

ONE GLOBAL CRISIS ago, during the mid-1970s, the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre penned a sprawling, four-volume work on the state, entitled simply *De l'État*. In it, he attempted to come to grips with the legacy of postwar national and international state-building, and the prospects for both capitalism and its opposition under the ever darkening shadow of the state. The modern state, Lefebvre argues, has through fits and starts become inextricably implicated in the production and allocation of the social surplus, and has thereby given rise to a political-economic configuration that is neither strictly capitalist nor socialist: the “state mode of production” (SMP). “A qualitative transformation occurs from the moment in which the State takes charge of growth, whether directly or indirectly [...] Such a State raises itself above society and penetrates it to its depths, all the way into everyday life and behavior” (p. 129). The state that is so transformed becomes more and less than its predecessor: more central to social reproduction, but less autonomous from either capital or civil society.

Lefebvre’s arguments about the state have for the first time become accessible to an anglophone audience with the publication of *State, Space, World*, a collection of his writings edited by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, spanning 1964 to 1986 and centered on excerpts from *De l'État*. Lefebvre’s point of departure is the greatly increased state role in spatial planning – providing the infrastructure to manage growth and maintain social order – in post-war Western European social democracies. He argues that capitalist growth has systematically transformed both the physical spaces of production and circulation and the social spaces of everyday life. The contradictions and crises caused by this remaking of space can only be managed by the state, which can effectively control investment into, and governance of, the built environment. But this intervention thereby remakes capitalism with the state at its centre. “The [capitalist mode of production] produces its own space; in so doing, it is transformed, and this is the advent of the state mode of production” (p. 241). The state’s interventions into social space

* About “Henri Lefebvre”, edited by Neil BRENNER and Stuart ELDEN, translated by Gerald Moore, Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden *State, Space and World: Selected essays* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

are at once homogenizing, fragmenting, and hierarchizing. This triad is Lefebvre's means of conceptualizing the contradictory tendencies of uneven development: the SMP organizes space into repetitive, uniform units for maximum efficiency, while state rationality imposes a strict division of that space into disparate functions and quantified parcels. And all the while some spaces are made powerful while others are made weak.

The concept of the SMP implies a good deal more than simply the active management of national space-economies, however. In the Westphalian world, "state" with its national connotations and "mode of production" with its global connotations are in inherent tension with each other. Lefebvre argues that as the state becomes decisive for securing the survival of capitalism, it is forced out of national space and onto the worldwide market. "By *becoming worldwide* [*en se mondialisant*] on the basis of the worldwide market, the State opens and closes the paths of worldness [...] It explodes, caught in contradictions, torn apart between what overwhelms it from the inside and from the outside" (p. 278; emphasis in the original). The development of the interstate system helps to manage some of these contradictions, and colonialism and neocolonialism help to manage others, but the end result is that the state mode of production is no less crisis-prone than the capitalist mode of production it supersedes.

Between the production of space and the contradictions of the worldwide, you would think the state had its hands full. But the SMP is defined not only by its active characteristics but also by the forces of resistance it generates and is opposed by. For Lefebvre this is *autogestion*. The term, which generally implies decentralized worker self-management, has a history dating back to Proudhon via the French radicals of 1968 and Yugoslavian socialism under Tito, but Lefebvre gives it a distinctive gloss. Because the SMP is predicated on state-managed economic growth, Lefebvre argues that *autogestion* must oppose this growth in order to oppose the SMP, and indeed that only *autogestion* can supply the foundations for the true withering away of the state – and of the SMP. "Without [*autogestion*] there is only growth without development (the quantitative accumulation of production, the qualitative stagnation of practice and social relations)" (p. 149).

Like his concept of the state, Lefebvre's concept of *autogestion* is distinctively global and worldwide. The totalizing nature of the SMP simultaneously makes concentrated and centralized revolutionary movements ineffective and creates the conditions for a diffuse but worldwide resistance with the potential and imperative to completely transform society. "*Autogestion* is born and reborn at the heart of

a contradictory society, but one that tends [...] towards a global integration and a highly structured cohesiveness” (p. 149). “Even radicalized, an *autogestion* that only organized itself into partial unities, without achieving globality [*le global*], would be destined to failure” (p. 150). The SMP and *autogestion* are thus two sides of the same coin. Once the state is thoroughly implicated in production and everyday life, it becomes a medium of social transformation and not simply a political-economic actor or an object of political contestation. If *autogestion* is, for Lefebvre, “both the means and the end, a phase of the fight and its objective” (p. 194), then we could similarly say that the state is both the target and the terrain of social struggle.

There is a certain preposterous gall to the SMP concept. After all, if we are living under the state mode of production, we are no longer living under the capitalist mode of production. Even leaving that implication to the side, Lefebvre did not anticipate the intense regulatory restructuring of the 1980s and beyond, and his thesis of the SMP has something of a terminal flavour to it – it is meant to describe the culmination of the Fordist-Keynesian trajectory, just as that trajectory faltered. The SMP might therefore be regarded as a Fordist owl of Minerva: grasping a significant fact, but of a fading era.

In some particulars this may be true; the class compromise which led welfare states to assume control over a wide range of social production and reproduction functions has been unevenly but thoroughly eroded through 30 years of neoliberalization. But on the whole Lefebvre’s claims are arguably more relevant now than when he first wrote them. As Brenner and Elden suggest in their introduction, neoliberalism can be interpreted as a reconstitution of the SMP along more starkly competitive lines. The states we are left with, as social welfare functions wither, are even more growth-focused than those Lefebvre examined, and even more implicated in the “survival of capitalism” from the world scale down to the urban scale. So while there may have been aspects of “roll-back” to neoliberal reforms, they do not undermine Lefebvre’s contention that the state’s role in global capitalism has undergone a qualitative shift.

Meanwhile, the worldwide aspects of statehood which were only vestigial in the 1970s (through the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and ongoing colonial and neocolonial relations) have since exploded, as have the worldwide forms of resistance to capitalism. The particular concept of *autogestion* as a global and worldwide strategy Lefebvre develops has just as much in common with the self-consciously global and globalizing “movement of movements” that has been

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animated in the last 15 years through social forums and summit protests as it does with the New Left which was his reference point. Consider also the current global economic crisis: is this not a crisis of the state-society relation in its worldwide dimensions? National governments in the Western European periphery struggle with increasingly acute balance-of-payments crises in direct opposition to the European Central Bank which sets their monetary policy, while the G20 and the IMF attempt to coordinate international stabilization efforts. This crisis is undoubtedly a capitalist one, but it is also one at whose centre lies the contradictions of the state and the worldwide market – contradictions Lefebvre has provided excellent strategies for exploring.

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