

Keil, Roger

Article

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The Long View: Henri, Christian and the Theory of the Production of Urban Space

Roger Keil

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The publication of Christian Schmid's book "Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space" (Schmid 2022) is a major milestone of urban and spatial scholarship. The title and the subject matter of Schmid's ambitious work fit squarely into the mandate of a journal with the title "Spatial Research and Planning". In fact, it sounds almost programmatic. We have thus taken the publication as an opportunity to ask four renowned international scholars to discuss the book in a symposium. Christian Schmid, who is Titular Professor of Sociology Emeritus at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich, has kindly agreed to respond to his critics.

Christian Schmid belongs to a rare breed of urban intellectual who combines, not always effortlessly, a firm commitment to urban emancipatory practice with a stellar academic career. A squatter during the 1980s Zurich "youth movement" ("Bewegung") and co-founder of the influential and enduring *International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA)*, he has also been one of the most innovative and influential urban geographers of his generation. Both his continuing presence as an activist in Zurich (and globally through the INURA network) and his international success as a scholar can, no doubt, be credited to Schmid's remarkable consistency in messaging, a tireless programmatic linearity in a field that has seen many turns since he first started publishing radical geographic texts as a graduate student. This praxis of urban theory prefigures Schmid's

lifelong treatment of Henri Lefebvre, too, as Finnish sociologist Mervi Ilmonen observes: In Schmid's view, "Lefebvre's theory can only be grasped in application" (Ilmonen 2024).

"Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space" can be read against the tendency of "the turn" as an organizing feature of academic inquiry. As early as in his breakthrough 2005 volume "Stadt, Raum und Gesellschaft", Christian Schmid bemoaned "today's scientific factory with its career patterns and its publishing obligations, where the half-times and expiry dates of new concepts and tendencies become ever shorter" (Schmid 2005: 8); an environment where the long-term, detailed and slow-moving discussions like the ones he prefers and presents in this book, would be almost an impossibility, an anachronism. Christian Schmid's innovation and contribution must be measured over the time of his storied career. Conversant in, and able to operate in German, French and English scholarly debates, Christian Schmid had already established himself as one of the most important international Lefebvre scholars, not least with the publication of a definitive collection of essays under the title "Space, Difference, Everyday: Life Reading Henri Lefebvre" (Goonewardena/Kipfer/Milgrom et al. 2008). Over the almost two decades since, Christian Schmid has left an indelible mark on global urban and geographic debates, some aspects of which are examined in this review symposium.

The current book has its foundation and origin in Schmid's doctoral dissertation at the University of Jena, published in German as "Stadt, Raum und Gesellschaft". As Mervi Ilmonen, a longstanding Lefebvre scholar in her own right, notes in her review, the obscurity of the German text is lifted as the (expanded and extended) text is now available to broader audiences in English. "Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space" presents a thorough treatment of Henri Lefebvre's theories on "the

✉ **Prof. Dr. Roger Keil**, York University, Keele Street, 4700 Toronto, Canada
rkeil@yorku.ca



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production of space” but as sprawling as this topic is in itself, the impact of the book is not contained by its focus on the influential French thinker or his spatial theory. It breaches conventional boundaries of urban studies and geography in many generative ways.

The book is a didactical marvel, systematic and idiosyncratic, synthetic and analytical, logical and dialectical, diachronic and synchronic. It fulfils the pedagogical promise of a text I have often used in teaching, Christian Schmid’s magisterial chapter “Networks, Borders, Differences: Towards a Theory of the Urban” in Neil Brenner’s path-breaking collection “Implosions/Explosions” (Brenner 2014). The eight chapters in “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” are theoretical treatises weaving both through Henri Lefebvre’s work and mind, and through the world of complete urbanization that Henri Lefebvre saw coming in the late 1960s and Christian Schmid has had as his empirical laboratory over the course of his life and career. From the streets and peripheries of Zurich, to the mountains and valleys of Switzerland as an urbanized country, to the urbanization processes that have engendered Tokyo, the Pearl River Delta, Kolkata, Istanbul, Lagos, Paris, Mexico City and Los Angeles, Christian Schmid has filled in the gaps that Henri Lefebvre’s theories of the production of space and urbanization had left (see, for example, Schmid/Streule 2023; Schmid/Topalovic 2023). In this way, Christian Schmid makes the move from a scholar of Henri Lefebvre to an urban theorist in his own right and demonstrates his ability to stay true to his theoretical (and critical, in the sense of revolutionary) interest in Henri Lefebvre and his ambition to fundamentally rewrite urban theory. “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” fits into this latter ambition and is the most cohesive and comprehensive theoretical plank in his joint project with Neil Brenner, that of developing a theory of planetary urbanization following Henri Lefebvre’s original intuitions in “The Urban Revolution” (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]) and later texts. The notion of planetary urbanization has been the most influential urban theoretical intervention of this century and remains a reference point – albeit challenged often, especially by a rising “southern urbanism”, criticized harshly by many who saw it as unduly all-encompassing, and ignored by an urban studies mainstream stuck in its “cityist” disposition. It is a certainty that “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” will cement the tremendous significance of a theory of planetary urbanization further. It also responds implicitly (or even explicitly) to some of the critiques leveled against the project.

In addition to Mervi Ilmonen’s already mentioned elegant double helix of a biographic essay – taking both her own and Christian Schmid’s intellectual journey under scrutiny – there are three more incisive reviews in this

collection, followed by a short reply by Christian Schmid himself. Markus Hesse focuses in his review on the book’s main contributions: the insistence on the social and collective production of space; the significance of a theory of the production of space for planning practice; and the incisive importance of the framework of planetary urbanization (Hesse 2024). Italian planning scholar, Camilla Perrone, uses the generative term “constellations” to contextualize Christian Schmid’s book in related and extant debates in urban studies and proceeds to discuss “Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space” critically in relation to work on global suburbanization and territory from which “an extended interpenetration of the contemporary process of the production of territories of urbanisation might arise” (Perrone 2024). Finally, Brazilian scholar of Urban and Regional Economics, João Tonucci, adds to the discussion the remarkable insight that Christian Schmid’s work manages to discuss the explosive (and implosive) process of planetary urbanization while recognizing “the spectral persistence of the city” (Tonucci 2024) and notes that while Christian Schmid’s work “stands as an illuminating guide for those seeking to navigate the intricacies of Henri Lefebvre’s complex oeuvre”, debates in its wake might also ultimately lead to recognizing “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” (Tonucci 2024). In his short reply, Schmid generously responds to the points raised by the critical reviews of his work with a more explicit discussion of biographic circumstance and intellectual context. As he notes, the debate on Lefebvre is far from over and now takes place in a vastly transformed and rapidly changing urban world.

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