

THE IGNORED PHILOSOPHER AND SOCIAL THEORIST

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THE WORK OF HENRI LEFEBVRE

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN reception of Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) is a classic case of mis-recognition. Although he has been called a sociologist, an urbanist, and a social theorist, he has rarely been understood as a philosopher. The recently translated third volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life* should correct past impressions, not only because Lefebvre himself subtitles the book "Toward a meta-philosophy of everyday life," but the work makes original contributions to philosophy. It is not excessive to claim that he is the ecophilosopher of the 21st century, for he made the connection between the massive despoiling of the global ecosystems, the new shape of social time and social space and the struggle for the transformation of everyday life which, he claims, is the key to the project of changing life and repairing our collective relationship to nature.

Lefebvre's creative work spanned most of the 20th century and after World War II, he was a leading French intellectual who wrote on a wide array of subjects that transgressed the disciplines, especially the relation of philosophy to the social sciences and art. He also argued against the confinement of knowledge by disciplinary conventions. For decades marxists, sociologists and others in the social sciences and philosophy ignored him, not mainly because most of his writing remained un-translated but because he could not be easily classified within the existing disciplinary predispositions. And he suffered a paradoxical fate: during the Cold War era as a marxist he was excluded from mainstream commentary in the US by an academic establishment that was incapable of distinguishing between dogma and creativity. When his writing was appropriated at all it had to fit narrowly into the conventions of the disciplines and as a result he was classified most comfortably as a sociologist, a designation that inevitably distorted the substance of his work.

This impression may have been abetted by the English language publication in the 1970s of Lefebvre's *The Sociology of Marx*, which was commissioned as part of a series on major figures of sociological thought. At the time none of his major works (more than fifty books) had been translated, the exceptions being his study of the May 1968 Paris events, *The Explosion* (1970); *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1971), a collection of papers covering diverse subjects; and *Dialectical Materialism* (originally published in 1939,

but only translated in the 1960s by a British publisher). Enamored with Louis Althusser and his school, the academic left largely ignored these works because he was a representative of the hegelian-marxist tradition that they were laboring to discredit. He was a prolific writer on rural social life, but these works have largely escaped the notice of American sociology, in part because sociology is predominately a study of industrial society for which agriculture is simply taken for granted and the countryside understood as a vanished civilization. It is arguable that Lefebvre's keen interest in the rural underlies his ecological thought, especially his reference to the biological level of human existence and the importance he accords to cyclical as opposed to linear time. Even his extensive writing on Marxist theory has failed to gain notice. For example, in the 1970s Lefebvre published a four-volume work on the state, but it made no dent in political philosophy and political theory. His famous studies of Nietzsche and Existentialism, and his works on the philosophy of art, especially his 1953 book on aesthetics, have failed to engage Anglo-American social theorists or cultural critics.

But in the years following his death in 1991 at the age of 90, he has been rediscovered but sadly not as he would have wished. Lefebvre has been credited by geographer and social theorist David Harvey, among others, with re-inventing urbanism. His various works in this field, notably *The Production of Space* (1979, 1994) influenced an entire generation of architects and social geographers in Europe, Latin America, the US and Britain. *The Production of Space* is, indeed, a signature work in the canon of urban studies. But it defies the fragmentation of knowledge that marks most of the social sciences. Lefebvre succeeds in invoking the specificity of various domains, even as he is able to link apparently disparate discourses from the point of view of the social totality, a standpoint that never left him and one that earned him the scorn or indifference of contemporaries for whom, in the postmodern world, the totality was an outmoded 19th century perspective. Nevertheless its breathtaking range and originality justifies the evaluation that, together with his series, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, *The Production of Space* stands at the pinnacle of contemporary social and political thought. He did not follow sociology's methodological imperative, or what C. Wright Mills called the "abstracted empiricism" (discrete small studies with no discernable implications for social theory) that afflicts the discipline. On the contrary, Lefebvre had a grand project: to discern the consequences of modernity in its late capitalist incarnation for the multiplicity of forms of social life and for (social) being itself. His investigations were directed to the key question of why and how global capitalism, despite a century of unrelied wars, revolutions, economic crises and political turmoil in both the

“advanced” and developing world, managed to survive. Lefebvre’s five studies of everyday life, written over a span of forty years (three volumes with the consecutive title of *Critique of Everyday Life* and two others that must be considered components of the project — *Everyday Life in the Modern World* and the posthumously published *rhythmanalysis*), taken together, constitute a monumental contribution to addressing the key question of capitalism’s survival. This project had enormous theoretical significance for the development of historical materialism itself. While sociologists and philosophers addressed the everyday as a subsystem, Lefebvre argued—most explicitly in the third volume of the *Critique* — that everyday life constituted the fundamental layer of social existence and, in the contemporary world superseded the economic and political:

... daily life cannot be defined as a “sub-system” within a larger system. On the contrary: it is the “base” from which the mode of production endeavors to constitute itself as a system, by programming this base. Thus, we are not dealing with the self-regulation of a closed totality. The programming of daily life has powerful means at its disposal: it contains an element of luck, but it also holds the initiative, has the impetus at the ‘base’ that makes the edifice totter. Whatever happens, alterations in daily life will remain the criterion of change.” (*Critique*, vol. 3, 41).

For Lefebvre, everyday life is the site of and the crucial condition for the “reproduction of the relations of production.” Its colonization by the state and by economic relations provides the answer to the question of the survival of capitalism in the wake of its horrendous 20th century history. This is precisely the proposition Lefebvre attempts to defend in his writings on the state, the production of space and other works. As we have learned by the examples of the 20th century revolutions conducted in the name of socialism, changing the state form, even abolishing private property in key production sectors and other large scale enterprises, fail to penetrate to the root of capitalist domination. Lefebvre’s central argument is that state and economy are outcomes of the everyday. We have already briefly mentioned that Lefebvre argues the priority of everyday life over the mode of production. But it is important to understand that the argument has historical specificity. At an historical moment when the “state and its apparatuses seem to be the keystone of society” (*Ibid.*, 122), he boldly argues that this is true in a certain sense, but more profoundly:

The state is now built upon daily life; its base is the everyday. The traditional Marxist thesis makes the relations of production and the productive forces the 'base' of the ideological and political superstructures. Today—that is to say, now that the state ensures the administration of society, as opposed to letting social relations, the market and blind forces take their course—this thesis is reductionist and inadequate. In the course of major conflicts and events, the relations of domination and reproduction of these relations have wrested priority over the relations of production that they involve and contain." (Ibid., 123).

If the forms of social life are not changed, the old order will reappear. If the state and the economy attempt to dominate and to assert their primacy over social life, this domination is only the form of appearance of social relations. If the old regime remains in force at the level of the family, personal relations, especially sexuality, and the structure of authority at the workplace, if the routines of repetitive everyday existence are preserved, if life is bereft of pleasure and desire is relegated to the dream world but is denied in the everyday, nothing much has actually changed. Recall, in the name of saving the Russian Revolution at a time of civil war the invasion of 21 foreign armies, it was Lenin who called a halt to the workers councils, to the cultural revolution initiated by Alexandra Kollantai, and whose repression was amplified by Stalin who openly declared that the revolution stopped at the door of everyday life. Within a few years after Lenin's death in 1924, as a matter of policy the regime ended the lively and often contentious public sphere where dedicated revolutionaries dared to disagree with the Communist Party leadership and with each other. What these repressions amounted to was portentous for the course of the revolution. The old pre-revolutionary everyday was restored by edict as well as by inertia. The party declared the family as the foundation of social life and work, in the form of wage-labor, was proclaimed as the highest revolutionary ethic. Here we can see the gulf that separates Lefebvre from marxist orthodoxy for which the fundamental precepts of historical materialism were permanently fixed by Marx and Engels and amended by Lenin and which required no basic rethinking. For orthodoxy capturing political power and abolishing private ownership of the means of material production are considered not only necessary but the sufficient conditions for socialism. Lefebvre's experience as a surrealist never quite leaves him: a grim, productivist society in which the individual is "over repressed" almost inevitably become what he called a "terror society," which is exactly what happened to the Bolshevik revolution after the seizure of power. And when in power, the internal life of the parties of revolution

mirrored the society they inherited and reproduced it, even against their intentions. The parties that proclaimed themselves “leninist” replaced democracy with bureaucratic centralism. Needless to say, the history of the French revolution exhibits similar traits; with Thermidor key elements of the old order were restored and remained in force for much of the 19th century. We can see these traits exhibited in Flaubert’s novels, and even today’s France: Sunday remains sacrosanct for family renewal in virtually all middle class families. They gather, eat the ritual lunch and dinner together and trudge through the rituals, both particular and general, that mark the extended French family.

Thus, far from being considered part of the “superstructure” that reflected the economic base or the layer between the economic infrastructure and the state, everyday life constitutes the lived experience of the social world: alienation. And alienation remains the basic mode of being in capitalist and state socialist societies. In societies in which the overwhelming power of economic relations and of the state seem to determine social life, Lefebvre argues that only when everyday life is elevated to “critical thinking” is it possible to discern its actual relation to the process of reproduction. From the perspective of the totality, everyday life is only a moment of determination; it is also determined. When the mode of production successfully “programs” everyday life, it becomes the base for the reproduction of the relations of production. Lefebvre’s heresy becomes evident in the wake of endless marxist predictions of the death of capitalism. Since he refuses the classical economic infrastructure/superstructure model, there is no “inevitability” of socialism or communism. More to the point, the cyclical crises of capitalism and the permanent war under which we live, provide no grounds for the prediction today of the arrival of a “general crisis” of capitalism (Lenin). This prognostication has been enunciated on a regular basis throughout the 20th century by, among others, Lenin and Trotsky. In the 1930’s, John Strachey and Lewis Corey published widely circulated texts which understood the consequences of the economic crisis as the sufficient warrant for announcing the “coming struggle for power,” or what Corey’s terms the “decline of American capitalism.” These were followed by a veritable army of political economists and left thinkers for whom the dual crises of wars and economic slump are the barometer and the condition of social transformation. It was Lefebvre who, as early as 1947, warned that if analysis does not take into account the everyday — the organization and production of social time and space, and the questions associated with culture — one cannot calculate the chance for capitalism’s historicity. His main object is to generate concepts that frame the relation of what he calls the “being” of

Man with the historically and spatially situated practices that mark human existence. This is a layer beneath the institutions of capital and the state.

In this spirit, Lefebvre engages particular writers in order to learn from them, as well as to have critical dialogue. For example, although he wrote extensively on the problem of method (his concept of the progressive-regressive method deeply influenced Sartre's *Search for Method*, the introduction to his neglected *Critique of Dialectical Reason*), Lefebvre never ceased to argue against the preoccupation of the social sciences with finding a "methodology" that would exempt it from speculative reason or the vicissitudes of the concrete. We shall have to revisit his concept of the concrete, but here we note that Lefebvre follows Marx in viewing the concrete as a situation to be reached, not the starting point of investigation and gladly welcomes a dialogue with Sartre, once the object of unrelieved excoriation by his Marxist critics.

Lefebvre eschewed the dogmatism characteristic of the official versions of Marxism promulgated by the communist parties and even most independent leftists. He dismissed Marxist orthodoxy with the same vehemence which he reserved for some bourgeois ideologists. As he makes clear, that orthodoxy is defined as "economism," the doctrine derived from an un-dialectical appropriation of *The German Ideology* where various young Hegelians are subjected to a critique which addresses the centrality of labor in the constitution of life, but particularly from Marx's celebrated "preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. There, Marx introduces the distinction between the economic infrastructure and the political and ideological superstructure; and argues that the superstructure "reflects" the economic base and that, with the transformation of the former, the whole of political and social relations will be "more or less rapidly transformed." The "preface" cannot be abstracted from its context.¹ According to Lefebvre, Marx subjected prices, profits and wages, supply and demand to

¹ Marx is fighting for a materialist position against the prevailing idealism which characterizes both the philosophy and economics of his own time. For any critical reader it is plain that the preface is not Marx's final word on the materialist conception of history. In many other works, infrastructure and superstructure are seen as moments of the totality rather than fixed positions with a unidirectional relation of causality. The influence of culture, ideology and politics on the constitution of the economic and the course of events is especially evident in Marx's historical writings but also seen in the notes for *Capital*, *The Grundrisse*, which many orthodox Marxists dismiss for its preliminary and incomplete character. By ignoring or refusing Marx's intention to subject political economy to critique, that is, to show the categories of political economy as forms of ideology that conceal more than they reveal, the tendency of marxist economism is to transform historical materialism into the positive study of political economy and to ascribe most, if not all social phenomena and events to their economic aspects.

withering immanent criticism, in order to reveal the social relations of domination underlying them. Theories of value, and surplus value — the “secret” source of profit” — were not intended to found a new school of economic analysis, but to show that relations of domination and exploitation — alienated labor — underlay capital accumulation and reproduction. Beyond the fulfillment of basic biological need, like every economic system, the capitalist economy is a mode of life, a cultural and technological sensorium that configures social life. In the capitalist epoch the commodity form defines, but also reifies, all aspects of human existence. For Lefebvre the meta-theoretical task of any study of society is to break open the reified relations that are embodied in these categories. This is the first major argument of Lefebvre’s *Critique*. Secondly, by opposing all forms of reductionism, Lefebvre is at pains to dispute the theory of causality that underlies Marxist orthodoxy. For Lefebvre, as for Marx, theories of determination must take into account the multiplicity of relations that bear on events, including the forms of struggle undertaken by oppressed and exploited classes. The point is to discover how people have made themselves as well as having been made by so-called “objective” forces. Whether or not the conditions that constrain praxis dominate the creativity of human action is always an empirical question. If the constraints are always dominant, it would be difficult to posit the possibility for change, except with reference to contradictions within the system of constraints. In the discourse of inevitability praxis is always already determined by History. In which case human beings are never truly creative but are agents of an external force. Thus, what distinguishes Lefebvre’s philosophy from objectivism is its elevation of the underdetermined to an “object of critical thinking.”

From the early writing on dialectical materialism to the two last books — volume three of the *Critique of Everyday Life* (1981) and the posthumously published *Rhythmanalysis* (1992) — he was critical of epistemological questions such as how do we know?; what it is the nature of truth, and of the scientific researcher’s quest for certain knowledge that is reducible to a set of formulae? He never ceased to remind us that the problem of truth was not located within the vagaries of knowledge or consciousness as Cartesian thought has it, but lay in social life and its practices. Akin to Theodor Adorno, Lefebvre is a severe critic of epistemology as a framework for addressing the social world. The reader of volume three can easily identify some of his targets who followed kantian prescriptions: among them, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Althusser, and the French gatekeepers of marxist orthodoxy. In fact his final assessment of much of post-war Marxism as dogma, led to his judgment that phenomenology had made more impor-

tant contributions to philosophy, particularly to the critique of everyday life, than the ossified party-Marxism that dominated the left throughout most of the post-war era. In this respect he owes a considerable debt to Maurice Merleau Ponty whose earlier works, particularly the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), was among the earliest attempts, from a phenomenological marxist perspective, to suggest a politics and a psychology of the everyday.

HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES

Born in 1901 Lefebvre's journey, from his childhood origins in Southeastern rural France to becoming one of the leading Parisian intellectuals, was marked by several twists and turns. In the 1920s he became a member of the Surrealist circle led by Andre Breton which included several future Communist luminaries: the poet and novelist Louis Aragon, whose surrealist writing propelled him to world fame, the writer Paul Nizan and, for a brief period Breton himself. In the late 1920s members of the circle joined the French Communist Party (PCF) en masse, but only a few remained in the party after the Moscow trials and the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Louis Aragon, Paul Nizan, and Lefebvre were among the most prominent who stayed. In 1939 Lefebvre published his first major work in the Marxist tradition, *Dialectical Materialism*, which for a brief period became a textbook in party schools and study groups. In contrast to the Soviet-inspired contributions to this genre, Lefebvre's book is a sophisticated, mostly non-dogmatic treatment of its subject, which stresses the pre-Socratic and Hegelian roots of the dialectic, avoids formulaic discussions that can be found, for example, in Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, which explicates the three "laws" of the dialectic — contradiction, the transformation of quantity into quality, and the negation of the negation — criticizes mechanistic materialism as a form of scientism (a mode of thought that arose in the French Enlightenment, and became subject to Marx's critique but which reappears as Marxist dogmatism during the periods of the second [Socialist] and third [Communist] Internationals). In this book Lefebvre shows, in embryo, the relevance of dialectics as a method for understanding social relations, especially everyday life, a suggestion that is elaborated after the war. After participating in the resistance during World War Two, in its aftermath Lefebvre became perhaps the party's major intellectual spokesperson. Between 1945 and 1948 he engaged, most famously, in a series of public debates with Sartre and other members of the independent left journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, which, in its early years, was the leading intellectual

voice for a putative “third camp” of political formation — a perspective that Sartre and Merleau Ponty shared with the tendency of French Trotskyism associated with the Socialism or Barbarism group whose most prominent figures were Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. These groups adhered neither to the Soviet Union nor to the Western capitalist powers. How did this non-dogmatic Marxist justify his leading role in a party whose subservience to Stalin and the arid ideologies of post-war Marxism-Leninism were legendary? With the hindsight of the collapse of Eastern European Communism it is difficult to imagine the powerful reputation enjoyed by the Soviet Union among workers, peasants and intellectuals. Lefebvre himself offers the explanation that it was the PCF’s critical role in the fight against fascism which conferred enormous prestige on it, and made the party a promising candidate to lead the transformation of French society. And he was among those intellectuals who were unable to forget the significant role played by the Soviets in the struggle against Hitler and fascism. Moreover, as Sartre was to later argue, the Communists were not only the most fervent advocates of peace at a time when nuclear annihilation threatened humankind, but were the leading force among the French working class. However, in the end, when Lefebvre undertook his own critique of what C. Wright Mills calls the “labor metaphysic,” in addition to the expose of Soviet Communism which became the efficient cause of his disenchantment with the CP, there was not much left to defend. Lefebvre became a staunch critic of the French CP, but never joined the Cold War anti-communist intellectuals such as former Temps Modernes editor Raymond Aron, nor those like Castoriadis who maintained the Soviet bloc was simply a form of state capitalism.

In 1947 Lefebvre published his *Critique of Everyday Life: Introduction*. It was widely heralded as a major innovation, even at first by party ideologues. However within months of its publication, Lefebvre was to suffer their criticisms: the work was non-marxist because it seemed to slight the importance of class and class struggle; did not insist on the primacy of the economic infrastructure in the constitution of social relations (if fact, the book pointed in an entirely different direction); and veered dangerously close to the thinking of the existentialists, notably Sartre and Merleau Ponty. Of course, buried in these critiques are the figures of Nietzsche and Heidegger, with whom Lefebvre is, implicitly, in dialogue. Both address the question of the quotidian, Nietzsche may be said to have discovered the everyday as a legitimate object of philosophical reflection. We see the everyday, for example, in Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return, which in one manifestation points to the repetition that marks daily life, or in his statement that noth-

ing disappears, a reference to his disavowal of the ideology of progress. Lefebvre undertakes a sharp attack on a parallel evolutionist doctrine characteristic of both Marxist and liberal thought. Accordingly, the conditions of change are incredibly difficult to affect unless this fundamental reality of repetition in the most intimate details of ordinary existence are addressed. A careful reading of the *Introduction* reveals that Lefebvre is trying to overcome the banality of the everyday that Heidegger problematizes in his daseinanalysis ("the Existential Analytic" of *Being and Time*, 1927), but he does so in a different way than Heidegger. He argues that the critique of everyday life is key for the recovery of the "concrete" against the abstractions of thought, for the understanding of the multiple dimensions of alienation, not only alienated labor, but also the reified forms of social relations initially discussed in Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*, but even more saliently for Lefebvre in Lukacs's seminal essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." While it is evident that he is deeply influenced by Lukacs, Lefebvre charts a new path of social discourse, particularly on issues of time and space, both in their fundamental existence in Nature and their social forms. The project of the *Critique* begins with the effort to recover lived experience: "Lived experience is taken up and raised up to critical thinking" (*Critique*, Vol.3,10) focusing on the question of the relation of the "fragmented activities" of thinking, dwelling (echoes of Heidegger, although thoroughly transformed) "dressing, but also engaging in a particular piece of work"(Ibid. p. 11). Unlike the tendency of social theory in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Erving Goffman, and Jurgen Habermas to situate everyday life "between" the state and the economic infrastructure, Lefebvre's thinking of everyday life includes the realm of repetition characteristic of material production, as well as the "cyclical" time that arises from biological need but transformed into "linear" time by conditions such as clocks and other instruments of domination, especially of labor time in industrial production, and the results of technology.

In Volume three of the *Critique* the distinction between cyclical and linear time is to play a key role for exploring the changes that have occurred in the last half century. There, at the conclusion of his account of the earlier *Introduction*, Lefebvre recalls that in the immediate postwar period everyday life seemed to express the fragmentation of the social world, what Nietzsche had termed its "decadence." Fragmentation signaled the eclipse of absolute truth, and uncontested social norms that regulated human relations. It was a time when concepts such as truth and norm seemed archaic. Yet the very banality of the everyday remained decisive for the reproduction of the system as a whole, precisely because of its invocation of linearity and repe-

tion. However degraded it provides a high degree of security in an otherwise uncertain world. While caring, shopping, consumption and other repetitive activities remove us from public life, they constitute a reassurance of certainty.

Lefebvre's reflection in Volume Two of the *Critique*, published in 1961, emphasizes his relation to the emergent political critique of the quotidian. Under the sway of the Khrushchev revelations at the 20th Soviet Party Congress in 1956 about the crimes of Stalin, but also the refusal of the French CP to address their implications, he had already left the Communist Party. Lefebvre was simply too politically independent to stomach the party's refusal to address the consequences of Stalin's ignominious rule for the doctrine of "Marxism-Leninism" which, among other strictures, demanded iron discipline in the promotion of the party line, and actively discouraged discussion and debate in the ranks. He was finally expelled after attempting to force a wide-ranging discussion of the issues. Freed from the stifling discipline of hierarchical organization, Lefebvre now focused on the variegated themes of freedom. The concepts of **desire** and **pleasure** were not to be conceived as categories of the impossible, a "bad" utopia, but were an expression of a wider recognition among intellectuals, workers, students and other elements of the underlying population that the emptiness of lived experience demanded a revolutionary transformation of everyday life as the condition of the possibility for the achievement of freedom which remains the highest aspiration of social being. Although the wealthy can escape everyday life by living in a world of "make believe," engaging in types of mysticism such as astrology, personal growth activities, meditation, affiliation to Eastern religions and the like and however much we try to adopt the "make believe" as a shield against the everyday, the rest of us are condemned to grapple with the harsh realities of work, "controlled consumption" and of alienation in its broadest aspects.

This was the moment when writers and artists — the Nouvelle Vague in France, the Angry Young Men in Britain and the Beats in the United States — announced their theme of profound discontent with the high flying Western culture and their refusal to be contained by its rules. Poverty was no longer defined exclusively in material terms; in the midst of the post-war boom within the industrially developed world, its emotional and psychological dimensions were thrust to the fore. Late capitalism's wager that technological change — with its proliferation of cheap consumer products that can be purchased on credit and indefinitely postpone any day of reckoning, and the promise of less arduous work for a substantial minority and more

leisure — would introduce a new epoch of endless prosperity and conformity to the prevailing social order, simply failed to assuage an entire generation of writers and artists, but also a substantial fraction of intellectuals, the growing technical intelligentsia and industrial workers. Precisely because material comfort cannot overcome the feeling of cultural emptiness, the oppressions of linear time and the widespread perception that urban space was no longer subject to their intervention but was being gobbled up by the alliance of the state and capital, the seeds of revolt appeared among the “new middle class.” Neither the “pleasures” of what Lefebvre was later to call the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” nor Guy Debord’s characterization, *The Society of the Spectacle*, were sufficient to overcome the overwhelming fact of lived experience, alienation.

To this scenario of aching discontent Lefebvre added the concept of the “cultural revolution,” that is, the hitherto under-theorized concept of the transformation of everyday life which embraced a new urbanism in which ordinary people would produce new, autonomous social space. Lefebvre recalls in the second volume of the *Critique* the appearance of the critical writing and speech about work; themes that first appear in Marx and in Paul Lafargue’s outrageous book *The Right to be Lazy* (1879), but which were resumed during the 1960’s in the wake of the sweeping technological changes of the postwar era, accompanied by material prosperity for a wide swath of people, and the emergence of consumer society in which the objects of desire were increasingly embodied in consumer goods and lifestyles that actualized Marx and Lukacs’s theory of reification. That the banalization of everyday life becomes a basis for a new politics presupposes the relative material prosperity in which scratching for bare survival no longer defines the everyday for most people. Now they can measure qualitatively the satisfactions of the built environment, the relation of the “things” available for purchase to their social being, the distance between lived experience and freedom. Although published seven years before the momentous May events of 1968 when students, then the workers staged the rebellion heard round the world and almost toppled the Gaullist regime, Volume Two anticipates some of the slogans that marked the May movement: against the poverty of student life, that the goal of the revolution is to “change life” and, even as the Situationists broke with Lefebvre and bitterly attacked him, Guy Debord’s condemnation of the “society of the spectacle” which focused on how the imagination was suffused with the emergent images of entertainment, echoed and added to Lefebvre’s critique.

VOLUME III: DISCONTINUITES AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

Volume three of *The Critique of Everyday Life* has the character of a final statement on the project of everyday life. That it was followed by *rhythmanalysis* has led some to conclude that the later book was actually volume four of the *Critique*. Indeed in volume three Lefebvre heralds *rhythmanalysis* as a “new science that is in the process of being constituted.” But for the most part, Volume Three is devoted both to a summary of past discoveries, “continuities” with the present and to those features of everyday life that have changed since the writing of the first two volumes, “discontinuities.” I want to now pass on to the new discoveries.

Lefebvre begins the section on “discontinuities” with the observation that the colossal advances in technology that accompany the introduction of the computer into industrial production “make the end of work possible (in the long run). What seemed abstractly utopian yesterday is now taking shape and is on the horizon: the wholesale automation of material production” (*Critique*, Vol.3, p.91). Of course, the spread of computerization to administration, to the independent professions crafts, retail and wholesale trades only underscore this insight. Twenty five years later the automation of material production is by no means complete. On a global scale, tens of millions still plant and harvest food by pushing or pulling cattle-driven carts, or by hand; much of the clothing we wear is made by cutters and operators using electric or hand knives and electrically powered sewing machines. Even though computerized machines for both occupations are available, it is simply cheaper to employ sweatshop labor in great quantities in countries like China and Thailand. And, in the United States many operations in the construction industry are still labor-intensive, although the “trowel trades” — carpentry, bricklaying, painting and plastering — have been subjected to some degree to automation. But combined with the worldwide reshaping of material production — outsourcing to developing countries and to low-wage, non-union regions of the US, plant closings due to consolidation of facilities made possible by technology, layoffs of redundant workers — as the safety net becomes a vanishing horizon, for millions the end of work, or more accurately the end of income, is a bitter reality. Today technological displacement of wage labor is so ubiquitous as to be routine.

What is new is that some laid off workers in the US — professional and technical as well as industrial — are refusing to engage in wage and salary labor that does not meet the standard of a living wage. For example, on July 31,

2006, *The New York Times* ran a front page article "Men Not Working and Not Wanting Just Any Job." Its protagonists were not the working poor suffering from lack of skills, drug addiction and just plain laziness, the three major ascriptions by politicians and many journalists of why men of prime working age refuse to take available jobs. For the most part they were either long-time employees of large manufacturing corporations or highly skilled professionals such as a 54 year old computer engineer, Christopher Priga, who was laid off from his \$100,000 a year job at Xerox in 2003. Since then he has been a free lance web designer who is forced to "postpone health insurance" and described himself as "more of a casual laborer" but has been completely out of work since March. Another is Allen Beggerow, a thirty six year veteran of Northwestern Steel who lost his job after the plant closed. Even though he was not a college graduate he taught mathematics for a time at a Community College, and worked for the union as a staff analyst, but is currently unemployed. Neither is willing to settle for low-paid, benefit-free employment which, for men over fifty, is about all the work that is available. They are among males, numbering in the millions between 30 and 54 who have dropped out of the labor force, a growing segment that is refusing to work, at least given their options. Absent a genuine safety net for people presumably in their prime of career life, they survive by taking out second and third mortgages on their homes, drain their pensions and 401K savings, depend on their wives' income and accept occasional short-term work to keep their heads above water. Drowning in debt but still defiant they have been skating on thin ice for years.

Lefebvre asks: "Is a reduction of labor time sufficient to set in train the process of the end of labour? ...Workers — the working class — find themselves caught between threatening technologies they barely understand which have begun to wreak their havoc, and the conservatism that promises a more or less ameliorated status quo?" (Ibid. p.92) He terms this change a "radical revolution" of non-work. While excoriating the "ideology of the end of ideology" that proclaims the technological fix manifested not only in the reduction of labor-time but also in the expansion of administration as the cure for all social ills and the end of class conflict, Lefebvre notes that, even in the wake of the drastic reduction of labor time required for the production of goods, labor leaders and the left generally still call for full employment and have refused to look the new situation squarely in the eye. Yet, ordinary people respond to the crisis differently: "the abandoned, the rejects abandon the prospects offered them by the technological and scientific revolution, that is to say unlimited growth." People are increasingly disenchanted by bureaucratic institutions and lack the understanding and

organization to devise alternatives. But the official opposition stubbornly retains its faith in the past or, in recent negotiations between the United Auto Workers and General Motors, union leaders and a substantial portion of the older membership have shown themselves prepared to go quietly into the night — for a substantial financial consideration — leaving recent hires and the unborn to fend for themselves.

In response to the end of the old capitalism based on labor-time as its regulative practice, Lefebvre raises the crucial question that has thus far been carefully avoided by the left. Referring to Marx he argues “the working class can affirm itself only in its negation, unlike all historically superceded classes and the bourgeoisie. The self-determination whereby the working class attains the status of ‘subject,’ transcending the condition of ‘object’ involves self-negation: the end of all classes, the end of the wage-earning class, hence the end of work, the end of the working class itself” (Ibid., p. 93). Then perhaps the most politically telling comment: “the organization or establishment of a party of non-labor cannot even be imagined.” This is an allusion to the failure of radical imagination or, alternatively, an indication of the grip old values and programs still have on the “brains of the living”(Marx), the hold of what Sartre termed the “practico-inert”(the dead past) on current practice. Can we imagine a movement that demands, or better, creates the situation where the refusal to accept work offering crappy wages and which entails subordination to the machine and to hierarchical authority is compensated, and self-determined work (labor) is possible? Not yet, but, since for many the world of the everyday has been turned upside down by the technological revolution, Lefebvre seems to foresee a rupture in daily life.

But the technological revolution has other, equally important consequences: “Dwelling, a social and yet poetic act, generating poetry and art work, fades in the face of housing, an economic function” (Ibid. p.94). Whether this change can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s — the years of the emergence of the computer and of technological thinking as dominant in everyday life — is debatable. In the US, where the vast changes in agricultural technologies occurred in the interwar years and mass urban housing and equally mass produced suburbanization accompanied the migration from country to city, the shift from dwelling to functional housing took place earlier than in most of Europe, even Germany where an urban culture was ensconced in the largest cities during the Weimar years. Yet what Lefebvre points to is indisputable: the sharp break technology has produced between past and future calls into question whether tragedy and play, laughter and weeping

— the contradictory binaries of modernity — retain their autonomy in a postmodern era, except in their commodified forms. Still he refuses the proposition that everything has been recuperated by technology and by the commodity. The “ludic” is intermingled with exchange, but uncomfortably. Lefebvre has not given up hope but warns that if we lose our capacity for play, if laughter disappears at the level of representation as well as personal relations, technology will have wreaked its most profound havoc: it will have destroyed the creative imagination without which change is impossible.

RECUPERATION

Of course the other term of the dialectic of transformation is recuperation. Subversion of the established order, new ideas, new political formations, experiments in different ways of living, products that violate the norms of mass production, especially foods, cannot expect to journey through space and time without challenge from the prevailing powers. Almost inevitably the existing power finds a way to make these changes their own. Lefebvre offers the example of the recuperation of human rights but we might invoke the shining American example of the movement, initiated by the counter-culture, to transform our often toxic food supply into products made without herbicides, growth hormones and the like. The introduction of bottled water drawn from ostensibly pristine sources was, perhaps, one of the earliest innovations. At first only health food stores carried the products of organic farmers, small processors, and independent distributors. Within a few decades huge international conglomerates announced a plethora of “natural” foods. And some of the original alternative brands — Arrowsmith peanut butter, Sunnyfield’s yogurt, Barbara’s potato chips, Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream, unbranded organic produce and so on — found their way onto supermarket shelves. Lefebvre admonishes “hypercritics” and “sectarians” who tend to blame the innovators for introducing changes subject to cooperation. He argues that short of a system meltdown, we should expect recuperation to occur, the deeper the changes, the more likely the effort to subsume them under the system’s logic. Lefebvre’s “law” is worth repeating “nothing is immune from recuperation.”

But in an attempt to go beyond the dialectics of recuperation, Lefebvre invokes and develops the concept of “difference” as a challenge to the ideology of homogeneity of both the left and right. Here he notes the great significance of the demands of the women’s movements, immigrants, among others in a sharp rebuke to the French Left which, when not

openly sexist and xenophobic, tended to remain silent in the wake of the struggles for sexual freedom and for immigrant rights and seemed tin-eared amid rising racism. The **Right to Difference** is, for him, a fundamental principle especially for the effectiveness of the left's struggle for democracy. Lefebvre opposes difference to separation but also to the notion of "distinction," a not too subtle critique of Pierre Bourdieu:

...What is distinction? An abstract principle of classification and nomenclature on the one hand and a principle of evaluation on the other. It is difficult to differentiate between these two aspects. The concept thus remains ambiguous as between logic and ethics (or aesthetics). The phenomenon theorized by it passes too readily from what is distinct to what is distinguished. In this way, it effects separations by accentuating social distances in the hierarchy." (Ibid., p.114).

Lefebvre objects that distinction is an object of classification "assuming that the object has a strictly objective character when, in fact, it intervenes and modifies the object" (ibid). A recurring theme throughout the book, these passages illustrate Lefebvre's persistent attack against a scientism that posits objects that are taken as independent of social practice, that deny the role of knowledge as an active agent in the constitution of these objects, whether the investigator intends to intervene or not. Echoing a famous remark of Marx, Lefebvre repudiates the tendency of social science to ascribe class membership to subjects on the basis of their self evaluation. He cites the capitalist who in answer to the question of what class they belong to are likely to proclaim "I'm a worker" which doesn't make it true, unless we take into account the portion of the capitalist's activity that may be termed the "labor of management." So Lefebvre defends, simultaneously, the contradictory statements that categories may be objective, even as their existence expresses forms of intervention and ideology.

Accustomed to encountering writing that obeys linear logic the reader may be put off by Lefebvre's juxtapositions of the discourse of the philosophy of science with historically situated reflection. But there is reason to proceed this way. He is trying to clear the field of concepts, but also to show their roots in methodological assumptions. Difference is defined in a way to suggest a democratic concept, while distinction is embedded in a hierarchical of classification. Always sensitive to context, the juxtaposition of historical and scientific reflection demonstrates the implications of concepts rather than arid definitions and description.

SPACE AND TIME... AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The overriding theme of *The Production of Space* is Lefebvre's contention that space is not an ether, a container that has the force of nature. The idea that space is pre-given is vehemently denied. Space is social as well as a property of the natural world but in the slow course of historical (capitalist) development "everything in terrestrial space has been explored and nearly everything has been occupied and conquered... As for forests, lakes, beaches, mountains, they have been well-nigh completely 'appropriated'" by capital. Apart from the ocean's depths, "the space of play, where the body rediscovers itself in rediscovering use, becomes an opportunity for profit..." (*The Production of Space*, 128). The "ludic" has not completely disappeared but is forced to struggle for every inch of space that can be reappropriated for the body. What has Lefebvre added to ecological philosophy? That it is impossible to address the human despoiling of nature without addressing the logic of capital for which no frontier remains unconquered. To reverse the process so that nature retains its relative autonomy from human intervention requires, simultaneously, that both space and time free themselves from the imperatives of capital accumulation. In other words, as Horkheimer and Adorno, Murray Bookchin, James O'Connor and Joel Kovel argue, the ecological crisis has become the most distinctive expression of the crisis of capitalism and modernity. Lefebvre does not rest content with an explication of the results of the processes of capitalist production; he brings to the dialogue a reflection on space and time, modernity and technology in terms of the transformation of everyday life.

As for time, Lefebvre again distinguishes between natural time's rhythmic character, of which qualitative time is a part. In this regard having invoked the body as subject — a tribute to the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty whose early work clearly parallels his own — Lefebvre takes the argument to another level of abstraction. Biological time is not linear; it is cyclical. However the bodily functions are subordinated by the requirements of industrial society. As E.P. Thompson showed in his classic essay "Time, Work and Discipline in Industrial Capitalism" production is no longer a self-regulating activity but is subsumed under the requirement that socially necessary labor time be reduced by any means possible. Consequently the body is no longer free to obey its natural requirements but must obey the economic imperative. The subsumption of rhythmic time under linear (labor) time means that qualitative time is subordinated to quantitative time and has "virtually disappeared" under the weight of linear repetition, the characteristic rhythm of industrial production. As with his discussion of

the production of space, the term “virtually” is a powerful qualifier: “the general problem here is the specialization of temporal processes” (Ibid. p.129). Parallel to Adorno’s designation of art as perhaps the one remaining sphere of resistance to the routines of repetition and spatial appropriation, Lefebvre declares “the work of art displays a victory of the rhythmical over the linear, integrating it without destroying it.” But he is not content to examine works of art in purely spatial terms, a marginal source. He declares the merging of art and everyday life has exemplary consequences for reversing the reversibility of time that routines and repetition have wrought. Here in contrast to the implications of the concept of the eternal return for the chance of genuine change, Lefebvre — through the back door — reintroduces a different notion of progress: through praxis at the most intimate level of social life, what has been termed “culture,” another world possible. Against the historical pessimism of much of 19th and 20th century philosophy, Lefebvre re-imagines history, not as inevitability but as possibility depending on whether we can act on our collective recognition that alienation can be overcome. In this respect, restoring music and dance for everyday life becomes a crucial task, for it reinvigorates the body by recapturing its rhythmic elements. Drawing on his own musical knowledge he gives the example of the metronome which “supplies a linear tempo” to music, which has both linear and rhythmic elements exemplified in the concept of “interval.” While Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis is introduced briefly in this book, his last book provides an extended treatment of the question.

THE “INFORMATION REVOLUTION”

The final, long section of the “Discontinuities” chapter is a sustained polemic against most of the claims of those, like Marshall McLuhan, Manuel Castells and Jean Baudrillard, that the widespread introduction of computer technology beyond material production to the media, taken in its widest sense to include the internet, fundamentally alters social life. While acknowledging the proliferation of information technology and the power of the “ideology of communication,” Lefebvre declares that information is a product which, under capital’s organization, has exchange value and arises from a “determinate productive activity” which is incorporated into the circuits of capital like any other commodity. And, anticipating Hardt, Negri and Virno’s later writing, information is a form of social labor, albeit an “immaterial” form. However, while noting that, historically, “communication in general and information in particular possessed an undeniable creative capacity” in connecting formerly isolated places through navigation, explo-

ration and piracy, in the course of time the productive and creative capacity of communication and information have varied inversely. Simply because new media have proliferated and quantity of information has multiplied at a geometric rate does not signify that creativity has thereby been enhanced. On the contrary, Lefebvre argues that its triumph — the replacement of meaning by signs, the shift from positive knowledge to information, the replacement of philosophy by technology — may realize the most important dream of domination: to permanently bury critical thinking.

To justify this facilely optimistic and rationalist thesis (McLuhan's thesis about the creative role of communications) today one would have to demonstrate the springing up in the modern world of possibilities that tend toward their own realization. Yet what we actually observe is that the increasing intensity of communications harbors the reinforcement of daily life, its consolidation and confinement. It harbors also a mounting danger of catastrophe. Is it not demagogic to support the thesis today? Does it not involve negating the negative such as it appears and manifests itself in society? (*Critique*, Vol. III,143). What is novel about the contemporary world is that there is a world market in information, which positively "drives" other markets, through advertising, propaganda, the transmission of positive knowledge, and so on. Is not information the supreme commodity, also the ultimate commodity? (*Ibid*, p.146)

In opposition to "computerized daily life" which he identifies with the growing tendency toward the domination of the abstract over the concrete, first theorized by Marx in his critique of the transformation of concrete labor into value and exchange value. Lefebvre's critique of the information society is that it fetishizes its own process of production and its ingression into everyday existence. Insofar as Lefebvre steps out of his own critical framework and addresses the question of what it to be done, Volume Three may be read as a program to restore the concrete — a lived experience that has been "crushed" by abstract, technological rationality.

Lefebvre's indictments are, up to a point, incontrovertible. Who can defend the proposition that the ubiquity of media and the availability to millions of people, through the worldwide internet, of mountains of information has brought about a renaissance of critical thought? Has the radical imagination been stimulated by the sordid details of war and mayhem, by the growth of medical knowledge and the mass knowledge of scientific discoveries, by inexhaustible details about the lives of the rich and famous that spew with alarming regularity from the internet as well as the mainstream

media? Have our civilizations been improved by the media, or do they serve to further confine everyday life, to restrict our scope of collective action — or, more accurately, to collective reaction — to the issues that are defined by mass communication? Do not these media, including the liberal blogs and webzines define the agenda of appropriate and legitimate politics? Are they not dedicated to blocking ideas that do not conform to the terms and conditions imposed by capital on acceptable discourse? Clearly, at least compared to the period ending with World War II, the level of political and philosophical discourse has declined and the radical imagination has all but been eclipsed by a global media, reflecting the new social hierarchies where access to data bases and the internet, becomes a marker of whether you count and the knowledge contained therein defines what political knowledge is.

Lefebvre's interlocutor, convinced that we live in a knowledge or information society that is capable of delivering unlimited benefits, may retort that the internet has made possible an unprecedented burst of activism against the Iraq war, and has brought people together to discuss their common problems and needs. It can even be claimed that the internet is a new public sphere and if the computer dominates everyday life, as more people log on, the opportunities for enriching lived experience and producing new social space are enlarged. Otherwise how can we explain the furious efforts of large media corporations to capture control of the internet which, in its twenty year history, has remained essentially unregulated, at least in terms of communications, even as the concentration and centralization of ownership of browsers and computer hardware reproduce earlier concentrations in the sphere of material production.

Lefebvre argues that the middle class is the new "subject" of everyday life but is not autonomous from the rule of capital. It may dissent, but only on "issues," not on the mode of life. The middle classes in their complexity are not prepared to revolt since, taken as a whole, it perceives itself to be within, and not against, the system. To break through the confines erected by the apparatuses of daily life, including the instruments of computer-mediated communications requires a more fundamental critique that goes beyond calls for a new economic order. While he is not prepared to name its agents, Lefebvre has made a major contribution to stating and elaborating the problematic of social change for our century. Can critical reason reverse the "negation of the negative," the substitution of the technological fix for critical reflection, and what in his conclusion he terms the "hegemony of the middle class(es) over everyday life" under the domination of monopoly capital? In the end, given the complicity of the left with the system,

Lefebvre can only enunciate general principles such as the urgency of the transformation of daily life beyond changing “political personnel,” advocating an unspecified “different growth” from that of capital accumulation, creation of new social space and new social time that are not reproductive of the prevailing order, and as a condition for this set of practices a “different form of thought” from that which posits “positive knowledge” as the only possible knowledge, where the term “positive” signifies knowledge that contributes to commodity production.

What distinguishes Lefebvre’s **critical philosophy** from Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school is that it understands that categories such as the “totally administered society” and the “eclipse of reason” are accurate as tendencies, but when taken as a new totality, are one-sided. Lefebvre’s most urgent goal is to recapture genuine experience and free the concrete from its subsumption under the abstract, represented most powerfully by technology and its companion, administration. However, unlike the late Adorno he refuses to confine his search to the sphere of art. And even when in concert with the negative dialectic, Lefebvre, too, insists that the dialectic is not resolved by the unification of opposites to constitute a new identity which preserves as it transforms the past, and does not follow Nietzsche, as Adorno does, in adopting nihilism in its refusal of the ideology of progress, and in his pessimism as to the possibility of going beyond the conditions of the present. Is this a cockeyed optimism? No, because Lefebvre’s philosophy refuses the thesis that the defeats of the past century are permanent and justify the refusal of the intellectual to engage in social and political practice; in this respect, Lefebvre stands with Sartre who insisted that the intellectual must commit oneself to an historical standpoint, even as one recognizes the pitfalls. In the end he offers us both an arduous and messy path, but one worth taking towards the restoration of concrete everyday lived experience, as a starting point.

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Marx never considered economics as determinative, or as determinism, but he saw capitalism as a mode of production where economics prevailed, and therefore that it was economics which had to be tackled; nowadays everyday life has taken the place of economics, it is everyday life that prevails as the outcome of a generalized class strategy (economic, political, cultural). It is therefore everyday life that must be tackled by broadcasting our policy, that of a cultural revolution with economic and political implications.

Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*