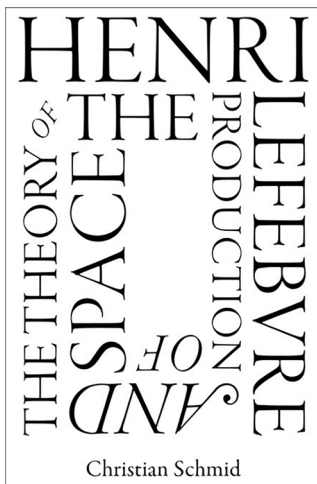


Schmid, Christian (2022): Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space

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The recently published book “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” helps clarify what has been perhaps one of the most misinterpreted philosophical-epistemological conceptualisations of urbanisation and the problem of urban space more broadly since World War II. The author, Christian Schmid, presents the theory of the production of space, portraying a Lefebvrian spatiotemporal, dialectic-materialistic, three-dimensional and revolutionary theory of society as an overarching and systematised contribution to the interdisciplinary debate on the urban question.

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This review portrays the book’s fundamental message. Critically, it puts the book in dialogue with a constellation of publications referred to by the author and a variegated debate on the urban question, referring back to a twenty-year period. The review suggests streams of literature equally intertwined with Schmid’s book, although not explicitly mentioned, while presenting some suggestions for future research and debate.

1 The core message of the book

“Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” is a publication that methodically reinterprets and theoretically organises the legacy of Henry Lefebvre’s theorising of the city’s crisis and explosion consequent to industrialisation, as well as the urban revolution and the critique of everyday life. Primarily, the book discusses the theory of the production of space, portraying a Lefebvrian spatiotemporal, dialectic-materialistic, three-dimensional and revolutionary theory of society as an overarching and systematised contribution to the interdisciplinary debate on the urban question.

While on Lefebvre’s shoulders, the author offers a formidable theoretical-epistemological structure (categories and concepts) with twofold scope: first, to analyse the modes of production of space that are nowadays dialectically destroying and re-shaping the planet and, second, to capture the changing spatiotemporal configurations (pathways and patterns) that define the world in its urban complexity. Schmid’s analysis in the book is developed historically in a continuous regressive-progressive ‘movement’ of analysis/procedure (in line with a Lefebvrian approach).

As shown throughout the book, the theory of the production of space is anticipated and elaborated in all of Lefebvre’s work – especially “The Right to the City” (Lefebvre

1968), “The Urban Revolution” (Lefebvre 1970), “The Production of Space” (Lefebvre 1974) and “De l’État” (Lefebvre 1976a, b, 1977, 1978). By digging into it, Schmid ultimately explains Lefebvre’s historical-materialist theoretical ‘movement’ from the ‘urban’ to ‘urban space’ as a process of production: the space is, then, conceptualised as a product, and in this sense, it becomes social reality. Schmid then presents the Lefebvrian concept of (urban) space as an overarching concept that integrates the variegated meaning of the urban.

Revolving around the dialectical component of the theory of the production of space, Schmid clearly, critically and analytically illustrates Lefebvre’s double dialectic triad of spatiotemporal moments/dimensions/formats of the production of space: the triad of the human being and the triad of language (these triads being among the most debated, misinterpreted and criticised Lefebvrian contributions). The triads are expressed in linguistic terms and in spatial terms: perceived space/spatial practice (production of goods and exchange), conceived space/representation of space (production of knowledge) and lived space/space of representation (giving meaning). Two more triads complete what Schmid defines as Lefebvre’s socio-spatial theory of society: the triad of a triple production process that includes the production of material conditions (material reality accessible to perception), the production of knowledge (representation of space related to a conceived space), the production of meaning (symbolic order that turns spaces into spaces of representation); the triad of contradictions that includes the interaction between the material order and the representation of this order, representation of space (language) and spaces of representation (meaning), and sensory perception and lived experiences.

Moreover, Schmid’s book clarifies how everyday life has been the epistemological foundation of Lefebvrian thinking and uses this foundation as the basis for a reconstruction of the theory of the production of space. This is reflected in Lefebvre’s “Metaphilosophy” (Lefebvre 1965), which includes the concept of ‘praxis’ (and everyday life). This concept emphasises activism and spontaneity related to self-production and self-determination, both of which Lefebvre considers crucial to the urban revolution.

All in all, the core message of the book and Schmid’s interpretation of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space as a sociotemporal theory of society is a relational definition of space that refers to the synchronous order of things and thus to the order of social reality (distant order: the state and the planetary network of production, near order: everyday life; middle level: the urban) as simultaneity.

2 The book’s constellations

Schmid’s book correlates various streams of literature in a map of urban studies that builds on Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space. Through this synthesis, the book refers to a global debate on planetary challenges and offers an epistemological basis that connects and differentiates the variegated theories and approaches to the urban question.

The constellation of literature in this book and the literature to which it relates and contributes by nourishing the debate is vast and differentiated; it can be traced back to the 1980s and refers to many disciplines (cultural anthropology, sociology, social sciences, urban design, architecture, planning and so forth) (Stanek/Schmid/Moravánszky 2016). This constellation parallels the three waves of Lefebvre’s ‘reception’, as the name of the corresponding book chapter suggests: Castell and Harvey’s critique of Lefebvre’s work on the question of the urban and the contribution made by the Anglo-American new urban sociology in the 1980s; the spatial turn and post-modern geography since the 1990s; critical urban studies on the interface of political economy and cultural-postcolonial studies since the 2000s.

As the Lefebvrian discussion of the production of space and the nature of the urban has been revived in the last two decades, Schmid’s book is a topical intervention that engages with the implications in depth.

Postcolonial studies contributed to this revival with the discourse on differentiating global urban studies and the recognition of historicised and emerging patterns and pathways of urbanisation (Robinson 2006; Roy 2011; Robinson 2016; Lancione/Simone 2021; Le Galès/Robinson 2023). These studies are encompassed by Schmid’s book and his previous work on patterns and pathways of urbanisation (developed at the ETH Studio Basel¹ and then at the ETH Zurich department Architektur and the ETH Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore), referred to in this new book. In parallel and throughout postcolonial studies, the thoroughly debated and controversial theory of planetary urbanisation by Christian Schmid, Neil Brenner (Brenner 2014; Brenner/Schmid 2014; Brenner/Schmid 2015) and Andy Merrifield (Merrifield 2013, 2014) emerged with a discourse that is closely related to the core message of Schmid’s book and reviews the Lefebvrian implosion-explosion dialectic. This theory proposes a new epistemology of the urban anchored to the three modes of urbanisation as extended, concentrated and differential, where the differential (new space) opens the possibilities for alternative pathways of the urban. One could even say that Schmid’s book contributes

¹ <https://planetaryurbanisation.ethz.ch/project/patterns-and-pathways> (22.03.2024).

by clarifying misinterpretations of planetary urbanisation theory, having generated fundamental critiques from feminist and queer standpoints (Ruddick/Peake/Tanyildiz et al. 2018).

Furthermore, the major research initiative on global suburbanism led by Roger Keil at the City Institute of York University of Toronto focuses on a particular kind of Lefebvrian process, one which Keil (2013, 2017, 2018) theoretically defines as a suburban explosion of disjointed urban fragments spread over the land throughout the planet, thus describing the socio-spatial configurations of a new emerging periphery (suburbanisation becomes the form and suburbanism becomes the way of life).

The contributions mentioned above critically engage with the consolidated influence of postmodern geography and Edward Soja's 'postmetropolis' perspective elaborated within the spatial turn (Soja 1996, 1999, 2011; recently developed in Balducci/Fedeli/Curci 2017) and under a reinterpretation of Lefebvrian three-dimensional dialectics. In Soja's 'thirthing-as-othering' interpretation of the dialectical sublation of the contradiction, Schmid reads a great misunderstanding of Lefebvre's dialectic in favour of a trialectic. In Schmid's words "Soja reifies the dimensions or moments of the production of space laid out by Lefebvre [...] into independent spaces [...] physical [...] mental [...] comprehensive social space [...]. According to Lefebvre's theory there can be no 'third space' just as there can be no first or second" (p. 318).

The debate on agglomeration is referred to as a transhistorical universal principle that captures the very nature of the city from a political economy perspective, which has been revived in parallel (Scott/Storper 2015). This debate is also critically presented by Schmid for failing to consider the other side of Lefebvre's implosion, which is the explosion of urban areas and the consequent formation and reorganisation of the centrality-peripheries dialectic.

Another contribution comes from the Territorialist Approach by Alberto Magnaghi (Magnaghi 2005, 2020), which in the last two decades has diffused through Latin America, India and the francophone countries, with Foucauldian and Raffestinian influences and the 'mediance' of the dialectical and historical-materialist conceptualisation of the production of territory inspired by Lefebvre's theory of society, power and everyday life. From this concept, Schmid develops a 'territorial approach' based on a double dialectical triad of networks-borders-differences and territory-power-difference (see also Diener/Herzog/Meili et al. 2005; Diener/Herzog/Meili et al. 2015).

Another couple of prominent books (Brenner 2000; Brenner/Elden 2009; Brenner 2019) relevant to Schmid's book interpret the Lefebvrian spatial understanding of the concepts of state, multiscalar 'state space' and the scale ques-

tion as the key to restructuring and rescaling urbanisation processes.

By interweaving an explicit and critical dialogue with the topics presented in the book, these streams of literature contribute to consolidating a debate arena to which Schmid's work contributes significantly.

3 Subsequent developments and critiques

A number of recent books are fundamental for thoroughly appreciating the practical-theoretical-generative contribution of Lefebvrian thinking systematically elaborated in Schmid's book. They report the result of a comparative, global research effort started in 2011 at ETH Zurich under Schmid's coordination and are an example of the interpretation and application of Lefebvrian transductive methodology. These books are "Vocabularies for an Urbanising Planet" (Schmid/Streule 2023) and "Expanded Urbanisation" (Schmid/Topalovic 2023) and they translate into an operative research movement offering an epistemological reorientation of Lefebvrian thinking as interpreted in the book and in other elaborations of Schmid and Brenner. To understand urbanisation in time and space and through diverse patterns and pathways developing across the planet, the authors above engage with the post-colonial turn in urban studies from a planetary perspective. They furthermore engage with the contribution by Jennifer Robinson on the need for decentring the analytical perspective and on diversifying sources and inspiration, thus developing insights from 'anywhere' (Robinson 2016; Robinson 2022).

Despite the enormous effort made to grasp the critical connections of Lefebvre's thinking in urban studies since the 1970s, Schmid's book only slightly touches on two relevant aspects (discussed in Section 2) whose deepening could have further enriched the book and its impact. The first has a crucial role in the debate of the third wave of Lefebvre's reception and the contemporary effort to view Lefebvre in coherence with his historical-materialist approach. It concerns the research on suburbanism by Roger Keil and a large group of international scholars (Ekers/Hamel/Keil 2012; Keil/Hamel/Boudreau et al. 2016; Harris/Lehrer 2018; Keil/Wu 2022) who, across a decade, variously interacted with the authors of planetary urbanisation theory and key figures in the post-colonial debate. Exploring the global phenomenon of suburbanisation as part of the dialectical implosion-explosion process, the suburban theory undertakes an epistemological and historical analysis focusing on a specific pattern-pathway of urbanisation consistent with the Lefebvrian regressive-progressive analysis.

The second aspect is less explicitly connected to, although theoretically rooted in, the Lefebvrian theories as reinterpreted by Claude Raffestin through the concept of the production of territory. It concerns the Territorialist approach by Alberto Magnaghi and Giancarlo Paba (particularly its direct connection to the Lefebvrian conceptualisation of the right to the city and the urban revolution) (Perrone 2022). This approach is quickly becoming widespread and is intensely inspirational for the historical-materialist analysis of socio-spatial configurations, expressed as territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. It develops and extends the concept of the production of space to one of the dialectics of the production of territory as a general theory of a (territorialist) society that tends to self-determination and self-organisation (also inspired by Adriano Olivetti's concrete community project) (Magnaghi 2022). In a certain way, this approach shares certain Lefebvrian utopic ideas and the concept of a possible future society.

In conclusion, and as a final inspirational hint drawn from Schmid's book on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, one can say that an extended interpenetration of the contemporary process of the production of territories of urbanisation might arise. This envisions a possible *new revolution* that goes beyond our planet and expands the idea of a multi-species, human/non-human, more-than-human coexistence (Brenner/Ghosh 2022). Possibilities for a future life on other planets have been elaborated through so-called space architecture, land occupation strategies and dwelling solutions (Wiles 1998; Karamercan 2022). The capitalist implosion-explosion logic seems to expand towards other planets within a new scientific-technological revolution related to artificial intelligence. Can we already speak of multi/extra-planetary urbanisation?

Full reference of reviewed title:

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