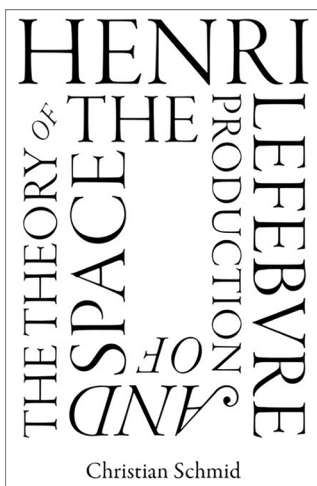


Schmid, Christian (2022): Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space

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1 What is the Urban?

Christian Schmid has written a brilliant book on Lefebvre. The book is not just another interpretation of Lefebvre's theories. What makes Schmid's book exceptional compared to other books on the same topic is that Lefebvre is not the starting point of the work. Schmid's primary interest and the topic of the book is critical urban theory, and secondarily Henri Lefebvre.

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When Schmid sets the task for his research, his question – a painful one for every urban researcher – is motivated by the unsatisfactory answers given to it in urban theory: What is the urban? More precisely: “I wanted to explore the paradigm shift in urban research and systematise our empirical and theoretical findings. However, at a certain moment, these new urban concepts had revealed their limits. [...] And they could not provide answers to the big question that had preoccupied me for so long: what is the urban? So, after much hesitation, I returned to Lefebvre and thus to an adventure with an uncertain outcome” (pp. xiii-xiv).

In the useful introductory chapters (pp. xix-40), Schmid sets the scene of the book with an overview of urban movements and critical urban theory. There are few books on the conceptual history of urban theory. Schmid critically and meticulously reviews the significant paradigms, their changes, and the works of major urbanists, ranging from the Chicago School to radical geography, through consumption to the cultural turn and beyond, and considers their answers in trying to understand the city/urban as he begins to address his question.

This is a contribution beyond Lefebvre and valuable to urban studies more generally. And the occasionally quite hilarious overview of urban movements and the street revolts tells not only of the tensions of urban development, but also explains how the person Christian Schmid became an urbanist, starting on the streets of Zurich in 1980 with some Dadaistic slogans (Down with the Alps! We want to see the Mediterranean!).

2 From a Theory of Space to a Theory of Urban Society

“Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” (2022) is based on Schmid's dissertation “Stadt,

Raum und Gesellschaft – Henri Lefebvre und die Produktion des Raumes” (Schmid 2005), written under the supervision of Swiss-German multidisciplinary geographer Benno Werlen. When I got the German book, I thought, well, I am probably not going to read this very thoroughly, perhaps only some parts here and there. It was 344 pages without a single chart or picture, all in German, where the crucial verbs are, if you are lucky, probably in the last sentence of the page – if not, they are on the next page.

But Schmid is an excellent author, who has the talent to break a very abstract text into manageable pieces which can be read in a tram or a short break. The book was surprisingly easy to read – and exciting in its thorough and new interpretation of the theoretical legacy of Henri Lefebvre. I was sorry that it was available only in German, because I thought that in the current Anglophile world it would largely remain unknown to the non-English speaking audience. Verso has made a significant cultural and scientific act by publishing the book in English.

The English version is not a translation of the German book. It is a re-contextualised and expanded book. As Schmid explains, this is partly because the position and reception of Lefebvre has changed in the 17 years between the publication of the two books, partly because some sections were omitted from the dissertation as being too controversial at the time with their explicit Marxist orientation. This omission is included as a completely new Chapter 7 (The State and Commodification of Space), which elaborates and extends Lefebvre’s dialectical-materialist theory of society. Also, the concepts of the right to the city, the question of concrete utopias, the conceptualisation of levels and scales, and planetary urbanisation are explored further.

The book is as bold as the first one. Again, this is not a currently typical picture book, it relies on the reader’s ability to read. But not to worry. In this book, too, Schmid takes the readers by the hand and leads them through the labyrinth. The drive and energy of the text also speeds up the long journey.

3 The Trouble with Henri

The title is borrowed from Schmid (2014). He refers to Alfred Hitchcock’s film “The Trouble with Harry”, where the body of Harry keeps appearing and disappearing during the film. This bears a similarity to Lefebvre’s career: in and out, praised and rejected, at the margins and on the forefront.

Lefebvre was born in 1901 and died in 1991. During his long life, he contributed to most of the intellectual and political movements of the century in France: dadaism, sur-

realism, existentialism, Marxism, situationism, structuralism. He was an eyewitness and an involved participant. He was an activist in the Resistance and a member of PCF, the French communist party. He broke across disciplines as a philosopher, geographer, and sociologist. He wrote about rural sociology, planetarisation, Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, everyday life, social space, urbanism, rhythmanalysis, fascism, space-time, total man and much more. He authored more than sixty books and three hundred articles, and more seems to be occasionally found (see Stanek/Schmid/Moravánszky 2014). His immense energy extended to his personal life as well. He was a legendary drinker, had several wives and companions – many of them also worked as his assistants and/or co-writers – and a large number of children.¹

During my studies, none of the sociology textbooks I read ever mentioned Lefebvre. He was not completely unknown, though. I had a vague idea of him as a controversial intellectual, an anti-structuralist and an unorthodox Marxist, as someone who was expelled from the PCF as a critic of Stalinist Marxism, represented by most western communist parties at the time. When the American social scientists and geographers became interested in him during the cultural turn in the 1980s, his books started to be translated in English.

My trouble with Henri was that I found the writings fascinating and imaginative, but that they seemed to be theories on particular subjects, eclectic with sprawling interests, and without interreference. Also, I thought that the concepts, although good to think with, were not empirically applicable. In the few pieces of research, I knew where Lefebvre was applied, he was mainly cited, and the famous triad, if used, did not really relate to the research framework. When I worked at the Helsinki University of Technology (currently Aalto University), I invited both Mark Gottdiener and Rob Shields as visiting professors at different periods to the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies. Each had authored a significant book on Lefebvre (Gottdiener 1985; Shields 1999), and during their stay we had courses on his thinking. Nevertheless, Lefebvre remained obscure to me.

Christian Schmid’s book(s) changed this. It was as if after staring at a rebus or puzzle picture for a long time, you suddenly find the hidden figure, which transforms the meaning of the picture completely.

¹ Lefebvre had 27 children, all of whom he educated (personal information, Rob Shields). According to Shields, this probably partly explains Lefebvre’s literary productivity as he educated all his children. At a party at Fredric Jameson in the late 1980s, Mark Gottdiener realised that the main guest there was his great idol Henri Lefebvre and wanted to have a talk with him. Lefebvre, then 89 years old, was more interested in the female guests present than in discussing sociology (personal information, Mark Gottdiener).

The reason for this is the question Schmid puts forward in the introduction, focusing primarily on the urban. This is the first Lefebvre book where I did not concentrate on what Lefebvre was saying but instead on the riddle of the urban. A highly theoretical book is seldom a thriller, which cannot be put down, but this book comes as close to the genre as possible.

All at once, the theories on particular subjects became parts of a comprehensible and coherent theory of urban society and the radical potential of several of Lefebvre's concepts finally manifested themselves to me: the right to the city, everyday life, planetary urbanisation.

Schmid also claims that Lefebvre's theory can only be grasped in application and demonstrates this with examples, also through his own work. With the research unit ETH Basel, he created a practical application of Lefebvre's theory of complete urbanisation in "Switzerland: An Urban Portrait" (Diener/Herzog/Meili et al. 2005), where a new territorial approach was created. A good companion to how Lefebvrian ideas can be used both as a theory and method for research and practice across the social sciences is also "The Urban Revolution Now" (Stanek/Schmid/Moravánszky 2014). The book presents several case studies from the global North and South as well as East and West, promoting understanding of urbanisation as a process by developing ideas based on Lefebvre.

Christian Schmid's well-written and thought-out book is an innate classic, a gamechanger, both for understanding

Henri Lefebvre's theories and for building a future for critical urban theory.

One more thing: Read this book.

Full reference of reviewed title

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