

Global Urban History

Henri Lefebvre, Mao Zedong, and the Global Urban Concept

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By [Stuart Schrader](#)

Global urban history takes three primary forms. One is to direct the analytic gaze beyond Euro-America, to cities that were once “off the map” of urban studies. Another is to study the interconnections among far-flung cities. Extensive commercial, cultural, and intellectual networks that underpin “globalization” have long been grounded in cities. With the increasing popularity of global and world history, it makes sense to emphasize the centrality of cities and the unique role they play in globalization. A third form is to analyze the history of an uneven global urban fabric. Works like Carl Nightingale’s [Segregation](#) or Mike Davis’s [Planet of Slums](#) analyze how the form of the urban changes as it also “globalizes.” In this post, I delve into this third mode of global urban history.

The theoretical innovation that allows us to conceive of an uneven global urban fabric itself has an intellectual history. One important genealogy draws us back to the French social theorist Henri Lefebvre, particularly his work on space and the urban in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He is a key figure who inspired the “[spatial turn](#)” in the humanities and social sciences. Yet what inspired Lefebvre to develop a global urban concept, and to whom was it addressed?

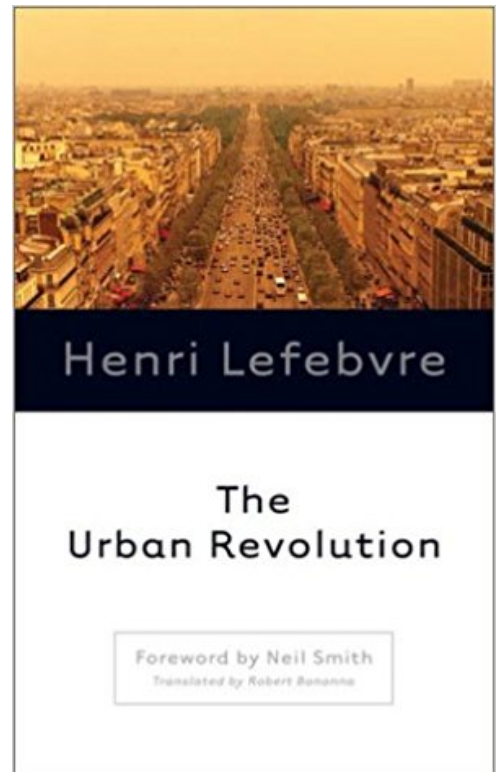
Lefebvre was prescient in observing an emergent condition of urbanity that was not confined to Chicago, London, or Paris, the canonical models of city-dwelling for two generations of social scientists. In his foreword to the 2003 [English translation](#) of Lefebvre’s *La Revolution Urbaine*, [Neil Smith](#) drew attention to the phrase *la ville mondiale*, which he translated as “world cities.” Smith noted, “The language of world cities and global cities emerged in the 1980s, but already in 1968, prior to most of this explosive urban growth, we find Lefebvre talking explicitly about ‘world cities’ (in fact, he attributes the concept to Mao).” But how are we to understand the reference to Mao Zedong, a figure closely associated with *rural*, not urban, revolution in the twentieth century?

This seemingly out-of-place mention of Mao suggests an intellectual genealogy of the global urban concept that bypasses New York or London. Lefebvre referred to Mao/Maoism almost every time he used *la ville mondiale*, as a way to indicate the necessary shift in thinking or methods suitable to the novel urban condition he was striving to characterize. In contrast to Smith, the book’s translator Robert Bononno rendered Lefebvre’s term *la ville mondiale* as “the global city,” a singular construction. Rather than “world cities,” suggesting a set of contained city units, the object of Lefebvre’s thought was the uneven, relational fabric of the urban, what he called [elsewhere](#) “the planetarization of the urban.”

At the outset of the third chapter of the book, Lefebvre declared that he would no longer use the term city; instead, he would refer exclusively to the urban. Lefebvre was departing from traditional social-scientific approaches that mobilized site-based understandings of cities and cityness. His goal was to unfurl a more historically appropriate process-based conceptualization. This shift underpinned classic works by [Doreen Massey](#), [David Harvey](#), and Smith himself, as well as Neil Brenner’s recent “[planetary urbanization](#)” approach.



Bidonville de Nanterre, 1968

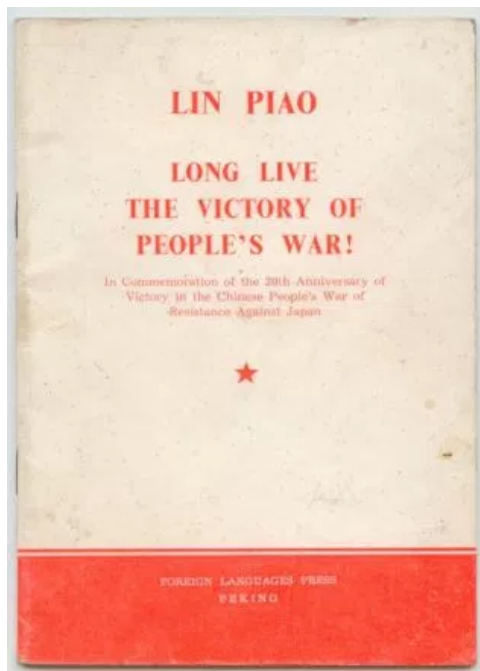


For Lefebvre, events of the 1960s across the globe had challenged prevailing socialist strategy. Whether the revolutionary upsurge of May 1968 in France, initiated at the university in Nanterre where Lefebvre taught, or the ongoing war in Vietnam, which had developed as an anticolonial insurgency against France, it seemed clear that orthodoxies were inadequate. Lefebvre drew on a Maoist statement issued in September 1965, near the outset of the Cultural Revolution, titled “[Long Live the Victory of People’s War!](#)” and attributed to China’s Defense Minister Lin Piao (but actually written by a team headed by People’s Liberation Army Chief of Staff Luo Riuqing, according to historian [Qiang Zhai](#)). The title referred to the defeat of Japan in World War II, and the pamphlet was issued to celebrate the twentieth anniversary. The pamphlet’s innovation upon standard Maoist thinking on guerrilla warfare, characterized by “the establishment of rural revolutionary base areas and the encirclement of the cities from the countryside,” was what might be called an upscaling of this practice.

Lefebvre extrapolated from this innovation to develop the concept *la ville mondiale*, a phrase that did not appear in the official French [translation](#) of the pamphlet. The key lines in the official English translation, issued by Foreign Languages Press, were:

Taking the entire globe, if North America and Western Europe can be called ‘the cities of the world,’ then Asia, Africa and Latin America constitute ‘the rural areas of the world.’ Since World War II, the proletarian revolutionary movement has for various reasons been temporarily held back in the North American and West European capitalist countries, while the people’s revolutionary movement in Asia, Africa and Latin America has been growing vigorously. In a sense, the contemporary world revolution also presents a picture of the encirclement of cities by the rural areas. In the final analysis, the whole cause of world revolution hinges on the revolutionary struggles of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples who make up the overwhelming majority of the world’s population.

These lines prefigured a different way of thinking about the urban, suggesting to Lefebvre a non-city-centric urbanism, or a rescaled conceptualization of the city. Although it described the First World, the global urban concept could be considered Third Worldist.



Upon publication, Lin Piao's statement earned headlines worldwide. The correct interpretation, however, was elusive. Some readers, including in Washington, DC, took it as indicating China's support for wars of liberation waged in the countryside, with the eventual goal of taking over Euro-America. But the rest of the text indicated the opposite: other countries should not depend on China's support in their independence struggles, particularly as the risk of nuclear confrontation loomed. The lesson of the war against Japan was self-reliance. Yet a push for self-reliance amid shifting global conditions contradicted dominant understandings of Communist internationalism. Lyndon Johnson's dispatching of ground troops to South Vietnam earlier in 1965, however, had illuminated the risks for the global countryside, the Third World countries. Although Lin Piao recognized the possibility of a unified global countryside, the People's Republic of China did not want to risk war with the United States by ascending to its leadership. In this way, Lefebvre intervened in a reanimated debate on the old Marxist-Leninist question of "what is to be done?"

The image of a globe divided into urban and rural was not wholly new, nor was it deeply out of step with prevailing renderings of development in modernization theory. Earlier Maoist principles had regarded cities as centers of despotism, with the countryside the locus of what Lefebvre called "the commune," where revolutionary activity would unfold, providing a bulwark against the spread of bourgeois, city-dominant relations. But weren't development processes themselves changing these conditions? Lefebvre worried that claiming simply that the city had been upscaled was insufficient, given the "fragmentation" of the urban, the "implosion-explosion" that was occurring. He asked of Maoist orthodoxy, "Can such a strategy assume . . . that the countryside will encircle the city, that peasant guerrillas will lead the assault on urban centers?" He continued, "Today, such a vision or conception of the class struggle on a global scale appears old-fashioned." He was skeptical because of the contemporary trends of urbanization and the continual integration of hinterlands into global capitalist circuits. The town-country dyad, so fundamental to social thought, was no longer holding firm. Further, he thought trying to arrest the ongoing process of "urban revolution" in the name of socialism was misguided, if not impossible. But Lin Piao's text also suggested that cities need not be considered the containers of urban processes, and rural areas their political opposite.

As a prompt for considering non-city-centric urbanization, Lin Piao caught Lefebvre's prodigious imagination. Yet the text lacked the fine-grained distinctions Lefebvre would make. For instance, throughout his [work](#) in coming years, Lefebvre would distinguish between the *global*, as a level of generality, and the *mondial*, as world-scale. Lin Piao's cities versus rural areas of the world conflated the two, as does the much-debated English-language concept of globalization. These geographies were regrettably static at a moment of dramatic change, including in China, based on shifting global divisions of labor, the rise of multinational corporations, the green revolution, decolonization, commercial air travel, and other transformations. Moreover, in Lefebvre's thought, the world-scale or planetary cannot be presumed but rather must be shown to have been brought into being and articulated with other scales through contradictory and contested political economies. To conceive of the *mondial* is to conceive how the *global* worlds itself, so to speak. What is *global* about these processes cannot necessarily be assumed to be *mondial*, or worldwide.

Lefebvre continued to develop his concept of the urban revolution in the coming years. Although Maoism grew in popularity in France in the years after 1968, Lefebvre did not need it for his conceptual exploration. As the famous Maoist aphorism had it, all it took was a single spark to start the prairie fire of Lefebvre's revolution in urban studies. Throughout his career, Lefebvre refused static geographies and saw the urban as process, which is perhaps the most useful lesson for urban historians today. We can study the uneven, irruptive, and discontinuous unfolding of urbanization in and beyond what we have traditionally recognized as cities. Widening our analytic aperture to the *mondial* offers one way to do so. As this genealogy shows, the global urban concept is more than a powerful analytic tool. It has long possessed deep political implications.

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