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Dialectical Method: Henri Lefebvre's Philosophy of Science

William S. Lewis examines the contribution to philosophy of science made by Lefebvre, in the context of his membership of the French Communist Party.



The Marxist philosopher and social scientist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) authored over 60 books. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that some of these are less well-known than his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947), *Introduction to Modernity*, (1962), or *Dialectical Materialism* (1940), each of which continues to inform the work of architects, geographers, sociologists, and philosophers. Active as an author for over seventy years, Lefebvre's oeuvre begins with contributions to the surrealist movement, proceeds with an important translation of Hegel and Marx, and then ranges across metaphysics, rural and urban sociology, critiques of fascism, memoirs, poetry, and literary criticism.

Given the breadth of his interests and the relative obscurity of some of his writings, it is little wonder that few readers have examined Lefebvre's contribution to philosophy of science. This is especially understandable given that his major work in this area, *des Sciences* remained unpublished for more than fifty years and only saw the light of day in 2002.[1] It remains untranslated into English. *des Science*, was written by Lefebvre under the auspices of the French Communist Party and—at that organization's behest—it attempted to integrate the “insights” of Stalin's *Short Course* into Marxian philosophy. Given this mission, one aspect of the work that remains of particular interest to those interested in how ideology affects understanding is the way in which Lefebvre maintains fidelity to Stalin's seconding of Marx and Engels' insight that a subject's social and economic position determines her worldview while simultaneously defending the objectivity of scientific knowledge

Fidelity to these seemingly contradictory epistemological positions sets up an interesting tension. For, insofar as scientists are methodologically rigorous, Lefebvre argues that they tend to produce true or correct knowledge about the world. However, Lefebvre also argued that ideology allows, motivates, directs, and controls scientific research and, further, that ideology informs the public reception of its results.

In negotiating this contradiction, Lefebvre's work does not resemble the then-dominant position in philosophy of science: logical positivism or logical empiricism, which had it that the problem of subjectivity could be overcome by sufficient

methodological rigor and logical analysis. Instead, he prefigures contemporary ideas about scientific practice and knowledge that have been voiced by feminist philosophers of science and social epistemologists over the last three decades. In so doing, his work anticipates standpoint theory, contextual empiricism, as well as methodological pluralism.[2]

Lefebvre finished *Méthodologie des Sciences* in 1947, at the exact time when the French Communist Party was moving from its endorsement of the “Thesis of the Unity of International Sciences” to that of the “Two Sciences.”[3] As part of a larger theoretical and political distinction which divided the world into two antagonistic camps, this dichotomy was deployed at the beginning of the Cold War in order to differentiate Soviet from Western Science and to prove the superiority of the former. With dogmatic assertion and propaganda directing research and research supporting propaganda and dogmatic assertion, communist scientists and party ideologues contended that ‘bourgeois science’ was unable to provide knowledge of the world as it really is because its method is based on the mistaken, positivist assumption that natural laws are discovered through empirical inquiry into objective facts.

By way of contrast, it was posited that proletarian science is able to discern dialectical processes at work in nature and to know the world truly. Why? Because it recognizes—at its heart—the dialectical relationship between theory and practice.

From the late 1940s until the mid-1950s, this theoretical distinction between the two types of scientific practice resulted in the denial of the veracity of conclusions reached by European and North American scientists and to the falsification or gross misinterpretation of empirical data obtained by Soviet scientists in their own research.[4] The distinction sometimes led to the Soviet Union’s rejection of practical technological advancements which were based upon the conclusions of Western science as well as to the forced and often disastrous application of proletarian science’s ‘discoveries’ to Soviet industry and agriculture.[5]

When the “Thesis of the Unity of International Sciences” was still in place, the PCF was quite happy to have sympathetic philosophers like Lefebvre developing their own

variants of Marxist philosophy. Besides echoing the spirit of unity and liberalization that the Communist Party wished to foster while participating in the post-war government, this type of intellectual work added to the Party's prestige. During this ephemeral moment, Lefebvre was even explicitly recognized by the Party as representing, "le marxisme vivant." [6] Given this policy and this approbation, it is understandable how a Party that immediately before the war had banned and destroyed his work for being too Hegelian would, in 1946, offer to publish a proposed eight-volume tome *À la lumière du matérialisme dialectique*. [7] According to Lefebvre's outline for the opus, this massive undertaking was to develop Marxist thought from its logical principles through to its applications in science, politics, history, psychology, ethics, and esthetics. [8]

The first volume in the series, *Logique Formelle, Logique Dialectique*, was published near the end of 1947. According to Lefebvre's biographer, it was initially well received. [9] However, after the declaration by the Soviet dominated Cominform of the Two Sciences position, the book was attacked in Party organs for its claim that "the dialectic does not abolish [formal] logic." [10] Despite Lefebvre's explanation that formal logic represents only one stage in thought's coming to know itself and his avowal that dialectical logic supersedes it, the fact that he gave formal logic any credence showed him to be "lacking party spirit" and to be petty bourgeois as well. [11] As the Party pointed out to him, what with its principles of identity and of non-contradiction, formal logic was obviously a bourgeois fantasy and was bivouacked in the wrong camp. So then, to give any credence to formal logic's ability to help us know the world or to establish truth claims was anathema. [12]

By the time Lefebvre received this criticism, the second volume of *À la lumière du matérialisme dialectique* on the methodology of the sciences had already gone to press. [13] However, after a meeting with a high ranking member of the PCF's Politburo, during which Lefebvre recounts that he was upbraided for not recognizing that—with the triumph of the proletariat—a new logic existed, Lefebvre withdrew the text from publication. Predicated as it was upon the assumption that the methodologies of the natural and human sciences relied upon formal logic to make

inductive and deductive hypotheses about the natural world, he did not feel that its claims were reconcilable with the Party's insistence that only dialectical logic could make sense of the world.[14]

Because Lefebvre withdrew *Méthodologie des Sciences* from the Party presses and because his autobiography recounts that he did so when he could see no way to reconcile his understanding of scientific method and of scientific knowledge with that of the Party, it is tempting to read this work as generally consistent with Lefebvre's unique brand of Hegelian Marxism and as not in any way influenced by Soviet Marxism. However, given the probable period of its gestation (1939-1947) and given that, during much of this time, the Party was consistent in its endorsement of the *Short Course*, there is reason to suspect that this is indeed his response to Stalin's theses in "Dialectical and Historical Materialism." [15] That Lefebvre was exquisitely cognizant of the *Short Course* and of the Party's endorsement of its ideas and that the themes and issues explored in Lefebvre's text seem to echo those of the chapter on "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" would also lend credence to the assertion that the criticism of Stalin's conclusions and the development of an alternative to them was at least partially Lefebvre's intent in writing the text.[16]

Of course, given that he was a Party member and firmly committed to communism, the criticisms that Lefebvre delivers of the *Short Course* in *Méthodologie des Sciences* are neither explicit nor direct. In fact, he never references Stalin's text at all.[17] Instead of attacking it frontally (as he would in a preface to the 1969 re-edition of *Logique formelle, logique dialectique*), Lefebvre describes his objective in the book to be a correction and critique of the two then dominant philosophies of science promulgated by academic philosophers.[18] Consequently, he proposes the dialectical materialist philosophy detailed in *Méthodologie des Sciences* in contradistinction to and as a compromise between "neo-dialectical" and "logical empiricist" theories of scientific knowledge.[19] As he argues, insofar as "neo-dialecticians" like Gaston Bachelard and Ferdinand Gonseth maintain that scientific concepts produce scientific objects and that these concepts (and objects) change over time purely by force of thought, they are guilty of being excessively conventionalist

and insufficiently materialist.[20] At the other end of the spectrum, Lefebvre criticizes logical empiricists like A.J. Ayer and Rudolf Carnap, not for being too materialistic, but for being naively materialist.[21] To him, a philosophy of science predicated on the assumption that logic is historically and culturally neutral and that there is a simple correspondence between linguistic signs and natural facts “neglects the historical connection between the real, knowledge, and the living individual.”[22]

Lefebvre positions his own dialectical materialist theory of the production of scientific knowledge somewhere between that of the neo-dialectician and that of the neo-positivist. With the positivists, he argues that material things exist, that scientists work to describe them in their objectivity, and that logic helps them to do so.[23] However, Lefebvre is also aware that a scientist’s social and historical position influences the questions she asks about the natural and social world, the way that she approaches her research, and the way in which the results of this research are interpreted. This bare-bones description of Lefebvre’s theory of the conditions of the production of scientific knowledge neither explains how he thinks objective knowledge of the real world is produced nor does it distinguish Lefebvre’s theory from that of Stalin. However, as it is developed over the course of *Méthodologie des Sciences*, its innovative take on the relationship between dialectical and historical materialism becomes clear.

Both Stalin and Lefebvre argue that the world (natural and social) develops dialectically and that it is known fully only through dialectical thought. However, it is not apparent to Lefebvre that only proletarians or the Communist Party can possess or advance this knowledge. Rather, inasmuch as scientists are engaged in an investigation of the material real, he argues that they are in the process of discovering objective truths about it. Morally, logically, and observationally rigorous, scientists describe the world as best they can and they tend to describe it correctly.[24] Despite this recognition of the scientist’s prerogative and achievement, the level of social, economic, and technological development of the culture in which a scientist finds herself practicing determines the level of objectivity and truth that she is able to reach.[25] Especially in the social sciences, but also in the natural sciences and mathematics, Lefebvre argues that scientists “present theses that constitute defenses

(more or less well disguised) of their interests or of the interests of the limited social group of which they are a part.”[26] How then could such theses be considered objective knowledge? Well, looked at individually and synchronically, they are not. However, as scientists critique one another and as the culture and the economy in which they do their work develops, untrue and subjective theses are progressively overturned and replaced by truer and more objective theories.[27]

Following Stalin, Lefebvre does suggest that some social groups (and therefore the scientists that come from these groups) achieve a higher degree of objectivity due to the social formation that produces them. The lesson that Lefebvre draws from this is not, however, that one social group, the working class or its representatives, finds and possesses objective knowledge while other groups merely reproduce prejudice. Rather, he contends, the recognition that social prejudices influence and distort scientific theses demands that every thesis be examined for its ideological biases and that every scientific discipline self-consciously reflect back on the conditions of its own production. So that this self-critique might be performed simultaneous to scientific research, Lefebvre argues that philosophers specializing in materialist dialectics be assigned to units of scientists; that way, the prejudicial assumptions undergirding the scientists’ hypothesis and leading to a lack of objectivity might be pointed out and avoided.[28]

Despite Lefebvre’s call for dialectical materialist philosophers to police scientists, he does have a fairly robust and sophisticated sense of scientific practice as well as a respect for the work that scientists perform. This sense and this respect stand in stark contrast to the way in which the PCF treated actual scientists like Marcel Prenant and Jacques Monod at the time.[29] Given his Hegelian orientation, it is no surprise that Lefebvre sees the activity of scientists as basically a dialectical one. In the course of their activity, scientists propose theories about the way in which the world works. With their research, they then “demand” or force the world to try to prove that this theory is an illusion by encouraging it to produce facts that challenge the theory’s veracity. If such concrete facts emerge, the first tendency of the scientist is to incorporate these facts into the existing theory by inventing a corollary or sub-theory

that explains them. However, if the facts cannot be so incorporated, then this forces a complete theoretical re-working; the original theory is abandoned and a new one that can account for the facts is introduced.[30] According to Lefebvre the history of science is the history of this dialectical movement from the abstract to the concrete repeated ad infinitum and its result is the progressive amelioration of knowledge.[31] This improvement is not, however, just an evolution in thought as the “neo-dialecticians” would claim. Rather, in the process of interacting with the material real, scientists come to know the real objectively, that is, in its actual dialectical development as a series of contradictions.[32]

In this claim and in his description of scientific practice, Lefebvre seconds the Party’s metaphysical stance that nature itself is dialectical. However, he does so in such a way that it is impossible to maintain that only the proletariat can have knowledge of this truth. In his account, knowledge of this truth is obtained retrospectively by the methods of Historical Materialism and is accessible to any and all who would inquire into the history of political economy.[33] With these universalist conclusions, it is no wonder that Party officials balked at publishing *Méthodologie des Sciences* at a time when they were calling for orthodoxy among Party members and when this orthodoxy included an endorsement of the two sciences position.

After withdrawing *Méthodologies des Sciences* from publication, Lefebvre never again attempted such a critique. In fact, soon after abandoning the text and the eight-volume project, he published a self-critical essay to atone for the sins he had committed against Marxism-Leninism in his work on logic and the dialectic.[34] However, this imposed exercise did not alter his consistent positions. Though for a time he curtailed his more heterodox statements on Marxist philosophy and retreated to literary analysis, Lefebvre never gave up the argument that Marxism was a philosophy of human liberation and that this liberation could be accomplished by scientific, cultural, and artistic means.

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[1] Henri Lefebvre, *Méthodologie Des Sciences* (Paris: Anthropos, 2002).

[2] Wenda K. Crasnow Sharon, Wylie, Alison, Bauchspies and Elizabeth Potter, “Feminist Perspectives on Science,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/feminist-science/>.

[3] Slava Gerovitch, “‘Russian Scandals’: Soviet Readings of American Cybernetics in the Early Years of the Cold War,” *The Russian Review* 60, no. 4 (2001): 550.

[4] Vadim J Birstein, *The Perversion of Knowledge: The True Story of Soviet Science* (Boulder, Colo.; Oxford: Westview, 2004), 239–67.

[5] David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 140–42.

[6] Rémi Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et l’aventure du siècle* (Paris: A.M. Métailié, 1988), 117.

[7] Henri Lefebvre, *À la lumière du matérialisme dialectique I, I*, (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1947); Henri Lefebvre, *Logique formelle, logique dialectique*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1982), 11–12.

[8] Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et l’aventure du siècle*, xix–xx.

[9] Rémi Hess, “Introduction to Henri Lefebvre’s ‘Méthodologie Des Sciences,’” in *Méthodologie Des Sciences* (Paris: Anthrope, 2002), xx. Anglophone reviews were mixed: Vivian Jerauld McGill, who would be fired by Hunter College in 1954 after refusing to “name names” before the House Un-American Activities Committee praised it. Lewis S. Feuer condemned it on logical grounds but argued that it is suggestive sociologically. Lewis S. Feuer, review of *A La Lumière du Matérialisme Dialectique. I. Logique Formelle, Logique Dialectique*, by Henri Lefebvre, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10, no. 4 (1950): 591–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2103431>; Richard T. Hull, “Biography: Vivian Jerauld McGill,” *The American Philosophical Association Centennial Series*, January 1, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.5840/apapa2013378>; V. J. McGill, “A La Lumière Du Matérialisme

Dialectique. Vol. I. Logique Formelle, Logique Dialectique,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, January 1, 1949, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2020124>.

[10] Hess, “Introduction to Henri Lefebvre’s ‘Méthodologie Des Sciences,’” xx.

[11] Hess, xx.

[12] Lefebvre, *Logique formelle, logique dialectique*, v–vi.

[13] This is according to his account in *La Somme et Le Reste* recounted in Hess MS, Rob Shields maintains in his bibliographie that the sciences book was done first, in 1940 and was censored.

[14] Hess, “Introduction to Henri Lefebvre’s ‘Méthodologie Des Sciences,’” xxii–xxiii.

[15] Though many letters were exchanged between the two friends and collaborators during World War II, there is no evidence in the correspondence between Norbert Guterman and Lefebvre held at Butler Library, Columbia University showing that he made progress during the war on the grand project described in *À la lumière de la marxisme*.

[16] Philippe Buton, “Le Parti Communiste Français et le Stalinisme au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale,” *Journal of Modern European History* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 67, https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944_2004_1_58.

[17] An omission that would make one suspect his endorsement of the document given that at the time it was *de rigueur* for Party members to cite the text in every philosophical analysis.

[18] Lefebvre, *Logique formelle, logique dialectique*, v–liii.

[19] Lefebvre, *Méthodologie des sciences*, 2, 198.

[20] Lefebvre, 2–4, 80–81, 192.

[21] Lefebvre, 85, 188.

[22] Lefebvre, 198.

[23] Lefebvre, 19–44.

[24] Lefebvre, 20–21. *Méthodologies des Sciences*, 20-21

[25] Lefebvre, 22. *Méthodologies des Sciences*, 22

[26] Lefebvre, 22. *Méthodologies des Sciences*, 22

[27] Lefebvre, 15–16.

[28] Lefebvre, 7.

[29] Yann Kindo, “L’affaire Lyssenko, ou la pseudo-science au pouvoir.,” *Contretemps*, avril 2009, <https://www.contretemps.eu/affaire-lyssenko-pseudo-science-pouvoir/>; Deniz Uztopal, “La réception en France du lyssenkisme, les scientifiques communistes français et la conceptualisation de la « science prolétarienne » (1948-1956),” *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, no. 122 (January 1, 2014): 121–41.

[30] Lefebvre, *Méthodologie des sciences*, 38–39.

[31] Lefebvre, 41. *Méthodologies des sciences*, 41

[32] Lefebvre, 41. *Méthodologies des sciences*, 41

[33] Henri Lefebvre, “Auto-Critique,” *La Nouvelle Critique* 4 (March 1949): 43–44.

[34] Lefebvre, “Auto-Critique.”

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