

NEWS

Henri Lefebvre, 1901-1991

Henri Lefebvre, the most prolific of French Marxist intellectuals, died during the night of 28-29 June 1991, less than a fortnight after his ninetieth birthday. During his long career, his work has gone in and out of fashion several times, and has influenced the development not only of philosophy but also of sociology, geography, political science and literary criticism.

Born in the Landes of South-West France in 1901, Lefebvre went to study philosophy in Paris at the age of twenty, and soon became attracted to Marxism, which was certainly not taught at the university, but was being espoused by many young intellectuals in the aftermath of the October revolution. Along with Paul Nizan, Georges Friedmann, Georges Politzer and other young philosophers, Lefebvre was active in a succession of short-lived journals during the 1920's and early 1930s, which successfully introduced Marxism into the mainstream of French intellectual life, at least on the Left. He shared some of the artistic avant-gardism of the surrealists, and like them was drawn towards communism as a practical means of implanting his aspirations. Lefebvre joined the French Communist Party in 1928 and for most of the next thirty years he toed the political line, in return for which, he secured a margin of tolerance for his rather heterodox interpretation of Marxism, which sat uncomfortably with the *stalinisme ordinaire* of the French Communist Party (PCF).

Lefebvre's great energy and erudition were largely responsible for popularising the early writings of Marx, some of which he translated into French in 1933, and which served to focus Lefebvre's own humanist interpretation of Marx. He delved deeply into the Hegelian ancestry of Marxism, from which he derived an abiding preoccupation with dialectical thought, and he read widely in German philosophy, finding particular affinities with Nietzsche, on whom he published a book in 1939, but also with Schelling and Heidegger, about whom he was publicly more reticent. This activity, carried out while he was teaching philosophy in provincial *lycées*, culminated in his influential book *Dialectical Materialism*. Published in 1939, within a few weeks of Stalin's infamous *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Lefebvre's book was the antithesis of *diamat*, and was therefore pointedly ignored by party circles. Banned during the occupation, it was for many years a bestseller after the war. Lefebvre affirmed the superiority of Hegel's dialectic over formal logic, based on the dialectic's attempt to achieve a synthesis of the concept and its content, and therefore a synthesis of thought and being. He accepted Marx's criticisms of Hegel's theory of the state, religion and alienation, based on the perception that while Hegel sought to derive the content from the concept, Marx saw the need to enable the content to direct the development of the concept. The resulting 'dialectical materialism', in Lefebvre's view, transcended both idealism and materialism, and oriented the dialectic towards a resolution of contradictions in practical activity, or Praxis. In historical terms, he thought it would eventuate in the practical realisation of the full potential of human existence: Total Man. The patriarchal resonance of Lefebvre's Marxist humanism was wholly consonant with the intellectual climate of the period, but was scarcely attenuated in later times as he prided himself on a seductive charm

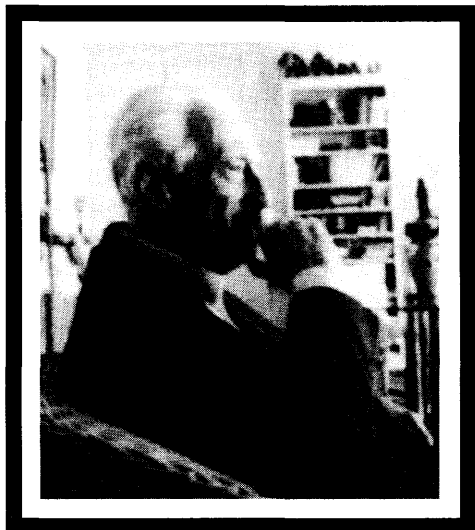
and virility that were almost legendary even in his old age.

After the war, in which he acquired a distinguished Resistance record, Lefebvre took a job in broadcasting in Toulouse, which left him time for a flurry of publications on Marxism and philosophy, including his successful popular account *Le Marxisme* (1948) in the 'Que sais-je?' paperback series. Developing his interpretation of the early Marx, Lefebvre argued that alienation was a fundamental structure of human practice. In broad outline, every human activity was characterised by a three-stage evolution in which initially spontaneous forms of order were shaped into rational organising structures, which finally lent themselves to abuse as a fetishized system of oppression. Lefebvre applied this analysis, for example, to economics, where division of labour eventually turns into the exploitation of workers; to politics, where effective administration (or leadership) decays into a coercive State (or party) apparatus; and even to philosophy where clarity of thinking finally hardens into a rigid ideology which those in power can wield as a blunt instrument.

Lefebvre's libertarian tendencies made him more popular with the social democratic and Christian democratic Left than with hard-line Stalinists in the PCF. However, philosophical debate in post-war France was not an occupation for the faint-hearted, and Lefebvre was not above accepting his share of the hatchet-work. His *L'Existentialisme* (1946), which he later disavowed, was probably the low-point of his work. On the one hand it was a virulent attack on Sartrean existentialism, then in its heyday, and therefore on philosophical positions which were in many respects close to his own. On the other hand, it included a posthumous attack on Paul Nizan, who had left the PCF over the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939, and whom Lefebvre ignobly accused of having been a police spy.

The tightening of the Cold War left Lefebvre exposed and uncomfortable. He accepted a research post in sociology and temporarily abandoned philosophy, though not without publishing an obligatory self-criticism. Zhdanov had set the tone and every party intellectual had to take a turn at correcting his or (more rarely) her own previous errors and deviations. Lefebvre's half-rejection of his earlier neo-Hegelianism was more tortuous than most.

Sociology was in comparison a safe haven. Despite a long intellectual tradition going back to Montesquieu, Comte and Durkheim, French sociology was not regarded as politically sensitive. It was not a secondary school subject, unlike philosophy, and though it was taught in universities it mainly flourished in non-teaching research centres, where it was often linked to the rapidly growing requirements of the national planning agency. Since the French approach tends to be highly theoretical, Lefebvre was one of many philosophers (including Raymond Aron and Edgar Morin) who made a comfortable transition to sociology. Drawing on his Marxist humanist framework, Lefebvre made distinguished and widely read contributions to both urban and rural sociology, to sociolinguistics, and to the sociology of everyday life. To some extent he is now regarded as having been a founder of some of these areas of study, and tributes in French



sociological journals have focused on this as his major achievement. He eventually held chairs of sociology in the universities of Strasbourg and then Nanterre.

After the traumatic events of 1956, Lefebvre returned to philosophical debate, directing withering criticisms against the dogmatism of Stalin and his French followers. He diagnosed a fundamental crisis in philosophy, and suggested that it had reached the point at which it was impossible to make any general philosophical assertions without falling into mystification. He thought it might be prudent for ontological or cosmological statements (about the world, nature, matter, and the place of man in the universe) to be left to poets and musicians rather than philosophers. As for Marxist philosophy, he thought it should eschew systematisation and sharpen the critical edge of the dialectical method. Linking with oppositional movements in Eastern Europe and with non-communist (often Trotskyist) intellectuals in France, Lefebvre became energetically anti-Stalinist in the late 1950s, helping to found the independent Marxist reviews *Arguments* and *Socialisme et barbarie*, and developing a criticism of the bureaucratization of societies East and West. His expulsion from the PCF in 1958 surprised no one and stimulated a succession of innovative works, disconcertingly mixing sociology, literary analysis, philosophy and poetry in attempts to break down disciplinary barriers and to free Marxist thinking from its self-imposed limitations. His autobiographical *La Somme et le reste* (1960) is strikingly original in this respect, anticipating some of the textual strategies of post-structuralism and dealing with his opponents in the manner of Mohammed Ali ('float like a butterfly, sting like a bee').

As the fifties turned into the sixties, the French intellectual scene was divided between the rising power of the structuralist theorists and the flagging inspirations of the existentialists and humanists. Lefebvre became one of the foremost opponents of the structuralo-marxists. Writing in the provocatively named journal *L'Homme et la société*, he castigated writers like Lévi-Strauss and Foucault for their hypostatization of theory into an Eliatic System. He regarded them as the apologists of technocracy, and coined the term 'cybernanthropie' to describe the new systems-oriented technocracy, which he saw emerging in France under their aegis. But he reserved his most venomous strictures, not surprisingly, for the theoretical anti-humanists of Althusser's school. Considering Althusser as a renovator of Stalinist dogmatism, he accused him, among other things, of divorcing theory from practice, of constructing a new structuralist ideology, and of recycling the old empirio-criticism that Lenin had so thoroughly demolished sixty years earlier. Althusser's static and convoluted system seemed to

him to demobilise and disarm the creativity of the masses while elevating a small intellectual élite to dangerous and unwarranted supremacy.

The events of May 1968 in France and the upheavals throughout Europe and North America seemed to Lefebvre to vindicate all that he had been arguing. The Stalinists and structuralists seemed to him unable to understand, sympathize with, or even communicate with the insurgent students, whereas Lefebvre saw the students as the victims of social and intellectual alienation, and as the agents of his long term programme of social liberation leading to the creation of the Total Man. As a professor at Nanterre, where the student movement was sparked off, he had a grandstand view of the early days of the May events: Daniel Cohn-Bendit was one of his students. His study of the causes and origins of the events (translated in English as *The Explosion*) remains one of the most influential. Both the innovative political methods and slogans such as 'imagination has taken power' echoed Lefebvre's own concerns. They also echoed the imaginative anarchism of the situationists, grouped round Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, who had long appealed to Lefebvre. His work was one of their theoretical sources, though his relations with them were often turbulent.

In many respects, the 1970s were the Golden Age of French Marxism. Lefebvre's many works reached a much wider audience during this period, and began to be translated into English as well as other languages (especially in Eastern Europe). He and those with whom he had worked during the late fifties and sixties (Morin, Chatelet, Axelos, Goldmann, Castoriadis, Fougeyrollas and others) became the senior figures of the non-communist Marxist revival. Reprints of Lefebvre's shorter accounts were snapped up, though his own energies were turned principally towards a series of innovative studies in urban sociology, in which he argued that the organisation of the urban time and space to fit the lived experience of its citizens and residents could become the focus for a renewal of direct democratic relationships in modern society.

To the surprise and dismay of many of his associates, Lefebvre moved back into a closer relationship with the PCF after 1978. In part he was attracted by its greater independence from the Moscow line, in part by its espousal of decentralising policies of local self-government, and in part by the more dialectical and humanist approach of its leading theorists, especially Lucien Sève. The rather more unbuttoned style of its publications gave him the freedom to develop unorthodox views, which were no longer regarded as threatening, and to deploy the humour and verve which was always a characteristic of his writing. His rapprochement with communism was probably also a reaction against the declining influence of Marxism and the tendency of many former Left-wing intellectuals to drift into political agnosticism.

An assertive and energetic Marxist to the very end of his long life, Henri Lefebvre continued to believe that an undogmatic reading of Marx and Engels provided the best framework for understanding the nature and development of society, and that an ambitious revolutionary project offered the best chance of assisting positive human development through the reverses and uncertainties of history.

Michael Kelly

Two of Lefebvre's most important works have recently been translated into English: Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1 (1947; 2nd ed. 1958), translated by John Moore, Verso, London, 1991, £29.95 hb; Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (1974), translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, £14.95 pb.