

possibility of a beginning, an access. Everyday experience radically questions the initial exigency. The idea of creation is inadmissible, when it is a matter of accounting for existence as it is borne by the everyday.

To put this another way, everyday existence never had to be created. This is exactly what the expression il y a du quotidien [there is the everyday] means. Even if the affirmation of a creating God were to be imposed, there is (there is already when there is not yet being, what there is still when there is nothing) would remain irreducible to the principle of creation; and there is the human everyday.

The everyday is our portion of eternity: the *eternality* of which [the symbolist poet] Jules Laforgue speaks. So that the *Lord's Prayer* would be secretly impious: give us our daily bread, give us to live according to the daily existence that leaves no place for a relation between Creator and creature. Everyday man is the most atheist of men. He is such that no God whatsoever could stand in relation to him. And thus one understands how the man in the street escapes all authority, whether it be political, moral or religious.

For in the everyday we are neither born nor do we die: hence the weight and the enigmatic force of everyday truth.

In whose space, however, there is neither true nor false.

1 [footnote 4 in source] Georg Lukács, *L'Âme et les formes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Homme de la rue', in *Nouvelle revue française*, no. 114 (Paris, June 1962); reprinted as 'La Parole quotidienne', in Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); trans. Susan Hanson, 'Everyday Speech', in *Yale French Studies*, no. 73 (1987) 12-20.

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Sometime in 1946, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre discovered the quotidian.¹ He discovered it, that is, in the sense that he proclaimed that most insignificant of categories, the everyday, to be worthy of theoretical attention. And he went on to spend the next several decades, until his death in 1991, paying very close attention to that rapidly changing and elusive phenomenon, French everyday life, first on his own and then in the company of countless fellow travellers. The fact that postwar France in a sense 'caught up' with Lefebvre, that

the 1950s and 1960s were awash in a kind of sociological fascination on the part of novelists, sociologists, historians and filmmakers with the transformed rhythms and accoutrements of daily lived experience, should not lessen the audacity of the discovery Lefebvre made right after the war. For here was a serious thinker elevating to the status of a theoretical concept what in the minds of most other thinkers was nothing more than the drudgery of routine, or at the very least that which constituted the *non-philosophical* par excellence. In interviews, much later, Lefebvre placed his groundbreaking work in context. Wasn't it in the nature of theoretical thought to investigate the trivial? Hadn't Marx done the same thing by analysing that most banal of activities – work? And what could be more ordinary than sexuality, which, once raised to the level of a concept by Freud, had generated countless theoretical edifices?

But to see in Lefebvre's work on the everyday nothing more than a neutral philosophical investigation, an exercise in pure thought, would be an error. For from the outset of his project, Lefebvre made it clear that to formulate the quotidian as a concept, to wrench it from the continuum in which it is embedded (or better yet, the continuum that it *is*), to expose it, examine it, give it a history, is already to form a critique of it. And to do so is to wish for and work towards change, transformation, a revolution in the very nature of advanced capitalist society in the second half of the twentieth century.

Seen in this light, the moment of Lefebvre's discovery, 1946, takes on added significance. The Liberation and the end of the war unleashed in France a euphoria and a sense of unlimited possibilities; for a brief time, life was lived differently, and the hope was that it might continue to be so. But the promise of social transformation gave way to a gradual submersion in old, daily patterns and routines. As the trappings of the everyday re-emerged, they appeared for a brief moment as alien, unnatural – not inevitable. Having been disrupted and thrown into question by the utopian optimism of the Liberation, old routines were suddenly all the more palpable and visible – and thus all the more difficult to bear.

From his experience of this turbulent mixture of freedom and inexorability, from a historical moment that combined the Resistance impetus towards national renovation with the cold war strictures that lay just around the corner, Lefebvre derived his emphasis on the inherent ambiguity of the quotidian. Earlier thinkers like Lukács and Heidegger (and Lefebvre himself in the 1930s) had, to very different philosophical purposes, presented the everyday as simply a negative category: dull, ordinary, rote existence, the dreary unfolding of trivial repetition. But Lefebvre, whose little book on dialectical materialism published in 1940 would provide many French youth with their earliest instruction in dialectical thinking, insisted on a more contradictory formulation.² Certainly the everyday consisted of that which is taken for granted: the sequence of regular,

unvarying repetition. But in that very triviality and baseness lay its seriousness, in the poverty and tedium of the routine lay the potential for creative energy. After all, people do not make revolutions because of abstract ideological principles; they make them because they want to change their lives. In the words of Michel Trebitsch, writing in the preface to the English edition of Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, everyday life in the modern world is not simply a residuum, 'it is both a parody of lost plenitude and the last remaining vestige of that plenitude'.³ Even at its most degraded, in other words, the everyday harbours the possibility of its own transformation.

In France a popular series of books exists which sets out to resurrect and document the lost daily habits of distant ages and civilizations – those of monks in Florence during the Renaissance, for example, or of Corsican shepherds in the thirteenth century. But to read books like these, Lefebvre argued, was to discover how much everyday life was absent from rural, premodern communities. In pre-industrial societies, he maintained, Church and monarch held sway, imparting a distinct imprint or style – and thus significance – to every gesture, utensil or article of clothing. Lefebvre's view of style seemed to allude to an almost poetic effect, a kind of aesthetic unification of the most trivial acts and objects into a meaningful cultural whole. As the power of the Church and the aristocracy declined, that auratic sense of cultural unity disintegrated as well. 'Everyday life', properly speaking, came into being only with the rise of the masses, when European cities began to swell with the arrival of large numbers of newcomers, when the lived experience of those new urban dwellers became organized, channelled and codified into a set of repetitive and hence visible patterns, when markets became common between the provinces and the capital, when everything – money, work hours, miles, calories, minutes – became calculated and calculable, and when objects, people and the relations between them changed under the onslaught of such quantification. Only then, midway through the last century, and only there, in the large Western metropolises, did the world, in Lefebvre's words, 'turn to prose'.

Everyday life, then, was a distinctly modern, a *bourgeois* phenomenon. We might imagine it lurching into being around the time that Baudelaire attempted to capture its vicissitudes in his essay on sketches by Constantin Guys. But if everyday life was a nineteenth-century development, it became an object of theory only during the post-World War II era. In 1961, fourteen years after the publication of the first volume of the *Critique*, in the face of the enormous changes wrought by the state-led modernization effort of the preceding decade, Lefebvre felt the need to return to the subject of the quotidian. In an anecdote he was fond of recounting, he attributed his return to the topic to a banal domestic incident: returning home from shopping one day, his wife held up a box of

laundry soap and announced, 'This is an excellent product'. Was the peculiar tone of her voice an unconscious imitation of the advertising slogans heard daily on the radio? In the 1950s and 1960s, something that could be called Americanism (or multinational capital, in another formulation) was insinuating itself into France not by means of any heavy-handed ideological takeover but precisely through the quotidian: blue jeans, car culture, cleaning products.

Lefebvre was far from alone in perceiving French society's gradual adoption of American-style consumption practices. Between 1957 and 1969, a fringe group of cultural activists, the Situationists, irregularly published an inspired journal of social critique called *L'Internationale Situationniste* whose subject was primarily the new patterns of consumption that had solidified after the war, as well as the image culture that fuelled that consumption.⁴ The Situationists took to interpreting Lefebvre's concept of everyday life in an essentially spatial way; their 'research', conducted as a series of day- or week-long 'drifts' (*dérives*) through the streets of Paris, was designed to map the psychological and political ambiances produced by the material organization of urban space. For the Situationists, changing everyday life meant transforming the space and texture of urban experience; to do so, the city would have to be surveyed for those elements, constructions and interstitial spaces that might be salvaged from the dominant culture, and, once isolated, put to new use in a utopian reconstruction of social space.

Other social theorists and novelists turned their attention to the changes transpiring in postwar French lived experience. In 1957 Lefebvre's friend and neighbour, Roland Barthes, published a collection of the occasional journalistic pieces he had been spurred into writing about such ordinary events as a wrestling match or the arrival of the new Citroën onto the floors of the yearly Salon de l'Automobile.⁵ With *Mythologies*, cultural studies *à la française* was born. Much of the source material for Barthes' studies came from women's magazines like *Elle* or *Marie-Claire*, born or reborn to enormous circulation after the war, whose pages provided a veritable roadmap of the quotidian. On those newly glossy pages, the products, appliances and domestic landscapes of daily life were proudly displayed next to informative 'how to' articles, step-by-step prescriptions for acquiring the compartments and gestures necessary for adapting to alien settings of chrome and Formica. (American movies, inundating France after the war, also helped make the new domestic spaces of 'the ideal home' seem more natural, the already sedimented background to neat, realistic film narrative.) Social theorists like Edgar Morin, Barthes and Lefebvre were not alone in plumbing the depths of women's journalism. Simone de Beauvoir and Perec wrote novelistic parodies of the upbeat tone of the emergent advertising discourse: the poetry of modernity.⁶

Behind such widespread immersion in the analysis of the quotidian on the part of sixties thinkers and artists, we might detect at least three critical perceptions still relevant in the France of today: First, that women 'undergo' the everyday – its humiliations and tediums as well as its pleasures – more than men. The housewife, that newly renovated postwar creation, is mired in the quotidian; she cannot escape it. Second, that the 'centre of interest' in French culture had been displaced away from work towards leisure, the family and private life. And third, that the daily existence of the streamlined middle-class couples who played such a starring role in the French modernization effort after the war, as well as in countless film and novelistic representations, transpired in an urban setting, much as they might hanker for (and in some instances acquire) a vacation home in the Dordogne.

By the year 1968, France had reached the summit of its economic miracle, the peak of postwar prosperity. But with the abundance of material goods and the widespread illusion of equal access to those goods, new scarcities that were not precisely reducible to the economic came to the forefront, scarcities like those of space or desire that Lefebvre would locate squarely in the realm of the quotidian. These lacks and dissatisfactions, among others, provided a project for the student activists of May 1968; the critique of everyday life gave them a theoretical perspective that was not turned toward the past or preoccupied with classical historical models. May '68 was a brief moment when, for the first time, and by way of paths that are still now very poorly understood, critical thinking rejoined practice.

The literature devoted to rethinking the notion of the everyday after 1968 reflected a sensibility disabused of what came to be seen as the naïveté of hope for social transformation. As such, it was in line with the generalized retreat, on the part of French intellectuals, from the historical materialism and ideological analysis of the 1960s. Writers like Michel de Certeau, in his *L'Invention du quotidien* (1980), in effect 'reinvented' the quotidian.⁷ Their new, more contentedly phenomenological quotidian dispensed with Lefebvre's emphasis on critique or transformation, and instead celebrated the homely practices – cooking, hobbies, strolling – of life as it is lived in the here and now by individuals intent on escaping the rationalist grids of modern administration. Everyday life for Certeau was a 'complex geography of social ruses'⁸ played out on the interstices of bureaucratic surveillance by the relatively powerless, a group that had given up any hope for a change in their circumstances. In his work, the everyday coincides with the actual order of things, which is 'precisely what "popular" tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it is about to change'.⁹

Art and social thought do not develop in a lockstep relation to each other.

They follow staggered, semi-autonomous paths, sometimes intersecting and communicating with each other at the same time, sometimes across decades and generations (and sometimes, it must be said, not at all). A case could be made, for example, that it was Henri Lefebvre's close friendship with Tristan Tzara, and his immersion in the Surrealist and Dadaist culture of the 1920s, that provided the groundwork for his articulation of a critique of the quotidian after World War II. In the 1990s artists and intellectuals alike, attuned to the question of the everyday, confront problems that are in one sense new: they are dealing not with a scarcity of theoretical materials or a lack of awareness of the quotidian, but rather with an abundance of such materials – a kind of surplus of knowledge. [...]

- 1 The first volume of Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne* was first published by Grasset in 1947 and republished by Arche with an expanded preface in 1958. Two subsequent volumes were published in 1961 and 1981. *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris: Arche, 1958–81); volume 1 trans. John Moore as *The Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 2 See Henri Lefebvre, *Le Matérialisme dialectique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940); trans. John Sturrock, *Dialectical Materialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968).
- 3 Michel Trebitsch, preface, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, xxiv.
- 4 *L'Internationale Situationniste: 1958–69* (Paris: Champ Libre, first published by Van Gennepe, Amsterdam, 1970). [...] For further study of the relationship between the Situationists and Lefebvre, see Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, eds, *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987).
- 5 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957); English translation by Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972).
- 6 See Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles images* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); trans. Patrick O'Brian, *Les Belles Images* (New York: Putnam, 1968). Georges Perec, *Les Choses* (Paris: Rene Julliard, 1965); trans. David Bellos, *Things* (Boston: Godine, 1990). For an analysis of the culture of postwar French modernization, see my *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995).
- 7 Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien: Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); trans. Stevan Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
- 8 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 26.

Kristin Ross, extract from 'French Quotidian', in *The Art of the Everyday: The Quotidian in Postwar French Culture*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 1997) 19–30.