
Review essay. The whole and the rest: Remi Hess and *les lefebvriens français*[†]

- I -

2009 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Henri Lefebvre's masterpiece, *La somme et le reste* (S&R 2009a), one of the greatest 20th-century philosophy books and the greatest text of confessional Marxism. [Only Louis Althusser's *The Future Lasts a Long Time* (1993) comes close in this latter respect.] Written between 1957 and 1958, when Lefebvre worked at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, this two-volume 800-page tome—still unforgivably off limits to non-French readers—let everything rip, loosened every shackle. Lefebvre was about to quit the Communist Party, to expel himself, departing from the leftwing. Stalin's misdeeds were now public; the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary had disgusted many communists, Lefebvre included. Here was Lefebvre's heart laid bare, his taking stock of the past, his settling of accounts—with the Party, with Stalinism, with fascism, with himself. The book, Lefebvre often joked, could have easily borne a subtitle: “the art of making an enemy of oneself!” (cited in Hess, 2009a, page 102).

S&R was a personal ‘inventory’ of a turbulent thirty-year interwar and postwar epoch: nostalgic reminiscences share space with stinging rebuttals, historical analyses with political polemics, portraits of friends with pillories of enemies (and vice versa), literary set pieces with poems that hint of Rimbaud and Mallarmé—all bound together by dense philosophical disquisitions and brilliant Marxist delineations of alienation and existentialism. For Lefebvre, *S&R* “speaks of deliverance, of happiness regained” (1973, page 11); here, for everybody to see, for everybody to understand, are the struggles and delights of a life in philosophy as well as the pitfalls befalling a philosopher in life. The spirit of Rousseau seems close by; yet we also suspect Lefebvre remembers Dostoevsky's underground man's warning: vanity will always force men to fictionalize themselves. Few scholars today could match Lefebvre's prosaic powers or his grip on the times. Fewer still could ever dream up such an idiosyncratic book. And even fewer, if any, Anglophone publishers would touch such a text with a barge pole. (Verso, though, has long fantasized about having the book on its list.)

But this is France, remember, and here philosophy plays an utterly different role in public life compared with either the US or the UK. Indeed, philosophy is vividly present in public life; *philo* books frequently top French bestseller lists (cf Michel Onfray's or Luc Ferry's, or Alain Badiou's most recent); and even giant doorstops like the brand new *La somme et le reste*, the all-in-one Economica-Anthropos edition (spanning 775 pages), somehow seem worthy of republication.⁽¹⁾ Since the rerelease of *La production de l'espace* in 2000, *S&R* is Anthropos's ninth reissued Lefebvre book,

† Books under review:

Lefebvre H, 2009a *La somme et le reste* (Anthropos, Paris)

Lefebvre H, 2009b *Le droit à la ville* (Anthropos, Paris)

Hess R, 2009a *Henri Lefebvre et la pensée du possible: théorie des moments et construction de la personne* (Anthropos, Paris)

Costes L, 2009 *Henri Lefebvre, le droit à la ville: Vers la sociologie de l'urbain* (Ellipses, Paris)

Lethierry H, 2009 *Penser avec Henri Lefebvre, sauver la vie et la ville?* (La chronique sociale, Lyon)

Lefebvre H, 2007 *Le cœur ouvert* (Cercle Historique de l'Arribère, Navarrenx)

⁽¹⁾ Anthropos's is the fourth reprint of *S&R*. La Nef de Paris did a two-volume first edition in 1959; in 1973, the Swiss publisher Béliaste reprinted Volume 2, with a new preface penned by Lefebvre's own hand; and then, in 1989, Méridiens-Klincksieck published an abridged single-volume edition.

each realized under the loving and diligent auspices of former student, friend and biographer Remi Hess, a professor of sociology at the University of Paris VIII, who has put his hand to prefacing (or afterwording) every new *Anthropos* Lefebvre edition to date. In the process, Hess has skillfully and perhaps unwittingly (or perhaps not) become the unofficial executor of Lefebvre's intellectual estate, *the* authority responsible for the transmittance of Lefebvre's Francophone legacy.

And yet, as Hess points out in his (and Gabriele Weigand's) preface to the latest *S&R*, on native shores Lefebvre's legacy is a rather strange one. In the twenty years between 1988—when Hess's *Henri Lefebvre et l'aventure du siècle* was first published—and 2008, no other French language book-length study devoted itself to Lefebvre's work. (In Brazil, by contrast, ten books on Lefebvre have come out since 2001 alone. In the Anglosphere, three monographs and one edited collection have appeared since 1999.⁽²⁾) Meanwhile, despite the fact that *La production de l'espace* has been more or less in print since 1974, Hess says sales pale compared with its English counterpart. In the whole of France, in its entire philosophy and sociology program, outside of Hess's own institution, only the sociology department at the University of Grenoble teaches Lefebvre on its curriculum. Thus, Hess concludes, “the center of Lefebvrian studies is firmly overseas.”

Why, one might wonder, is this the case? Hess's response is simple: because Lefebvre had “a lot of enemies” (2009b, page ix). His life and thought pivoted on *confrontation*—confrontation on the page and confrontation in practice, in real life, in people's faces. Not everybody was amused. “Lefebvre”, says Hess, “is a victim of the relegation of authors who refused the system; he contested the cathedral of concepts”, contested the establishment status quo (2009a, page 70). And *they* have not forgotten: he is a man the French no longer want to remember, a philosopher tarnished by his communist past, too communist for philosophers, too philosophical for communists.⁽³⁾ In Anglo-Saxon countries, Lefebvre's political past is seldom stated, or else rarely fully understood. Rather, he has a glittering ‘academic’ shelf-life as an innovative urbanist, as a prototypical postmodernist, as the inventor of the concept of ‘everyday life’, as a giant thinker about space, as a state theorist, as a utopian architect's best friend; in France, on the contrary, he is merely an old-fashioned communist, a Party man, and, after the felling of the Berlin Wall, increasingly a relic. In France, where the Party political stakes run higher, the wounds also cut deeper; and the scars remain without ever quite healing.⁽⁴⁾ Nowadays, says Hess, we are Lefebvrians; but he, the man himself, Henri Lefebvre, was a Marxist-Communist. There's a difference.

- II -

So it is no light affair that alongside the republication of *S&R* come a spate of new texts about Lefebvre and his thought, all hinting of a Lefebvrian renaissance in France, *un frémissement autour de sa pensée*, stimulating future projects involving reeditions of some long-forgotten Lefebvre texts. This is exciting stuff for us Anglophones! And we need to take it seriously, engage with it, comprehend what is going on, and why it is

⁽²⁾The list includes: Shields (1999), Elden (2004), Merrifield (2006), and Goonewardena et al (2008).

⁽³⁾Thus Lefebvre was victim of a ‘double marginalization’: political and intellectual (see Lethierry, 2009, especially page 69).

⁽⁴⁾Lefebvre's old Party, the French Communist Party (PCF), frequently used to poll over 25% of the national vote (as between 1945 and 1956); since its 1920 founding, the PCF has actively participated in three governments, something unimaginable in Anglo-Saxon politics. Yet, unsurprisingly, for younger people in Sarkozy's 21st-century France the ‘PC’ has but one connotation: personal computer!

happening now. Hess suggests Lefebvre gives us the concepts and energy that help us confront our world today, especially as crises cut deeper into everyday life. At first blush, left politics is reasonably alive and quite well in France, in spite of (or because of) Sarkozy. While the Socialist Party continues its disintegration from within, postman Olivier Besancenot's hard-line "Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste" [New Anti-capitalist Party] proceeds to gain support and membership; and as the all-but-spent Communists fumble for a new direction, veteran *soixante-huitard* Dany Cohn-Bendit and peasant militant José Bové have taken the Greens to a sweeping success at the 2009 Euro-elections. But all that somehow does not either excite or inspire; all that seems to attest to what Perry Anderson once said about Mitterrand's presidential victory in 1981: "The left gained the epaulettes of office after it lost the battle of ideas" (2004).

And it is big ideas that are wanting, ideas about what is possible, about hope and action, about utopia and change; and here, perhaps, Lefebvre is ready to fill the gaping intellectual void: as French suburban *banlieues* bristle against state coercion, and as their resident *racaille* (scum) demand its right to the city, Lefebvre's urbanism strikes a starkly salient chord; as the neoliberal long march across the globe continues apace, Lefebvrian theses on the state and the production of space have never seemed truer; as power becomes ever more centralized in the hands of a decentralized few, ideas of *autogestion* (self-management) capture the heart and imagination of those who are searching for something else, for some other meaning to their lives, for another sort of praxis. Moreover, while it is obvious that Lefebvre is seldom the man of the moment, he is nonetheless the man of the theory of *moments*; and these, Hess insists, will endure whatever the prevailing fashion. So, it is around the concept of moments that Hess grounds his latest project on his late *maître*; and in form—almost 700 pages—*Henri Lefebvre et la pensée du possible* (2009a) approaches the formidable epic-size proportions of *S&R*.

A twenty-year-old Hess first encountered a sixty-six-year-old Lefebvre in 1967 in amphitheatre B2 at the University of Paris X—Nanterre, at an introductory sociology class, alongside hundreds of other students, Dany-Cohn Bendit included.⁽⁵⁾ And he has been smitten ever since. In 1973, in the wake of sixties unrest, himself a child of Marx and Coca-Cola, Hess, under Lefebvre's direction, went on to write a doctoral thesis on *The French Maoists*. And over the decades to follow, a vast chunk of Hess's academic output has centered on all-things Lefebvre; the latter has become both the subject and object of Hess's research, to the degree that Lefebvre's only real living disciple is without doubt also the world's foremost *Lefebvreologist*.

None of which denies Hess's own originality and repute as an educationist; nor is it to downplay the interesting ways he has brought Lefebvre's theory of moments alive—literally alive, to the sway of new rhythms and beats, as in *Le moment tango* (1997), one of a handful of books Hess has devoted to the theme of dance. (Hess was born into a family of musicians, and popular dance was apparently ever present in his adolescent life-world.) Yet after Lefebvre's death in 1991, Hess decided to consecrate more of his scholarship to what he calls the "Lefebvrian moment," to his reading and rereading of the man's sixty-eight published works, to getting a lot of them back into print, into the public domain again, and to trying to politicize our own Lefebvrian moment. For if ever there is a recurrent theme in Lefebvre's whole oeuvre, Hess is insistent that it is the theory of moments. The moment somehow lives on despite everything thrown at it; like Lefebvre himself, the moment refuses all systematization, every attempt to put it in a box, every neat classification.

⁽⁵⁾ Hugues Lethierry, author of *Penser avec Henri Lefebvre* (2009), was also an attendee, as was the still-active Trotskyist-Marxist Daniel Bensaïd.

Following Lefebvre, Hess says the moment does not fit into any whole, is what is left over after all the sums have been done, after everything has seemingly been accounted for: the moment is a philosophical anticoncept, an affirmation of *residue*, of remainders, of marginal leftovers, of the power and radicality of the ragged and the *irreducible*.⁽⁶⁾ Accordingly, the Lefebvrian theory of moments expresses the limit of the validity of systems theory, of philosophy's obsession with grand totalizing, of power's political desire to control totally, of its quest for ultimate and indomitable mastery. No system of control can ever be total, Lefebvre maintains, can ever be without possibility, contingency, inconspicuous cracks, without little holes in the net, glimmers of light, and pockets of fresh air. There is always leakiness to culture and society, even in capitalism, always unforeseen circumstances buried within the everyday, immanent moments of prospective subversion.

In this vein, the moment becomes Lefebvre's key progressive motif, signifying that all is not lost, that all can never be lost, not quite. The moment is nothing other than "*the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility*" (Lefebvre, 2002, page 348, original emphasis). The moment is there, always there if you look hard enough, written between the lines, lurking within the whole, unnerving the whole, out of place, and out of sync with time. It is an opportunity to be seized and invented, something metaphorical and practical, palpable and impalpable, geographical and temporal, intense and absolute, yet also fleeting and relative, like sex, like the delirious climax of pure feeling, of pure immediacy, of being there and only there, like the moment of festival, or of revolution.

Moments are never absolutely absolute or unique—even if, in themselves, they are 'relatively absolute'. Lefebvre says that moments have a *duty* to define themselves absolutely; they propose themselves as impossible, as the heady thrill of chance. The political moment is an absolute act of contestation: a street demo or flying picket, a rent strike or a general strike. And just as alienation reflects an *absence*, a dead moment, empty of critical content, the Lefebvrian moment signifies "a modality of *presence*" (Lefebvre, 2009a, pages 226, 645) a fullness, a connection, a certain notion of liberty and passion. "For the old-fashioned romantic", Hess quotes Lefebvre from *S&R*, "the fall of a leaf is a moment as significant as the fall of a state for a revolutionary" (Hess, 2009a, page 173; cf Lefebvre, 2009a, page 639). Either way, whether for the romantic or the revolutionary—or for the romantic revolutionary—a moment has only a certain specific duration. The moment "wants to endure. It cannot endure (at least, not for very long). Yet this inner contradiction gives it its intensity, which reaches crisis point when the inevitability of its own demise becomes apparent" (Lefebvre, 2002, page 345).

- III -

Hess lets us marvel at Lefebvre's theory of moments, and underscores its importance in Lefebvre's oeuvre. Over the course of several short, scene-setting chapters packed with information and sources, Hess whets our appetite for more. Like a dedicated bibliophile, he has done the steady editorial work his subject warrants. What I expected thereafter was some analysis, some critical engagement, a deepening of Lefebvre's theory, an illustration of what might be politically possible, of what can be done in

⁽⁶⁾ Lefebvre explains a bit more what he means by "*irréductible*" early on in *Métaphilosophie* (1965). Totalizing systems, he says, tend to "expulse" a certain residue, and each residue constitutes its dialectical "other", something precious and essential in its irreducibility, in its implacability, in a refusal to sit down and comply. Philosophy, for example, "expulses" the everyday, festival, and the ludic; technocracy expulses desire and imagination; state bureaucracy expulses "deviancy" and subversion; reason and rationality expulse irrationality and spontaneity.

praxis, in real life. But then, just when we are poised to move forward, ready to address these concerns, something inexplicable happens to the narrative of *Henri Lefebvre et la pensée du possible*. Somehow, for some reason, the text takes a detour—an “interlude”, Hess calls it—into Hess’s own private life, and the story begins to lose direction. Soon the detour becomes the substance of the text itself, and in so doing we get dragged *inwards* inside Hess’s household, into his diary entries, hearing blow-by-blow accounts of what Hess did, who he met, what he is reading, what he is thinking, where he has been (and going): he sups champagne with Jack Lang, has late-night blow-outs with selected colleagues, slap-up lunches with publishers, rides the Metro, strolls through Paris’s streets, voyages up and down France on the TGV, attends doctoral defenses, professional colloquiums, and does all the mundane tedium academics these days must do.

Hess is utterly devoted to Lefebvre; it is admirable how much energy he channels in that direction. In a perverse sense, this is fascinating fanzine stuff for any Lefebvre addict; and as an addict myself I have to admit that I was fascinated. But beyond the likes of me, does all this stack up to a book—and a book of almost 700 pages? Does Hess really believe that such self-indulgence demands a public? He maintains, coming to his own defense, that “the practice of keeping a diary is a means to enter into the construction of moments” (2009a, page 301). Diary in French, he reminds us, is *journal*, and *journal* is also a newspaper, aka “*le quotidien*”—one’s daily read, “the daily”. Thus *le journal* permits you to read the daily news in its personal, national, and international forms, and hence keeping a diary is a sort of particular and general act, a two-pronged dialogue supposedly close to Lefebvre’s own heart about the nature of daily life—“*le quotidien*”. Besides, says Hess, great philosophers and thinkers of the past, people like John Locke, kept diaries; and diaries are legitimate literary forms, too, as Kafka and Flaubert attest. Alas, Hess is no John Locke, and neither is he Kafka or Flaubert. Nor is he Henri Lefebvre, whose personal touches in *S&R* always let us enter into the much wider world of the times, into *both* the personal and the political dramas of his epoch. There, the constant toing and froing between the person and society is always dialectical, is always politically motivated; one constitutes the other: the personal really is political with Lefebvre.

One of major problems with *Henri Lefebvre et la pensée du possible*, then, is its solipsism, is its inability to go beyond the self: what Hess gives us is not so much a theory of moments as an example of a ‘*conscience privée*’. Lefebvre critiqued the notion of a *conscience privée* a number of times in his life, notably in *La conscience mystifiée* (1936), written with friend Norbert Guterman,⁽⁷⁾ and later in *S&R*. For Lefebvre, the *conscience privée* is above all a private consciousness: “isolated, insular and cut off from links” (Lefebvre, 2009a, page 549). And a private consciousness is also a consciousness *deprived*, deprived of a broader public reality, of an outward turning political consciousness. (In *La conscience mystifiée*, Lefebvre calls the latter “*la conscience du forum*.”) Hess might object to this accusation, but it is precisely a tale of a private life he has ironically recounted; and here, in short, he has done a disservice to his late teacher. For it is not clear what the politics of Hess’s ‘thinking of the possible’ might be. Nor what his possible is. A possible *what?* When there’s so much he could have said, when Lefebvre’s ideas have such contemporary salience, these silences are tantamount to a political betrayal.

⁽⁷⁾ Throughout the 1930s, Lefebvre worked away at a manuscript of *La conscience privée*, an intended companion study to *La conscience mystifiée*. The book was never realized; for years the draft was thought destroyed. But it resurfaced in the 1950s, and republished editions of *La conscience mystifiée* contain the fated text as an annex. A fascinating typescript version of *La conscience privée*, bearing Lefebvre’s handwritten annotations, can be glimpsed amongst Guterman’s archives at New York’s Columbia University.

A while back now, Lefebvre was on television, talking to Bernard-Henri Lévy about the Russian scholar Alexandre Kojève; it was a repeat of a series from the late 1980s called *Les aventures de la liberté*. An octogenarian Lefebvre told Lévy that Kojève

“made a great impression on me because of his knowledge of Hegel. He knew Hegel better than I did. But he drew no practical or political consequences. It was enough for him to know what Hegel thought. So that created a gulf between us. Because, for me, Hegel’s propositions seemed only interesting if they were applied to the present, to current events, to the real society of the day.”⁽⁸⁾

The passage says a lot about Hess himself, who, like Kojève, seems happy just knowing what his old master thought and wrote, without drawing any practical or political consequences from this knowledge, perhaps without being able to draw any political consequences. But, for me, as for other Lefebvrians, Lefebvre’s propositions seem interesting only if they are applied to the present, to current events, to the real society of our day.

- IV -

Laurence Costes and Hugues Lethierry are two other French *lefebvriens* who do try to apply the man’s thought to current reality, to the glaring contradictions of our day. For that alone they should be commended. Costes, a sociology lecturer at the University of Évry-Val-d’Essonne and researcher at the school of Architecture at Paris-Val-de Seine, has written a useful little primer to Lefebvre’s first great urban manifesto, *The Right to the City*; her text even stimulated Anthropolos to rerelease Lefebvre’s original work on the topic, written on the brink of the street skirmishes of May 1968. This new edition of *The Right to the City* is worth having even if you are familiar with its contents, because there is a wonderful (and bizarre) picture of the man adorning its front cover, drinking a beer *en plein air*, at a café high above the new town of Mourenx. With trademark turtleneck sweater, old Lefebvre gesticulates with an outstretched arm, surveying Mourenx’s dreaded barrack-block housing estate like Faust surveyed the giant modernist construction works in Goethe’s classic. The same bird’s eye vantage point likely prompted Lefebvre’s debut foray into the modern urban condition, “Notes on a New Town (April 1960)”, from *Introduction to Modernity* ([1962], 1995).

Costes stresses the pivotal importance of Lefebvre’s ‘discovery’ of Mourenx, the purpose-built city for employees of the nearby gas plant at Lacq, not far from Lefebvre’s native Navarrenx, a medieval town in Southwest France. For the ten years prior, he had been preoccupied with rural questions, with agrarian reform; now, at Mourenx, a new capitalist modernity opened its pages to Lefebvre, a terrible beauty was born, with a thoroughly modern aspect to its everyday life, one based around isolation, functionality, monotony, and bureaucratization. From now on, Costes says, quoting from an earlier Lefebvre essay, “*Les nouveaux ensembles urbains*”, “the struggle against boredom commences” (Costes, 2009, page 26).⁽⁹⁾

Costes roots the genesis of Lefebvre’s career as an urban prophet in the period 1960–68. On the one hand, the material context of postwar French modernity comes into play, itself partly responsive to wider global economic and cultural shifts; on the other hand was the emergence of a distinctively new French ‘urban sociology’, reacting both to the conservatism of Chicago School urban ecology and positivism of French

⁽⁸⁾ See the Lévy book that accompanied the television series, translated as *Adventures on the Freedom Road: French Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (1995, page 138).

⁽⁹⁾ Lefebvre’s prototypical essay from 1960 explores Lacq-Mourenx as an “urban problem of the new working class” and is republished in his *Du rural à l’urbain* (1970).

sociology and firmly anchoring its theoretical ontology in the tradition of Western Marxism. Lefebvre would quickly reinvent both flanks at once, pioneering research into a new object of analysis—the urban—while converting Marxism into a fresh-faced *cultural* and *spatialized* theory. With *The Right to the City*, Costes says, “Lefebvre is one of the first French thinkers to become interested in the urban as a specific object, in a specifically urban problematic, in the future of the city, and, beyond that, in the future of contemporary civilization” (page 43).

From this heterodox Marxist standpoint, burning concerns of contemporary capitalism—the possibility of social change, recomposition of the working class and the state, political praxis and participation—are now inextricably entwined with questions of the city: urban space both belies and reveals the inner contradictions of postwar capitalist modernity. In France, explicit class warfare was in motion, characterized by a denial of working-class urbanity, just as it did in the days of Baron Haussmann. Working and lower middle classes more and more found themselves decanted and banished to outlying *banlieues*, to places like Mourenx, or to new giant high-rise housing estates, *grands ensembles*, that littered peripheral Paris and other big French towns. Meanwhile, the center was conquered by the well heeled, by the bourgeois. Old neighborhoods underwent disintegration and renewal; once gritty use values became spick and span exchange values, museumified for gaping tourists and anointed by the state for the accumulation of rentier and finance capital. Although the process in the Anglo-American world has been the flipside—with white middle classes abandoning the center in favor of low-density suburbs—Lefebvre recognizes the same *antiurban* trump card being played. The city has become either recentered or decentered, asphyxiated or hollowed out, a showcase or a no-place. Thus, it has not just lost a sense of cohesion and definition; its dwellers have lost a sense of *creative and collective purpose*.

Cities should be inspiring ideals that people *inhabit*; instead they are dismal *habitats*, seats of decivilization. In the middle section of her book, Costes does an impressive job of explaining Lefebvre’s usage of the term ‘inhabiting’, of showing how Lefebvre mobilizes it to stamp a richer gloss on city life, evoking urban living *as becoming*, as growing, as something dynamic and progressive. She shows how Martin Heidegger affected Lefebvre’s thinking here, but also how Lefebvre loosened the deep ontological moorings of Heidegger’s notion of “place as the unique dwelling of being,” bedding the concept down in political and historical reality (Heidegger, 1971). A loss of inhabiting is, for Lefebvre, a political, social, and aesthetic loss. His city is not one of the past, the traditional city, but categorically a city of the future. Downgrading ‘inhabit’, reducing it to a mere *habitat*, signifies a loss of the city as *œuvre*, a loss of *integration* and *participation* in urban life, and cuts off the possibility for any experimental utopia. It denigrates humanity’s great works of art—not one hanging on a museum wall, but a canvas smack in front of our noises, wherein we ourselves are would-be artists, would-be architects. “The city Lefebvre yearns for,” Costes writes, his “virtual object”, “is a little like the image of the superman that Nietzsche wanted” (page 47):⁽¹⁰⁾ the right to the city is the will to empower the center, a cry and demand to overcome all exchange values, to party and to encounter others in public; it is the right to centrality; it is the sea-level mountaintop where the superman meets the total man to the detriment of the business man.

⁽¹⁰⁾ *The Right to the City*’s epigraph also bears Nietzsche’s fair hand, from *The Will to Power* (1968, paragraph 1): “Of what is great one must either be silent or speak with grandeur. With grandeur—that means cynically and with innocence.”

- V -

Costes is undoubtedly correct to say that Lefebvre, writing at the centenary of Marx's *Capital*, is a "good Marxist"; following the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, perhaps Marx's most facile and widely cited remark, she says: "Lefebvre conceives his theorizations like instruments designed to understand the world in order to transform that world" (page 89). But is she correct for the correct reason? Costes is weak in her lack of engagement with the concept of 'rights', with how, from an 'orthodox' Marxist standpoint, the whole question of rights is treated with considerable suspicion. To that degree, one could beg to differ with Costes's conclusion: one could argue that Lefebvre is in fact a 'bad' Marxist. Or is he?

By invoking not just a 'right' but a 'right to the city', Lefebvre moves the terrain of debate around rights onto an entirely different plane, seemingly even more metaphysical than any liberal notion of right. How does a Lefebvrian right (the right to the city, the right to difference, etc) differ from its bourgeois counterpart? And how to realize the right to the city, this right to *habiter*? Costes has nothing to say on the matter; like Hess, she seems unable, or unwilling, to stray from the text, from the gospel according to Henri; she knows that after *The Right to the City*, Lefebvre has 'politicized' the urban question like never before, that it is no longer a technocratic or bureaucratic fix on the agenda, a cyberanthropic hustle. But she seems reluctant to prod Lefebvre a bit more—for answers as well as for other questions—to push him out onto a bigger canvas, to run with this thesis into the 21st century. Costes merely states he is a good Marxist without really explaining to us why and in what guise.

By 'rights', it is pretty evident that Lefebvre has something else in mind than the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948. "Everyone", Article 25 of that Declaration says, "has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care." Then Article 17 chips in with these two clauses:

"(1) Everybody has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others; and (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property."

Both Articles 25 and 17 are salient for any discussion of the right to the city. Yet, for any Marxist, these two rights are directly contradictory, contradictory in a bourgeois sense: the right to property deprives the poor of a place in the center of the city, yet apparently nobody can be deprived of their right to property, thus of their right to the city. Moreover, everybody has a right to adequate housing and well-being, but property owners have the private right to deny such a universal right, because no one can deprive them of their property. So, how to resolve this dilemma?

It is striking how much the contradiction resembles the contradiction Marx sets out in "The working day" chapter of *Capital I*. It is equally striking how much Lefebvre follows Marx's logic about how a reconciliation might be possible, how a right to the city might be enacted. The dialogue Marx constructs between capitalist and laborer around the length of the working day, barely four pages long, contains the kernel of Marxian political thought and demonstrates very vividly how questions of 'rights' have no universal meaning, have no foundational basis in institutions; nor are they responsive to any moral or legal argument: questions of rights, be it rights to the city, are, first and foremost, questions about *social power*, about who wins. "The capitalist takes his stand on the law of commodity-exchange", Marx says.

"Like other buyers, he seeks to extract the maximum possible benefit from the use-value of his commodity. Suddenly, however, there arises the voice of the worker, which had previously been stifled in the sound and the fury of the production process: 'The commodity I have sold you differs from the ordinary crowd of commodities in that its use creates value, a greater value than it costs.

That is why you bought it. What appears on your side as the valorization of capital is on my side an excess of expenditure of labor-power” (1976, page 342).

What the capitalist gains in labor, Marx says, by putting his employee to work for as long and as hard as possible, for the maximum duration of the working day, the worker loses ‘in substance’, through damaging their health and well-being. “Everybody has a right to their property”, the UN Declaration of Rights has it, and no one can be deprived of this inalienable right. “The capitalist”, Marx says, sticking tight to the UN’s credo, “maintains his right as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, to make two working days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser”; so the worker responds in kind, and likewise clings on to the UN’s Declaration: “the worker maintains his right as a seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to a particular normal length” (page 344). Consequently, here, Marx concludes, is an “antinomy of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange,” both equally bearing the seal of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights.

And yet, for Marx, “between equal rights *force decides*.” Hence the struggle for rights is not something granted from above, is not acknowledged through the courts, granted because it is morally correct; instead, for those who have no rights, it is something that is *taken*, that involves struggle and force. As such, one must struggle for one’s right to the city; nobody is going to give it to the displaced and banished. It must be taken, by force, through practical action, through organized militancy and spontaneous subversion, through cynicism and innocence. That is the only means through which one creates a Marxian truth, obtains a Marxian right: through force. Uprisings in assorted French *banlieues* have already started to demand this right, by force; perhaps more far reaching, though, is how the Lefebvrian struggle for the right to the city is now a planetary phenomenon. Costes knows this because she briefly alludes to Mike Davis’s *Planet of Shums* [(2006); translated in French graphically and dystopically—doubtless more to Davis’s apocalyptic taste—as *The Worst of Possible Worlds* (2007)]. Yet this global struggle is never developed in *Henri Lefebvre, le droit à la ville* (Costes, 2009).⁽¹¹⁾

By 2020 two billion people will inhabit shantytowns, *favelas*, and *bidonvilles* scattered around the edge of the world’s biggest cities. By 2015 nineteen of the twenty-three boomtowns predicted to have populations in excess of ten million will be in ‘developing’ countries (UN Habitat; cited in *Libération* 2004). The vast global banlieue in the making will thus be homemade, constructed from tin, cardboard, and plastic, teetering in the breeze, waiting to be washed away in the next mudslide. A global ruling class, meanwhile, shapes out its core, at the center, Haussmannizing nodes of wealth and information, of knowledge and power, creating a feudal dependency not just between the ‘North’ and the ‘South’ but *within* urban life everywhere. Will those two billion dispossessed ever want to stake a claim to the core, to assert their right to centrality, to *demarginalize* themselves with grand style, by force, in a giant street festival, in the construction of an absolute Lefebvrian moment? Will globalization of communication and publicity open everything up to ‘the eyes of the global poor’—adapting Baudelaire’s words from Paris’s Second Empire—inspiring indignation and organization as well as awe (‘big saucer eyes’), prompting the ‘world literature’ Marx dreamt of in *The Communist Manifesto*? I honestly do not know. But with Lefebvre’s help, we should try to find out.

⁽¹¹⁾ Davis’s harrowing book makes an interesting read alongside one of Lefebvre’s last essays: “Quand la ville se perd dans la métamorphose planétaire” [“when the city loses its way in the planetary metamorphosis”] reprinted in *Le Monde Diplomatique*’s bimonthly magazine *Manière de voir*, special report “Banlieues” on revolts in the global suburb (2006).

- VI -

One of the nicest compliments anyone paid to Lefebvre was when Manuel Castells called him the greatest “philosopher on cities we have ever had.” Needless to say, Castells was not being entirely generous towards his old boss. “Lefebvre’s style”, Castells reckoned, “was metaphysical. And I don’t think metaphysics helps too much” (*City* 1997, page 146). Lefebvre “didn’t have the slightest idea about the real world—not at all: he didn’t know anything about how the economy works, how technology works, how new class relations were building—but he had a genius for intuiting what was really happening” (page 14). He was more like an artist, Castells said, like a poet, like his rival Martin Heidegger: a philosopher with a poetic sensibility.

Lefebvre’s poetic sensibility is publicly visible in the recent posthumous collection, *Le cœur ouvert* (2007), a kind of Baudelairean ‘heart laid bare’, a labor of love of Lefebvre’s hometown historical society, Cercle Historique de l’Arribère (CHAR). On view here is a little bundle of Lefebvre’s verse, written between 1952 and 1956, during his Stalinist dark days, when his impending split with the PCF was most painful. Lefebvre seems to reverse Adorno’s infamous logic that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric,” contending that poetry comes into its own precisely under barbarism, as something that helps ward off vampires and demons. *Le cœur ouvert* is a low-budget homage to Navarrenx’s forgotten son, an internationally renowned philosopher who, according to CHAR, was locally unknown. Lefebvre’s widow, Catherine Régulier-Lefebvre, introduces the text, placing Lefebvre’s poetry within the context of his theory of moments—the moment of love, of struggle, of play, of woman, of Marxism, and of everyday life, reiterating what Lefebvre himself had said in *S&R*: “I’ve taken seriously only three realities: love, philosophy and the Party” (2009a, page 335).

Some of Lefebvre’s lines smack of Ted Hughes-lite, a Gallic *Birthday Letters* (2000), flat yet loaded with powerful feeling and painful expressions of inner life and inner struggle, stuff we never quite hear in Lefebvre’s theory and philosophy.⁽¹²⁾ Here’s a snippet from one poem, “A guilty conscience” (2007, page 119).

We killed Rajk⁽¹³⁾ comrades
 We killed Rajk Rajk Laszlo Rajk
 and then over there Stalin
 vanquished
 And death surges in the valley
 Without hope of a judge
 Without hope of a sage
 Without hope a howling rage

⁽¹²⁾ I note, in passing, Kanishka Goonewardena’s (2008) ‘comradely’ critique of my *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*, in which he suggests an anti-Stalinist Lefebvre is a figment of my own overly romantic imagination. The latter charge—of me being overly romantic—may well be the case; but Goonewardena’s use of a single Lefebvre text from a 1949 *La nouvelle critique* (the PCF’s unofficial journal of ‘militant Marxism’) to prove all, citing it as indicting evidence before the House unMarxist Activities Committee, seems itself sinisterly sectarian: “*So Monsieur Lefebvre, are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party? In 1949, you said ...*”. For one thing, portraying the postwar communist cause in simple either/or terms, without considering the complex stakes and loyalties involved then, is not so much romantic as naïve. For another, the incriminating document also appears to fly in the face of what *Le Cœur ouvert* candidly reveals in its poetry. Lefebvre as Stalinist hack? This, I would have no trouble letting Goonewardena know—peacefully in a pub—is nonsense. For the record, Lefebvre was kicked off the editorial board of *La nouvelle critique* in 1957 and in 1958 he was suspended from the Party for one year. The following year, he did not retake his card, thus ending himself a stormy thirty-year relationship.

⁽¹³⁾ Laszlo Rajk was a Hungarian communist, a former Foreign Affairs Minister, accused of being a Titoist spy. Rajk was the victim of a Stalinist show trial and executed in 1949.

Here's another, "The open heart" (2007, page 83).

The street was covered
 With debris and dust
 The route wasn't yet paved
 Nor the door shut
 Who shut the door
 Who dumped this dismal dust
 And how has my heart survived
 Without air to nourish it
 at the crossroads of solitudes

Elsewhere, Lefebvre is lighter, more intimate, and expresses a typical impulse: "Life is everyday" (2007, page 29):

In our little bedroom on the 8th floor
 happiness within arm's reach
 Something close by
 You work, you play
 Your dress brushes against my cheek
 happiness within arm's reach
 I adore each morning your coffee ballet
 the invention of milky bread
 nothing is banal
 your waltz I love
 around the little table
 serving wines from Alsace and Anjou
 I kiss you, I laugh
 like someone demented

But poetry does not only have a therapeutic quality for Lefebvre; it likewise expresses a form of radicality, a resistance and offence; poetry, in short, is fundamentally subversive, is a disruptive moment. Plato knew all about the dangers of dreamy poets in our midst, inciting and transmitting powerful feelings and latent desires, destabilizing accepted notions of order and restraint, of cool rationality. Poetry, for Lefebvre, is like politics: it expresses something *hot*; it voices hotness from the margins. Lethierry's *Penser avec Henri Lefebvre* (2009) succeeds admirably in its billing as an "intellectual and political biography" precisely because it is steeped in the poetic side of Lefebvre's persona, and demonstrates how his poetic and libertine excesses are vital ingredients in his Marxist politics. From that standpoint, it is ludicrous to conclude, as Costes does at the end of her *Henri Lefebvre, le droit à la ville* (2009), that Lefebvre's method is "militant and *scientifique*". If anything, Lefebvre was antiscience [cf books like *Vers le cybernanthrope* (1971)], more Rabelais than Descartes, and Lethierry's suitably rambunctious little book brings us closer to Lefebvre, the man, politico, and seducer than any other French text to date.

This may be because Lethierry, a sixty-something independent scholar, a self-avowed Gaston Bachelard look-alike—gray-bearded Old Testament prophet-cum-vagrant—has not had his wings clipped by the rigidities and conservatism of French academia, with its haughty arrogance and curriculum border controls;⁽¹⁴⁾ perhaps that is the reason he is

⁽¹⁴⁾ Lefebvre's relationship with academia was hardly rock solid either. For a long while he was in and out of research and teaching posts, and began his first permanent position at the University of Strasbourg only in 1963, at the age of 63. At 65 he switched to the University of Paris-X Nanterre, hotbed of the 'March 22nd' student activism, until retirement in 1973. It was a long, uneven, and interrupted academic career that gives hope to skeptics like myself!

able to soar higher and freer than either Hess or Costes? Whatever the reason, Lethierry has trumped Hess by writing not the most exhaustive—many chapters of *Penser avec Henri Lefebvre* are extremely sketchy—but certainly the most *breathing* biography of Lefebvre in Lefebvre’s own language. [In comparison, Hess’s ‘classic’ bio, *Henri Lefebvre et l’aventure du siècle* (1988), reads like a staid chronological list.] *Penser avec Henri Lefebvre* compensates for its blind spots because it brings to French Lefebvrian studies what has hitherto been lacking from French Lefebvrian studies: a sense of humor and irony, a tongue-in-cheek playfulness, an intellectual daring more fitting for the subject matter in question. What Lethierry has written is a *radical* book—stylistically as well as politically—approaching Lefebvre as Lefebvre himself approached reality: neither deductively or inductively, but *transductively*, a mode of thinking that is not based either on fact or theory as much as on *imagination*, on normative consciousness, on what ought to be and what might be, on what is possible in the future. It is progressive thinking because it conceives ‘what is’ only in terms of what it is becoming, what it might be at some point to come. As Lethierry says of Lefebvre, this utopian approach owes as much to Fourier as to Marx:

“Lefebvre, like he said of Fourier, projected, dazzled, prophesized, spurted out ideas.

His verbs often use the past tense or the conditional...imagining possible cases neither yet encountered nor logically constructed” (2009, page 46).

Lethierry makes the point that Lefebvre essentially saw no distinction between anarchism and Marxism, and always clung to a looser Marxism—an *altermarxisme*—that posited workers’ and citizen self-management—*autogestion*—rather than narrow dictatorship of the proletariat. Lefebvre hated the state, and loathed institutions, frequently speaking of the state as Nietzsche spoke in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “state is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly it tells lies, and this lie crawls out of its mouth: ‘I, the state, am the people’” (1954, pages 162–163; cf Lethierry, 2009, page 138). Some of Lethierry’s best moments are when he teases out little known, apparently minor details from Lefebvre’s personal life, stuff that actually had long-standing political consequences, like his friendship with French novelist and Goncourt winner Roger Vailland, a one-time Party fellow traveler, renegade surrealist, *résistant*, and soul mate libertine. Vailland and Lefebvre maintained close ties and “great complicity” (as Lefebvre put it in *Le temps des méprises*) until the former’s death in 1965, of lung cancer, and shared penchants for women and radical politics, for alcohol and the good life. Yet, whereas Lefebvre used this libertine energy in his philosophy and theory, Vailland worked it through in his novels and plays. Both men were committed communists who were fascinated by the concept of *fête* and pleasure, more inspired by the Paris Commune than by the storming of the Winter Palace. In 1956, after the Soviets invaded Hungary, Lefebvre helped Vailland “solemnly burn” his Party card.⁽¹⁵⁾

Vailland and Lefebvre’s cavaliering tastes for philosophy and politics are really only matched by their cavaliering taste for women. At heart, they remain two classicists, honing a sensibility that derived from the classical humanism tradition; Lacos and

⁽¹⁵⁾ The episode is recounted in *Le temps des méprises* (1975, page 97). Lefebvre’s most detailed commentary on Vailland’s novels can be found in the “Foreword” of Volume I of *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991, pages 25–27). Vailland himself once wrote a wonderful little political pamphlet called *Éloge de la politique* [In praise of politics], first published in a 1964 edition of the French weekly *Le nouvel observateur* (then under the co-auspices of a certain Michel Bosquet, aka André Gorz). The piece makes for a fascinating read today, in our own days of the ‘death of politics’. With a few Lefebvrian allusions to ‘l’homme total’, there renamed ‘l’homme nouveau’, Vailland makes a passionate appeal for political engagement—for “political combat”—to overcome social apathy and personal disillusionment. “As a citizen”, he says, “I want you to speak to me of politics; I want to rediscover politics, to provoke the occasion to lead (real) political activity. I want us all to become politickers” (Vailland, 1999, page 27).

Stendhal come to mind. In fact, Lethierry calls Lefebvre (using Stefan Zweig's description of Nietzsche) "the Don Juan of knowledge" (2009, page 69), conceiving babies almost as fertile as he conceived radical ideas. For Lethierry, Lefebvre's psychopolitical universe is triangular, and women are the sexual and intellectual 'mediators' therein: "women 'mediate' between philosophy and politics", he says; "politics mediates between women and philosophy; philosophy mediates between politics and women. At least that's our hypothesis" (2009, page 87).

Such is the Lefebvrian 'style', a style predicated upon fluidity and vagueness, where thinking becomes like vagabondage, like strolling in a city, or in the countryside on a Sunday afternoon: more rhapsodic and musical than fixed and analytical. To think with Henri Lefebvre, then, is to think capriciously, is to be a capricious sower who casts his seeds to the wind, without any hang-ups, without worrying whether or not they will germinate. A politically incorrect image, for sure; yet rather than the crippled, jargon-ridden theoretical construct we so often find in academic studies, it is one that brings us closer to Lefebvre the *living* person and human thinker; it brings us closer, in short, to the philosopher we need most.

- VII -

Lethierry has done something important and unprecedented in French *études lefebvriennes*: he has deigned to read what we Anglophones have written; he has brushed up on what Stuart Elden, Rob Shields, Ed Soja, David Harvey, Neil Brenner, Stefan Kipfer, myself, et al, have done with Lefebvre. And he has put *our* Lefebvre back into French translation, transforming how both we and the French must now henceforth see Henri Lefebvre, the 21st-century *global* intellectual. En route, Lethierry has founded a new school of thought in France: *French Lefebvre Theory*, doing for Lefebvre what François Cusset did for Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co., where a French loose cannon has disrupted the Anglo-Saxon analytical applet—like in geography where mainstreamers still heckle at blurry Lefebvrian tropes—while at the same time Anglo-Saxon reappropriations have tossed a deconstructed and profane Lefebvre back across the Atlantic, demonstrating what we heathens can do with a bit of imagination.

Language barriers notwithstanding, an ongoing dialogue is vital and worth pursuing across those barriers. We can show the French what can be done with their man beyond the formalities of the text; they, as they continue to rediscover their forgotten philosopher, can tell us who that man really was, and emphasize the context of those battles he waged. An intellectual cross-fertilization promises a heady conceptual hybridization. With it we can do something politically meaningful today, something politically necessary, just like the old man did with those formal Hegelian contradictions of yesteryear. Meanwhile, if we can somehow overcome the man, put him to work for us, in our concepts, in our practical life, we may even discover ourselves: not as private scholars fretting about the next research assessment exercise, but as political subjects struggling over our precarious collective future.

Andy Merrifield

Instituto de Estudos Avançados, Universidade de São Paulo, Av. Prof Luciano Gualberto Travessa J 374 térreo, Cidade Universitária, 05508-900 São Paulo, Brasil

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