

Henri Lefebvre, “La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne”, 1968

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Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) is a prominent Neo-Marxist French sociologist who is regarded as “the last great classical philosopher”. Lefebvre was the first intellectual to show the importance of studying everyday life in order to reveal the functioning of the entire society. Everyday life has been generally considered an uninteresting and a banal social sphere. Lefebvre shifted the Marxist thought from a focus on the mode of production as the foundation of the capitalist modern society to a focus on daily life as the most revealing sphere of human existence. Everyday life constituted the center of Lefebvre’s thought and the basis of all his works. He wrote many books including : *Critique de la vie quotidienne* in three volumes (1947, 1962, 1981), *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (1968), *La révolution urbaine* (1970), *Le contrat de citoyenneté* (1990). In his most outstanding book entitled *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (1968), and which will be the subject of my analysis in this paper, Lefebvre calls for a return to everyday life in order to de-alienate modern society. In this book Lefebvre revolts against ‘the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption’ that mystifies our knowledge and commodifies our culture and that leaves us in a perpetual feeling of dissatisfaction.

In the prologue of his book *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, Henri Lefebvre starts with Herman Broch’s analysis of James Joyce’s Ulysse (1922). He describes Ulysse as « l’entrée du quotidien dans la pensée et la conscience, par la voie littéraire, c’est-à-dire par le langage et l’écriture ». He further maintains that through the narration of the banal details of an ordinary day in the dreary life of Léopold Bloom, Joyce was able to give a theatrical depiction of the quotidian of one man and make it the symbol of the universal modernist everyday life. He says that « Toutes les ressources du langage vont s’employer à exprimer la quotidienneté, misère et richesse. Et aussi toutes les ressources d’une musicalité cachée qui ne se sépare pas du langage et de l’écriture littéraires ». Joyce mythologized the banal by appropriating to his hero two paradoxical dimensions which are the human and the divine, the quotidian and the cosmic (p. 12) Lefebvre argues that transfiguration of the quotidian into the historic in the Modern Age was centered on the subjective experience. However, Lefebvre states that half a century later « le sujet s'est estompé, il a perdu ses faibles contours, qu'il ne

paraît même plus une source, même plus un flux ». In fact under post-modernism the representation of the quotidian has shifted its focus towards objects.

Lefebvre defines everyday life as « l'économique, ou le psychologique, ou le sociologique, objets et domaines particuliers (...) C'est la nourriture, le vêtement, l'ameublement, la maison, le logement, le voisinage, l'environnement. » (p. 46) it is in fact everything. He argues that in order to define the quotidian we have to understand the general social structure in which it is repetitively lived and one cannot understand a society unless he makes the link between the different details and habits of the quotidian. Lefebvre states that the everyday life of the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Incas and the Aztecs had a style and was not at all prosaic; however, with the advent of capitalism the prosaic mode has pervaded everything, modernity has eradicated “style” and the prose has permeated every object. Capitalist everyday life is characterized by commodity fetishism. Objects are reified. People find in consumerism the fulfillment not only of their physical needs but also of their emotional desires. Commodity has become an important aspect of everyday life.

Philosophers have neglected the study of the quotidian from their works, considering the analysis of the ordinary as an inferior and an unimportant human condition. In addition most philosophers have dismissed the idea of including the everyday into their inquiry as they deem it a non-philosophical sphere compared to the superior and ideal world of the philosophical and the imaginary. Lefebvre rejects the fact that the quotidian would be left to its own miserable fate, instead he confirms that it is the task of philosophers to reveal the internal reality of the quotidian with all its contradictions so as to change it. Lefebvre maintains that the concept of “quotidenneté” derives its origins from philosophy, and it should be taken by philosophers as a starting point for criticizing modern society.

Lefebvre examines the historical changes caused by the advent of capitalism and that have produced multiple effects on the everyday life of modern men. Lefebvre contends that everyday life comprises various opposing forces that create different forms of human alienation. The quotidian is the place where free men are under the indirect influence of the power mechanisms of the dominant political, economic and ideological system. Lefebvre wants to conduct a dialectical study that tries to comprehend the relationship between the different the real forms of alienation that are displayed in the quotidian. In the light of the historical changes produced by the development of capitalism, Lefebvre finds in Marx's dialectical materialism the basis of his analysis of the quotidian through philosophical inquiry.

Everyday life is the foundation of the entire society and both the economic and political spheres. By studying the quotidian we may reveal important features about a society such as the economic structure, people's degree of participation in the political democracy, and the dominant cultural practices.

We should have a critical outlook towards our daily life; we should maintain a distance between us and what we are scrutinizing while being critical investigators rather than passive spectators. He was the first philosopher to reveal the historic importance of studying every detail of the quotidian in order to investigate the nature and functioning of a particular society. Marx has considered that the economy is the most constitutive sphere to which every social, political and cultural phenomenon is related and through economics everything can be explained. Today, Lefebvre confirms that the quotidian will took the place of economics and it is more efficient to study some neglected details about man's leisure time, urban life and daily practices.

Lefebvre shares with existentialism its conception of the human being as conditioned by his daily existence and who has a dialectic relationship with his quotidian. For existentialists like Sartre existence precedes essence, Man exists first and then acquires his essence or in other words his nature. We cannot decide apriori what a human being will become or what is his being as every individual is a "self-making-in-a-situation"¹ (Fackenheim 1961:37). The individual makes existentialist choices everyday, he is free and hence responsible for his own choices and duties. Existentialists made an idealistic conception of man's subjective existence, they maintain that it is part of the material world and it is the subject who controls the object. They saw the alienation of the self from the world as universal and not only specific to the capitalist modern society. Lefebvre repudiated existentialism's individualistic character. Unlike the Marxists who view the self as a historic and social creation, Existentialists regard individuals as responsible for their acts because they have free conscience.

Modern everyday life characterized by technocracy and consumer culture has produced a growing sense of disenchantment. Lefebvre wrote about the terrorism of "the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" and called for the revival of a non-alienated utopian society and human fulfillment. Bourgeois democracy signaled "the end of history". Lefebvre was a revolutionary romantic intellectual who contested the rationalization of the daily life

¹ Fackenheim, E. *Metaphysics and Historicity*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press: 1961) 37

that stifled the imaginative faculty of people and explored the possibility of a positive social change emanating from the rebellious youth.

Lefebvre states that although everyday life appears natural and free from repression and control, nevertheless it is the realm where the most latent forms of repression operate. He states that repression has only been studied in the economic, institutional and ideological spheres neglecting its study in the quotidian. In fact repression and terror are pervasive in every aspect of the quotidian “Des pressions et répressions s'exercent à tous les niveaux, à tous les instants, sur tous les plans, y compris la vie sexuelle et affective, la vie privée et familiale, l'enfance, l'adolescence, la jeunesse” (p. 271). He contends that invisible forms of bureaucratic terrorism are ubiquitous in modern everyday life. Lefebvre talks about the terror caused by advertising. He takes the example of fashion; people are always in a constant race trying to follow the latest fashion, those who are unable to adopt the newest fashion and current style are ridiculed. These people can't find their place in the modern society they are in a constant fear of being unfitted and “démodé”. Everyday life in the modern era is characterized by terror and it is based on impersonal relationships between individuals; each individual tries to define himself according to his fashionability and conformity to the consumerist culture “non que la mode fasse à elle seule, isolément, régner la terreur. Mais elle fait partie intégrante-intégrée de la société terroriste. Elle fait régner une certaine terreur, une terreur certaine. Etre à la mode ou ne pas être à la mode, voici la formulation moderne de Hamlet” (p. 306). Lefebvre maintains that advertisements have become the poetry of the bureaucratic society; we are made to believe that satisfying our vanities by increasing our material possessions would bring us freedom and happiness.

Modern society, says Lefebvre, denies the “human” under the ostensible aim of helping Man. The massification of the human being has led to “individualization”; every human being is centered on himself, lives for himself, focusing on the fulfillment of his desires and selfish ambitions. Max Weber lamented that modern society has unlocked men into an “iron cage of commodities and regulations”, explaining that over rationalization related to the technological development was thought to help man tame nature and organize his social life, but in reality it has led to the loss of the old ideals giving birth to “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart” (Weber 1968b: 182). Man is looking for a meaning in the world but because he is dissolved into the mass he fetishises commodities thinking that this will restitute the lost values and ideals. Lefebvre states that individualism makes the individual responsible of his

own self who gives him many rights that would help him achieve his autonomy; these include the right of work, leisure, education, and housing.

Lefebvre wants to study everyday life with its banality while revealing the internal contradictions that cause the alienation of individuals and thus elicit how to transcend this conformist condition and bring positive social changes. For Lefebvre the most important characteristic of “la vie quotidienne” is its repetition and recurrence “Le quotidien dans sa trivialité se compose de répétitions : gestes dans le travail et hors du travail, mouvements mécaniques (ceux des mains et du corps, et aussi ceux des pièces et des dispositifs, rotation ou allers-retours), heures, jours, semaines, mois, années ; répétitions linéaires et répétitions cycliques, temps de la nature et temps de la rationalité, etc.” (p. 40) this aspect is considered the most threatening to human creativity and the awakening of their consciousness. Repetition imposes on Man a continuous rhythm, man is fully taken up in this daily cycle and used to it. He exercises his daily activity mechanically without thinking and without being able to distance himself away from it so as to criticize the mediocrity of his quotidian and get free from his enslavement by the bureaucratic society.

Women are the most vulnerable to fall into the trap of the quotidian. Lefebvre says that everyday life bears down the most on women. In fact they are in an ambiguous position as they are subjects in the quotidian and victims of the quotidian, consumers of goods and symbols in the marketing of goods (p. 143). Lefebvre argues that the ambiguity of their situation hampers their understanding of the everyday and its alienating impact on them “L’ambiguité de leur situation dans le quotidien, qui fait partie précisément de la quotidienneté et de la modernité, leur ferme l'accès à la compréhension” (p. 143) Beginning from the late 1940's modernity has brought some changes on the status of women, it altered some of its traditional obligations and gave them a sense of autonomy. Consumerism has given women a sense of self emancipation as it portrays them as active subjects capable of making choices for which commodity to buy or which brand to adopt. Consumer culture has made women more visible and their role not only restricted to the domestic domain. This private domain remained women's sphere of activity but it has become rather a more sophisticated domain where women display the latest fashions and make use of the latest technologies in their homes. Women ignore that in reality the ethos of consumerism objectifies them and renders them mere objects of sexual desires and pleasure. This new identity for women pushed Lefebvre to assert that women's historical struggle in changing the everyday life lacks organization and clear orientation, he says that: “Reléguées dans le

quotidien, elles en font une forteresse et s'efforcent d'autant plus d'en sortir, mais en éludant les implications de la conscience. D'où une protestation perpétuelle mais maladroite qui ne donne que des revendications peu orientées” (p. 176). In the same terms Lefebvre talks about the Middle classes, he depicts them as both objects and victims of the modern everyday life, they are all the time preoccupied by satisfying their desires, they are not powerful and by consumerism they get a superficial sense of fulfillment. Lefebvre argues that we cannot also depend on intellectuals for social change as they are constantly submerged in their imaginative world and have nothing but an empty rhetoric that is rarely transformed into real action. Intellectuals, according to Lefebvre, use language to escape from their quotidian rather than engaging in it. They are powerless lacking power and financial resources, and this is what makes easy their assimilation by the bureaucratic administration.

Lefebvre argues that in modern everyday life there is a prevalence of signals, he maintains that in the semantic field there has been a shift from the symbol to the sign and then to the signal. Lefebvre states that the signal conditions and regularizes daily life “il commande, il ordonne les comportements et les régularise. Il se compose d’oppositions définies par leur seule opposition (le rouge et le vert). Cependant les signaux se groupent en codes (le code de la route, exemple simple et trop connu) et constituent ainsi des réseaux contraignants » (p. 121). The “on-off” signals characterize the postmodern everyday life and symptomize its sequencing of pre-determined codes of behavior to which individuals are accustomed. Human beings no longer act according to symbols which have strong social and cultural meanings, but rather follow some instrumental signals which are thought to organize the social life. Individuals obey this abstract system of signals in their quotidian, they abide by them without questioning their origins or the commander behind them, and they do so just because these signals have been standardized and fixed. The repetitive submission to the commands of signals makes them more powerful while humans become less and less critical and reflective. Lefebvre argues that signals manipulates human beings and their consciousness : “Le glissement du champ vers le signal implique la predominance des contraintes sur les sens, la généralisation du conditionnement dans la vie quotidienne, la réduction du quotidien à une dimension (l’agencement des éléments découpés) en écartant les autres dimensions du langage et du sens, les symboles, les oppositions signifiantes. » (p. 122)

Lefebvre states that everyday life is marked by the separation between signifiers and signifieds. Words are used for the manipulative aim of propaganda and advertisements. Images and signs are detached from their signifieds. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson in

their seminal book *Sign Wars : the Cluttered Landscape of Advertising*, conducted a study on the manipulation of signs in the advertisement industry for the sake of consumption optimization, they argued that “Advertisements are always commodity narratives (...) Consumer ads typically tell stories of success, desire, happiness, and social fulfillment in the lives of the people who consume the right brands (...) In today’s consumer-goods markets, products require signs that add value to them.” (p. 2-3) In fact in the post-modern world the direct relationship between the signifier and the signified has been thrown into confusion in order to generate new signs and build new product images that give it additional values. Advertisers are always in competition for creating new images and styles for commodities that make the consumers constantly thirst for and fetishise a commodity brand name. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson concluded that “The necessity of differentiating products motivates sign competition. The competition to build images that stand out in media markets is based on a process of routinely unhinging signifiers from signifieds so that new signifier-signified relationships can be fashioned” (p. 5) Lefebvre contends that the constant disruption of the relationship between the signifiers and signifieds generates an empty world filled with multiple signs. People are just taken up by the fancy images emblazoned on TV ads, the value of things has become ephemeral, nothing has a fixed meaning, people take ads ‘meanings for granted as the presented images satisfy their vanities, they rarely notice the fragmented meanings they get from these commercials through critically observing the cluster of images of the same product.

Lefebvre contends that the modern era is marked by the appearance of new phenomena such as the segmentation of the everyday into work time, leisure time and what he calls “compulsive time” which is increasing when compared to the other moments of the day. “Compulsive time” is the moment of commuting that occurs between the work time of one person and his free time. Individuals’ work time remains fixed, it is part of the signal system that commands and regulates the social life, however “compulsive time” consumes men’s social time outside the factory. This kind of time has remarkably increased; it is part of the uneasiness produced by the capitalist society where human beings remain trapped in the exigencies of the urban life that consumes the time as well as the money of the ordinary citizen that could be better spent in socialization.

In the last chapter of *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, Lefebvre asks the question of what should be done in order to achieve a permanent cultural revolution that will make human life a work of art. Lefebvre conception of a cultural revolution is implicit in the work

of Marx, explicit in Lenin and Trotsky, and applied by Mao Tse-Tung in specific conditions (p. 370). The basic aim behind this cultural revolution is not the attainment of a revolution by and for culture, instead it seeks to create a culture that is made a style of life rather than institutionalized. Lefebvre invites for the revival of the philosophical practice for a radical cultural critic, he says that philosophy must be the theoretical base from which the cultural revolution emanate. Lefebvre insists that the revolution must not only be centered on transforming the state and the economic structure, it should however take the everyday as the site for change. It is by working on removing the alienating forces in the everyday life that we can liberate human creativity and restore the lost pre-modern values. Lefebvre states that a ‘permanent cultural revolution’ must concentrate on three main areas which are: sexual reform and revolution, urban reform and revolution, and the rediscovery of the festival (p. 373-376). The sexual revolution releases the body from all controls that restrain and alienate human beings. Lefebvre stresses the fact that sexual reform is not only concerned with the liberation of the “male-female” relations, but rather with the eradication of controls on the sexual behavior. He maintains that control on sexual activities should not be completely abolished; controls must be maintained by the individual and not enforced by institutions that terrorize us. Lefebvre says that in the modern world, eroticism has become a substitute for love (p. 317). For Lefebvre the urban revolution would follow the industrial revolution which would mark the next stage of human development and that would replace the commodity culture and transform the everyday and render it the sphere of desire and not just of need. The urban revolution can be achieved by the renewal of the festival. For Lefebvre the festival has a broader scope than the everyday, it encompasses the different forces that interact in the daily life of the individual. During the festival the antagonistic forces operating in the everyday become apparent; this is why its revival has a revolutionary bearing. It can be the basis for changing the social order and restoring harmony between the everyday life and the city.

Henri Lefebvre applied traditional Marxism and made a different criticism of capitalism by shifting the focus from the production system to the realm of everyday life. He had introduced a new modern idea of class struggle that does not limit the struggle of productive forces in the place of production but rather includes it in a broader social space which is of the quotidian. In the modern society, human beings live under the manipulation of a powerful system of mystification and alienation that gives them just an illusory sense of freedom. Because modern man is both the subject and victim of everyday life it is very important to

evoke his consciousness and de-alienate him by bringing to his knowledge the fact that it is in the sphere of the everyday that modern capitalism diffuses some “make-believes” that exacerbate the estrangement of the subject from itself and tries to render impossible any action for positive change. A radical reinvention of daily life is crucial for a revolutionary change.