what is culturally constructed, and thus normatively relevant, in a sphere of validity. In short, social spaces are human spaces whose existence is contingent upon the practices performed by those who inhabit them.

## 2. The sociality of social space

What manifests itself in the sociality of social space is an obvious, yet crucial, insight: human spaces are socially constituted realms. Critical sociologies of space need to confront the challenge of ‘uncovering the social relationships (including class relationships) that are latent in spaces’ (Lefebvre 1991: 90). In the human world, spatial relations are never only physical arrangements but always also social constellations: a ‘mutual interference occurs here between natural peculiarities of space and the peculiar nature of a given human group’ (1991: 110). To recognize that human spaces are socially created means to account for the fact that they are composed of inter-related, rather than isolated, subjects and objects. It is the relations between, rather than the properties of, subjects and objects which are important to the constitution of social space: ‘space is neither a “subject” nor an “object” but rather *a social reality* – that is to say, *a set of relations and forms*’ (1991: 116, emphasis added). The historical determinacy of a given social space cannot be dissociated from the relationally constituted setting in which, and through which, it emerges.



### 3. The constructability of social space

Social space is never simply a given, because it is always constructed by those who bring it into existence: 'For this is a place that has been *laboured on*' (Lefebvre 1991: 76, original emphasis). Human beings constantly act and work upon the world, forming and transforming it according to their needs. Yet, a world that can be constructed can also be deconstructed and reconstructed. Social actors are continuously in the process of reconstructing the spaces and places they inhabit. Rejecting a narrowly economic sense of production, we are able to recognize that social spaces owe their existence to the daily performances of a *socio-constructive species*. The power of social construction can convert a given space into a place. In fact, the latter is the outcome of the former: a place is a socially generated and culturally signified form of space. Put differently, a place is a space modified by labour and imbued with meaning by culture. (On the distinction between 'space' and 'place', see, for example: Massey 2005: 68, 183–84; Merrifield 1993; Zieleniec 2007: 71, 73.) We are both a productive species of working creatures and a cultural species of meaning-giving beings: as purposive, cooperative and creative actors, we work upon the world; as assertive, normative and expressive entities, we attribute meaning to our existence. Social space is permeated by the species-constitutive forces of production and interpretation, which ensure that there is always a still-to-be social space: a still-to-be-developed, a still-to-be-transformed and a still-to-be-signified. The very possibility of spatial production rests upon the performative resources of social action.

### 4. The economy of social space

Economic production and spatial production are intimately interrelated, because there is no division of labour without a distribution of space. In Lefebvre's words,

social space is produced and reproduced in connection with the forces of production (and with the relations of production). And these forces, as they develop, are not taking over a pre-existing, empty or neutral space, or a space determined solely by geography, climate, anthropology, or some other comparable consideration.

(1991: 77)

On the contrary, the productive forces, as they unfold, take on the shape of a normative space, of a space which is determined by, and at the same time determines, the organization of the division of labour. Spatial relations are unavoidably influenced by economic relations, and vice versa. Lefebvre eloquently captures the ineluctable interdependence of spatial and economic relations in the following passage:

Is space a social relationship? Certainly – but one which is inherent to property relationships (especially the ownership of the earth, of land) and also closely bound up with the forces of production (which impose a form on that earth or land); here we see the polyvalence of social space, its 'reality' at once formal and material. Though a *product* to be used, to be consumed, it is also a *means of production*; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it. Thus this means of production, produced as such, cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it.

(1991: 85, original emphasis)



Social space, then, is not only inextricably linked to the forces of production, but it is a requirement for their existence. For the spatial structuration of reality is a precondition for the economic organization of society. The steering power of every economy depends on its capacity to control the spatial constitution of society.

## **5. The ideology of social space**

The ideology of social space is reflected in the representations of space which predominate in a given society. Representations of space are the imagined realms of those groups of people who have the power to monitor and control the territorial organization of society. Every social order is a spatial order. The spatial order sustaining a given social order can be maintained by virtue of an ideological apparatus capable of giving legitimacy to the physical configuration of reality. In this sense, the regulation of space ‘cannot be separated . . . from the state and the superstructures of society’ (Lefebvre 1991: 85). The recognition of the ideological character of social space obliges us to rethink the Marxian model of base and superstructure in terms of a spatialist analysis of society. According to Marx, the base consists of economic relations, which constitute the material foundation of society, whereas the superstructure is composed of an ideological apparatus, which serves to legitimize the relations of production underlying a given historical formation. According to Lefebvre, neither the material infrastructure nor the ideological superstructure of society can be divorced from the spatial constitution of reality. Indeed, space itself is both a physical and a symbolic element of society, that is, it is both a foundational and an epiphenomenal force of human reality. As a foundational force, the organization of space is a precondition for the consolidation of society; as an epiphenomenal force, the signification of space is necessary for the creation of a collective imaginary. The distribution of space is never neutral but always value-laden, since the territorial organization of society is impregnated with the symbolic power of ideology. There are no political regimes that are not also spatial regimes, because the control over societal configurations requires at least a minimal degree of power over their territorial organization. The exercise of regulatory social authority is inconceivable without recourse to a legitimizing spatial ideology.

## **6. The relationality of social space**

The various forms in which human actors relate to one another cannot be abstracted from the spatial organization of the society to which they belong. Just as social spaces can determine relations established between people, people can determine relations established between spaces. Every social space designates an interactional arena of possibilities which impacts upon the relations between actors, whilst every group of actors represents a conglomerate of possibilities which shapes the relations between spaces. Social spaces never exist simply in themselves; on the contrary, they exist through the *relations* established between physically embedded subjects. To the extent that ‘a space is not a thing but rather *a set of relations* between things (objects and products)’, and that ‘any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships’ (Lefebvre 1991: 83, 82–3, emphasis added), the creation of spatial relations is contingent upon the construction of social relations. Social spaces are composed of subjects *and* objects, both of which are imbued with the power of social agency. Agency is not only a privilege of subjects, but also a potential attribute of objects, since both subjects and objects have the power to determine the ways in which worldly practices unfold in a universe of relationally defined circumstances.

Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the *networks and pathways* which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also *relations*. As objects, they possess discernible peculiarities, contour and form. Social labour transforms them, rearranging their positions within spatio-temporal configurations.

(Lefebvre 1991: 77, *emphasis added*)

Given the relatively arbitrary nature of all social relations, spaces created by human actors are always subject to change.

## 7. The structurality of social space

The structural nature of social space is symptomatic of the tangible impact that the territorial organization of society has on human actions. ‘Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others’ (Lefebvre 1991: 73). To borrow a concept from Pierre Bourdieu, every social space is an *espace des possibles*, literally a ‘space of possibles’ (Bourdieu 2000: 151; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 152–53). Social spaces are structurally constituted realms of possibility. Human actions take place within the territorial limits imposed upon them by spatial realities. Hence, using another Bourdieusian expression, we may describe social space as both a structured and a structuring structure (see Bourdieu 2000: 144; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 139). As a structured structure, it is structured by human actions; as a structuring structure, it structures human actions. Our actions have the power to structure the social spaces we inhabit, and the social spaces we inhabit have the power to structure our actions. Human actors cannot escape the structuring power of social space, and vice versa.

## 8. The visibility of social space

The visibility of social space is fundamental in that it permeates every sighted subject’s relation to the world. ‘Sighted human beings navigate the social world visually’ (Knowles and Sweetman 2004a: 1). For ‘[s]eeing comes before words . . . [and] establishes our place in the surrounding world’ (Mellor and Shilling 1997: 6). In fact, there is a crucial connection between the visualization and the organization of space. In our daily lives, social spaces are often seen but unnoticed. The spatial appears natural to its inhabitants when it imposes its presence on the daily routines of their actions. Human societies are visualized settings of coexistence, capable of exploiting the power of the spectacle to assert the omnipresence of the spatial.

A further important aspect of spaces . . . is their increasingly pronounced *visual character*. They are made with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and of whatever is contained by them. The predominance of visualization . . . serves to conceal repetitiveness. People *look*, and take sight, take seeing, for life itself.

(Lefebvre 1991: 75, *emphasis added*; ‘look’ *emphasized in original*)

When we take sight for life itself, we transform representations of reality into realities of representation. The visual power of space consists in its capacity to convert social normativities into seen-but-unnoticed objectivities. Social spaces can make human acts appear as if they were mere historical facts. What we all see without noticing is what we all agree upon. What we all agree upon, however, is never simply objective but always also normative. ‘Visual

practices are *regulatory*, they demand that certain things are noticed, that other things are denied, and that other things are not seen at all' (Pile and Thrift 1995b: 48, emphasis added). The more we are used to being immersed in particular social spaces on a daily basis, the less likely we are to notice their existence.

## 9. The rationality of social space

Since human settings serve particular functions with corresponding codes of legitimacy, every social space possesses an idiosyncratic rationality. In the Lefebvrian universe, however, rationality is conceived of not as a metaphysical force inherent in a monological subject or an omnipresent object, but as a social force embedded in spatially constituted contexts. From this perspective, different modes of rationality emanate from spatially structured realms of sociality.

The *rationality of space* . . . is not the outcome of a quality or property of human action in general, or human labour as such, of 'man', or of social organization. On the contrary, it is itself the origin and source . . . of the *rationality of activity*.

(Lefebvre 1991: 71–2, emphasis added)

In other words, all forms of human agency are shaped by underlying rationalities inscribed in spatially constituted realities. Within the Lefebvrian architecture of society, then, space obtains a foundational status: the rationality that motivates a specific human activity cannot be dissociated from the spatial determinacy of the social reality that defines its own conditions of possibility. The rationality of a particular social space can differ substantially from the rationality of another social space. The more complex a given society, the more spatially differentiated forms of rationality it tends to generate. Different social spaces are sustained by diverging modes of rationality with idiosyncratic sources of legitimacy. The legitimacy of a performative act depends on its acceptability in relation to a social context. In brief, social spaces have the power to impose their self-referential rationality on the development of human agency.

## 10. The universality of social space

The universality of social space is based on its ubiquity in the human world. In fact, every human action is – directly or indirectly – constrained by the presence of social space.

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it *subsumes* things produced, and *encompasses* their interrelationships in their co-existence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder

(Lefebvre 1991: 73, emphasis added)

Thus, according to Lefebvre, we need to recognize the foundational status of social space. *All* human relations in *all* societies at *all* times are situated in collectively constructed forms of space. We cannot possibly relate to the world without contributing to the production of space. For 'any activity developed over (historical) time engenders (produces) a space, and can only attain practical "reality" or concrete existence within that space' (Lefebvre 1991: 115). If space is literally all over the place, then it is a transcendental condition of human life. As a transcendental condition of human existence, space is a *conditio sine qua non* of actors' immersion in the world. Given its ubiquity in the social universe, space constitutes a foundational force in the daily construction of human reality.

## 11. The historicity of social space

The historicity of social space is due to the temporal contingency that pervades all realms of worldly existence. Every social space has a unique history, just as history takes place through the construction of social spaces. Since '[e]very social space is the outcome of a process', 'every social space has a history' (Lefebvre 1991: 110). The malleable nature of the social manifests itself in the processual nature of the spatial: social spaces are never forever; their constitution changes over time.

In the *history of space* as such . . . the historical and diachronic realms and the generative past are forever leaving their inscriptions upon the writing-tablet, so to speak, of space. The uncertain traces left by *events* are not the only marks on (or in) space: society in its actuality also deposits its script, the result and product of *social activities*.

(1991: 110, *emphasis added*)

Social spaces have – throughout history – been, and will continue to be, produced and transformed by human actors. The historical variability of people's engagement with their physical reality is symptomatic of the spatial contingency of human agency. To combine Marx's historical materialism with Lefebvre's historical spatialism means to uncover the spatio-material determinacy of the human condition. Accordingly, Marx's famous aphorism on the historical determinacy of human life can be reformulated as follows: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it in *spaces* chosen by themselves, but in *spaces* directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.'<sup>1</sup> The history of social spaces permeates the unfolding of human practices.

## 12. The complexity of social space

The increasing complexity of social space is a sign of the growing differentiation of late-modern life forms. In light of this complexity, reductionist accounts of the social in general and of the spatial in particular lack explanatory power.

A social space cannot be adequately accounted for either by nature (climate, site) or by its previous history. Nor does the growth of the forces of production give rise in any direct causal fashion to a particular space or a particular time.

(Lefebvre 1991: 77)

In this sense, Lefebvre's socio-spatial analysis is opposed to three forms of determinism: (a) essentialist determinism, (b) naturalistic determinism and (c) economic determinism. The problem with *essentialist determinism* is that it does not do justice to the fact that social spaces are *relationally constructed*. Social spaces acquire particular meanings from the relations established between human actors, as well as from the material and symbolic connections between social spaces. The problem with *naturalistic determinism* is that it does not account for the fact that social spaces are *culturally constructed*. Surely, social spaces cannot escape the physical constraints of the natural world; it is by working upon, and attributing meaning to, the physical world, however, that human actors have succeeded in transforming their natural environment into an ensemble of social arrangements. As a species, we have learned to challenge the law-governed objectivity of the natural world by immersing ourselves in, and constantly reconstructing, the power-laden normativity of the social world. The problem

with *economistic determinism* is that it underestimates the fact that social spaces are *interactionally constructed*. The relative autonomy of spatial realities derives from the self-empowering contingency of human agency, which enables us to challenge the systemic imperatives imposed by the economy. Social spaces are unavoidably shaped, but not necessarily determined, by economic relations. ‘The *hypercomplexity* of social space should by now be apparent, embracing as it does individual entities and peculiarities, relatively fixed points, movements, and flows and waves – some interpenetrating, others in conflict, and so on’ (Lefebvre 1991: 88, emphasis added). In short, the potential complexity of the spatial structuration of the human universe illustrates that society is irreducible to a monolithically constituted totality.

### 13. The polycentricity of social space

The polycentricity of social space is indicative of its potential complexity. Reflecting upon the diversified nature of highly differentiated societies, Lefebvre reminds us of the fact that ‘[w]e are confronted not by one social space but by *many* – indeed, by an *unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces* which we refer to generically as “social space”’ (1991: 86, emphasis added). The polycentric nature of highly differentiated life forms manifests itself in the emergence of pluralized social spaces: commercial spaces, political spaces, cultural spaces, religious spaces, urban spaces, rural spaces, public spaces, domestic spaces, institutional spaces and recreational spaces – to mention only a few. Acknowledging the diversified nature of spatial settings in large-scale societies, Lefebvre’s approach precludes any illusions about the possible reducibility of the social to one constitutive element. The diversification of social spaces in highly differentiated collective life forms does not allow for the reduction of society to a monolithically constituted totality. The polycentric distribution of social space is symptomatic of the decentred constitution of highly differentiated societies.

### 14. The interpenetrability of social space

One crucial feature of social spaces is their interpenetrability. Social spaces are never completely, but only relatively, autonomous, since they necessarily exist in relation to one another and can, in principle, always be permeated by one another. The interpenetrative nature of social spaces stems from their structural intertwinement. ‘The *intertwinement* of social spaces is also a law. Considered in isolation, such spaces are mere abstractions’ (Lefebvre 1991: 86, emphasis added). Social spaces do not constitute autopoietic systems that exist and function in isolation from one another. Rather than representing completely self-sufficient and self-referential micro-universes, social spaces exist in relation to each other. Given that ‘[s]ocial spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another’ (Lefebvre 1991: 86, emphasis removed), they are always subject to power relations: the penetrability of one social space by another social space depends on the power of the latter to impose itself upon the former.

The principle of the *interpenetration and superimposition* of social spaces has one very helpful result, for it means that each fragment of space subjected to analysis masks not just one social relationship but a host of them that analysis can potentially disclose.

*(Lefebvre 1991: 88, emphasis added)*

In other words, the interpenetrability of social spaces cannot be divorced from the polycentricity of social relations.

## 15. The separability of social space

What manifests itself in the separability of social space is the differentiability of human coexistence. Even the most rudimentarily developed form of society cannot dispense with a minimal degree of structural differentiation. Yet, the separation of social spaces is never neutral but always power-laden. Separations between social spaces are always also partitions between people: between rooms, flats, houses, buildings, streets, neighbourhoods, cities, regions, countries or continents. Social spaces can be both externally and internally divided: they can be *externally* divided in that they can be separated from one another, and they can be *internally* divided in that the actors situated in them can be separated from one another. Spatial separations necessarily result in normative divisions, for territorial fragmentations inevitably structure the constitution of social interactions.

The dominant tendency fragments space and cuts it up into pieces. It enumerates the things, the various objects, that space contains. Specializations divide space among them and act upon its truncated parts, setting up *mental barriers and practico-social frontiers*.

*(Lefebvre 1991: 89, emphasis added)*

Spatial separations have a tangible impact on how people relate to one another and in fact on how they relate to themselves: there are no spatial separations without social mechanisms of *inclusion* and *exclusion*. Who we are depends on how we are spatially situated in relation to other social actors. The construction of every human identity is contingent upon its spatial determinacy. In order to make sense of reality, we need to be placed in society. How we make sense of the world is influenced by how and where we are situated in space. The more a given society is marked by spatial fragmentations, the more likely it is to produce social separations. ‘The ideologically dominant tendency *divides space up into parts* and parcels in accordance with the social division of labour’ (Lefebvre 1991: 89–90, emphasis added; ‘ideologically’ emphasized in original).

The control over the partitioning of social space involves the exercise of authority over the partitioning of people. The spatial partitioning of society is epitomized in the separation between centre and periphery, which can be regarded as a form of real sham: it is *sham* because the criteria for the definition of both the former and the latter are part of an ideological imaginary and, therefore, always relatively arbitrary; it is *real* because it leads to the relative empowerment of the spatial core, and the relative disempowerment of the spatial margins, of society. People’s social status is reflected in their spatial position: our status as members of a given community cannot be divorced from our relationally contingent location in social space. Separations between social spaces can trigger, or reinforce, the existence of divisions between people.

## 16. The commodifiability of social space

The commodifiable nature of social space is a paradoxical affair. On the one hand, it is an intrinsic property of social space *that* it can be commodified. On the other hand, it is a relatively arbitrary matter, depending on the economic organization of a particular life form, *if* social space is commodified. There is nothing natural or inevitable about the commodification of social space; on the contrary, social space tends to be commodified primarily in market-driven societies. Nevertheless, even in capitalist systems some spaces – for example, public spaces – are protected from commodification, in order to avoid them being absorbed by the functional imperatives of the market economy. Yet, the fact that particular social spaces

are deliberately excluded from the commodifying logic of the market confirms the view that, in principle, *all* social spaces *can* be commodified. To ‘fetishize space in a way reminiscent of the old fetishism of commodities, where the trap lay in exchange’ (Lefebvre 1991: 90), means to measure the social worth of space primarily in terms of its market value, rather than in terms of its use value.

Social space *per se* is at once *work* and *product* – a materialization of “social being”. In specific sets of circumstances, however, it may take on fetishized and autonomous characteristics of things (of commodities and money).

(1991: 101–2, original emphasis)

Given the ubiquity of exchange value under capitalism, it is easy to forget that the commodification of space, far from constituting an inevitable social process, is contingent upon the hegemonic existence of market-driven imperatives.

## 17. The controllability of social space

Struggles over the control of social space illustrate that the territorial organization of society is impregnated with individual and collective interests. One central concern of human life has always been, and will always remain, the control of social space. Both as members of particular communities and as members of different societies, humans are obliged to organize the space they inhabit in one way or another. The right to spatial control can be at stake on various levels: individuals’ control over their private sphere, society’s control over its public sphere, landowners’ control over their property, or a nation-state’s control over its territory – to mention only a few examples. When given the right to be in control of a given space, actors tend to take territorial integrity for granted. By contrast, when being deprived of the right to be in control of a given space, actors are forced to reflect upon the normative status of territorial realities. ‘The forces of production and technology now permit of *intervention* at every level of space: local, regional, national, worldwide. Space as a whole, geographical or historical space, is thus modified, but without any concomitant abolition of its underpinnings’ (Lefebvre 1991: 90, emphasis added). In brief, the exercise of power over social arrangements is unthinkable without the control over their spatial organization.

## 18. The usability of social space

Social spaces are used for different purposes. Indeed, as human beings, we *must* make use of space. We are obliged to make use of space because we are compelled to live in space. What may, at first sight, appear to be a truism is, actually, of crucial importance: we need to confront the implications of the fact that relationally constructed realms serve socially specific functions. *That* social spaces can, or need to, be used is relatively uncontroversial; *how* they should be used, however, could hardly be more controversial. In most cases, the function of social space is determined by those who control it. For this reason, Lefebvre insists that

[t]he arrogant verticality of skyscrapers, and especially of public and state buildings, introduces a phallic or more precisely a phallocratic element into the visual realm; the purpose of this display, of this need to impress, is to convey an impression of *authority* to each spectator.

(1991: 98, emphasis added)



Space is used not only for the *imposition* but also for the *representation* of power. In fact, it is through the spatial representation of power that both the symbolic imposition and the material imposition of social control become possible. Power needs to have a place in society in order to have an impact upon reality. The more we are forced to accept the organization of the spaces we inhabit, the more we are deprived from exercising autonomy over our physical immersion in the world. The more we are permitted to contribute to the organization of the spaces in which we find ourselves situated, the more we are involved in self-determining the ways in which we participate in, and engage with, reality. Disengagement generates indifference, whereas engagement induces responsibility. If we leave it to 'specialists who view social space through the optic of their methodology and their reductionistic schemata' (Lefebvre 1991: 108) to decide over the territorial organization of society, we miss out on the opportunity to create empowering collective realms shaped by deliberative processes and the assertion of human sovereignty.

## **19. The contestability of social space**

By definition, the organization of social spaces can be contested, because how and by whom realms of action and interaction are used and controlled is always relatively arbitrary. What may appear to be an 'is' when considering the constitution of a given social space is at the same time an 'ought to be'. When we are subject to the *condition* of a spatial setting, we experience the apparent naturalness of its presence. By contrast, when we are engaged in the *construction* of a spatial setting, we contribute to the genuine arbitrariness of its existence. Surely, what can be socially constructed can be socially reconstructed, and what can be socially reconstructed can be individually or collectively fought over. 'Space as locus of production, as itself product and production, is both the weapon and the sign of this *struggle*' (Lefebvre 1991: 109, emphasis added). From a Marxian perspective, '[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx and Engels 1985 [1848]: 79); from a Lefebvrian point of view, the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of spatial struggles.

## **20. The transformability of social space**

The fact that social spaces can, in principle, always be transformed reflects the malleable nature of human existence. Social spaces are in a continuous state of flux, that is, they change over time in terms of their structure, their composition and their inhabitants. In the Marxian world, everybody should have a right to purposeful work; in the Kantian cosmos, everybody should have a right to make use of critical reason; in the Habermasian picture, everybody should have a right to a communicatively structured lifeworld; in the Lefebvrian universe, everybody should have a right to space. Despite the quasi-ubiquity of commodity fetishism under capitalism, the consolidation of non-commodified social spaces is both achievable and desirable: it is achievable because the commodification of space is reversible, and it is desirable because the commodification of space is detrimental. In capitalist society, social spaces are bureaucratically controlled by a means-oriented polity and financially driven by a profit-oriented economy. In an emancipatory society, on the other hand, social spaces are democratically managed by grassroots-based communities and deliberately regulated in accordance with the demands of a needs-based economy.

If the production of space does indeed correspond to a leap forward in the productive forces . . . , and if therefore this tendency . . . must eventually give rise to a *new mode of*

*production* which is neither state capitalism nor state socialism, but the collective management of space, the social management of nature, and the transcendence of the contradiction between nature and anti-nature, then clearly we cannot rely solely on the application of the ‘classical’ categories of Marxist thought.

(Lefebvre 1991: 102–3, original emphasis)

From this perspective, the social struggles that determine the course of history have to be conceived of as spatially constituted conflicts. The formation of autonomous lives depends not only on the creation of purposeful activity (Marx), critical minds (Kant) or communicative lifeworlds (Habermas), but also on the construction of autonomous spaces (Lefebvre). As subjects capable of immersion, we live in social spaces; as subjects capable of transformation, we can change them.

## Main criticisms and limitations

The production of space plays a pivotal role in the construction of social reality. Thus, a comprehensive theory of the social must confront the challenge of providing a critical account of the spatial. Drawing upon the work of Henri Lefebvre, the foregoing analysis has proposed an outline of a general theory of social space, that is, of a conceptual framework that permits us to identify the key elements that determine every ordinary subject’s spatial immersion in the world. Such an outline is aimed at developing the conceptual tools necessary to understand the very possibility of society in terms of its spatial determinacy. Whilst the preceding analysis has sought to identify various – arguably transcendental – features of social space, it also raises a number of serious questions about the explanatory limitations of Lefebvre’s approach. It is the task of this section to reflect upon these limitations, before considering recent and possible future developments in the sociology of space in the final part of this chapter.

1. Social spaces are *human* realms. As such, they are permeated by both the objectivity of the natural world and the normativity of the cultural world. Yet, it is far from clear to what extent the critical study of space obliges us to abandon the very distinction between ‘the natural’ and ‘the cultural’. To the extent that human lifeworlds are both physically constituted and symbolically structured, the *confluence* of the givenness and the meaning-ladenness of social space escapes the binary logic of a functional dichotomy between objectivity and normativity.
2. Social spaces are *collective* realms. The idiosyncrasy of a culturally created space cannot be divorced from the sociality generated by its inhabitants. Nonetheless, while it is important to recognize the collective constitution of social spaces, we must not lose sight of their potentially *individualizing* function. Human subjects have the ability to develop a sense of autonomy and identity within real and imagined spheres of spatiality.
3. Social spaces are *constructed* realms. Human beings constantly act upon, and attribute meaning to, their physical and cultural environment. Yet, although it is crucial to remind ourselves of the constructedness of social arrangements, we must be careful not to overlook the constraining power of the ‘*hard*’ *dimensions* of spatial realities: the lawfulness of physical, geological and biological factors is irreducible to the arbitrariness of historical accidents.
4. Social spaces are *productive* realms. Different economies generate different forms of spatiality, for the division of labour constitutes the material infrastructure of social reality. Arguably, however, the dynamic development of technology has created a *global network*

*society*, whose advanced production, information and transportation systems transcend local, regional and national boundaries.

5. Social spaces are *ideological* realms. Every regulatory authority requires a symbolically constituted representation of spatiality. This insight, though, does not permit us to explain the *relative autonomy* of the discursive frameworks that emerge in particular spatial realities. While language games arise within spatially constituted life forms, the creative playfulness of the former can challenge the constraining influence of the latter.
6. Social spaces are *relational* realms. Just as people can determine relations between spaces, spaces can determine relations between people. Relational accounts of space derive their explanatory power from their epistemic capacity to capture the interconnectedness underlying different modes of agency. They tell us remarkably little, however, about the extent to which the ontological specificities of subjects and objects can *rise above* the spatiotemporal contingency of relationally constituted realities.
7. Social spaces are *structural* realms. As structured structures, they are brought into existence by human actions; as structuring structures, they shape the nature of human actions. Yet, *regimes of space* are always impregnated with *regimes of time*: every spatial interaction takes place in a culturally codified syntax of temporal organization. Immersion in time is by no means a less significant precondition for the emergence of social structures than immersion in space.
8. Social spaces are, at least potentially, *visible* realms. Often spaces are seen without being noticed, for visual perception does not always trigger critical reflection. Even when both seen and noticed, however, spaces have an *underlying and imperceptible* physical constitution, which may be studied scientifically, but which escapes our commonsense grasp of reality.
9. Social spaces are *idiosyncratic* realms. In this sense, not only are they sustained by distinctive forms of rationality with self-referential codes of legitimacy, but they also serve as vehicles for the situational contingency of human agency. Yet, foundational forms of rationality – notably purposive and substantive rationality – are not necessarily determined by the prevalence of a given spatial rationality, because cognitive modes of motivation are *irreducible* to the logic of a specific location. Put differently, rationality is a privilege of human beings, rather than of their environment.
10. Social spaces are *ubiquitous* realms. Given that space is all over the place, we have to accept that physical situatedness is a precondition for our engagement with reality. In the digital age, however, the construction of *cyberspace* allows for the experience of hyperreality, which transcends traditional notions of bodily determinacy.
11. Social spaces are *historical* realms. Social actors make their own history, but they do so in spaces directly experienced, shaped by and passed on from the past. There is no such thing as an ahistorical social action taking place in a timeless space. Yet, the explanatory challenge consists in identifying the specific *conditions* that make some spaces relatively *stable and durable*, and others comparatively *malleable and transposable*.
12. Social spaces are potentially *complex* realms. Instead of reducing society to a monolithically constituted totality, we need to face up to its spatially constituted complexity. It may be fairly straightforward to illustrate that social spaces are composed of multi-layered and interwoven elements; it is rather difficult, however, to shed light on the main constituents that account for the *specificity* of a particular type of spatiality.
13. Social spaces are *polycentric* realms. Yet, an important question that poses itself – not only to Luhmannian systems theorists and Bourdieusian field theorists, but also to Lefebvrian space theorists – can be phrased as follows: given that, particularly in highly differentiated

societies, various interactional realities overlap, what criterion or criteria should we use to define the boundaries of a spatial setting? More specifically, does the *preponderance* of a particular spatial realm depend primarily on *objective* factors (e.g. structural circumstances), *intersubjective* factors (e.g. relational arrangements), *subjective* factors (e.g. cognitive projections), or a combination of these elements? Critical sociologists have a major task on their hands when seeking to provide evidence-based parameters for a non-reductive analysis of space.

14. Social spaces are *interpenetrable* realms. The relational realms shaped by human subjectivities permeate one another as spatial objectivities. The analytical challenge, however, consists in exploring not only the penetrability of, but also the *hierarchy* between, different spatial realities in the formation of society.
15. Social spaces are *separable*, and hence potentially divisive, realms. Divisions between social spaces reflect partitions between people: our spatial position cannot be dissociated from our social position, for we need to have a locus in space in order to occupy a place in society. Yet, if we admit that spaces can be separated both physically and symbolically through the construction of objective and interpretive boundaries, we need to problematize the *potential discrepancy* between really existing demarcations and phenomenologically projected classifications: although ‘spaces-in-themselves’ and ‘spaces-for-themselves’ – that is, ‘realities of space’ and ‘conceptions of space’ – are intimately intertwined, they do not necessarily coincide.
16. Social spaces are *commodifiable* realms. In capitalist markets, the exchange value of social space tends to be predominant over its use value. Nevertheless, even in commodified social realities there is room for *meaningful* activities. The presence of an instrumental teleology does not necessarily prevent social actors from mobilizing the self-empowering resources inherent in substantive rationality.
17. Social spaces are, at least potentially, *controllable* realms. The power over a given social formation requires the control over its spatial organization. Yet, even the exogenous regulation of people’s space does not guarantee control over their minds. Social actors have privileged access to their subjectivity *regardless* of their spatial environment.
18. Social spaces are *usable* realms. People need to be able to make use of space, in order to engage with and act upon the world. The philosophically more interesting question, however, is to what extent humans either have a moral right to use spaces as *means to an end* or have a moral obligation to treat spaces as *ends in themselves*. The tension between the instrumental nature of *Verstand* and the value-laden constitution of *Vernunft* comes to the fore when grappling with the ethical implications of our relation to space.
19. Social spaces are *contestable* realms. Legitimate actors are nothing without legitimate spaces, just as legitimate spaces are nothing without legitimate actors. The struggle over the right to space is a struggle over the right to live. It is far from clear, however, on what *normative grounds* it is possible to distinguish between universally defensible and tribalistically motivated reasons for the right to space. An emancipatory politics must resist the temptation to endorse primordial and exclusionary conceptions of *Lebensraum*.
20. Social spaces are potentially *transformable* realms. A critical sociology of space allows us to put our capacity to reconstruct reality at centre stage. As immersive entities, we are thrown into social spaces; as transformative entities, we can change them. Social struggles, in addition to shaping the course of history, have a place in space. This does not mean, however, that *every* social struggle is reducible to a struggle for and over space.

## Recent and possible future developments

Having reflected upon some of the key limitations and questions arising from Lefebvre's approach, let us, in the final part of this chapter, consider recent and possible future developments in social and cultural theories of space. Given that, unavoidably, such an analysis is selective and limited in scope, this closing section does not aim to do justice to the range and complexity of the various explanatory frameworks that have been developed over the past few decades in the sociology of space. Rather, it will focus on a few central issues relevant to contemporary studies of space.

- a) John Urry is widely recognized as one of the major social theorists of *global flows*, '*mobilities*' and *migration*. Perhaps the most fundamental thesis underlying his writings on space (see, for instance, Elliott and Urry 2010; Gregory and Urry 1985; Urry 1985, 1995, 2000, 2007) is the following assumption: the traditional notion that '[e]ach "society" is a sovereign social entity with a nation-state that organises the rights and duties of each societal member or citizen' (Urry 2000: 8) no longer holds true. In other words, whereas in classical sociology '[m]ost major sets of social relationships are seen as flowing within the territorial boundaries of the society' (2000: 8), in the contemporary age 'shifts towards global networks and flows' transcend the narrow logic and 'boundaries of the nation-state' (2000: 198). Given the increasing interconnectedness of the contemporary world, we need to account for the material and symbolic complexity of the global network society, whose transnational character obliges us to revise the conceptual and methodological tools of classical sociology.
- b) Manuel Castells, one of the most celebrated contemporary social theorists, is perhaps best known for coining the idea that in the late twentieth century the world witnessed the rise of the *network society*. It comes as no surprise, then, that 'space' is a key category in his major works (see, for example, Castells 1977, 1989, 2001). In his acclaimed trilogy *The Information Age* (Castells 1996, 1997, 1998), he offers a remarkably detailed account of the sociological issues arising from the emergence of informational and communicational networks across the world. According to Castells, the consolidation of the network society is the result of three interconnected processes: (i) the rapid development of information technologies; (ii) the profound restructuring of welfare regimes and the collapse of state socialism; and (iii) the emergence and growing influence of new social movements. To the extent that technological, economic and political '[n]etworks constitute the new social morphology of our societies' (Castells 1996: 500), we live in an age in which the interplay between locality and globality is crucial to the historical development of humanity.
- c) Anthony Giddens, arguably one of the most influential and prolific social theorists of the late twentieth century (see, for instance, Giddens 1984, 1991, 2000), maintains that an essential feature of modernity is the *uncoupling of space and time*. Giddens's view that this 'time-space distanciation' (see esp. Giddens 1990) is central to social modernization processes is based on the following assumption: '[i]n pre-modern societies, space and place largely coincide' (1990: 18), as people's engagement with reality is limited to their immediate experience of geographically constricted lifeworlds; by contrast, '[t]he advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction' (1990: 18). Put differently, the perpetual reproduction of the pre-modern world is founded on the experience of social, cultural and territorial embeddedness, whereas under the condition of modernity 'space' has escaped the confining shackles of 'place'.

- d) Ulrich Beck is probably best known for his numerous writings on the thesis that the rise of a 'second' or 'reflexive' modernity manifests itself in the emergence of a '*global risk society*' (see, for example, Beck 1992, 1999, 2009). By definition, global risks transcend geographical and demographical boundaries. More importantly, however, global risks require global solutions. In order to overcome the 'methodological nationalism' of classical sociology, we need to understand the various paradigmatic shifts that are indicative of the transition from 'first modernity' to 'second modernity': (i) *Critical reflexivity*: Social actors have become increasingly critical of traditional norms, institutions and belief systems, whose legitimacy is constantly at stake in public debates guided by the search for rational and empirical evidence. (ii) *Complex identities*: Social actors are not only allowed but also expected to construct multifaceted personal identities, as they enjoy an unprecedented degree of individual freedom. (iii) *Ontological continuum*: The condition of 'reflexive modernity' is characterized by the gradual erosion of traditional dichotomies, such as culture versus nature, life versus death, citizen versus foreigner, micro versus macro, local versus global, and place versus space. (iv) *Time-space compression*: Due to the rapid development of globalized production, information and transportation systems, physical proximity is no longer a precondition for social propinquity. (v) *Cosmopolitanism*: In light of the increasing influence of non-governmental actors 'from below' and supranational actors 'from above', the nation-state fails to serve as a viable normative reference point for dealing with the profound political, economic and environmental challenges faced by the global risk society. From this perspective, cosmopolitanism is not only a realistic utopia but also a practical necessity. Social actors have always lived in a global space, but, in the era of 'second modernity', cosmopolitan forms of reflexivity have become a precondition for the long-term survival of humanity.
- e) In his abundant writings (see, for instance, Soja 1989, 1996, 2000), Edward Soja aims to demonstrate that 'space' deserves to be treated as a practical foundation of human life as well as a theoretical cornerstone of social and cultural analysis. Drawing on central insights from poststructuralist and postmodernist thought, he insists upon the *normalizing function* of spatial arrangements. To the extent that 'relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life . . . human geographies become filled with politics and ideology' (Soja 1989: 6). More specifically, Soja seeks to illustrate the validity of three fundamental assumptions. (i) Under the condition of late modernity, capitalism has been restructured in such a way that 'the spatial' is both materially and symbolically preponderant over 'the temporal'. (ii) 'Space' constitutes a central component of social life. (iii) Given its pivotal role in processes of social reproduction and transformation, the concept of 'space' needs to be given analytical priority in critical theory. Soja's 'triple dialectic of space, time and social being' (1989: 12), then, is aimed not only at the (re-) spatialization of critical theory, but also at the deconstruction of the problematic opposition between space (often misrepresented as a fixed, stable and immobile state of being) and time (commonly conceived of as a dynamic, fluid and volatile mode of becoming). His insistence upon the ontological interdependence of *spatiality*, *historicity* and *sociality* is inspired, at once, by the defence of a critical human geography, by the post-modern incredulity towards determinist accounts of history, and by the Marxist-Weberian suspicion towards instrumental rationality. Arguably, this *trialectics of being* lies at the heart of any society, regardless of its typological specificity.
- f) Doreen Massey is commonly regarded as one of the most prominent contemporary British geographers. In her various writings (see, for example, Massey 1994, 1995, 2005), she aims to demonstrate that space is a product of interrelations (*relationality*), a physical realm



composed of heterogeneous parts (*multiplicity*) and an open reality constantly under construction (*malleability*). The first assumption is motivated by the conviction that spaces are shaped primarily by the *relations* and *interactions* between subjects and objects, rather than by their alleged properties. The second claim is based on the view that, particularly in highly differentiated settings, spaces are constructed by *multiple* and *heterogeneous* subjects and objects, whose diversified identities are indicative of the complexity of polycentric societies. The third presupposition suggests that spaces are *malleable* and *dynamic* modes of being, that is, they are in a constant state of flux, even when this is not immediately obvious. While insisting on the relational, multifaceted and malleable nature of social space, Massey's empirical studies shed light on the manifold ways in which social spaces are differentiated in terms of sociological variables, notably class, ethnicity and gender. Her substantive investigations have five major theoretical implications. (i) Just as there is no space without place, there is no place without space. (ii) Space is situated in time, while time is located in space. (iii) To the extent that space is shaped by and through society, society is constructed by and through space. (iv) The construction of space is imbued with meaning, and the creation of meaning takes place in space. (v) Spatial power is a form of social power, at the same time as social power is a form of spatial power. It is the task of a radically anti-essentialist politics to challenge hegemonic practices and beliefs, thereby reminding us of the fact that '[i]t is not spatial form in itself (nor distance, nor movement) that has effects, but the spatial form of particular and specified social *processes* and social *relationships*' (Massey 1984: 5, emphasis added).

- g) In her plentiful writings (see, for instance, Sassen 2001, 2007, 2008), Saskia Sassen aims to demonstrate that, contrary to common wisdom, 'place' plays a crucial role in the construction of an increasingly interconnected global society. This, she claims, is illustrated in the managerial and economic power exercised by professional elites in metropolises such as London, New York and Tokyo. Their existence indicates that we are confronted with a curious paradox: on the one hand, we live in a world of increasing mobility, volatility and dispersal of both capital and labour; on the other hand, the contemporary age is characterized by the concentration of power, resources and wealth in metropolitan centres with global influence. In other words, the dynamic interplay between space and place is fundamental to globalization processes. To be exact, the simultaneous globalization and localization of social reality is reflected in five key tendencies: *economic transnationalization* (geographical scattering of commercial activities), *economic specialization* (outsourcing of productive, distributive and administrative services), *economic concentration* (agglomeration of financial power in urban areas and metropolises), *economic tertiarization* (concentration of a highly specialized service sector in global cities) and *economic urbanization* (hierarchization of global cities in terms of their influence on the worldwide network of knowledge, information and services). As these tendencies unambiguously show, 'place' is vital to the global organization of space.
- h) Inspired by Lefebvre's approach, one of the key aims of David Harvey's work is to give the concept of 'space' a central place in Marxist social theory (see, for example, Harvey 1989, 2000, 2001, 2006). Far from conceiving of space as a natural given, Harvey regards spatial arrangements as both a cause and an effect of social practices. In the context of modernity, social spatiality is permeated by the systemic logic of the capitalist economy. Harvey insists that, by definition, the spatial organization of human environments contains both an *objective* and a *subjective* dimension. In fact, all human societies are composed of both (material) 'spaces-in-themselves' and (symbolic) 'spaces-for-themselves'. At the objective level, the most idiosyncratic places can be absorbed by the standardizing logic of capitalist



productivism and consumerism. At the subjective level, the most homogenized spatial arrangements are perceived and experienced differently by interpretive actors with unique life stories. It is one of Harvey's major achievements to have demonstrated that, just as the dialectical construction of human reality is inconceivable without the production of space, the existence of hegemonic systems of domination manifests itself in instrumental modes of geographical organization. Thus, even the 'condition of postmodernity' (Harvey 1989) – commonly associated with unprecedented degrees of complexity, multiplicity and fluidity – constitutes an era characterized by the enduring existence of systematicity, determinacy and instrumental rationality.

- i) Given the eclectic nature and large scope of his intellectual work, it is difficult to do justice to the depth and breadth of Nigel Thrift's analysis of space (see, for instance, Leyshon and Thrift 1997; Peet and Thrift 1989; Pile and Thrift 1995a; Thrift 1996). One may suggest, however, that his 'new regional geography' is based on six central assumptions.
  - (i) *Contingency*: Space is socially constructed, both as a material sphere, acted and worked upon by purposive entities, and as a symbolic realm, imagined and experienced by interpretive creatures.
  - (ii) *Temporality*: Space is situated in time, just as time is located in space. Spatial arrangements are imbued with historicity.
  - (iii) *Agency*: Far from representing simply a social fact, space constitutes also a social act. The performativity inherent in social reality permeates spatiality with meaning-laden horizons of human agency.
  - (iv) *Intersubjectivity*: Even in a globalized environment, in which 'space' appears to be preponderant over 'place', interpersonal relations, established in communicatively structured lifeworlds, continue to be vital to the functional reproduction of the social fabric. The most abstract forms of social relations, mediated by money and bureaucratic administration, cannot dispense with mutual understanding, trust and cooperation.
  - (v) *Contextuality*: Notwithstanding the degree of planetary interconnectedness, critical geographers need to be sensitive to local and regional specificities. In fact, globalization is as much about systemic standardization as it is about social differentiation.
  - (vi) *Discursivity*: Just as different spaces create different discourses, different discourses generate different spaces. It is because humans are immersed in space that they play language games in historically specific life forms.

## Conclusion

As should be evident from the previous analysis, 'space' – both as a symbolic imaginary and as an empirical reality, as a conceptual tool of critical enquiry and as a constitutive element of society – deserves to be taken seriously by social and cultural theorists. This is essentially due to the fact that all domains of human existence are, directly or indirectly, affected by the production, and constant reinvention, of space. Hence, in order to uncover the social determinacy of the spatial, we need to grasp the spatial determinacy of the social, and vice versa.

As elucidated in the first section of this chapter, it is worth remembering that, although space can be regarded as a marginal category in classical sociology, Simmel's work provides useful insights into the spatial constitution of everyday life. To be exact, his writings shed light on the fact that the social construction of spatial realities is permeated by five power-laden tensions: inclusivity versus exclusivity, unifiability versus separability, fixity versus changeability, proximity versus distance, and sedentariness versus mobility.

As demonstrated in the second section of this chapter, Lefebvre's writings are based on the assumption that the construction of society is inconceivable without the production of space. As a species, we have learned to shape not only the cultural and economic arrangements of social life, but also the spatial circumstances of our existence. Thus, in order to comprehend

how we are embedded in society, we need to understand how we are situated in spatial forms of reality. To this end, the foregoing study has proposed a Lefebvrian outline of a general theory of social space, that is, an analytical framework capable of identifying the transcendental conditions underlying the spatial structuration of *any* society, regardless of its historical specificity. As emphasized in the third section of this chapter, however, it is vital to be aware of the explanatory limitations of Lefebvre's approach, in order to avoid painting a simplistic picture of the spatial organization of human societies.

Finally, as shown in the fourth section of this chapter, there have been considerable developments in recent sociological studies of space. The above overview, which captures only some of these paradigmatic trends, is unavoidably selective and limited in scope. No attempt has been made here to give an exhaustive account capable of doing justice to the variety and intricacy of the explanatory frameworks that have emerged over the past few decades in the sociology of space. Nonetheless, the preceding synopsis has illustrated that several social and cultural theorists – as diverse as Urry, Castells, Giddens, Beck, Soja, Massey, Sassen, Harvey and Thrift – share one central conviction: human actors, given that they are bodily entities, will always have a place in space.

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## Notes

- 1 Cf. Marx (2000 [1845]: 329): 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.'

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