Stuart Elden

Through the Eyes of the Fantastic: Lefebvre, Rabelais and Intellectual History

In the late 1940s, with the increasingly strict Stalinist line of the Parti Communiste Français, Henri Lefebvre was in an awkward position. His Hegelian Marxism, his interest in thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, and his refusal to toe the party line had him marked out as a difficult presence within the party. His work on logic had particularly upset the ruling echelons, because of his heretical claim that logic – an apparently idealist superstructure – transcended historical context. As he remembered some years later, he had argued that logic was 'the same in Paris, Moscow and New York . . . that A = A or $(A+B)^2$ is the same formal identity in all countries, all régimes, all modes of production'.[1] This is because logic and the dialectic do not function as superstructures. Though they are historical developments, they are not contained within the ideology or institution that gave rise to them.[2] It was no surprise that the PCF publication of *Logique formelle, logique dialectique* (1947, but written around 1940) – the first

[1] Lefebvre and Régulier 1978, p. 37.
[2] Lefebvre 1982, p. 3.

Historical Materialism, volume 10:4 (89–111)

Also available online – www.brill.nl

of a projected series *À la lumière du matérialisme dialectique* – was halted. This series of eight books, which, as its title suggests, was to illuminate dialectical materialism, was conceived as a direct challenge to Stalin's understanding of diamat, particularly as found in his *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*.[3] Further volumes of *À la lumière du matérialisme dialectique* never saw the light of day because of these political problems. Most were never written, although the second was printed but destroyed on the order of PCF censors. However, it still existed in manuscript, and has recently been published by Anthropos.[4]

With the difficulties surrounding publication on more explicitly political topics, in the late 1940s to the mid-1950s Lefebvre devoted much of his attention to work on literary or philosophical figures within the French tradition.[5] This included books on major figures such as *Descartes* (1947), *Pascal* (two volumes, 1949 and 1954), *Diderot* (1949), and *Rabelais* (1955) and more obscure figures such as the dramatist *Musset* (1955) and the artist *Pignon* (1956).[6] In 1953, he also published the more general *Contribution à l'esthétique*, a book which had originally been written four years earlier, but which had been withheld because of political reasons.[7] It covered some of the material destined for the eighth volume of *À la lumière du matérialisme dialectique*. It was finally published, in part, because of a fabricated quotation from Marx serving as an epigraph. This quotation – 'L'Art est la plus haute joie que l'homme se donne à lui-même', 'Art is the highest pleasure that man gives to himself' – was assembled from various sources, and, indeed, Lefebvre claims that a fairly similar phrase does appear in Marx, 'but with a much more restrained sense'. Lefebvre admits that this was a 'shameful deception'.[8]

The other epigraph to *Contribution à l'esthétique* was from the Soviet theoretician Andrei Zhdanov, which together with the fabrication, not only enabled the book to be published, but also led to its being translated into numerous languages, including Russian. It also helps us to understand the context more

---

[3] Stalin 1976.

[4] Lefebvre 2002. See Shields 1999, p. 193. See Lefebvre 1982, p. 11 for a list of the planned volumes; and p. v for a discussion of the changes.

[5] The other principal focus was rural sociology, discussed in more detail in Chapter Four of Elden forthcoming.

[6] Lefebvre 1947, 1949, 1954, 1983, 2001a, 1970b, 1956; Lefebvre and Goldman 1969.

[7] Lefebvre 2001b.

[8] The epigraph appears in Lefebvre 2001b, p. 3. It had previously appeared – without the attribution – in 1991, p. 174. The discussion is found in 1989, pp. 538–9.

clearly.[9] In this early period of the Cold War, various and contradictory forces were at play within France. Following from George Kennan's 'X' article, Zhdanov had given a speech at the first meeting of Cominform on 22 September 1947, where he outlined what became known as the 'two camps' doctrine. In part recognising political reality – the Communists had been expelled from the French government in May that year – but also helping to constitute it, Zhdanov argued that there were two major camps in the post-war world: 'the imperialist and anti-democratic camp, on the one hand, and the anti-imperialist and democratic camp, on the other'.[10] With a simplicity worthy of George W. Bush today, you were either with one camp or against it. This was not confined to foreign policy. The two camps doctrine was also applied to science,[11] which makes sense of the bad reception of Lefebvre's claims about logic and science being the same across the world and history. Equally, Zhdanov had been instrumental in the establishment of the Union of Soviet Writers and broader cultural policy under Stalin, including the doctrine of socialist realism. Zhdanovism, as it became known, is important in understanding the situation Lefebvre was writing in.

The PCF therefore declared itself against Americanism in all its forms. Talking up its own role in the resistance was one strategy, but this was partnered by an emphasis on things French, in large part in the arts, but also through tirades against symbols of American consumerism and cultural control. Poster suggests that 'unless one were prepared to fall into the camp of the Americans with their anti-Communism – and very few French intellectuals were – Marxism had to be identified with Russian socialism without qualification'.[12] Marxists such as Louis Aragon provided readings of the great French writers within these new constraints, and, superficially at least, Lefebvre appeared to be part of the same movement. Whilst writing on figures who were not political in the most obvious sense gave Lefebvre much more freedom of expression, it would be misleading to suggest, as Poster puts it, that 'Lefebvre retreated to the relatively uncontroversial sphere of literary criticism'.[13]

---

[9] The second epigraph comes from Zhdanov 1950, p. 72. On the use of these epigraphs, and the book more generally, see Hess 1988, pp. 127–9; and 2001b.

[10] Zhdanov 1947. On the context, see Ra'anan 1983; Kelly 1982. It is generally accepted now that Stalin himself was the author of this policy. See Tucker 1997.

[11] Hahn 1982, p. 182.

[12] Poster 1975, p. 38.

[13] Poster 1975, p. 238.

Lefebvre was clearly operating in a highly charged atmosphere. The fabricated epigraph from Marx and the one from Zhdanov in *Contribution à l'esthétique* were attempts to cover his tracks. We should note, too, that he occasionally puts in a complimentary reference to Stalin.[14]

In these works, Lefebvre developed an explicitly Marxist sense of writing intellectual biography, which, for reasons that will become clear, was also a chance to write some intellectual history. We would be amiss though, if we did not note the specificity of the figures chosen. Many of them were writers who suffered religious or political persecution for their ideas. Descartes, for example, held back many of his works because he saw what had happened to Galileo and feared the same for himself; Diderot was imprisoned for his beliefs; Pascal defended Antoine Arnauld and Jansenism against the Jesuits; and Rabelais's work was banned by the church for 'obscenity', which at the time meant morally and political dangerous rather than indecent.[15] The parallels with Lefebvre's own position are readily apparent. Equally, Lefebvre's readings of these particular thinkers were in tension with Zhdanovist orthodoxy. Lefebvre was eventually expelled from the party in 1958, after a membership lasting thirty years, and his dissonant line was then much more obvious in works such as *Problèmes actuels du marxisme* (1958) and *La somme et le reste* (1959).[16] Lefebvre's work of this transitional period was, therefore, part of this appropriation of French cultural capital in opposition to Americanism and for Marxist goals; but it was also a means of resisting dominant trends within Soviet thinking. *Contribution à l'esthétique*, for example, for all its epigraphical deference to Zhdanov, engages with some of the central tenets of socialist realism.

None of Lefebvre's books mentioned so far are available in English translation, and they demonstrate a range of his interests which are largely unknown to the Anglophone world. Shields's recent study only mentions the work on 'literary figures' in passing, for example.[17] Even Hess's French biography says

---

[14] See, for example, Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 25, 34, 196, 203.

[15] Though see Lefebvre 2001a, p. 130, where he suggests the book was charged 'not as subversive or heretical, but as obscene'.

[16] Lefebvre 1958; and 1989. See also 1957. For more on the background to this work, see Hess 1988 and 2001a.

[17] Shields 1999, p. 84. For a more general critique of the partial reading, see Elden 2001.

relatively little.[18] This article will first say something about the conceptual and thematic concerns of these books, before focusing on one of the most interesting of these works, the book on *Rabelais* first published in 1955, but recently reissued in a new edition in France. Given Rabelais's status as a writer of exuberance and parody, of satire, invention and exaggeration, this book of Lefebvre's stands out as a strong example of the relation between Marxism and the fantastic.

Marxist biography

One thing that is immediately noticeable about Lefebvre's books on these figures is how much attention is devoted to contextual background and situation of the writers in question, and how, correspondingly, the works themselves are of almost secondary importance. This is partly explained by my suspicion that Lefebvre was using these writers as a surrogate for other concerns, but there is a much more fundamental reason. Lefebvre argues that the history of philosophy can only be written as a chapter in the more general history of culture, ideas and knowledge. 'And this history can be nothing other than a *social history of ideas*, connected to *the social criticism of ideas*'.[19] The social history of ideas differs profoundly from a history of social ideas, which assumes 'social ideas' can be separated from other types of ideas.[20] The notion of an autonomous history of philosophy, 'badly camouflaged by vague considerations of social "milieu", of the epoch, must be rejected'. However, it should not be rejected in favour of a crude materialism.[21] Rather, we need to take ideas as historical facts themselves, 'which signifies precisely the interdependence of the ideas and the practical conditions of life and action'.[22]

Lefebvre therefore believes that, in order to understand a writer's work, it is central to comprehend the intellectual context they were writing within. His book on Pascal, for example, situates Jansenism, Pascal's work and Christianity itself in the context of historical facts. It begins, he suggests, 'as

[18] Hess 1988, pp. 141–51.
[19] Lefebvre 1947, p. 13.
[20] Lefebvre 1983, p. 9.
[21] Lefebvre 1947, p. 13.
[22] Lefebvre 1947, p. 14.

is necessary for all Marxist studies, by situating, objectively, historically, these ideologies'.[23] Accordingly, he discusses the economic situation of France in the seventeenth century, the class divisions in the monarchical state and the opposition forces before introducing Pascal in context.[24] The political and scientific developments of the time are crucial to a proper understanding, as are economic, social and religious issues. A whole range of other thinkers, amongst them Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, and movements such as the Jesuits supplement the argument. Political events are also crucial. Lefebvre suggests that 'the *Fronde*, and its failure, divided the 'grand century', and the life of Pascal, into two distinct parts'.[25] As Lanavere puts it, Lefebvre read Pascal's *Pensées* 'as a dialectical work'; he gave it a 'coherent interpretation which was founded on the principles of a critical Marxism'.[26] Indeed, were we to put the historical sections of these books together we would have a fairly wide-ranging intellectual history of France between the late fifteenth and the eighteenth century.[27]

Lefebvre claims that an insufficiently historical and dialectical materialism is no better than idealism, which it can oppose only in the most sterile way. We need to recognise the balance and unity between idealism and materialism, as a dialectical movement.[28] The history of ideologies is, he argues, more complicated than it would appear to a cursory [*sommaire*] materialism, which is 'insufficiently dialectical (and by consequence insufficiently historical and insufficiently materialist!)'.[29] As he continues, 'the complete condemnation of idealism – as a block of errors – is a symmetrical error to that of idealism, which accepts it as a block of truth'.[30] Idealist arguments, such as the ontological argument for the existence of God, cannot simply be rejected, but need to be understood in their historical context.

---

[23] Lefebvre 1949, pp. 8–9; see 1983, pp. 9–10.
[24] Lefebvre 1949, pp. 11–26.
[25] Lefebvre 1949, p. 116. The *Fronde* – literally 'the revolt' – was the period 1648–53, characterised by a range of protests during the rule of Louis XIV, from the court, nobles and the people.
[26] Lanavere 1969, p. 154.
[27] See Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 33–115; 1947, pp. 49–98; 1949, pp. 8–150; 1983, pp. 9–55. Although it situates his work in the context of the time, Lefebvre 1970b does not quite treat the nineteenth century in the same way.
[28] Lefebvre 1947, pp. 16–17.
[29] Lefebvre 1947, p. 235.
[30] Ibid.

> It requires a historical rehabilitation of idealism, which does not have anything in common with a *restoration* of idealism. Quite the contrary: the only manner of liquidating idealism is to do it justice, to explain it *as such*, and of therefore explaining the function it had in the history of knowledge, and which acquisitions were carried out *through* idealism (and not *by* idealism as such).
>
> In that way, and only in that way can idealist arguments fall![31]

The beginning of the second volume on Pascal is revealing, as Lefebvre discusses the reception of the book. His approach was clearly not without its critics. Although Lukács liked it, he received criticisms of his supposed sympathy to Jansenism, Jesuitism, and existentialism.[32] In response, Lefebvre suggests that the Marxist historian should move between the inside and the outside, the internal and the external, but not solely one way. The external context should both determine the reading, and be shaped and revealed by it. Pascal's *Pensées* can be read both as a product of the time, and as a producer of it. For Lefebvre, as is shown in many of his better known works, the base/superstructure model should not be viewed in a single direction, but in a dialectical relation.[33] He suggests this is the same with the relation between the objective and the subjective, and that Lenin showed this at work in his notebooks on Hegel.[34]

It is important, Lefebvre contends, to recognise that we should not read later problematics into thinkers. To try to understand Descartes, for example, as an idealist or a materialist, is misleading. It is contrary to historical and dialectical materialism, because it relies on an atemporal understanding. The distinction between idealism and materialism is posterior to Descartes, and therefore does not help us to comprehend his work.[35] It is worth noting that the Zhdanovist reading of Descartes at the time reduced him to a crude mechanicist. Although Descartes's work moves from the abstract to the concrete, and that concrete element is the human, this does not mean that he has transcended his time and become a Marxist two centuries before Marx.

---

[31] Lefebvre 1947, p. 293.

[32] Lefebvre 1954, pp. 7–8. It is not entirely surprising that Lukács recognised Lefebvre's work. He too was operating under political constraints, and his work on Balzac and Goethe – written around the same time as these works of Lefebvre's – demonstrated similar aims.

[33] See, above all, Lefebvre 1968.

[34] Lefebvre 1954, p. 9; see 1947, pp. 235–6.

[35] Lefebvre 1947, p. 16.

Rather, Descartes's concrete element is the human, but not the *social* human, which it is for Marx.[36]

To consider Cartesianism formally, in an abstract succession of doctrines – those of the Middle Ages, those of the Renaissance – is absurd. It is the equivalent of studying Descartes outside of his time.[37] Rather, we need to understand how to analyse his work in the context of multiple, and sometimes contradictory, intellectual and social currents. For example, the *Discourse on the Method* should, Lefebvre argues, be understood as a manifesto in a triple sense: a manifesto of Western civilisation, relying on myths, religion, the agrarian civilisation of the Middle Ages; of industrial society, the modern human's mastery of nature and the earth – knowing, dominating and utilising it for their own purposes; and of the ascendant bourgeoisie and liberalism.[38] All of these form the context for the work, although it seems that the last – the emergence of the bourgeoisie and liberalism – is particularly important for Lefebvre.

Why should this be so? Lefebvre underlines the emergence of the individual, with the ontological and epistemological stress of the 'I am', and the freedom of that individual. This is coupled with the sense of the rational, and together these form the rational, self-interested individual of classic, bourgeois, liberalism. Other thinkers contributed to this conception before Descartes; others following him continued it, enriching and clarifying some points, obscuring others. Of the earlier thinkers, Lefebvre notes Rabelais, Calvin, and Montaigne.[39] Pascal would surely be one of the later ones, along with more obvious figures such as Locke. All of these writers contribute to the historical role of the bourgeois classes in developing the science of nature and the techniques and forces of production. Indeed, Lefebvre suggests that the *Discourse* appears to the historian as a manifesto comparable to a manifesto which, two centuries later, inaugurated the theoretical and political ascendance of the industrial proletariat.[40]

Lefebvre underlines that Descartes needs to be read as a thinker who is at once a move toward something new, *and* as one embedded in the time he

[36] Lefebvre 1947, p. 244.
[37] Lefebvre 1947, p. 29.
[38] Lefebvre 1947, pp. 37–9.
[39] Lefebvre 1947, pp. 36–7.
[40] Lefebvre 1947, p. 37.

was writing. As he suggests, Descartes is not able to 'transcend' his epoch. Rather than follow the writers on Descartes who stress the medieval, theological, mystical aspects of his work, such as Étienne Gilson,[41] or those who see him as entirely and consistently rational,[42] we can find the 'true Descartes', which is attainable through the 'objective method of dialectical materialism'.[43] As Lefebvre underlines, 'philosophy is a "secularisation [*laïcisation*]" of theology: it disengages from it slowly and not without difficulty'.[44] Descartes's work has had a wide-ranging influence, in a range of extremely complicated and contradictory ways. For Lefebvre, these contradictions are explained by the internal contradictions of Cartesianism, and can only be explained by way of them. But this is not simply an exercise in the *history* of ideas, because as he sagely notes, all contemporary French thinking is a bit Cartesian, even when it believes itself not to be.[45]

Reading Rabelais

We find a similar quest in the book on Rabelais. There are a number of ways we could read Rabelais – as anticlerical atheist, a defender of royal privilege, a precursor of rationalism; or as a religious disciple of Erasmus, a humanist, a defender of a particular view of religion against the domination of Rome.[46] Romanticism also found much to applaud in Rabelais's work.[47] As with Descartes, Lefebvre claims the 'authentic figure of Rabelais'[48] is somewhere in between, he is on the cusp of the religious question, neither able fully to escape his time nor entirely embedded within it. As with the discussion of Descartes as an idealist or a materialist, to discuss Rabelais's atheism or not is to read a modern problematic back into his work. For Lefebvre, Rabelais

[41] Gilson 1951. Lefebvre also cites Gouhier 1924; and Laporte 1945.
[42] Lefebvre cites Leroy 1929; and Milhaud 1921. I have been unable to trace a further reference to Cécile Angrand, *Cours de l'Université Nouvelle*. According to Hess 1988, p. 142, it was an internal party publication.
[43] Lefebvre 1947, p. 181.
[44] Lefebvre 1947, p. 18.
[45] Lefebvre 1947, p. 303.
[46] For the former, see Lefranc 1953; for the latter, Febvre 1968. See Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 3–4.
[47] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 3.
[48] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 2.

is a 'realist visionary', with feet both in concrete reality and idealist aspiration,[49] someone who is open to a whole range of interpretations.[50]

The plan of this book is strikingly similar to the ones on Pascal and Descartes. Rather than study Rabelais thematically, i.e. focus on the theme of giants, or the theme of the voyage, Lefebvre aims to study him according to a Marxist schema. He therefore discusses the economic and social situation of France in the sixteenth century as a prelude to Rabelais's life and, finally, his work.[51] Like both Pascal and Descartes, Rabelais is important because he is a transitional figure – neither entirely within his own time, nor able to fully transcend it: 'The five books of Rabelais appear to us already as a *reflection* of this epoch. *A living reflection*'.[52] His work harks back to earlier literary forms, such as the epic of Homer's *Odyssey*, but looks forward toward the modern novel – particularly Balzac's *The Human Comedy*. 'Between these two great forms of literature, the work of Rabelais represents a transition. Still an epic, it is an burlesque odyssey. Already a novel, it is the novel of the first modern individual: Panurge'.[53]

There are a number of difficulties in approaching Rabelais's work, including his wide-ranging vocabulary, which includes technical terms, dialect, and archaisms and an abundance of word-play and comic imagery.[54] As Cohen points out, the term 'Rabelaisian', which usually refers to the scatological and sexual language, could be more properly applied to his verbosity and loquacity.[55] That is not to say that the standard sense of the word Rabelaisian is misplaced. Rabelais frequently uses vulgarity, coarseness, obscenity, lewdness, cruelty, carnage and savagery for dramatic and comic effect. Equally, Rabelais's sources are wide-ranging, demonstrating his immense erudition. This is not simply in terms of the object of his satire, but the literary tradition he draws upon – Celtic and other myths, religious texts, works of literature, etc. The story of Gargantua, for example, was popular long before Rabelais, being a

[49] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 19.
[50] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 101.
[51] Lefebvre outlines this plan in 2001a, p. 31; and puts it into practice in the rest of the book.
[52] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 115; see p. 213.
[53] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 31–2.
[54] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 2.
[55] Cohen 1955, p. 17. I have used Rabelais 1955a for the original French text, and 1955b for a translation. Citations are by book and chapter number, in roman numerals.

name given to places, mountains and other sites; similarly, Pantagruel was the name of a 'goblin, a familiar spirit [*un lutin, un elfe familier*]'.[56] In Arthurian legend, Merlin created the giants to help the King in the struggle against Gog and Magog.[57] Such a legend was the basis for the popular *Les Grandes et inestimable Croniques: Du grant et enorme geant Gargantua*, published in the same year as Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, and cited by him in its Prologue.[58] To read Rabelais therefore requires some level of knowledge about the sources of his inspiration and his satire; and a recognition of the more 'vulgar' aspects of his work.[59] As Lefebvre cautions, we should not mistake his enormous richness for confusion.[60]

Reading *Rabelais*

Lefebvre's reading of Rabelais is therefore wide ranging and historically situated. He argues that there are two major influences on Rabelais's work, the peasant life, and the emergence of a new bourgeois class, the commercial and manufacturing class, rather than the merchant bourgeoisie of the medieval cities. Rather than solely emphasise the importance of scholasticism and the Council of Trent – that is the realm of ideas – we should recognise the transitions in the economic base of society, from feudalism to the emerging capitalism.[61] *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is written at the beginning of a new society, with all the future expectation and explosion of new ideas, before the stagnation and disappointment set in.[62] There is still the ability for a balance between accumulation and play; the division of labour has not set in; intellectual labour is not separated from practical, manual labour, social life, life as a whole.[63] Equally, Rabelais's work does much to illuminate the birth of the national, the formative years [*jeunesse*] of France, emerging from the Hundred Years

[56] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 28.
[57] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 63.
[58] See Rabelais 1995a/1955b, II Prologue. On the *Croniques* see Lefebvre 2001a, p. 129; Heath 1996, p. 16; Prescott 1998, pp. 13–15.
[59] For an extensive treatment of the references within Rabelais, see Screech 1979; for the coarser side see Clark 1983; and Prescott 1998, Chapter Three.
[60] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 214.
[61] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 34; see pp. 33–5; 71–115. Lefebvre cites Étienne Gilson as an example of the rejected approach.
[62] See, for example, Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 10, 24, 26, 92.
[63] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 24.

War and the national symbol of Joan of Arc.[64] Rabelais is also central to the affirmation of the French language as a break from Latin. Latin was the language of the clergy, of nobility; French was closer to the immediate and less capable of abstraction. But Lefebvre argues that before Calvin, and well before Montaigne and Descartes, among others, Rabelais elevated the French language to one of philosophical dignity, without losing its popular character.[65] Rabelais then may be seen, on a linguistic level at least, as the French Luther.[66]

Lefebvre notes, however, that 'Rabelais, as writer and mouthpiece of the newly emergent class, is also a *peasant* writer, and indeed the greatest of these'.[67] Rabelais admires their honest simplicity and earthy language, despite his own erudition: 'He was a man intoxicated by every sort of learning and theory, who had at the same time the earthy commonsense of a peasant'.[68] As Lefebvre somewhat exaggerates: 'Only one man of this epoch can be compared to Rabelais in the extent of his knowledge and the power of his genius: Leonardo da Vinci'.[69]

Accordingly, in his analysis of Rabelais, Lefebvre provides some important discussions of rural society, of sexual behaviour and festivities, and of food and drink. These are festivities marked by a freedom and a collective intoxication [*une 'ivresse' fusionelle*], with an interdiction to eat as much as possible, to drink to the point of drunkenness, and through this festival to realise the communion between the members of society and nature.[70] Lefebvre uses Rubens's painting *Kermesse* [The Village Fête] as an illustration of this Rabelaisian scene, which he describes as 'floods and eddies of human flesh, frenzy, drinking, couples intertwined with an animalistic fury'.[71] The peasant festival was orgiastic, and celebrated order through the momentary disorder created when the discipline of the community came undone.[72] The carnival

[64] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 25.
[65] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 25–6, 124. For a critique of the abstraction of Latinate influence on French, see Rabelais 1995a/1955b, II vi.
[66] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 209. As Lefebvre partly acknowledges, they were of course very different in numerous other ways such as on religion and Luther's polemical attitude to the peasantry. On the religious links between Rabelais and Luther, see Febvre 1968. For more on the background, see Hale 1993.
[67] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 27.
[68] Cohen 1955, p. 17.
[69] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 79.
[70] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 58.
[71] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 58–9; see Rabelais 1995a/1955b, I iv–v.
[72] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 58.

atmosphere was inherent to everyday life. Through this analysis of peasant life, Lefebvre is able to illuminate how collective custom is in conflict with the emerging society of production and its individualising of morality.[73] As he importantly notes,

> [l]et us not forget for a moment that '*paganus*', peasant [*paysan*], signifies 'pagan' [*païen*]. This simple etymology corresponds to a major historical truth in France, upon which we cannot insist too much.
>
> It clarifies whole epochs and the ideologies of the centuries of resistance to Christianity in morals and habits, heretical speech and sorcery.[74]

To take one example, that of sex. Lefebvre argues that sex was not a question of individual morality, but something bound by collective custom. There was not a moral conflict between instinct and individual conscience, but there were customs and rituals that had to be followed. Though there was considerable freedom for women before marriage, after marriage there was a strict control of fidelity, with serious sanctions for transgression. Not, Lefebvre argues, morality in the precise sense of the word, but customs and an organisation of life on the collective and familial level that is different from our own.[75] Rabelais's writings are at the cusp of the transition to a new, individualistic morality, with the breakdown of the rural community and extended family, the transition to the city and the atomisation of society. New prohibitions and necessities shape a new morality, which finds particular expression in the Council of Trent (1545–53), and which clashes with the old peasant custom.[76] Rabelais should therefore be seen neither as 'vulgar [*grossier*], nor as 'immoral' – above all not *immoral*'[77] – rather as illustrating the limit case. In a certain sense, for Lefebvre, he is a 'great moralist . . . an inventor in morality, an inventor of morality'. But this is individualistic, bourgeois, morality – at least in its nascent state, before it became more puritan.[78]

Lefebvre traces how this interrelation of pagan and peasant works in Rabelais, by showing that the agrarian myths that he draws upon were integral

---

[73] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 42–3; 58–9, etc.
[74] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 27.
[75] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 43.
[76] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 43–4, 159.
[77] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 43.
[78] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 188.

to the culture of antiquity as well.[79] The giants were of peasant origin, 'resulting from the Carnival, the festivals and the agrarian rites, they represent the colossal wastage at the time of the village fairs [*kermesses*] and festivals [*frairies*], at the time of sowing, the harvests and the grape harvest'.[80] The giant was not a monster, but a larger human, everything taken to excess.[81] It is in this excess that we gain more insight into the life of humans at a more ordinary, everyday level.

Rabelais, Cervantes and the fantastic

We therefore find a whole range of influences in Rabelais – from antiquity, the middle ages, and the Renaissance; from peasant life, the life of the emergent bourgeoisie, from France, the King's entourage, and the Church. The books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, read, on the one hand, like tales of chivalry. They trace the birth of the heroes, their education and childhood, and then their heroic exploits [*prouesses*]. But on the other hand, like *Don Quixote*, they are parodies: 'they "liquidate" the Middle Ages through laughter'.[82] The comparison to Cervantes's work is useful because, here too, we find the mix of the real and fantastic, the love of the subject of parody, and the formalistic contours of the work parodied. Like Cervantes too, the parody is in some sense more excessive than that parodied. Of course, this does not mean that they are exactly the same. In Rabelais, 'the medieval heroes become *good giants*, the Hercules and the beneficial kings who rid the earth of its monsters, installing an era of peace and the wise'.[83] As Prescott notes, 'physically, marvels and monsters were concentrated at the margins of the medieval and early modern world, but culturally they were central to the European imagination'.[84]

At least, this is the case in the earliest books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. There are five books in total, the first entitled *Gargantua* and the subsequent *Pantagruel*. In the later books, the giants take a less important role, and a character who first appears in the second book, Panurge, takes centre stage.

---

[79] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 27.
[80] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 28; see pp. 67–8.
[81] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 59.
[82] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 13, see p. 192.
[83] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 13–14; see p. 29.
[84] Prescott 1998, p. 161.

His adventures are inspired by the grand voyages of discovery of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and by older precedents such as the *Odyssey* or the tale of Sinbad the sailor. Lefebvre also argues that the search for the Divine Bottle in Book V can be read as a parody of the quest for the Holy Grail.[85] There are a number of reversals from the standard forms of the myth – which is older than the Christian version – but it is not solely a parody, because Panurge and his companions are really searching for the truth, and find it.

Lefebvre argues that the voyage also represents the quest of an individual life, with its uncertainties, problems, contradictions and search for happiness. Panurge asks the very modern questions 'Who am I?', 'What must I do?', 'How should I live?'[86] Rather than being somewhere between adventurer and chivalresque companion, in the third book Panurge loses his 'medieval traits' and 'becomes a man of the new epoch. Not a *condottière* [Italian for leader of a troop of mercenaries], or Machiavellian, or a fanatic, or humanist, but a man in the most general sense, the most human of the initial period: the *isolated* man, posing the question of life'. Panurge is a bourgeois, an individual, isolated though not alone.[87] Indeed, Lefebvre goes so far as to suggest that, along with Cervantes, Rabelais initiates the modern novel, because the novel, properly so called, is concerned with the exploits of individuals in their earthly and secular life. This does not mean that the novel is necessarily individual, but that it was at its birth.[88] The notion of the individual at this time was an exaggerated one – the heroic exploits of adventurers or vagabonds, or the achievements of men of talent or genius – but was able to illuminate the more mundane reality of the world.[89]

For example, Panurge's travels are a voyage through lands which parody the institutions of the time.[90] In this, we see the sense in which Rabelais is a 'visionary realist': Panurge's journey is an imaginary voyage, certainly, but

[85] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 14, 30, 36, 138.
[86] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 138, 154.
[87] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 154–5.
[88] Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 192, n. 1.
[89] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 92.
[90] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 14. Cohen 1955, p. 21 suggests though that 'Rabelais is not concerned with individuals; he is not sufficient of a Renaissance man for that. What he draws is the picture of an age or, to be more exact, of a time when two ages overlapped, the new age of research and individualism, with which he was in intellectual sympathy, and the age of the fixed world-order, to which he owed emotional loyalty'.

it 'traverses the real, the time, the epoch, institutions, social classes'.[91] We could, for example, trace the Picrochean War on a map of Touraine; equally the Universities that Pantagruel frequents parallel those Rabelais himself was involved with.[92] In Book IV, Lefebvre suggests that the targets of satire are no longer individuals in authority or ideologies, but institutions, institutions of the state.[93] Through a range of parody, imagination and fantasy, issues, events and changes in society are illuminated and understood:

> The fantastic gives a means of penetrating the real, to *expose it*, to condense it while amplifying it, and to show how a concrete reality [*une réalité profonde*] corrodes the apparent reality, carries it through in becoming it, and therefore exceeds it, renders it comic and destroys it through laughter, because this reality already goes toward its negation and destruction.[94]

Fantasy and imagination are therefore means of understanding the real in its development and transition; seeing the multiple forces and perspectives that run through it.[95] The exploration of the real through imagination, enthusiasm and laughter, enabled Rabelais 'to decide between [*départager*] the *illusory* (the religious, the occult, the specifically mythical) and the possible'. For Lefebvre, 'in a prodigiously complex transition between two times – between two modes of production – Rabelais had the genius of a *clarifier*'.[96] Rabelais's giants, like those of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (either the giants of Brobdingnag, or Gulliver himself to the Lilliputians), give us 'an in-depth description, defining types, manners and institutions, and provides the means to attack them'.[97] They are multiple in their significance. Once again, we find this in Cervantes too:

> In the same way, the downcast Knight, the righter of wrongs, the ideal master accompanied by his earthly double, Sancho Panza, the mocking and naïve peasant, traverses Spain. And Cervantes, through the eyes of the fantastic Don Quixote (or Don Quixote through the eyes of Cervantes) sees and describes Spain in-depth.[98]

---

[91] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 20.
[92] Rabelais 1995a/1955b, I xxv–ci; II v. See Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 124, 127, 208.
[93] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 158.
[94] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 20.
[95] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 213. See 2001b, pp. 77–8; 1991a, pp. 105ff.
[96] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 214.
[97] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 20. On the political use of the giant motif, see Prescott 1999; and 1998.
[98] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 20.

As Lefebvre notes, this period knew better than others how to link the imaginary and realism, something we find perhaps best today in the science fiction writings of Jules Verne.[99]

Bakhtin and Lefebvre: Rabelais in contexts

Rabelais's work is today often interpreted through Bakhtin's important study,[100] but as Delory-Momberger notes, though this was written in 1940, it was not published for 25 years, and only appeared in French in 1970.[101] Rather than look for influence one way or the other between Bakhtin and Lefebvre, we should perhaps seek out comparison and contrast between these two influential thinkers.

In his reading of Rabelais, Bakhtin emphasises the role of popular culture, that is the role of the peasantry, the folk, the common people. Indeed, though his book in translation is entitled *Rabelais and His World*, a more literal rendering of the Russian title would be *François Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*.[102] Bakhtin stresses the importance of their earthy humour and lower body pleasures to Rabelais's work. He stresses the importance of laughter, the language of the market place, the festival, the carnival, the banquet, the grotesque body and the 'material body lower stratum'.[103] As Holquist has noted, this is a way of challenging the idealisation of the peasantry in Stalinist Russia. The peasantry are blasphemous and vulgar rather than deferential, and cunning and devious rather than intelligent. They are 'coarse, dirty and rampantly physical'.[104] Bakhtin argues that Rabelais sees the qualities of daily life as a challenge to officialdom, and utilises this as a parallel critique of his own time.[105] As Bakhtin ends his book:

> Every act of world history was accompanied by a laughing chorus. But not every period of history had Rabelais for coryphaeus. Though he led the popular chorus of only one time, the Renaissance, he so fully and clearly

[99] Lefebvre 2001a, p. 20.
[100] Bakhtin 1984. For a discussion see Berrong 1986.
[101] Delory-Momberger 2001, p. xxv.
[102] Holquist 1984, p. xxi.
[103] Bakhtin 1984. The quote is the title of Chapter Six, see also pp. 81, 153.
[104] Holquist 1984, p. xix.
[105] See Gardiner 2000, Chapter Three.

> revealed the peculiar and difficult language of the laughing people that his work sheds its light on the folk culture of humour belonging to other ages.[106]

Bakhtin's account has been challenged, notably by Berrong. Berrong claims that though there is a clear difference between *Pantagruel* and the subsequent novels in the use of popular culture, Bakhtin does not recognise this. Indeed, to recognise it would be to negate much of his argument. Berrong's suggestion is that, beginning with Chapter 14 of *Gargantua* – Book I in all editions, but the second book written – 'popular culture definitely loses the equal footing with learned culture that it had enjoyed in *Pantagruel*'.[107] That said, Rabelais seems both aware of this, and such a difference is more complicated than Berrong would allow.[108] However, although Berrong thinks Bakhtin's work is flawed for this and other reasons, he suggests that its true worth lies in the political message he is making about Stalinist Russia.

On the other hand, Lefebvre looks at popular culture *and* the emergent bourgeois culture. Delory-Momberger suggests that, while Bakhtin establishes relations between Rabelais's work and popular culture at the time, and especially the element of dissidence within it, Lefebvre shows how Rabelais, at the time when peasant morals and customs were beginning to be affected by the development of the new society, utilised agrarian myths and transformed them in the expression of the real and contradictory forces exerted within society.[109] The changing emphasis stressed by Berrong is to an extent acknowledged by Lefebvre, who cites the more abundant classical references; the central role of Panurge; and the transition from a medieval to a renaissance style in the later books.[110] It should, however, be noted that it is a change in emphasis, and not as clear-cut a divide as Berrong wants us to believe. While Bakhtin emphasises vulgarity, the grotesque and laughter, Lefebvre focuses more on the fantastic, the parodic, the burlesque.

---

[106] Bakhtin 1984, p. 474.
[107] Berrong 1986, p. 22.
[108] For the realisation, see, for example, Bakhtin 1984, p. 280. Here, concerning banqueting, he suggests that 'there are fewer of these images in the Third Book', but 'we find an increasing number of banquet scenes in the Fourth Book'. For the problems of a strict divide see, for example, Rabelais 1995a/1955b, IV, cxvii – the very last lines of the last book Rabelais himself published – which are as scatological as anything else in the work. See Bakhtin 1984, p. 175.
[109] Delory-Momberger 2001, p. xxv. See Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 42–3, etc.
[110] See, for example, Lefebvre 2001a, pp. 14, 30, 36, 129, 138.

Lefebvre's *Rabelais* is, unsurprisingly, not without its critics. Largely ignored by most writers on Lefebvre, it is generally either unacknowledged or treated with contempt by writers on Rabelais. Berrong, for example, apologises for using Lefebvre as a 'straw man' to further his argument, and describes him as 'very biased' and an 'uninformed historian'.[111] Berrong is particularly scathing about the ideas of a rising middle class in the early sixteenth century, claiming it would be refuted by 'any historian of Early Modern Europe'.[112] That Berrong supports this with a citation of a historian challenging the received wisdom on the middle class at this time – that is, the views of other historians of Early Modern Europe – is presumably an irony that is lost on him.[113] Heath is barely more generous:

> Rabelais has been given a stimulating if implausible Marxist reading by Henri Lefebvre, unconsciously echoing Ginguené [Pierre-Louis Ginguené, eighteenth-century poet and activist involved in the Revolution] and interpreting Rabelais's literary portrayal of a semi-mythical society as a faithful if involuntary account of the sixteenth-century class struggle and the growth of capitalism.[114]

It is only from within the French academy, and from someone who clearly shares Lefebvre's political views, that his work seems to have been well received.[115]

But, while Berrong is willing to concede some ground to Bakhtin because of political circumstances, he is unwilling to allow – or more probably unaware of – the restrictions on Lefebvre at the time. I suggested that there was something of a hidden agenda in Lefebvre's work on these writers. Despite the political exigencies, Lefebvre was able to write about historical materialism, the inception of capitalism and the emergent bourgeoisie, issues of historical context and determinism, and related matters. However, it is also clear that in this work he was able to pursue topics of interest that would be more fully

---

[111] Berrong 1986, pp. 86, 89–90, 148, n. 9.
[112] Berrong 1986, p. 86.
[113] The text is Hexter 1961, cited by Berrong 1986, p. 148, note 11. We should note that Hexter's text deals with England, and that Lefebvre expressly notes that capitalism was more advanced in France and Italy than the rest of Europe. See Lefebvre 2001a, p. 129.
[114] Heath 1996, p. 122.
[115] See Paris 1979.

developed in later work. One of the most striking examples is the work in the *Descartes* book on space, a topic for which he is best known in the English speaking world today;[116] more relevant to *Rabelais* is the discussion of the country in Lefebvre's writings on everyday life, and his other works on rural sociology.[117] Equally, the notion of the *fête*, the festival, is deployed regularly in Lefebvre's work: not just in the *Critique of Everyday Life* – with which this book shares a startling continuity – but also in the analyses of the Paris Commune and the events of May 1968.[118]

Whatever the worth of Lefebvre's interpretation of Rabelais to a literary audience, it is, as Heath acknowledges, undeniably 'stimulating'.[119] It sheds light on Lefebvre's own interest in the carnival, the everyday and rural France; is part of his attempt to create an explicitly Marxist approach to intellectual history; and his interest in persecuted writers can be read as an allegory of his own position at the time of writing. Above all though, it can be profitably viewed as an example of what can be seen of the material, real, world through the eyes of the fantastic.[120]

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail 1984 [1968], *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Berrong, Richard M. 1986, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press.

Clark, Carol 1983, *The Vulgar Rabelais*, Glasgow: Pressgang.

Cohen, J.M. 1995, 'Translator's Introduction', in *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, by François Rabelais, Harmandsworth: Penguin.

Delory-Momberger, Christine 2001, 'Avant-propos: La littérature au risqué du matérialisme historique . . . et à la lumière de Henri Lefebvre', in *Rabelais*, by Henri Lefebvre, Paris: Anthropos.

[116] See Lefebvre 1947, pp. 144–7, 187–243; and, for example, 1973; 1991b.
[117] See, among others, Lefebvre 1991a; 1963; 1970a.
[118] See Lefebvre 1965; 1998.
[119] Heath 1996, p. 122.
[120] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for some extremely helpful comments, particularly on the context of Zhdanovism at the time.

Elden, Stuart 2001, 'Politics, Philosophy, Geography: Henri Lefebvre in Recent Anglo-American Scholarship', *Antipode*, 33, 5: 809–25.

Elden, Stuart forthcoming, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*, London: Continuum.

Febvre, Lucien 1968 [1942], *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle: La religion de Rabelais*, Paris: Albin Michel. Translated by Beatrice Gottlieb as *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Gardiner, Michael E. 2000, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, London: Routledge.

Gilson, Étienne 1951, *Études sur le role de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésian*, Paris: J. Vrin.

Gouhier, Henri 1924, *La pensée religieuse de Descartes*, Paris: J. Vrin.

Hahn, Werner G. 1982, *Postwar Soviet Politics: The Fall of Zhdanov and the Defeat of Moderation, 1946–53*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hale, John 1993, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, New York: Touchstone.

Heath, Michael J. 1996, *Rabelais*, Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.

Hess, Rémi 1988, *Henri Lefebvre et l'aventure du siècle*, Paris: A.M. Métailié.

Hess, Rémi 2001a, 'Le centenaire d'Henri Lefebvre', in *Rabelais*, by Henri Lefebvre, Paris: Anthropos.

Hess, Rémi 2001b, 'Henri Lefebvre et l'activité créatrice', in *Contribution à l'esthétique*, by Henri Lefebvre, Paris: Anthropos.

Hexter, Jack H. 1961, 'The Myth of the Middle Class in Tudor England', in *Reappraisals in History*, London: Longmans.

Holquist, Michael 1984, 'Prologue', in *Rabelais and His World* by Mikhail Bakhtin, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kelly, Michael 1982, *Marxism in Modern France*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Lanavere, Alain (ed.) 1969, *Pascal*, Paris: Firmin-Didot Etude/Librairie Marcel Didier.

Laporte, Jean 1945, *Le rationalisme de Descartes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Lefebvre, Henri 1947, *Descartes*, Paris: Éditions Hier et Aujourd'hui.

Lefebvre, Henri 1949, *Pascal*, Tome Premier, Paris: Nagel.

Lefebvre, Henri 1954, *Pascal*, Tome Deux, Paris: Nagel.

Lefebvre, Henri 1956, *Pignon*, Paris: Édition Falaise.

Lefebvre, Henri 1957, 'Le Marxisme et la pensée Française', *Les Temps Modernes*, 137–8: 104–37.

Lefebvre, Henri 1958, *Problèmes actuels du marxisme*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Lefebvre, Henri 1963, *La vallée de Campan: Étude de sociologie rurale*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Lefebvre, Henri 1965, *La Proclamation de la Commune: 26 mars 1871*, Paris: Gallimard.

Lefebvre, Henri 1968 [1939], *Dialectical Materialism*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Lefebvre, Henri 1970a, *Du rural à l'urbain*, Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri 1970b [1955], *Alfred de Musset: Dramaturge*, Paris: L'Arche.

Lefebvre, Henri 1973, *Éspace et Politique*, Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri 1982 [1947], *Logique formelle, logique dialectique*, Paris: Terrains/Éditions Sociales.

Lefebvre, Henri 1983 [1949], *Diderot ou les affirmations fondamentales du matérialisme*, Paris: L'Arche.

Lefebvre, Henri 1989 [1959], *La somme et le reste*, Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck.

Lefebvre, Henri 1991a [1947], *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume I: Introduction*, London: Verso.

Lefebvre, Henri 1991b [1974], *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, Henri 1998 [1968], *Mai 68: L'Irruption de Nanterre au sommet*, Paris: Syllepse.

Lefebvre, Henri 2001a [1955], *Rabelais*, Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri 2001b [1953], *Contribution à l'ésthétique*, Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri 2002, *Méthodologie des sciences*, Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri and Lucien Goldman 1969, 'Pascal et l'ordre des *Pensées*', in *Pascal*, edited by Alain Lanavere, Paris: Firmin-Didot Etude/Librairie Marcel Didier.

Lefebvre, Henri and Catherine Régulier 1978, *La révolution n'est plus ce qu'elle était*, Hallier: Éditions Libres.

Lefranc, Abel 1953, *Rabelais: Études sur Gargantua, Pantagruel, le Tiers Livre*, Paris: Albin Michel.

Leroy, Maxime 1929, *Descartes: Le philosophe au masque*, Paris: Rieder.

Milhaud, Gaston 1921, *Descartes savant*, Paris: Félix Alcan.

Paris, Jean 1979, *Rabelais au futur*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Poster, Mark 1975, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Prescott, Anne Lake 1998, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Prescott, Anne Lake 1999, 'Rabelaisian (Non)Wonders and Renaissance Polemics', in *Wonders, Marvels and Monsters in Early Modern Culture*, edited by Peter G. Platt, Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Ra'anan, Gavriel D. 1983, *International Policy Formation in the USSR: Factional 'Debates' during the Zhdanovschina*, Hamden: Archon.

Rabelais, François 1955a, *Oeuvres Complètes*, edited by Jacques Boulenger and Lucien Scheler, Paris: Pléiade.

Rabelais, François 1955b, *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Screech, Michael A. 1979, *Rabelais*, London: Duckworth.

Shields, Rob 1999, *Lefebvre, Love & Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*, London: Routledge.

Stalin, Joseph V. 1976, 'Dialectical and Historical Materialism', in *Problems of Leninism*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press.

Tucker, Robert C. 1997, 'The Cold War in Stalin's Time: What the New Sources Reveal', *Diplomatic History*, 21, 2: 273–81.

Zhdanov, Andrei A. 1947, *For a Lasting Peace, For a People's Democracy*, 10 November.

Zhdanov, Andrei A. 1950, *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.