



## The Structuralism Critique in the Production of Space\*

**Haldun ILKDOGAN**

*Dr. Assistant Professor, Yozgat Bozok University, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, haldunilkdogan@gmail.com*

**Emel AKIN**

*Dr. Assistant Professor, Atılım University, Department of Architecture*

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### ABSTRACT

Lefebvre, who summarizes (Social) space as a (Social) production, has presented his "The Production of Space" project, which conceptualizes space with its social and political qualities. Lefebvre, in the study of The Production of Space, used many theories related to Marxism as a theoretical foundation, existentialism, phenomenology, and semiotics. But he criticized semiotics because of its structuralist notion. The aim of the study: displaying and examining the reasonings of the structuralist semiotics critiques in The Production of Space and defining Lefebvre's position in the context of semiotics. Findings: Lefebvre, in his study The Production of Space, criticized structuralist semiotics because of its generalizing view and deficiency of social contents. Through this, although he is not a semiotician, he unwittingly deepened the universe of signs in the context of space and its social contents in his later works about space. Even if he didn't name it, his criticizing of the structuralism moved signs to the Social Semiotics thought plane.

**Keywords:** Lefebvre, Space, Space Production, Structuralism, Social Semiotics

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Space has a multi-dimensional structure. Its multi-dimensional quality creates complexity in comprehending space. Complexity is difficult to explain and leads to uncertainty. However, explaining the quality of complexity will provide the opportunity to comprehend space, no matter what size, scale, difference, and historical section it is in. The creation of space, like the creation of every tangible or abstract entity, stems from many parameters' in their own creation universe and their relationship with other parameters in their higher universe. This creation is a production and expresses the presence of a process with its own dynamic structure. Therefore, according to Lefebvre (2014 [1974]), "*space is a production*". Before getting into the semiotics aspect of this study, it would be right to briefly summarize the scope of Lefebvre's work, The Production of Space.

Lefebvre, summarizing (social) space as a (social) production (2014 [1974]: 56), developed his "The Production of Space" work, which conceptualizes space with its social and political qualities. In his work, The Production of Space, Lefebvre tried to integrate insights from other philosophers while critiquing some philosophical movements. He especially fused the thoughts of Marx, Hegel, and Nietzsche, which he saw as the three paths trying to understand the modern world (although they seem contradictory when thought together), together on the same plane. To understand The Production of Space, examining the thoughts of these three philosophers is inevitable, but at this point, Martin Heidegger should be mentioned as the fourth philosopher. Although Lefebvre did not put into words that he was inspired by Heidegger, his attempt to criticize Sartre's thoughts on existence caused him to evaluate some of Heidegger's thoughts through Marxist critique and adopt them (Elden 2004a: 87-88).



In creating the "The Production of Space" thought, while the content of "production" comes from Marx, comprehending, reading space, comes from Heidegger's insights. So, what does "The Production of Space" express? Lefebvre does not only mean the economic production of "things" when speaking of production. This is an "Aura (oeuvres)" production, so the production of knowledge, institutions, in short, everything tangible and intangible that creates society. Furthermore, social space is not a socialized space, because it did not previously exist as a non-social "thing", it was created with social influences due to its own nature (Elden 2004a: 98). Therefore, (Social) space is a (Social) production (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]).

Space production happens with the dialectification of the different dimensions of space on a relational plane. Lefebvre, explaining that the physical and mental must be thought together with the social in order to comprehend space, states that the dialectic creation of space happens between the three dimensions of space that are "Perceived Space" (the physical and determining the movement of the body), "Conceived Space" (expressing spatial abstractions and the spaces of architects, city planners etc.) and "Lived Space" (created with the perceived and lived space dialectic, having a dynamic structure with the historical process, the space of those who live there). The spatial expressions of these definitions are named as "Spatial Practice", "Representations of Spaces" and "Representational of Space" (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]; Harvey 2013 [2008]: 149).

The theoretical foundation of the dialectic of space has been built within existentialism, phenomenology, and semiotics, alongside many theories related to Marxism (Gardiner 2016 [2000]: 107). Lefebvre is not a semiotician, although he benefits from semiotics in reading the visible face of the phenomenal world, on the thought plane of the era he lived in semiotics hovered heavily on the Structuralism plane. This position of semiotics was both used and critiqued in Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Before evaluating Lefebvre's critiques on Structuralism, it is necessary to explain semiotics and structuralist semiotics.

### **1.1 SEMIOTICS**

In his *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, English philosopher John Locke (1632 - 1704), named the discipline of analyzing signs "Semiotike" (Rifat 2014 [1992]: 28). According to Locke, signs are indispensable tools of sciences. He emphasized that all ideas are created through our senses, and our senses are about perceivable external objects or originate from a mental reflection, and mental reflection is about minds perceiving their inner processes, perceived by ourselves, and reflected back to ourselves (Akerson 2005: 57). After Locke, French mathematician Jean Henri Lambert (1728 - 1777), discusses semiotics in a chapter of his two-volume piece *Neues Organon* [1764] as the discipline about displaying thoughts and objects (semiotic) (Rifat 2014 [1992]: 29).

Later on, contemporary semiotics find a place in the scientific thought plane with American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). It should be noted here that these two names who are the pioneers of contemporary semiotics were unaware of each other and their work while providing insights on semiotics (Akerson 2005: 49-50).

F. de Saussure expressed semiotics as the science that will examine the place of signs in society (Guiraud 2016 [1975]: 17). Saussure is actually a linguist and views language as a sequence consisting of signs. In many points of *Course in General Linguistics*, he describes Semiotics as a science that will be established in the future. He reviewed the regenerating arrangement characteristics of language in the sequence and interpreted this as structure. This understanding later formed the basis of the Structuralism movement (Akerson 2005: 60). Moreover, for Saussure, a sign is a physical object with meaning, so it consists of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the image of the sign



we perceive. The signified is the mental concept that the signifier refers to (Fiske 2014 [1990]: 124 - 127).

As a philosopher, Peirce is concerned with experience and understanding the world that wraps us. His main interest, signs, is directed to understand the structural relationship between humans and objects. Instead of concentrating on the signs' relationship with other signs like Saussure, he questions its relationship with objects, external meaning. He views signs, the thing that the sign is referring to, and the users of the sign as three corners of a triangle. Each corner is closely related to the other two and can only be understood through its relationship with the others. A sign refers to something -an object- apart from itself and is understood by someone; so, it has an effect on the users - the interpreters- mind (Fiske 2014 [1990]: 124 - 127). Thus, while Saussure calls attention to the social aspect of semiotics, Pierce laid the groundwork for logical semiotics.

Semiotics could only separate itself from linguistics after the 1960's and was defined as a field in science. The main reasons of this are experiencing that semiotics can also be used in areas such as architecture, industrial product design, city planning, social behavior patterns, fashion, mythology, cinema etc. (Akerson 2005: 80). Due to linguistics and language being formed with the concept of "structure", the prevalence of the structuralist attitude is observed in studies carried out in different fields during this period.

## 1.2 STRUCTURALISM

Most of the semioticians previously adopted an approach named "Structuralism" (Akerson 2005: 80). The origin of structuralism is linguistics, it addresses language within itself and for itself. According to this theoretical approach, language is a structured ensemble, what defines this ensemble is the relations between components on various levels (phonemes, semantics, sentences) (Rifat 2014 [1992]: 237). Structuralism takes its basic similarities as an effort to determine the general structure of human activities from linguistics. It is known that structural linguistics carries out four basic functions in general: firstly, it is directing attention from consciousness studies related to the linguistics phenomenon to studies that also oversee the unconscious structure. Secondly, being based on analyzing the relationship between terms instead of approaching these terms as terms that are independent of one another. Thirdly, reviving the concept of sequences. Fourthly, pursuing the discovery of general laws (Sarup 2004 [1993]: 62).

Even though Saussure (2014 [1915]), the pioneer of structuralism, brought attention to the social aspect of language within the structuralist thought, concentrating on the more morphological aspect of language made him stray farther from the social aspect. In Barthes' words (1979 [1964]: 14-15),

*"Linguistics developed especially the <<sequence of values>> aspect of Saussure's concept of language. Thus, the view that it was an obligation to examine the linguistic institution on the immanence plane was adopted: immanence is not suitable for sociological research".*

Saussure's main purpose is to put the complex speech acts of language in order through "linguistic structure". He associates the reason that language facilitates understanding in society with the presence of a universal structure in language. The attribution of meaning to structure in Saussure's language understanding establishes the structure as the subject. Consequently, meaning is determined by the structure that the subject is in: The subject's life within the "structure" is predetermined (Saygin 2010: 10 -11).

Levi-Strauss, as one of the first pioneers of structuralism, applied Saussure's language analysis to anthropology. He developed his studies within the framework of the thought that *"Social phenomenon are also connected to a structure, just like linguistic*



*phenomenon*" (Yucel 2015: 70). He adopted an analysis method such as the analysis of language when explaining society. Researching the basic structure of kinship relationships and myths (Rifat 2014 [1992]: 127), Strauss's structural anthropology approach is one of the most important aspects of the structure and subject problem. According to Strauss's views, the individual is completely passive in the social structure, they are formed by the structure and it is out of the question that the subject could be effective in the social field (Saygin 2010: 13).

Roland Barthes, another important name of structuralism, worked on a semiotics framework based on Saussure's insights. However, he separated from Saussure at some points. Barthes, with an idea completely opposite of Saussure's, said "*linguistics, although privileged, is not a part of general signs science, semiotics is a part of linguistics*" and expressed that linguistics included semiotics (Barthes 2014 [1985]: 28-29). Another thought that separated Barthes from Saussure is what a sign expresses. According to Barthes, a sign, like Saussure says, is basically a denotation format. So, the signifier directly names a specific object or clearly states what it is referring to. Additionally, signs refer to culturally determined meanings or connotations with additional meanings. In this context, the meaning of objects also includes higher order connotation levels associated with cultural processes, in more robust ways that Saussure only expressed with the denotation mechanism (Gottdiener 2005 [1995]: 30-31).

The foundation of Barthes's understanding is based on a critical approach inspired by Marx's "the German Ideology". With this approach, he states that there is an ideological meaning determination, and this can be observed in the connotation – denotation relationship that exists in all myth systems (Saygin 2010: 13).

In the period led by Derrida until the post-structuralism movement started, Structuralism tried to carry out its own evolution in different studies, such as the ones mentioned above, through subject and structure contradictions. While going through a painful thought production process such as this, Lefebvre wanted to benefit from this incomplete science but encountered many deficiencies. In his work the Production of Space, he made critiques in order to broaden the semiotics plane (inadvertently).

## **2 THE STRUCTURALISM CRITIQUE IN THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE**

Lefebvre is critiquing the linguistically originated Semiotics that tries to explain space while expressing that explaining The Production of Space can be carried out in the context of production and reproduction relationships. He used this statement for this:

*"To the extent that semiology (semiotics), which is an incomplete knowledge, spreads and does not recognize boundaries (that must be set even if it is difficult), complex problems arise. Even if codes prepared based on literary texts are applied to space, such an application will remain descriptive, which is not difficult to display. Does the effort to settle such coding – a procedure deciphering the social space – not carry the risk of reducing this coding to a message, and frequency to a reading? This would be to omit history and practice."* (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]: 38)

Lefebvre making a negative critique of semiology stems from the suspicion that the historical quality of space and social formation cannot be explained with codes and meanings ascribed to sequences consisting of codes. Lefebvre emphasizes that the research who tries to analyze space through these codes will alternate between illusion of transparency (the illusion that everything will reflect and can be read externally) and illusion of realism (the illusion that the interpretations of the deciphered codes are real). This situation conceals the social characteristic of space in the thought of the (social) production of (social) space (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]: 57). When Lefebvre critiques semiotics, it is clear that he is right in these critiques when the scientific foundation of the semiotics thought plane in his time (1974-The Production of Space) is considered.



The structuralist thought plane that Lefebvre takes as semiotics, is still prominently linguistics during the years (1974) that Lefebvre prepared "The Production of Space". Additionally, he sums up his concentration on semiotics in his thought that the complete meaning of space cannot be accessed only through units called signs and it can only be done with the experience and vision of the researcher.

Lefebvre builds his Structuralism critique on the thoughts of Marx and Engels. He views Structuralism as the ideology of the dominant class and the scientific humiliation of progressive thinking. He mentions that the relationship between form, function and structure is overlooked and criticizes Structuralism focusing on structure. He views structuralism not only as a misuse of language, but also as the reduction of social intelligibility and its systematization. According to Lefebvre, the structuralist thought with no historicism is not scientific and far from dialectic thought (Elden 2004b: 22- 27). In the statement he included in *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre presents this critique (2014 [1974]: 376),

*"Structuralism is concerned with high level intellectual reasonings, organizations and classifications (consisting of signs); here it discovers comprehensibility, the high relationship between (thinker) subject and (built) object. Thus, but not only due to this, this ideology under a knowledge garment serves the government"*

With this, he expresses that structuralism organized the area with classification and by forbidding contact (dialectic relations) between these classifications, gave them contact signs (images) instead of contact to carry out this organization. Furthermore, Lefebvre thinks that structuralism evaluates structures hyperbolically (in search of generalizations). He points out that doing this endangers the notion of structure, that it is against structure. He elaborates on this thought as such:

*"Pure Structuralism, despite all efforts, loses historicism as the variety of social realities. Structuralisms main area is archaic groups and relics. An entity that crumbles obstacles sustains defeat in the face of processes with historical style. We think, a completely structuralist method (of course, if these words have a meaning) cannot tackle the problems of the modern world. Like empiricism, it turns to exclude dialectic thought o da (even if it cannot succeed). By exaggerating the significance of persistence, it turns to refuse the concept of alienation (without excluding the extreme form of alienation, reification)." (Lefebvre 2013 [1961]: 188 – 189).*

Reviewing his critiques directing relating to semiotics, it is clear that he displayed a sharp, clear attitude towards semiotics regarding reading space. While mentioning the drawbacks of reading space as a linguistic text, he speaks of the presence of levels that cannot be reduced to signs in a comprehensive existence such as space (within the readings done in the structuralist context). In his work, *The Production of Space*, he concludes that *"semiotics incorporates the idea that space stems from a reading, therefore a practice -reading-writing-"*. Also, he brings the expression *"Social space is never a white paper that a message is written on,"* against semiotics and mentions that space has a secret aspect. Thus, he reaches the statement, *"The lifestyle of space, (including the form of space) "its reality", radically differs from the reality of a written object, a book (there-being)" (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]: 162-163).*

Criticizing the understanding of a semantical space with the statement below he reflects on the distance of semiotics to the qualities of space in the context of reading space (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]: 215).,

*"A narrow and insensitive rationalism neglects the essence and basis of space, the holistic body, brain, hand arm movements etc. The fact that space is not only a reflection of an intellectual representation, the ones that are readable-visible; that it is firstly heard*



*(listened to) and influences through hand arm movements and physical displacements would be forgotten,"*

The result that the critique reaches is that: The experienced dimension of space, so the social content, cannot be explained in line with a structuralist space reading, because the experienced is more than the visible and the denotation of the visible.

Although Lefebvre exhibits a post-structuralist appearance due to his views that space cannot be explained through a general structure, his orientation towards Nietzsche in *The Production of Space*, and his thoughts regarding giving the subject the place it deserves and a free space in the structure, this is misleading. Lefebvre's purpose is not only to put the reduced subject in the monopoly of structure into human focus, but to explain space with a social understanding due to his Marxist side, including signs as well. Lefebvre's confrontation with post-structuralists is not dealt with in great detail in *The Production of Space*. His thoughts on Post-Structuralism appears in many of his sentences, additionally, he critiques Derrida (Lefebvre 2014 [1974]: 37) as well but since his concern was not to create a science such as semiotics, it only remains on a critical level.

Lefebvre's semiotics critique in *"The Production of Space"*, is the preliminary work for the attempt to save signs from the shallow and misleading waters of structuralism and give it the place it deserves on a social dimension. Although he did not give it a name (or could not come up with it), he tried to approach signs on a Social Semiotics foundation in works (especially *Right to the City* -first edition year 1968) other than *"The Production of Space"* (first edition year 1974). However, he is not concerned with being a semiotician, this is why he conducted his work without giving it a name. His works *The Production of Space* (1974) and *Critique of Everyday Life I-II-III* (print years 1958-1961-1981) are actually oriented towards creating the Social Semiotics approach within the context of signs. To put it more clearly, in Lefebvre's works, we encounter an aspect of space as semiotized Marxism (Semiotized Marxism) (Cobley & Randviir 2009: 16).

Lefebvre being a Marxist philosopher allowed him to evaluate signs on this thought plane as well. Thus, he criticized structuralism and moved the perception of signs to the Social Semiotics plane, even if it was not under this name. The fundamental idea of Social Semiotics is that every cultural object is an object of use within a social entity that has an historical and social context throughout generations or a sequence. Simultaneously, in the signification sequence within the social structure, it is a component with different spatial practices and additions (Gottdiener 2005 [1995]: 53). This context of Social Semiotics overlaps with the way Lefebvre handles signs in his works *The Production of Space* and *Critique of Everyday Life I, II, III*. He did not accept the production of meaning out of its context by conducting his structuralism critique through examining the signs according to social context and historical processes. Furthermore, the illusion of transparency and reality Lefebvre mentions in *"the Production of Space"* have been explained in Gottdiener's (2005 [1995]: 53) discourse on Social Semiotics stating that the meaning of material culture cannot be found with an independent observer decoding a speech-centric text, but it can be found with the decomposition method explained in the Social Semiotic sign model, so by resolving the articulation between coded ideology and material forms.

As a linguist, Saussure (2014 [1915]), discussed establishing a semiotics field, especially emphasizing the social aspect of signs. Again, he approached the structuralist signs put forth from Saussure's "structure" notion separating it from its social aspect. Lefebvre, stating that structuralism overlooks the social aspect and historical process, approached signs in its social aspect as Saussure stated, and moved interpreting signs to the Social Semiotics thought plane. Therefore, the structuralism critique in his work *"The Production of Space"* comes from Lefebvre, rightfully, approaching signs on a Social Semiotics thought plane.



## CONCLUSION

Humans live a life surrounded by many physical elements in the phenomenal world. The elements surrounding humans falls into a classification at the point of perceiving the world. This classification makes signs coded with some symbolic realities exist. Therefore, semiotics had to move itself to a scientific plane as an inevitable conclusion. An important aspect of humans comprehending the aura they are in depends on the phenomenon being an examinable systematic. Thus, Lefebvre, also included semiotics in *The Production of Space*, which he created with the concern to explain space.

Semiotics was included in *The Production of Space* before it was completed and made its presence distinct by leaving the scope of linguistics (the dialectic process of its evolution is still not even completed). Lefebvre encountering the conceptualization of space in the semiotics' journey on the thought plane in the context of structuralism, caused it to be criticized by Lefebvre, due to its shortcomings. Structuralist semiotics' attempt to attribute a generalization to signs and its inability to grasp the social context of the individual reading the signs and the way of reading are the points that are loudly dictated and stated as errors in *The Production of Space*. Although Lefebvre is not a semiotician or he does not attempt to restructure a theoretical framework such as semiotics, he inevitably attempts to attach signs to social context in *The Production of Space* and in his other works. He continuously voices his thought that if (social) space is a (social) production, its phenomenon is also social and thus, signs must be approached in a social context between the lines of his works as well. This thought, although he overlooked social context due to its structure focus, it is in line with Saussure's thought, who is considered the founder of semiotics. Saussure expressed that signs' circulation in society must be examined and the semiotic aspect of Lefebvre's works did exactly that and moved signs to the Social Semiotics thought plane, even if he did not name it.

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