

THE POLITICAL RENEWAL OF MATERIALIST ANALYSIS IN  
HENRI LEFEBVRE'S *THE CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE*, VOLUME III

THE THIRD VOLUME of *The Critique of Everyday Life* was finally published in English recently, twenty-five years after its original publication in France (for a survey of Lefebvre's work, see Aronowitz in this issue). Little did anyone know back then, but it was written at the moment when "globalization" was emerging in full, with politics turning from liberalism to neoconservatism and economics from welfare-state Fordism ("demand side") to just-in-time flexibilism and market neoliberalism ("supply side"); two years after Thatcher ascended to power in Britain, and a year after Reagan triumphed in the US. It was also the moment when the postmodern logic of these transformations was emerging, and this volume is a clear adjustment and response to such "new thought." Lefebvre's lengthy project on the everyday is remarkable for its timeliness with respect to moments of specific social change in contemporary capitalism. This entire project results from an understanding of the connection between history and daily life, precisely because it is at that "ordinary" level where society happens, and where the capitalist order is constructed — that is to say, it is produced and reproduced. Here are some reflections on two of the key conceptual possibilities that Lefebvre opens up in Volume Three; not with the intent of calling for an "applied theory approach," but to simply set a starting point for work yet to be done.

I

The structure of Volume Three is illuminating. In the introduction, he posits the main question and reason for writing this book — something is changing: what, how, why. He also reviews the various installments of his project on everyday life in a critique of the critique. The next two sections involve a look at what remains the same in the face of social transformations and, then, what is changing at that very moment. The concluding chapter and its epilogue tackle the correspondence between everyday life and a social formation, which poses fundamental problems but also possibilities for a leftist response to and eventual overcoming of this new adjustment of capitalist power. This structure of the book already entails a basic triad of historicity: past-present-future; putting into effect one of the key

approaches that Lefebvre will privilege in this book more than any other: the fact that a dialectically critical approach needs to shake itself out of mechanical binary oppositions in order to put into full effect the third possibility always and already contained in the opposition of the first two moments.<sup>1</sup> This is not to be taken as a mere rhetorically functional device; rather, it is intended to be a fully politicized conceptual move involving, in the first and last instance, the fact that his own work is composed of a fully armed triad: analysis-critique-politics.

This triad, of course, implies that analysis and critique already contain, at the very least, a political potentiality. That is to say, the very act of analyzing critically<sup>2</sup> is already an act directed towards politics. Thus, a fundamental aspect of political analysis is to pay attention to its own procedures, its own practice — both in the general and collective aspects of said practice, as well as in the individual aspects of the particular analysis being presented in a specific book or a particular project. In the intellectual practice of analyzing critically, there is already a material basis that is being explored and self-explored as part of a process of political practice in itself; it is nothing more or less than the production of knowledge, which not only has its material practice of production, but is itself part of the material practice of social construction. It follows, then, that the first act of a truly political critique, as opposed to a neopositivist statement of social or political “science,” is for the “author or authors” to become the critics in the first instance of *both* their own assumptions as well as their own conclusive statements. What results from taking this politically intellectual position is the following triad: knowledge-production of social praxis-social transformation. In essence, though, this triad does not yet dictate that its end product will yield emancipatory results. The dynamism of capitalist regulation avails itself of precisely such triad, not just for social reproduction but for adjustment and production of new modes of regulation (recuperation from crisis).

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<sup>1</sup> In very basic terms, dialectical analysis does not simply consist of opposing A to B, but also of understanding that A to B always implies moving on to C. Implicit in the dialectic are the dynamics of life understood always as a process, always in movement. Thus, any dialectic that reduces analysis to the mere instrumentality of opposing A to B in order to project a result or a measure of predictability is already engaged in the uncritical reification or objectification of something that is never set as a “thing” because it is always in motion. Because it is a dynamic process and not a frozen thing, the dialectic aims to engage that third possibility always available beyond the first two elements of its opposition (the first two moments); it is in the process of always reaching out for that third moment that Lefebvre sets the politically productive aspect of a social critique.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, in the work of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, critique is meant to be analysis; the distinction here is due to the fact that modern analysis is meant as positivist science, and what we mean by critique is a full use of dialectics — i.e., not just analysis in a positive vein of scientific neopositivism, but also in the negative vein of opposing the first element (or the first analytic explanation) to others in order to arrive at the full determinations of the “object of study.”

There is a false sense of “progressive activism” that can result from assuming that the form of this triad is revolutionary by itself.<sup>3</sup> The point, then, is to move from politics in general, to active politics on a critically produced progressive front.

## II

Very early in his introductory recount of the work on everyday life, Lefebvre recalls the “catchword of protest movements: ‘*changer la vie*[-:]’” a slogan which he takes as a thread to weave the manifest politics of his critique of capitalist life. As a coda to Marx’s famous Thesis Eleven, Lefebvre seems to be implying that the point to analyzing life (triadically, he may add) is to change it. Like the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, which carried out its own renewal of Marxism, Lefebvre approaches a renewal of materialist analysis with the understanding that we cannot separate “culture” from “society” any longer — not even for a purported “mode of presentation.” It is not that culture has “sociopolitical agency,” but that culture is simply not separable from the economic, political or social (which themselves are not separable, either), something made clear especially at the level of everyday life experience. Thus, when Lefebvre seeks to understand and describe our contemporary life experience at the level of everyday life, he is not, like the American Pragmatists, seeking experience to corroborate utilitarian purposiveness; he is seeking to redefine a terrain of thought which is by necessity also a terrain of action — due to the inseparability of culture from society, therefore, of thought from reality.

A politicized critique of everyday life, then, must entail a look at occurrences in and of the everyday level (events, language strategies, mental and behavioral adaptation to technological innovation, etc), while simultaneously looking at the intellectual/cultural iteration that one’s own thought represents; because that thought is itself simultaneously a product and a producer of everyday life. To become politically active, as we already said, this approach of “analysis *qua* self-analysis” needs the impulse of “*changer la vie*” to aim precisely towards change and not to look for mere adaptation.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the case of acts and activities which are very worthy of our support but which do not reach a fully transformative political stage: like running soup kitchens or shelters for sick people, and so on. These are activities that carry out for capitalism the good and noble works that the system itself refuses to do. At the other extreme, is the reactionary and retarding effect of identity politics, which plague the postmodern version of leftist activism in the form of minority movements, women’s movements, alternative lifestyle movements, anti-defamation movements, etc.

The organic intellectuals of contemporary capitalism understand in full the binary dialectic of oppositions and readily instrumentalize it to create the various cycles of adjustment constituted in the various modes of late capitalist regulation. It is possible, then, to be a keen dialectical observer of everyday life for utterly reactionary purposes.

A differentiation, then, needs to be made. This volume would already be remarkable for its sharp awareness of computers and other innovations, or of the strengthened recuperative capacities of capitalism, as well as of identity politics in tension with supranational formations, and of new spaces and rhythms of life — especially considering that it was written when people had scarcely noticed any, let alone all, of these things. The book becomes a superior statement, when it produces this differentiation between the capitalist recuperation and radical political action by moving the analysis from a report on continuities and discontinuities in everyday life into a concrete look at the middle classes and the intellectual production they elicit. This is where the real political core of the book takes place.

Lefebvre notes what Hegel knew better than Marx: that the middle classes would prevail rather than dissolve into a presumed proletarian flow towards the classless society. With this sly statement, he trips the wire against mechanical, dogmatic materialism; but he also trips the wire against the reactionary, Neo-Nietzschean idealism that proclaims the end of history in an alleged alliance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie or in the end of class politics and the beginning of biopower and rhizomatic self-construction. This double cut into two fronts of thought (the then fashionably intellectual movements of Neoconservatism and Post-Structuralism) comes out of a renewed class analysis that re-establishes the material conditions for the analysis of dominant social regulation itself *and* for the search of means of political struggle against that very action of social regulation at the source. This dominance through regulation is put into effect by the very status of the middle classes: they impede access to power for the lower classes, but they never find themselves in a position of fully taking control of power itself. Everyday life, then, emanates from the middle classes in all directions; becoming a socially nodal point of tension that holds for the moment, but also offers points of rupture in full view. Like Gramscian “passive revolutions,” these social transformations with their regulatory recuperative power, which result from a globally generalized middle class ethos, aim at superficial well-being involving banal forms of self-satisfaction and retreat from reality. But this quotidian one-dimensionality of middle class semi-hegemony is accompanied by counter movements also emanating

from this very class, replete with their conformism and banality disguised as radical and revolutionary force. The women's movement, in one example offered, results from middle class relative-power and its discontent, but it finally jettisons any transformative means and aims to merely opt for a wider band in the current division of labor.

As it stands, then, the middle class origins of radical thought must be themselves analyzed, acted upon, and overcome. How? This is where Lefebvre's project remains incomplete. Everyday life, as he says, is "simultaneously the arena and the total stake." But what does this mean? It means, in a first instance, a break from the postmodern fashion of hypersymbolic representation parading as reality, which is nothing other than the conformist thought of the middle seeking refuge from the Tragic knowledge of life (which, of course, breaks off the banal illusions of quotidian consumer bliss). In a second instance, it also means an active, albeit clumsily difficult, aim towards the end of work and, in consequence, the end of value (that is, of relations of production for exchange instead of for use). What next? Lefebvre is silent on this matter.

### III

What now? Well, we have the following triad: everyday life-the non-quotidian (the philosophical, the supernatural, the sacred, the artistic and also, the tragic)-and power, government, the state-political. For Lefebvre, everyday life becomes the base, the foundation of this edifice of capitalist modes of regulation: capitalism self-regulates by programming changes at the base, but not as a "closed system" where nothing new "comes in" and nothing old "goes out." The always imperfect system makes haste of its own dynamism to keep abreast of its own imperfections. It follows, for Lefebvre, that paying attention to those changes at "the base" calls for the struggle to precipitate desired changes precisely at that base, which is the purpose that his scholarship serves: "*changer la vie.*"

In this manner, then, Lefebvre leaves us with a new possibility of rethinking the "object of study" (everyday life) and the "method of study" (base: made of thought stemming from and "re-entering" reality)<sup>4</sup> triadically

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<sup>4</sup> In everyday experience, reality is also made up of such acts and practices of thought; thus, nothing stems "up" or re-enters "back," we simply lack the vocabulary to fully express an analytic distinction of inseparable processes at the level of everyday experience.

combined with the Tragic sense of politics aimed at changing that base. But this alone is not enough. A new materialist articulation does have to emerge between the materiality of the empirical world and the materiality of intellectual processes and practices, but the flow of its dialectical moments has to be understood as moving from everyday life (“reality” and “thought”), to “*changer la vie*” (politics), towards the unknown (the future, the yet indiscrible and yet untheorizable). Lefebvre’s unknown is not *nihil* or the end of history but, like Marx, the end of prehistory and the beginning of a humanity defined not by abstract labor but by emancipatory joy. This is not intended as a freeing of the Bergsonian *élan vital*, mysteriously imbued in us all; but as a call for a programmatic approach to the analysis of and intervention on the material conditions of everyday life (“reality and thought”) for the sake of a new human reality where labor disappears, and abstract living and the banality of middle class ways of living are obliterated, so that we can exist in all our determinations (fishing in the morning, doing poetry in the afternoon, and engaging in critical criticism in the evening).

The work to be done is not only to locate the everyday points of political action in order to take this new material reality towards its full realization, but to figure out, if at all possible, whether even this critical critique — and this critical journal itself — is not part of middle class illusionism. Can the middle class — to which this author clearly belongs and the readers of this article probably do, too — create the possibility and realize the activities of “transcending itself” through triadic conceptualizations? Hard work to be done, by any account.