



ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter

Vol.11 – Issue 1 [July 2024]

Understanding how ontological conflicts materialize through dialogue between political ontology and Henri Lefebvre's spatial theories

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Accepted: 14 May 2024 / Published online: 23 May 2024

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How to cite:

Lamers L. (2024), Understanding how ontological conflicts materialize through dialogue between political ontology and Henri Lefebvre's spatial theories, *Alternautas*, 11(1), 39-69. DOI: 10.31273/an.v11i1.1467.

University of Warwick Press
<http://www.alternautas.net>



ISSN - 2057-4924

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Abstract

This article explores how Henri Lefebvre's spatial theories can inform post-development research, particularly into socio-environmental conflicts. Post-development's politico-ontological branch understands these conflicts as ontological clashes, stemming from the imposition of particular understandings of concepts like 'development' and 'nature'. The article argues that Lefebvre's spatial theories constitute a language for grasping the spatial dynamics of these ontological conflicts. The article offers guidance on applying this language by navigating through four key areas: (1) the ontological domain, by first overcoming some problems in Lefebvre's work through a politico-ontological reading, (2) the methodological domain, by demonstrating how his work provides an analytical framework to dissect the spatial manifestations of conflicts between diverse worlds, (3) the epistemological domain, by highlighting how Lefebvre's theories give insights into strategies of dominant ontologies to remain in power, (4) the domain of theories of change, by emphasizing Lefebvre's advocacy for the empowerment of marginalized communities to reclaim agency in shaping their spatial environment. This theoretical effort is then briefly illustrated with tensions that can arise from fortress conservation policies. Given their clear material concerns regarding land use and distribution, it is demonstrated how a PD's

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politico-ontological examination of such socio-environmental conflicts can benefit from Lefebvre's spatial theories.

Key Words: Post-Development; Political Ontology; Henri Lefebvre; Spatial Theory

Introduction

This article sets out to illuminate how the work of French sociologist and geographer Henri Lefebvre – particularly his theories of space – can contribute to the post-development (PD) school. At the core of this theoretical endeavor lies a recognition of the profound implications of socio-environmental conflicts such as conservation initiatives that lead to land grabbing (Quiroga and Uscátegui, 2021; Parra-Romero and Castillo, 2022; Marijnen, 2017). These conflicts are not merely disputes over territory; they embody deeper struggles over the conceptualization and implementation of 'development' and 'nature'.

The PD school, rooted in Latin-American critical socio-political scholarship, understands socio-environmental conflicts as ontological clashes, emerging from the imposition of specific, often Western-centric, notions of 'development' and 'nature' onto diverse socio-ecological contexts (Blaser, 2010; Tassinari, et.al., 2020; Demaria and Kothari, 2017;2022; Parra-Romero and Castillo, 2023). These clashes are not abstract philosophical debates, but material struggles that influence how societies organize themselves and utilize their environments.

As Mario Blaser puts it: ontologies, – as the sets of assumptions about what *is* and their interrelations – are always enacted (2010: p.3). This is exemplified in initiatives like REDD+ (Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), where the designation of, for example, Amazon areas as carbon sinks underscores the clash between divergent ontologies (Gutiérrez Escobar, 2022). The abstract valuation of forests as carbon storage units for carbon trading purposes contrasts starkly with the lived realities of indigenous communities, who perceive these areas as integral to their cultural and economic livelihoods (Gutiérrez Escobar, 2022).

In this context, Henri Lefebvre's spatial theories offer valuable insights. His seminal work *The Production Of Space* unveils the intricate interplay between society, space and power (1991). His work provides robust methodological frameworks for analyzing the spatial dynamics of ontologies (1991: p.33; 38). Through Lefebvre's lens, space is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic arena shaping, and shaped by, social practices and power relations.

Arturo Escobar recognizes the potential of phenomenologists like Lefebvre for post-development, supported by political ontologists like Blaser (Escobar, 2001; Blaser, 2004; 2009). This article argues that Lefebvre's spatial theories constitute a language to explore how ontological conflicts play out spatially. Therefore, this paper advocates for a deeper integration of Lefebvre's spatial theories into politico-ontological analyses within the PD school, emphasizing synergies between post-development's politico-ontological critique of modernism and Lefebvre's Marxist critique of capitalism. Focusing primarily on *The Production of Space*, incorporating some concepts from his other works, the article guides this integration across four key domains: the ontological domain, the methodological domain, the epistemological domain, and the domain of theories of change.

The article is structured as follows: first, an initial context introduction to post-development, political ontology and Lefebvre's work is given. Secondly, it proceeds to demonstrate how Lefebvre's spatial theories serve as a language to understand the materialization of ontological conflicts. This is achieved by navigating a dialogue with political ontology across four key domains: ontology, methodology, epistemology, and theories of change. Finally, it synthesizes the potential of Lefebvre's work to capture the spatial dynamics of ontological conflicts through a brief illustration of fortress conservation.

Introduction to Post-Development, Political Ontology and Henri Lefebvre

Both political ontology and critical geography are important theoretical pillars of post-development (e.g. Escobar, 2015B; 2018: p.66; Tassinari, et.al., 2020). However, despite clear shared influences from mid-20th century European phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the explicit incorporation of Lefebvre's spatial theories remains sparse, indicating a need for deeper examination and engagement (Elden, 2004; Escobar, 2018). The following is an introduction to the PD movement, Politico-Ontological theory and Lefebvre's oeuvre.

Post-Development and Political Ontology

During the 1990s, the post-development school was gradually taking form (Escobar, 2005; Neusiedl, 2019). With roots in critical Latin-American scholarship, its founding works (*The Development Dictionary*, by Sachs; *Encountering Development*, by Escobar; *The History of Development*, by Rist; and *The Post-Development Reader*, by Rahnema and Bawtree) focus on the

adverse outcomes of a political international development discourse and policy (Demaria and Kothari, 2019: p.2589). Post-development contends that the conventional view of development as economic growth within a modernist, often neoliberal framework has stripped 'development' of its political dimension. It has become an elitist tool imposed on so-called 'developing countries,' depriving their populations of agency and the ability to lead lives they find meaningful (Neusiedl, 2018: p.651).

In the mid-2000s, Escobar identified what he calls an 'ontological turn' in social sciences with prominent scholars such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Tim Ingold, Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (Tassanari et.al., 2020: p.489). It is marked by a renewed attention for ontological struggles adjoining epistemological conflicts about what knowledge counts, something by which social theory has been prominently shaped in the past decades, particularly with post-structuralism. This renewed attention for ontology has led to particularly heated debates on the human-nature relationship in anthropology, geography and political philosophy (Tassanari, et.al., 2020: p.498).

Post-development and political ontology both understand reality generally as composed of multiple ontologies, coexisting with the dominant Euro-modernist ontology. The latter divides object and subject, nature and culture, modern and non-modern, and adheres to a linear past-to-future temporality (Blaser, 2010: p.4; De La Cadena and Blaser, 2018). Blaser comprehensively defines 'ontology' as assumptions about what exists and their interrelations (Blaser, 2010: p.3). Importantly, ontologies or worlds are not fixed; they evolve through human and non-human interactions and therefore result from social processes. Ontologies can be conveyed as "stories" encapsulating a world's assumptions and relationships. Yet, ontologies always extend beyond verbal expression to encompass embodied and enacted aspects, with myths serving only as an entry point to understanding ontologies (Blaser, 2010).

Post-development's main endeavor is denouncing Euro-modern-ontology's pretention to be a single world whereby differences are mere deviations from itself as the norm (Escobar, 2015; 2015B; 2018). Thereby, development, as a practice and discourse, is an explicit tool to universalize modernity and its institutions (Blaser, 2010: p.6; Demaria and Kothari, 2017; Neusiedl, 2019; Parra-Romero and Castilla, 2023). PD opposes this self-proclaimed 'One-World' world with what it calls a 'pluriverse' – a world in which many worlds fit (Demaria and Kothari, 2017: p.2595; Reiter, 2018; Escobar, 2018: pp.16; 86). It links the clashes between worlds with epistemological struggles as it argues how pluriversality, up till today, is the entanglement of several cosmologies connected in a power differential (Mignolo in Reiter, 2018: p.X). Political ontology, as PD's main theoretical pillar, has a three-fold focus: first, it wants to shed light on the mechanisms that shape a particular world or ontology. Second, it aims to

conceptually capture the “conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other” (Blaser, 2009: p.877). Third, it contributes to theories of change on how to move from the One-World-world to a pluriverse.

Henri Lefebvre

Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) is considered one of the world’s leading, French post-war sociologists, philosophers and geographers (Foster, et.al., 2020). Kipfer, Saberi and Wieditz represent Lefebvre’s work as “a representative of a heterodox and open-ended, passionately engaged, and politically charged form of Marxism.” (2012: p.116).

In the first (1947) and second (1961) volumes of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, he introduced the concept of the ‘colonization of everyday life’ (Harvey in Lefebvre, 1991: p.428; Kipfer, Saberi and Wieditz, 2012: p.116; Davies, 2016).

During his time at the University of Nanterre in Paris in the mid-1960s, Lefebvre connected his *Critique of Everyday Life* with the student uprisings of 1968, as reflected in his book *The Right to the City* (Harvey in Lefebvre, 1991: p.430; Fischer and Bauer, 2019: p.3). For Lefebvre, the city, rather than the factory, is the site where the high diversity in lived realities clash most visibly with capitalism’s space, highlighting its homogenizing and colonizing nature (Stewart, 1994: p.614; Bogaert, 2012; Prigge, 2008: p.51; Kipfer, 2008: p.203; Huchzermeyer, 2019). Hence, it was not solely the proletariat’s responsibility to unite and challenge the capitalist system within the confines of factories. Instead, he believed that everyone should come together to resist the pervasive influence of capitalism in everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991: p.61).

In 1974, Lefebvre published *La Production de L’Espace*, offering a perspective on everyday life through the lens of space production. He views space as an amalgamation of three domains: ‘social,’ ‘mental’ and ‘physical space’ (figure 1) (Schmid, 2008). Lefebvre introduces the concept of ‘abstract space,’ causing the ‘colonization of everyday life’ (Davies, 2016). It describes Western space where the physical and social realms are made subordinate to the mental realm (Lefebvre, 1991: p.39; Wilson, 2013). This process leads to the establishment of a universalized conception as a norm that homogenizes lived experiences and practical engagements with the world in everyday life (Stewart, 1994).

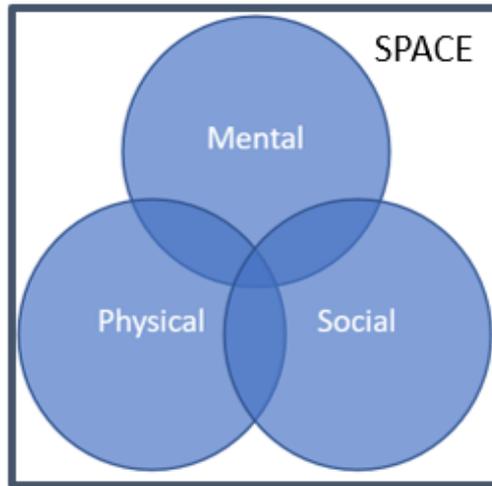


Figure 1: Lefebvre's Ontology Of Space

Lefebvre's influence is most noticeable in (1) political economy with Harvey (2001) who used his work as an inspiration for a Marxist geographical account of political economy, world-system analysis, and global studies; (2) cultural studies with Soja (1999) who introduced his work in scholarship from the postmodern linguistic and cultural turn (Kipfer, 2012: p.116); and (3) urban studies with his *The Right To The City* (Lefebvre, 1968; e.g. Goonewardena, et.al., 2008).

Reading Henri Lefebvre from a politico-ontological perspective

This section will guide the deeper integration of Lefebvre's spatial theories into the politico-ontological branch of the PD school by navigating a dialogue between both across the four domains of ontology, methodology, epistemology and theories of change (Figure 2). By doing so, we can enhance our understanding of how ontological conflicts materialize.

	How Lefebvre informs Political Ontology	Synergies	How Political Ontology informs Lefebvre
Ontology	<p>Assets: Phenomenology of place: merging object and subject.</p> <p>Problems: (1) the construction of spaces starting from one reality (2) Upholding a nature-culture divide</p>	Multiple modes-of-space-production // ontological enactments	A politico-ontological reading of Lefebvre allows for: (1) the acknowledgement of the pluriverse (2) overcoming the human-nature divide
Methodology	Lefebvre's triads constitute frameworks for empirical analysis: (1) his representations of space-representational space- and spatial practice triad to analyze struggles between ontological enactments (2) his physical-mental-social triad to analyze epistemic struggles.	Lay bare the arbitrariness of a particular mode-of-production/ontological enactment and the injustices that surge from this.	(1) a more open-ended, flexible and non-deterministic approach counterbalancing Lefebvre's predefined analytical frameworks to avoid rigid interpretations (2) nuancing Lefebvre's terminology that upholds the idea of one order to which all else relates: coded and uncoded, norm and difference, producers and users of space.
Epistemology	(1) theorizations of how the One-World world perpetuates itself (A) with his concept of Abstract Space and (B) his history of decorporalization decorporalization . (2) overcoming the north-south divide in terms of alternatives to Modernity. Alternatives are omnipresent, also in Western societies.	One space or ontology purports to be the only world.	(1) highlighting maximal differences with roots external to the modernist space. (2) reframing Lefebvre's concepts of differences as equivocations reflecting a more relational philosophy.
Theory of Change	(1) theorizing the dynamics of human agency as users and producers in world-making (2) locating the key to transition in a return to the body that enables the conscious production of space true to the lived reality of the body (3) non-deterministic understanding of space-production from which differences inevitably emerge.	Transition is possible through conscious alternative ontological design/enactment or space-production which implies prefiguration. This implies self-determination.	Adding a non-human dimension to Lefebvre's theorization of agency.

Figure 2: This table guides the integration of Lefebvre's spatial theories into politico-ontological research by navigating a dialogue between both across four domains. This

dialogue enables Lefebvre's spatial theories to constitute a language to dissect the material dimensions of ontological conflicts.

The Ontological Domain

In order to render Lefebvre's theories apt to articulate how ontological conflicts manifest spatially, they must align with the core tenets of Political Ontology. PO asserts that differences are ontological, constituting a pluriverse. PO distinguishes itself by challenging three fundamental issues within Western theoretical traditions that uphold the notion of a single world: an object-subject divide, a nature-culture divide, and the belief in a single reality (Escobar, 2001; Viveiros De Castro, 2004).

Aligning Lefebvre with PO's stance on these three issues is crucial because he has been criticized for overlooking other-than-human agency and he does not explicitly endorse the concept of the pluriverse (Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2020B). Hence, this section outlines how Lefebvre can be read from a politico-ontological perspective.

Let us start with the issue of the object-subject divide, which stems from the Kantian division between the material and the mental realm (Lefebvre, 1991). Materialism asserts the complete independence of the physical world from consciousness, with object features inherent to their physical nature (Lacerda, 2015). Hence, knowledge originates from understanding objects themselves. In contrast, idealism emphasizes the primacy of ideas in shaping reality (Lacerda, 2015). It suggests that objects mainly exist as their mental constructs. Knowledge thus stems from the cognitive interpretations of objects by subjects. Hence, while realist materialism fuels positivism's quest to uncover the mechanisms of external reality, constructivist idealism critiques positivism, viewing reality as socially constructed and interpretable across cultures (Grix, 2002; Scarso, 2013). Post-structuralism, for example, - an influential idealist school - focuses on discourse in reality construction (Lefebvre, 1991).

While in certain respects diametrically opposed, both materialism and idealism sustain the ontological dualisms of object-subject, nature-culture, and one reality (Scarso, 2013; Lacerda, 2015). This, because they maintain an either-or narrative: reality is either the fixed, external material realm, or a mental construct. The knowability of reality is found in either the material object or the cognitive subject (Scarso, 2013; Lacerda, 2015).

Lefebvre sits at the intersection of both, arguing for an and-and narrative. He critiques Stalin's historical materialism for pretending that "the world and its laws are [fixed, universal, and] fully knowable": "man knows the limits of consciousness and reason" (Kipfer in Lefebvre, 2009: p.XXIII). Yet, he criticizes

post-structuralist idealism for focusing on the mental abstraction of reality that is discourse: “concepts [are mere] abbreviations of the infinite mass of particularities of concrete existence” (Kipfer in Lefebvre, 2009: p.XX). While acknowledging the impact of mental constructs, Lefebvre would agree with Ingold when he asks: “Is the seagull wheeling outside my window a genuine creature producing its own form of life, or a blob of raw material to which I have attached a concept, drawn from my cultural tradition, of ‘seagullness’? It might seem strange that anyone should entertain the latter idea. Yet many anthropologists have found themselves arguing along precisely these lines: namely that non-humans can figure in the world of humans only as animated cultural constructs” (2005: pp.504-505).

Hence, Lefebvre presents reality not as a mental construction or a fixed, external, objective world, but as praxis, and thus in constant evolution (Kipfer in Lefebvre, 2009). Praxis constitutes the complete spectrum of all practices, representing the total activity of living beings. For Lefebvre, within the practices of an individual, the material and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract, object and subject merge in living actuality. From this perspective, reality emerges as socially produced rather than mentally constructed or constituting a fixed, external, objective realm.

Kipfer outlines how “this yields Lefebvre's dialectical materialism, which diverges from Stalin's portrayal of historical materialism as merely the opposite of idealism” (Lefebvre, 2009: p. XIX). Lefebvre's dialectical materialism refers to the dynamic of 'space-production', wherein the real and the ideal engage in constant interaction through praxis.

By bridging the materialism-idealism divide in praxis, Lefebvre overcomes the object-subject dualism. In doing so, he is strongly influenced by phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty who emphasize an active, practical, and perceptual involvement and experience of the lived world (Elden, 2004; Simonsen, 2005). Hence, the material realm of the object and the mental realm of the subject merge in reality (Pierce & Martin, 2015: p.1287).

Along these lines, Lefebvre strongly advocates for the reunification of object and subject in the body: “Western philosophy has betrayed the body; it has actively participated in the great metaphorization that has abandoned the body; and it has denied the body. The living body, being at once ‘subject’ and ‘object’ cannot tolerate such conceptual division” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.132; 407; Stewart, 1994: 612; Simonsen, 2005; Meyer, 2008; Frehse, 2020; e.g. Silva, 2016).

Bodies are not merely traversing a pre-existing world to which mental conceptions are attached (Lefebvre, 1991: p.199; Bauer, 2019). Perception is not understood as an internal representation of the external world but rather as an active bodily engagement (Lefebvre, 1991: p.199; Simonsen, 2005: p.9; Bauer, 2019). Quoting

Merleau-Ponty, Simonsen clarifies this idea: “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them. The scope of this inclusion is the measure of that of my existence” (in Simonsen, 2005: p.10).

In this framework, the environment and the body are inseparable, blurring the lines between object and subject (De La Cadena and De Castro, 2018). Lefebvre uses the example of a spider spinning its web as an extension of its body to illustrate how bodies produce and experience space in a unique way: “for any living body, just as for spiders, shellfish and so on, the most basic places and spatial indicators are first of all qualified by that body” (1991: p.174). Time and space of mayflies are unavoidably different than the time and space of dogs or a human collective: “The space of one group, like their measures of duration, must have been unfathomable to all others” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.120).

While Lefebvre’s phenomenology bridges the object-subject divide, he is unable to overcome the nature-culture divide. Although Lefebvre acknowledges that other-than-human bodies also create space, he has been severely criticized for depicting nature as a mere décor, molded by human social practices acting upon it (Kipfer, Saberi, and Wieditz, 2012: pp.125-126; Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2020B; Dorch, 2019). PD and PO scholars, as well as political ecologists extensively criticize disregarding more-than-human agency as reductionist anthropocentrism (De Castro: 2004; De La Cadena, 2019; Alimonda, 2022: p.114; Burke, 2022).

Lefebvre does effectively question the Kantian division between mental subjects and material object, which caused people to *abstractly think about*, rather than *vividly experience* reality, resulting in the alienation of humans from reality (1991: p.24; Foster, et.al., 2020: p.34). Yet, he praises other-than-humans for their immediate engagement with the world because they lack the mental realm altogether (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.174-175). Hence, they do not possess the curse of mental abstractions that alienates humans from their reality: “Long before the advent of the logos... lived experience... was already producing [space]... Long before the analyzing, separating intellect, long before formal knowledge, there was an intelligence of the body” (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.174-175).

According to Lefebvre, other-than-human spaces are enacted and lived, not conceptualized like those of humans (1991: p.173). Hence, this enactment cannot be corrupted by abstractions, homogenizations and reductionism. Lefebvre distinguishes between the other-than-human *creation* of space and human *production* of space, whereby the construction of reality is still reserved for human social interactions (1991: pp.173-174). Lefebvre finds other-than-human immediate space-creation admirable and encourages humans to strive for it (1991:

p.173). However, by asserting that only humans possess a mental realm, Lefebvre inadvertently perpetuates the material-mental division he criticizes.

Besides bridging the object-subject and the nature-culture divide, political ontology requires Lefebvre's theories to explicitly reject the notion of a singular reality where differences are viewed solely as cultural variations (Scarso, 2013). This perspective endorses the idea that there are no genuine alternatives beyond the modernist world (Blaser, 2013). All there is, are cultural variations of modernity. Essentially, it suggests that the modernist worldview has effectively eradicated all non-modern ontologies (Blaser, 2013).

PO counters this idea by understanding reality as multiple worlds (Viveiros De Castro, 2004). This idea is based on bridging the two dualisms of object-subject and nature-culture. Drawing from shared influences with Lefebvre of mid-20th century European phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, PO bridges object and subject by merging both in the body (De La Cadena and Viveiros De Castro, 2018; Escobar, 2019; Elden, 2004). Yet, unlike Lefebvre, PO extends this idea to the more-than-human realm (De La Cadena and Viveiros De Castro, 2018). Each body – human or non-human – experiences and produces a unique world.

De La Cadena and Viveiros De Castro explain how bridging both dualisms can sustain the idea of a pluriverse with the “almost canonical example ... of the differences between jaguar and human”: what beer is to humans, is different from what beer is to a jaguar. Equally, what blood is to humans is different from what blood is to a jaguar. “The reason for the differences between their points of view resides in their different bodies.” (De Castro, 2004: p.471; De La Cadena, 2019: p.38). This perspective refutes the idea of one reality in which differences are merely cultural, because different bodies entail different realities. Hence, political ontology allows for a more radical acceptance of differences, something that constructivist idealism is unable to accommodate.

Despite the critiques Lefebvre faces, his phenomenological understanding of the body in which object and subject come together, allows for a politico-ontological reading of his work when extended to the other-than-human realm (Janzen, 2002: p.99): collective human or other-than-human bodies do not just experience and produce space in unique ways, they produce and experience unique spaces. Spaces then, do not refer to socio-cultural constructs of one world, but to multiple enacted ontologies or worlds (figure 3). This interpretation overcomes the human-nature divide and allows for understanding reality as a pluriverse. Escobar confirms that “in refusing to separate knowing from doing and these from existing, [Lefebvre]

provides us with a language with which to question radically the dualisms of [object-subject and] nature and culture” (Escobar, 2001: p.205).

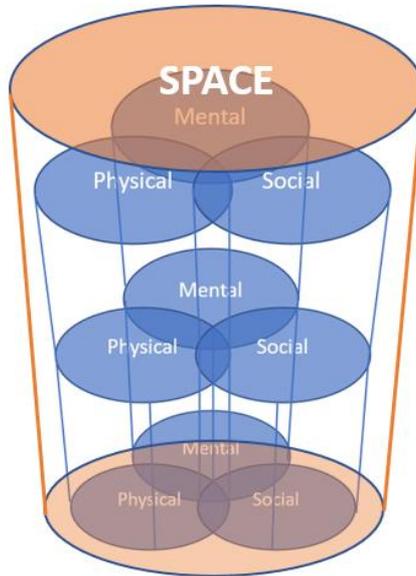


Figure 3: A Space of Spaces: A Politico-Ontological Reading Of Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Theory

A Politico-ontological reading of Lefebvre’s work enables it to constitute a language to explore how ontological conflicts play out spatially. For example, Lefebvre’s theorization about how bodies produce space according to the analysis of rhythms and spatial directions as well as his theorization of space-production via his dialectic triad, appear valuable to understand how these multiple worlds come to be, i.e. how collective bodies enact their particular ontology, how they produce their particular space.

The Methodological Domain

Let us focus here on the methodological potential of Lefebvre’s dialectic triad. Lefebvre posits that space is produced through a triadic dynamic of representations of space, representational space, and spatial practices. This dynamic offers insight into how ontologies are enacted and how incompatible enactments may clash in space.

1. Representations of space are conceptions, born out of logic, such as mathematical spaces, maps, and commodified and monetarized landscapes. It is the space of structures that reduce the rich variety of lived reality to mental abstractions. (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.33+38; Stewart, 1994: p.610; Prigge, 2008: p.51).

2. Representational spaces are lived spaces, imbued with symbolism and meaning through use. It is the space of lived actuality that is historically and contextually contingent (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.33+38; Stewart, 1994: p.610; Prigge, 2008: p.51).

3. Spatial practices are the “social practices by which space is materially produced” (Wilson, 2013: p.367). It is all praxis observable in the physical realm (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.33+38; Stewart, 1994: p.610; Prigge, 2008: p.51).

When conceptions are in accordance with lived reality, or at least continuously informed and revised by it, there is no conflict in spatial practice. Lefebvre calls this state ‘absolute space’ (Stewart, 1994: p.612). However, when conceptions are thought to be real, true, and fixed, despite being reductions of the rich variety of lived realities, conflicts may arise in spatial practices. Lefebvre identifies a tendency in the West whereby conceptions are universalized and imposed onto the rich variety of lived experience. He calls this state “abstract space” (Lefebvre, 1991; Stewart, 1994).

For example, the human-nature divide is a well-known conception that has been universalized under capitalism (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020; Moore, 2015). It is the idea that nature is diametrically opposed to and subservient to humans. This representation of space has resulted in particular spatial practices such as the establishment of strict national parks from which humans are forcefully displaced so as to preserve pristine wilderness as real, true nature.

This contrasts with the representational space of the rich variety of lived actuality, which results in physical manifestations despite particularly influential abstractions such as the human-nature divide. For many, these park areas are their dwelling place, apparent in farms, pastures, meadows, cattle, and honoring practices of places of particular significance (Parra-Romero, 2023; Silva, 2016). In this case, representations of space and representational space result in contradictory spatial practices. When representations of space are not adapted to lived actuality, but imposed onto it as the self-proclaimed truth, this might lead to severe conflict.

According to Lefebvre many alternative representational spaces are prevented from finding expression in spatial practices at all, because the capitalist system intends to annihilate all possible alternative practices that could potentially

undermine the system through reduction or violence (Lefebvre, 1991: p.393+396; Wilson, 2013).

When the capitalist system is successful in reproducing its space and reducing or annihilating all maximal differences, a coded mode-of-space-production appears. It is a coherent reproduction of space in which representations of space and representational space result in cohesive spatial practices. Yet, any mode-of-space-production unavoidably generates uncoded differences (Lefebvre, 1991: p.52; 393; 396; Shmueli, 2008: p.222).

Whereas Lefebvre understands the struggle to be about controlling the codification of the mode-of-production (the social production of one world), reading Lefebvre from a politico-ontological perspective allows to understand the struggle to be between rivaling modes-of-production (the acknowledgement of the Pluriverse). The enactment of an ontology in space, with its particular representations of space, representational space and spatial practices, along with its internal differences, might coexist harmoniously – as in an ecosystem – with the enactment of different ontologies. Or, they might potentially clash. Consequently, PO is able to nuance Lefebvre’s terminology that upholds the idea of one order to which all else relates: coded and uncoded, norm and difference, producers and users of space.

In sum, Lefebvre’s triad of space-production captures how ontologies are enacted. Hence, it can constitute an analytical tool to examine how conflicts between ontological enactments manifest spatially. Furthermore, according to Lefebvre’s second triad of mental, physical and social space, the weight given to perceptions, conceptions, or lived experiences regarding truth claims can inform us about the epistemological dimension of ontological clashes. In other words: what knowledge counts? According to Lefebvre, in the capitalist space, mental abstractions hold the highest truth claim. Because of this particular epistemological feature of the capitalist mode-of-production, it can never be compatible with other modes-of-space-production. This brings us to the epistemological domain.

The Epistemological Domain

The Political Ontologist Viveiros De Castro demonstrates how thinking in ‘worlds’ – according to political ontology – or ‘spaces’ – when using Lefebvre’s terminology – allows for understanding differences not as errors, “mere beliefs, or romantic yearnings” (Blaser, 2009: p.888), but as ‘equivocations’ (Viveiros De Castro, 2004). Equivocations surge when two worlds encounter each other and clash. For example, when talking about or living with nature means different

things to different people and beings, this might lead to misunderstandings between them.

Viveiros De Castro distinguishes between ‘error’ and ‘equivocation’, using a language metaphor: ‘errors’ occur within a specific language game, whereas ‘equivocations’ happen between different language games (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: p.9). Consequently, determining who is wrong becomes irrelevant since no norm serves as a reference point (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: p.9). He views the anthropologist’s role as that of a translator, emphasizing the equivocation, revealing the concealed gap between languages in contact. Translation doesn’t eliminate the equivocation, as that would assume it never existed. “If anthropology exists..., it is precisely ...because ... “common sense” is not common.” (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: p.8). Viveiros de Castro calls this translation ‘controlled equivocation’ (2004).

De La Cadena’s distinction between ‘equivocations’ and ‘disagreements’ highlights the colonial feature of the ‘One-World’-world (2019). For her, an equivocation denotes a misunderstanding among equals who are ontologically different (De La Cadena, 2019: p.39). Meanwhile, a disagreement occurs when one ontology claims universality and imposes its world on others, seeking to eliminate the equivocation by enforcing assimilation with its own norms. (De Cadena, 2019). Essentially, disagreements stem from the Euro-Modern, hegemonic ontology purporting to be the only space, or ‘world’.

Blaser indeed contends that modernist political assumptions persist despite their inadequacy when confronted with other ontologies (Blaser, 2010: p.2). Modernity’s tendency to impose its categories on alternative ontologies leads to ontological conflicts (Blaser, 2010: p.2; Garcia-Arias and Schöneberg, 2021). Consequently, the contemporary era witnesses increasingly visible and widespread ontological clashes as societies seek to define a global age distinct from modernity (Blaser, 2010: p.1; Alimonda, 2022: p.120; Lazala, 2020: pp.57-58; Silva and Postero, 2020; Silva, Vidal, and Holmes, 2022).

Blaser describes modernity’s strategy of dismissing alternative ontologies as establishing a truth regime that universalizes the equivalence between the world and its modernist representation (Blaser, 2010: p.5). This approach instrumentalizes expert knowledge as the epitome of true knowledge (Blaser, 2010: p.6; Garcia-Arias and Schöneberg, 2021).

Given the mutual influences from mid-20th century phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, Lefebvre offers a similar critique of capitalist space (Stewart, 1994: p.616; Douglas, 2002; Simmons, 2020).

He posits that the strategy of the capitalist space to prevail and spread, is evident in the historical transformation of space (Stewart, 1994: p.616). For Lefebvre Western space initially embodied a harmonious integration of lived, perceived, and conceived dimensions, constituting 'absolute space'. However, it has since evolved into 'abstract space', where mental conceptions disproportionately determine other realms and claim to define reality (Stewart, 1994: pp.5-6; Wilson, 2013). This reduction and homogenization of diverse lived realities serve the interests of those in power, sustaining their position (Delaisse, Huot and Veronis 2020; Shmueli, 2008: p.221). Lefebvre's concept of abstract space extends Marx's notion of economic alienation to also encompass political, human and spiritual dimensions in everyday life. It represents a condition where lived experience is suppressed and overshadowed by the dominance of conceptualization (Lefebvre, 1991: p.51; Stewart, 1994: pp.615-616; Simonsen, 2005: p.3; Wilson, 2013: pp.366-370; Davies, 2016):

Reduced models are constructed - models of society, of the city, of institutions, of the family, and so forth... This is how social space comes to be reduced to mental space by means of a 'scientific' procedure [which] is really nothing but a veil for ideology.... Reduction and reductionism appear as tools in the service of the state and of power: not as ideologies but as established knowledge.... Reduction can reach very far indeed in its implications. It can 'descend' to the level of practice.... Many people...of a variety of groups and classes, suffer (albeit unevenly) the effects of a multiplicity of reductions bearing on their capacities, ideas, 'values' and, ultimately, on their possibilities, their space and their bodies... Designed with a reductive practice in mind, they [those in power] manage, with a little luck, to impose an order. (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.106-107)

Lefebvre faced critique for romanticizing non-Western spaces as absolute space (Fischer and Bauer, 2019: p.8; Dorsch, 2019: p.92). In contrast to Western space, he argues that these regions did not experience the exaltation of the mental over the physical and social space, resulting in an 'abstract space'. Instead, space still exists in the harmonious state of 'absolute space', which he considers a characteristic of Western societies in the past (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.122-123). This understanding of space follows a rather linear historical trajectory, whereby other societies are - albeit positively - perceived as being stagnant (Dorsch, 2019: p.92).

The strategy of abstracting space also involves decorporalization. Decorporalization neglects the fact that space is produced and experienced through diverse bodies before conceptualization (Douglas, 2002): "Western philosophy... has actively participated in the great process of metaphorization that has abandoned the body" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.407; Simonsen, 2005).

An example of this decorporalization process is our current measurement system, which abstracts and homogenizes body parts of varying sizes (Lefebvre, 1991:

p.110; Stanek, 2008: p.71). For instance, the "foot" measurement originated from King Henry I's foot length, while the inch was based on a man's thumb width (Lefebvre, 1991: p.120). This history of abstracting measurements in the West reflects decorporalization, contributing to reality reduction and norm reproduction.

Lefebvre links the decorporalization and abstraction process to a transformation in the nature of knowledge. Abstract space, rooted in abstract reasoning, produces *savoirs*. In contrast, absolute space generates *connaissances*, which are locally, historically, and geographically contingent forms of knowledge derived from direct engagement with the world (1991: pp.368; 413; Stewart, 1994: 611; Escobar, 2001: pp.204-205). Consequently, a genuine bodily experience of everyday life, akin to a child's, becomes a site of resistance and counter-discourses that elude the grasp of power apparatuses" (Stewart, 1994: pp.610-611; Wilson, 2013: p.373; Davies, 2016: p.15).

Lefebvre argues that Western philosophy and science – particularly structuralism, but also post-structuralism – have contributed to decorporalization and spatial abstraction. By focusing on mental reductions of lived realities, they reinforced the existing order (Lefebvre, 1991: p.106; Douglas, 2002; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: p.247). Science can counter this by exploring lived and perceived space alongside mental space, uncovering the "truth of space," by revealing the differences between them (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.398-399; Blaser, 2010: p.5).

Lefebvre argues that deviations from the dominant abstraction are only accepted as long as they do not undermine it (1991: p.396). He terms these deviations 'minimal differences' (1991: p.397), while 'maximal differences' are deviations incompatible with the capitalist mode-of-space-production (Lefebvre, 1991: p.397). This distinction parallels Viveiros de Castro's differentiation between multiple modernities as Euro-modernity with its minimal differences and non-modernities as the pluriverse of maximal differences such as Buen Vivir or Ubuntu (Blaser, 2009: p.886). 'Reduced differences' occur when maximal differences are suppressed through violence (Lefebvre, 1991: p.382). This process resembles cooptation, for example, the redistribution of land amongst communities who hold the privatization of land as immoral (e.g. Dario Chambi, 2015). According to Lefebvre, homogenization "serves those forces which make a tabula rasa of whatever stands in their way,... – in short, of differences. These forces seem to... crush everything before them, with space performing the function of a plane, a bulldozer or a tank. The... instrumental homogeneity of space, however, is illusory... because it uncritically takes the instrumental as a given" (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.285; 396; Lazala, 2020: p.54).

Lefebvre contends that differences unavoidably emerge during space production, even during the reproduction process of the capitalist space. This counters the notion that significant differences are solely external. This perspective avoids reinforcing a north-south divide, highlighting substantial differences produced from within Western space. Escobar's comparison of the degrowth movement in the global north with other post-development alternatives supports this view.

Modernist-capitalism's strategy of abstraction and homogenization, acknowledged by both post-development and Lefebvre, underscores the similarities between PD's Modernity/Coloniality (M/C) interconnectedness and Lefebvre's concept of the 'colonization of everyday life'. Modernity/Coloniality highlights that modernity's imperial powers and capitalist centers rely on colonized societies and capitalist peripheries (Silva, Vidal, and Holmes, 2022: p.134; Escobar, 2007; Reiter, 2018: p.98). Similarly, Lefebvre asserts that the success of capitalism's space relies on its colonization of everyday life by homogenizing and reducing diverse worlds to the singular mental construct of capitalism (Stewart, 1994: p.610; Wilson, 2013; Kipfer, Saberi, and Wieditz, 2012: pp.122-123).

In sum, Lefebvre's insights into the strategies of the dominant ontology reveal the colonial nature of the modernist/capitalist space. To counter this, we must challenge the arbitrariness of abstract concepts presented as reality by emphasizing differences as unique worlds, rather than deviations from the norm. Enhancing maximal differences while preventing their reduction, i.e., cooptation, is essential.

Theories of Change

This brings us to strategies to oppose the current state of affairs and to enhance alternative paths. PD scholars highlight alternative ontologies and how they differ from Euro-modernity, such as the rejection of the human-nature divide, a relational view of differences, and an emphasis on the uniqueness of people's experiences (Acosta, 2018; De Castro, 2004; De la Cadena, 2019; Blaser, 2010: p.2). These alternatives, termed Transition Discourses (TDs), encompass various movements like degrowth, communing, conviviality, and Buen Vivir (Escobar, 2015B; 2018: p.4; Blaser, 2010: p.14). PD explores strategies for TD's to thrive and resist the homogenizing force of the dominant ontology.

One effective strategy in challenging the dominant ontology, as advocated in PD literature, involves promoting autonomy and self-management. Similar to Lefebvre's concept of 'autogestion' (Wilson, 2013: p.373). This approach allows individuals to live by their own values, empowering them to enact their own worlds (Escobar, 2018: pp.15-17; Kothari et al., 2019; Neusiedl, 2019; Alimonda,

2022). Autogestion embodies the ‘right to difference,’ enabling the choice for alternative lifestyles (2013: p.373; Alimonda, 2022; Kipfer, Saberi, and Wieditz, 2012: p.123). By allowing these to appear, instead of oppressing, punishing, coopting, and assimilating differences, one is prefiguring the pluriverse.

Escobar introduces another strategy labelled 'ontological design,' which involves consciously shaping one's own world through creating artifacts, structures, and organizational systems, thereby influencing daily life patterns (Escobar, 2015B: p.15; 2018: p.116). Ontological design recognizes the importance of the physical dimension of an ontology. These performances, along with everyday practices and social mobilization, have become visible as ongoing cosmopolitical struggles to sustain and expand the diverse worlds of the pluriverse (Blaser, 2004: p.19).

In that sense, ontological design is not so different from Lefebvre's conviction that the “ability to produce space, rather than just to conceive space, is the means by which people can take back power in their everyday lives” (Stewart, 1994: p.610). Hence, the success of TD's depends not so much on creating alternative mental constructions, but rather on their practical enactment. It is crucial that this enactment is led by lived experiences rather than abstract constructions that homogenize.

Ontological design thus implies prefiguration, where the distinction between present struggle and future goals is annihilated, merging the real and the ideal in the present (Maeckelbergh, 2014: p.4): “[Space-]production process and [space as a] product present themselves as two inseparable aspects” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.37).

Hence, ontologies should be enacted here and now. But who brings about this enactment? Lefebvre distinguishes between producers and passive users as the two groups involved in the space-production process (1991: p.43; Stewart, 1994). Although the terms may suggest otherwise, both actively contribute to space production, as “such responsibility [is] attributed...to the social totality” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.115).

Producers of space are those that materialize abstract ideas into tangible spaces, producing representations of space. Those in power can easily remain in power because they hold positions that strongly influence the physical organization of space: politicians, architects, urban planners, product designers and affluent individuals. They produce space according to those abstractions on which they thrive (1991: p.48; Hoffman, 2013). Users of space, meanwhile, interact with these physical environments, assigning meaning to them and engaging in spatial activities: they produce representational space (Thompson, 2017). For instance, the standardization of time through clockworks is a representation of space, with people then using pocket watches and adhering to punctuality norms as a result.

Both representations of space and representational space can lead to spatial practices that can either reinforce the dominant ontology when they are in accordance with its coded logic, or they might introduce differences to it, potentially guiding space production in new directions. One can conceptualize a Hijri calendar instead of a Gregorian calendar to make sense of time, producing an alternative representation of space. Or one can wake up with the sun instead of the clock alarm as an alternative representational space. Hence, both producers and users of space can drive change, albeit in different ways. Lefebvre underscores that successful change in space-production should be guided by the lived experience of users rather than by universalized conceptions of producers.

A politico-ontological reading of Lefebvre expands the user-producer framework to the more-than-human realm (Ingold, 2005). For instance, the Andean bear demonstrates user agency in space production as it adapts to human-induced environmental changes in Colombia (Garrido, et.al., 2021). As farmers expanded into new territories, creating pastures and meadows high in the mountains, the bear performs a different spatial practice in this new representation of space: it starts to hunt cattle. While scientists view the Andean bear as shy and herbivorous, local communities, experiencing the bear's predatory behavior, perceive it as aggressive and carnivorous; a *connaissance* that contrasts sharply with the scientists' *savoir* (Garrido, et. al., 2021: p.11).

Discussion: the fortress conservation model as an illustration

Now, let us examine how everything converges in one case study analysis. This theoretical endeavor aims to inform analyses of socio-environmental conflicts, especially those related to conservation issues resulting in land grabbing. PD understands these conflicts as ontological clashes with clear material consequences regarding land use and distribution. Hence, analyses of these conflicts can particularly benefit from insights into how ontological clashes materialize.

The analysis presented here focuses on socio-environmental conflict involving the displacement of communities from strict national parks. It is important to note that what follows serves as an illustration of the tensions often associated with strict national park policies in general, rather than representing a specific context. Rather than empirically analyzing a real-world case, the purpose of this example is to demonstrate how the theoretical framework of this article could be applied to similar situations.

Let us start by examining the ontological enactment of the modernist/capitalist space that brought about this strictly delineated national park, with Lefebvre's triad of space-production.

Strict national parks as the result of a particular ontological enactment

In fortress conservation conflicts, the rigid segregation of ‘pristine nature’ and ‘humans’ by park boundaries is the enactment of a human-nature divide rationale. This rationale has been identified as a typical abstraction of the modernist/capitalist ontology, where nature is seen as fundamentally separate from and subservient to specific human groups (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020; Moore, 2015). Hence, this *representation of space* results in particular spatial practices: the creation of a strictly protected national park.

This physical manifestation is not questioned when it aligns perfectly with the *representational space* of lived actuality. Multinationals purchasing carbon credits representing the park’s carbon storage capacity, along with park guards safeguarding this ecosystem service, and tourists paying for the sight of it, constitute coded *representational spaces*. Coded, because they represent lived reality in complete accordance with the common sense of the dominant modernist/capitalist rationale. However, it is not the only ontological enactment in the same location.

Plural ontological enactments in the same area

Indeed, the national park as a representation of space contrasts sharply with the uncoded *representational spaces* of lived actuality in the area. For local farming communities this area is their dwelling place, intrinsically bound up with their own history and identity (Parra-Romero, 2023; Silva, 2016). This becomes apparent in particular spatial practices (Blaser, 2010): farms, meadows, pastures, cattle, hunting practices, honoring practices of places with special significance for the community.

While these representational spaces are uncoded in relation to the modernist/capitalist mode-of-space-production, a politico-ontological reading of Lefebvre would reframe this to coded representational spaces according to another, competing mode-of-space-production. This reframing overcomes measuring everything against the modernist/capitalist ontology as the standard.

Clashes between ontological enactments

It quickly becomes apparent that both ontological enactments in the same physical area are incompatible. *Equivocations* surge between people from both

worlds (Viveiros De Castro, 2004). When a local farmer talks with a park representative about the national park, they will talk about the same area, yet about different worlds (Parra-Romero, 2023). The solution is not to undo the equivocation, as this would require the imposition of sameness. The solution is to become aware of it and to control it. Control can only result from mutual understanding and finding compromises to organize the area which fits both worlds as good as possible (Viveiros De Castro, 2004).

The danger lies in equivocations becoming *disagreements* (De La Cadena, 2019). This occurs when one world purports to be the only real or correct world. When the establishment of the national park is considered crucial to some for whatever reason – to conserve ecosystem services such as carbon storage capacity for emitters in the global north in the case of REDD+, or because it is considered the only effective way to safeguard future human generations, economic growth, or even the ecosystem itself – defenders of this idea might try to find strategies to dismiss ontological enactments that put this into peril. One such strategy is propagating the universalization of the equivalence between these natural areas with their modernist *abstraction* as wilderness containing ecosystem services (Stewart, 1994: p.616). This process is defended by *savoirs* under the banner of science, undermining the *connaissances* of lived experiences as romantic aberrations (Lefebvre, 1991: pp.368+413).

Another strategy is to coopt or reduce those ontological enactments that constitute maximal differences vis-à-vis this modernist/capitalist abstraction (Lefebvre, 1991). This could for example involve monetizing the emotional significance of the ecosystem for its inhabitants. In some cases, outright violence is even used, destroying the spatial practices of the rivaling ontology: destroying farms, meadows and pastures, slaughtering cattle, etc. (Garrido, et.al., 2021). These are all ways by which the modernist/capitalist space avoids maximal differences to take hold. This homogenization of lived realities to fit the modernist/capitalist rationale, is described by Lefebvre as ‘the colonization of everyday life’ (1991; 2002).

Bounding back

Of course, communities enacting alternative ontologies in the same area will not just sit back and assimilate. They continuously highlight the arbitrariness of the conceptions on which the modernist/capitalist representations of space are based as well as of the symbolisms and practices that uphold them (Blaser, 2010; Silva, 2016). They attack the human-nature divide conception, they question the idea of ecosystem services. All this, to weaken the claim of the modernist/capitalist ontology that it constitutes the only true, correct world.

While this work is important, for Lefebvre, the key to oppose the dominant modernist/capitalist ontology that is often overlooked, is striving for the *materialization of the alternative ontology* (1991b). He underscores the importance of the empowerment of marginalized groups to reshape their environments, resulting in spatial practices that reflect the particularities of everyday life: "Any revolutionary 'project' today, whether utopian or realistic, must make the reappropriation... of space, a nonnegotiable part of its agenda" (1991b: p.166-167).

For example, when park residents remain on their territory despite strict park boundaries, they oppose the modernist/capitalist mode-of-space-production to fully crystalize. By cultivating the land or honoring community landmarks, they oppose the modernist/capitalist mode-of-space-production by reproducing their own world. Government officials advocating for these communities may utilize what Escobar calls ontological design, organizing areas to align with local ways of life. This could involve establishing peasant reserve zones, as seen in Colombia, allowing farming communities to engage in conservation efforts without compromising their identity and lifestyles (Ruiz Reyes, 2015). Hence, transition or change is always prefigurative, because it implies the process of production of space as the enactment of an ontology.

More-than-human space-production

Up till now, the analysis only focused on human groups producing space. Yet, a politico-ontological reading of Lefebvre's work allows for the acknowledgement that the national park area constitutes unique worlds created by more-than-human groups (Garrido, et.al., 2021). Consequently, one mode-of-space-production not only potentially clashes with other human worlds, but also with non-human worlds. To give a straightforward example, when a hydroelectric powerplant is installed in a freshwater ecosystem, it might disrupt the habitats produced by other-than-human groups.

These groups are equally forced to adapt and assimilate. When Freya, the 600-kg walrus, sunbathed on boats along the Norwegian coast, accidentally sinking one or two of them, she was euthanized because her spatial practices, common to her world, were considered inappropriate (Horowitz, 2022).

When indigenous knowledge is praised for effectively protecting the other-than-humans, it is due to its explicit goal of comprehending other-than-human ways of being. Viveiros De Castro describes how shamans or other trans-specific beings are believed to possess the unique ability to communicate with the other-than-

human realm (1998). To facilitate this communication, they sometimes adorn themselves as the animal or other-life-form in question to immerse themselves in its way of life (Viveiros De Castro, 1998: p.471). They observe, listen, and attentively engage with other-than-human groups, not as objects of scientific study, but as ontologically distinct equals.

This illustration showcased how the integration of Lefebvre's spatial theories into politico-ontological analyses within the PD school can enhance our understanding of how ontological conflicts play out spatially. It offers various concepts, frameworks and tools for analysis.

Conclusion

This article aimed to demonstrate how Lefebvre's spatial theories can constitute a language for post-development's politico-ontological research to capture how ontological clashes – particularly socio-environmental conflicts – materialize. The objective of political ontology and Lefebvre's spatial theories is to expose arbitrary ontological enactments, or modes-of-space-production, revealing the resulting injustices. Building further on this synergy, Lefebvre's work can contribute to post-development literature by offering a language that captures how ontological conflicts materialize. How this language can be deployed has been explored across the four domains of ontology, methodology, epistemology and theories-of-change.

His triad of space-production can offer insights into ontological enactments and how the resulting worlds are spatially compatible or incompatible. Apart from insights into world-making, Lefebvre's theories are also informative regarding epistemological power dynamics and theories of change. Within the scope of this article, the potential of the dialogue has been primarily discussed in theoretical terms, with only a brief, general illustration. Future research is encouraged to conduct in-depth analyses of socio-environmental conflicts by leveraging the theoretical insights presented here.

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