

# Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life

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To study everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking, unable even to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not explicitly for the purpose of transforming everyday life.

The lecture, the exposition of certain intellectual considerations to an audience, being an extremely commonplace form of human relations in a rather large sector of society, itself forms a part of the every day life that must be criticized.

Sociologists, for example, are only too inclined to remove from every day life things that happen to them every day, and to transfer them to separate and supposedly superior spheres. In this way habit in all its forms - beginning with the habit of handling a few professional concepts (concepts produced by the division of labor) -- masks reality behind privileged conventions.

It is thus desirable to demonstrate, by a slight alteration of the usual procedures, that everyday life is right here. These words are being communicated by way of a tape recorder, not, of course, in order to illustrate the integration of technology into this everyday life on the margin of the technological world, but in order to seize the simplest opportunity to break with the appearance of pseudo-collaboration, of artificial dialogue, established between the lecturer "in person" and his spectator. This slight discomfiting break with accustomed routine could serve to bring directly into the field of questioning of every day life (a questioning otherwise completely abstract) the conference itself, as well as any number of other forms of using time or objects, forms that are considered "normal" and not even noticed, and which ultimately condition us. With such a detail, as with everyday life as a whole, alteration is always the necessary and sufficient condition for experimentally bringing into clear view the object of our study, which would otherwise remain uncertain -- an object which is itself less to be studied than to be altered.

I have just said that the reality of an observable entity designated by the term "everyday life" stands a good chance of remaining hypothetical for many people. Indeed, the most striking feature of the present "Group for Research on Everyday Life" is obviously not the fact that it has not yet discovered anything, but the fact that the very existence of everyday life has been disputed from its very inception, and

increasingly so with each new session of this conference. Most of the talks we have heard so far have been by people who are not at all convinced that everyday life exists, since they haven't encountered it anywhere. A group for research on everyday life with this attitude is comparable in every way to an expedition in search of the Yeti, which might similarly come to the conclusion that its quarry was merely a popular hoax.

To be sure, everyone agrees that certain gestures repeated every day, such as opening doors or filling glasses, are quite real; but these gestures are at such a trivial level of reality that it is rightly objected that they are not of sufficient interest to justify a new specialized branch of sociological research. A number of sociologists seem disinclined to recognize any aspects of everyday life beyond these trivial ties. They thus accept the definition of it proposed by Henri Lefebvre -- "whatever remains after one has eliminated all specialized activities" -- but draw a different conclusion: that everyday life is nothing. The majority of sociologists -- and we know how much they are in their element in specialized activities, in which they generally have the blindest faith! -- recognize specialized activities everywhere and every day life nowhere. Everyday life is always elsewhere. Among others. In any case, in the nonsociological classes of the population. Someone said here that it would be interesting to study the workers as guinea pigs who have probably been infected with this virus of everyday life because they, having no access to specialized activities, have only everyday life to live. This condescending manner of investigating the common people in search of an exotic primitivism of everyday life - and above all this ingenuously avowed self-satisfaction, this naive pride in participating in a culture whose glaring bankruptcy no one can dream of denying, this radical inability to understand the world that produces this culture -- all this never ceases to astonish.

There is in this an evident will to hide behind a development of thought based on the separation of artificial, fragmentary domains so as to reject the useless, vulgar and disturbing concept of "everyday life." Such a concept covers an uncatalogued and unclassified residue of reality, a residue some people are averse to confronting because it at the same time represents the standpoint of the totality; it would imply the necessity of an integral political judgment. Certain intellectuals seem to flatter themselves with an illusory personal participation in the dominant sector of society through their possession of one or more cultural specializations; these specializations, however, have placed them in the best position to realize that the whole of this dominant culture is manifestly moth-eaten. But whatever one's opinion of the coherence of this culture or of the interest of one or another of its fragments, the particular alienation it has imposed on these intellectuals is to make them think, from their position in the heaven of the sociologists, that they are quite outside the everyday life of the common people, or to give them an exaggerated idea of their rank on the scale of human powers, as if their lives, too, were not impoverished.

Specialized activities certainly exist; they are even, in a given period, put to a certain general use which should be recognized in a demystified manner. Everyday life is not everything - although its osmosis with specialized activities is such that in a sense we are never outside of everyday life. But to use a facile spatial image, we still have to place everyday life at the center of everything. Every project begins from it and every realization returns to it to acquire its real significance. Everyday life is the measure of all things: of the fulfillment or rather the nonfulfillment of human relations; of the use

of lived time; of artistic experimentation; of revolutionary politics. It is not enough to recall that the old stereotypical image of the detached scientific observer is fallacious in any case. It must be stressed that disinterested observation is even less possible here than anywhere else. What makes for the difficulty of even recognizing a terrain of everyday life is not only the fact that it has already become the ostensible meeting ground of an empirical sociology and a conceptual elaboration, but also the fact that it presently happens to be the stake in any revolutionary renewal of culture and politics.

To fail to criticize everyday life today means accepting the prolongation of the present thoroughly rotten forms of culture and politics, forms whose extreme crisis is expressed in increasingly widespread political apathy and neolliteracy, especially in the most modern countries. On the other hand, a radical critique in acts of prevailing everyday life could lead to a supersession of culture and politics in the traditional sense, that is, to a higher level of intervention in life.

"But," you may ask, "how does it happen that the importance of this everyday life, which according to you is the only real life, is so completely and directly underrated by people who, after all, have no direct interest in doing so - many of whom are even far from being opposed to some kind of renewal of the revolutionary movement?"

I think this happens because everyday life is organized within the limits of a scandalous poverty, and above all because there is nothing accidental about this poverty of everyday life: it is a poverty that is constantly imposed by the coercion and violence of a society divided into classes, a poverty historically organized in line with the evolving requirements of exploitation. The use of everyday life, in the sense of a consumption of lived time, is governed by the reign of scarcity: scarcity of free time and scarcity of possible uses of this free time.

Just as the accelerated history of our time is the history of accumulation and industrialization, so the backwardness and conservative tendency of everyday life are products of the laws and interests that have presided over this industrialization. Everyday life has until now resisted the historical. This represents first of all a verdict against the historical insofar as it has been the heritage and project of an exploitative society.

The extreme poverty of conscious organization and creativity in everyday life expresses the fundamental necessity for unconsciousness and mystification in an exploiting society, in a society of alienation.

Henri Lefebvre has extended the idea of uneven development so as to characterize everyday life as a lagging sector, out of joint with the historical but not completely cut off from it. I think that one could go so far as to term this level of everyday life a colonized sector. We know that underdevelopment and colonization are interrelated on the level of global economy. Everything suggests that the same thing applies at the level of socioeconomic structure, at the level of praxis.

Everyday life, policed and mystified by every means, is a sort of reservation for good natives who keep modern society running without understanding it--this society with its rapid growth of technological powers and the forced expansion of its market. History--the transformation of reality--cannot presently be used in everyday life

because the people of everyday life are the product of a history over which they have no control. It is of course they themselves who make this history, but not freely.

Modern society is viewed through specialized fragments that are virtually incommunicable; and so everyday life, where all questions are liable to be posed in a unitary manner, is naturally the domain of ignorance. Through its industrial production this society has emptied the gestures of work of all meaning. And no model of human behavior has retained any real relevance in everyday life. This society tends to atomize people into isolated consumers, to prohibit communication. Everyday life is thus private life, the realm of separation and spectacle.

It is thus also the sphere of the specialists' resignation and failure. It is there, for example, that one of the rare individuals capable of understanding the latest scientific conception of the universe will make a fool of himself by earnestly pondering Alain Robbe-Grillet's aesthetic theories or by sending petitions to the President of the Republic in the hope of convincing him to change his policies. It is the sphere of disarmament, of the avowal of the incapability of living. Thus the underdevelopment of everyday life cannot be characterized solely by its relative inability to put technology to use. This trait is an important, but only partial, consequence of the everyday alienation as a whole, which could be defined as the inability to invent a technique for the liberation of everyday experience.

In fact many techniques do more or less markedly alter certain aspects of everyday life: the domestic arts, as has already been mentioned here, but also the telephone, television, the recording of music on long-playing records, mass air travel, etc. These elements arise anarchically, by chance, without anyone having foreseen their interrelations or consequences. But on the whole this introduction of technology into everyday life - ultimately taking place within the frame work of modern bureaucratized capitalism - certainly tends rather to reduce people's independence and creativity. The new prefabricated cities clearly exemplify the totalitarian tendency of modern capitalism's organization of life: the isolated inhabitants (generally isolated within the framework of the family cell) see their lives reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory absorption of an equally repetitive spectacle. One can thus conclude that if people censor the question of their own everyday life, it is both because they are aware of its unbearable misery and because sooner or later they sense - whether they admit it or not - that all the real possibilities, all the desires that have been frustrated by the functioning of social life, were focused there, and not at all in the specialized activities or distractions. That is, awareness of the profound richness and energy abandoned in everyday life is inseparable from awareness of the poverty of the dominant organization of this life. Only the perceptible existence of this untapped richness leads to the contrasting definition of everyday life as poverty and as prison; and then, in the same movement, to the negation of the problem.

In these conditions, repressing the political question posed by the poverty of everyday life means repressing the depth of the demands bearing on the possible richness of this life - demands that can lead to nothing less than a reinvention of revolution. Of course an evasion of politics at this level is in no way incompatible with being active in the Parti Socialiste Unifié, for example, or with reading *Humanité* with confidence.

Everything effectively depends on the level at which this problem is posed: How is our life? How are we satisfied with it? Dissatisfied? Without for a moment letting ourselves be intimidated by the various advertisements designed to persuade us that we can be happy because of the existence of God or Colgate toothpaste or the CNRS.

It seems to me that this phrase "critique of everyday life" could and should also be understood in this reverse sense: as everyday life's sovereign critique of everything that is external or irrelevant to itself. The question of the use of technological means, in everyday life and elsewhere, is a political question (and out of all the possible technical means, those that are implemented are in reality selected in accordance with the goal of maintaining one class's domination). When one envisions a future such as that presented in science fiction, in which interstellar adventures coexist with a terrestrial everyday life kept in the same old material indigence and archaic morality, this implies precisely that there is still a class of specialized rulers maintaining the proletarian masses of the factories and offices in their service; and that the interstellar adventures are nothing but the particular enterprise chosen by those rulers, the way they have found to develop their irrational economy, the pinnacle of specialized activity.

Someone posed the question, "What is private life deprived of?" Quite simply of life itself, which is cruelly absent. People are as deprived as possible of communication and of self-realization. Deprived of the opportunity to personally make their own history. Hypotheses responding positively to this question on the nature of the privation can thus only be expressed in the form of projects of enrichment; the project of a different style of life; or in fact simply the project of a style of life ... Or, if we regard everyday life as the frontier between the dominated and the undominated sectors of life, and thus as the terrain of risk and uncertainty, it would be necessary to replace the present ghetto with a constantly moving frontier; to work ceaselessly toward the organization of new chances.

The question of intensity of experience is posed today - with the use of drugs, for example - in the only terms in which the society of alienation is capable of posing any question: namely, in terms of false recognition of a falsified project, in terms of fixation and attachment. It should also be noted how much the image of love elaborated and propagated in this society has in common with drugs. A passion is first of all presented as a denial of all other passions; then it is frustrated and finally reappears only in the compensations of the reigning spectacle. La Rochefoucauld observed, "What often prevents us from abandoning ourselves to a single vice is that we have several." This is a very constructive observation if we ignore its moralist presuppositions and put it back on its feet as the basis of a program for the realization of human capacities.

All these questions are of present significance because our time is visibly dominated by the emergence of the project borne by the working class - the abolition of every class society and the inauguration of human history - and thus also dominated by the fierce resistance to this project and by the distortions and failures it has encountered until now.

The present crisis of everyday life takes its place among the new forms of the crisis of capitalism, forms that remain unnoticed by those who cling to the classical calculation of the date of the next cyclical crisis of the economy.

The disappearance in developed capitalism of all the old values, of all the frames of reference of past communication; and the impossibility of replacing them by any others before having rationally dominated, within everyday life and everywhere else, the new industrial forces that escape us more and more--these facts produce not only the virtually official dissatisfaction of our time, a dissatisfaction particularly acute among young people, but also the self-negating tendency of art. Artistic activity had always been alone in conveying the clan destined problems of everyday life, albeit in a veiled, deformed, partially illusory manner. Evidence of a destruction of all artistic expression now exists before our eyes: modern art.

If we consider the whole extent of the crisis of contemporary society, I don't think it is possible still to regard leisure activities as a negation of the everyday. It has been recognized here that it is necessary to "study wasted time." But let us look at the recent evolution of this idea of wasted time. For classical capitalism, wasted time was time that was not devoted to production, accumulation, saving. The secular morality taught in bourgeois schools has instilled this rule of life. But it so happens that by an unexpected turn of events modern capitalism needs to increase consumption, to "raise the standard of living" (if we bear in mind that this expression is completely meaningless). Since at the same time production conditions, compartmentalized and clocked to the extreme, have become indefensible, the new morality already being conveyed in advertising, propaganda and all the forms of the dominant spectacle now frankly admits that wasted time is the time spent at work, which latter is only justified by the hierarchized scale of earnings that enable one to buy rest, consumption, entertainments - a daily passivity manufactured and controlled by capitalism.

If we now consider the artificiality of the consumer needs prefabricated and ceaselessly stimulated by modern industry - if we recognize the emptiness of leisure activities and the impossibility of rest - we can pose the question more realistically: What would not be wasted time? The development of a society of abundance should lead to an abundance of what? This can obviously serve as a touchstone in many regards. When, for example, in one of those papers where the flabby thinking of "leftist intellectuals" is displayed - I am referring to France-Observateur - one reads a title like "The Little Car Out To Conquer Socialism" heading an article that explains that nowadays the Russians are beginning to pursue an American-style private consumption of goods, beginning naturally with cars, one cannot help thinking that one need not have assimilated all of Hegel and Marx to realize that a socialism that gives way in the face of an invasion of the market by small cars is in no way the socialism for which the workers movement fought. The bureaucratic rulers of Russia must be opposed not on the level of their tactics or their dogmatism, but fundamentally, on the fact that the meaning of people's lives has not really changed. And this is not some obscure fatality of an everyday life doomed to remain reactionary. It is a fatality imposed on everyday life from the outside by the reactionary sphere of specialized rulers, regardless of the label under which they plan and regulate poverty in all its aspects.

The present depoliticization of many former leftist militants, their withdrawal from one type of alienation to plunge into another, that of private life, represents not so much a return to privacy, a flight from "historical responsibility," but rather a withdrawal from the specialized political sector that is always manipulated by others - a sector where the only responsibility they ever took was that of leaving all responsibility to uncontrolled leaders; and where the communist project was betrayed and frustrated. Just as one cannot simplistically oppose private life to public life without asking: what private life? what public life? (for private life contains the factors of its negation and supersession, just as collective revolutionary action harbored the factors of its degeneration), so it would be a mistake to assess the alienation of individuals in revolutionary politics when it is really a matter of the alienation of revolutionary politics itself. It is right to dialectize the problem of alienation, to draw attention to the constantly recurring possibilities of alienation arising within the very struggle against alienation; but we should stress that this applies to the highest level of research (to the philosophy of alienation as a whole, for example) and not to the level of Stalinism, the explanation of which is unfortunately more gross.

Capitalist civilization has not yet been superseded anywhere, but it continues to produce its own enemies everywhere. The next rise of the revolutionary movement, radicalized by the lessons of past defeats and with a program enriched in proportion to the practical powers of modern society (powers already constituting the potential material basis that was lacking in the so-called utopian currents of socialism)--this next attempt at a total contestation of capitalism will know how to invent and propose a different use of everyday life, and will immediately base itself on new everyday practices, on new types of human relationships (being no longer unaware that any conserving, within the revolutionary movement, of the relations prevailing in the existing society imperceptibly leads to a reconstitution of one or another variant of this society).

Just as the bourgeoisie, in its ascending phase, had to ruthlessly liquidate everything that transcended earthly life (heaven, eternity), so the revolutionary proletariat - which can never, without ceasing to be revolutionary, recognize itself in any past or any models - will have to renounce everything that transcends everyday life. Or rather, everything that claims to transcend it: the spectacle, the "historical" act or pronouncement, the "greatness" of leaders, the mystery of specializations, the "immortality" of art and its importance outside of life. In other words, it must renounce all the by-products of eternity that have survived as weapons of the world of the rulers.

The revolution in everyday life, breaking its present resistance to the historical (and to every kind of change), will create the conditions in which the present dominates the past and the creative aspects of life always predominate over the repetitive. We must therefore expect that the side of everyday life expressed by the concepts of ambiguity - misunderstanding, compromise or misuse - will decline considerably in importance in favor of their opposites: conscious choice and gamble. The present artistic calling in question of language - appearing at the same time as that metalanguage of machines which is nothing other than the bureaucratized language of the bureaucracy in power - will then be superseded by higher forms of communication. The present notion of a decipherable social text will lead to new methods of writing this social

text, in the direction my situationist comrades are presently seeking with unitary urbanism and some preliminary ventures in experimental behavior. The central production of an entirely reconvered industrial work will be the organization of new configurations of everyday life, the free creation of events.

The critique and perpetual re-creation of the totality of everyday life, before being carried out naturally by all people, must be undertaken in the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy these conditions.

An avant-garde cultural movement, even one with revolutionary sympathies, cannot accomplish this. Neither can a revolutionary party on the traditional model, even if it accords a large place to criticism of culture (understanding by that term the entirety of artistic and conceptual means through which a society explains itself to itself and shows itself goals of life). This culture and this politics are worn out and it is not without reason that most people take no interest in them. The revolutionary transformation of everyday life, which is not reserved for some vague future but is placed immediately before us by the development of capitalism and its unbearable demands--the alternative being the reinforcement of the modern slavery--this transformation will mark the end of all unilateral artistic expression stocked in the form of commodities, at the same time as the end of all specialized politics.

This is going to be the task of a new type of revolutionary organization from its inception.