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Verena Andermatt Conley, *Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Cultural Theory*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012. 171 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1846317541.

Review by Larry Busbea, University of Arizona.

“As is well known,” Michel Foucault said in 1967 (to an audience of young architects and urban planners), “the great and obsessive dread of the nineteenth century was history.... Our own era, on the other hand, seems to be that of space. We are in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered. A period in which, in my view, the world is putting itself to the test, not so much as a great way of life destined to grow in time but as a net that links points together and creates its own muddle.”[1]

Many French intellectuals in the postwar years would also offer analyses of contemporary space, to the point that the entire epistemo-ideological category became something of an obsession, which was only retroactively described as a “spatial turn.” Louis Althusser defined his notion of ideological state apparatuses spatially: “...ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time...*it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality).”[2] This conflation of inside and outside was described by Guy Debord in different terms as a paradoxical mechanism of modern urbanism and its collusion with capital that “eliminates geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation.”[3]

Verena Andermatt Conley’s book, *Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Cultural Theory*, takes up just after this intensive moment of the French renegotiation of the Marxist dialectic via the literal and metaphorical transformation of space in the decades following WWII. Her carefully curated list of philosophers and cultural critics, however, though they are very much grounded in the events of May 1968, sought to move beyond the cynicism and disillusionment that took hold of the intelligentsia at that moment.[4] Largely inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s philosophical investigation of *la vie quotidienne*, the writers Conley chooses to focus on understand space as a series of *loci* of negotiation and contested identities, not as stagnant, striated fields totally controlled by the powers that be. Indeed, the author’s emphasis on subject formation, communality, *habitus*, and citizenry is what raises this book well above the status of a simple survey text. It gives her selections a hermeneutic logic, and gives the reader a sense of purpose as well, working through the writings of more and less familiar figures in order to gain a sense of the new models of spatial subjectivity Conley ultimately suggests.

There is little doubt, however, that the selections are also dictated by Lefebvre himself, and his legacy as a thinker and a pedagogue. Many of the philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists Conley discusses were students of Lefebvre, or separated from him by only one additional degree of institutional or personal affiliation. These include Michel de Certeau, Jean Baudrillard, Marc Augé, Paul Virilio, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, and Etienne Balibar. *Spatial Ecologies* proceeds by devoting one chapter to each of these individuals, attempting to give a general sense of their work, and then honing in on those spatial or subjective aspects that tilt toward the book’s thesis, which asserts that each author was engaging in a kind of critical and political “ecological” project, even if they did not use that

term. All of them, according to Conley, “...make strident appeals for the opening of a space that would not be purely interval or dimension but where habitability would be defined in clearly existential and ecological terms” (p. 7). In the end, Conley’s argument is what is known in architectural theory as “operative criticism”; her selections and readings are undertaken with a specific goal in mind, to posit new understandings of urban globalization, and the individuals and groups who inhabit those spaces. As she states in her conclusion: “...in the context of consumerism those beings that a media-driven ideological ‘apparatus’ shapes and colonizes have to be replaced by a new concept of *citizen-subjects* who, while held together by fate and analytically militant, think about habitability through the three lenses of mental, social and environmental ecology” (Conley’s emphasis, p. 151).

Falling between Conley’s justification for her inclusions and her ultimate attempt to fuse their thought into a new method of thinking contemporary spatial existence are the chapters themselves, each of which strikes a good balance between general information for readers who may or may not be familiar with the material, and critical analyses of the texts and authors in question. For the most part, Conley chooses to focus on writers who do not fit neatly into a particular ideological category—Marxist, Deconstructionist, Phenomenologist, et cetera—but who bend the boundaries of those very categories around and through concepts of space. Indeed, some of those authors discussed—Paul Virilio and Michel de Certeau, for instance—are truly outliers within French (or any other) theory. But this only enriches the selections and serves to give a lively context to discussions of better-known figures like Baudrillard and Deleuze.

The format of the book also makes it possible for readers to dip in as they like, using the text almost as a reference. I have recommended it to a number of graduate students already, with precisely this use in mind. Having said that, *Spatial Ecologies* suffers at times from the weaknesses that plague all overviews—occasional over-generalization, glosses on complex passages, and lingering questions over what material was included and excluded. Lefebvre, for instance, who spent almost half a century thinking about spatial production, is discussed for fewer than twenty pages, and Conley describes his dream of an utopian spatial praxis at one point as “charmingly romantic” (p. 27). Lefebvre’s ideas about space and his implication in the urban culture of France after WWII are indeed problematic, but as Lukasz Stanek’s recent monograph demonstrates, their complexity can sustain prolonged examination.[5] On the other hand, it takes Conley a comparably short space to offer one of the most illuminating readings of the difficult work of Paul Virilio I have read. Her concise formulation that, in his work, “speed itself is a milieu” (p. 81), and her explanation of that statement are remarkable.

Similar minor points regarding editorial choices can also be made. The logic of the inclusions is clear, but why stop with these eight chapters? So many French authors have spoken to concerns of globalization and community in the last forty years—one thinks of the later work of Foucault, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou, and Jean-Luc Nancy. For that matter, why limit the selection to France, when writers from so many different national contexts have written seminal and relevant texts? Conley also chooses not to focus on the psychoanalytic strain in French spatial thought, resulting in a lack of emphasis on gender as a determining factor in subject formation (Luce Irigaray is never mentioned, for instance). Also, as the book concludes and as Conley’s incisive readings bring us to “...a threshold where our own spatial condition can be reconsidered” (p. 145), one is left with many questions about the self-reflexive “citizen-subject” she invokes. What actions might this subject undertake? Where might these take place, or are there real places where such actions are emerging? I found it helpful when asking these questions to think about Conley’s work in conjunction with Monique Yaari’s recent book *Rethinking the French City*, which deals more explicitly with architectural discourse and urban theory in the late twentieth century.[6]

Such quibbles, though, will always attend such a book, which was clearly written as a starting point and not a definitive summary. And, indeed, it is as a kind of handbook that *Spatial Ecologies* works best, serving as a reference to a particular post-Marxist strain in French spatial theory and emphasizing

among those texts and authors a sense of hope regarding place and inhabitation in a global context. Beyond that, however, the indeterminacies in the text have the salutary function of lending it a certain disciplinary polyvalence. This book should be read by sociologists, philosophers, designers, architects, art historians (and historians), and anyone else intent on bridging the often-yawning gap between theory and practice as regards our existence in a simultaneously expanding and contracting world.

## NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture and Rizzoli), p. 420.

[2] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 175. Note: the italics are Althusser's.

[3] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 120.

[4] See Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[5] Lukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[6] Monique Yaari, *Rethinking the French City* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi Press, 2008).

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