Envisioning the European Union as Abstract Space: 
A Non-essential Ontology of Space.

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1. Preliminaries

Did it start with Bergson or before? Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. (Foucault, 1980a: 70)

Despite the theoretical debates that have taken place in the course of the two decades that have passed since Foucault’s assessment of its theoretical status, space still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, and undialectical – while time is seen as the dialectic and revealing context for critical social theorization. Thus, when context is taken into consideration in the social sciences as well as in the humanities in general, it is usually “the historical context” that is evoked in order to situate and contextualize phenomena, be they texts, institutions or events. The project of spatializing social theory – arguably begun by Henri Lefebvre and then explicitly taken up by Edward Soja and others – though it is by no means unitary in its numerous manifestations, is aimed primarily at redressing this privileging of the temporal over the spatial. There are, however, several strategies operating at different levels of this project, each of which could be regarded in its own right as instrumental to achieving this overall goal.

One of these strategies is, in fact, textual, and struggles somewhat quixotically against the discipline imprinted in a sequentially unfolding narrative, which Soja (1990) sees as “predispos[ing] the reader to think historically” (Soja, 1990: 1). In contrast, what he envisions for his own text(s) is a spatial turn rather similar to the one undertaken by him in his theoretical journey, which would involve writing “the text as a map, a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic” (Soja, 1990: 1). His aim, then, is to “spatialize the historical narrative, to attach to durée an enduring critical human geography” (Soja, 1990: 1). But these textual micro-politics of the spatial are just as precarious as the macro-politics of his theoretical ambitions, because language as a medium dictates a sequential succession, “a linear flow of sentential statements bound by that most spatial of earthly constraints, the impossibility of two objects (or words) occupying the same precise place (as on a page)” (2). His professed method, at least in his Postmodern Geographies (1990), is to re-collect and creatively juxtapose, “experimenting with assertions and insertions of the spatial against the prevailing grain of time” (Soja, 1990: 2).

Soja does not, however, combine the textual politics discussed above with another, particularly postmodern stratagem of spatializing the text which has recently found advocates among both writers and academics. Rather than struggling against the unavoidable
sequentiality of language itself, postmodern figures such as Paul Auster, Italo Calvino or Lawrence Grossberg have conceived of the process of writing the text as a journey, a process inevitably spatial and temporal at the same time. The metaphorical language used to ground such a textual practice in a spatial vocabulary varies widely, from the anthropological traveler of James Clifford (1992) to the migrant of Edward Said (1994) and the nomad of Deleuze and Guattari (1986).

The envisioned destination of the journey undertaken by Lefebvre – and, in so far as I shall partly re-trace it, also of this paper – is a place where the meaningful existential spatiality of being and human consciousness can be “restored”, and a social ontology can be composed in which space matters “from the very beginning” (Lefebvre, 1991: 73). Building on Lefebvre, Giddens, and others, Soja (1990) reformulates the destination of this theoretical journey as an existentially structured spatial topology of being-in-the-world, a topology in which social being is seen as always already contextualized in a multi-layered geography of socially created and differentiated spaces on many different scales, from the mobile personal space of the human body to the more fixed communal locales of human settlements and global spaces (cf. Soja, 1990: 8). Thus, any attempt to describe abstract space must account for it, in the terms set out by Soja (1990), as always already contextualized (historically and spatially), multi-layered (at the same time ideological, economic and political), as well as socially created and differentiated on many different scales (regional, national, and transnational). It must furthermore be able to account for the numerous strategies, media, and modes which contribute to its construction, maintenance and change, such as architecture or advertising.

Despite the revolutionary appeal of this spatialization, however, it is important not to deny the power and significance of historiography as a mode of critical insight. The spatiality of social life is rooted in temporal/historical contingency, is rooted in spatial contingency in much the same way as the temporality of social life, from the routines and events of day-to-day activity to the longer-run making of history. Consequently, the materialist interpretation of history and the materialist interpretation of geography should be seen as theoretically concomitant, with no inherent prioritization of one over the other (Soja, 1990: 130). And yet, historicism needs to be related to the creation of a “critical silence”, an implicit subordination of space to time that obscures geographical interpretations of the changeability of the social world. This “silence” operates at every level of theoretical discourse, from the most abstract ontological concepts of being to the most detailed explanations of empirical events (cf. Soja, 1990: 15). Rather than privileging, in turn, space over time, however, Soja proposes
entwining the making of history with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies. The resulting theory would form “a triple dialectic of space, time, and social being; a transformative re-theorization of the relations between history, geography, and modernity” (Soja, 1990: 11-12). Combining the theoretical project of Soja’s postmodern geography with the postmodern means of writing a travel account, then, this paper projects its own destination as a spatialization of both social theory and textual product. Its proposed mode of travel is the mapping the symbolic construction of the European Union through various linguistic, semiotic, and social – but ultimately spatial – practices as an abstract space. As such, it is always already contextualized, multi-layered, socially created and differentiated on many different scales.

2. An Ontology of Space

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal or “ideal” about it [...] Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. (Lefebvre, 1991: 73)

Much of the confusion concerning the term “space” and its theorization can be explained by pointing out that it can be – and, indeed, has been – apprehended both as a category and as material reality. On the one hand, some currents in philosophy and social theory conceive of it as a principle of understanding, one of the forms of knowledge, a tool of theory on a level with time, to which of course it is linked (cf. Lefebvre 1991, Giddens 1981). City planners, architects and most geographers, on the other hand, regard it as inert matter, and at best allow for architecture or built form to be conceptualized as a material artifact or index of social relations (cf. Rothenberg & McDonough 1993). Alternatively, as a third interested position, one may consider space in a double light, as simultaneously a product of society and as a factor of social production (cf. Soja 1990). In this view, the separate category of “place” denotes those stable and materially fixed spaces which people create through their habitual relationships with space.

In light of the problematic of definition addressed above, it is perhaps necessary to begin by making as clear as possible the distinction between material space, space as a contextual given, and socially-based spatiality, the created space of social organization and
production. From a materialist perspective, whether mechanistic or dialectical, time and space represent the objective form of matter. This essentially physical view of space has deeply influenced all forms of spatial analysis, whether philosophical, theoretical or empirical, whether it has been applied to the movement of heavenly bodies or to the history and landscape of human society. This notion of space has also imbued all things spatial with a lingering sense of primordiality and physical composition, an aura of objectivity, inevitability, and reification.¹

Within the largely materialist discourse of Western philosophy and science, discussions of the absolute and relative properties of space (a long debate which goes back to Leibniz and beyond), of its characteristics as environmental “container” of human life, its objectifiable geometry, and its phenomenological essences have held a central place. But, as Soja (1990: 79) argues, this physical conception of space has formed a misleading epistemological foundation upon which to analyze the concrete and subjective meaning of human spatiality. Lefebvre (1976b) offers what is perhaps the most explicit case against a view of space as a neutral object:

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be ‘purely’ formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident on the landscape. Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies. (Lefebvre, 1976b: 31)

As Lefebvre pointed out, and as others have repeated in different ways, the appearance of spatial coherence and homogeneity (which Lefebvre links to the advent of capitalism) are not only social products but often also an integral part of the instrumentality of political power. As Soja (1990) puts it, these are not intrinsic qualities “of material spatiality or the mode of production in some simple, deterministic fashion, nor do they reflect back on society, once established, with simplistic determinacy of another kind” (Soja, 1990: 126). What is more, conceptions or representations of space in social thought and discourse cannot be understood as projections of modes of thinking and thus independent of socio-material conditions. Neither mere projection nor absolute matter, space is no more a simple mental category than it is a material one

¹ For more on the history of strictly material or physical conceptions of space, see Soja (1990: 79).
This view has been shared by a number of (historically linked) attempts to construct a social ontology of space and to describe the social reality of space in its many forms (which include both material and psychological forms). Some of these approaches are outlined and brought together in the following as an important basis for an analysis of the construction of the European Union as abstract space.

2.1. Spatializing Social Theory

The spatial turn so forcefully invoked by Soja in his *Postmodern Geographies* (1990) was not confined to sociology, but rather manifested itself in a growing interest in the serious engagement of the issue of spatial meanings in various disciplines, including anthropology (Bourdieu 1977), social psychology (Goffman 1971), urban studies (Källtorp 1997; Harey 1973, 19851, 1985b; Rothenberg & McDonough 1993), modern geography (Gregory 1978), and semiotics (de Certeau 1984). What virtually all of these perspectives share – even though they are associated with rather diverse disciplines – is an interest in the construction of social space as well as the desire to spatialize the historical materialism of Gramsci, Deleuze, and other currents in the tradition of Western Marxism.

Within these approaches, such a re-articulation of Western Marxism was generally seen as necessary because Marxism had traditionally conceived of the making of history as facilitated through the unfettering struggle of social classes. The geography of this process, when it was seen at all, was recognized either as an external constraint or as an almost incidental outcome (cf. Soja, 1990: 32). The same marginalization of the spatial was more or less the case also in the traditional paradigms that dominated the various disciplines which were affected by the spatial turn. In the field of modern geography, for instance, there was some attention given to human geography and to the geographically uneven development of society, but the spatial side of this geography of modernity remained essentially an adjunct, a reflective mirror of historical modernization. Thus, even the discipline presumably most predisposed towards the investigation of spatiality allowed itself to be reduced “primarily to the accumulation, classification and theoretically innocent representation of factual material, describing the ‘real differentiation’ of the earth’s surface – to the study of outcomes, the end products of dynamic processes best understood by others” (Soja, 1990: 4).

Not surprisingly, then, it was elsewhere than in the soil of geography that the initial assertion of a postmodern critical human geography took its first roots. In the line of the

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2 See Soja (1990: 4-33) for a more detailed discussion of the role of space in modern geography.
French Marxist tradition, which had always been more open to the spatial imagination than its Anglo-American and German counterparts, the work of Henri Lefebvre (1946, 1974, 1976a, 1976b) prepared the ground for all following attempts to spatialize social theory. A no doubt selective list might include here the work of Sartre, Althusser, and Foucault in general, and specifically Poulantzas (1978), Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984), Harvey (1973, 1985a, 1985b), and Jameson (1991). As the list indicates, for some time now, and as a result of the increasing momentum of spatially inflected theories, those involved in the larger debate on spatiality no longer fit comfortably within the conventional labels of either “geographer” or “Marxist”.

Despite the large body of later theoretical work, the position initially staked out by Lefebvre is worth visiting by way of a “detour through theory”, as it is both exceedingly articulate on the subject of space and already contains most of the pivotal moments of the spatial project as it developed later on. In all of his seminal works, Lefebvre sought dialectically to combine the relational contradictions of thought and being, consciousness and material life, superstructure and economic base, objectivity and subjectivity. However, his use of the dialectic in this, Lefebvre admitted, was “no longer Marx’s dialectic, just as Marx’s was no longer Hegel’s” (Lefebvre, 1976a: 14). Instead, for him “[t]o recognize space, to recognize what ‘takes place’ there and what it is used for, is to resume the dialectic; analysis will reveal the contradictions of space” (Lefebvre, 1976a: 17). Indeed, Lefebvre sees space as implicated in the very survival of capitalism, which he describes as dependent upon the creation of an increasingly embracing, instrumental, and socially mystified spatiality, hidden from critical view by thick veils of illusion and ideology. In this analysis of capitalism, it is the city and urbanism which serve Lefebvre as constant touchstones, and he alludes to the urban as a “brutal condensation of social relationships” (Lefebvre, 1991: 227).

If one accepts, as Berger (1974), Lefebvre (1974), and Soja (1990) maintain, that it is now space more than time that hides things from people, then the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power becomes an important key to making practical, political, and theoretical sense of the contemporary era. At the same time, however, it is equally important to realize that the structure of organized space is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, independent from historical or discursive processes. Rather, social and spatial structures are dialectically

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3 For a detailed genealogy of spatial philosophy and theory, see Soja (1990: 42-44).
4 Hegelian influences, Soja (1990) argues, figure prominently in Lefebvre’s early Marxism. On a reading of Lefebvre’s own elaboration of the Hegel-Marx relation and on the place objective idealism within the materialist dialectic in the work of Lefebvre, see Soja (1990: 47).
5 See later section on the special role of urban space.
intertwined in social life, not just mapped one onto the other as categorical projections (cf. Soja, 1990: 127). As for the nature of these social relations, Lefebvre poses the question in his *The Production of Space* as follows: “There remains one question that has not yet been posed: what exactly is the mode of existence of social relations? Substantiality? Naturality? Formal abstraction?” (Lefebvre, 1974: 152f). In his opinion, it is the study of space which allows one to answer this question by revealing that “[t]he social relations of production have a social existence only insofar as they exist spatially; they project themselves into a space, they inscribe themselves in a space while producing it” (Lefebvre, 1974: 153). Once one accepts that the organization of space is a social product – that it arises from purposeful social practice – then there is no longer a question of its being a separate structure with rules of construction and transformation that are independent from the wider social framework. As a social product, spatiality is thus simultaneously the medium and outcome, presupposition and embodiment, of social actions and relationships.

The problematic of the connection between social and spatial reproduction follows directly from the dual role of space as Lefebvre conceives of it. If spatiality is both outcome/embodiment and medium/presupposition of social relations and social structure, their material reference, then social life must be seen as both space-forming and space-contingent, a producer and a product of spatiality. This two-way relationship defines a socio-spatial dialectic that is simultaneously part of Lefebvre’s spatio-temporal dialectic, a tense and contradiction filled interplay between the social production of geography and history. In order to complement this re-articulation of Marx’s dialectic with an adaptation of Marx’s familiar dictum concerning agency, one can turn to Soja (1990): “We make our own history and geography, but not just as we please; we do not make them under circumstances chosen by ourselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the historical geographies produced in the past” (129).

Just as important as Lefebvre’s initial formulation of a spatio-temporal dialectic is the recognition that spatiality is socially produced and, like society or culture itself, exists in the substantial forms of concrete spaces, mental maps or configurations, and as a set of social relations between individuals and groups. Obviously, the form of spatiality as socially produced space needs to be distinguished both from the physical space of material nature, its “embodiment” and the mental space of cognition and representation, each of which is used

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6 Soja (1990) re-reads Lefebvre’s reading of Marx in order to stake out the meta-theoretical project of his postmodern geography: the search for an appropriate ontological and epistemological location for spatiality, an active place for space in a Western philosophical tradition that has rigidly separated time from space and intrinsically prioritized temporality to the point of expunging the ontological and epistemological significance of spatiality (cf. Soja, 1990: 119).
and incorporated into the social construction of spatiality but cannot be conceptualized as its equivalent. To a certain degree, both physical and psychological processes and forms can be theorized independently with regard to their social dimensions and attributes. The classical debates in the history of philosophy and science over the absolute versus relative qualities of physical space exemplify the former, while socio-psychological attempts to explore the personal meaning and symbolic content of “mental maps” and landscapes illustrate the latter. Despite the long history of such theorizations, the possibility of independent conceptualization and inquiry can not be seen as based on any theoretical autonomy or rigid separation between these three spaces (physical, mental, and social), as they both interrelate and overlap (cf. Soja, 1990: 120f). Defining these interrelations, however, remains one of the most formidable challenges to social theory, especially since most theoretical debate in the field has been dominated by the physical-mental dualism to the almost complete exclusion of social space. It is also part of the ambition of this paper to theorize some of these relations by way of discussing the social construction of the European Union as a heterogeneous and abstract space.

As relevant and independent as they may appear in their own interpretative contexts, both the material space of physical nature and the ideational space of mental maps or memory have to be seen as being socially produced and reproduced. Each needs to be theorized and understood, therefore, as ontologically and epistemologically part of the spatiality of social life. Conversely, social spatiality cannot be completely separated from physical and psychological spaces. Physical and biological processes affect society no matter how much they are socially mediated, and social life is never entirely free of such restrictions as the physical friction of distance, to name but one example. The effectivity of this “first nature”, to use a term coined by Soja (1990), is not naively and independently given, however, for its social impact always passes through a “second nature” that arises from the organized and cumulative application of human labor and knowledge.7

This interpretation of the connections between physical, mental, and social space is closely related to a key assumption about the dynamics of spatiality and hence also about the relations between (social) space and time, geography and history. According to the position characterized by this assumption, spatiality exists ontologically as a product of a transformation process which always remains open to further transformation in the contexts of

7 There are important parallels between Soja’s (1990) use of the terms “first” and “second nature” to Poulantzas’ (1978) conceptualization of the spatial “matrix” of the state and society as simultaneously the presupposition and embodiment of the relations of production, a “primal material framework” rather than merely a mode of “representation”. See also Soja (1990): 120-121.
material life and is thus never primordially given or permanently fixed, even though its products – such as built form and landscape – may appear in precisely that way. The significance of this assumption, as Soja (1990: 122) makes clear, is that the analysis of spatial structure “can no longer be seen as derivative and secondary to the analysis of social structure”, as a structuralist approach would suggest. Rather, “each requires the other”, as Gregory (1978) puts it, because “spatial structures cannot be theorized without social structures, and vice versa, and [...] social structures cannot be practised without spatial structures, and vice versa” (Gregory, 1978: 120-121). In the case of the European Union, the process of transformation that gives rise to the spatial structures that presently dominate/characterize the Union consists of several trajectories, coexisting temporally and spatially, some of which are easily named: the tension-filled transition from national to “European” and regional authorities and legislation; the equally contested political, economic, and social terrain of the eastern expansion of the European Union, which furthermore necessitates a redefinition of boundaries, borders, and identities; and the emergent discourse around a possible European military alliance that could replace national armed forces and thus strongly affect national identities. In all of these examples, the assertion of space involves issues of demarcation, boundaries, and definitions of self and other – but they also illustrate the fact that spatiality is not necessarily a stable concept, but an on-going production. In that sense, the nation state of the nineteenth century (and its ideological foundations) seem to have aimed at masking precisely this instability of space – a perspective which sheds some light on why the 19th century (most prominently in the form of its ideologies and myths) was so important to the formation of the prevalent conception of space as stable and inert.

2.2. Illusions of Space

Prophesy now involves a geographical rather than historical projection; it is space not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men as they are throughout the whole world in all their inequality. (Berger, 1974: 40)

Poulantzas (1978), Zeleny (1980), and, most recently, Soja (1990), have discussed the confusing myopia which has persistently distorted spatial theorization by creating illusions of opaqueness, generating interpretations of spatiality which focus too narrowly on either material or mental properties of space. The more widespread of the two, the so-called “illusion of opaqueness”, reifies space and thereby induces a myopia that sees only a superficial materiality, concretized forms that are susceptible to little else but measurement
and phenomenal description: fixed, dead, and undialectical, this is the spatial science of Cartesian cartography. Spatiality is accordingly interpreted and theorized only as a collection of things, as substantive surfaces which may ultimately be linked to social causation but are knowable primarily (if not exclusively) as things in themselves. This essentially empiricist (but also occasionally phenomenological) interpretation of space reflects the substantive-attributive structure that has dominated scientific thought since the philosophy of the Enlightenment (cf. Zeleny, 1980). From this myopic perspective, spatiality is comprehended only through some combination of sensory-based perception, Cartesian mathematical-geometric abstractions, or the mechanical materialism of a post-Newtonian social physics and a post-Darwinian socio-biology (cf. Soja 1990: 122-124). The work of Bergson, as both Foucault (1980a) and Soja (1990) argue, is a more contemporary cynosure of this spatial myopia, and has done much to reinforce it.

Alternatively, the “illusion of transparency” dematerializes space into pure ideation and representation. It is a more abstract way of thinking which, however, equally prevents one from seeing the social relations embedded in spatiality by naturalizing an interpretation of space as a “concrete abstraction”. Accordingly, Soja (1990) sees this second illusion as interrelated with the first although – or, perhaps, even because – it is conceived of as its philosophical negation. Platonic in origin, this solipsistic conception of space as a projection of the mind was boosted by Leibnitz’s assertion of the relativism of physical space, its existence as an idea rather than a thing (cf. Soja, 1990: 124-125). Nevertheless, its arguably most powerful source of philosophical legitimacy and elaboration was – and, perhaps, still remains – Kant’s transcendental spatial idealism. A more recent example of the neo-Kantian cognitive mapping undertaken in many socio-psychological studies is Robert Sack’s work on conceptions of space in social thought (cf. Sacks, 1980).

As Soja argues in his introduction to *Postmodern Geographies* (Soja 1990), the two illusions discussed above have so dominated Western ways of seeing space that they have blocked from critical interrogation a third interpretative geography, one which recognizes spatiality as simultaneously a social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium) in social life. It was this crucial insight into the dual nature of space that made both the socio-spatial dialectic and the historical-geographical materialism formulated by Lefebvre so important and controversial, and which equally assures that his work remains of relevance today.
2.3. Kinds of Spaces

The concepts of the production and of the act of producing space are at the core of the Lefebvrian project as formulated in the seminal *The Production of Space*: “(social) space is a (social) product” (Lefebvre, 1991: 26). Lefebvre furthermore distinguishes between the levels or layers of spatial practices (including our perceptions of space), representations of space (including our conceptions), and representational spaces (including the lived space of everyday life). Each of these layers is productive of space in different and distinct ways and thus also contributes differently to the social production of space. As a result of these multiple planes of signification, “space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning” (Lefebvre, 1991: 154).

In a general sense, the results of these differentiated layers and processes of production are distinct kinds of spaces, whose distinctiveness is often rooted in the manner and conditions of their production. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre identifies the following kinds of space: absolute, abstract, appropriated, capitalist, concrete, contradictory, cultural, differentiated, dominated, dramatized, epistemological, familial, instrumental, leisure, lived, masculine, mental, natural, neutral, organic, original, physical, plural, political, pure, real, repressive, sensory, social, socialist, socialized, state, transparent, true, and women’s space. The heterogeneity of this list demonstrates that there is nothing finite or fixed about Lefebvre’s conception of spatial types, as he adopts new distinctions between different kinds of spaces as he moves in his discussion from one phenomenon to the next. In this sense, Lefebvre’s theory of social space is also contextualist and non-essentialist (a notion I will return to at a later stage of this paper).

Perhaps the most widely discussed of his spatial types, “abstract space” is associated by Lefebvre with the – distinctly capitalist – space of accumulation, in which production and reproduction processes are separated and space takes on an instrumental function. It is initially produced as the result of state intervention in the production of space, sometimes to serve the purposes of private interest in capital accumulation and sometimes to serve its own purposes. As a consequence, it is fragmented, heterogeneous, and hierarchical. Furthermore, as characteristic of the capitalist system, abstract space is marked by the conflicts and contradictions common to this system: the contradiction between economic and political practices on the one hand and the use values produced by people in their pursuits of everyday life (cf. Lefebvre, 1979: 241).

What I will refer to here as “representative” or “symbolic spaces” occupy a place of special importance in relation to abstract spaces, because “spaces made (produced) to be read
are the most deceptive and tricked-up imaginable” (Lefebvre, 1991: 143). This spatialized problematic of representation arises from Lefebvre’s assumption that space is lived before it is perceived, and produced before it can be read. Lefebvre (1991) quotes the symbolic or representational space of monuments as a potent example of deceptive space, and concludes that the principle purpose of a critical reading of space is to help “us” understand the transition from representational, lived spaces to representations, conceptions of space. In the case of the many representational or symbolic spaces involved in the construction of the European Union, the point at which the transition Lefebvre speaks of will have become stable enough to be recognized as such is still far off. This, I would argue, makes the present juncture of the social and spatial production of the European Union an extraordinary opportunity for studying and theorizing the on-going production of an emergent spatial order.

On a different plane, at times at odds but not necessarily in contradiction with that of abstract space, one needs to locate what Lefebvre calls the “personal” and “collectivized” spaces of people, characterized by the experience of place attachment, communal sites, and places containing (group) specific activities. As potential sites of resistance, these are the spaces of de Certeau’s everyday or, as he would call it, the “landscape” of the everyday (cf. de Certeau, 1984). As even a cursory glance at de Certeau’s work on resistance and appropriation will make apparent, conceptions of space other than the one articulated by Lefebvre have emphasized different aspects of spatiality, and the following section is intended not only to complement Lefebvre’s list of spatial types but also to broaden the theoretical scope of this paper.

2.4. Foucault’s Heterotopia

As Soja (1990) demonstrates, Foucault’s historiography can be read as an important contribution to a spatial ontology because, as a theory of history, it is spatialized from the ground up rather than exhibiting merely a shift in metaphorical preference. Much like Lefebvre, Foucault, too, focuses on the spatiality of life, the actually lived (and socially produced) space of sites and the relations between them. For Foucault, as for Lefebvre, space in general is neither a substanceless void to be filled by cognitive intuition nor a repository of physical forms to be phenomenologically described in all its resplendent variability. In his general discussion of space, Foucault (1980a) furthermore contrasts what he calls the “real

8 For Soja’s argument on how Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy of knowledge provided an important passageway to the postmodern cultural critique of spatiality and the cartography of power, see Soja (1990: 16f and 63f).
spaces” of social life with the “fundamentally unreal spaces” of utopias, which present society in either “a perfected form” or else “turned upside down”. Obviously, both his terminology and typology of spaces differ from those developed by Lefebvre in an altogether different context. In his essay “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Foucault develops the notion of “heterotopias”, which he sees as the characteristic spaces of the modern world: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible […] they have a function in relation to all the space that remains” (Foucault, 1986: 25). Like Lefebvre’s abstract space, the heterotopia is a many-layered palimpsest of spaces, a heterogeneous and relational spatiality. The heterotopia is thus similar to what Lefebvre would describe as abstract space and is produced, in part, by what I have termed representational or symbolic space; both concrete and abstract at the same time, it is the result of a conflicting and contradictory multiplicity of spaces. The heterotopia is a space difficult to see in its abstract form rather than its contingent materiality, for it has been obscured by the traditional view of space as either a mental construct or a physical form – the dual illusion discussed above.

2.5. The Special Role of Urban Space

The fact that Lefebvre uses the city and urbanism as constant touchstones in his analysis of capitalism, viewing the built environment as a “brutal condensation of social relationships” (Lefebvre, 1991: 227), has reasons as significant as it has had consequences for subsequent theorization. Following Lefebvre in his predilection towards the urban, most studies of spatiality have focused on the city and urban space, its institutions and the fissures within the system, as well as sites of resistance and empowerment within the urban system. As suggested above, there are several reasons for the attention paid to the urban, the most obvious being that the city is the densest space created by humans there is. More than anywhere else, space in the city is forced to take on multiple meanings; as a result, none of urban space is permitted to be neutral – or homogenous. What is more, if, as Soja (1990) maintains, the present epoch is characterized by the convergence between the three different paths of spatialization that he calls “post-historicism”, “postfordism”, and “postmodernism” (Soja, 1990: 61), then these paths converge most visibly in urban space. These spaces, as Virilio (1993, 1995) has also argued, belong to the second half of the twentieth century. Speed, transport, the globalization of trade, circulation, consumerism – are all responsible for the production of globalized, interchangeable places, identical throughout the world, spaces “through which people move
without stopping and without meeting anyone” (Virilio, 1995: 126). While the abstract space of the European Union is clearly not exclusively urban in nature, I would argue that it is anchored, to a substantial degree, in the urban space of the principal cities of its member states – with the important qualification that the many rural (or non-urban) spaces benefiting from European Union developmental funding, in particular those marked by signs as such, are perhaps just as significant.

3. Space as a Site of Struggle

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers […] from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat. (Foucault, 1980: 149)

Social spatiality – as a process simultaneously produced and productive– needs to be theorized as a competitive arena for struggles over social production and reproduction. As such, it is the domain of social practices aimed either at the maintenance and reinforcement of existing spatiality or at significant restructuring or radical transformation. The symbolic construction of abstract spaces such as the European Union can thus be read as a hegemonic struggle over spatiality (including both representations and conceptions of space), different from and yet similar to the discursive struggles usually associated with the notion of hegemony.

The social and spatial construction of the European Union is clearly a struggle over identity and hence also over national identity, a field that has recently become the focus of many studies in critical discourse analysis, viewing discursive processes as both product and producer of social reality. And because any analysis of the production or construction of identity must necessarily conceive of identity as non-essential, Natter and Jones’ (1997) recent discussions of space as a non-essential category (as opposed to essential space) are highly relevant to the issues under considerations here. Space, they argue, no less than identity, will always offer the potential for tactical refusal and resistance in de Certeau’s sense

9 See also Benko (1997) on the space of globalization. I would, however, dispute Benko’s generalizing claims regarding the loss of “place” and “milieu” in contemporary urban space. While the respective meanings and effects of the two concepts have no doubt been greatly altered, it seems unlikely that they have ceased to have any significance at all.

10 See, for instance, Wodak et al (1999) and Wodak and Meyer (2001). Indeed, recent work by critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough (presented at an international conference in Vienna, 2003) suggests that discursive practices (what he referred to as genres) are instrumental in defining the conditions of possibility of governance and meta-governance. See also Christiansen (1996), Ferguson and Jones (2002), and Jessop (2003) for recent work on space, scales of governance, and regimes of meta-governance done from a variety of perspectives.
of the terms. But Natter and Jones’ (1997) structural critique also has implications for the status of the concepts as “centre” and “periphery”, which have informed both discourse and the structuring of space itself as organizing principles. Following Natter and Jones (1997), the process of “centering” is understood here as entailing a structuring moment necessary to perform the ordering of space. At the same time, however, any such structuring necessarily implies the assignation of a periphery. In turn, assignment of the periphery provides a home – one of terror – for the other, the mere existence of which is both a provocation to, and the raw material for, the centre. On the one hand, the power emanating from the centre thus peripheralizes alterity, but on the other hand also incorporates traces of the periphery from which it is constitutively constructed. According to Natter and Jones’ poststructural position, to speak of space as containing a “centre” and a “periphery” is already to acknowledge the latter’s constitutive power (cf. Natter and Jones, 1997: 150f). This critical perspective furthermore opens up possible sites of critical intervention into the (discursive) production of social space.

The non-essential conception of spatiality thus recognizes that space, like identity, is subject to the naturalizing processes of hegemony. Just as fixed identities rely upon categories condensed at nodal points, so too does the meaning, truth value, and objectivity assignable to any spatial object and spatial system rely upon its naturalization. The equation between certain (and essential) identities and certain (and essential) spaces can thus be negated by complementary theories of non-essential identity and non-essential space, suggesting that no identity can claim certainty with regard to any particular space – and vice versa. Such a perspective on the social production of space also has the advantage of being able to explain, for instance, why the same physical space can at times be experienced as regional, national, or even as “European” and can thus give rise to various contradictory and conflicting identities.

3.1. Tributary Practices in the Social Production of Space

To Lefebvre, the transition from former habits of analyzing things in space to a new gaze on the actual production of space seemed fraught with difficulties, since it involve a rethinking of the relationship between space and every other kind of social practice, linguistic, semiotic, or otherwise. This means, most importantly, to insist that social space is neither a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, “it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (Lefebvre, 1991: 73). Space is thus the outcome of a set of operations and cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object, while, at the same time, there
is nothing imagined, unreal or “ideal” about it. Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what ultimately permits new actions to occur – a “condition of possibility” – but can also act as a constraint, suggesting some things while prohibiting others.

Under these changed conditions of theorization and analysis, nothing can any longer be taken for granted in studying abstract and symbolic or representational spaces: these are all spaces which are meant to be read and, as a result, are often the most opaque. Above all, these spaces are always multi-faceted, multiply-coded, and often culturally and historically overinscribed. Hence, Lefebvre’s wariness of them, but also his special interest in them. The following sections each visit one or several of the points of connection or nodes in the complex interplay between the social production of space and the tributary practices of signification that have some part in the inscription of social meanings (be they cultural, historical or political) into the abstract space of the European Union.

3.1.1. Language and Naming

The practice of naming is one of the intersections at which the different layers of spatialization – habitual spatial practices, representations of the world, and a spatial, imaginary geography – become most apparent. According to Shields (1997), the act of naming reinscribes cultural hegemony upon the physical landscape to “haunt” the materiality of what Bourdieu has called habitus. Similar to a cognitive and practical habitus, the concept of a habitual social spatialization as proposed by Shields (1997) is a source not only of “templates” or “algorithms” (traditional routines), but of allegorical solutions (attempts to solve new problems by metaphorically assimilating them to older, routine difficulties), differentiating images (locating someone or something spatially) and conceptual shortcuts (attributing stereotypical qualities to a person from a given region or place). In general, practices of naming play a key role on all three layers of spatialization considered here, including the lived discursive, psychological, as well as material aspects of social landscapes (cf. Shields, 1997: 189).

There are many such instances of naming that relate to the construction of the European Union, probably most prominently practiced by national agencies and agencies of the European Union (in the naming of streets, bridges, squares or entire regions). But naming is practiced no less by the advertising industry, which has recently discovered that the attribute “European” can be made to carry positive connotations, and captions such “The European among sports cars” (“Der Europäer unter den Sportwagen”) bear witness to this wide-spread development. The name of the common European currency is another prominent
example of the ways in which naming can contribute to the production of abstract spaces such as the European Union, as the currency as an abstract type (and each note or coin as its token) is made to stand in for the space of the Union itself. Of course, visual means are involved here as well, and so are the uses and everyday practices associated with the use and exchange of currency.\textsuperscript{11}

3.1.2. Built form or Architecture

Shields (1997) is far from alone in relating language and practices of naming to the habitual uses people make of physical space. Fredric Jameson, in his attempts to decode what he calls “postmodern hyperspace” relies not only upon naming, but also on architecture – the “privileged aesthetic language” of modernity (Jameson, 1991: 37) – because the latter seems to possess a virtually unmediated relationship with the economic. Built form – whether designed or “grown” – is perhaps the most tangible and accessible possibility of examining how different systems and practices contribute to the production of abstract space. Explaining built form in its relation to culture can provide important clues to the meaning encoded in historically generated spatial forms, because the built environment not only reflects sociocultural concerns, but also in turn shapes behavior and social action. Thus, embedded in these forms, one can detect a living history of cultural meanings, intentions and contingencies. However, as a repository of historical meanings that reproduce social relations on an epistemological level, built form also naturalizes our experience of space in a way that does not seem open to challenge.\textsuperscript{12} In analyzing built form, it is therefore necessary to look beyond the materiality of architecture even as it (partially) impresses its spatiality on the subject.

On a strictly practical level, any architectural form, monument, or town plan is a product of conflicting sociopolitical forces which, as Harvey (1985) has demonstrated, become partly accessible through built form. However, the seemingly unchallengeable interpretation of architectural or urban design often obscures the latent subtexts of meaning, such as, for instance, the political implications at the root of any aesthetic sensibility. This is probably one of the least visible ways in which architecture and urban planning contribute to the dominance of one group over others and function as mechanisms for coding their reciprocal relationships at a level that includes not only the surveillance of the subject but even the subject’s movement itself (cf. Low, 1993: 75). As a consequence, an understanding

\textsuperscript{11} For a general discussion of the spatiality of everyday practices, see the corresponding section below.
\textsuperscript{12} For more on the normalizing effects of built form, see also Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1979).
of the effectivity and articulations of spatial meanings and forms can provide valuable insight into the flow of power relations and sociopolitical control.

In fact, some of the most influential studies of the relationship between culture and built form have thus approached the former through the latter (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Lawrence 1982 and 1987). That is to say, they have approached the relationship between culture and built form through the study of vernacular architecture, objects, spaces, and regions. Characteristically, these approaches emphasize the importance of cultural and social practice, but analysis nevertheless begins with material forms as a way of getting at the less tangible habits, beliefs, and categories that structure and produce space in the built environment. As Rodman (1993) has pointed out, an intriguing example of such an approach is the position taken by Lawrence (1982, 1987), which is innovative, though hindered by some of its basic assumptions. Some of these limitations arise from Lawrence’s textual strategy of personifying buildings as pseudo-individuals and from his reliance on structural analysis. In attributing agency to buildings, Lawrence effectively rewrites the relationship of built form to culture as one of people to people (or people to people-like buildings), and thus masks the status of space as a social product.

Because most studies of built form undertaken in this vein they are largely based on Levi-Straussian structuralism, they furthermore inherit the problematic question of the relationship between the “underlying systems” they discover and the reality these systems allegedly explain. Moreover, they are at a clear disadvantage when compared to other approaches since their static form of analysis leaves no room for ambiguity, conflict, and contest. Part of this problematic stems from the separation of built form and culture rooted in Western culture’s acceptance of the notion of “representation”, which views the human being as separate from (built) forms in the experience of reality and thus also in analysis. This epistemological tradition is also at the heart of the work done by Källtorp (1997), who sees built form as the “definite physical consequences” of social reality, “the concrete evidence of […] effective power and influence” (Källtorp, 1997: 379). Evidence it might be, but it is rarely ever definite or “concrete” and, even more significantly, it is always also productive of social reality rather than mere inert “evidence” to be studied and recorded. In her critique of Lawrence (1982, 1987) and similar structuralist approaches to built form, Rodman (1993) calls for a shift of focus from the nature of the relationships between social form and physical form to studies of how these are produced in the first place (cf. Rodman, 1993: 130ff). Although the pages of this paper are not the place to carry out her suggestion in all its ramifications, even a few examples of the interrelation between built from and the abstract...
space of the European Union may be able to demonstrate the relevance of Rodman’s argument to any study of spatiality.

The first of these examples, and an important means by which the abstract space of the European Union is beginning to influence built form, is its regulative legislature concerning norms of building and construction. These new “European” norms of building, however, are meeting significant resistance on a national (and, presumably, also regional) level – at least in Austria – which, however, is much more persistent than it is political or articulate. Further examples of the impact of the European Union on physical space in Austria as one of its member states might include not only the construction of town squares and bridges christened “Europa”, but also the design of an enormous flower patch opposite the French embassy in Vienna. In the living colors of blue, yellow – and, unavoidably, green – this design each year since 1998 has taken the form of the € symbol. Significantly, the location of this space of homage to the common currency of the European Union is not coincidental, as it was mainly the French who advocated the establishment of a common currency to counteract the ever increasing dominance of the German Mark in the European economy. In this instance, as in the other cases briefly mentioned here, physical space – built form – has been affected by and partially incorporated into the production of abstract space. What remains to be seen is to which degree the built forms characteristic of national and regional spaces will be adapted or superseded by new transnational forms associated with the European Union (or, alternatively “Europe”), or whether they will continue to be productive of space on a different and somewhat independent plane of social spatiality.

3.1.3. The Visual

Due to its ubiquity, and because it contributes to virtually all other layers of spatial meaning discussed here, some aspects of the visual have already been touched upon in above sections. In its own right, the visual has received increasing attention over the past decade or so, with a growing awareness taking hold that a new “visual culture” has been emerging in every domain of the social, including the production of space. While several critics such as Robins (1989) have argued that the image industries are implicated in these sociospatial processes in significant and distinctive ways, the interrelations between the two phenomena themselves have so far escaped critical attention. It remains to be seen whether studies and theories of “visual culture” (e.g. Mirzoeff 1998, 2001), “visual grammar” (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 1996) or “visual design” (e.g. Bonnici 1999) in general can be usefully “integrated” into spatial theory as they stand, but they certainly need to be reread by any social theory of space
that takes seriously the call for an account of the relationship between social space and other systems of meaning. Several of these approaches to the visual may be able to provide critical readings of visual forms (and their ideologies), while some (especially Kress & van Leeuwen 1996) may also provide the necessary analytical tools for an analysis of visual meanings.

Among the most prominent visual articulations of the space of the European Union (which is often and deliberately confused with that of “Europe”) one needs to consider not only design, photography, advertising and film, but also the particularly representational space of flags (which furthermore have in common with naming the function of symbolic marking). In fact, the symbolic space of the flag is perhaps one of the most culturally overdetermined kind of visual space there is: intended to symbolize a whole nation and its people, the flag carries an enormous potential in terms of apparently unifying even the most heterogeneous group of people in the name of the common denominator of citizenship. Indeed, the flag has been historically instrumental in creating the illusion of homogeneous space associated with the concept of nationality. In light of the history of this particular visual form, the low salience of the flag of the European Union has to be seen in relation to the continuing significance of national flags (and, of course, nationality as such) throughout Europe.

The case of the so-called “image industries” of advertising and film is substantially more complex than it might appear at first glance. As far as the production of film is concerned – while there is no distinctly European filmic style or tradition – the many national schools and styles of film coexisting in Europe are nevertheless experienced as distinct from Hollywood mainstream cinema. The European Union, meanwhile, is doing its part to strengthen European film mainly through the MEDIA program aimed at supporting inter-European but trans-national film productions. On a discursive level, advertising – at least in Austria – has become “European” in the sense that it has become aware of the need and opportunity of situating both national and regional products in a European context or space. The means by which this spatiality is produced at the moment, however, rely largely on conceptual shortcuts – that is to say, clichés of national difference on the one hand and stereotypes of regional distinctiveness on the other. Thus, a recent commercial for the Austrian “Bank für Arbeit und Wirtschaft” depicted French, Italian, Dutch, and other European nationalities in stereotypical dress, location, and occupation, while all of these “European” citizens were supposedly united in their desire to get to Austria and the attractive interest rates of the bank in question. The visual elements in such productions of European and national spaces are, of course, highly salient and mesh with already existing conceptions.
Especially in film and advertising, however, the sounds, music, and speech used to articulate and produce these spaces are probably just as significant, if less often the focus of critical enquiry and theorization.\footnote{A notable and promising exception in this field is van Leeuwen’s \textit{Speech, Sound, Music} (1999), which establishes a conceptual framework for further analysis of sound, speech, and music in contemporary media.}

\subsection*{3.1.4. The Everyday}

Even though the notion of “everyday life” has often been criticized for its sometimes convenient vagueness, it may prove helpful to consider it here for its connection to practices discussed at earlier stages. Generally speaking, “the everyday” denotes practices rather than objects – which may, however, be part of those practices – and has the advantage of including the seemingly asignifying and insignificant. By associating “popular culture” and “everyday life” with the notion of landscape, Michel de Certeau (1984) has furthermore given an explicitly spatial inflection to his theory of the everyday and thus brought it even closer to the concept of socially produced space. And while this spatial significance is only suggested by the use of “landscape” in de Certeau’s early work, it becomes more pronounced in his discussion of the city as both a structured place and a “lived, disquietingly familiar space”.\footnote{Like Lefebvre before him, de Certeau regards urbanity as the most intricate form of social space. See de Certeau (1984) and de Certeau et al (1998) for an account of everyday life and the social production of urban space.}

The term “everyday life” does not just refer, then, to de Certeau’s “kaleidoscope” of social practice and lived experience that exceeds attempts to fix it as an inert and stable structure, but also to the transience of social subjects amidst the spatial organization of the social world. For de Certeau, the visible and largely material city is a planned, geometric environment and landscape – the total grid of places, buildings, streets, and so on, whose identity and relations seem relatively secured through proper names and maps. Amidst this city, de Certeau argues, there is also a less visible, “migrational” and mobile city – a “metaphoric” city – comprised of the multiple, vernacular passages, producing new spaces, across and through the institutionalized and visibly marked relations among places. The landscape produced by this mobility – the metaphoric city – is both that which, as the continual creation of invisible spaces, exceeds attempts to control the environment of social life and simultaneously that which secretly structures the determining conditions of social life (cf. de Certeau, 1988).

In one sense, then, de Certeau’s landscape of the everyday is the material condition and impression of social structure that people inhabit. On the other hand, its materiality is nevertheless contingent upon its being practiced. The spaces produced across everyday life
form attributes of this landscape and make it seem both plastic and structured. Significantly, de Certeau sees a landscape’s materiality as bound up not only with built form but also with language (“names and words”) and its practice (“reading and writing”) in their spatial articulations: walking as the production of a passage through streets with names. Amidst much that is recursive and routinized, this process of production is nevertheless always problematic, filled with contradiction and struggle. According to Soja (1990), these contradictions arise primarily from the duality of produced space as both outcome/embodiment/product and medium/presupposition/producer of social activity (cf. Soja, 1990: 129). In other words, it is the interaction of space with people and their limited but real agency that makes space the site of struggles over meaning.

The materiality of the common European currency – especially of the coins, with their two faces, one “European”, the other “national” – is a good case in point. Through what I would describe as its design and production of “diversity in unity” – or, alternatively, of “unity through diversity” – these coins symbolize both national and European space and identity as literally two sides of the same coin. The Euro can thus be read as articulating those who habitually use it as citizens of both the European Union and their respective nation. By checking for and actively seeking out relatively rare specimens of the nationally coded coins – such as those of the Vatican – many people are appropriating the currency to ends which, if not entirely their own, are at least significantly different from those of the European Union. And people are doing so by means of what de Certeau would call “the tactics of the everyday”, effectively looking for the element of diversity while largely ignoring the symbolic space of the Union.

In this, as in other examples, everyday practices cannot be easily and never completely controlled, and thus offer sites of local resistance. As de Certeau (1984) and de Certeau et al (1998) have argued, in everyday life people make do with and appropriate the spaces that are constructed for, against, or even by them. These uses are not always resistant, of course, and are frequently complicit in the production of hegemonic (spatial) order. The following, therefore, draws on and engages with the notion of spatial hegemony in order to briefly suggest the outlines of a spatial dialectic that can account for practices of appropriation and resistance.

15 Although “reading” and “writing” are the terms used by de Certeau (1984) to describe the ways in which the “language of spatiality” is practiced in the space of the everyday, it might be more appropriate to use the terms “speaking” and “listening” for their association with the transience of spoken language.
3.2. Space, Hegemony, and Resistance

Invariably, social spatializations are the product of what Lefebvre characterized as a particular “mode of production of space” under the control of specific groups. Spatializations are thus instrumental in the reproduction of cultural hegemony and dominant ideologies, as well as associated practices. At the heart of this aspect of the instrumentality of space, Lefebvre argues, is the process through which different socially coded spaces are accorded the status of a priori material objects which approach, asymptotically, the features of the natural landscape (cf. Lefebvre 1976: 89f). To push this argument even further, one might argue that even natural topography itself is inaccessible except through the mediation of the human mind’s imposition of significance, meanings, and associations of topographical features. While this suggestion is closely related to discussions of the “social construction of reality”, Lefebvre’s Marxian approach to theorizing the production of space has the advantage of grounding the notion of “production” (of space in particular and of reality in general) in a historical materialist framework as opposed to Hegelian idealism.

Within the overdetermined and overinscribed abstract space of the European Union – which needs to be seen as a layer superimposed and dependent to some degree on the abstract spatiality of individual member states – it seems difficult though never impossible to “carve out a space”, to use a phrase coined by Rutheiser (1993) by resisting the hegemonic production of space. Such resistance allows people to live their own distinctive cultural identities and practices without directly challenging – except, perhaps, on a local level – the hegemonic spatiality of the European Union.

4. Conclusion

*The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. (Foucault, 1980: 10)*

The present juncture in history seems to be informed by two perhaps interdependent changes in the social production and theorization of spatiality. On the one hand, one faces what has been termed “the explosion of spaces”, a phenomenon characterized by the proliferation of

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16 See, for instance, Shields (1997: 189ff) for a Lefebvrean reading of natural topology and its social production.

17 It is interesting to note as well that in the case of exceedingly abstract spaces such as the European Union, even other abstract spaces, such as regions or entire nations, can be found to tacitly resist spatial hierarchies of another order imposed upon them.
abstract and representational spaces, including those of virtuality and so-called cyberspace. On the other hand, theoretical developments in and around postmodernism have made it obvious that the grip of older categories, boundaries, and separations is weakening. As Soja has so aptly described it, “[w]hat was central is now being pushed to the margins, while the once tactful fringes boldly assert a new-found centrality” (1990: 60). Standing at this crossroads of a changing theoretical and social production of space, one can assert that, because and in spite of its implication in hegemonic struggles, space will always offer the potential for tactical refusal and resistance.

As the examples visited on the way have shown, this is also the case in the tension-filled production of the abstract space of the European Union. What is more, the postmodern critique of such concepts as “centre” and “periphery” as organizing principles in structured space clearly applies to the symbolic (and discursive) production of “Brussels” as the almost mythical center of the European Union. If the social process of “centering” always entails a structuring moment necessary to perform the ordering, it at the same time implies the assignation of a periphery – in this case the actual member states of the European Union – but also incorporates traces of this periphery into the centre. As Natter and Jones (1997) have pointed out in their discussion of non-essential space, a poststructural theorization of “centre” and “periphery” as a spatial “self” and “other”, must necessarily acknowledge the latter’s constitutive power. Needless to say, thinking of social space as a potentially empowering category has political as well as theoretical implications, as it allows one to see new gaps and fissures opening up in the matrix of political power and hegemony where once there was only the dead matter of physical space.
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