

Philosophy in Review XXXVIII (February 2018), no. 1

Henri Lefebvre. *Metaphilosophy*. Ed. Stuart Elden. Trans. David Fernbach. Verso 2016. 384 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781784782733); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781784782740).

This may be a difficult book for some philosophers to read, in a number of ways. First and foremost, it is written by someone who orbits and even penetrates the discipline of philosophy in a professional capacity, yet he is calling for its end. More precisely, its author, Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), is saying stop whatever philosophy you're currently doing. On the one hand, this is a clarion call to philosophers around the world to take philosophy to its limits and beyond. On the other hand, it offers a bleak take on the contemporary relevance of philosophical inquiry. To Lefebvre, much of philosophy is moribund and has been so for some time. That is, of course, if it is not already dead. Lefebvre identifies eleven aporia that he deems to be at the heart of philosophy's withering away, all of which detail the contradiction of the gap between the real and the idea; everyday life and the privileged position of the philosopher. In a way, it could even be seen as anti-philosophy. Regardless of where it stands on any philosophical purity spectrum, it is above all inspired by Marx's famous theses on Feuerbach, specifically the eleventh thesis: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it.' Lefebvre is, essentially, saying that the world cannot change if philosophy does not change, and the world ought to change.

Other than using the moniker 'Marxist,' Lefebvre would often describe himself, at least in the latter half of his career, as a metaphilosopher, eschewing the standard disciplinary titles of philosopher, geographer, and sociologist, among others. Lefebvre was, of course, all of these things and none of these things. As the title suggests, *Metaphilosophy* is a book about going beyond philosophy. Superseding philosophy has always been part of the Marxist program. Realizing philosophy and living it in one's everyday life is what is meant by superseding philosophy. Such is the case that Lefebvre presents throughout the book.

It is quite remarkable how Lefebvre was able to craft such an in-depth and comprehensive text (over 300 pages) in a relatively short amount of time – August 1963 to November 1964. As the author of more than 70 books during his 90 years on earth, this is certainly consistent with his publishing practices. Some of this can be attributed to his brilliant intellect, some of it to his tireless work ethic, and part of it to his method of dictating his texts to a scribe. The latter item makes for a conversational tone that has fits and starts, and one can imagine Lefebvre's mind racing in various directions as he spoke the words. Like many of Lefebvre's works, *Metaphilosophy* is very much a non-linear text. Argumentative threads seem to come and go, sometimes seemingly out of nowhere. This is a necessary, albeit frequently frustrating, aspect of Lefebvre's dialectical style, and it applies to both the prose and the structure. An example of the latter is most evident with the 'table of forms, systems, structures' put forth in the first chapter, titled 'Prolegomena: Notice to Readers.' The reader is instructed to return to the table over and over again, every so often. Chapters could be re-arranged into several different patterns, as could a bulk of the sentences. Arguments are suspended, only to return at a later point in the text or another text entirely.

Lefebvre's core influences appear on almost all of the pages, with allusions and citations of Hegel, Nietzsche, Axelos, and, to a lesser extent, Heidegger. Above all else and anyone else, Lefebvre is most indebted to Marx, which is made abundantly clear throughout. It is quite obvious that Lefebvre sees himself as an heir of sorts, almost as if the title of the fifth chapter—The Search for Heirs—is a reference to himself. At the time of the book's genesis in the mid-1960s, Lefebvre would have been considered by many to be the runner-up to Louis Althusser, whose structural Marxism is diametrically opposed to Lefebvre's humanist Marxism.

Lefebvre covers a lot of ground in this book, and many of its themes will be familiar to readers of his other work. Alienation, dialectic, moments, style, and so on, are peppered throughout. There are,

however, three terms that stand above the rest in *Metaphilosophy*: Praxis, Mimesis, and Poiesis. These three concepts are the main foci of Lefebvre's argument. Lefebvre seems to play hide and seek with these terms, searching to pin them down and define them in various ways, all while they seemingly wriggle free and morph into something else. These three terms are interrelated, with each being defined throughout the course of the book. Praxis is akin to practice, yet something beyond it, poiesis is akin to creation, yet also something else, and mimesis is similar to repetition, but cannot be reduced to it. *Metaphilosophy* wrestles with these three terms, yet never entirely settles on what exactly they are. Such elliptical manoeuvres are a hallmark of Lefebvre's approach to his many other texts.

Two broad themes have emerged from the English translations of Lefebvre's work. The first is Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, whose three volumes have all been translated, along with related texts, such as *Everyday Life in the Modern World* and *Rhythmanalysis*. The second theme is space, with books like *The Production of Space*, *The Urban Revolution*, *Writings on Cities*, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, and last year's translation of *Marxist Thought and the City*. These two themes are substantial parts of Lefebvre's oeuvre, and often stand in the way of Lefebvre's other scholarly contributions on the state, history, literature, philosophical figures, etc. *Metaphilosophy* is a book that cuts across all of these themes, even linking them together like a red thread, and could be used as an introduction to Lefebvre's thought, more generally, even though it is not something one would consider to be at the introductory level.

There are two guides included in this book that are helpful for the reader. Lefebvre's text is bookended by an in-depth introduction by longtime Lefebvre scholar, Stuart Elden, and an equally intriguing postface, written in 1997, by the late Georges Labica. In his introduction, Elden argues that *Metaphilosophy* helped lay some of the groundwork for the field of cultural studies, several decades *avant la lettre* (xi). This is not readily apparent, especially if one only glances at the chapter titles, half of which include the keyword 'philosophy,' or a variation thereof. One must burrow much deeper into the text to get at Lefebvre's message(s) and tarry with them, even if they appear to be going astray. One could say that Lefebvre shares a compositional bond with Frankfurt Schooler Theodor Adorno, as far as thematic choices and dialectical argumentation and presentation go. Indeed, it is through the weaving, sprawling, herky-jerky writing that reveals the seeds of many key topics that would fascinate cultural theorists in the decades following the publication of this book, albeit without the same recognition bestowed upon Adorno for his analyses of the culture industry.

Despite Lefebvre's belated and slowly developed recognition as an important continental thinker, this book, composed five decades ago, is a text worthy of one's time and effort, especially for those interested in thinking about and beyond the boundaries of philosophy. Early in the text, Lefebvre gives the most succinct summary of his main argument: 'Philosophy must be superseded. It realizes itself by superseding itself and abolishes itself by realizing itself' (17). An immediate solution to this, according to Lefebvre, is to study the early work of Marx. Lefebvre is quick to point out that Marx's early work is often wrongly described as philosophical, as it is actually metaphilosophical. Lefebvre does acknowledge that Marx's work is an incomplete starting point. Nevertheless, Lefebvre does sell himself quite short and does not acknowledge the innovation and importance of his own work. This text shows that Henri Lefebvre's work deserves a place alongside other notable 20th century continental thinkers, such as the Frankfurt School, Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Louis Althusser. For those looking to take philosophy to its limits and beyond, one would be hard pressed to find a better starting point than this newly translated text of this 20th century French Marxist metaphilosopher.

Patrick Gamsby, Memorial University of Newfoundland