

HENRI LEFEBVRE: EVERY DAY LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Written in 1971, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* is a query into how the daily lives of individuals in general and French people in particular are molded by decisions on which they do not participate. Situating his study in France during the 20th century, Henri Lefebvre applies philosophical perspectives to the analysis of everyday life, questioning the limits of the discipline with regard to finding practical solutions to issues of everyday life. The author assesses the impact of consumerism on society, analyzes linguistic phenomenon and evaluates the effect of terrorism on everyday life.

Considered as one of the most prolific French Marxist intellectuals, Henri Lefebvre showed a particular interest in analyzing and understanding the everyday life of the everyday man, thus offering an original set of works and methods to understanding the simplest elements of a society which has often been overlooked by philosophers and sociologists, usually concerned with “the big picture”. His three volumes of *Critique of Everyday Life* won him a great acclaim and respect in the intellectual world . Unlike several Marxists, philosophers or social scientists confined to the world of theories, Henri Lefebvre was a great activist and is remembered in France and in the world as one of the founders of the May 1968 social movement in France.

Everyday Life in the Modern World's context is that of the 20th century French industrial revolution when French people were experiencing a change in their everyday life characterized by the development of urbanization, the rapid acceleration of consumerism and an evolution of modern capitalism. These structural changes brought along new uncertainties and created new personal and social problems that the French people had to deal with. “The question underlying *every day life in the modern world* is what gives a society devoted to the all consuming transitory and to accelerated change the illusion of stability?” What do the everyday people hold on to, when old social ways and values are being challenged by new economic and structural developments? (p.7)

Lefebvre tries to answer these questions by applying different notions to the understanding of everyday life. In this book, in trying to understand everyday life through a philosophical perspective, Lefebvre referred to the works of Karl Marx, who, in the nineteenth century “concentrated mainly on the everyday existence of the working classes from the dual viewpoint of productive power and illusions to overcome.”

According to Lefebvre, “...a critical analysis of everyday life involves, in retrospect a particular view of history and the historicity of everyday life can only be compiled by exposing its emergence in the past...” However, “until the nineteenth century, until the advent of competitive capitalism and the expansion of the world of trade, the quotidian as such did not exist. (p.38)

The author identifies everyday life in the 20th century as a non philosophical notion which “represents reality in relation to ideality” while philosophical life is a more secluded, abstract and detached notion. Despite the proven superiority of philosophical world and philosophical realities to everyday life, solving everyday issues or troubles using a philosophical perspective has usually been unsuccessful. As the author writes, “when [philosophy] attempts to solve the riddles of reality it only succeeds in proving the unreality which is indeed implicit in its nature. It requires a realism it cannot achieve and aspires to transcend itself *qua* philosophical reality.” (p. 12) Considering this inherent contradiction and apparent opposition between the two notions of everyday life and philosophical life, the first representing “reality without truth” and the second “truth without reality” how is it possible to understand everyday life through a philosophical perspective? “Should philosophy be isolated for ever from the contamination of everyday life and detached from everyday contingencies? Is the quotidian an obstacle to the revelation of truth, an unavoidable triviality, the reverse of existence and the perversion of truth and as such another facet of existence and of truth? Either philosophy is pointless or it is the starting point from which to undertake the transformation of non philosophical reality with all its triviality and its triteness.” (p.12)

Despite the limits of philosophy in finding practical solutions to everyday troubles, Lefebvre considers that “philosophy should not serve as a barrier nor should it oppose

attempts at improving the world and perpetuate distinctions between triviality and seriousness by isolating on the one hand notions of Being, Depth and Substance, and on the other, events, appearances and manifestations.” (p.14)

Lefebvre notes that “in the nineteenth century, the axis of thought was redirected from speculation towards empirical practical realism with the works of Karl Marx and the budding social sciences forming landmarks on the line of displacement. In the social framework of freely competitive capitalism, Marx concentrated mainly on the everyday existence of the working class from the dual viewpoint of productive power and illusions to overcome. Notwithstanding the assaults of positivism and pragmatism philosophy still directs such inquiries and is alone capable of connecting fragmentary ideologies and specialized sciences; moreover, it cannot be dispensed with if we want to understand the essence and existence, the real or imaginary responsibilities, the potentialities and limitations of mankind and there is no method to equal it in linking and assessing disconnected material. This is because philosophy, through the wide range of its interests, projects the image of a complete human being, free, accomplished, fully realized, rational, yet real.” (p. 12)

The notion of truth should be at the service of reality and thus philosophy, despite its apparent limits truly possesses the qualities to analyze everyday life and thus brings reality and everyday life to a higher understanding of the truth about each society.

In orienting philosophy towards the realities of everyday life, Lefebvre “directs the course of the discipline away from its traditional objectives.” He argues that the particularity of the philosopher is his capacity “to retain a certain philosophical outlook” when confronted with the realities of everyday life. This philosophical outlook “is foreign to everyday man, who, in such a predicament, finds himself completely bewildered, though he is capable, when required of taking risks.” (p.17) Instead of representing a limit, the capacity of the philosopher to embrace the larger image within which everyday life is portrayed as well as the capacity to grasp the links between the everyday riddles and the interconnections of the larger societal structures, makes him a qualified person to tackle these issues.

The analysis of everyday life “exposes the possibilities of conflict between the rational and the irrational in our society and our time” and offers several disciplines, including philosophy, the opportunity to adequately link the reality of everyday life to the unreality of philosophy “thus permitting the formulation of concrete problems of production...” (p.23)

While “the philosopher sees everyday life as the repository of mysteries and wonders that elude his discipline”, everyday man's reality is a constant “search for security” in a context where possessions and needs seem more relevant and important than any spiritual quest. (p.18)

As such, Lefebvre analyzes the impact of consumerism on any given society. According to the author, “satisfaction” has become the “aim...and the official justification” of our society in such a way that “every known and imagined need is or will be satisfied.” (p.79)

The satisfaction implies a saturation of the need, and when this is reached for a need, a vacuum is created that needs to be filled. The strategy of the consumer society is then to create the desire for new needs to be satisfied. Within this context, when the acquisition of material items in order to satisfy real or imagined needs become the cement or the objective of a society, social values are undeniably pushed aside. As Lefebvre writes, “values generally undergo a general crisis where satiety is generalized; there is a slump of ideas, philosophy, art and culture, significance vanishes to re-emerge in disguise; a void makes itself felt...” (p. 80)

However, “satiety cannot provide an end, is devoid of finality and of meaning. For a distinction must be made between satisfaction, pleasure and happiness.” The more individuals run after the satisfaction of their every material need, the less happy they become. The satisfaction of a determined need might provide a temporary feeling of pleasure but once that feeling is gone, there's an emptiness that installs itself and one realizes that satisfaction doesn't necessarily bring happiness. It is the case in some societies and in particular the western society where consumerism has become the finality of every individual or groups of individuals. The capitalist system of production creates

imaginary needs in order to incite the population to keep buying and consuming in order to have a good and “healthy” economic system. However, one notices that the more there are consumer goods and the more individuals satisfy their needs, the less happy they really are. (p.80)

The “remarkable economic expansion” of the 20th century, with an abundance of consumer goods, technology and all types of material development seems to have been achieved without or at the price of a real human development. Everyday life within the context of capitalist expansion is limited to the satisfaction of material needs and the search for material security. The population is unconsciously reproducing roles imposed on them by the dominant classes. The masses need to be satisfied in order to avoid a revolt. Their preoccupations are oriented towards everyday troubles such as paying the bills, filling the fridge, paying school fees... and they cannot focus on the real issues affecting their everyday lives. In everyday life, the every day man is “circumscribed by his possessions and his needs”, (p.17-18) Henri Lefebvre considered that the population must free itself from this quotidian whose realities and riddles have been dictated by the dominant classes. (p.80)

Still with regard to the consumer society, Lefebvre expressed his regrets that most intellectuals adopted a bureaucratic approach to the analysis of this society. They “elaborate sub-systems and specific codes to organize a society, that in turn organizes everyday life in approximate categories such as environment, dwellings, furnishings, horoscopes, tourism, cookery, fashions.[...] These honest theoreticians impose their own limits to their endeavors and refuse to question invisible patterns, ignore the significant absence of a general code.” (p.74)

According to Lefebvre, in a consumer society, “language and linguistic relations become denials of everyday life.” Language whose function is to “to denote and describe situations” becomes an objective in itself in such a way that it shifts from being a means of communication to becoming an end. Communications in the everyday life of the modern world are devoid of real meaning as the focus is no longer on the message being conveyed but on the means used to convey that message. Consequently, “active groups,

with their active relations communicating through reference to habits objects and objectives are replaced by groups whose relations are based on formal communication.” (p.120)

Henri Lefebvre noted that the consumer society eventually evolves into a terrorist society. A concept which Lefebvre distinguishes as “any society involving, on the one hand, poverty and want and on the other a privileged class (possessing and administrating, exploiting, organizing and obtaining for its own ends, as much social overtime as possible, either for ostentatious consumption or for accumulation or indeed for both purposes at once).” This society is “maintained by the dual method of (ideological) *persuasion* and *compulsion* (punishment, laws and codes, courts, violence kept in store to prevent violence, overt violence, armed forces, police...)” For a society to become a terrorist one, it goes through different stages of repression. (p.144)

The author considered that “the basis of repression is a controlled balance of *sexuality* and *fecundation*.” Through different stages, every society has been faced with the issue of limited resources and unlimited needs; in order to survive on a limited amount of resources, the “number [of people] had to be limited.” Thus, the one component of the society which had to be controlled has usually been the population. This solution has been used over and over again through birth control, the imposition of celibacy, when the numbers needed to be reduced. On the other hand, when the active population capable of producing declined, other arguments such as sexuality as a duty to procreate and not a pleasurable act were used to stimulate a population growth. At different stages, the ruling class also felt repressed. Thus Lefebvre considered that it is inexact to “restrict an analysis of repression to economic conditions or to institutions and ideologies; both attitudes omit the important factor of everyday life, of the pressures and repressions at all levels, at all times and in every sphere of experience including sexual and emotional experience, private and family life...(p 145)

The first stage of a terrorist society is a repressive society which evolves into an over repressive one. This society “modifies the conditions of repression, its methods, means

and foundations...it directs adaptation into the channels of purely private experience.”
(p.147)

A terrorist society is the final stage and the logical and structural outcome of an over-repressive society. The distinction between *other directed* and *inner directed* conscience is abolished since what now plays the part of the inner is the other disguised, integrated and justified. The repression is no longer directed by an outside force but in everyday life, individuals who have come to accept and even justify the ideologies of the terrorist society “auto-pressurize themselves.”

To illustrate this, consider women in a terrorist society. They go to great lengths to assume the roles of the emancipated female that they think are expected of them. They auto pressurize themselves into achieving as much or even more than the masculine sex, convinced that emancipation means “ being able to do exactly what men do.” In most cases, a woman with a professional life and thus theoretically “emancipated” is still expected to fulfill the tasks traditionally assigned to “housewives.” Trying to fit in this terrorist society where she feels the pressure from both her professional and private life, she turns into a “superwoman”, killing herself at work and at home to prove that she is a modern woman. Meanwhile, she is privately miserable since she realizes that she was cheated out of this “emancipation phenomena.” However, she will publicly declare her happiness and express her pride at being able to have a professional and a fulfilling life.

Henri Lefebvre considers that a terrorist society differs from a violent reign where political terror is used during a short period to establish and maintain a dictatorship. In this case, only a faction of the society is exercising terror. In a terrorist society, every member of the society is a potential terrorist since pressure is felt from all sides and violence is latent. Every member of that society wants to have some sort of power. Everyone feels the need to “walk” on someone else in order to assert their power, to feel superior. (p. 147)

Objectors to the notion of a terrorist society often consider that “as long as the living conditions are improved and the elementary needs of the population are catered for” it doesn't matter if in the process, the population loses some of its freedom. (p.149)

In this book, Henri Lefebvre demonstrates how the capitalist system of production negatively influences the every day life of the ordinary man. His analysis is still valuable today as many societies especially in the western world have evolved into a terrorist society. Unfortunately, very few people are able today of considering the whole picture of the economic and public system and see how public decisions affect their everyday lives. The development of the consumer society has blinded the majority of the population who feel trapped into the pattern of “work, pay the bills and do not question the system.” Intellectuals in general and philosophers as well as social scientists today have also unfortunately embraced bureaucratic notions of study, unable to provide a comprehensive analysis of the social phenomena.