

Lefebvre, Henri

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Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991) was one of the most important Marxist theorists, introducing the ordinary to Marxist theory while living an extraordinary life himself. Lefebvre joined the French Communist Party in 1928, and was expelled in the late 1950s, a heterodox voice in a Stalinist, orthodox structure. He joined the French Resistance, became close to the Situationist International and backed the May 1968 revolt.

Lefebvre was born at the dawn of the twentieth century and died in the year that officially ended the Cold War, the era riddled with the potentially catastrophic effects of state and power antagonisms upon the everyday lives of populations caught in their midst – very symbolic for a thinker who departed from traditional paths of Marxist theory to develop a theory encompassing the sphere of everyday life instead, one that read through and beyond the nation-state as its unit of analysis. Lefebvre left behind an extremely large amount of writing that includes more than 60 books and over 300 articles. To summarize these would be impossible. Yet, if one were to outline his legacy, it would be a gross omission not to include, at the very least, Lefebvre's enhancing of our understanding of everyday life, of the production of space, and of the urban potential for revolution.

Lefebvre penned his *Critique of Everyday Life* trilogy over a period spanning more than 30 years (1947, 1961, 1981). The trilogy's key message is that, in order for us to understand the great forces at play around us, we need to delve deep into the ordinary, the quotidian. Not by coincidence, this is a message conveyed from an urbanist who placed utmost importance on the rural. Lefebvre conducted his doctoral thesis on the peasant communities in the Pyrenees and never lost his interest in the rural question. This might seem a strange juxtaposition, but it is not: we cannot comprehend the great concentration of labor and energies that make the urban possible without tracing them to their roots.

Lefebvre's acclaimed *The Production of Space* (1991/1974) perfectly encapsulates what is a seeming weakness and, at the same time, a great strength of the thinker's work. Faithful to his own idea of "rhythms" that permeate and define our lives, Lefebvre's writings follow rhythmical patterns in turn: sometimes cyclical, other times leading to ostensibly chaotic trajectories, leaving to the reader much of the task of weaving through and making sense of what is at hand. In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre covers a vast conceptual and cognitive array, from architecture to urban history to representation and language. But what permeates the book's logic is the understanding that space may indeed change through practice – whether through power, in terms of appropriation, or in terms of a quotidian resistance to this power, through *détournement*.

There might be no work of Lefebvre's that encapsulates better his broad and optimistic vision of the capacities of the urban than *The Urban Revolution* (2003/1970). Here, Lefebvre paved the way for what would become commonplace in social sciences, the understanding that our societies undergo a process of complete urbanization. To comprehend the urban we need to look beyond cities, to comprehend the nodes, links, and networks that stretch far beyond their geographical boundaries. Lefebvre's proposition is that we must look beyond cities as mere accumulations of capital, and discern the potentially revolutionary possibilities lying in their accumulation of bodies, energies, and information.

The full scope and breadth of Henri Lefebvre's work had until recently remained something of an enigma to the English-speaking world, with a number of his major works having remained untranslated from the French. This situation has been in part rectified, with recent translations, critical introductions, and collections providing a good overview of his work. Lefebvre's thought has been picked up at the time of the crumbling of power structures he saw coming. In his work, Lefebvre discerns the eventual inability of capitalism to reproduce without delegitimizing itself or

the social and political structures supporting it. These structures – and the nation-state in particular – are by now faced with a perennial crisis at a scale and magnitude unseen since the end of the twentieth century's two world wars. Along with them, our established conceptual schemata are also severely questioned. It is in this conjuncture and context that the work of Henri Lefebvre has enjoyed a phenomenal, if understandable, posthumous resurgence.

SEE ALSO

Geography (Human and Urban); Marxism; Public Space; Rural–Urban Continuum; Situationists; Urbanization

REFERENCES

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FURTHER READING

Elden, Stuart. 2004. *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*. London: Continuum.

Merrifield, Andy. 2006. *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.