



John Roberts

# Philosophizing the Everyday

Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory

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the Fate of Cultural Theory

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# *Contents*

Preface	vi
Prologue: Dangerous Memories	1
1 The Everyday and the Philosophy of Praxis	16
2 The Everyday as Trace and Remainder	59
3 Lefebvre's Dialectical Irony: Marx and the Everyday	100
Epilogue	120
Notes	124
Bibliography	138
Index	144

# Preface

This book began its life as an essay for *Radical Philosophy*, ‘Philosophizing the Everyday: the philosophy of praxis and the fate of cultural studies’, published in 1999. Since then the arguments of my essay have gradually expanded their range, as the need to probe and develop my history of the concept of the everyday became a priority in the face of the increasingly ubiquitous (and vague) use of the concept in contemporary cultural studies and other disciplines. Moreover, I felt I needed to nuance and clarify my own use of the term from my previous work. In 1998 I published *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*. The book looked at how photography in the twentieth century developed at the intersection of the philosophical claims of realism and the cultural claims of the ‘everyday’, and how this in turn transformed the concept of the everyday in cultural theory. However, my emphasis was primarily on a discussion of the relationship between photographic form and everyday ‘modes of attention’ – as subscribed to by the early Soviet and Weimar avant-gardes. I didn’t actually discuss the critique of the everyday as *praxis*, the defence of which had an overwhelmingly, indeed hegemonic, influence on revolutionary theory and Marxist theories of cultural democracy and transformation during the first half of the twentieth century. *Philosophizing the Everyday* remedies this omission by reclaiming and reflecting on this extraordinary range of the literature of the everyday, in order to draw on its continuing philosophical and political vitality for cultural work today. In this I direct my focus of attention to the history of the concept itself.

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## *Prologue: Dangerous Memories*

Recently the concept of the everyday has undergone a widespread revival. It is the subject – or reference point – of a wide range of books and essays on art, architecture, design, urban studies, anthropology and political science, as well as being the interdisciplinary theme of many recent art exhibitions and cultural events.<sup>1</sup> On these grounds the concept has become the common currency of much contemporary discourse on art and popular culture and cultural studies. After modernism, after postmodernism, it is argued, the ‘everyday’ is where art goes, not only to recover its customary and collective pleasures, but to display its own ordinariness, just as it is also the place where the pleasures of popular culture are indulged and negotiated, from soap operas to celebrity magazines and out-of-town shopping stores. The everyday is the place where we supposedly define and shape our common pleasures, a place where a democracy of taste is brought into being. In this way the current ease with which the term is identified with the popular, and the ease with which it is able to pass between disciplines and practices, suggests that the everyday has now become, above all else, a meta-signifier of social and cultural inclusivity. The everyday is demotic, spectacular, interactive – all things to all people, in fact – a space where the worlds of design, architecture, fashion and art coalesce, compete and constellate.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, use of the term is now something of an ecumenical fetish: evidence of the up-to-dateness of each discipline’s interdisciplinarity.

*Philosophizing the Everyday* is a response to this contraction of the concept of the everyday into a theory of consumption

and simple cognate of 'ordinariness', an attempt, in short, to reinstate the philosophical and political partisanship of the concept. For, with the broad assimilation of the term into contemporary cultural studies, the 'everyday' has suffered from not only a general process of critical dehistoricization but an acute philosophical foreshortening. In an eagerness to borrow from what is most amenable to postmodern theories of the productive consumer, contemporary debates on the everyday have severed the concept's connections to prewar debates on social agency, the cultural form of art, and cultural democratization. Too much contemporary theory is eager to limit the critique of the everyday to a theory of signs and patterns of popular cultural consumption or the dilemmas or ambiguities of representation. This is not the place to analyse in any great detail how this conception of the everyday has shaped the recent history of cultural studies. But, suffice it to say, cultural studies' use of the everyday remains largely locked into a prevailing 'redemptive' model, in which the creative powers of the consumer operate freely in the heartlands of mass culture. Since the 1980s and the formative theorization of these moves in terms of working-class subcultural 'practices of resistance', cultural studies has tended to follow the direction of Michel de Certeau's work: creative consumption is to be identified with the popular memories and counter-knowledges and histories to be found in the workings of ideology (see Chapter 2). As one author on the everyday and cultural studies has argued recently, in de Certeauian terms, what remains significant about the everyday is how it escapes or defeats our rational attempts to locate and describe it.<sup>3</sup> The critical importance of the redemptive model of cultural studies is not in doubt in its exposing of the intellectual condescension towards 'non-professional' cultures or popular experience. But if a critical concept of ideology needs a conception of culture, then a critical concept of culture needs a conception of ideology.<sup>4</sup> In this, cultural studies' increasing focus on the autonomy of



popular agency has weakened the grasp of ideology (and as such diminished the theory of alienation in the analysis and critique of the popular).

The de Certeauian model has emerged as a belated theory of the everyday in Anglo-American cultural studies, overstepping the works of Henri Lefebvre, whose important writing of the 1950s and 1960s on the everyday was only translated into English in the 1990s. As such there is no systematic Lefebvrian or Marxist engagement with the concept of the everyday in Anglo-American cultural studies before the rise of de Certeau's influence.<sup>5</sup> As late as 1993, for example, Stanley Aronowitz in a thorough survey of the rise and fall of Anglo-American cultural studies only mentions the everyday in passing and without any conceptual weight.<sup>6</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, why the 'everyday' is so politically and philosophically depleted in contemporary cultural studies: in its eagerness to critique an older cultural studies it bypasses the richness and complexity of the concept's early history.

This book does something different: it maps out the pre-Second World War debates on the everyday in order to reinstate the concept's complex and contested history as the basis for a *critique of culture*, beginning from the modern origins of the term in Freudian psychoanalysis and the Russian Revolution to the concept's critical reinvention (and more familiar extension) in postwar France. Indeed, the emergence of the concept of the everyday in the first three decades of the twentieth century is the outcome of four interrelated sets of far-reaching critical practices: (1) the Leninist extension of politics into cultural politics during and after the Russian Revolution (Trotsky's cultural activism; Soviet Productivism and Constructivism); (2) the transformation of European Marxism into a philosophy of praxis out of Marx's critique of traditional materialism and the return to Hegel and the philosophy of consciousness (Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Lefebvre); (3) Freud's

demedicalization of mental disorders and illness; and (4) the emergence of the new avant-garde documentary art and literature. At some points these overlapping practices repulse each other, at other points they interfuse, yet what they produce overall is an extraordinary attentiveness to the political form and significance of cultural activity and change. Revolutionary and radical, avant-gardist and anti-avant-gardist, attach themselves to a notion of culture as ‘everyday’ practice and ‘everyday’ practice as culture. In this light what has preoccupied Marxists and others who have written on the concept of the everyday since the Russian Revolution, is how the concept allows artistic practice and aesthetic experience to be mediated by the demands of social transformation, thereby enabling artistic practice and aesthetic experience to fall under the broader concept of cultural praxis. This is not to say that revolutionary theorists of the everyday have sought the ‘politicization’ or instrumentalization of the *content* of art, but rather, by bringing the alliance of culture and politics under the mantle of the everyday, the revolutionary transformation of the everyday presupposes the radical transformation of the content of social and cultural experience itself; and, therefore, by definition this process involves the transformation of the taken-for-granted market and canonic forms of culture under capitalism (its relations of production; its material and semiotic boundaries; its relationship to productive labour). Consequently, the everyday has usually been constructed and defended as the place or places where culture as the space of relations between art, aesthetic experience and labour might be reinvented in the interests of, and as part of, proletarian emancipation and the democratization of cultural production. Thus, if this notion of the everyday carries an intellectual challenge to the segregation of politics from culture, it also provides a demotic and philosophical confrontation with the categories of art and labour and the traditional accounts of aesthetic experience itself. I prefer, therefore, to think of the

concept of the everyday as the very antithesis of contemporary cultural studies in this respect, insofar as it stands squarely against the discipline's disaggregation of cultural production and consumption; and – moreover, and more pertinently – for their democratic reintegration. To defend the concept today is to defend the continuing possibilities of cultural theory as a revolutionary critique of the social totality.

In this respect, *Philosophizing the Everyday*, focuses on the major *primary philosophical and political texts* which have shaped and defined the everyday as a cultural category from 1917. It does not engage with secondary sources or address itself to contemporary debates on the everyday and art. Similarly it does not concern itself with 'everyday' modes of attention or directly with the construction of the 'everyday' in early avant-garde film theory and photography, something that I have explored elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> To pursue these themes would dilute the wider concerns of my argument here – that, as a cultural category, the everyday is, in fact, much broader, much more capacious aesthetically and critically, than any specific art practices which might fall under its descriptions; indeed, as a cultural category it is directly subsumptive of these practices, and this is what gives the everyday its philosophical singularity. This is why I break off my historical narrative around 1975, for it is at this juncture that the debate on the concept is largely overtaken by aesthetic theory and the semiotic model of cultural studies, fundamentally transforming and narrowing its political and philosophic character. Michel de Certeau's theory of critical semiosis is a paradigmatic instance of this shift. In *Cultural in the Plural* (1974) and *The Practices of Everyday Life* (1974) he uses the phenomenological categories of memory and narrative to establish a powerful reorientation of the debate away from a general theory of cultural production to the productive consumer. Furthermore, 1975 is the point where the last great identification of the critique of the everyday with the philosophy of praxis, which had lasted for almost

20 years in the form of the Situationist International, had ended; and also the point, significantly, where Lefebvre, the key figure linking prewar and postwar debates, moves away from the direct theorization of the everyday after spending 40 years or more working on the concept. There is a sense, then, with the demise of the collective identity of the Situationist International and the rise of cultural studies in the academy, that the epoch in which the everyday had been forged through a series of richly theoretical innovations in response to an extraordinary succession of class convulsions, technological transformations, avant-garde manifestations, and forms of cultural secularization, had concluded. Consequently, in concentrating on the time span of 1917–75, we are able to link the rise and fall of the theory of the everyday across its three significant, and determining, time-lines during the twentieth century.

The first moment, of course, is the Russian Revolution itself, whose cultural, social and political impact under the auspices of modernism shattered the class-exclusions and genteel aestheticisms of the old bourgeois culture and academy across Europe and North America between 1917 and 1939. The second is the anti-Fascist Liberation in 1945 at the end of the Second World War – particularly in France and Italy – which unleashed a popular and intellectual dissent from the official forms of political restitution associated with the old prewar bourgeois ruling parties and culture. This was driven, to a certain extent, by the example and memory of the earlier prewar culture and the heroism and egalitarianism of the war years, resulting, for example, in the widespread repoliticization of realist aesthetics across all the advanced European countries. In Italy, for example, the opening up of a new cultural front between realism and modernism, exemplified by the films and writing of Pasolini and the fiction of Italo Calvino, allowed the non-Stalinist left to establish new forms of counter-hegemonic alliance.<sup>8</sup> And thirdly, the period of modernist counter-cultural

ascendancy from 1966 to 1974, which although detached from the earlier avant-garde forms of the 'everyday' continued the revolutionary critique of high culture and political economy. This period is represented, of course, by the incendiary moment of May 1968, which transformed the post-Bolshevik form of this critique, as a generation of young non-Party intellectuals and artists withdrew their consent from all the old reformist and gradualist arguments and realist aesthetics that dominated the post-Liberation, social-democratic consensus.<sup>9</sup> And of all these periods, it is this briefest of counter-cultural moments that has had perhaps the widest influence since.

These three time-lines – essentially covering some 50 years – are the extended historical crucible out of which the modern cultural concept of the everyday is made. In this sense there is good reason to focus our understanding of the everyday solely on these decades, because it reveals how the intellectual and culture fortunes of the critique of the everyday is bound up with an extended period of counter-hegemonic incursion into bourgeois culture during these years. It is of course easy to exaggerate the success of these incursions, just as it is easy to present a historicist procession of moments of resistance 'from below' across very different cultural milieux and social formations and mistake this for historical continuity or shared interests. In the immediate postwar period Stalinism remained impervious to the problems of cultural form. Nevertheless, taking the long view, there is something broadly unifiable about this period in the way it accomplished a decoupling of cultural production from bourgeois institutions that needs to be acknowledged and addressed in detail.<sup>10</sup>

In various ways, and in various modes and from various perspectives, cultural critique and the critique of capitalist forms of cultural production were in these years brought into some kind of alliance. The links between culture and the democratizing force of extra-cultural practices and interests 'from below' found various deprivatized and collective forms.

This is why it is possible to talk about the multiple counter-cultural practices in this period as mediated by something larger than their relationship to the market and the artistic canon. At various points, and in various contexts, and under various descriptions (popular and high cultural), counter-cultural practices in art, cinema, theatre and music defined their future sense of possibility from a dialogue between art and social praxis. In actuality much of what was said and done was localized in its relationship to extra-artistic forces. The working class, for example, only entered this counter-cultural world occasionally outside of the Soviet Union, and increasingly so after the 1950s with the demise of the prewar culture of radical autodidacticism and labour organizations committed to workers' education. But, nevertheless, something did thrive across class boundaries during this period. Counter-cultural practices saw themselves as orientated towards a world of everyday practices that allowed the production of art to participate in a network of social relations not defined directly by the exchange of commodities and the exclusionary interests of bourgeois institutions. This was a period of cultural groups and artist collectives, free associations and free exchanges – particularly between artists and non-artists. After 1974, and the long boom, the capitalist state, however, went on the offensive, first fitfully and hopefully, then more confidently in the 1980s and since the early 1990s, systematically and brutally stripping the public realm of the public content of this long and vital period of counter-cultural resistance. The residual counter-cultural spaces for labour, for neo-avant-garde art, and for non-bourgeois lifestyles (and realism), were gradually foreclosed or pushed out, as access to culture was recommodified as 'late modernism' then 'postmodernism'. However, this is not to say that this counter-hegemonic content was, in any ideologically precise sense, the primary target of the post-1970s capitalist cultural 'restitution', although many conservatives were enraged by how far liberationist and

avant-garde rhetoric had penetrated education and cultural institutions. But, rather, the restitution was the result of capital's need to dismantle the revived militancy of labour between 1966 and 1974 and the socialized and non-market spaces and cultural interests attached to such militancy, in an attempt to restore (previous) levels of profit and the social hegemony of the bourgeoisie. This direct attack on labour and the expansion and deepening of market relations, then, was the spur to the 'reprivatization' of public culture, and more generally to the creation of a culture of dissociation between art, labour and counter-cultural form. This was characterized by the re-emergence of the power of the new liberal cultural institution after 1975, reflected, for example, in the massive museum-building programme undertaken by private and public capital by numerous states across the globe. Art and the everyday were repoliced through national forms of cultural aspiration and aesthetic, market driven, pluralism. One of the outcomes of the dissociation between art and counter-cultural form for artists was the generalized subordination of cultural praxis to aesthetic discourse. Irrespective of whether the work of artists was deemed by them or others to be disaffirmative or not, its status and visibility as art would be secured solely from within the intellectual boundaries of the art institution. This was not simply a debate, therefore, about how museums direct and take charge of the production of art, that is, encourage some practices and discourage others, but about the ways in which art is brought into cultural meaning, into cultural form, in what ways art might impinge itself on the world. In this era of the hyper-museum these counter-cultural possibilities remained seriously curtailed as the drive of the market to disconnect art from the forces of extra-artistic critique pushed art further into the realms of aesthetic docility.

Yet if the everyday is irredeemably connected to a period of work and activity, which has been destroyed in practice, this is not to say that after 1975 the themes and ideals of the early

concept of the everyday became unusable, or that the 'turn' to a theory of consumption in critical theory after the 1970s did not have some critical basis in earlier theoretical work. But, rather, that the philosophy of praxis, which had sustained the *longue durée* of the concept of the everyday's ideological productivity, was in a process of dissolution and crisis, and therefore, that this dissolution and crisis has to be recognized in any revolutionary retheorization of the everyday now. Indeed, Lefebvre was saying pretty much the same thing in 1961 in the second volume of *The Critique of Everyday Life*, at the point where he himself was refashioning his revolutionary commitments: 'the idea of a revolutionary transformation of the everyday has vanished'.<sup>11</sup> This means that in defending the revolutionary transformation of the everyday the recovery and rehistoricization of the concept needs to be made coextensive with an understanding and assessment of the blocked utopian horizons of recent political history, and the intersection of these horizons with cultural theory. There is no concept of the everyday that is inscribable outside of this history, outside, that is, of the rewriting of this history in the present.

My emphasis, in this book, therefore, is of necessity on the key theoretical texts and critical practices which have shaped the formation of the concept, because, in thinking through this would-be vanished culture, we need to be clear about how the concept of the everyday came to possess the critical character it did, and why Lefebvre, for instance, devoted so much of his theoretical energy defending it. In this respect, the rehistoricization of the concept of the everyday invokes a simple question: what has been lost in the assimilation of the concept of the everyday into cultural studies after 1975 that makes the aesthetic and semiotic appropriation of the concept problematic? What is it that a concept of the everyday cannot do without from the earlier period? Which is not to say this book turns its face against contemporary cultural politics in a defence of some politically reinvigorated notion