Perhaps no author in the field of urban and regional studies has elicited as much fascination, controversy and misunderstanding as Henri Lefebvre. In the book “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space”, Christian Schmid provides us with a safe map to traverse the expansive terrain of Lefebvrian scholarship. Based on the translation of Schmid’s doctoral thesis, which was published in German, this volume presents the most comprehensive and philosophically underpinned reconstruction of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space available in English. In addition to its translation, the book has been revised, expanded and updated, thereby situating Lefebvre’s contributions within current debates in urban theory and critical geography. The main aim of the book is to reveal the basic principles of the theory of the production of space, offering an analytical framework that empowers readers to engage with Lefebvre in a theoretically, empirically and practically meaningful manner.

However, beyond being a mere exposition of Lefebvre’s theory, Schmid undertakes a lucid interpretation. By framing the epistemological and theoretical context of the theory of the production of space, he offers a critical analysis of its main categories and concepts. Specifically, Schmid executes three noteworthy intellectual maneuvers. First, he historically and theoretically articulates the different moments of Lefebvre’s diverse writings on the urban and space. Second, he situates Lefebvre’s concern with the spatial dimension within his metaphilosophical project based on praxis and a renewed three-dimensional dialectic. Finally, Schmid locates his interpretation within the constellation of other “waves” of reception of Lefebvre’s theory. In doing so, the author duly acknowledges the predecessors who played a pivotal role in the crucial task of interpreting and disseminating Lefebvrian spatial thought in the English language, such as David Harvey, Edward Soja, Eleonore Kofman, Elizabeth Lebas, Andy Merrifield, Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden. But he also engages critically with these previous interpretations to propel his own thinking of Lefebvre.

According to Schmid, the structure of his book follows the “logic of development” of Lefebvre’s thought. The inaugural chapter scrutinizes the reception and interpretation of the theory of the production of space. The following chapter delves into the epistemological and philosophical
foundations of that theory. The third chapter presents the hypothesis of the urbanization of society and explores the evolution of the city in the West. The fourth chapter dissects the dissolution of the specificity of the city within urbanization. Next, Schmid elucidates the three dimensions of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, and the sixth chapter explores the Western history of spaces. In the seventh chapter, Schmid investigates how Lefebvre understood the role of the State in the commodification of space. Finally, the final chapter presents a general outline of a spatio-temporal theory of society.

The structural framework chosen for the book emerges as one of Schmid’s particularly astute decisions. Confronted with the extensive and variegated nature of Lefebvre’s body of work, the challenge lay in exploring his thought without falling into a chronological evolution of the author’s ideas or into a biographical narrative. By strategically adopting the theory of the social production of space as the gravitational core of his investigation, Schmid manages to reconstruct in thought the connections between different – and often divergent – concepts and concerns found in Lefebvre’s work, connecting the parts to the whole. He reveals how concepts and related hypotheses metamorphose incessantly in the dialectical formulation of Lefebvrean thought. Akin to Rosdolsky’s (1977) excavation of Marx’s “Capital”, Schmid captures both the genesis and the structural intricacies of the theory of the production of space. In doing so, he injects a dynamic quality and a sense of historicity into Lefebvre’s theoretical framework, which constitutes an accomplishment of considerable significance.

This intellectual endeavor becomes viable through Schmid’s thesis that, notwithstanding its outward semblance of fragmentation, elusiveness and incompleteness, Lefebvre’s body of work maintains a foundational theoretical and philosophical coherence. Based on a systematic and immanent reading that follows the internal logic of the text itself, the author strives to restore the threads that reveal the continuity of concepts and concerns. It is essential to recognize that the Lefebvrian text, often characterized as “digressive”, “poetic” and “incoherent”, embodies, in its form, the movements of a philosophical discourse grappling with a central query: how can we engage with lived experience and theoretically apprehend it without subjecting it to the violence of abstraction? Thus, although Schmid’s emphasis on coherence is extremely productive, we could provocatively ask ourselves whether there is also the risk of crystallizing a new system of thought, a finished theory or a final word on a living thought that always refused systematization. It is worth remembering that many heterodox readings of Lefebvre’s work, today seen as theoretically inconsistent – such as postmodern appropriations – were extremely generative in terms of research and practice.

Despite this apprehension, Schmid’s work, in my view, distinguishes itself by clarifying two aspects of Lefebvre’s thought that are often misconstrued. Firstly, Schmid illuminates Lefebvre’s original conception of the urban as the sublation (aufheben) of the contradiction between the countryside and the city, without the complete disappearance of these two terms. Schmid underscores Lefebvre’s emphasis on a multifaceted process of societal urbanization, eclipsing the conventional focus on the city as a bounded object. However, he also delves into the spectral persistence of the city, which continues to project its inherent qualities of mediation, centrality and difference into the (possibly) urban society.

Secondly, the heart of the book lies in the meticulous reconstruction of Lefebvre’s theory, developed to unveil the process of the production of social space. This theory, rooted in three-dimensional dialectic, extends beyond a mere political economy of space. Schmid carefully traces the genealogy of this German-inspired dialectic, which integrates Marx (material praxis), Hegel (abstract thought) and Nietzsche (poetic transcendence). The author also uncovers Lefebvre’s often unassumed engagement with phenomenological thought and language theory, in dialogue with authors such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard. From this foundation, Schmid presents the theory of the production of space unfolding in three dialectically interconnected dimensions or moments: perceived space (spatial practice), conceived space (the representation of space) and lived space (space of representation). This theory is positioned not only as a culmination of Lefebvre’s preceding considerations regarding the city and urbanization, but also as a pivotal reference for subsequent reflections on the contradictions of abstract space dominated by the State and capital. Lastly, I want to highlight Schmid’s discussion of the distinctive features of Lefebvre’s theory of difference, rightly centered as one of the foundations for the philosopher’s concrete utopia of a differential space of encounter, joy, pleasure, autogestion and urban democracy.

Undoubtedly, Christian Schmid’s work stands as an illuminating guide for those seeking to navigate the intricacies of Lefebvre’s complex oeuvre. However, in line with expectations for a comprehensive exploration, certain aspects remain open-ended. In particular, it would be important to evaluate in more detail the connections between Lefebvre’s previous investigations of the rural (Lefebvre 2022) and the process of urbanization, as well as better situate his final life project of the rhythmanalysis of everyday life (Lefebvre 2010) within the scope of his spatial-temporal theory of society. Moreover, in line with postcolonial calls to decenter urban theory, there remains the need to reframe Lefebvre’s thought beyond his often-assumed Eurocentric perspective. This question was only slightly touched upon by Schmid,
drawing on the insightful readings of Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena (2013) on urbanization and colonization, among others. I hope this book helps to establish a more generous dialogue on Lefebvre beyond the northern academic centers of the world, taking into account the fertile appropriations of his work in Latin America, Africa and Asia at least since the 1960s. Moreover, I believe Schmid’s work can serve as a platform for authors and activists around the world to foster new critical conversations and practical interventions on urban and spatial problematics.

Full reference of reviewed title

References