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The Return of Henri Lefebvre

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The Return of Henri Lefebvre

Books reviewed:

- Elden, Stuart. *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique de la vie quotidienne I: Introduction*. Paris: L'Arche, 2nd edition, 1958 (1947). Translated by John Moore as *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1: Introduction*. London: Verso, 1991.
- ---. *Critique de la vie quotidienne II: fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté*. Paris: L'Arche, 1961. Translated by John Moore as *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of Everyday Life*. London: Verso, 2002.
- ---. *Critique de la vie quotidienne, III: De la modernité au modernisme. (Pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien)*. Paris: L'Arche, 1981. *Critique of Everyday Life, III: From modernity to modernism. (Towards a metaphilosophy of the Quotidien.)* London: Verso, 2006.
- ---. *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968. Translated by Sacha Rabinovitch as *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Second Edition. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1984.
- Shields, Rob. *Lefebvre, Love & Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

I am a non-specialist and I hold this title with pride, though not without difficulty.

—Henri Lefebvre, *Le temp des méprises (The Time of Errors)*

Few thinkers have been as unstintingly industrious in generating and disseminating ideas over so long a period as Henri Lefebvre, who was born at the turn of the 20th century and died after a biblical span of four score years and ten. Lefebvre once observed that philosophers such as himself “should devote more time to speaking than to writing,” but one suspects that behind this exhortation there lurked a wry joke, for during the course of seven decades the French polymath scripted one of the most prodigious oeuvres ever to have flowed from a single pen: seventy books—many of them influential both inside and outside of academia, some of them as hefty as a Bible—and more than two hundred specialist articles, along with sundry journalistic pieces, academic lectures, political speeches, and other ephemeral interventions. (If we are to be pedantic about it, we can note that Lefebvre technically lived up to his own injunction, since he dictated much of his work to typists.)

Lefebvre wrote incessantly on a belief-beggarly range of subjects, many of which were located squarely at the crossroads of 20th century European life and thought. Nationalism, Fascism, Existentialism, Marxism, Modernity, the State, and the City were among the myriad topics that came under Lefebvre’s scrutiny. Such a list indicates more than ample evidence

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of uncommon intellectual prowess and sweep. This roster, however, does not begin to exhaust the scope of Lefebvre's production, nor does it convey the energy and erudition that animated his entire enterprise. Although he was fully immersed in the canon of Western classical philosophy, Lefebvre was an interdisciplinarian *avant-la-lettre*. Conversant with a panoply of fields, among them literature, architecture, music, and mathematics, Lefebvre could discourse as readily on Brechtian drama as he could on Bach's cantatas, and would do so in the same essay. (He once noted that he was sometimes asked at academic conferences what his specialty was, to which he would reply that he had no specialty, much to the consternation of his interlocutors.)

But Lefebvre was never merely content to engage in contemplation for its own sake. Rather, he consistently sought to place his mental labor at the service of societal transformation. More to the point, his thinking was often directed towards and guided by the imperatives of collective political action and intellectual intervention. To that end, he served for over three decades as one of the leading lights of the French Communist Party (PCF), nurtured the growth of an independent French Left, pioneered the study of rural societies and urban spaces, founded influential journals and research centers, worked as university professor for two decades in two different cities, traveled extensively in Europe and Latin America, and maintained a productive writing agenda until shortly before his death at the age of 90. Furthermore, in the midst of his unceasing intellectual and organizational activity, Lefebvre somehow found enough time to perform military service, participate in the Resistance to Nazi occupation, work as a factory hand, taxi driver, schoolteacher, and radio station director, marry four times, and father six children by three different wives. Little wonder, then, that his 1959 autobiography should run to 775 pages spread across two volumes!

Entitled *La Somme et le reste (A Summing Up and the Remainder)*, this as yet un-translated tome was written in the heat of Lefebvre's momentous 1958 break with the PCF, an organization to which he had devoted thirty years of loyal if often uneasy service, and which was then a considerable force in French politics. From the PCF's standpoint, Lefebvre's work had been suspect from the late 1930s, when he introduced an idealist note into his assessment of Marx's philosophy, thereby sullyng its purportedly unblemished materialism. Nonetheless, Lefebvre's unorthodoxy had been tolerated by the PCF's leadership because of the intellectual prestige that his membership lent the Party. (In those years, the PCF also attracted scientific and artistic luminaries, such as Pierre Joliot-Curie and Pablo Picasso.)

As the 1950s progressed, however, and in the wake of the Soviet destruction of the workers' revolt in East Germany and of the democratic

experiment in Hungary, Lefebvre became more publicly disenchanted with Stalinism in France as well as in Russia. Emboldened by Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's crimes at the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Lefebvre grew increasingly outspoken about the stultifying character of dogmatic Communism's political and intellectual culture. In response, party commissars publicly censured their most prominent intellectual after they had spent more than a decade censoring his work. Suspended from the PCF for a year, Lefebvre decided to leave the official Communist fold. Despite his subsequent condemnation of Communist orthodoxy, however, Lefebvre retained his faith in the power of Marxist thought to illuminate the workings of advanced capitalist society, as well as his belief in the desirability of achieving a humanistic socialism.

Lefebvre's departure from the PCF's orbit proved immediately beneficial to his intellectual health. His musings in *La Somme* bespeak the relieved re-entry into free speech of a long-silenced but finally irrepressible voice. *La Somme* is not cast as an exercise in linear and descriptive autobiography. Instead, it offers up a heady bouquet of genres and topics. Through modes as varied as personal remembrance, political polemic, literary criticism, lyric poetry (his own), and philosophic critique, Lefebvre breaks down the barriers between disciplines as he attempts to come to terms with his intellectual and political development, with French society at mid-century, with the promise of progressive social transformation, and with the past trajectory and possible future of philosophy, the discipline in which he was schooled and against which he continuously rebelled, just as he had revolted against the Catholicism of his childhood.

Of Basque, Breton, and Picard stock, Lefebvre was born in 1901 to a well-to-do professional family in Hagetmau, a hamlet nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenee Mountains. His childhood in rural Southwest France, the strict Catholic upbringing that was an integral part of it, and his subsequent clandestine existence in the mountains during World War Two were to mark him deeply. It was while rummaging in the archives of small Pyrenean towns, for instance, that he stumbled upon evidence of erstwhile agrarian lifeways that in the post-war years would come to represent for him a less fragmented and alienated experience than that spawned by the industrialized, consumerist society that France was then fast becoming. Moreover, his experiences in the countryside were to form the basis of his interest in rural sociology, the first area of research to which he would turn after the war, a turn that was prompted in part by his dissatisfaction with what he perceived as the biases of classical philosophy. As for his parents, Lefebvre comments in his second autobiography that his mother came from a commercial family and that his father was a func-

tionary, as a result of which Lefebvre grew up to detest both bureaucracy and the world of business.

In any event, it was at Aix-en-Provence in Southeast France that Lefebvre precociously obtained his first degree in philosophy at age seventeen. In the following year, he gravitated to Paris from the provinces to pursue higher studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, where he would later offer the first academic course on Marx in the country. Lefebvre was to spend much of his adult life in the City of Light, whose *arrondissements* and demi-monde he got to know intimately as a taxi-driver. (After the manner of the *haute bourgeoisie*, Lefebvre would eventually spend vacations in a country house, one located in the Pyrenean town of Navarrenx, his mother's ancestral seat, and the locale of his retirement.) Moreover, the abrupt and far-reaching transformations which the capital underwent in the post-war years were to provide him with a living archive of materials on which he drew to produce the work for which he is today best known in the English-speaking world, namely, his critical disquisitions on urbanism and on social space. The latter themes began to preoccupy Lefebvre in earnest in the 1960s, while he himself was in his sixties, his life span being almost co-terminous with the century. While the route that led him to his spatial investigations was not circuitous, it was long and marked by several turning-points, the most far-reaching of which was his encounter with Marxist thought.

Lefebvre had discovered Marx's writings while he was in his late twenties and living in Paris, and he was to remain faithful to elements of this complex congeries of concepts, methodologies, values, doctrines, and beliefs until his death. Even though during three decades he remained loyal in practice to the sclerotic strains of Marxism represented by Stalin and his French epigones, Lefebvre was from the start an heterodox Marxist, incorporating elements of the philosophies of Hegel, Schelling, and Nietzsche into his outlook, one that was marked moreover by a pronounced libertarian strain. Lefebvre liked to claim that he owed his non-doctrinaire Marxism to Marx himself, and in particular to Marx's early "humanistic" works, especially the famous *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. In the early 1930s, Lefebvre had published translations of the *Manuscripts* into French for the first time and had thereby helped to spawn revisionist interpretations of Marx's legacy that veered away from the economism and revolutionism that had characterized most official Marxisms since the Bolshevik Revolution.

In his efforts to extend the reach of Marx's thought, Lefebvre always kept his ears and eyes open, and while he was formidably bookish, he was also constantly alert to changes in the surface phenomena and the deep structures of the everyday world around him. Indeed, throughout his preternaturally long and prolific career, Lefebvre was perennially concerned

with discerning the nature of day-to-day life in the contemporary world. For Lefebvre, everyday life contained within itself an implicit critique of classical philosophy's relentless abstraction away from lived social relations as well as of its privileging of certain aspects of reality over others. In his view, Marx's work had initiated the philosophical critique of classical philosophy. Now the time had come to take this critique a stage further by critically applying Marx's insights and methods to areas not countenanced by Marx and thus to Marxism itself. As Stuart Elden notes in his recent study of Lefebvre, the *sui generis* cross-disciplinarian regarded his critique of everyday life as his most important and enduring contribution to Marxism. This review essay focuses chiefly on Lefebvre's contribution to the critical apprehension of everyday life as an object of intellectual inquiry and political import, and as a conceptual category in its own right.¹

II

To rehabilitate the masses—the masses of instants that philosophers condemn to “triviality” as well as the peoples that poets relegate to the shadows—are related tasks. Is it not in everyday life that man should fulfill his life as man?

—Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life I*

Like other heterodox Western Marxists (Herbert Marcuse, say), Lefebvre approached Marx's texts not as Holy Writ but as a usable guide to the workings of capitalism, one that would continually need to be updated and articulated with other modes of critical thought if it was to retain its freshness and relevance. While he regarded Marx's critique of 19th century capitalist society as foundational, Lefebvre noted on several occasions that Marx's thinking was constrained by its economic biases and that as a result much Marxist thought had remained stuck within the domains of labor and production. But much had changed since Marx's day, he observed, and a Marxism that failed to take into account the enormously dynamic and even protean nature of capitalism would not be a Marxism worth saving.

In Lefebvre's view, there was an unjustly neglected area of social existence towards which philosophy in general and Marxist thought in particular should orient themselves, and that was everyday life itself. Workers in mid-20th century France did not just produce output and generate capital for the bosses, he insisted. They also raised families, for instance, or relaxed with a bottle of wine and *pique-nique*, as we can still see them doing in his compatriot Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous photograph, “By the Marne River.” Even for workers, much of day-to-day life in the technologically advanced capitalist societies and elsewhere lay outside the realm of labor, and Marxism could only be adequate to the task of apprehending the complexity of the actual if it paid at least as much atten-

¹ For a summary of the entire array of Lefebvre's intellectual concerns, see the first chapter of Stuart Elden's *Understanding Henri Lefebvre and of Rob Shield's Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle*.

tion to the daily non-labor dimensions of experience—the arena of social reproduction—as it did to the realm of production. Thus, Marxism would have to delve into such hitherto unsuspected areas of social and political significance as banality and boredom, spontaneity and subjectivity, style and spectacle, depression and desire. It would also have to be attentive to the intersections between such subjective phenomena and the institutions and processes that helped determined what Marx called “social being.” (One consequence of this attentiveness would be the twofold recognition that during France’s post-war modernization, the working class had acquired novel characteristics and become much more variegated in composition than before the war, and that the complex lived reality—not to mention the increasing material prosperity—of French workers simply belied the PCF’s doctrine of the relentless pauperization of the proletariat.)

Modesty was not one of Lefebvre’s attributes, and on occasion he would compare the significance of his philosophical contribution to that of two of the most influential thinkers of modern times; Marx himself and that other product of 19th century German culture, Sigmund Freud. Before Marx, Lefebvre noted, no one had deemed labor worth thinking about critically, and the same could be said of sex and sexuality before Freud. Similarly, he went on to remark, before him no one had really thought that daily life itself should be subjected to critical scrutiny. In fact, however, two German-language philosophers—one a Marxist, the other a sometime Nazi—had elaborated on the significance of quotidian existence. In *History and Class Consciousness*, the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukacs had elaborated on the ways in which the commodification of economic relations had spread to the arena of social relations such that human subjectivity had itself been commodified, or as Lukacs put it “reified.” Lukacs attributed the “reification” or “thingification” of people and inter-personal relations to the operations of bourgeois capitalism. In contrast, Martin Heidegger regarded reification as inherent not just to this or that form of social organization, but to the nature of Being itself. For Heidegger, daily reality (*alltäglichkeit*, or dailiness) was the realm of the inescapably inauthentic and of the soul-crushing objecthood of things.

While influenced by the work of his immediate philosophical predecessors, Lefebvre adhered neither to an outright rejection of bourgeois society and all its works nor to a pessimistic ontology, and his originality lies in part in his ongoing efforts—motivated in part by his Marxist belief in the primacy of dialectical thinking, and in part by his own quirky intellectual restlessness—to synthesize and transcend the Lukascian and Heideggerian positions. Thus, Lefebvre insisted that everyday life under capitalism harbored the possibility of its own transformation (for the better) and even of its own transcendence, such that it would cease to be the repository of commodity fetishism, quotidian alienation, and social

atomization.ⁱⁱ Moreover, after he left the PCF, Lefebvre did not ascribe the ability to transform everyday social relations under capitalism either to a class—the proletariat—nor to a vanguard party claiming to be acting in its name. Instead, along with many other thinkers in the traditions of Western Marxism, he de-emphasized questions of class struggle and revolution in order to lay emphasis on the complexity of the inter-connected contradictions engendered by capitalism, technology, and modernity on the one hand, and by their interaction with such countervailing forces as tradition and anti-capitalist critique (both progressive and regressive) on the other. Always, the primary task should be to understand life as actually lived and experienced by human subjects. As he put it in the third volume of his *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne* (*Critique of Everyday Life*):

To understand the lived, to situate it and restore it to its place among the moving constellation of concepts, to explain it by disclosing what it implies, this is the sense in which I intend this work as well as the project [the critique of everyday life] of which it forms a part. (*Critique* III, 22. My translation.)

Thus it was that in his first major attempt to account for the ideological structures and fissures of everyday life, the first volume of his three-volume *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne*, which was published in 1947 in the aftermath of the Liberation, Lefebvre announced that his objective was not just to subject the everyday to critical inquiry, but to think of ways in which it might be transformed. Orthodox Marxists believed that full human community could only be achieved by first seizing the apparatus of government and the commanding heights of the economy, and they insisted that the focus of political attention ought therefore to be the machinery of state and economic power. In contrast, Lefebvre maintained that daily life itself in all its baffling complexity (“this bloody riddle” he once called it) contained the potential of progressive social transformation. As he noted, “the amorphous muddle we know as the everyday in all its triviality,” is the locus where analysis “discerns the detritus and the seeds of every possibility.” (*Critique* II, 345)

Lefebvre’s insistence on the significance of everyday life in the modern world was intended in part as a rebuke to his intellectual progenitor, classical philosophy, which in his view had mistakenly abstracted itself away from the actual, practical concerns of everyday men and women. “With its speculative (metaphysical) vocabulary, philosophy is itself part of human alienation” he noted in the 1947 *Critique* (249) And as he observed in 1968, “the limitations of philosophy—truth without reality—always and ever counterbalance the limitations of everyday life—reality without truth” (*Everyday Life* 14). But might not a critique of “reality without truth,” the realm of banality, serve merely to perpetuate and reinforce the reign of the trivial? No, Lefebvre insisted. While it was true enough that numer-

ⁱⁱ Some of Lefebvre’s earliest work, co-authored with his life-long friend, a Russian immigrant to France called Norbert Guterman, who after World War Two would become first a socialist and then a Hasid in Brooklyn, dealt with the powerful forms of mystification thrown up by Fascism and Nazism.

ous people led limited lives steeped in superficiality, and while their full humanity could never flourish as long as they went through life as units of alienated labor, self-alienating consumerism, or passive conformity, the very weightlessness at the core of much modern life ought not to be haughtily dismissed as meaningless. Rather, along with other aspects of day-to-day experience it ought to be critically analyzed so that it could disclose the sources and secrets of its own transformation. The purpose of such critical analysis of banality would then be not merely to record the ways in which people are beguiled by superficiality but to understand the reasons—both existential and systemic—why they are and if possible, to propose alternatives to the status quo that would encourage alternative structures of feeling. Undertaking this re-evaluation of the significance of daily life would entail shaking off old habits of perception in order to see the world anew. The following paragraph from the first volume of *The Critique of Everyday Life* captures Lefebvre's insistence on the imperative to revise, or re-vision, our understanding of the daily world around us:

City dwellers getting away from it all, intellectuals at a loose end, we wander through the French countryside simply for something to do, we look but we are unable to see. We are caught in a hybrid compromise between aesthetic spectacle and knowledge. When the flight of a bird catches our attention, or the mooing of a cow, or a shepherd boy singing, we think we are being very clever and concrete. But we are unable to seize the human facts. We fail to see them where they are, namely in humble, familiar, everyday objects: the shape of fields, of ploughs. Our search for the human takes us too far, too "deep," we seek it in the clouds or in mysteries, whereas it is waiting for us, besieging us on all sides. We will not find it in myths—although human facts carry with them a long and magnificent procession of legends, tales and songs, poems and dances. All we need do is simply open our eyes, to leave the dark world of metaphysics and the false depths of the "inner life" behind, and we will discover the immense human wealth that the humblest facts of everyday life contain (*Critique I*, 132).

At a time when "reality television" and the parenting choices of "pop stars" command the attention and allegiance of millions, one might be forgiven for deeming Lefebvre's comments quaintly antiquated, perhaps even touchingly naive. But although he may not have grasped the extent to which "advanced" capitalist societies would propagate trivia and thereby mystify the nature of social relations, Lefebvre was not unaware of the seductiveness of creature comforts and of intellectual and spiritual banality. Nonetheless, and despite the dark tone of some of his writings on everyday life in the modern world, Lefebvre chose to hang on to hope as a guiding principle and wellspring of action, and he would have agreed with a remark made by a younger contemporary of his, the Welsh socialist thinker Raymond Williams, to the effect that the purpose of critical analysis should be to

make hope possible, rather than to make despair convincing. For Lefebvre, Marxist thought (constantly updated) offered the best means of truly grasping the “immense wealth that the humblest facts of everyday life contain,” as well as the reasons why such wealth remained (wrongly) under wraps. In order to undertake this task, however, it would have to relinquish its fetishization of the economic sphere and its deterministic biases. Moreover, it would have to re-orient itself towards a wider and more diffuse arena of significance than hitherto: everyday life, at once a distinct stratum of social existence and its conceptual horizon. Deploying a sexist metaphor characteristic of the times, Lefebvre insisted that the goal of the critique of everyday life would henceforth be the realization of the “total man” that every human being was capable of becoming. Lefebvre concludes the first Critique with a resounding affirmation of humanism:

Going beyond the emotional attempts by philanthropists and sentimental (petty-bourgeois) humanists to ‘magnify’ humble gestures, and beyond that allegedly superior irony which has systematically devalued life, seeing it merely as back-stage activity or comic relief in a tragedy, the critique of everyday life—critical and positive—must clear the way for a genuine humanism, for a humanism which believes in the human because it knows it. (*Critique I*, 252)

In 1957, a second edition of the 1947 Critique appeared.ⁱⁱⁱ Lefebvre had a proclivity for long prefaces and summing ups, and the preface to the 1957 edition of the Critique was almost as long as the book itself. In the preface, Lefebvre notes that his 1947 tome was motivated in equal measure by an exploration of alienation and by an attempt to discern the progressive dimensions of everyday life at a moment in French history when socialism seemed to lie within graspable reach. But much had changed in a decade. Until World War Two, France was an unevenly developed and predominantly agrarian society, one in which according to Lefebvre the 18th century notion of “the people” still retained some referential value. By the late 1950s, however, the country had undergone an irreversible and far-reaching transformation. In her Lefebvrian study of the French '50s, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Kristin Ross observes that “the state-led modernization drive was extraordinarily concerted, and the desire for a new way of living after the war widespread” (4). She goes on to note some of the ramifications of the encounter between a drive for modernization from above and a desire for newness from below:

The speed with which French society was transformed after the war from a rural, empire-oriented Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized, and urban one meant that the things that modernization needed—educated middle managers, for instance, or affordable automobiles and other ‘mature’ consumer durables, or

ⁱⁱⁱDuring the intervening ten years, Lefebvre had experienced a bout of sustained productivity, one that led him to publish *inter alia*, a four-volume study of Pascal, monographs on Diderot, Hegel, and Lenin, and a volume on Marx for the popular paperback series, *Que sais-je?* (The latter has been frequently updated since and has sold over three hundred thousand copies to date.) Moreover, Lefebvre defended his doctoral thesis (on social relations in the Tuscan countryside), undertook pioneering sociological research at the prestigious Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, parted company with the PCF, helped found the independent Left journal *Arguments* (in his 20s and 30s he had also co-founded important if short-lived journals on Marxism and on philosophy), wrote his two-volume autobiography, and pursued his critique of everyday life.

a set of social sciences that followed scientific, functionalist models, or a workforce of ex-colonial laborers—burst into a society that still cherished prewar outlooks with all the force, excitement, disruption, and horror of the genuinely new (4).

The central vehicle of modernization in France, as elsewhere, was the automobile. Widely regarded as both engines of material progress and as cherished status symbols, cars like the new Renaults that rolled endlessly off the assembly lines certainly evoked excitement and force in their many admirers. For critics, however, the shiny privatized conveyances created new forms of disruption, horror, and alienation, concretized as traffic jams, car crashes, and a radical restructuring of urban landscapes to facilitate traffic flow. (As the number of cars in the Paris region doubled to 2 million between 1960 and 1965, then Prime Minister Georges Pompidou affirmed “Paris must adapt to the automobile. We must renounce an outmoded aesthetic.” [Qtd in Ross 53])

One critic of the car’s ubiquity and hegemony was the New Wave film director, Jean-Luc Godard, whose 1967 film *Weekend* features an eight-minute tracking shot of an endless and bloody pile-up. Another was a brooding young avant-gardist, Guy Debord, leader of the Situationists, whom Lefebvre met four years after writing the 1957 preface. In an article entitled “Situationist Theses on Traffic,” Debord pronounced the automobile to be at once “the sovereign good of an alienated life and the essential product of the capitalist life” (Qtd in Ross 26). Debord also argued that everyday life in the French social formation had been “colonized” by new technology and by consumerist culture. Lefebvre, who sustained many an intellectual exchange with his young interlocutors, agreed on both counts, even though he would eventually part company with *les Situs* over mutual accusations of plagiarism. (In his youth, Lefebvre had also fallen in and out with a group of brash young subversives, the Surrealists.) In any case, Lefebvre confronted this new colonization with a two-fold program: to examine how it had infiltrated into the traditionally autonomous worlds of leisure and family life, and to discern its weak spots, the points at which its sway over the social world was incomplete or contested. In *La Somme*, Lefebvre had sketched out a theory of how “moments” (of romantic passion, say, or of committed political contestation) constituted one form of resistance to the colonization of all areas of human subjectivity. He pursued this line of thought in volume two of the *Critique*:

The moment is passion and the inexorable destruction and self-destruction of that passion. The moment is an impossible impossibility, aimed at, desired, and chosen as such. (*Critique II*, 347)

[The moment] is an individual and freely celebrated festival, a tragic festival, and therefore a genuine festival. The aim is not to let festivals

die out or disappear beneath all that is prosaic in the world. It is to unite festival [“la fête”] with everyday life. (*Critique* II, 348)

This notion of reuniting carnivalesque festivals of the kind that had prevailed in pre-modern Europe with alienated everyday life in the modern world was dear to both Lefebvre and to Debord, both of who saw in the tumultuous outpouring of art and political rebellion of the 1871 Paris Commune a historical precedent for the insertion of revolution into the fabric of the everyday. (Revolutions constituted the horizon of Lefebvre’s political thought and hopes, although as a critic of Stalinism, he was keenly aware of the oft-remarked upon tendency of revolutions to self-destruct.) Lefebvre first met Debord in Strasbourg, the old Alsatian capital on the Franco-German border. He had gone there in 1961 to take up the country’s first chair in applied sociology, after having spent the better part of the 1950s working in research centers in Paris. University life was to be enormously rewarding for Lefebvre, personally, intellectually, and politically. For one thing, having decided not to return to the PCF, he was no longer constrained to toe the party-line. For another, teaching brought him into contact with a generation of critical young thinkers who responded with enthusiasm to his diagnosis of their society’s body politic.

It was in the same year he moved to Strasbourg (whose stolid burghers he scandalized by co-habiting with a sociology student thirty years his junior) that Lefebvre published the second volume of the *Critique*, or to give it its full title: *Critique de la vie quotidienne quotidienne II: fondements d’une sociologie de la quotidienneté* (*Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of Everyday Life*). Like the first *Critique*, the second is by turns dizzyingly abstruse and strikingly concrete. It contains a much more sustained attempt than its predecessor to categorize the different dimensions of the everyday as well as the conceptual categories (such as “totality,” “alienation,” “the spontaneous,” and “praxis”) through which everyday life can be critically apprehended. Often, the book seems to take us far from everyday life, as when Lefebvre expounds on “Transduction and Transducers,” or on “Logic and characterology,” but no sooner does it feel as though the author has ascended into the ethereal airs of high abstraction of the kind he deplored than he comes right back down to earth, as when he comments on such everyday matters as fashion, furnishing, and beauty products.

In the second *Critique*, Lefebvre developed the notion that everyday life occupied its own *level* in the multi-layered totality of social being, and went on to sketch a corresponding theory of levels.

The human world is not defined simply by the historical, by culture, by totality, or society as a whole, or by ideological and political superstructures. It is defined by this intermediate and mediating *level*: everyday life. In it, the most concrete of dialectical movements can

be observed: need and desire, pleasure and absence of pleasure, satisfaction and privation (or frustration), fulfillments and empty spaces, work and non-work. The repetitive part, in the mechanical sense of the term, and the creative part of the everyday become embroiled in a permanently reactivated circuit which only dialectical analysis can perceive. (*Critique II*, 45)

These and other notions had only been hinted at in the first Critique. Nonetheless, despite the new elements in the second volume, there is a fundamental continuity of outlook and preoccupation between the two, as the following two quotations illustrate:

Would everyday life be merely the humble and sordid side of life in general, and of social practice? To repeat the answer we have already given: *yes* and *no*. Yes, it is the humble and sordid side. But not only that. Simultaneously, it is also the time and the place where the human either fulfills itself or fails, since it is a place and a time which fragmented, specialized, and divided activity cannot completely grasp, no matter how great and worthy that activity may be (*Critique II*, 19).

In one sense there is nothing more simple and more obvious than everyday life. How do people live? The question may be difficult to answer, but that does not make it any the less clear. In another sense nothing could be more superficial: it is banality, triviality, *repetitiveness*. And in yet another sense nothing could be more profound. It is existence and the “lived,” revealed as they are before speculative thought has transcribed them: what must be changed and what is the hardest of all to change. (*Critique II*, 47)

Lefebvre frequently insisted that a critique of unfulfillment and alienation should not be reduced to a bleak picture of pain and despair. Rather, as he noted in the second Critique, it implies an endless appeal to what is possible in order to judge the present and what has been accomplished. (A recent commentator on Lefebvre’s work, Michael Gardiner, notes that Lefebvre subscribed to a kind of “critical utopianism.”) Nonetheless, bleakness is often the dominant mood evoked by Lefebvre’s ruminations on quotidian life under advanced capitalism. In a late summary of his trilogy, Lefebvre provided a useful summary of why he believed that the everyday generated a hard-to-define yet real enough malaise, “le malaise du quotidien,” as he dubbed it. His analysis hinges on the quotidian modern experience of time:

In modern life, the repetitive gestures tend to mask and to crush the cycles. The everyday imposes its monotony. It is the invariable constant of the variations it envelops. The days follow one after another and resemble one another, and yet—here lies the contradiction at the heart of everydayness—everything changes. But the change is programmed; obsolescence is planned. Production anticipates reproduction; produc-

tion produces change in such a way as to superimpose the impression of speed onto that of monotony. Some people cry out against the acceleration of time, others cry out against stagnation. They're both right. ("Everyday," 10)

Accelerated and stagnant at once, daily life was a paradoxical zone, vertically structured by the state and by corporations yet rife with horizontal disconnectedness and lack of communication. Lefebvre's dissection of everyday life was sharpest in a book published in 1968, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, which consisted of the text of lectures he gave at Nanterre University in Paris, whence he had relocated from Strasbourg. Nanterre was the epicenter of the student-and-worker-led eruption that was to shake the self-assurance of General De Gaulle's Fifth Republic in that same year. Lefebvre had mentored several of the student leaders of the "événements" of 1968, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit ("Danny the Red"), and some of his concepts ("moments," "the festival," "the right to the city") were to influence the thinking and practice of numerous student radicals. (One of the few books by Lefebvre to be translated into English before the 1990s was his study of the momentous events that transpired in the classrooms, factories, and streets of France in '68, *L'irruption de Nanterre au sommet*, literally, *The eruption, from Nanterre to the Summit*.)

In *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre argued that the new social formation that had emerged from the technocratic modernization of the 1950s was a sinister new "Bureaucratic Society of Controlled Consumption," whose smooth operation and successful perpetuation required social conformity, political passivity, intellectual superficiality, and a submission to manipulation (by the state and by corporations), to paternalism (on the part of all establishment entities and politicians, be they of the left or of the right) and to the exaltation of consumerism and obedience as the panacea of all social ills. (Although Lefebvre's moniker for contemporary societies has a 1984-ish ring that's redolent of present-day conspiracy theories, it's hard to dismiss his insights into the ways in which conformity, passivity, and superficiality—and the ongoing crises that they serve to entrench, obscure, and mystify—belie the happy picture of life at the End of History conjured up by such establishment thinkers as the neo-Hegelian philosopher Francis Fukuyama, a picture as forced and false in its own way as the frozen portraits of smiling peasants and heroic factory workers beloved of communist regimes.) It was against this all-pervasive regimentation from above that the students (in universities and in lycées) and workers (in factories and offices) rebelled. Alain Touraine, a colleague of Lefebvre's at Nanterre, described the upheaval in this way:

The May Movement was a thunderbolt announcing the social struggles of the future. It dispelled the illusion that improvement in production and consumption result in a society in which tensions replace conflicts,

quarrels replace disruptions, and negotiations replace revolutions (Qtd in Poster 371).

In his study of Existential Marxism in France, Mark Poster provides a useful gloss on Touraine's observation:

Perhaps for the first time in the history of an advanced industrial society, the routines of everyday life were totally upset by dissident groups. From Nanterre in March, to the Sorbonne on May 3rd, to the Renault factory at Flins on May 16th, the rebellion spread quickly. What appeared at first as the pranks of children...soon became a general threat to established authority. After ten days of street battles between students and police...the Sorbonne and schools throughout France were relinquished to the students. Just as the authority of the state was overturned in academia, so the authority of the capitalists was brought down in the factories. Ten million workers were on strike, and they did so not by going home or picketing but by taking control of their workplaces. France was without electricity and oil, without mail, telephones, garbage collection, banks, and stores; movie houses were closed, the production of commodities was stopped. Everywhere the smooth hum of the technocratic machine was silenced. Liberated from the pressures of everyday routines, the French paused and then began talking and relating to each other in new ways, ways that evidenced creative powers that had hitherto lain dormant. In the eyes of many, the monstrous spectacle of meaningless toil and passive consumption gave way to an exhilarating, joyous festival (372-3).

As France came close to being the staging ground for the first socialist revolution (of a novel kind) to take place in an advanced industrialized society, the students who were trying to enact new relations of reciprocity captured their experience in pithy graffiti that they daubed on classroom and urban walls:

We lead a marvelous life here [in the Sorbonne]. We sleep; we eat; we don't touch money; no one here thinks of money. This is already the society we want to create.

We want a new and original world. We reject a world in which the certainty of not dying of hunger is secured by the risk of dying of boredom.

Let's not change employers; let's change the way we employ life.
(All qtd in Poster 382)

In pursuit of these ideals and desires, thousands of students emerged from their sequestered cloisters brandishing not academic certifications, but irreverent manifestoes for social change. Seized by an insouciant resolve to forge a future free of authoritarianism and pre-programmed lives of alienation, these students were hardly content to hold up a mirror to the status quo. Instead, they wedded theory and action in ways that seemed

to Lefebvre to vindicate his arguments about the dialectical relationship between critical thought and everyday life. (In *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre had proclaimed: “Let everyday life become a work of art! Let every technical means be employed for the transformation of everyday life!”) Moreover, the verve and nonchalance with which these students questioned authority, and the romantic optimism with which they sought to transform their society, were youthful traits that they shared with their nonconformist elder, who once declared that he was on the side of everyone, young or not-so-young, who did not believe in adulthood.

Nonetheless, to the extent that May was a cultural revolution whose political expression did not achieve a lasting institutional revolution, it can be dubbed a failed experiment. In Lefebvre’s view, one of the failings of 1968—itself a local chapter in a global story of anti-authoritarian rebellion—was that anti-systemic rebels who questioned this or that aspect of morality, hierarchy, and authority divorced themselves from considerations of political economy while revolutionaries whose gaze was riveted on questions of political economy did not contest anything other than state power. In other words, parallel efforts to transform the status quo had dissociated themselves from each other and failed to dovetail. After ’68, and in part as a consequence of the political defeat registered by the French and international left that year, Lefebvre focused increasingly on themes to which he had hitherto paid glancing attention in his books and articles, but which he now sought to elaborate upon in a more systematic manner, namely, the nature of the state, the production and appropriation of social space, and the right to difference.

In the midst of these other researches, however, everyday life remained central to Lefebvre’s purview. In 1981, shortly after he turned 80, Lefebvre published the third and final *Critique*, an English translation of which was published in London and New York in January of this year. This slender tome, the slimmest of the three volumes, also bears the longest title of all: *Critique de la vie quotidienne, III: De la modernité au modernisme. (Pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien)*. [*Critique of Everyday Life, III: From modernity to modernism. (Towards a metaphilosophy of the Quotidien)*.] The third *Critique* is as notable for its highly condensed summary of the objectives of the first two volumes as for its discussion of the latter’s limitations. In the third *Critique*, Lefebvre also succinctly summarizes and critiques many of the intellectual developments of the previous two decades, including the rise and fall of Structuralism and the emergence of an empiricist sociology. The book’s main purpose, however, is to track both the continuities in everyday life (such as the persistence of traditional family relations and of private property) and the changes that have taken place almost forty years after the publication of the first *Critique* and nearly two decades after the publication of the second, such as the arrival of the post-industrial infor-

mation society and the urgent need to think all important philosophical and political questions at the level of the global (“le planétaire”).

One major way in which the third volume differs from the first is that it dwells on the meaning of revolution after a revolution had nearly taken place in France. Commenting on the legacy of 1968, Lefebvre notes that in that year theory met practice on the street, and that the counter-knowledge advanced in the first and second *Critiques* had allowed for new possibilities that the rebels took up. While recognizing that 1968 ended in political defeat, he refuses to concede that it was a failure. As Marx and Nietzsche taught, he says, things can progress “in the wrong way” (“par le mauvais côté”) (40). At any rate, he asserted, neither dogged pessimists nor dogmatic optimists can properly capture the new character of the times. While the watchword in 1968 was “revolt” the keyword in 1981 is *crisis* (“*crise*”):

No crisis, say some, simply a new division of labor on a global scale as a result of technological progress...A total crisis, say others: a crisis of all that makes a society, including culture and values (*Critique III*, 40. My translation.).

Perhaps, Lefebvre remarks, there’s an alternative to these discourses of (conjunctural) crisis. Perhaps the crisis, so-called, is not a crisis between two periods of general stability. Perhaps ongoing crisis is simply an inherent feature of modern societies. But in this and other works, Lefebvre was less concerned with registering a crisis, whether conjunctural or chronic, than he was with analyzing what such crisis meant for the old and ongoing project of changing everyday life. And such analysis, as he had pointed out in the second *Critique*, required steady and steadfast attention to the actual state of the world:

Critique of everyday life has time on its side; it requires patience; it would be rather in favor of people who wait for situations to mature (but it avoids those who let these situations atrophy...) (*Critique II*, 12)

III

There are many, many Lefebvres'

—*Rob Shields, Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*

Until 1991, none of the Critiques had been translated into English, and Lefebvre’s work was only available piecemeal in the English-speaking world. (Readers of Spanish and Portuguese, among others, have until recently enjoyed much readier access to Lefebvre’s work.) While book chapters had been devoted to Lefebvre by such students of French intellectual life and of Western Marxism as Mark Poster in the USA and Michael Kelly in the UK there was no book-length study of his corpus in

English, although such studies had been published in France, Germany, and Italy.

One symptom of Lefebvre's longtime hit-or-miss reception in English-speaking countries is the absence of entries either on Lefebvre himself or on the subjects to which he made the most original contributions in the redoubtable *Dictionary Of Marxist Thought* published by Blackwell's in the UK in 1991, although attention is paid in its pages to far less interesting figures. As recently as 1982—more than fifty years after Lefebvre started publishing—Michael Kelly noted in his book on French Marxism that “considering the quality and range of Henri Lefebvre's work it is extraordinary that no monograph has yet been devoted to him, though such a study would be a daunting undertaking.” (231) Although by the 1980s a handful of Lefebvre's books had been translated into English, the bulk of his writings remained un-translated into the world's hegemonic language.

The relative neglect to which Lefebvre has historically been subjected in the Anglophone communion has finally come to an end. In 1999, an undaunted Canadian scholar, Rob Shields, Director of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies at Canada's Carleton University, published the first full-length study of Lefebvre's work to appear in English. In 2004, another book-length examination of Lefebvre's writings, by Stuart Elden, Lecturer in Political Geography at Durham University in the UK, appeared in London and New York. Elden is also among a small but assiduous group of translators who since the early 1990s have devoted themselves to rendering some of Lefebvre's major works into English in whole or in part. In 1998, Shields could justifiably lament that “the vast bulk of Lefebvre's work...is largely unread, unremarked upon, and untranslated.” Shields' complaint is no longer quite accurate, thanks in no small measure to his own efforts. Since 1991, when English translations of the first *Critique* and of *La Production de l'Espace* (*The Production of Space*) were published (the first English translations of Lefebvre's work in fifteen years), the second and third *Critiques* have appeared in English, as have Lefebvre's *Introduction à la modernité* (*Introduction to Modernity*), two of his major works on urban life (*La révolution urbaine* / *The Urban Revolution*) and a large part of volume one of *Le droit à la ville* (*The Right to the City*), as well as his *Rhythmanalyse* (*Rhythmanalysis*). While it remains true that major texts such as the four-volume *De l'Etat* (*On the State*) and *Le manifeste différentialiste* (*The Differentialist Manifesto*), among others, remain unavailable in English, at least the bulk of Lefebvre's writings on everyday life and on the production of space can finally be read in the English-speaking world, and Lefebvre's influence has percolated into geography, architecture, and urban studies, among other disciplines.^{iv}

In a review essay on recent books about Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Wolin notes that to write about Sartre is to attempt a

“Regrettably, the single most accessible point of entry to Lefebvre's personal life, political activism, and intellectual concerns, *Le temps des méprises*, a brief autobiographical essay in the form of responses to questions posed by an editor, is still awaiting the hand of a translator. Recently, many of Lefebvre's long out-of-print books have been re-issued in France, where there has also been a revival of interest in his writings, particularly those with an explicitly philosophical or political purview.

near-impossible undertaking, given the French writer's uncommonly voluminous production. Something of the kind could be said of the task faced by anyone who would seek to take on the entirety of Lefebvre's corpus, as Shields and Elden have done, although in Lefebvre's case the daunting nature of the challenge resides not just in his impossibly vast output but in the enormously wide-ranging nature of his work. As both Elden and Shields point out, however, there are certain veins of inquiry that traverse all the strata of Lefebvre's textual production, and the critique of everyday life is most prominent among them.

Shields' book follows Lefebvre life and work across eleven chapters that proceed more or less chronologically, although they are arranged under thematic headings. Drawing on the full range of Lefebvre's writings—from his early work on consciousness to his late work on rhythmanalysis—and availing himself of previously untranslated and unpublished works and correspondence, Shields usefully historicizes the different turns in Lefebvre's thinking and practice, even as he seeks to place special emphasis on Lefebvre's work on the social construction of space. Shields has also written on shopping malls and internet cultures, and it is evident from his comments that he is particularly interested in and indebted to Lefebvre's work on spatial constructions, representations, and practices. (His longest chapter by far borrows its title from Lefebvre's magnum opus, *The Production of Space*, and delves into the various books in which Lefebvre analyzed and categorized the kinds of spaces that societies produce as well as the ways in which such spaces shape the experience and the potential of everyday life.) Shields often finds fault with this or that aspect of Lefebvre's personality or production; his male chauvinism, for instance, or his ethnocentricity, or even his failure to properly synthesize theory and practice. On the whole, however, Shields clearly finds much to admire about his subject, particularly his humanism, and he regards Lefebvre's work as "a toolkit for progressive action now."

Towards the end of his six-chapter thematic survey of Lefebvre's work, Stuart Elden also deploys the metaphor of texts as tools, but does so to refer to his own book, which he intends not as a "directive but as a tool," an introduction "in the best sense of the word, a leading into a topic, a problematic, an understanding of a thinker's work, an opening to the possible" (244). These pioneering guides to Lefebvre's work necessarily cover much of the same ground. They also share similar strengths and weaknesses. Just as Shields somewhat begrudgingly acknowledges the appropriation of Lefebvre's work by fellow geographers such as Edward Soja, so too does Elden refer to Shields' earlier study in a slightly dismissive tone. Furthermore, he distinguishes his book from its predecessor by claiming that it is "more theoretically rigorous" than the latter. Be that as it may, Elden too attempts to take on the near-entirety of Lefebvre's

corpus, although where Shields seeks to emphasize the centrality of space in Lefebvre's thinking, Elden wants to insist on the importance of always keeping in view the political edge of Lefebvre's critique, as well as the philosophical complexity of the latter's underpinnings. (In *Le temps des méprises*, Lefebvre remarks: "Deep down, I've never been anything other than a political writer.") Thus, Elden devotes more attention to Lefebvre's indebtedness to Nietzsche and Heidegger than does Shields, and whereas Shields' longest chapter is on Lefebvre and space, the longest chapters in the more recent study are on Lefebvre's relationship with Marxism, politics, and philosophy.

At any rate, indulging in the churlishness that occasionally mars the tone of both books, one can note that Elden's prose is often plodding and his tone pedantic, while Shields' writing bears some of the disfiguring hallmarks of books that are abruptly tossed into the maw of a publish-or-perish schedule, such as frequent mis-citations, meandering paragraphs, and clogged-up sentences. Moreover, both authors frequently resort to sketchy assessments of their subject's work that belie the complexity they rightfully attribute to it. All churlishness aside, however, both studies provide readers with an accessible and comprehensive guide to the monumental work of a long and unjustly neglected thinker, and their different emphases can be of help in approaching Lefebvre contrapuntally. Furthermore, both Shields and Elden rightly emphasize the inter-connectedness of all the many facets of Lefebvre's production, and each of them deftly reads that production against the backdrop of a life lived to the full in the context of a tumultuous century.'

IV

Life is lagging behind what is possible.

—Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life I*

In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, Kristin Ross discusses the relationship between concepts and their historical contexts:

Theoretical categories are not free-floating analytic devices, innocent of historical content. If they instead find their origins in forms of experience, then the transitory importance of critical categories like "alienation" and "everyday life," or the move to the forefront of the concept of "reification" during these years, must then be another sign of the upheaval in social relations occasioned by the sudden, full-scale entry of capital into "style of life," into lived, almost imperceptible rhythms (5-6).

If Ross is right and the emergence and dissemination of a concept is intimately linked to historical change, what might the re-emergence and re-dissemination of a hitherto neglected thinker's work tell us about our times and preoccupations? One simple answer is that the resurgence of

Each of these studies presupposes a vast amount of reading of primary and contextual materials, and the authors have clearly done their homework assiduously. While the two books carry extensive bibliographies of Lefebvre's work, Shields' study provides a more extensive listing than Elden's. It also contains a list of secondary works, which Elden's does not. Elden's book also lacks an index of topics, although it does carry an index of names.

interest in Lefebvre is bound up with a larger intellectual phenomenon, in this case the emergence of everyday life studies as a trans-disciplinary and trans-national enterprise. In the Anglophone academy, signs of this arrival abound: among them, special issues of sundry learned journals devoted to the quotidian as problematic, numerous studies foregrounding a focus on everyday life in contexts as ostensibly disparate as Stalin's Russia or London's supermarkets, and a renewal of interest not just in Lefebvre, but in the work of his co-national, younger contemporary, and fellow student of daily life, Michel de Certeau.^{vi}

^{vi}For an extensive selection of texts drawn from different areas of everyday life studies, see Ben Highmore, Ed, *The Everyday Life Reader*. Highmore's introduction surveys various theories of everyday life and places them in their historical contexts.

If this is indeed the case, why might the field of everyday life studies be shedding the chrysalis of its emergent phase and spreading its wings as a multi-faceted and wide-ranging body of intellectual inquiry at this precise juncture? I can think of three broad reasons. First, the various strains of "theory" that subjected social reality to a remorseless textualization (for instance, assorted versions of structuralism and post-structuralism) have lost their former clout. In their wake, new forms of theorizing have emerged that seem more interested in explaining the complex world of lived experience than in affirming ad nauseam that all the world's an unreadable, self-imploding text or an impersonal ensemble of politically neutral codes and structures. (In books and articles published in the 1960s and early 70s, Lefebvre inveighed against Structuralism, which he regarded as the ideology of technocratic capitalism, and which he denounced for eliminating historical consciousness and human subjectivity from the human sciences.)

Moreover, there appears to be a dawning awareness among the middle sectors of the advanced industrialized countries that the spatially and hierarchically conceived geo-political planetary orders (First and Third Worlds) are overlapping segments of a globalized if unequally structured whole, yoked together as much by the operations of transnational corporations as by the movements undertaken by migrants. Thus, there seems to be an emerging understanding that many of the products and artifacts that shape everyday middle-class lives in the West—the beans from which our coffee is ground, the oil on which our cars depend, the clothes in which we sortie to our workplaces every morning—come to us from multiple other histories, places, and realities that while seemingly distant from us geographically and culturally are inextricably bound up with our own in a relationship marked by radically uneven power relations.

Finally, just as Lefebvre and others in the 1950s knew themselves to be living through momentous if ambiguously coded changes, changes that were often registered in the minutiae of everyday life, so too do we seem to be living through a historical moment that is shadowed by portents of potentially terrifying developments, even as it simultaneously seems to promise a radiant future of technologically-inspired self-actualization.

Although the darker side of our times may be more readily apparent in Argentina or in Bolivia than in America or Britain, even within the prosperous fortress democracies of the Western World, there is a palpable dissonance between the rhetoric of progress and the actuality of regress in the contemporary world, dissonance for which the palliatives proffered by the powerful offer no convincing remedy. (It is pertinently symptomatic in this regard that the response from the highest political officer in the land to the trauma of September 11, 2001 was a three-fold injunction to spend, to patronize the fantasy-worlds of Disney and Vegas, and to prepare for a long night of endless war against a shadowy and ruthless enemy.)

Interestingly, that currently dominant ideological construct—the War on Terror—resonates curiously with a trope that structures much of Lefebvre's 1968 tome *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, and in particular, Chapter Four, "Terrorism and Everyday Life." In that text, the bleakest by far of all of his sustained engagements with the everyday, Lefebvre argues that one of the characteristics of life under late capitalism is the manner in which fears are exploited in the service of continuous consumption: fear of aging, fear of losing status, fear of others, fear of The Other. Such systemic stoking of fear is a form of terror, he claims, and its peculiar insidiousness is that it depends less on external coercion than on more or less willing internalization on the part of individuals. But despite the awesome power and sweep of its productive capacity, including the capacity to produce and reproduce the consumption, not just of consumer durables, but of ways of life and self-images, neo-capitalism cannot ultimately satisfy profound human needs; nor despite its historically unparalleled ability to generate goods will it ever distribute the goods equitably on a global scale: hence, in Lefebvre's view, the pervasiveness in the global North of a generalized if hard to identify anomie, and of a sense that life in the post-industrial age is permeated by superficiality, wracked by recurrent crises (unemployment, recession, war), and glutted by a surfeit of signs and images inciting us to shop till we drop. Hence, too, in the global South, the periodic resurgence of anti-capitalist movements, such as have sprouted over the past decade in places as far apart as Cochabamba and Cape Town.

Some of the questions that Lefebvre raised as France underwent an accelerated spate of modernization and urbanization are as pertinent in 2006 as they were in 1963, as witness the recent upheavals in the soulless *banlieues* of major French cities, designed to warehouse immigrant workers during the period when Lefebvre was insisting that considerable material progress under capitalism was also accompanied by the obverse of technological advancement, viz., social degradation. Over on this side of the Atlantic, we are also burdened with geographies of social inequality, and the need for a critical understanding of the daily has been thrown into sharp relief in recent years. How do we read the texture of our everyday

lives at a time when our mass media offer up equal doses of trivia and of toothless assessments of social contradictions? When our national politics often amount to little more than TV-mediated spectacles? When our airwaves are being Clear-Channeled, our clothes sweat-shopped, our food genetically engineered, our active citizenship corroded by the imperatives of consumerism? Under such conditions, Lefebvre's multi-faceted reflections on the reasons for our dissatisfaction and the possibility of our emancipation could not be more timely.

In any case, as the French philosopher Daniel Bensaïd has recently argued, the decline and fall of actually existing Communism (in the Soviet bloc) has opened up spaces for renovating Marxist critique. Using language more lurid than Lefebvre would ever have permitted himself, Bensaïd notes that the "intimate and implacable enemy" of *Das Kapital* "capital itself—an insatiable vampire and fetish-automaton [is] now more invasive than ever" (2002 [1995] ix). He further notes that it "to see what it [capital] is up to, to escape its phantasmagorias, to respond to its enigmas," remains the business of Marxism so long as capitalism remains the dominant form of production on a global scale (2002 [1995] xi). Lefebvre, as I have said, would demur at the metaphors that Bensaïd deploys, but he would no doubt have approved the sentiment that animates them. More to the point, he would have agreed that a Marxism adequate to these times should connect up with social practice and that it should think itself as having to apprehend matters on a planetary scale. Or as Bensaïd puts it:

...The research programme inspired by Marx remains robust. But it only has a genuine future if, rather than seeking refuge in the academic fold, it succeeds in establishing an organic relationship with the revived practice of social movements—in particular, with the resistance to imperialist globalization (2002 [1995] xv).

If Lefebvre's work is re-situated within this revised research program, it will also benefit from an articulation with other modes of critical thought and practice, especially feminism and the investigations into everyday forms of resistance pursued by non-Marxist critical thinkers such as Michel de Certeau. It's worth noting that there are undoubtedly many weak areas in Lefebvre's thought, such as the patriarchal cast of his thinking about the place of women in everyday life, as his notion of "the total man" and his patronizing remarks on women's ability to counter-act the banalizing force of the everyday suggest. And it is extraordinary that an anti-authoritarian thinker as attentive to world-historical circumstances and as well-traveled outside the Euro-American zone as Lefebvre should have had so little to say in his books about French imperialism in Algeria and Vietnam, say, or about the struggles waged by the independence movements in those countries, or about the revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua. Moreover, some of the questions with which Lefebvre grappled, and some of the

polemics in which he took part, are now of interest only to specialists. Few now care about—or are forced to take courses in—the finer points of dialectical materialism, and the once urgent question as to whether Existentialism is a progressive or a reactionary philosophy is of scant interest anywhere. Finally, while Lefebvre continually chided philosophy for its tendency towards relentless abstraction and its alienating vocabulary, his often opaque and rambling forms of expression can be forbidding and off-putting, as can his tendency to proliferate conceptual categories without always defining them carefully. Nonetheless, for all its sins of omission and of commission, Lefebvre's texts can yield rich insights into the nature of our current moment and of the century that preceded it. For anyone concerned with reclaiming the commons in our post-everything era, Lefebvre's perspectives can help turn our attention to plots of fecund earth situated right beneath our feet that we might otherwise overlook. As he put it in the third *Critique*:

Everyday life receives the debris, the remains, of allegedly superior activities; in return it furnishes such activities with their élan, with the growth that allegedly inferior activities enable. Everyday life is the common measure of both kinds of activity, their nourishing or sterile soil, their resource, the place or terrain on which they meet. (*Critique* III, 16. My translation.)

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