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# Perspectives For Conscious Changes in Everyday Life

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(TRANSLATION)

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

The lecture (a speaker's exposition of certain intellectual considerations to an audience), being an extremely commonplace form of human relations in a rather large sector of society, is itself part of the everyday life that must be criticized.

Sociologists, for example, are only too inclined to exclude from everyday 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 labour) — 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 take the simplest opportunity to break with the appearance of pseudocollaboration, of artificial dialogue, between the “in person” lecturer and his spectators. This slight discomforting break with accustomed routine may serve to bring directly into

the field of questioning of everyday 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 changed.

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 trivialities. 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 everyday life nowhere. Everyday life is always elsewhere. Among others, somewhere 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 no life except everyday life. 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 naïve pride in participating in a culture whose glaring bankruptcy no one can dream of denying, and this radical inability to understand the world that produces this culture — all this never ceases to astonish.

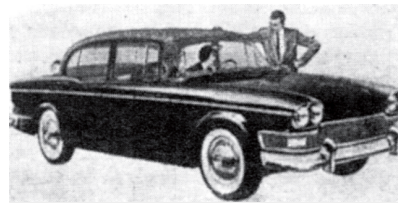
This attitude clearly reveals a desire to hide behind a development of thought based on the separation of artificial,

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 don’t want to face because it at the same time represents the standpoint of the totality and thus implies the necessity of a holistic 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, though those specializations have put them in the best position to see that this whole dominant culture is 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 imagine, from their lofty sociological position, that they are quite outside the everyday life of the common people, or to give them an exaggerated idea of their sociopolitical rank, as if their lives were not as *fundamentally impoverished* as everyone else’s.

Specialized activities certainly exist; they are even put to certain general uses which should be recognized in a demystified manner. Everyday life is not everything — although its overlapping with specialized activities is such that in a sense we are never outside of everyday life. But to use a somewhat simplistic spatial image, we still have to place everyday life at the center of everything. Every project begins from it and every accomplishment returns to it to acquire its real significance. Everyday life is the measure of all things: of the (non)fulfilment of human relations; of the use of lived time; of artistic experimentation; and 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 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 neoilliteracy, 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 tendencies 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 exploitive society.

The extreme poverty of conscious organization and creativity in everyday

life reflects the fundamental necessity for unconsciousness and mystification in a society of exploitation and 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 at 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 the 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 who live that 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 they do not make it freely or consciously.

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 behaviour has retained any real relevance in everyday life.

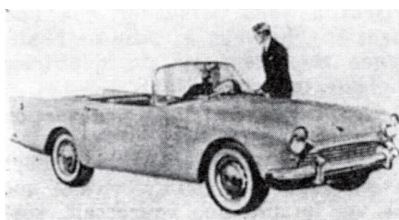
This society tends to atomize people into isolated consumers and to prohibit communication. Everyday life is thus private life, the realm of separation and spectacle.

It is thus also the sphere of the specialists’ resignation and failure. It is the reason, 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 in the hope of convincing him to change his policies.

It is the sphere of personal disarmament, of an avowed incapability of living.

Thus the underdevelopment of everyday life cannot be characterized solely by its relative inability to put various technologies to good use. This inability is only one consequence (though an important one) of everyday alienation as a whole, which could be defined as the inability to invent a technique for the liberation of everyday experience.

Many techniques do, in fact, more or less markedly alter certain aspects of everyday life — not only housework, as has already been mentioned here, but also telephones, television, music on long-playing records, mass air travel, etc. These developments arise anarchically, by chance, without anyone having foreseen their interrelations or consequences. But there is no denying that, on the whole, this introduction of technology into everyday life ultimately takes place within the framework of modern bureaucratized capitalism and tends 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 consumption 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, are focused there, and not at all in the various specialized activities and distractions. 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. The

awareness of this untapped richness leads to the contrasting definition of everyday life as poverty and as prison; which in turn leads to the repression of the whole problem.

In these conditions, repressing the political question posed by the poverty of everyday life means repressing the most profound 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* [French Communist Party newspaper] with confidence.

Everything really depends on the level at which this problem is posed: How is our life? In what ways are we satisfied with it? In what ways are we dissatisfied with it? 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 National Center for Scientific Research.

It seems to me that the 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. Out of all the potential technical means, those that actually get implemented are selected in accordance with the goal of maintaining the rule of a particular class. When one imagines 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 poverty 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-fulfillment; deprived of the opportunity to personally make their own history. Positive responses to this question about the nature of the privation can thus only take the form of projects of enrichment; the project of developing a style of life different from the present one (if the present way of life can even be said to have a “style”). Or to put it another way, if we regard everyday life as the frontier between the dominated and the undominated sectors of life, and thus as the terrain of chance 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 drug use, 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 wrote: “What often prevents us from abandoning ourselves to a single vice is that we have several.” This can be taken as a very positive observation if we ignore its moralistic presuppositions and put it back on its feet as the basis of a program for the realization of human capacities.

All these questions are now relevant because our time is clearly 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 is thus also dominated by the fierce resistance to this project and by the distortions and failures it has encountered up till now.

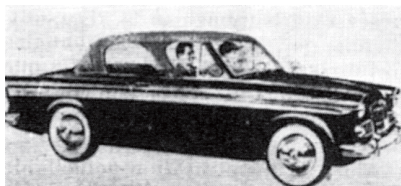
The present crisis of everyday life takes its place among the new forms of the crisis of capitalism, forms that remain unnoticed by those who cling to classical calculations of the dates of the next cyclical crises of the economy.

The disappearance in developed capitalism of all the old values and 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 give rise not only to the virtually official dissatisfaction of our time, a dissatisfaction particularly acute among young people, but also to the self-negating tendency of art. Artistic activity had always been alone in expressing the clandestine problems of everyday life, albeit in a veiled, deformed, and partially illusory manner. Modern art now provides us with undeniable evidence of the destruction of all artistic expression.

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 notion 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 and "raise the standard of living" (bearing in mind that that 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, the only purpose of which is earn enough to enable one to buy rest, consumption and 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? Or to put it another way, 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 (*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 mastered 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 in terms of their tactics or their dogmatism, but more fundamentally: because the meaning of people's lives has not really changed. And this is not some obscure, inevitable fate of an everyday life supposedly doomed to remain reactionary. It is a fate 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; a sector where the communist project was side-tracked and betrayed. 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 harboured the factors of its degeneration), so it would be a mistake to assess the alienation of individuals within revolutionary politics when it is

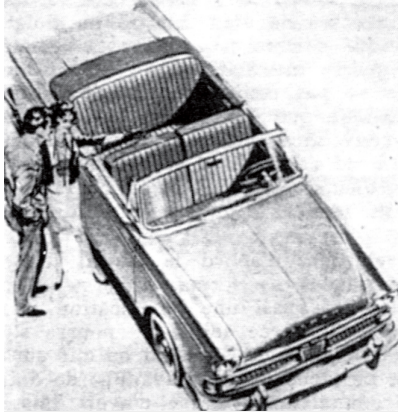
really a matter of the alienation of revolutionary politics itself. The problem of alienation should be tackled dialectically, so as to draw attention to the constantly recurring possibilities of alienation arising within the very struggle against alienation; but we should stress that this applies to 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 potentials of modern society (potentials that already constitute the material basis that was lacked by the "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 and 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 that society).

Just as the bourgeoisie, in its ascendant 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, "historical" acts or pronouncements, the "greatness" of leaders, the mystery of specializations, the "immortality" of art and its supposed 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 ones. We must therefore expect that the side of everyday life expressed by the concepts of ambiguity (misunderstandings, compromises, misuses) will decline considerably in importance in favour of their opposites: conscious choices and gambles.



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

behaviour. The central aim of an entirely reconverted and redirected industrial production 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 everyone, must be undertaken within the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy those 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 both 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 only 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.

This talk was presented by tape recording 17 May 1961 at a conference of the *Group for Research on Everyday Life* convened in Paris by Henri Lefebvre.

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