

Henri Lefebvre: A Brief Review

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Abstract: *This paper elaborates on the French Romantic Revolutionary Henri Lefebvre's theorization of everyday life, who construed everyday life as a site for production, consumption, socialization, alienation and resistance. The author particularly rejects the commonsensical and dismissive construction of everyday life as "mundane, trivial, unobserved" and sides with Lefebvre's understanding who saw everyday life as one that disentangles the nuances of the relationship between individual and history and offers an understanding of the course of the transformation of the world we live in. The author argues that Lefebvre was against the reduction of everyday life to "everyday things and practices", or to a life contesting the philosophical, supernatural, sacred, and the artistic"; for him, the everydayness of life lies in "manifold lived experiences" which revolve around such culturally embedded things and practices. Against conventional Marxist thinking, Lefebvre argues that daily life is the "base" from which the mode of production endeavours to constitute itself as a system, to programme this base. The author gives an outline of the new areas of research in the field of sociology of everyday life and drops some important methodological hints.*

Keywords: *Everyday life, everydayness, epistemology, bureaucratic society, controlled consumption, everyday resistance.*

It is well-known that Henri Lefebvre (1901-1999), the critical everyday study scholar, was committed to the knowledge-led transformation of the human condition initially and mainly in West European capitalism, but later in socialism in the Soviet Union and East European societies. That was the Enlightenment project via Marx. He was a critique of the "sacred" knowledge-forming practices, which he stigmatized as "bourgeois". A good part of the reason for hesitation about being driven by a specific theory or by a

couple of theories committed to a single epistemology is the fact:

- that the concept of every day may elude sufficient objectification to think up what instances and examples of some processual attributes define a time-space bound every day.
- that a concept is polysemous keeps open the possibility of multiple curiosities, otherwise foreclosed by manual-based "operationalization" of a concept for the sake of easy replication.

Henri Lefebvre cherished the polysemy of the notions of everyday and everydayness. What he was against was the systematic diminishing of the diversity of both everyday and everydayness. Ben Highmore and Kathleen Stewart are good advocates of this Lefebvorean quintessence.

Everyday life is a vague and problematic phrase. Any assumption that is simply "out there" as a palpable reality to be gathered up and described, should face an immediate question: Whose everyday life?¹

Ordinary effects are the varied surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergencies. (Stewart 2007)²

But they are not against the theory. Many works on everyday phenomena are only implicitly theoretical: 'aphoristic [that is, a succinct statement expressing an opinion or a general truth], descriptive, and evocative.' The book, *Ordinary Affects*, is not theoretical in the sense of being a theoretical disquisition [that is, a long formal essay or discussion on a subject]; rather, 'it is implicitly theoretical in its inquisitive commitments and its descriptive style.' They are against making theory explicit which may make a theory un-amalgamated in the rest of the research: Ben Highmore comments:

...there is nothing explicit here that can simply be extracted and applied to something else, no easily borrowed system of thought or analysis, no quotable paragraph that would underwrite a methodology. Stewart's pedagogy is deep and performative. As you read the book you become more and more alert to your surroundings. Your skin begins to prickle with the apprehensions of the lives of others, of resonances of care and indifference, of anxiety and ease.³

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How does Lefebvre conceive everyday/everydayness?

'The everyday can [...] be defined as a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct. Thus defined, the everyday is a product, the most general of products in an era where production engenders consumption, and where consumption is manipulated by producers: not by "workers," but by the managers and owners of the means of production (intellectual, instrumental, scientific). The everyday in this sense is the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden. A condition stipulated for the legibility of forms, ordained using functions, inscribed within structures, the everyday constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected.¹⁴ Thus, it is a level between the individual and history and continues to have much potential for an understanding of the transformation of the world we live in. Everyday cannot be reduced to only everyday things and practices. This is because everydayness lies in "manifold lived experiences" which revolve around such culturally embedded things and practices. Further, 'daily life is not counterposed in some binary opposition to the nonquotidian: [like] the philosophical, the supernatural, the sacred, the artistic'. Against conventional Marxist thinking, Lefebvre argues that daily life 'is the "base" from which the mode of production endeavours to constitute itself as a system, to programming this base'.

It depends on what explanatory depth one intends to take the concept of everyday to. Thus, again, the core of the critical studies of this genre is that its scholars take every day/ every night as their analytical point of departure that it is a space for subjectification and resistance, for struggle and winning or losing and for continuity and change. This frame of analysis has an agenda of locating myriad processes of conformity: conformity secured through socialization which lends it an appearance of willing conformity, a show of conformity under threat of sanction and succumbing under coercion, and conformity obtained through manipulation.

In this conception resistance has a critical place for resistance:

- " repelling elite coercion through their overt resistance activities⁵ [however, the very gestures of resistance entail a departure from routine, until/unless resistance becomes everyday activity say for insurgents in a protracted resistance// or a two-layered everyday life emerges.]

" Mimetic challenges as constituents of James Scott's notion of the weapons of the weak, in which the normative discourses of the elite are mobilized for the subordinate actors.⁶

As a process, such resistance

- is an oppositional act.
- is situated in a certain time, space and relations,
- engages with different (types of) actors, techniques and discourses; hence articulations of oppositional acts are plural.
- is a practice (neither a certain consciousness, intent, recognition nor an outcome), historically entangled with (everyday) power (not separated, dichotomous or independent)
- is intersectional as the powers it engages (not engaging with one single power relation)
- is heterogenic and contingent due to changing contexts and situations (not a universal strategy or unitary action form)⁷
- Notably, everyday resistance (Scott 1985) is one example of a shared conceptualization among the critical everyday scholars within the folds of subaltern, feminist, cultural, queer, peasant and post-structural studies.

How, then one should grasp every day and everydayness based on the above-mentioned concept of everyday

- For those who seek to represent what happens every day at the surface level, their normal recourse is to narration: the recounting of the sequence of events.
- However, for those who move beneath the surface of everyday practices and engage in a narrative, that is, 'the communication (telling, recounting) of a sequence of happenings or events by establishing a meaningful connection between them', the task is complex.
- It should be noted in this connection that the latter ["meaningful connection between them"] is marked by narrative supervenience that involves 'prioritizing certain narrational organizing concepts denoting certain forces in the past' which 'supervened over (or determined) others'. Theory and philosophy play a critical part in the narratives of everyday, as they do in conceptualizing every day.

The works of Lefebvre are the best examples. We need to note also the meaning of "supervene", namely, something which ensues, follows or succeeds - the following or beginning of something unforeseen or unpredictable. Supervene means something that interrupts.

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The above is based on a critique of the so-called bourgeois way of comprehension:

- more specifically, a radical critique of structural-functionalism led and infected research methodology - early positivism, particularly,
- hence a felt need among the early everyday scholars to turn to the qualitative method much of which was also named the humanist method.

I have called this the sensitive way of knowing.

Hence, Lefebvre proposed:

a radical re-constitution of the epistemology of those consciously or unconsciously contributing to the critical everyday scholarship which entailed redefining the disciplines also. He proposed and worked towards this. He felt the need for a philosophically grounded Sociology: because Sociology could only perform a critical function if it formed part of a more ambitious examination of the human condition under capitalism and [Soviet-type] socialism, philosophical. He demanded the reconstruction of Sociology unhindered by any official dogma. This reconstruction should also avoid quantitative sociology. Because sticking to enumerations and classifications cannot exhaust reality. Also to be avoided is participatory sociology, that is, the sociology of surveys and questionnaires postulating a spontaneity of the social. This is because imperative quantification eliminates - the qualitative in time and space.

He made another round of important observations, like:

- critical knowledge of daily life does not require special or perfect knowledge, distinct from everyday discourse...we should use only such words as possess meaning - and only one meaning only
- there is no need to invent a different vocabulary, syntax, or para-

digm from the one that is present in the discourse.

- this rules out proof but does not preclude the element of play and risk inherent in any conversational discourse.

On the researchability of his ideas regarding everyday life,

- he makes a candid admission that a programme of empirical and theoretical research presented in the first volume has proved too difficult to achieve.
- he concedes that the real difficulty begins when concepts which are new and as yet not fully clarified come into confrontation with a mass of empirical documentation, and when our thinking is prepared neither to give up those concepts in return for innumerable observations nor to give up facts in return for a conceptual abstraction.
- hence, it must blaze its trail between philosophical reflections and fragmented and specialized research.

However, he is confident that:

- Knowledge and genuine thought pass methodically from the individual scale to the social and national scale (by a process of thought comparable to the mathematical integration of very small elements).
- Both also transcend the temporality and locality of specific everyday experiences.

We need to recall his research, namely,

- Henry Lefebvre, and Catherine Régulier, *Attempts at the Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities* (1986)
- Henry Lefebvre, ed., *Writings on the Cities* (1996)
- Proposed and worked out Rhythm analysis as a tool of analysis rather than just an object of it.

Henri Lefebvre stands out with three volumes which announce his critical intention in their titles: *Critique of Everyday Life 1: Introduction* (1947), *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* (1961), and *Critique of Everyday Life: From Modernity to Modernism* (1981). The other thinkers placed with him include Karl Marx (1818-83), on whose philosophy Lefebvre's "critical Marxism" rests, and Friedrich Engels (1820-95), Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Georg Lukacs (1885-1971) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). By another count, the list is fuller: Mikhail M. Bakhtin

(1895-1975), Agnes Heller (1929 -), Michel de Certeau (1925-86) and Dorothy E. Smith (1926-2022).

Notes

1. Ben Highmore, ed., *Everyday Life: Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002: 1
2. Stewart, Kathleen, *Ordinary Affects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, Durham, 2007: 2.
3. Ben Highmore on Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* in Ben Highmore, 'Something Ordinary', review of Kathleen Stewart. *Ordinary Affects*, *Cultural Theory* Vol. 1, Issue 1, Winter 2010:5.
4. Henri Lefebvre, Levich, Christine, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', *Yale French Studies*, No. 73, *Everyday Life*:7-11, 1987. Lefebvre, Henri and Mehretu, Julie, *The Everyday and Everydayness: Two Works Series* Vol. 3, London: Afterall Books.
5. Hobson and Seabrooke, *Everyday Politics and World Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 16.
6. Davies, Matt, 'Everyday Life as critique: Revisiting the Everyday in IPE with Henri Lefebvre and Postcolonialism'. *International Political Sociology*, Volume 10, Issue 1, March 2016: 22-38,
7. Vinthagen, Stellan and Johansson, Anna "'Everyday Resistance": Exploration of a Concept and its Theories ', *Resistance Studies Magazine*, 2013, No. 1.

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