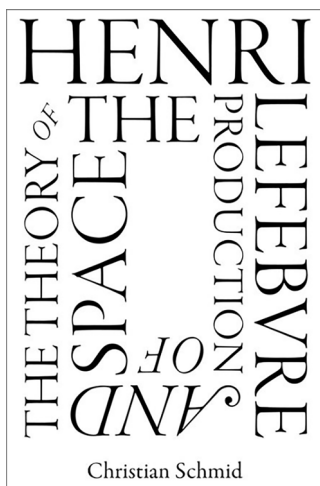


Schmid, Christian (2022): Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space

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“Lefebvre was largely absent from scholarly debates at that point” (p. xiv). This statement, referring to the early 1990s, seems hard to believe from today’s perspective, with the recent recognition, if not overemphasis, of Henri Lefebvre’s topical agenda in contexts such as urban studies or geography. Clearly, things have changed since the time when the contributions of Lefebvre could somehow be “ignored” (p. xiv) by contemporaries, despite a rising interest in French philosophy. These days – in fact for the past two decades

now – it is nearly impossible for any urban academic or activist to move forward without referring to the “right to the city”, which was prominently placed by Henri Lefebvre back in the late 1970s.

Despite its age, this old wine is worth revisiting and there will undoubtedly be much interest in Christian Schmid’s “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space”. The book is a carefully composed translation of the author’s PhD thesis initially published in German (Schmid 2005). It brings to the fore the distinctive French account of social theory applied by Lefebvre, which also stands in contrast to the predominant Anglophone tradition of post-war urban theory in general, and to the works of the so-called Chicago and Los Angeles schools in particular. Even the localities to learn from are different: “To understand Lefebvre, one must understand Paris” (p. xiv).

Lefebvre’s oeuvre is known for its highly complex and deep reflections on a broad range of themes and approaches, and for not being easy to follow in substantial terms. Apart from that, language and translation issues presumably played a role in its initial reception as well. One of his essential contributions, which is “La production de l’espace” (“The Production of Space”), the opus magnum that is also key to this volume, was first published in 1974 in the French original (Lefebvre 1974). It was therefore difficult to access for parts of the international scientific community. The book’s English translation, which first appeared 17 years later in 1991, had the reputation of being somewhat flawed. Perhaps this was the reason that Molotch (1993: 893) called Lefebvre’s writing style “terrible”, while recognizing his substantial contributions with more than sympathy. Thus, language issues may have led many readers to feel that Lefebvre’s theoretical accounts represent an ambitious marriage of urban and social theory which is difficult to follow.

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“Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” was translated by Zachary Murphy King and seems to follow the German original (Schmid 2005) fairly strictly, with some changes applied to chapter and section headings. While most parts have remained identical to the 2005 volume, others have been revised, expanded and adapted to the current state of knowledge. This is seen particularly in Chapter 7 that deals with Lefebvre’s dialectical-materialist theory of society, which Schmid has rewritten almost entirely. The book is not only a long-awaited entry point to a complex body of theoretical reflections, making it appealing for the English reader, but the 24-page foreword and introduction provide some useful background on the origins of the research and assist readers who are not so familiar with Lefebvrian style of thought and French social theory. This “guide to the book”, a sort of introduction to the introduction, really helps to navigate through the subject matter.

Following the introductory sections, the book comprises eight chapters that more or less systematically explore the different dimensions of Lefebvre’s thoughts on the production of space, urbanization and society. After getting started with the initial reception of the theory (Chapter 1), which coincided with the era of postmodernism emerging in urban studies as well, the subsequent chapters deal with key elements of the approach, such as the three-dimensional dialectics in the Marxian intellectual tradition, the relation of urbanization and urban society, and the urban level as a particular entry point to prominent frames such as the city in an urban world, the right to the city and dialectics of the city. The second half of the book includes chapters on the production of space, the history of spaces and the role of the state. Chapter 8 summarizes main thoughts under the umbrella of a spatio-temporal theory of society. ‘The production of space’ as a whole can claim to have had some foresight as to the role of space, as it significantly preceded what became to be known as the ‘spatial turn’.

Despite the theoretical appeal of the work and the high degree of complexity applied in the book, there are a number of possible takeaways from reading this volume – not necessarily as recipes with which Lefebvre’s oeuvre could immediately instruct practice, but as part of a renewed understanding of the subject matter, which is space in today’s societal *and* urban contexts. Based on both the reflections from the original author and Christian Schmid’s careful synthesis, one could assume that a reflective practice can benefit from reinterpreting Lefebvre’s work – even though urban practice seems to be somewhat reluctant to adopt theoretical thought. My admittedly subjective and selectively chosen favorite takeaways include the following three inspi-

rations drawn from the reworking of the ‘The Production of Space’:

- The assumption that ‘space’ is not a given and fixed entity; rather something that is produced, subject to individual and collective action. This allows for an analysis of the powers of change and respective underlying interests, which goes beyond understanding space as a neutral, material container.
- Different understandings of what space can, or should, mean were essentially put forward by Lefebvre. This seems a no-brainer for relational geography but is hardly considered by practitioners such as those from planning or architecture. When aiming to change the built environment, social relations, power issues or discursive imaginaries must necessarily be included, otherwise planning concepts may fall short of perceiving how these spaces will be lived.
- Planetary urbanization has affected even many places that are actually considered to be ‘rural’ or periphery. This points at different meanings of the relationship between society and space. Planetary urbanism is a cornerstone of Lefebvrian thought that can also provide inspiration for dealing with an emerging populist agenda, whose pundits often use the juxtaposition of the urban and the non-urban to instigate conflict, while the real forces at work are not causally related to territory.

While the theoretical construction of ‘The Production of Space’ remains complex, this gives volumes like this one an important guiding function. As the author points out in the foreword of the book, the writing was guided by three different missions: to introduce readers to Lefebvrian thought; to provide an overview of the theory of the production of space; and to present an inspiration and stimulus for further explorations of contemporary urban worlds. In sum, these commitments were accomplished.

Full reference of reviewed title

Schmid, C. (2022): *Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space*. London/New York: Verso.

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