

# Everyday life in the real world

Neil Maycroft  
History of Art & Material Culture  
Lincoln School of Art & Design  
University of Lincoln  
e-mail: [nmaycroft@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:nmaycroft@lincoln.ac.uk)

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‘You may start from almost any detail, however trivial, and often find it leading, without any conscious effort on your part, to discoveries of prime importance’ - George Simenon, *The Man Who Watched The Trains Go By*, London, George Routledge & Sons Ltd, 1943, 106.

## **Abstract**

This paper aims to be both an example of how one may interpret an aspect of the ‘politics’ of everyday life and a critical comment on some of the emerging orthodoxy around the academic study of everyday life. These two themes are intertwined here but in summary the paper argues the following:

- That the politics of everyday life are just as fruitfully approached through empirical study as they are via philosophical or cultural contemplation.
- That the often stated idea that a ‘critique’ of everyday life can be readily built on the foundations of some small detail or other requires qualification.
- That the orthodox distinction between everyday life and non-everyday life in terms of work and non-work realms needs qualification.

Specifically, the paper concerns an empirical description, and subsequent analysis, of a series of everyday events, their effects and significant consequences; it describes changes, and the effects of these changes, occurring at Nottingham railway station over a short period of time (4 weeks from 29/09/02 onwards).

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade or so, the concept of everyday life has been elevated to both theoretical and practical importance within the social sciences - economics, politics, sociology- and within other academic disciplines including philosophy and cultural studies. Indeed, for some publishers in these

fields, the simple addition of the word ‘everyday’ to a title or series of titles is deemed to add some of the ‘value’ seen to derive from professing an interest in the term.<sup>1</sup> For other commentators, many of whom are building their academic reputations on the study of everyday life, the term has, perhaps unsurprisingly, attained an elevated status which I feel it cannot sensibly bear. Everyday life can, here, be seen as one in a long line of conceptual philosophers’ stones by which theory and practice can be transformed. There has been space, place, identity, material culture, and everyday life. Everyday life is the latest object of analytical foci seen as somehow unlocking the secrets of social formations, a magic conceptual key for understanding societies.

The ongoing academic attention paid to everyday life is also, of course, part of the process of classifying it and the result has been a proliferation of descriptions and definitions of this object of study. Space does not permit a detailed engagement with all of these differing analyses but we can condense a rough and generally agreed upon definition; everyday life is that aspect, portion, time of one’s life that is conducted away from institutionally defined or organised activities. In terms of a common sense understanding it is life outside of work, school, hospital, prison and so on, with the most distinctive opposition seen to be the one between one’s time at and away from work. On the basis of this distinction flows much of the analysis of everyday life and common themes include the repetitive and mundane nature of everyday life, it’s ‘colonisation’ by various bureaucratic and commodifying dynamics, the rationalisation of leisure and so on. Against this negative critique of everyday life, many commentators argue that everyday life also represents a milieu of Utopian aspiration against these negative dynamics, a repository of ‘authentic’ human relations and activities, a bulwark against the increasingly ‘programmed’ character of contemporary life. Given both such wide-ranging definitions and characterisations it is little wonder that, in the face of all of this conceptual specificity, the notion of everyday life remains both vague and nebulous.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, in a recent catalogue from a mainstream sociology publisher, a series of introductory texts on a range of subjects have all had ‘and Everyday Life’ appended to their titles; ‘Gender and Everyday Life’, ‘Race and Everyday Life’, ‘Criminology and Everyday Life’ and so on. Upon inspection, these books reveal no specific engagement with any concept of everyday life, rather, they are ‘orthodox’ textbooks which a few years ago would be called ‘Gender’, ‘Race’, and ‘Criminology’.

## **An emerging academic orthodoxy?**

Despite the variations in the approaches to both conceptualising and characterising everyday life, certain recurrent themes are discernible and these include; that everyday life is best approached either philosophically or in a culture-centred manner, and that analysis proceeds most fruitfully from small details which can be built into social theories of everyday life.

### *Philosophy and culture*

The problem with philosophically and culturally driven accounts seem to me twofold; firstly they tend to proceed from reified conceptions which are then applied to the concept of everyday life and, secondly, in their explicit disavowal of the usefulness of empirically-driven accounts they fail to take account of the ‘reality’ of everyday life as experienced by the very people on who’s behalf they often argue they are undertaking their analyses. For example, the transformative and progressive dimension of everyday life is assumed, and even wished, rather than demonstrated. Conversely, the banality and oppression of everyday life are also assumed or ‘read-in’. Everyday life tends to be presented in a rather unhistorical and fixed manner in many accounts. So, while it is accepted that the economy and the world of work have undergone major restructuring over the past thirty years this is routinely not acknowledged in relation to everyday life? Even if we accept a view of everyday life as passive or reactive response to other changes (or as the fertile medium from which they spring) then everyday life must also have undergone some major changes? Philosophical accounts do not grant us access to this changeable nature of the object in question while culture-driven accounts often emphasise the ‘textualism’ of social reality with its attendant collapse into symbolic politics, there is little interest in political-economic structuring or restructuring.

Of course, the suspicion of empirical investigation has a long history but, in relation to everyday life rather a noble one including the Chicago School and Mass Observation. One advantage (though not without many attendant problems) of this kind of empirically driven approach is that it allows for events as actually experienced in everyday life to lead to theoretical reflection upon the nature of everyday life, rather than having abstract theoretical frameworks act as templates against which to judge or classify observed

events in everyday life. This approach may well lead to observations and ideas that run current to the growing orthodoxy concerning the theorisation of everyday life. In a sense it is allowing the practice of everyday life to lead the theory rather than the other way around. It may also produce accounts which connect more directly with the realities of everyday life as experienced by many people, accounts that are more apprehensible than some of the more theoretically driven approaches. This may be no bad thing as when it comes to considering the experience of everyday life, academics are reluctant to essentialize the immediate experiences of those articulating other accounts. They tend to see the accounts of ordinary people as alienated yet they do not demure from essentializing from their own experiences as academics, experiences which are often presented as somehow never alienated, mystified or prone to ideological distortion.

### *The small detail*

The quotation from Simenon at the start of this paper captures the often repeated claim that the best way to apprehend everyday life, philosophically, culturally or empirically, is to start from some small almost insignificant detail or event and from there to build a theory of everyday life as a whole. It is a claim I endorse in general. However, many of the accounts which claim to do this actually read to me as though they are ‘theories’ in search of a validating detail, that is, the theory arrived at was never in question and that what has happened is that details which support the move towards a particular theoretical model are favoured and considered at the expense of any other details that do not afford such analysis. On the other hand, starting with the trivial detail runs the risk of simply producing a catalogue of minor irritations and moans which are then disingenuously linked to wider social processes; a misreading of the idea that critique can be informed by the smallest detail.

Clearly, then, we need some kind of ‘theory of small details’, a method of sifting the truly significant from both the insignificant and the presumed significant. Or do we? Not really. We can start with empirical observations of changes in the structure of everyday life and build from those observations an account of the wider significance and import of such changes as they spread outwards carrying their effects in both particular and general manners. The empirical example at the heart of this paper represents an attempt to do just

that.

## **The small detail: An empirical example**

So, this paper will proceed to analyse everyday life on the basis of one small detail; the removal of the 8.42am train service from Nottingham to Lincoln on October 29th, 2002. The decision to remove this service represents one of many similar examples over the course of the last few years and no particular significance is attached to this example, it just happens to be one that I documented and thought about a lot at the time. I believe an analysis of this small detail does allow the building of a ‘critique’ or ‘politics’ of everyday life but that does not go on to become a critique of the current state of the British railway system, for example. That, I believe, would be an example of simply inserting this detail into an already formed critique; a theory in search of a validating detail.

### ***Everyday life and the reorganisation of time***

What follows, then, is a record of a number of observations and impressions which followed the decision to remove this one rail service. Most observations were the result of talking to fellow passengers regularly travelling between Nottingham and Lincoln.

1. Many people did not know, or did not anticipate, such a change as they had not picked up the new timetable issued before the changes to the services were put into operation. Previous timetable revisions had been largely a matter of small adjustments in the arrival and departure times of services. Consequently, there was a widespread assumption that the removal of such a significant service would not occur or, at least, little anticipation of such a change as the service was so well used and convenient. Many regular commuters turned up on 29/09/02 expecting the 8.42 service but discovered that it had been withdrawn. Consequently, most of these people were late getting to work, meeting friends, going about their varied business, etc, as they had to wait until the 9.05 train, the next service to Lincoln.

This, in itself represents an everyday irritation, a small though for some a significant detail, from which it is difficult to build a fuller account or a

persuasive theory. After all, commuters now knew that the service had been withdrawn and would not encounter the surprise of this discovery the next day. However, such a change is not just an isolated frustration of everyday life and if one considers the knock-on effects and everyday consequences of the service change itself, a much more extensive and critical description starts to emerge.

2. One had to get up earlier (and maybe go to bed earlier) or, at least, do what is necessary to arrive at Nottingham station earlier in order to catch the 8.09am train which was the service before the 9.05am one. Hence, there was a shuffling of events in individual people's everyday lives of half an hour. One can imagine all kinds of knock-on consequences revolving around getting up, reorganising one's bathroom time-tabling and routines with other family members, getting the children up and ready for school, perhaps the taking of the children to school which may not open until 8.30am so what to do with them and so on? There were similar consequences at the end of the day; perhaps the choice of watching one's favourite television programme but not getting enough sleep or of getting enough sleep but missing one's favourite television programme. Life suddenly revolved around work and the journey to work a little bit more than it did previously.
3. The 9.05am service was too late to get many people to Lincoln in time for work. Consequently, if they were forced to travel by train, they were forced back onto the 8.09am service.<sup>2</sup> This may well have got them to Lincoln too early such that they have half an hour to kill but which ends up being wasted as there is really nothing worth starting in such a time; their workplace may not be open for example.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the cumulative effect of this half hour daily is likely to be felt, two and a half possibly wasted hours a week.<sup>4</sup> Again, everyday life becomes

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<sup>2</sup>The removal of the 8.42am service also removed the 'safety valve' that existed should one have aimed for, but missed for whatever reason, the 8.09am service. Passengers now had to wait an extra hour for the 9.05 service (this has now been removed and one has to wait for the 9.26am service).

<sup>3</sup>The fact that passengers had not previously opted to travel by the 8.09am service is indication that the earlier arrival of this service was of little practical benefit to them otherwise they would have used it before the removal of the 8.42am service.

<sup>4</sup>One effect of 'absorbing' the various amounts of time 'freed up' by these changes is often the spending of money as one waits around in station cafés and retail outlets that

increasingly defined and attenuated by work or the non-everyday.

4. The 8.09am service was already a busy one, carrying as it did, those who had to be at work in Lincoln much earlier than those who use to travel on the 8.42am service. Now it became far more busy as it has had to absorb the passengers from the 8.42am service. The consequence was that people had now to stand for various portions of the journey which made the journey more uncomfortable and less relaxing. Hence, many arrived at work less rested than they previously were. No small point as many people used the journey in order to catch up on sleep. Others used the journey time to work and, having to stand on an overcrowded train curtailed this possibility. Hence time often had to be found elsewhere in order to fulfil one's obligations to work such that some other portion of one's time away from work becomes constrained directly by one's work obligations - either catching up on work or catching up on sleep such that one was able to do one's work effectively (and this could be defined as being effectively able to avoid unwanted supervision of one's ability to work, something that ongoing tiredness could undermine). Again, everyday life was framed a little more by the imperatives of work.
5. This overcrowding was exacerbated due to the fact that while the previous 8.42am service was a double carriage train, the 8.09am service remained for some weeks, as before these changes, a single carriage train but, one that was expected to carry two services worth of passengers. There had been no increase in the number of carriages because the service did not start in Nottingham and was not specifically tailored to the journey from Nottingham to Lincoln. It was simply one portion of a series of connected services for most of which the single carriage service may have been most appropriate in relation to the number of expected travellers.
6. The return fare from Nottingham to Lincoln on the 8.42am service was £6.00. However, as it was designated as peak time, the same fare for the 8.09am service was £7.50, that is, 25% more. While the train operators clearly benefited from having passengers pay 25% more,

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tend to be more expensive than those away from the station. Again, this may tighten the financial belt of work around everyday life.



through forcing them onto an earlier service, the passengers themselves had to find the extra 25% fare. Hence, while not directly impinging on time in everyday life, everyday life is still directly attenuated by work in as much as passengers had to pay 25% more just to go to work. However, these same people may, especially if low waged, have had to work longer hours in order to pay a year's increased travelling costs. Indeed, one may have had to take advantage of the earlier arrival in Lincoln and work during the extra time available simply in order to pay for arriving early.<sup>5</sup> Again, work dominates everyday life. Extra time and an increased proportion of income becomes devoted simply to getting to work; paying more to get to work simply to work more in order to be able to pay more to get to work!

## Some tentative propositions

On the basis of these observations and informal conversations with commuters affected by these changes, a number of conclusions can be advanced, ones which do flow from the 'small detail' in a manner befitting the claim that analysis of everyday life can proceed on such a basis.

### *The framing of everyday life by work*

Most commuters on the 8.42am service were on their way to work; this service was seen as being a little too early for all but the most enthusiastic shoppers and too late for the many schoolchildren who daily commute on this route. One effect of the removal of this service was to highlight, as a consequence of the material effects initiated, the manner in which everyday life and work are intimately linked. The specific material effects have been described above so, here some more general points can be advanced.

1. *The demarcation of work from everyday life.*

Of course, an individual may perceive less of an elision between everyday life and non-everyday life than some of the theoretical accounts

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<sup>5</sup>The amounts may appear small, almost inconsequential, to well paid academics for example. However, if one takes a working year of 240 days the cost of rail travel increases by £360 per annum at the then current prices, a significant amount for most people.

suggest. What rail commuting reveals, however, is a specific time and place which both enables and allows such elision of this distinction. For example, ‘work’ may spread out into one’s everyday life - self-administration, carrying out unpaid tasks for the day’s work, catching up on outstanding work,<sup>6</sup> and so on, all of which a rail journey particularly facilitates unlike other forms of transport.

This blurring of the distinction between work and everyday life may be even more pronounced if, for example, one has more than one paid job, in order to secure decent wages, as the ‘constrained’ time, including travelling and performing work tasks out of work, is doubled yet, has to fit into the same amount of daily time available.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. *The demarcation of everyday life from work*

The above points very much follow what may be regarded as orthodoxy in relation to many social sciences; leading with ‘work’. For example, classic sociology would focus on work organisation ahead of the perceived ‘disorganisation’ of everyday life, economics would likely lead with an emphasis on ‘macro’ structures and ‘formal’ market relations than on the informal, micro-economies of everyday life, and politics would emphasise organised political activity ahead of the cultural politics of everyday life. However, we can consider the demarcation between work and everyday life by prioritising everyday life over work.

For example, the reverse penetration of everyday life into non-everyday life may also be of significance. If one has a main, waged job, it may well be the case that the obligations, concerns, desires and pleasures associated with everyday life flow into work. This may be in terms of preoccupying one’s thoughts though it may also be a more material concern, for example, using one’s commuting time in order to do the unpaid ‘work’ associated with activities deemed to be part of everyday life; searching for a holiday, planning weekend activities, and so on.

## 3. *What’s so great about ‘work’?*

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<sup>6</sup>Much of which may be the direct consequence of the removal of the train service in question as such a change may well eat into time put aside for work elsewhere in the day.

<sup>7</sup>There are also more social obligations, such as caring for elderly or infirm relatives, which may further muddy the distinction between the realm of everyday life and non-everyday life for particular individuals.

Framing everyday life by work, or vice versa, seems to me to be a consequence of a particular way of conceptually ordering and characterising human activity; there is work (paid employment) and there is the non-work everyday realm. To be sure, in terms of analyses of everyday life, this distinction makes intuitive sense as everyday life itself is seen as emerging when industrial production in the 18th and 19th century brought into being a clearly defined realm of paid employment thus destroying the pre-capitalist unity of 'work' and non-work activities. However, if we consider what work actually represents we can offer a new inflection on the relationship between work and everyday life.

Work is simply the means, in societies such as ours, of satisfying our survival needs, broadly defined. This is done in an indirect manner through the selling of one's time in exchange for a wage with which we can purchase those goods and services in the market place which are deemed to satisfy those needs. However, this is only one of a broad range of historical alternatives that humans have developed to satisfy their survival needs. Moreover, paid employment is not the only manner in which the satisfaction of survival needs is secured in societies like ours today. An acknowledgement of this fact leads us to consider everyday life in ways different from some of the classic, dated and static accounts.

For example, the direct meeting of basic needs via one's own labour, or through non-commodified forms of exchange, may further erode one's experience of everyday life as something distinct from work. Activities such as gardening, making clothes, decorating, and so on, are often seen as everyday life activities distinct from work rather than as part of the same rationale, logic, motivation, coherence; to meet one's basic needs.

Moreover, if one does not have paid employment, or has only a limited manner of meeting one's needs through paid employment, but attends to one's survival needs in other ways, the elision between everyday life and non-everyday life further weakens as the temporal and spatial partitioning of work is absent or is constituted in less formal ways. Some commuters on the 8.42am service from Nottingham to Lincoln were just such people; for example, 'Big Issue' sellers moving between one city and the other and, more significantly, unemployed people using the journey for a variety of reasons.

In many respects, everyday life and non-everyday life largely coincide for the unemployed. That is, attending to their survival needs does not coincide with time spent at work in order to secure wages. In this sense, we could argue that such people have more, even unlimited, everyday life as they have no work. In the case of the unemployed, attending to survival needs often takes place in different places and often at different times and some of the activities involved may be quite autonomous. Consequently, we could argue that the unemployed either have all everyday life or no everyday life depending on how we demarcate it from 'work'.

We could also contrast the lives of the unemployed with those of the very rich, indeed, formally, in some respects, the lives of the unemployed are similar to those of the very rich, they both lack work and do not have their everyday lives bounded by the distinct activity of engaging in paid employment. However, one group have to devote the greater portion of their daily lives to meeting their basic needs while the other group does not. So, for the unemployed and the rich, the distinction between work and everyday life is largely irrelevant while the nature in which they attend to their respective survival needs is not.

#### 4. *The interpenetrating of everyday life and non-everyday life*

Most commuters on the 8.42am rail service between Nottingham and Lincoln were neither super rich nor unemployed, rather, they were employed wage labourers on their journey to work. In this respect they represented a relatively homogenous group. However, they were only one group of people whose activities can be analysed by considering the demarcation between work and everyday life; one's everyday life is always someone else's non-everyday life, that is, their work life, and vice versa. This is true in several senses:

**In terms of the time of everyday life:** Commuters on a particular service 'share' a common conception and experience of time -the timetable- one which overrides many culturally variable and individually experienced times. This may be dimly experienced especially if the service is running without delay. However, it may be sharply experienced such as when an individual service is cancelled or when a service is removed from the timetable.

However, this shared experience of time is at odds with other shared experiences both overlapping, running alongside and interpenetrating the ‘time of the 8.42am commuter’. For example, the time of those working in the retail outlets on the station, those of the cleaners, station rail staff of various sorts, those begging in and around the station, are all different from the one implied as central in this paper.

**In terms of the space of everyday life:** The public space of everyday life is always someone else’s space of non-everyday life. In many respects this is saying the same things those being advanced in relation to time. However, space is significant precisely because, unlike time, its variance always imposes itself on human activity in a direct, sensuous manner. The varieties of time in everyday life can be contemplated quite passively while the spatial differences associated with groups and individuals are much more pressing materially. Plotting the ‘time-geography’ of individuals in a space such as Nottingham’s railway station would reveal this complexity in relation to social space.

**The perception and experience of everyday life:** Temporal and spatial perceptions and experiences are, of course, part of the stuff of the more general perception and experience of everyday life. However, they are not the only constituents. People bring to their everyday lives a perception and experience based on, and coloured by, many differing, prior factors and the negative ones tend to impose themselves more pointedly. Some of these may flow from everyday life itself including all manner of specific and general anxieties and frustrations; one is running late for one’s train because of traffic on the way to the station, one is worried by the state of one’s personal relationships, and so on. Other everyday life perceptions and expectations may flow from work, or the realm in which one attends to satisfying one’s survival needs; worrying about an oppressive work environment, having too much to do, having too little money, having to comply with the dictates of benefits’ agencies, and so on. At any one time all or any of these perceptions may contribute to an experience of everyday life in which its intimate interpenetrating with either the everyday lives and non-everyday lives of others is obscured or recedes in

importance.

So, different people may experience a given situation very differently in terms of the often largely unconscious feelings of time, space, rhythms and so on (consider a child and an adult, for example). Moreover, the conscious expectations of the situation, its meaning, possibilities, structuring of power and so on may be apprehended very differently such that we may talk of a ‘clash’ of everyday lives.

## Conclusions

In terms of the intent of this paper, to build a reasonable analyses of the significance of everyday life through the identification of a ‘small detail’ which may lead to ‘discoveries of prime importance’, I leave others to judge its success. I have implied both an epistemological and a conceptual question exist in relation to the rapidly consolidating tropes identifiable in much of the academic literature on everyday life. Epistemologically, analysts need some way of assessing the significance of ‘small details’ in everyday life such that ones that can lead to more powerful analyses can be separated from both those that lead to the ‘dead-ends’ of isolated frustration or whimsy and those that are, in reality, inserted into pre-existing critiques in search of legitimising examples.<sup>8</sup> Conceptually, the relationship of everyday life to work as one of demarcation needs more study as, if it was ever sustainable, historic restructuring of political-economic processes, structures and relationships certainly now bring this demarcation into question.

More abstract conclusions may also be worth briefly stating: Given the questions the paper raises in relation to the relationship of everyday life to ‘work’ (however defined), and the overlapping nature of ‘everyday lives’, where does the common, shared, irreducible core of everyday life reside? Is there such a thing? If there is not, what are the implications for a politics of everyday life? On the one hand, a common understanding of everyday life, based on a core of shared experience, provides a platform for normative political analyses and potential actions. On the other hand, if there is no

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<sup>8</sup>This is not to generally denigrate either of these; life would be dull without both impotent rages against and whimsical musings on daily life and, of course, the rejection of the deductive/inductive method would hardly be useful.

such thing as everyday life, rather, everyday 'lives' what kind of analyses and intervention does this licence?

Finally, where there is an experience of everyday life, rather than its Utopian possibilities, it is, for many people, at most a respite from non-everyday life pressures and repressions and to the extent to which everyday life is increasingly prey to 'colonisation' of time, of the need to attend to survival needs, and so on, it increasingly becomes a source of frustration and pressure itself from which escape is severely limited (maybe through fantasy, extreme experiences, drugs, alcoholism, madness). Instead of 'resistance' originating *from* everyday life it may be increasingly apt to speak of resistance *to* everyday life.