

Some Thoughts Written While Visiting the Swedish Countryside

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A forest near Linderød, Sweden (Author's photograph)

Recently, I've been studying a selection of Henri Lefebvre's works closely. His output included philosophy, sociology, history, economics, art criticism, and political philosophy—among other things. What a mind! Lefebvre's long life (1901-1991) spanned almost a century and included two World Wars, the Cold War, the 1968 student revolutions, and the right-wing turn in France during the 1980s, as well as a variety of academic and research posts.

What makes Lefebvre's works so interesting has everything to do with his thinking method and prose style. Seldom, if ever, does he present an argument in the academic or scholarly philosophical sense. Instead, we encounter a gentle and flowing torrent of thoughts, occasionally punctuated by a passionate exclamation or acerbic remark. But then, the tone changes, and a gem of an observation comes along. It happens almost in passing, so pay attention! The beauty of Lefebvre's writing style is that it is

exploratory, like a walk in the forest. Its paths and trails meander, search, lead to unexpected vista's, become overgrown or simply end in between the trees.

So, I could not resist paraphrasing the title of a (circa) 1947 essay of his, called "Some Thoughts Written One Sunday in the French Countryside." Try to imagine for a moment that you intend to publish an academic book, and one of the chapters bears that title. Fire and brimstone would be rained down upon you by an angry reviewer! Luckily, however, this feral strain of reviewer was not around when Lefebvre published his work, granting me the opportunity to pay homage to its author.

Currently, I find myself, however, not in the French, but in the Swedish countryside. Staying and working in a cabin in the woods, finding finally the time to let my thoughts flow freely, has a calming effect, a tranquillity that permeates everything. The walks during the day stimulate my thinking. It's not that I have inspirational moments or direct insights during the walks. Instead, they are the mediators and gently direct the process of thought. They provide my mind with the necessary conditions for thinking, or to enjoy thinking. But above all—to enjoy wandering.

To think is to move, after all. It is to change viewpoints, but also to wander in the silences between the thoughts, to engage in a prolonged exercise of examining this or that figment of the imagination, or to enjoy whatever expanse one discovers, or to follow aimlessly the train of thought. And actually, that is the most interesting philosophy: instead of the author blathering on-and-on, busily trying to fill all possible holes in their argument and trying to find supports for all the weaknesses they know all too well, readers can interpolate their own thoughts into the gaps between the author's thoughts.

What ensues is a dialogue without spoken words, a new plane of thoughtful existence from which philosophical creativity and novelty arise. Classical philosophy had a name for this: dialectics. It is the movement of thought that is free, but not purposeless; generative but not sprawling; playful but not rash; open but intentionally limited; explorative yet focused; suggestive yet precise; appearance yet also reality. And only those who keep the living tension of dialectical thought alive through its application reap its fruits.

Lefebvre was undoubtedly such a master. The informal tone, the leaps and jumps, the oscillation between fact and conjecture, summary and observation, passion and searching precision all kept a vital movement of thought alive. Because of this, he understood Hegel's philosophical intentions very well, even while Hegel tried to chain his dialectics to a method, imprisoning it in a conceptual cage where it languished and ultimately died: the shrivelled husk of a great philosophical promise. Was Hegel afraid of the movement he set in motion in the *Phenomenology*? Perhaps. It is entirely possible that the young Hegel discovered something that the older Hegel

avoided facing up to, namely, that reality as such is not wholly graspable in conceptual terms alone.

But Marx—he took a path *not only* crassly materialistic *but also* original; *not only* dogmatic *but also* creative. And he left us with Marxism, that highly conflicted and controverted political legacy that has fathered many children, although only a very few of them could utilize its potential in full. Lefebvre is definitely an unusual Marxist, because he did not buy into the superstructure of dead concepts, dogmas, and pseudo-dialectical reversals that ostentatiously pepper the writings of other Marxist thinkers like Lukacs, Adorno, Mao, Gramsci, Lenin, Badiou and Žižek. In their writings, Hegel looms darkly and menacingly in the background as the conceptual engineer, and his dialectics figures as the holy method, while Marx is treated as the prophet ushering in the light. But to what do their clever reversals ultimately lead?

—Often, all too often, to a glorification of paradox for the sake of paradox. And isn't this very feature so blatantly detectable and detestable in many left-wing journals and books? The terminology and methods of Hegel and Marx are used to “radicalize,” “subvert,” “undermine,” etc., etc. All these fashionable catchphrases tell more about how the tradition of social philosophy is understood than the contents of the articles themselves.

Far too frequently, Marxist methods of thought are cast in terms of revolutionary potential. A revolution! The sooner, the better! Nowadays, under the influence of social media, revolution has become a pastime, an empty yet colorful spectacle, an exciting and agreeable item on the social agenda. Carrying it out has become a mode of instant gratification. And so, we see in a toy version what real revolutions caused in the real world: brutal and swift justice at the hands of those who think history is on their side. And all the talk about radicalization, subversion, and undermining is just the preferred rhetorical trope: playing around with the notion of the philosopher as the revolutionary, the visionary cultural saboteur chipping away at the foundations of hegemony.

I often wonder what would have happened had Marx chosen the anarcho-socialistic and decidedly more humanistic paths taken by Bakunin and Kropotkin, or the mystical paths of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy. I suspect that we would have ended up with a political tradition of social thought that would have avoided at least some of the pitfalls of the 20th century. The tendency of the Left to proclaim free expression and free-thinking for the individual—*dare to think for yourself!*—while simultaneously insisting on authoritarian coercive collectivist ways of thinking—don't you *ever* dare to think for yourself, *or else!*—is its most menacing, unsavory, and indeed tragic characteristic.

Far too often, the so-called “freedom of the individual” is framed as arising only in and through its conformity with the collectivist superstructure. Or: individuality is fine, *as long as* it does not overstep the carefully dotted lines drawn by those who know best. Or, once again in other words: *argue as much as you like about whatever you like, but obey!*

Lefebvre was well aware of this, and it shows. His work as a sociologist in the Pyrenees imbues all his writings with a directness and a practicality that is often comically absent in the writings of those who are regarded as Marxism’s great thinkers. In Lefebvre, there’s mud on your boots, and the sun shines through the leaves of trees. Moreover, there is less Marxist dogmatism in his work than in any Marxist work I have come across yet. No elaborate theories of commodity exchange, or a theory of value, or fine-grained analyses whether class struggle is real.

Instead, the theoretical apparatus is kept to a minimum, and what there is of it, is applied to the mucky problems of the real world, the ones that cling to your boots. No dialectical reversals or toying around with the notion of revolution and the consciousness of the masses, but instead a keen eye for tradition, practical solutions, and an emphasis on everyday life, whether the life of the farmer or the factory worker.

But above all in Lefebvre’s work—and this is sorely missing in the works of other more famous Marxists—there is the development of social thought as a legitimate alternative to neoliberal economic theory and social policy. The troublesome and resentful Marxism of the revolution is replaced with an embodied and refreshingly earthly sociology as a mode of serious philosophical thought, a genuine alternative to current economic and social philosophy.

The most promising offshoots of Marxism must discard what Marx literally said or did—he could be a singularly narrow-minded and unpleasant person—and instead utilize his mode of thinking in ways that do justice to the line of empirical, real-life, real-world criticism that he and Friedrich Engels initiated. In doing so, they developed as a viable alternative for re-appreciating, reconceiving, rethinking, and indeed transforming the world. And nowhere else is this shown more clearly than in Lefebvre’s writings.

The opposite trap must also be avoided: it would be a mistake to fall into the trap of breathless alarmism and instantaneous social action and, or even worse: undirected activism. Marxism has a respectable pedigree of dialectical thought, although we should be relentlessly critical of the stifling and ossifying forms of thinking this has produced, and that includes the all-too-hasty coercive authoritarian collectivist leap into instantaneous world-improvement.

Nevertheless, the dialectical manner of thinking, with all its context-sensitivity, creativity, dynamism, and flexibility, must be developed for the 21st century. This is of the utmost importance, even if only to avoid the aggressiveness and ruthlessness with which the very idea of “context” was treated during the 20th century.

Even more crucially, I would say, is that current social thought *must transcend Marxism, while also incorporating what's best of it*, in a truly Hegelian fashion. The categories of thought that served the tradition of Marxist political critique must be re-adapted and reinvented and must grow into a socio-political repertoire or toolkit that can stand on its own, without any invidious comparison-&-contrast with the Marxist tradition in its entirety. In short, the thought of Marx's thinking must itself be “*aufgehoben*” — that is, overcome and sublated — and indeed this is precisely Lefebvre's take on the matter: it must assume a new shape, so that it cannot be mistaken for the old theory anymore.

Meanwhile, the sand and pine needles of the Swedish forests stick to my shoes, and unwittingly I bring them inside the cottage—a piece of the cosmos has been a hitchhiker I unselfconsciously picked up! This is the real world that we unavoidably are morally required to deal with, and that we also unavoidably share with others. It is a home, a *topos*, and a cosmos for us, and also for a myriad of *other* creatures and systems on which we necessarily depend, all of which must be treated with awe and respect, thereby minding and interiorizing their dignity. So, our social thought must not only affirm that *everything matters*, but also deal with how we deal with others, thereby taking fully into account our own specific *place* in the cosmos, somewhere *off-center*, hence *without* taking ourselves to be *the center* of all that matters.

We must learn to think from a “decentered center”—that is, we must face up to the fact that we can't occupy the center stage any longer, given all the knowledge we currently possess, and seeing how dependent we are on life-sustaining systems. Marx's materialist path won't help us; but perhaps the philosophical course charted by Lefebvre will.