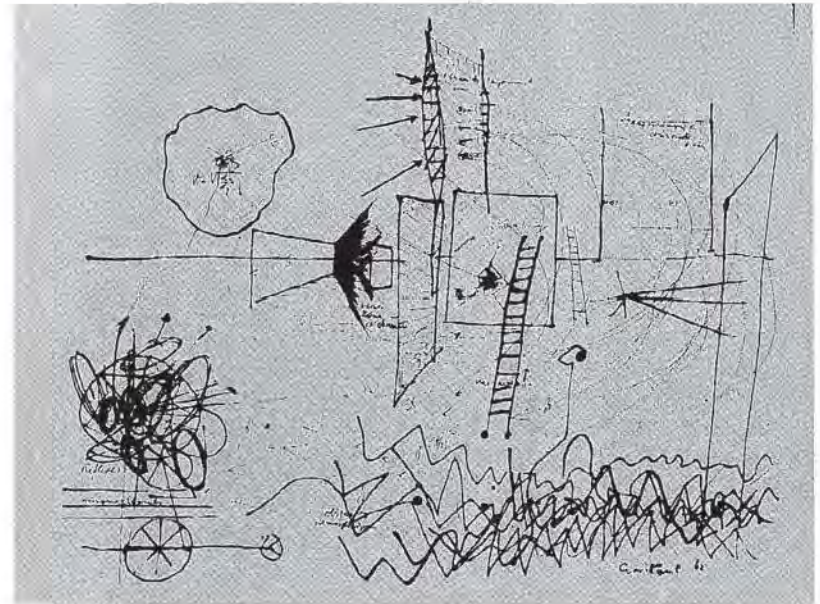


Lefebvre  
Writings on  
CITIES

# Writings on CITIES

Henri Lefebvre



Translated and Edited by  
ELEONORE KOFMAN AND  
ELIZABETH LEBAS

The work of Henri Lefebvre, the only major French intellectual of the post-war period to give extensive consideration to the city and urban life, has since he publication in English of *The Production of Space*, received considerable attention among both academics and practitioners of the built environment. This new collection brings together for the first time in English, Lefebvre's reflections on the city and urban life written over a span of some twenty years.

The selection of writings is contextualized by an introduction – itself a significant contribution to the interpretation of Henri Lefebvre – which places the material within the context of Lefebvre's intellectual and political life and times and raises pertinent issues as to their relevance for contemporary debates over such questions as the nature of urban reality, the production of space and modernity.

*Writings on Cities* is of particular relevance to architects, planners, geographers, and those interested in the philosophical and political understanding of contemporary life.

**Eleonore Kofman** is Professor in the Department of International Studies at Nottingham Trent University. **Elizabeth Lebas** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Geography and Environmental Management at Middlesex University. Both have researched and written extensively on French urbanization and urban theory.

Cover illustration: *Le retour a la dialectique, douze mots clés*, Paris: Messidor, Editions Sociales, 1986, page 13. Constant was a member of the Situationists International until he left it in 1960. His writings include *Pour une architecture de situation* (1953). Between 1956 and 1960 he worked with the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck on a series of models for what they called the New Babylone Project. Lefebvre was influenced by Constant's emphasis on play and the right to the city as a place of play and encounter.

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# *Writings on Cities*



*'To our mothers, Rachel Kofman and Fernande Lemouton.'*

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HENRI LEFEBVRE

Selected, translated and introduced by  
Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas

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## *Town and Country*

A theme which has been used and over-used, hyperinflated and extrapolated, namely, 'nature and culture', originates from the relation between town and country and deflects it. There are three terms in this relation. In the same way, there are three terminologies in existing reality (rurality, urban fabric, centrality) whose dialectical relations are hidden beneath term to term oppositions, but also come to reveal themselves in them. Nature as such escapes the hold of rationally pursued action, as well as from domination and appropriation. More precisely, it remains outside of these influences: it 'is' what flees: it is reached by the imaginary; one pursues it and it flees into the cosmos, or in the underground depths of the world. The countryside is the place of production and *oeuvres*. Agricultural production gives birth to products: the landscape is an *oeuvre*. This *oeuvre* emerges from the earth slowly moulded, linked originally to the groups which occupy it by a reciprocal consecration, later to be desecrated by the city and urban life (which capture this consecration, condense it, then dissolve it over through the ages by absorbing it into rationality). Where does this ancient consecration of the ground to the tribes, peoples and nations come from? From the obscure and menacing presence/absence of nature? From the occupation of the ground which excludes strangers from this possessed ground? From the social pyramid, which has its basis on this ground and which exacts many sacrifices for the maintenance of a threatened edifice? One does not prevent the other. What is important is the complex movement by which the political city uses this sacred-damned character of the ground, so that the economic (commercial) city can desecrate it.

Urban life includes original mediations between town, country and nature. As the village, whose relationship with the city, in history and

in actuality, is far from being well known. As are parks, gardens, channelled waters. These mediations cannot be understood as such by city dwellers without symbolisms and *representations* (ideological and imaginary) of nature and the countryside.

The town and country relation has changed deeply during the course of history, according to different periods and to modes of production. It has been sometimes profoundly conflictual, and at other times appeased and close to an association. Moreover, during the same period, very different kinds of relations are manifested. Thus in Western feudalism, the territorial lord threatens the re-emerging city, where the merchants find their meeting place, their homebase, the place of their strategy. The city responds to this action of landed power, and a class struggle ensues, sometimes quiescent, sometimes violent. The city liberates itself, not by integrating itself by becoming an aristocracy of commoners, but by integrating itself with the monarchic State (for which it provided an essential condition). On the other hand, during the same period, in so far as one can speak of an Islamic feudalism, the 'lord' rules over the city of craftsmen and shopkeepers and from it, over a surrounding countryside, often reduced to gardens and to sparse and insignificant cultivations. In such a relationship, there is neither the kernel nor the possibility of a class struggle. From the outset this takes away any historical dynamism and future from this social structure, although not without conferring upon it other charms, those of an exquisite urbanism. The class struggle, creative, productive of *oeuvres* and new relations, takes place with a certain barbarism which characterizes the West (including the most 'beautiful' of its cities).

Today, the town and country relation is changing, an important aspect of a general transformation. In industrial countries, the old exploitation by the city, centre of capital accumulation, of the surrounding countryside, gives way to more subtle forms of domination and exploitation, the city becoming centre of decision-making and apparently also of association. However that may be, the expanding city attacks the countryside, corrodes and dissolves it. This is not without the paradoxical effects already mentioned. Urban life penetrates peasant life, dispossessing it of its traditional features: crafts, small centres which decline to the benefit of urban centres (commercial, industrial, distribution networks, centres of decision-making, etc.). Villages become ruralized by losing their peasant specificity.



social and political forms, what theory will one entrust with the realization on the ground of a renovated centrality and fabric, freed from their degradations?’