

# Mystified Consciousness

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Like in the 1930s, whiffs of fascism are in the air. Demagogic chauvinism is thriving across the globe and tolerance has undergone core meltdown. Nationalism is alive and apparently well. Borders are getting staked out, walls erected, and mass media – especially social media – saturate us with misinformation morning, noon, night, and much of the time in between. Politicians now seem to have a free reign to engage in what Jonathan Swift long ago called “the art of political lying.” Telling the truth does not require great art, Swift warned, not like “salutary falsehoods,” which, he reckoned, need to be carefully crafted. The problem, the author of *Gulliver’s Travels* noted, is that a lie has to be believed only for an hour for its work to be done. Twitter helps. “Falsehood flies,” said Swift, whereas “truth comes limping after it.”

These days, the peddling of salutary falsehoods no longer seems to disgruntle masses of people, let alone harm anybody’s political career. On the contrary, it assures that political career, guarantees it, because now there is a *popular willingness to believe in falsehoods*. Even when we knew Brexit would never save Britain’s National Health Service £350 million a year, or that Donald Trump was never going to make America great again, the lie became the necessary mood music for millions of people. They wanted to hear it, yearned to trust, *felt* the need to believe.

Why? It is a troubling question for intelligent people, especially for those of us who do not take lies at face value. Someone who can help us navigate these murky waters is, I think, the “last” great French Marxist, Henri Lefebvre (1901–91). He lived through almost the entire twentieth century, knew it firsthand, traversed its big historical shifts and tumultuous events, its world wars and major avant-garde movements. He belonged to the French Communist Party, introduced France to a whole body of humanist Marxism, fought against fascism, witnessed the growth of modern consumerism, the age of the Bomb, and godfathered a generation of 1968 student rebels. He even witnessed the tumbling of the Berlin Wall. His three-volumed masterpiece, *Critique of Everyday Life*, spanned

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four decades, debuting with the founding of the United Nations and concluding during Ronald Reagan's first term.

Along the way, Lefebvre authored sixty-eight books, since translated into thirty languages, making brilliant analyses on dialectics and alienation, everyday life and urbanism, ecology and citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Yet, one Lefebvre book, published in 1936, the year the Popular Front triumphed in France, has seemingly been forgotten in every language, largely ignored everywhere. Though it may well be his most enduring political tract, it was his most prescient thesis for understanding the human condition in the twenty-first century. The title alone speaks volumes: *La conscience mystifiée* (*Mystified Consciousness*).

Written in collaboration with Norbert Guterman, *La conscience mystifiée* was immediately denounced by the French Communist Party and later burned by the Nazis. Some of its contents seemed directed more at old comrades than at new enemies. Pride was piqued, loyalties tested, workers critiqued, classical Marxism impugned. Despite left wishful thinking, proletarian class consciousness is not an "objective" category. Lefebvre contends it is not something pure and singular, absolutely distinct from bourgeois consciousness. If anything, the German situation in the 1930s, like our own today, revealed the mismatch between "economic" consciousness and "political" consciousness, given that many German workers voted against their own class interests. Old friends began to disown Lefebvre; George Politzer, defending the mind of the proletarian masses, told his former comrade, in no uncertain terms: "There is no mystified consciousness, only those who mystify."

But Adolf Hitler marched on and the people cheered and followed, carried along by a wave of mass adoration. With eight million workers without jobs, Hitler promised work, promised bread. We will make arms again, he proclaimed, we will get our factories moving. We will make Germany great again. Workers cheered even louder, while giving themselves over – as cannon and economic fodder – to big financiers and monopoly capitalists. "The bourgeoisie," Lefebvre says in *La conscience mystifiée*, with a contemporary tonality, "doesn't need ideas too refined and metaphysical. Carefully instigated banalities are usually more useful than metaphysics. It needs only to utilise old everyday sentiments, sentiments whose fragrance is 'all natural' and 'simply itself': faith, hearth, race, heroism, purity, duty – banalities inscribed in all our hearts."

Demagogues wax lyrical in simple yet seductive language; they conjure up festivals and launch wars, create external enemies apparently more fearful than internal enemies: "they tenderly embrace infants, or eat soup with unemployed workers and soldiers [at Thanksgiving]; they en-

noble work, and arouse sacred emotions.” “Amplified by a servile press,” Lefebvre said, “these shameful machinations glory in heroism.” Under mystified consciousness, fiction easily transmogrifies into fact.



Lefebvre made a long trip to Germany in 1932. There is a breeziness and carefree air to his descriptions of solitary country walks, hopping from one youth hostel to another, swigging beer with young communists in rustic inns, swaying to melodies of the *Threepenny Opera*. He spoke to many different people, he said, observed the German situation close up, gasped at “the ardour of the Hitler Youth,” which clashed with the “enormous rigidity of the German Communist Party and its administrative apparatus,” whose “brutal internationalism” was almost as brutal as Hitler’s nationalism. As economic crisis deepened and unemployment grew, Lefebvre felt the repressed power of a volcano about to blow.

He returned to France anxious about Hitler yet quietly optimistic that misery would prompt the German working class to do the right thing. International communists believed Hitler a passing phase, something destined to fizzle out, maybe as U.S. and British progressives think of Trump and Boris Johnson as passing phases, destined to fizzle out. Still, in 1932, Hitler received 30 percent of the vote, mostly from the petty bourgeoisie and rural sectors, but a lot of the more privileged workers voted for him as well. Rank-and-file Communists were urged at times by the Party leadership to put their opposition to Social Democrats even ahead of that to the National Socialists, weakening the left opposition to fascism. Social Democrat leaders, like Rudolf Hilferding, meanwhile, seriously underestimated the Nazi threat.<sup>2</sup> Many proletarians displaced their angst rightward, acting counter to classical communist texts: once, they had nothing to lose but their chains; now, they had enchained themselves, seduced and manipulated by the National Socialists, betrayed by institutional leftism. “One needed to explain this fact theoretically,” Lefebvre said. Indeed, one does.

Several factors shaped the theoretical coordinates of *La conscience mystifiée*. For one thing, Lefebvre had been impressed by a series of path-breaking essays written in 1926 and 1927 by philosopher-theologian Jean Wahl (1888–1974), exegeses that would later figure in Wahl’s influential book, *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (1929). The buzzword here is *malheur de la conscience* – unhappy consciousness – which Wahl gleaned from G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). There, Hegel formulated the objective world as an internal movement of the mind, constantly trying to overcome itself in a medley of the-

ses, antitheses, and syntheses. Within this restless movement, unhappy consciousness strikes as the inability of consciousness to reconcile itself. This “dualising of self-consciousness within itself,” Hegel said, is the source of great inward disruption in people. “Hence the Unhappy Consciousness. The Alienated Soul is the consciousness of self as a divided nature, a doubled and merely contradictory being.”

Hegel thought unhappy consciousness is like gazing at one’s own self-consciousness in somebody else’s consciousness. Consciousness is real yet somehow out there, elsewhere, unable to understand its own thinking or conditions that surround it. People exist in a mist-enveloped reality, cut off from themselves within themselves. In such a context, thinking “is no more than the discordant clang of ringing bells,” Hegel said, “or a cloud of warm incense. This boundless pure inward feeling comes to have its object; but this object doesn’t make its appearance in conceptual form, and therefore comes on the scene as something external and foreign.”

Therein, Wahl said, lay the pervasiveness of alienation and the tragedy of human history. Wahl was not interested in the formalism of the Hegelian dialectic, nor in the “master-slave” contradiction that Alexandre Kojève would illuminate a decade on; instead, Hegel’s emotional and spiritual content shone through. In Wahl’s eyes, Hegel’s dialectic was first and foremost intuitive and experiential, not conceptual and intellectual, something felt rather than thought. Yet, Lefebvre recognized how the idealist basis of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* ought to be grounded in concrete history. Before long, he would put a distinctively political spin on Wahl’s religious Hegel, stressing the social and structural origins of unhappy consciousness. The trajectory was aided by another formative event for Lefebvre: the rediscovery in the early 1930s of the Hegelian origins of Marxism, glimpsed in Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Almost immediately, he and Norbert Guterman began translating and popularizing Marx’s early writings, extracting them alongside snippets from Hegel.<sup>3</sup>

The Hegelian fix to alienation, to unhappy consciousness, had recourse to thinking alone, to abstract dialectical logic. Everything is in the head, is all form without content, without any materiality. People populate Hegel’s universe, but, as Marx said, they course around as mere “forms of consciousness,” as minds without men. Hegel, said Marx, “turns man into the man of consciousness, instead of turning consciousness into the consciousness of real men.” Lefebvre’s originality lay in how he united Hegel’s unhappy consciousness with young Marx’s humanist critique. In the mix, he warned how neither individual

nor collective forms of consciousness necessarily represent a criterion of truth, since *all* modern consciousness is manipulated by ideology, by state power and modern media, by consumer culture. Different kinds of authority enter into people's head, fill their minds, mist up their brains, deceive and deform how reality appears.

*La conscience mystifiée* shattered prevailing Marxist faith that working-class consciousness had *transparent* access to reality, that it reflected in its collective head what is really out there in the world. The thinly disguised target was comrade Georg Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) had become a staple for Third International Marxists. Crucial for Lukács had been *reification* – how in capitalist society, relations between people take on the “phantom-form” of relations between things. Lukács reckoned reification could be punctured, exposed by the knowing mind acting in full knowledge of itself, acting in a “unified manner,” understanding the “totality of history.” But Lefebvre did not buy into Lukács's notion that the proletariat is “the identical subject-object of history,” did not see Marxism or dialectics as universal.<sup>4</sup> Instead, his Marxist line queried: Given proletarian mystification, how can “a true and revolutionary consciousness be created?” Dialectical thought and analysis can help, of course, yet only with an openness, flexibility, and honesty about “actual forms of alienation.” Mystification is more difficult to access when there appears to be no mystification.



In *La conscience mystifiée*, Lefebvre flags two forms of consciousness: *la conscience du forum* and *la conscience privée*. The former is a public consciousness, something social and collective; the latter, a consciousness more individual and usually more bourgeois. Since the birth of modern capitalism, these two realms have increasingly split apart; modern Western philosophy has tended to perpetuate the separation between society and the self, between the collective and the individual, between public and private life. In our own times, this separation manifests itself as a glaring contradiction, as both a plague on the public realm and a denigrated notion of individuality – what Lefebvre terms “an individualism against the individual.”

Private consciousness, he says, is a consciousness *deprived*.<sup>5</sup> Here, Lefebvre plays on the Latin-rooted French *privé*, with its dual meaning of *private* and *lack*. (The infinitive is *priver*, to deprive somebody of.) Thus, when people claim private property as their own, “as mine,” the etymology of the word indicates that this once constituted a loss, an act that deprives a larger public. Individual possession, meanwhile, the shibboleth of bourgeois society,

equally deprives the self of real selfhood. As Marx wrote in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, “private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it.... Therefore *all* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of *all* the senses – the sense of *having*.”<sup>6</sup> This sense of “having,” Marx said, is the only sensibility that really counts under capitalism.

As a collective impulse, the desire to possess – and to organize a public consciousness around possession – drives a wedge between our subjective selves and our objective environment, between our private consciousness and our social being. Dangers loom on both flanks. On the one hand, Lefebvre warns of how a public consciousness – a collective will – can fall prey to ideologues who speak for “us,” for a community based around nationhood and patriotism. False and forced unity can produce what Friedrich Nietzsche called a *herd mentality*, a tyranny of the majority, where individual liberties end up getting suppressed. On the other hand, Lefebvre also recognizes that as capitalism deepens and broadens, as it promotes its phony spirit of individuality, and as money mediates our lives, abstract falsehoods become voluntary and instinctive; they become “sacred” truths nobody recognizes anymore as myths.

Those who espouse a private consciousness, who flaunt it, who believe in it as gospel, are actually more susceptible to cults of personality and to the worshipping of demagogues. Lefebvre sniffs out Fyodor Dostoevsky’s parable of “The Grand Inquisitor” from *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881): “Today, people are more persuaded than ever that they are completely free,” says the Grand Inquisitor, “yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet.” People are prepared to forsake their freedom in return for (national) security and happiness. They are, per the Grand Inquisitor, willing to entrust their consciences to the “captive powers” of three formidable forces: “miracle, mystery and authority.”

A private consciousness *deprived* of the means to comprehend broader social and political reality, one that has lost its capacity to think critically, will always be more manipulable, more vulnerable to modern-day Grand Inquisitors. “Modern man,” says Lefebvre, “for whom illusions are everywhere, can no more be compared simply to a man in a boat who believes that the horizon is moving around the vessel; he is more like a man who sets sail in a boat he believes will never be shipwrecked and it’s the objects around him that toss and turn while he himself is fixed firmly on solid ground.”

So many illusory ideas and falsifications, *La conscience mystifiée* argues, so many mechanisms for upholding a *conscience privée*, are rooted in the

“obscure zones” of capitalist everyday life, in thoughts and actions rote-learned and routinized. “The kernel of direct, qualitative and relatively authentic human relations,” Lefebvre says, “are overwhelmed by diverse pressures. Instruments of information (TV and radio), as well as the press, consciously or not, pursue the task of investing in the sphere of deprived consciousness, of exploiting it, of rendering what was already deprived more deprived, bringing an illusory view of the social whole, one where deprivation has apparently disappeared.... Herein the ‘socialisation’ of the ‘*conscience privée*’ is complete.” The fetishism of the everyday marketplace leads to other fetishisms, to other kinds of abstractions. So it goes. Minds already reified are ill-equipped to fend off other reifications. “The reality attributed to an abstract entity,” he concludes, “accompanies the reality attributed to the commodity.”



Arguably, the most potent source of “miracle, mystery and authority” today does not come from the church but from the state, with its incumbent and wannabe leaders, whose lust for power is cynically secular and capitalist. Politicians promise miracles that seduce the masses, that conjure up the spirit of nationalism, a particularist identity flourishing not through blood or soil but through some mystified desire, through manufactured bigotry. As I write these lines, it is the morning after the British General Election – “the most important poll in a generation,” the *Guardian* called it. Johnson’s Conservative Party has just swept the board, up and down the country, winning a large majority of parliamentary seats for a manifesto that proposed nothing.

Traditional working-class Labour heartlands – the Midlands, North, and Northeast – have dramatically swung to the Tories; Labour’s former “red wall” has been trampled on by a “blue route” that marches merrily across the land. Endorsed by a right-wing press and dodging any format or public hearing that might interrogate his policies (or lack of them), Johnson sealed the show, duping the British populace with his one-note mantra: “GET BREXIT DONE.” We have to get Brexit done, he says, because we have to get Brexit done. *Ça suffit*. We can even buy the t-shirt. Carefully instigated banalities are more useful than metaphysics. The ruling class utilizes sentiments whose fragrance is simple, nothing too fancy.

Perhaps, during the mornings after to come, people cannot stop politicians from practicing the art of political lying. But maybe one day progressives can hope to patent an antidote for the need to believe in lies. Perhaps we can go on struggling to create the social conditions whereby people’s need to believe, their need for miracle, mystery, and authority,

will somehow dissipate, wither away, in a society that can absorb human sorrows and fulfill our deepest desires. To call on people to give up illusions about our condition is, above all else, to make a call to give up a condition that requires illusions. As the young Marx said, criticism has to pluck the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order for people to continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that we shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.

## Notes

1. The earliest Lefebvre text to be translated into English, in 1969, was *The Explosion*, actually published by Monthly Review Press. It was Lefebvre's take on the May 1968 uprising; *L'irruption de Nanterre au sommet* he had called it in French, written—or rather dictated, as he was wont to do with his books—as cars still blazed in central Paris and smoke smoldered in Nanterre, where Lefebvre taught sociology. The manuscript's ink was hardly dry when Monthly Review Press snapped up its English translation rights, principally because director of Monthly Review Press, Harry Braverman, found himself in the heart of the maelstrom, in town then on book business. Braverman described his experiences in a lockdown city in a wonderful essay, "Six Days in Paris," published in the *Nation* in June 1968. Lefebvre's *The Explosion*, translated by Alfred Ehrenfeld, has been in print by Monthly Review Press ever since.

2. Paul A. Baran to Paul M. Sweezy, February 23, 1949, in *The Age of Monopoly Capital*, by Baran and Sweezy (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 56–59.

3. With Guterman, Lefebvre translated Hegel, Marx, and Lenin (on Hegel), presenting each in volumes called *Morceaux choisis de Hegel*, *Morceaux choisis de Marx*, and *Cahiers de Lénine sur la dialectique de Hegel*. In 1933, Guterman, who was Jewish, fled France and settled permanently in the New York region. For more than forty years, until Guterman's death in 1984, he and Lefebvre maintained a lively collaboration and correspondence. Many of their letters and manuscripts are stored at the Guterman Collection in Columbia University's Butler Library, there as moving testimony to a friendship that survived a century of war, displacement, and disruption.

4. There is a curious sense in which Lefebvre's critique of Lukács's *concrete universal* equally applies to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's thesis on the *multitude* in *Empire*. Lukács's act of faith of the proletariat as the "identical subject-object of history" mirrors to a tee Hardt and Negri's act of faith in the multitude. "The concrete universal," Hardt and Negri say, "is what allows the

multitude to pass from place to place and make its place its own." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 362. Interestingly, Lefebvre's old Hungarian sparring partner (and friend) is one thinker Hardt and Negri do not actually mention.

5. Throughout the 1930s, Lefebvre worked on a companion volume to *La conscience mystifiée* called *La conscience privée*; the two texts were to be part and parcel of a larger project called *Sciences des idéologies*. Alas, the dialectical counterpart of the 1936 book was never completed. For years, Lefebvre's manuscript, which he dedicated to Guterman—"reduced to silence on the other side of the Atlantic"—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 of *La conscience privée*, bearing Lefebvre's scribbled annotations, can be found at Guterman's Columbia archives.

6. Emphasis in the original.



Mastery over nature, associated with technology and the growth of productive forces, and subject solely to the demands of profit (surplus value), culminates in the destruction of nature. The flow of organic exchange between society and the earth, a flow whose importance Marx pointed out in his discussion of the town, is, if not broken, at least dangerously modified. With the risk of serious, even catastrophic results. We may very well ask whether the destruction of nature is not an "integral" part of society's self-destruction, a turning against itself, while maintaining the capitalist mode of production, its forces, and its power.

—HENRI LEFEBVRE, *Marxist Thought and the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 149.