

We are not judges and life is not a trial: Henri Lefebvre's *Metaphilosophy*

Henri Lefebvre's *Metaphilosophie* was first published by éditions de Minuit in French in 1965 as part of the *Arguments* series, which was overseen by Kostas Axelos. Translated into English by David Fernbacs,¹ it was published in 2016 by Verso as *Metaphilosophy*.² My soft-cover copy of this long and very dense book cost a whopping \$32.00. It was not worth it.

According to Stuart Elden, the book's editor and the author of its "Introduction: A Study of Productive Tensions," *Metaphilosophie* was "re-edited in 2001 with éditions Syllepse" (p. xix). Elden then goes on to list the differences between the two editions.

In the original, the book bore the subtitle *Prolégomènes* – 'Prolegomenas' – but this was removed for the re-issue. Instead, 'Prolégomènes: Avertissement' has been assigned as a title to the first section, in place of 'Avertissement et tableaux.' Two other chapters have their titles amended in the table of contents [...] Both changes mean the second edition's table of contents is also different between editions [...] While we have followed the second edition for this translation, these changes are important in terms of cross-references (pp. xix-xx).

But other changes must have been made, because, within the text itself, the reader can occasionally read references to historical events and publication dates that came *after* the first edition was written (between August 1963 and November

¹ Though he is an excellent translator, Fernbacs is very British and a bit stiff. For example, he translates *copains* as "buddies," instead of "guys," and, in a footnote (p. 242), explains that "'Copains' here is likely a reference to a French radio programme of the 1960s, *Salut les copains*, identified with *yé-yé* pop music." Fernbacs doesn't bother to explain that *yé-yé* was a condescending reference to the type of music played by the Beatles, especially their hit song "She Loves You" (which includes the line, "She loves you, yeah yeah yeah"), or that, by 1965, both the Beatles and "*yé-yé* pop music" as a whole had evolved musically and had become the center of an emerging "counter-culture," one that would threaten the established order on a number of levels.

² All page references in what follows refer to the Verso soft-cover edition.

1964). For example: “The good little girl who becomes a good wife and mother is here in front of our eyes in 1965” (p. 225). Did Lefebvre project the developments of 1964 into the following year? Or was the year 1965 added in later, perhaps when the book was “re-edited” in 2001?

These might seem to be trivial questions, but they aren’t. According to Elden, historical contextualization is crucial here:

Metaphilosophy, a book he wrote in his sixties but which counts as a mid-career landmark, is an essential part of the story. The book pre-dates all of his major texts on urban questions, including *The Right to the City*,³ *The Urban Revolution* and *Marxist Thought and the City*. It comes several years before *The Production of Space*⁴ and almost twenty-six years ahead of his final book *Elements of Rhythmanalysis*.⁵ It appeared shortly after the second volume of *Critique of Everyday Life*, and in the same year as his *La proclamation de la Commune* and his study of the Pyrenees (pp. vii-viii).

In the words of Georges Labica, the author of “Marxism and Poetry,” a text from 1997 that has been added to the English translation of *Metaphilosophy* as a postface (evidently because it was included in the 2001 re-edition),

in 1965, *Metaphilosophy* found itself wedged, literally short-circuited, by the simultaneous publication of Althusser’s two works, *For Marx* and the collective volumes of *Reading Capital*. The historical moment, *which we will not dwell on here*, saw the sudden transition from a humanist Marxism, challenging, iconoclastic and utopian, to a Marxism that proclaimed its scientific character and recited certainties. This transition was a double paradox, as it replaced one figure of Marx by another (p. 326, emphasis added).

One need not “dwell” on the historical moment of 1965 to realize that, when it came to Marx and Marxism, something very different from this allegedly “sudden transition” was going on. A cursory glance in other directions will suffice. On the one hand, there were Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, members of the Situationist International, who, in the 1963 to 1965 period, were writing two highly original and influential books – *La Société du spectacle* and *Traité de savoir-vivre*

³ Cf. our review of this book: <http://www.notbored.org/writings-on-cities.html>.

⁴ Cf. our review of this book: <http://www.notbored.org/space.html>.

⁵ Lefebvre died in 1991 at the age of 90.

à l'usage des jeunes générations (aka *The Revolution of Everyday Life*), respectively⁶ – that marked a return to “humanist Marxism, challenging, iconoclastic and utopian.” On the other hand, there was Cornelius Castoriadis, a leading member of Socialisme ou Barbarie, who, by 1965, had conclusively broken with Marx entirely,⁷ that is to say, both with “humanist Marxism, challenging, iconoclastic and utopian” and “a Marxism that proclaimed its scientific character and recited certainties.”⁸ Only apologists for the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union such as Althusser still believed (or continued to pretend to believe) that Marxism had “a scientific character.”

Significantly, these attempts at establishing *Metaphilosophy*'s historical context are at odds with the book itself, which – intentionally or not – presents its author as *disconnected* from his historical moment. For example: in the chapter titled “Philosophy as Message,” Lefebvre presents his readers with a list of “figures or quasi-figures of philosophical rhetoric” that Jorge Luis Borgès left out of his essay “A History of Eternity,” which, in Lefebvre's words, includes an “incomplete and confused list of stereotypes of discourse on truth.” After offering up a dozen pairings (for example: “emphasis and reticence”), Lefebvre moves on to “immediately add another list of figures,” only these are grouped into triplets, not pairs (for example: “assertion, negation, denial”). And *that's that*: mission accomplished! A triumphant Lefebvre declares,

It is important for our line of argument and our method to emphasize the triple grouping of these categories. Starting from dichotomous oppositions, they lead to the restitution of dialectical movements. Besides, they attain affectivity and ambiguity, whose role is incontestable but escape dichotomies. The affective connotations, trials and errors of social communications and expression return into the research. The rationalism inherent in the fetishization of the discursive is corrected without being dislocated. It is here and in this way that we grasp again, starting with the reduction to language and discourse (semantic reduction), the ‘realities’ that this reduction brackets out, but makes it possible to order and situate (pp. 264-265).

⁶ Both books were published in 1967.

⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Recommencing the Revolution,” written in 1963 and published in 1964, included in *Political and Social Writings: Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society, 1961-1979*, edited and translated by David Ames Curtis (University of Minnesota, 1992).

⁸ Lefebvre remarks: “In order to think the new possibility, we might perhaps have to go further and elsewhere than Marx” (p. 185).

Wasn't that easy? All it took was making a list with entries that included *three* terms instead of just two!

Two pages later, Lefebvre confides to his readers that,

we could even *amuse ourselves* by constructing the matrix of transition that results from the table of probabilities of transition from one state of equilibrium to another among possible states. In this formalization, those elements that have been seen as determinant (biography, historical and social context) would on the contrary be seen as simply the intervention of chance in the transition of the system from one state to another. It would be still more *amusing* to demonstrate that the System tends towards a final state of equilibrium (which occurs, mathematically speaking, when the 'Markov chain' is regular and the matrix of transition possesses at least one column made up of positive terms). This final state, naturally enough, would be Hegelianism! (p. 268, emphasis added).

I'm sorry: this isn't the self-portrait of a public intellectual or a political revolutionary who is confronting his historical moment. It's the portrait of an academic thinker, cut off from the rest of world, perhaps completely unaware of the true nature of the historical moment in which he finds himself, *amusing himself* with his lists and tables and columns.⁹

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Why did Lefebvre feel the need to retreat in this way and at this particular time? My guess is that he was still reeling from the tumultuous end to his relationship with Debord, Vaneigem and other members of the SI – a relationship that had been as much personal as it had been intellectual. Years later, in

⁹ Note well Debord's critique: "The defect in Lefebvre's conception lies in making the simple expression of discordance a sufficient criterion for revolutionary action within the culture. Lefebvre renounces beforehand all experiments toward profound cultural change while remaining satisfied with a content: awareness of the (still too remote) impossible-possible, which can be expressed no matter what form it takes within the framework of decomposition." Guy Debord, "Theses on the Cultural Revolution," *Internationale situationniste* #1 (1958). In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/theses.html>.

conversation with Kristin Ross, Lefebvre himself would refer to it as a “love story.”¹⁰

This story began in early January 1960, when Lefebvre sent a letter to the SI in response to the contents of its journal, *Internationale situationniste*.

Since the debut of your journal, I have desired to enter into relations with you. Your [issue] #3 has incited me. Not so much because of what you have written about me, but because of your views on urbanism, on (and against) functionalism, on radical critique and the possibly creative attitude, etc.¹¹

No doubt Lefebvre was further “incited” when issue #4 of *Internationale situationniste* (June 1960) included an unsigned article that had been in preparation for over a year¹² and that compared “the theory of moments and the construction of situations.”¹³ It would appear from Debord’s letter to Lefebvre, dated 5 May 1960,¹⁴ that they meet soon after. The following year, Lefebvre invited Debord to speak about the SI’s “Perspectives on the Conscious Modification of Everyday Life” to the Research Group on Everyday Life, a small group “at the margins of the CNRS.”¹⁵ Debord agreed, and presented his talk in the form of a tape recording on 17 May 1961. The text itself was printed in *Internationale Situationniste* #6 (August 1961).

The personal relationship between Lefebvre and the situationists officially ended in February 1963, with the SI’s publication of a polemic titled *Into the Trashcan of History*. According to this text, which received no response from Lefebvre himself,

Henri Lefebvre, then writing a book about the Paris Commune, asked the situationists for some notes that could be useful in his efforts.

¹⁰ In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/lefebvre-interview.html>.

¹¹ Cf. footnote by Alice Becker-Ho to the letter from Debord to Andre Franklin dated 14 February 1960, in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-14February1960.html>.

¹² Cf. Debord’s letter to Andre Franklin dated 22 February 1960, in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22February1960.html>.

¹³ In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/moments.html>.

¹⁴ Letter from Debord to Lefebvre, in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-5May1960.html>.

¹⁵ Debord to Maurice Wyckaert, letter dated 4 February 1961, in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-4February1961.html>.

These notes were indeed communicated to him at the beginning of April 1962.¹⁶ We had believed it would be good to publish some of these radical theses on this subject in a collection that would be available to the general public. The dialogue between Henri Lefebvre and us – let us take this opportunity to deny the perfectly fantastic rumor that Lefebvre was a clandestine member of the SI – was justified by his important approach in *La Somme et le Reste*¹⁷ and even earlier, although more fragmentarily, in the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*¹⁸ and his declaration concerning revolutionary romanticism,¹⁹ to several problems that concerned us. We then learned that Lefebvre had, of course, not ceased his collaboration with *Arguments*, even though the SI had issued its call for a boycott as a counter-measure.²⁰ As shown by the documents that have been reproduced since then, Lefebvre – who had for some time been evolving away from a radicalization that was necessary for his own theoretical work – believed it was time to rally the *Argumentists* at the precise moment of their rout. In the last issue, numbers 27-28, he published the good pages from his book on the Commune. It was in this way that the so-called ‘situationist theses’ paradoxically found themselves celebrated by their enemies, like pearls hidden in the shit of absolute questioning [...] After this, we suggested to Lefebvre that he immediately publish his own opinions, whatever they were, not of course about the Commune, but about the Situationist International and the collapse of *Arguments*: silence about the SI could not be legitimated either by complete ignorance nor by a sincere judgment about the subject’s lack of interest. An essay in manuscript that he communicated to us on 14 February [1963] and that seemed intended for publication in *L’Express*, though favorable, wasn’t as promptly

¹⁶ The notes “On the Commune” were dated 18 March 1962 and signed by Guy Debord, Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem.

¹⁷ Published in French in 1959 and still not translated into English.

¹⁸ Published in French in 1947 and translated into English by John Moore in 1991.

¹⁹ Published in French in 1957. In translation here:

<http://www.gavingrindon.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Henri-Lefebvre-Revolutionary-Romanticism.pdf>.

²⁰ At the first session of the SI’s Central Council in Alsemberg, near Brussels, held early November 1960, it was decided that, “No person collaborating with the journal *Arguments* from 1 January 1961 onwards will be considered a situationist under any circumstance at any point in the future.”

published nor as profoundly studied as his book about the Commune. Thus, and once more, we can only count on ourselves to indicate the meaning of the itinerary and shipwrecking of *Arguments*.²¹

In 1969, when the SI reprinted this text, it reported that, “Lefebvre had *personally* confessed that he thought he could make use of our text, even [publish it] in *Arguments*, and that he regretted the ‘misunderstanding.’”²²

After the publication of *Into the Trashcan of History*, the SI tried to persuade young revolutionaries who were sympathetic to both the situationists and Lefebvre that they needed to take sides. One couldn’t be pro-Lefebvre and truly situationist at the same time. In a letter to a Bechir Tlili, evidently a revolutionary student who’d been attending Lefebvre’s classes, Debord wrote,

If one lives among the politenesses, lies, fashions, communal interests and solidarities of intellectuals (of the ‘party’ or, having broken with the party, of the CNRS) – and, at the same time, one is involved in other behaviors of this type – one can only *understand or not understand* certain ideas that come from a real break [with the dominant order]. Thus, in his attitude towards us, as in one or two of his books, [Henri] L[efebvre] feigns to believe that we live – practically – in his world, that is, in the world of the recognized intelligentsia, the publishers and benefactors of critique. And thus, being of this world, we feel an anger, a bad humor and a quite exaggerated – and perhaps personal – aggressivity against such-and-such an Axelos or against nearly everyone. But we do not want *nor can we be* recognized by this world. Naturally, we have all the inconveniences (but also the ‘creative’ advantages) of not being *thinkers guaranteed by the State*. But, knowing this, we cannot tolerate the double-play of those who feign to ignore it.²³

In another letter to Bechir Tlili, written a year later, Debord declared,

²¹ Situationist International, *Into The Trashcan of History!* in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/trashcan-of-history.html>.

²² Situationist International, “Reasons for a Reprint,” in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/reasons.html>.

²³ Letter dated 14 May 1963, in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-14May1963.html>.

You know our divergences from and our ‘public’ judgment of Lefebvre. All personal relations, even very indirect ones, have been rendered impossible by his act and [if continued] could only serve his crude confusionism. In a recent discussion with a third party, this old man, out of pique, didn’t recoil from referring to us as ‘avid little shits of publicity.’ To match the many shitty characteristics that have notoriously marked his whole life, Lefebvre only gave one necessary and sufficient proof of our shitty quality: the fact that we have published *Into the Trashcan of History!* Thus, he considers it sufficiently established that, in this affair, we are wrong and he is right. Meanwhile, over the course of the last thirteen months, all the honest witnesses have had to state that we are right and that Lefebvre hasn’t even dared to defend his position, instead limiting himself to half-confessions mixed in with wisps of excuses so fake and contradictory that he must change one for another as they collapse. I believe that you yourself are among the witnesses who know, without any doubt, where the lie is. If Lefebvre, and others, have an interest in completely forgetting, rendering vague, mixing things up and making compromises, it is certain that our politics are exactly the contrary. We simply oblige people to choose what is ‘shitty,’ and to keep to their choice and its consequences. Even if the conclusion on the plane of personal relations between you and I is regrettable, it is quite necessary to say that flirting with the term ‘situationist’ and Lefebvre at the same time can, unfortunately, only expose you to a disagreeable contradiction; and it isn’t from Lefebvre that it will come.²⁴

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Significantly, Lefebvre doesn’t use any of the many pages of *Metaphilosophy* to attack or even counter-attack the situationists, to “tell his side of the story,” or anything like that. He doesn’t mention the SI, any of its members or even any of its publications. He limits himself to making a few critical remarks about a couple of isolated points, perhaps hoping that his readers will make the connection between them and his intended target.

Though he personally was expelled from the French Communist Party in 1957, Lefebvre insists on the importance of “a political party, a site where the contradictions of praxis would be openly expressed, where options would confront

²⁴ Letter dated 15 April 1964, in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-15April1964.html>

one another – which would no longer be a place where contradictions are expressed and weighed behind closed doors.” He goes on to say,

this notion of the political party goes further than the customary democratic demands (free expressions and tendencies, currents of opinion, etc.). Is it not the Marxist and Leninist conception of the party? Who could refuse it? Many people. Those who place tactics and organization above theoretical thought. Those who pins labels on ideas and people (‘revisionist’, ‘dogmatic’). Those who have not had this conception, despite its necessity, because they think differently, according to empirical schemas, or simply obsolete schemas in their fixed dogmatism (p. 311).

But did the situationists really “place tactics and organization above theoretical thought”? No: this was in fact the essence of the SI’s critique of current-day anarchist organizations. In an attempt to supersede anarchism, the situationists did all they could to elevate “tactics and organization” to the level of theory, to show that theory and practice could not be separated, and to show that recent advances in both theory and practice (especially the Hungarian workers councils of 1956) required corresponding advances in how revolutionary organizations are formed and maintained. In view of these developments, it is, precisely, “the Marxist and Leninist conception of the party” that is fixed, dogmatic and obsolete.

A few pages later, Lefebvre criticizes “the Lukácsian school,” which, “by emphasizing reification,” has “committed a double error: it has defined alienation by its ‘structural’ limit, omitting the nuances of human non-realization. Moreover, it has overlooked analysis of new forms of alienation” (p. 313). I’m not sure about “the Lukácsian school,” but it is clear that Debord and the other situationists – who were, no doubt, strongly influenced by Georg Lucács’ analysis of the becoming-world of the commodity in his great book *History of Class Consciousness* – were among the strongest and most lucid critics of the “new forms of alienation.”

Despite these critiques, both of which seem typically Leninist, Lefebvre still sees himself as a “situationist.” That is to say, he remains committed to the project that the situationists inherited from him: the revolution of everyday life. Though it is an academic work about the history of philosophy, *Metaphilosophy* is full of references that are clearly “situationist” in nature. There is Hegel’s owl of Minerva (p. 64); the combination of Rimbaud (“change life”) and Marx (“transform the world”) (p. 109); a dismissal of urbanism as “nothing more than an ideology” (p. 112); the idea that Roland Barthes possesses a “zero degree of style” (p. 174); the observation that, in a technocratic society, time collapses into an “eternal present” (p. 178); machine-produced art and self-destroying art (pp. 202 and 240); the

critique of roles and survival (pp. 219 and 235); a fascination with female fashion models (p. 225); an interest in the political character of religious heresies (pp. 283, 284 and 294); and the music of Couperin (p. 287), among many other things.

But does making “situationist”-style cultural references make an author a “situationist”? Clearly Guy Debord didn’t think so. In 1969, when the SI reprinted *Into the Trashcan of History!*, he noted that, “in *Le Monde* on 26 June 1968, one reads praise from the original minds who, in the journal called *Utopie*, have just now begun the revolutionary critique of urbanism, and have taken the basic idea from their master Lefebvre, who wrote in *Metaphilosophy* (1965): ‘What could what one currently calls ‘urbanism’ be other than an ideology?’”²⁵

Let us be clear. If the choice for young radicals in 1965 was between the SI and Lefebvre, then the decision was obvious. While the situationists were analyzing and intervening in the current political situation in places like Algeria, Lefebvre was writing about the history of philosophy.²⁶ Though he might *speak* about “youth,” “unease and revolt” (p. 243), about “youth, deviance, underdevelopment, and so on” (p. 300), they do not appear to be part of his actual, day-to-day existence.

As a result, *Metaphilosophy* is subject to the very critique of philosophy and philosophers contained in its pages.

Entry into this domain demands a preliminary procedure: an epoche, a distancing that situates the philosopher outside of everyday life, outside of praxis. This procedure involves asceticism and separation (split). Reflection changes into wanting a philosophy, into the desire to philosophize, into philosophical culture. From this point on, the philosopher is established in his private domain – house, castle, fortress. He is isolated and becomes a private philosopher [...] He will draw up a list of these problems: soul and body, being and thought, essence and existence, immanence and transcendence, theory and

²⁵ Situationist International, “Reasons for a Reprint,” in translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/reasons.html>.

²⁶ Unfortunately for its readers, *Metaphilosophy* only concerns what took place before the advent of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Guattari, and Baudrillard – that is to say, before post-structuralism, which exploded in France between 1965 and 1973. As a result, *Metaphilosophy* is still a critique of structuralism, and mostly concerns Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty. But post-structuralism blew all of that away. These days, who gives a shit about Sartre? No one. And if anyone still cares about Heidegger and Nietzsche, it is only because of the post-structuralists’ critiques of them.

practice, knowledge and action, consciousness and reality, subject and object, and so forth. Thus he will have beneath his eyes, stuck to his wall, his table of categories, his panoply of problems, his list of ‘pertinent oppositions’ [...] It could be that the philosopher, even when he does not believe himself indifferent, even when he is far from disinterested, even passionately interested, in political problems, remains somewhat indifferent to the masses, who for their part have their [own] ‘problems’, those of everyday life for example, which they perceive and seek to resolve otherwise than by philosophical reflection [...] Even when he speaks and is not satisfied with just discourse, other people do not recognize themselves in the words of the philosopher; they find in them neither their complaints, nor their tumults, nor their silences – neither their abstentions, nor their acceptances, nor their refusals [...] No one understands this rather vain speech, but many believe that they understand it, given that they find themselves in an analogous situation: rather solitary, rather detached, rather overwhelmed by the world outside (pp. 47, 48-49, 55 and 57).

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Just because Henri Lefebvre wrote a bad book, even if he wrote a series of bad books between 1965 and 1973 (cf. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, for example), this doesn’t mean that we can or should dismiss him entirely or that we should only focus on the books he wrote before 1965. As we have indicated elsewhere, *The Production of Space* (1974) is a truly great book – one that goes well beyond the works of the situationists and other revolutionaries. No doubt there are several other later works by him that are equally as good. I say, “no doubt” because only a few of the many books that Lefebvre wrote have been translated into English. This isn’t a matter of postponing an “ultimate” judgment of him until all the “evidence” has been submitted. We are not judges and life is not a trial.

Bill Brown
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