

Rhythmanalysis: An Introduction

Lost again. Where was I? Where am I? Mud road. Stopped car. Time is rhythm: the insect rhythm of a warm humid night, brain ripple, breathing, the drum in my temple – these are our faithful timekeepers; and reason corrects the feverish beat.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*¹

Elements of Rhythmanalysis was the last book Lefebvre wrote, although it only appeared after his death, published by his friend and colleague René Lourau.² It is a work which shows why Lefebvre was one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century, but simultaneously illustrates how his work critiqued and moved beyond that paradigm, incorporating insights from elsewhere in an intoxicating mixture of ideas, illustrations and analyses. In the analysis of rhythms – biological, psychological and social – Lefebvre shows the interrelation of understandings of space and time in the comprehension of everyday life. This issue of space and time is important, for here, perhaps above all, Lefebvre shows how these issues need to be thought together rather than separately. For the English-speaking audience of his works it equally shows how a non-linear conception of time and history balanced his famous rethinking of the question of space.

Lefebvre's study includes a wide range of discussions in order to illustrate these points. Music, the commodity, measurement, the media, political discipline and the city are all deployed to powerful effect. It is at once a book about metaphysical issues and

one concerned with the minutiae of everyday life; a political book and a contribution to cultural studies. Lefebvre had been working on the themes explored in the book for a number of years, in writings on Nietzsche and aesthetics particularly,³ although it was only in the 1980s that he explicitly dealt with the notion of rhythm – first in the third and final volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, published in 1981,⁴ and then in two co-written shorter pieces which preceded the book *Elements of Rhythmanalysis*. These essays, ‘The Rhythmanalytical Project’ and ‘Attempt at the Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities’, co-written with his last wife, Catherine Régulier, are included in this volume, which therefore brings together all of Lefebvre’s writings on this theme.

In general terms, Lefebvre is concerned with taking the concept of rhythm and turning it into ‘a science, a new field of knowledge: the analysis of rhythms; with practical consequences’.⁵ Rhythm, for Lefebvre, is something inseparable from understandings of time, in particular repetition. It is found in the workings of our towns and cities, in urban life and movement through space. Equally, in the collision of natural biological and social timescales, the rhythms of our bodies and society, the analysis of rhythms provides a privileged insight into the question of everyday life. Lefebvre takes a number of themes – the thing, the object, life in the urban or rural environment, the role of media, political discipline and the notion of dressage, and music, among others – and rethinks them through the notion of rhythm. The question of the body, and in particular the body under capitalism, is a recurrent and indeed central topic. As he notes, the push–pull exchange between the general and the particular, the abstraction of concepts and the concrete analysis of the mundane, starting with the body, is at play throughout the work, although Lefebvre follows the former, starting with ‘full consciousness of the abstract in order to arrive at the concrete’.⁶

Everyday Life, Time and Space

As Armand Ajzenberg has noted, Lefebvre considered this book on rhythmanalysis to be the de facto fourth volume of his occasional series *Critique of Everyday Life*.⁷ The first volume

appeared shortly after the liberation of France, in 1947, and was republished with a lengthy preface in 1958. The second volume appeared in 1961, the third twenty years later.⁸ Lefebvre covered a wide range of themes in these volumes, ranging from economic and political analyses to film and literary criticism. This work is no exception, with the range of issues already noted. Lefebvre's work on rhythms and repetition is useful in gaining insight into the double sense of the notion of the everyday – a dual meaning found in the English and the French. *Le quotidien* means the mundane, the everyday, but also the repetitive, what happens every day. Indeed in the second volume, thirty years in advance, Lefebvre had promised a future work on rhythmanalysis,⁹ a promise which was partially delivered in the third volume, and then finally in this, his fullest treatment of the question.

But the writings on rhythmanalysis are more than this. Most explicitly they are a contribution to another of his lifelong projects, the attempt to get us both to think space and time *differently*, and to think them *together*. In the English-speaking world, apart perhaps from *Critique of Everyday Life*, no other book of Lefebvre's has had as much impact as *The Production of Space*. Here Lefebvre poses questions about the role space plays in our lives, from the conceptualisation of the world to cities and rural environments, and to the homes we live in. Lefebvre's analysis is both conceptual – the threefold distinction between spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation – and historical, with discussion of abstract, absolute, relative and concrete space.¹⁰ The historical dimension is often neglected in contemporary appropriations of Lefebvre's work, which is seriously to misread him. And as he notes at the end of this book, an analysis of rhythms, a rhythmanalysis, 'would complete the exposition of the production of space'.¹¹ Although Lefebvre was concerned with correcting what he saw as Marxism's over-emphasis of the temporal dimension – and concomitant under-emphasis of the spatial – he was also involved in a lifelong struggle both within and without orthodox Marxism to pluralise its understanding of time and history.

Lefebvre's very earliest writings in the mid-1920s were written either in collaboration or in close contact with a group of young

philosophy students in Paris. The group included such figures as Norbert Guterman, who went on to become a translator in New York, the philosopher and psychologist Georges Politzer, the novelist Paul Nizan, and the sociologist Georges Friedmann.¹² Together they edited various journals including *Philosophies* and *L'esprit*, before discovering Marx and going on to found *La revue marxiste* in the late 1920s. Lefebvre later recounted that they were concerned with challenging the dominant philosophy of Bergson.¹³ Lefebvre claimed that it was at this time that he developed what he called the 'theory of moments'. For Lefebvre, moments are significant times when existing orthodoxies are open to challenge, when things have the potential to be overturned or radically altered, moments of crisis in the original sense of the term. Rather than the Bergsonian notion of *durée*, duration, Lefebvre was privileging the importance of the instant. The moment has a long tradition in Western thought, most recently in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For Lefebvre it is above all Nietzsche's writings that are important. In Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the moment, the *Augenblick*, the blink of an eye, is a gateway where past and future collide, and the image of the eternal recurrence.¹⁴ In Lefebvre's own life it was his vision of a crucified sun, of the Christian cross imposed over a solar image, seen when he was walking in the Pyrenees, that he thought was a significant turning point. Lefebvre suggested that the sight was one where the elemental forces of his adolescence were held in check by the constraints of the Catholic church.¹⁵ The question of rhythm and tempo is also important to Nietzsche's conception of style: 'to communicate a state, an inward tension of pathos, by means of signs, including the tempo of these signs – that is the meaning of every style'.¹⁶

Lefebvre's understanding of time was also shaped by his reading of Proust, with the issues of loss and memory, recollection and repetition becoming particularly important.¹⁷ By the time Lefebvre became a Marxist, in the late 1920s, he therefore had a fairly worked-through understanding of questions of temporality. In his analysis of the difference between linear and cyclical time, and the contrast between clock time and lived time, there is a difference between his understanding and that of Marxism. His

understanding of history is not the linear, teleological progression of Hegel or Marx, but closer to a Nietzschean sense of change and cycles. It is also notable that Lefebvre's understanding of time as non-calculable, as resistant to abstracting generalisation and in need of being understood as 'lived', is the same as his more well-known critique of prevalent ways of comprehending space. Just as Cartesian geometry is a reductive way of understanding space, so too is the measure of time, the clock, a reductive comprehension. But what is particularly central is that Lefebvre's work on questions of temporality preceded his analyses of spatiality by some years. His work on moments, although prefigured in writings as early as the 1920s, found its most detailed expression in his 1958 autobiography *La somme et le reste*; his principal work on history is 1970's *La fin de l'histoire*.¹⁸ Neither of these works is available in full English translation, unlike his most important works on space and the urban, although some important excerpts appear in the *Key Writings* collection.¹⁹

Lefebvre's recurrent inspiration for his work on time was, as for Nietzsche, music. Musical metaphors and discussions are scattered across Lefebvre's extensive writings, and he was a keen amateur musician, playing the piano and numbering Beethoven and Schumann as his favourite composers.²⁰ He was also interested in the challenges to dominant modes of musical theory in the work of Pierre Boulez and his antecedents Webern and Schönberg. Lefebvre thought it was important to theorise music as a relation of three terms – melody, harmony and rhythm. His suggestion is that the last of these is often neglected in discussions of music, though it is of paramount importance. All of these three depend on an understanding of time – melody being a sequence of notes in temporal succession, harmony relying on notes sounding at the same time, and rhythm being the placement of notes and their relative lengths. The importance of beat, or musical measure – both captured in French by the word *la mesure* – is found throughout Lefebvre's discussion of measure (also *la mesure*). Music gives us an alternative to purely mathematical models of calculation and measure.

Music is discussed throughout Lefebvre's writings on rhythm-analysis, although Chapter 7 represents its most explicit

theorisation. Elsewhere in the discussion it functions as a metaphor and more. As music demonstrates, the question of rhythm raises issues of change and repetition, identity and difference, contrast and continuity. Lefebvre's interest in the comparison of natural, corporeal rhythms and mechanistic, machine rhythms can also be given a musical twist in the age of programmable instrumentation. As noted, Lefebvre uses rhythm as a mode of analysis – a *tool* of analysis rather than just an *object* of it – to examine and re-examine a range of topics. One of these is the question of the urban, the life of cities in France and elsewhere. As Lefebvre notes, a rhythmmanalysist is 'capable of listening to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony, an opera'.²¹ Because of their prior translation in the *Writings on Cities* collection, these sections are the best-known part of the book.²² Important though they are, there is much else here. The section on dressage and the disciplining and training of the body bears close comparison to Foucault's work on similar topics in *Discipline and Punish* where the model, just as it is for Lefebvre, is the military. Perhaps less obviously, the discussion of how the mechanical repetition of the cycles of capitalist production is imposed over our circadian rhythms should remind us of the discussion of the working day in Marx's *Capital*.

Both of these references show the stress Lefebvre puts on the body. As he notes, 'at no moment has the analysis of rhythms and the rhythmmanalytical project lost sight of the body'.²³ In the discussion of the body we can see how Lefebvre recognises the coexistence of social and biological rhythms, with the body as the point of contact. Our biological rhythms of sleep, hunger and thirst, excretion and so on are more and more conditioned by the social environment and our working lives. We train ourselves, and are trained, to behave in a number of ways. However, Lefebvre believes that the rhythmmanalysist does not simply analyse the body as a subject, but uses the body as the first point of analysis, the tool for subsequent investigations. The body serves us as a metronome.²⁴ This stress on the *mode* of analysis is what is meant by a rhythmmanalysis rather than an analysis of rhythms.

Influences and Influence

Aside from Nietzsche, Proust and Marx, already mentioned, there is one other key figure for Lefebvre's work on rhythms. This is Gaston Bachelard. Lefebvre notes how the term rhythmanalysis itself is taken from Bachelard, although as is also noted, it originates with the Portuguese writer Lucio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos.²⁵ In this lineage we can perhaps see the other meaning of the word 'elements' in the book's title *Éléments de rythmanalyse*. As well as referring to the constituents or the basic principles of rhythmanalysis, in French as in English, *élément* also means the primal building blocks of the world, that is fire and water, air and earth. Bachelard is well known for having written on these elements in a range of his works including *The Psychoanalysis of Fire, Water and Dreams, Air and Dreams* and *Earth and Reveries of Will*.²⁶ Lefebvre was very interested in Bachelard's work, and occasionally referenced his writings.²⁷ But perhaps more important than these 'elemental' books, or the scientific works of Bachelard's earlier career,²⁸ are two other books – *The Poetics of Space* and *Dialectic of Duration*.²⁹ Lefebvre regularly cites the former, particularly in his *The Production of Space*, where Bachelard, along with Nietzsche and Heidegger, is one of those he draws upon for an understanding of space, just as Marx is his mentor for the notion of production.³⁰ *Dialectic of Duration*, though, is the book where Bachelard discusses rhythms most explicitly. Here Bachelard suggests that the notion of duration, made famous by Bergson, is never as unitary and cohesive as Bergson suggested, but fragmentary and made up of disparate elements. It is the notion of continuity above all that Bachelard wishes to critique.³¹ Lefebvre took much from this critique.

Readers may discern other influences at work here. Lefebvre's relations to Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard (another colleague from Nanterre) for example, are unexplored avenues of research, as is his complicated debt to and critique of Heidegger.³² But Lefebvre expressly states that the ambition of the book 'is to found a science, a new field of knowledge'.³³ Has he been successful in this aim? It is probably too early to tell, but his ideas on rhythm have certainly found little purchase since their

publication over a decade ago. Some Anglophone geographers have been inspired by his recounting of the rhythms of Parisian streets in Chapter 3, 'Seen from the Window',³⁴ but the work on temporality more generally and on music have had little attention paid to them. This is the case even in books on Lefebvre. Rémi Hess's *Henri Lefebvre et l'aventure du siècle* was written before *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* was published, though probably not before it was written, and his 'official' status as Lefebvre's biographer makes it surprising that he says almost nothing about rhythm.³⁵ Similarly Rob Shields's *Lefebvre, Love & Struggle* says little about it, though like Kurt Meyer's *Henri Lefebvre* it does discuss the notion of moments at some length.³⁶

Rather than searching for those inspired by Lefebvre, the project of rhythmanalysis may best be served by looking at two other writers – writing around the same time as Lefebvre – who also used rhythm as a tool of analysis. Both come from intellectual orientations similar to Lefebvre's, though with less emphasis on the Marxist side and more on the Nietzschean/Heideggerian one. The first I would like briefly to mention is Henri Meschonnic, whose *Critique du rythme* discusses the rhythmic patterns of language in some interesting and productive ways.³⁷ Lefebvre himself only briefly mentions language's rhythmic or metrical properties in relation to poetry.³⁸ But as Meschonnic notes, 'the relation of rhythms and the methods for defining them clearly expose the epistemological challenge [*enjeu*] of the human sciences, a theory of meaning, a challenge which is not only poetic but a politics of literary practices'.³⁹

Second, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth blends literary analysis with social theory in her *Sequel to History*, a remarkable book which takes Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, Nabokov's *Ada* and Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* as examples of shifts in our comprehension of time and history.⁴⁰ For Ermarth, 'it is musical rhythm that best suggests the nature of postmodern temporality'.⁴¹ To return to Nabokov himself, in a passage partly cited by Ermarth:

Maybe the only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm; not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats, the grey gap between black beats: the Tender

Interval. The regular throb itself merely brings back the miserable idea of measurement, but in between, something like true Time lurks.⁴²

This translation of Lefebvre's writings on rhythmanalysis will hopefully continue the English-language reappraisal of his work. Of Lefebvre's books explicitly concerned with questions of temporality it is the first to receive a complete English translation. And yet it is a work that says much to those who have found in Lefebvre one of the most productive theorisations of space in the European tradition. It is to be hoped that this work, where questions of space and time come together, allows the thinking of their relation to progress in some important ways. As he notes, 'Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is **rhythm**'.⁴³ In addition, as the *Key Writings* collection attempted to show, Lefebvre's work was always philosophically informed and politically aware. His writings on rhythmanalysis are no exception, and those interested in his philosophical and political outlook will find much of interest here.

Finally, a word on the question of everyday life. Lefebvre himself believed that the introduction and critique of this concept was his most important contribution to Marxism, and in many ways almost all of his writings can be seen as part of that large, multi-faceted and ongoing project. As *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* and the shorter writings which follow here demonstrate, Lefebvre was concerned with the contrast between the capitalist system and the daily lives of individuals to the very end of his own life.