

Keeping our Thinking in Motion

Response to the Lefebvre Symposium

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This symposium on my book about Henri Lefebvre is very inspiring. The precise and meaningful articles are a pleasure to read. Nevertheless, some additional information about the context in which the book came to be, might be helpful.

When I began writing my dissertation on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space – more than three decades ago – I did not write it for a specific audience. I basically wrote it for myself, in order to better understand

Lefebvre's rich, but troubling, theoretical world (Schmid 2014). As Mervi Ilmonen (Ilmonen 2024) rightly remarks, my primary goal was not to write a book about Lefebvre, but rather, to develop a critical urban theory. Lefebvre had provided a path-breaking – and at the same time open-ended – understanding of urbanization, which had initiated a renewal and reorientation of urban theory. To get a more solid theoretical basis, I conducted a systematic immanent reconstruction of his theory of the production of space, which I understood as the linchpin of his comprehensive and complex theoretical oeuvre. João Tonucci (Tonucci 2024) points out the risk that this kind of systematic reconstruction could crystallize into a new system of thought, taking on the appearance of a finished theory, or the final word on a living thought that consistently refused systematization. Indeed, such a reconstruction necessarily involves a reduction of the original texts' richness, and could never exhaust the multitude of insights that these texts allow. It is a tool that allows us to apprehend the basic construction of a theory. To better understand the perspective of my reconstruction, it has to be read through the broader context of the discussions on Lefebvre that unfolded over the past three decades.

In the early 1990s, when I embarked on my theoretical endeavour, Lefebvre was mostly absent from academic discourses. In 2005, when I finally published my book in German (Schmid 2005), it became part of the "third wave" of Lefebvre interpretation. This wave not only opposed the first, neo-Marxist wave – particularly Manuel Castells' misleading critique of Lefebvre's concept of the urban revolution (Castells 1977) – but also the second, very influential wave initiated by the "postmodern" Lefebvre interpretation (see Goonewardena/Kipfer/Milgrom et al. 2008). It is certainly true, as Tonucci highlights, that some of these post-

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modern readings were generative in research and practice. Edward W. Soja, in particular, presented an interpretation of Lefebvre's three-dimensional dialectics that drew much interest (Soja 1996). However, many scholars who tried to work with Soja's interpretation struggled with its confusing internal inconsistencies – which resulted in part from his basic assumptions, and his ambition to link Lefebvre's approach to postmodern thinking without really elucidating and acknowledging his epistemology. The third wave, in contrast, analysed the theoretical origins of Lefebvre's three-dimensional dialectics, explored his transdisciplinary methods and his procedure of transduction, and it highlighted his open-minded critical humanism. In this sense, the third wave of Lefebvre interpretation could be understood as a collective project to explore the full potential of Lefebvre's approach. It became the basis for many urban research projects, while helping to both extend and further develop his theory. The debate launched by the third wave was thus not a struggle about the “right” interpretation of Lefebvre's theory, but rather, about the epistemological fundamentals of his work.

In the 2000s and 2010s, this third wave came to fruition in many ways. It also gave rise to a series of projects, such as a postcolonial critique of Lefebvre's thinking (Kipfer/Goonewardena 2013); the exploration of his work on the state and his concept of state space (Brenner/Elden 2009; Brenner 2019); and a new theorization of his concept of planetary urbanization (Merrifield 2014; Brenner/Schmid 2015).

Finally, these theoretical developments provided an impetus to translate my German book. We discussed a possible English translation at the time of publication, but such a project would have required considerable efforts and more time than was available. Thanks to Verso, who proposed publishing a translation, and to the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, who financed the translation, it finally became possible. However, the main problem that complicates and often impedes the translation of so many texts is the process of translation itself, which is not a straightforward process. As Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Kofman/Lebas 1996) noted, it is a process of transposition, which must take into consideration that languages are not neutral containers. As Lefebvre himself pointed out, languages are instruments of power. Lefebvre strongly criticized the alienation that results from codifying the use of language, leading to its reification and thus to the incorporation of power relations. His frequent evocation of poetics and poesis were thus demands for a liberation of thinking. I experienced this moment of estrangement from my own text during the translation process, when I faced the frustrating limitations of the standards and rules of the Anglo-American academic industry. I also learned

that Lefebvre's theoretical world was strongly embedded in a common French-German philosophical tradition, which was particularly well developed in phenomenology during the first half of the 20th century. This is a very different world than the English philosophical tradition, which sometimes makes it really difficult to convey the full meaning of an idea in a translation. The transposition of German dialectics, so fundamental to Lefebvre's work, posed considerable additional problems and required corresponding explanations in the text.

Furthermore, in the new edition of my book, I had to take the fundamental changes of the Lefebvre interpretation into consideration, and the further theoretical developments and extensions that have been produced over the two decades after I completed my original German text, as described above. The English version is thus, in many respects, a different text than the original book (see also Hesse 2024).

Still, as some of the critics are arguing, a range of important questions are not extensively discussed in my book. As Tonucci (2024) points out, Lefebvre interpretations beyond the Western metropolis are only briefly discussed, particularly Latin American contributions on urbanization and on space by scholars such as Milton Santos, Aníbal Quijano, and Roberto Luís Monte-Mór. This also implicates the dialogue with postcolonial and anti-colonial approaches – a topic addressed by Stefan Kipfer's recently published book, entitled “Urban Revolutions”, bringing together Lefebvre, Fanon and Gramsci to reflect on Marxism, anti-colonialism, and urban questions (Kipfer 2023).

A further important topic is the territorial approach and related efforts discussed in the contribution by Camilla Perrone (Perrone 2024). She raises the question of the “production of territory,” which indeed deserves a much longer discussion and analysis. This would have far exceeded the scope of my book, particularly because the links between Lefebvre and the territorial approach are not often made explicit in the original texts. A key precursor of the territorial approach is Claude Raffestin (Raffestin 1980), who developed a novel concept of territory by bringing together Foucault and Lefebvre. This, in turn, inspired scholars including Alberto Magnaghi (Magnaghi 2020) and Giancarlo Paba (see Paba/Perrone/Lucchesi et al. 2017), two leading theoreticians of the territorial approach in Italy.

Another version of the territorial approach that I could but briefly discuss in my book was developed by ETH Studio Basel, an experimental research unit of ETH Zurich's Department of Architecture, which was active from 1999 to 2018, and where I was involved from the beginning. This approach, grounded in Lefebvre's theory, paved the way for the encompassing, large-scale analysis of urban territories (Diener/Herzog/Meili et al. 2005; Diener/Gunnarsson/Gunz et al. 2016). At the same time, we developed a comparative

procedure to address the inevitable specificity of urban territories (Diener/Herzog/Meili et al. 2015).¹ This work was foundational to the subsequent new conceptualization of urbanization processes that allowed the further elaboration and investigation of planetary and extended urbanization. Two recently published books discuss these efforts in detail: “Vocabularies for an Urbanising Planet” (Schmid/Streule 2023) and “Extended Urbanisation” (Schmid/Topalovic 2023).² They present a novel, dynamic understanding of the production of urban territories, and also show the potential of comparative analysis for the enrichment of our urban vocabulary. Together, these two books elucidate the complex interplay of concentrated and extended urbanization processes.

Reflecting on the discussions and applications of Henri Lefebvre’s oeuvre reveals the dramatic urban changes we have experienced over the past several decades. Today, we live in a very different urban world than the time in which Lefebvre wrote his groundbreaking books. This accordingly necessitates a fundamental change in conceptualization and theory building. We therefore have to creatively responding to the stimuli and challenges of Lefebvre’s theory and thus to keep our thinking constantly in motion.

Full reference of reviewed title:

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¹ The entire publication list of ETH Studio Basel is now available as open access (<https://studiobasel.ethz.ch>).

² These two books will soon be available as open access publications.

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