A Crucial Moment of Transgression:
Henri Lefebvre and the Radical Metamorphosis of Every Day Life in the City

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To conceive of the impossible is to embrace the entire field of possibilities Henri

Our emerging, amodern civilisation is gradually, step by step, losing its formerly steadfast but indeed illusory grip on the modern reality. Apparently disoriented, it is entering a maze. A confusing and contradictory manifold of projected and technically simulated realities are added to and vastly enhancing our basic concepts of reality, of space-time perceptions. At the same time many deplore the continuing loss and qualitative erosion of public city space, the basic prerequisite for the utmost experience of a shared, common reality, the occasion for a socio-spatial celebration of society, the realisation of alterity, the spontaneous encounter with the other.

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre was among the most eloquent, action oriented theoreticians and ferocious defenders of public city space during a now distant period in the early sixties when political issues was intimately and dangerously connected to the realities and social events of the street and the square. He was equally observing in great empirical detail and conceptual clarity the considerable changes in our predominant perceptions of every day reality in the modern world.

He very early confronted the Heideggerian conservative concept of Alltäglichkeit with his radical notion of everydayness, la quotidienneté, as a basic criteria for judging fundamental changes in our ways of conceiving the world and of transforming it, of metamorphosis as he preferred to put it. For him the true experience of an authentic reality was to be found in the exhilarating virtualities of a social project, regarded as precious moments of creative transgression. As crucial elements in such a reformulation of our future world he regarded projects of material invention and symbolic reinterpretation, like projects of art, the architectural advent and urban transformation, revealing by non-verbal means yet unforeseen possibilities. These were conceived, within his political thinking, as vital elements indispensable for the rethinking of every day life in the new massively urbanised and rationalised society where even nature itself is merchandised and turned into an archaic relic and a reminiscence of

a lost human innocence. The ubiquitous urban reality, as a result of the generalised concept of production of space, is a creation of man himself, is our new nature, thus wide open to political and cultural strategies, to conflicting strategies of exertion of power on the one hand and the realisation of desire on the other.

Reaching far beyond Modernity...

As we are experiencing the very closing moment of a whole century, and the birth of a new, Henri Lefebvre, according to some to be the less known and the most misunderstood among qualitatively oriented Marxist philosophers during this century,[1] gives us a unique opportunity to portray, through his very wide life span, the history of this aged century and potential future prospects beyond it. When looking back at the passed hundred years he must be regarded as the most predominant intellectual to consistently include spatial, urban and architectural dimensions into his sociological and political thinking, particularly if you also consider his key role in the realisation of these ideas within a radical urban and architectural social movement.

His main achievement within this field, recently presented to an English speaking audience more than twenty years after its first appearance in 1974, The Production of Space, might be summarised to project conceptual unity to our perceptions of physical space, mental space and social space. The key theme in this book is that the social construction of reality is heavily dependant upon spatial aspects, as a mediating structure of social interaction and mental dispositions.

The by now already legendary and apparently most widely diffused text of his hand, Le Droit à la Ville, The Right to the City, first time published in March 1968, but initially written and published as an article during 1967, exactly a hundred years after Karl Marx Das Kapital, as the author himself is very much aware of, is ripe for reinterpretation and reconsideration. This was the text that gave Henri Lefebvre a world wide reputation as a prominent intellectual within the new urban social movements of the sixties and seventies.

Such a reconsideration is not simply prompted by the fact that Henri Lefebvre has recently been re-erected and re-discovered – surprisingly now considered as a phenomenological theoretician on the concept of everyday life experiences in the city[2] – but mainly because of the very actuality of the key questions he addressed in his philosophical investigations on the nature of the turbulent urban reality of western societies. The moment has come to see how the projections he made, the new horizons he discovered, can possibly be corrected by the realities and perceptions of our present time or to what extent these might perhaps be confirmed today?

Just like the well-known implications of Karl Marx' Communist Manifesto behind the most crucial political events of the 19th century in the French capitol, the text by Henri Lefebvre, produced just before the break-out of the May 1968 student movement upheaval in Paris, has had – and that is no exaggeration – a vast importance on our perceptions of a completely urbanised reality, of the political role of the production of space itself and of significant architectural symbolic projections of the 20th century.

A witness to a century

Henri Lefebvre was born 1901 in Hagetmau and passed away 1991 in Paris. His life adventure projects a particular rich picture of a genuine European intellectual, an epic drama spanning almost the whole of this turbulent century. A century, characterised by the philosopher himself, as the century when the historical process amounted into the coming of age of modernity. The very notion of modernity represented for Lefebvre a stage of human maturity lifting itself far beyond the violent social revolutions and transformative convulsions produced by the process of industrialisation and subsequent urbanisation. I believe Lefebvre also sensed and imagined something distinctively new out there, far beyond modernity, captured in his notion of the emerging urban society, on the verge of creation.

He was an intellectual and political actor with major contributions to the events of this century already in the early vibrant years of modernism, the golden age of philosophical and architectural creativity. Arriving in Paris at the age of twenty, Lefebvre saw the surrealists appear, was deeply inspired by Dada and Tristan Tzara, was taught by an archaic professor called

Henri Bergson on the notions of space and time and encountered very early, to his opinion, the dreadful ideas of a philosopher by the name of Martin Heidegger. The more he learned about this philosophy the more he became convinced he must devote his entire life to counter such an extremely conservative and pessimistic ideology, rather devoted to death than to life itself, far from any kind of bodily existence and tactile experience of reality.

The point of departure for this firm position taken by him was by that time the urgent quest to find a way beyond the repressive and repetitious triviality of the modern experience. How could one avoid constant alienation? In what way could the experience of the every day life be liberated through an artistic inquiry and social exploration of all possible possibilities? The surrealists had already established their approach, the poetic enchantment and enrichment of the world by artistic projections on the one hand. On the other stood Martin Heidegger with a retro oriented metaphysical-philosophical solution that could only lead backwards. But there was another option, the creative transformation of everyday life through a social revolution, the appropriation of life instead of a constant alienated existence, conceived by the group of young philosophers to which Lefebvre was dedicated by that time. This path led to the revolution, the immediate and radical transfiguration that would immediately change everyday reality. This of course was a rather naive conviction as Lefebvre himself later acknowledges. But it was a crucial moment of transgression:

> For us the solution was to be found at the horizon. We belonged to those who incessantly scrutinised its shape for new signs. We looked forwards and not backwards. To the question 'What does it mean to think?' we answered not with existence (l'être) but with the possible (le possible).[3]

This situation later leads to the very influential Lefebvrian concept of the revolution of everyday life within the alternative social movements of the seventies. It must be conceived as a vision of a peaceful and fundamental cultural transformation in opposition to the conventional notion of violent revolutionary convulsions. It has been witnessed that radical alternative communities, like e g the well known Kommune II in West Berlin in the early sixties, experiencing on the one hand the apolitical aspect of everyday life and on the other the non–personal nature of political manifestations on the street, discovers by that time, that for a genuine social change to come about the political reflection must also influence the realities of an intimately shared life world beyond the thresholds of formerly sacred individual or marital realms.

A moment of metamorphosis in everyday life

His close relation to an artistic and political avant-garde within the situationists international during the early fifties, animated in particular by his young disciple, Guy Debord, is of great interest in our contemporary situation.[4] Against the situationists' conceptions of the ethics and aesthetics of the situation Lefebvre proposed his idea of the spirit of the moment, le moment de l'oeuvre, the natural or the constructed, suddenly opening the frontiers of a new world. The ideas, theoretical speculations and action oriented approaches developed by the two philosophers in close cooperation gave considerable inspiration to the radical movements within art and architecture during the sixties and are still referred to today as the architecture of the event, by theoreticians like the architect Bernard Tschumi, memorised by the well known Parc de la Villette in Paris in 1989.[5]

This attitude led to one of the most important contribution to contemporary sociology, the theory developed around the conception of everyday life, documented in three principal volumes and constantly revised and revisited over a long time span from 1947 to 1962 and The Sociology of Everyday Life and further on to the last part in 1981.[6]

In retrospect, when more than fifty years have vanished since the time these ideas were originally formulated, it is surprising to see the very extent to which Henri Lefebvre regarded art, architecture and the urban project as extremely vital supports for a genuine transfiguration of everyday life experiences, for the realisation of a life project, reaching for new levels of qualitative human interaction and mutual exchange as pure

celebrations of life itself, conceived by the philosopher as the occasion for a continuos ludique urban moveable feast and festival.

His most inspiring, action oriented philosophy and buoyant, dynamic and persuasive personality were founding elements to – and certainly the very ignition charge behind – the student upheavals of the late sixties. His lectures at Nanterre university in front of huge crowds of students, among them the illustrious Daniel Cohn-Bendit, were sessions witnessed as profound transformations of mental orientations and ideological re-inventions forever changing life aspirations among those who participated.

Although he oriented much of the post war avantgarde art scene as well has he orchestered a major rupture in architectural practice post 68 in France, very few realised projects can be precisely acknowledged to him and his influence. With one important exception however, when he actively supported to some degree the Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill in the early eighties, by that time the most celebrated post modern foreign architect in France.

His vast impact can however easily be detected in so many situations on a more general level on the French scene as well as on the European scene at large. The new current political interest in architectural qualities and architectural identity on national and regional levels as part of government policies in the late nineties can also be regarded as the logical result of the constant ideological focus on urban issues since the early sixties. In France, the plentiful socially oriented building experiments supported by government resources during the seventies, the far reaching innovative urban and architectural research endeavours equally initiated the generally admired and most audacious French architectural scene projected by president François Mitterrand's many dubious grands projets and a subsequent concise policy on architectural culture, still in effect, with such huge repercussions on a global level, simply could not have been perceived in the same way without the particular support of an intellectual force like Henri Lefebvre's along with his numerous followers.

Even the very slogan "...rendre possible..." behind all these experimental governmental practices echoes Lefebvre, setting out the vision of making the seemingly impossible a possible, constructed, built and experienced reality. To Lefebvre, the possible, the virtualities of the present moment, open to adventure are to be conceived as the true authentic experience of reality.

The resurrection and actuality of Lefebvre

Only some years after his death in 1991, paradoxically enough, to many French intellectuals, his ideas suddenly seemed completely renewed after a long period of oblivion. As one critique notes, the phantom of Henri Lefebvre seems to have come back in full spirit when in the early nineties prominent philosophers like Jacques Derrida suddenly brings up Karl Marx to the surface of thought again and Michel Serres is equally all of a sudden appalled and deeply disturbed by the bad and unethical manners of a new aggressive bourgeoisie. Even Pierre Bourdieu finally re-discovers the persistent misery of this world in that context.

This renaissance of Henri Lefebvre is perhaps also due to the very collapse of Marxism as state official ideology, thereby making it possible to read marxist philosophers from a more relaxed standpoint, finally making it possible to reassess their whole rich potential, to some extent liberated from its association with a violent, dark and sombre past, presenting a renewed occasion for a more creative interpretation.

He concludes when finally witnessing the iron curtain and the Berlin wall torn down during these memorable November days in 1989, that in spite of everything, as long as there are inequalities the heritage from Karl Marx will not be forgotten:

> Marxism is indeed a part of the world we are leaving, but it also gives us a clear indication of the world we are about to meet in the future. This new world cannot be understood without Marxism, without its history, without its difficulties and basic problematic.

And he continues:

> The fundamental motivation behind Marx's thinking was that production – or the creation – of new social relationships should not be dictated by structures of domi-

nation and oppression. In that sense the revolutionary project is eternal…or rather imperishable, immortal. [7]

At the same time we also see Paul Virilio with great vigour continue and extend the sociologically oriented investigations initiated by Lefebvre, in a quite different spatial environment, announcing critical space, the end of place and the era of electronically provided atopological ubiquity. He concentrates his analysis of contemporary societies on the notion of socially distributed access to free and unlimited movements in space, on topological and atopological social relations. What for Lefebvre was politics of space becomes with Virilio politics of velocity; thus the product of time and space, of chronopolitics as he puts it.

The fact that Lefebvre exactly predicted this development towards the social analysis of time perceptions as a continuation of social space analysis, hard to conceptually grasp some twenty years ago, but today so utterly obvious, shows the profound changes in perspectives that has come about since that time not so very long ago. The originally romantic attitudes towards the technological inventions and gadgets of a supermodern reality we find with Virilio, finally, by the end of the century typically amounts into a plea for the body itself, for the resurrection of public space and city life, for genuine human exchanges, announcing and highly criticising the so called grey ecological erosion of our relation to time, space and distance, amounting into the catastrophe of an inevitable information bomb to go off everywhere at the same time, the end of the world in a new understanding.[8]

In 1971 Lefebvre made a now famous presentation of a progressive urban strategy announcing the political content of the contemporary urban phenomena, revealing the true ideological nature of the bourgeois preoccupation with urban issues. Since that time it is easy to identify, at least in West European cities an apparent but superficial return to a former carnival atmosphere as if the fear for resurrection, a memory from the last century, finally has succumbed into a well controlled commercial realm. Could perhaps the hypothesis be put forth that city space and public space is no longer that crucial tool for domination and repressive control that it has been before, as described by Lefebvre along with Foucault? Are there today other more powerful spaces and scenes where this control might be exerted? A society now controlled by other means, emerges on the horizon, the media spatial reality, a commonplace of enormous proportions creating a new liquid spatial reality, with a paramount influence on our perceptions of our selves and of our world, wide open for meticulously aimed political and cultural messages. Making actual presence in space less a question of physical travelling but of electronically projected virtualities.

The support Lefebvre was able to pour into the urban research during the golden age of urban sociology during the seventies, finally also amounts into the wide acceptance of Gilles Deleuze's rich and most intriguing reflections on the nature of nomadic space and disciplinary diagrams in societies of highly refined control mechanisms, ending up in conceptions of baroque labyrinthine folds as projections of new cosmologies of space and time, inspired by the mysterious Leibniz instead of the rational Descartes.

With Jean Baudrillard as his intellectual aide de champ at Nanterre University, Roland Barthes his very close friend for many years and Jean-Paul Sartre – who during his very active and influential philosophical life in contrast remained surprisingly silent on the issue of working class dreadful suburbs like Sarcelles – to be conceived as his junior disciple in so many respects – Henri Lefebvre seems to be the intellectual chef d'orchestre to this spectacular French intellectual drama.

This is further underlined finally with Michel Foucault altogether at his side speaking of other spaces and heterotopias in 1967 at the same time as Lefebvre himself is preparing his proclamation that the human rights should include the Right to the City, the right to an urban and architectural identity, the right to participate in events of urban re-appropriation directed towards the discovery of new territories and exploration of vast new continents of cultural meaning, thereby transgressing formerly unknown and forbidden borders.

Processes of alienation and of appropriation

The most vital point in the dialectical philosophy of Henri Lefebvre, as I conceive of it, and as I have myself tried to apply these themes to my own research as a follower of Lefebvre, is the two fold capacity to reveal, on the one hand, the concept of ideological domination by material, spatial means and on the other to put into political focus the virtual realisation of spaces of desire within hidden life projects, on individual as well as on a collective subconscious levels. Combined with these basic dialectical concepts of domination and liberation, or power and desire, comes the basic idea of social change conceived as a general transformation or more precisely as processes of appropriation, the concept made so famous through Lefebvre's particular interpretation and application within the field of housing. On this point his contribution to architectural and housing analysis and environmental social psychology is extremely important. But the notion of appropriation within his philosophy must be conceived on a very general level as the appropriation of space, of time, of the body itself and of experience as such, the appropriation of every day life in particular.

One of the most important points where his concepts considerably differs from current artistic convictions circles around the notion of abstraction. Abstract space, l'espace abstrait, was for Lefebvre a powerful alienating force, a tool for structural domination embodied in the modern suburb, conceived as a vast archipelago of repression and directed consumption. The famous formulation that "...violence is embodied in the very nature of abstraction..."[9] is in striking conflict with the ideas defended among influential architects today like Rem Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel. For them abstraction is democratic, abstractions in design are necessary prerequisites for true reinvention, for the discovery of new worlds and continents of meaning, whereas the figurative, the repetition of already well-known architectural conventions must be regarded as conservative tools looking backwards, as if history finally had come to an end.

This man's destiny is truly to be fully engulfed by this century, in the midst of it, at all levels. But he almost catches glimpses of a new amodern age, beyond modernity, through his discovery of the far reaching potentialities of the urban revolution, the ultimate urban society, where superhuman stages of social communication, of constant celebrations to mankind, can finally be conceived, at least as a desirable possibility on the horizon.

He remains however highly sceptical to the very contributions of his own science, the famous French urban sociology, to the creation of other urban realities, of social spaces yet never invented, as one of his very last remarks clarifies:

> (...)this urban science (sociology) has not kept its promises. It has produced what is today called urbanism that can be summarised as a set of sever restrictions to architectural creation with vague instructions to authorities and managers. In spite of some merits this urbanism has not been developed into a philosophy of the city. It has even confined itself to become a sort of catechism for technocrats. How and why is it possible that such a considerable amount of research and profound redirections of point of views has not been able to create a vivid and inhabitable city? [10]

The contours of the social project he thus envisaged

still prevails, more valid than ever. In such an audacious endeavour, artistic, architectural and urban invention, crucial moments of transgression, serves as extremely vital supports for a genuine cultural invention of everyday life experiences, reaching for new levels of qualitative human interaction and mutual exchange as pure celebrations of life itself, the never-ending, constant urban moveable feast. The future of art he once said, is not artistic. It is urban.[11]

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Today, the ghostlike market reigns with no opposition, only sometimes threatened in low voice with regulations if it doesn't behave properly. In the east as well as in the west. Mustn't we reconsider the city as pure human use-value, as relative to authentic desires of human intentions, not only as the victim of market forces or as such, a threat to global environmental sustainability, producing an image of a free city ready for cultural experiences with actual empowerment through the architectural project among its basic principles, thereby not only strengthening but also significantly advancing the democratic tradition of the European city, the very cradle of philosophical reflection itself.

We might consider, what Henri Lefebvre late in his life, together with the Groupe de Navarenx, presented as a new citizenship, a new social contract for urban citizenship, un contrat de citoyenneté,[12] what this concept could possibly imply in a new amodern reality, when the city, as he puts it, is lost or seems to vanish in front of a planetarian metamorphosis, a new vision of the world.

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Notes

1. David Harvey, Frederic Jameson, Allan Scott and Edward Soja, cf Espaces & Sociétés no76, 1994, Actualités de Henri Lefebvre
2. The surprising actuality of Henri Lefebvre today particularly stems from the wide interest for a kind of phenomenologically oriented analysis of the rhythms of the city, the bodily experience, with all senses, of the built environment, initially developed in this text.
3. Hess 1988:54
4. Cf Leach, Neil (1999) The anaesthetics of architecture, where this situation is described.
5. Guy Debord (1967) La Société de Spectacle
6. Lefebvre, Henri (1981) Critique de la vie qoutidienne III

De la modernité au modernisme (Pour une métaphilosophie du qoutidien, Paris, L'Arche
7. Espaces & Sociétés no76 (1994) Actualités de Henri Lefebvre, p 144
8. Cf Virilio, Paul (1996) Cybermonde, la politique du pire, entretiens avec Philippe Petit, Les Eds Textuel, Paris
9. Lefebvre 1974
10. Quoted in Espaces & Sociétés no76 (1994) Actualités de Henri Lefebvre, p 49, Le Monde Diplomatique, 1991, pp. 14–17
11. This text is primarily based on the excellent biography by Remi Hess from 1988, supervised to a large extent by the philosopher himself, it must be noted however, and based on extensive taped interviews. The recently published book by Rob Shields (1999) Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics, Routledge/International Library of Sociology, carries this perspective further to the English reader. For the general French scene see Jacques Lucan's descriptions from 1990 written with great personal insight. For an interesting current application of the philosophy of the Everyday see particularly Mary McLeod's different contributions centred around the analysis of gender e.g. in Harris, Steven & Deborah Berke eds. (1997) and also a contribution by Michel de Certeau, a close follower of the master, in English translation, The Practice of Everyday Life (1984). For the philosophical context related to architecture and planning to which Henri Lefebvre belongs see the anthology by Leach, Neil, ed. (1997)
12. Cf Lefebvre 1991