State Theory in the Political Conjuncture: Henri Lefebvre's "Comments on a New State Form"

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> The trouble with Lassalle was that he supposed you can build a new society the way you build a railway: by borrowing from the government.
>
> —Lefebvre (1968a:181)

> What the "Left," apart from a few exceptional people, has been proposing for years is the same thing that the government has been proposing (by promising that it will do more and better): a higher rate of growth, fairer distribution of the national income, etc. It has proposed no new concept of society, of the state. The ruling socialist concept is still that of state socialism, with all its defects (including a prodigious boredom, and a monstrous lack of vitality, imagination, or social creativity). Weak when it is without an apparatus, strong when it has one—the Left thus situates itself on the terrain of those against whom it is fighting.
>
> —Lefebvre ([1973] 1976d:126)

> *Autogestion*, far from being established once and for all, is itself the site and the stake of struggle.
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> —Lefebvre (2001:779)

Introduction

The mid-1970s were a remarkable phase of Henri Lefebvre's long intellectual and political career. Having published his momentous and now widely disseminated book *La production de l'espace* in 1974,

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Lefebvre immediately embarked upon an equally ambitious project on the theory and historical geography of the modern state on a world scale. The result of this inquiry, which appeared in France between 1976 and 1978, was a sprawling four-volume treatise entitled *De l'État* (Lefebvre 1976a, 1976b, 1977, 1978). In significant part because it has never been translated into English, *De l'État* has been largely ignored in the extraordinarily energetic rediscovery of Lefebvre's work on urbanism and capitalist spatiality within Anglo-American geography during the last decade. Yet *De l'État* arguably represents an essential theoretical and political pillar within the corpus of Lefebvre's mature writings on sociospatial theory (see Brenner 1997a, b; Dieuaide and Motamed-Nejad 1994; Schmidt 1990; Wex 1999).[1]

As in previous decades, Lefebvre developed many of his most seminal theoretical ideas of the 1970s in close conjunction with his involvement in political struggles and debates within the French Left. The dialectical interaction of Lefebvre's theoretical and political projects is particularly apparent in his writings on state theory of the late 1970s, in which issues of conceptualization, interpretation, strategy, and praxis are explored in an exceptionally immediate relation to one another. Although Lefebvre (1957:254–337; 1968a:123–186) had previously published scholarly commentaries on the political sociology of Marx and Lenin, *De l'État* represented, simultaneously, the culmination of his own theoretical reflections on the modern state, an important extension and concretization of his writings on the production of space, and, perhaps most importantly, an impassioned call to arms in the name of an anti-Stalinist *and* anti-social-democratic form of radical-democratic political praxis.[2] Indeed, Lefebvre's writings on the state in the late 1970s develop important theoretical foundations for a number of political projects which he had already begun to promote in his earlier writings, including radical political decentralization, grassroots democratic governance, and the transformation of everyday life. Lefebvre's writings on the state during this period can thus be read as an expression of his sustained efforts to clarify both theoretically and practically the possibility for transformative political praxis under the highly fluid global, European, national, and local conditions of that tumultuous decade.

It is in this context that Lefebvre's 1979 essay "A propos d'un nouveau modèle étatique"—translated in this issue of *Antipode* as "Comments on a New State Form"—must be understood. The essay was published one year after the release of the fourth volume of *De l'État* and two years before the triumphant but ultimately Pyrrhic victory of François Mitterand and his *Parti Socialiste* in the French general elections of

1981.[3] If the invocation of these distinct "events" situates the essay in relation to Lefebvre's intellectual trajectory and the political development of the Fifth Republic during the late 1970s, this framing also sets into relief the essay's multidimensional, even hybrid, character as a work of politico-theoretical commentary. In the course of his somewhat meandering analysis, Lefebvre broaches three central, and closely intertwined, themes: (a) the political dilemmas and contradictions of the western European Left—including both communist and social-democratic parties—during the late 1970s; (b) the consolidation of a new state form, which he had already analyzed at length in volumes three and four of *De l'État* under the rubric of the "state mode of production" (*le mode de production étatique*); and (c) the possibility of a radical-democratic and socialist political praxis, based upon the project of what he, like many other European socialists at this time, termed *autogestion*.

"Comments on a New State Form" is the product of a specific historical-geographical context, and the essay may interest some readers as a uniquely Lefebvrian "spin" on the peculiarities of French Left politics during the 1970s. More importantly, perhaps, to readers of *Antipode*—who have long been familiar with Lefebvre's importance as a theorist of spatial politics (see Lefebvre 1976c)—"Comments on a New State Form" reveals an aspect of Lefebvre's intellectual persona that is not always readily apparent within his more formal writings on urbanism and the production of space (Lefebvre 1968b, 1972, 1974). In contrast to the rather austere, densely philosophical style that prevails throughout most of the latter works, "Comments on a New State Form" has the aura of a spirited political discussion, filled with questions and responses, arguments, ripostes, asides, and counter-arguments. Like the political commentaries of Gramsci, Habermas, or Bourdieu, this essay illuminates a major critical theorist's moorings within, and reactions to, a rapidly changing political-economic context.

Particularly in light of the lively interest in Lefebvre's work among Anglo-American geographers, the aforementioned reasons would probably suffice to justify publishing an English translation of this relatively obscure essay. However, there is an additional, and more immediate, justification for dusting off Lefebvre's contribution to a debate on social democracy within the pages of the now-defunct Parisian journal *Dialectiques*. It can be argued that a number of the core foci of Lefebvre's essay—in particular, his conception of radical democracy as a process of *autogestion* and his concern to develop a left-radical critique of the capitalist state—remain centrally relevant to the work of radical geographers and other critical social

researchers in the contemporary political conjuncture of neoliberal globalization.

Marxism Exploded: Lefebvre, 1968, and the French Left

"Comments on a New State Form" is a deeply political essay, and thus its relation to Lefebvre's complex political biography deserves some clarification. As Stefan Kipfer (1996:34) has argued, Lefebvre's politics were forged under the influence of four key experiences during the postwar period:

> (1) the critique of Stalinism in France and Eastern Europe before and after his expulsion from the PCF [French Communist Party] at the end of the 1950s; (2) a critical engagement with Situationist avant-gardism in the 1950s and 1960s; (3) a brief flirtation with the alternative Communism of Yugoslavia and China; and (4) his contribution to New Left politics in France both before and after 1968.

Like *De l'État*, "Comments on a New State Form" is tightly enmeshed within this fourth layering of Lefebvre's political identity, which he articulated most powerfully and systematically during the 1970s as his relation to politics shifted—in the words of his biographer Rémi Hess (1988:284)—"from [an embrace of] grassroots militancy to a critique of the state".

The post-1968 period witnessed a number of dramatic transformations within the French Left that significantly conditioned Lefebvre's political outlook. Lefebvre (1980) would subsequently describe these transformations as an "explosion" (*éclatement*) of Marxism, in which the rigidly enforced, dogmatic unity of Marxian theory associated with Stalinism was definitively splintered into a multitude of autonomous strands and currents. Although, as Lefebvre (1980a:21) noted, this explosion of Marxism had begun to erupt as early as the late 19th century in the bitter debates between Marx, Lassalle, and Bakunin, it continued in wave-like succession well into the late 20th century, rippling through a broad constellation of urban and national contexts.[4] In the post-1968 period, the explosion of Marxism occurred in sites scattered throughout the world, from Prague, Belgrade, London, Chicago, and Berkeley to Mexico City, Calcutta, and Beijing, but Paris was arguably one of its most vibrant global flashpoints. Here, as Khilnani (1993:121) remarks, "[t]he 'long decade' between the revolutionary efflorescence of May 1968 and the Socialist Party's election to

government in 1981 produced the most dramatic and decisive realignment in the political affiliations of French intellectuals that has occurred in recent times." Since much of Lefebvre's analysis in "Comments on a New State Form" is an attempt to decipher these realignments, it is worth reviewing some of their main contours here.

The *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO), which had been the major political organ of the noncommunist Left in France since 1920, entered a process of terminal decline in the early 1960s and was dissolved following the spectacular defeat of the traditional Left parties in the 1968–69 national elections. Soon thereafter, the PCF emerged from the political ghetto to which it had been consigned since the outbreak of the Cold War: following the example of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), it embraced the project of "Eurocommunism" by abandoning its commitment to a dictatorship of the proletariat and its rigid support for the Soviet model. Major segments of the noncommunist Left were reconstituted under Mitterand's leadership at the Epinay congress of 1971 to form a revived Socialist Party (PS). Although some segments of the post-1968 New Left subsequently affiliated themselves with the PS, other *gauchiste* thinkers, such as Lefebvre, André Gorz, and Cornelius Castoriadis, continued to seek an alternative, radically democratic socialism that circumvented the rigidified orthodoxies of the PCF as well as the feeble reformism of the social-democratic model (Brown 1982; Khilnani 1993:121–154; Mortimer 1978; Sassoon 1996:534–571).

In July 1972, the newly formed PS, the PCF and the Left-Radicals forged a political alliance under the so-called Common Program of Government (*Programme commun du gouvernement*), in which they committed themselves to a somewhat inchoate mixture of communist/socialist/*gauchiste* political goals (demand-led growth, nationalization of major industrial sectors, increased corporate taxation, extension of social protection and civil liberties) and traditional liberal ideology (acceptance of political pluralism, multiple political parties, and the parliamentary system of the Fifth Republic). During the ensuing decade, as the electoral base of the PCF dwindled under Georges Marchais' foundering chairmanship, Mitterand's pragmatic and power-hungry PS acquired an unprecedented political influence as it aggressively strategized to expand its constituency by appealing to the anticommunist Left. Although the unified Left lost the parliamentary elections of March 1978, the socialists obtained more votes than the PCF for the first time since 1936. Indeed, in contrast to the "popular front" of the 1930s, which had benefited the communists, the "popular front" of the 1970s was a major boon to the PS and "signaled the beginning

of the end for French communism" (Sassoon 1996:541).[5] Through its embrace of the *Programme commun*, the PS managed to gain credibility as a left-wing reformist party. In the late 1970s, the PS surpassed all other parties of the Left in strategic political importance, paving the way for its landslide electoral triumph in 1981. The PCF, meanwhile, refused to accept its increasingly subordinate role as a mere junior partner within the unified Left alliance and withdrew from the *Programme commun* following the March 1978 elections. Throughout the subsequent decade, the PCF retreated from its earlier Eurocommunist stance, but its electoral base continued to decline.

In the midst of these unpredictably shifting political tides, *autogestion*—an idea "whose vagueness was its strength" (Sassoon 1996:538)—became a central topic of political debate and ideological struggle throughout the French Left (Brown 1982). Literally, *autogestion* means "self-management," but its specific connotation in the French context of the 1960s and 1970s may be captured more accurately as "workers' control." The project of *autogestion* can be traced to the antistatist socialist movements of the 19th century; it was subsequently debated among contributors to Castoriadis' journal *Socialisme ou barbarie* in the 1950s and again in the 1960s in discussions within the French Left of the Yugoslav system of industrial democracy and the Algerian independence movement. During the events of May 1968, *autogestion* became a popular rallying cry for the noncommunist and anarchist Left, including Lefebvre himself, who discussed it enthusiastically in a number of texts and interviews during this period and afterwards (see Lefebvre 1966; 1969; 1971:294–306; 1976d:40–41, 120–124; 1976e; 1978:438–439).

In the early 1970s, the concept of *autogestion* was reappropriated by a range of Left intellectuals, organizations, and movements to characterize very different, and often fundamentally opposed, political projects within universities, factories, trade unions, localities, and municipal and regional administrations (Brown 1982; Cot 1979). Guided by editor and philosopher Pierre Rosanvallon, the main noncommunist trade union federation, the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT) promoted *autogestion* as a means to enhance workers' control at the site of production (see Rosanvallon 1976). Dissident socialist Michel Rocard and CFDT trade unionist Edmond Maire, both of whom were strongly influenced by the events of May 1968, advocated *autogestion* as a form of radical democratic political mobilization to counteract the hierarchical, state-centered orientations of both the PCF and the PS. Meanwhile, in part through the influence of Lefebvre and the regionalist thinker Robert Laffont, various urbanistic and

regionalist strands of the *autogestion* discussion emerged that advocated a radical decentralization of political power, enhanced local control over basic economic and administrative tasks, and an abolition of the divide between governors and governed.[6] At its founding congress, the PS likewise embraced the slogan of *autogestion*, albeit primarily on opportunistic grounds as a means to gain trade union support (including, from 1974, that of both Rocard and Maire), to maintain its alliance with the PCF and to recruit *soixante-huitards* (Sassoon 1996:538–540). Finally, despite its entrenched *étatiste* tendencies, even the PCF tentatively adopted a politics of *autogestion* in conjunction with its experiments with Eurocommunist ideology, particularly between 1975 and 1978. In short, as Lefebvre (1976d:40) quipped in *The Survival of Capitalism*, *autogestion* was the ideological focal point for "a great outburst of confusion." By the mid-1970s, the concept of *autogestion* had come to operate as a strikingly vague and internally contradictory semantic placeholder, an "infinitely plastic idea" (Khilnani 1993:182) that encompassed, at one and the same time, both antistatist and statist political projects, both antiproductivist and productivist visions of modernization, and both radical-grassroots and traditional liberal forms of political participation (Brown 1982).

Nowhere in "Comments on a New State Form" does Lefebvre explicitly invoke the *Programme commun* or its abrupt dissolution in 1978, and he only fleetingly alludes to the PCF's confused appropriation of a politics of *autogestion* just prior to the 23rd congress. Nonetheless, Lefebvre's essay is packed with allusions to the changing ideological landscape of the French Left, in particular to the evolving positions of the PCF and the PS, in relation to one another, to French civil society, and to the state apparatus itself. As Lefebvre notes, the political conjuncture of the late 1970s appeared to be strongly reminiscent of the 1930s in France. In both cases, an organizationally fragmented and ideologically divided Left was struggling to articulate and defend a common ground of political positions against its opponents in the midst of a systemic capitalist crisis. And in both cases, the communist and noncommunist factions of the socialist Left engaged in frenzied internal debates as they attempted to clarify their ideological positions, political commitments, and practical strategies in order to respond to that crisis. It was a moment in which established political choreographies were being unsettled as an atmosphere of heightened uncertainty—but also of possibility—swept across the European Left.

While insisting upon the superiority of a critique "from the Left," Lefebvre distances himself decisively both from "the so-called Socialist Party" and the "so-called Communist Party" (Lefebvre 1976d:40)

in his assessment of the political conjuncture. In "Comments on a New State Form," Lefebvre (2001:771, 772) dispenses with the political positions of the PCF relatively quickly, confining himself to the observation that it had yet to break sufficiently with its Stalinist legacy and that its approach to political strategy in the Fifth Republic was "dangerously empirical" due to a consistent failure to ask the question, "What kind of state do we want?"[7] Lefebvre devotes a more extensive commentary to the evolving agendas of the PS, particularly to the work of social-democratic economist and theoretician Jacques Attali, whose widely discussed book *La nouvelle économie française* had appeared the previous year (1978). Against the traditional Communist position, Lefebvre (2001:770) rejects the instrumentalist interpretation of social democracy as the "principal social support of capital," emphasizing instead the ideological heterogeneity of the *Parti Socialiste* in contrast to the social democratic parties of Germany and northern Europe. Although, as Lefebvre explains in his discussion of Attali's work, the PS had in fact posed the question of the state, it had done so in an extraordinarily naïve manner. Despite their tendency to sprinkle their texts with certain Marxian-inspired categories, social-democratic theoreticians such as Attali ultimately conceived the state in traditional liberal-pluralist terms, as a neutral institutional framework for the articulation, organization and implementation of societal interests. Lefebvre (2001:769) scornfully dismisses this view as a "peevish negation of politics".

Albeit in qualitatively different ways, both the PCF and the PS proposed during the 1970s to strengthen civil society through a decentralization of political power. Lefebvre likewise endorsed such an agenda in his earlier writings on cities and on territorial *autogestion*, but here he expresses extreme skepticism about its viability in the absence of a systematic and thoroughgoing critique of the state. Alluding to De Gaulle's cynical use of political decentralization as a covert weapon of central state steering, Lefebvre (2001:773) suggests that this project has all too frequently amounted to no more than a "simulacrum" of democratization, in which administrative problems and fiscal burdens are merely reshuffled without qualitatively modifying the balance of power (see also Lefebvre [1958] 1991:379, 382–383). More generally, Lefebvre argues that society-centered projects of political transformation have, since Hegel, been tightly intertwined with a de facto enhancement, extension, and fine-tuning of diverse mechanisms of state control. Hence, Lefebvre maintains, any viable approach to the democratization of civil society must be dialectically linked to a sustained critique—and radical democratization—of the modern state form itself.

Left Productivism: Social Democracy and the State Mode of Production

Here Lefebvre arrives at his essay's core argument: the real historical significance—and political danger—of both Stalinism and social democracy lies in their role in facilitating the consolidation of a "new state form" (*une nouvelle forme étatique*), a hyperproductivist politico-institutional ensemble to which he (2001:773) refers as "the state mode of production" (SMP). Clearly, Lefebvre considers the ideological nuances *within* the French Left to be of paramount strategic and political importance, but his analysis quickly moves to a higher level of abstraction in order to interrogate theoretically the very institutional field within which the sociopolitical forces of the Left have situated themselves. The various dispersed threads of Lefebvre's analysis of the French Left thus converge around the theoretical and political problem of the SMP.

For Lefebvre, the structural essence of the SMP is the state's increasingly direct role in the promotion and management of capitalist industrial growth. The concept of the SMP is intended primarily as a means to describe what might be termed *state productivism*: "A qualitative transformation occurs from the moment in which the State takes charge of growth … From this moment forward, economic failures are attributed to the state" (Lefebvre 2001:773). In volumes three and four of *De l'État*, Lefebvre (1977, 1978) examines the dynamics, geohistory, and political, institutional, and sociospatial consequences of state productivism at some length, with reference both to the Stalinist state apparatuses of the East and to the neocapitalist state apparatuses of Western Europe and North America. In "Comments on a New State Form," Lefebvre focuses his attention more closely upon the role of social-democratic political regimes in the reconstitution of the SMP in Western Europe during the 1970s. According to Lefebvre (2001:775), the social-democratic model of the state is but one specific politico-institutional form in which the SMP has been articulated historically.[8]

Lefebvre interprets the social-democratic form of the SMP as the long-term historical outcome of the Lassallean political project that had been promoted by reformist social-democratic parties during the early 20th century. Since this period, when social-democratic parties first gained legitimate access to the national parliamentary systems of Western European bourgeois democracies, social-democratic control over the machinery of state power has been deployed consistently, if unevenly and incompletely, as a means to redistribute the social surplus to the working class on a national scale. This social-democratic

politics of national redistribution, Lefebvre suggests, has in turn masked a profound transformation of state/economy relations in which the state apparatus has become ever more deeply imbricated in producing, maintaining, and reproducing the basic socioinstitutional and territorial preconditions for expanded capital accumulation.

The conception of social democracy as a deradicalizing form of collaboration with the capitalist "class enemy" dates to Marx's 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program* (a text which Lefebvre frequently cites) and to the subsequent debates between Kautsky, Bernstein, Lenin, and Luxemburg within the Second International (Przeworski 1985). However, Lefebvre's central concern in his analysis of the social-democratic form of the SMP over 50 years later is to assess the politico-institutional *consequences* of this strategy of social-democratic redistribution + aggressive state productivism. From his vantage point in the late 1970s, the key issue is less the role of social democracy as a reformist political strategy than its long-term structural impacts upon the nature of state power and everyday life within neocapitalism. In short, Lefebvre maintains that the social-democratic strategies that were deployed during the first half of the 20th century have now been inscribed directly onto the very structure and logic of the capitalist state: state productivism appears to reign supreme, independently of fluctuations of political regime or ruling coalition, within the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" of the late 20th century. Throughout Western Europe, Lefebvre argues, the social-democratic "class compromise" has served as a key political anchor for the consolidation of state productivism as a deep structure of the global capitalist system.[9]

One of Lefebvre's overarching concerns in "Comments on a New State Form" is to articulate an uncompromising critique of the French Left for its failure to recognize and critically interrogate its own role in the creation of this social-democratic crystallization of the SMP. Lefebvre considers this task particularly urgent because, as he argues in the second half of the essay, the SMP is being reconfigured in a number of disturbing ways in the contemporary period. In *De l'État*, Lefebvre had already examined at length the role of the SMP in the production and continual modification of the socioterritorial infrastructures for successive historical regimes of capital accumulation. In Lefebvre's framework, state institutions play an essential role in the production, regulation, and reproduction of a vast range of capitalist spaces—from factories, industrial farms, housing estates, commercial zones, suburban enclaves, and large-scale urban ensembles to roads, canals, tunnels, port facilities, bridges, railway networks, highway grids,

airports and air transport corridors, public utilities systems, and diverse technoinstitutional infrastructures for communication and surveillance. According to Lefebvre, the state's unparalleled capacities to channel large-scale, long-term investments into the built environment for industrial production, collective consumption, commodity circulation, transportation, and communication—coupled with its sovereign legal power to plan and regulate the social uses of such investments—give it a particularly privileged institutional position in the production of capitalist spatiality. As he (1978:298) notes, "Only the state can take on the task of managing space 'on a grand scale.'" In "Comments on a new state form," Lefebvre extends this analysis by focusing upon three emergent realms in which the SMP is attempting to protect and promote capitalist growth: (1) the regulation of energy; (2) the control of computers and information technology; and (3) the mediation of national and worldwide market relations (Lefebvre 2001:775–778). In each of these spheres, Lefebvre (2001:774) argues, state institutions have been extending their power over everyday life at a range of spatial scales, causing civil society in turn to be threatened with "obliteration."

Lefebvre's remarks on each of the aforementioned aspects of the modern state are highly abbreviated but nonetheless suggestive. For instance, he suggests that the real danger of nuclear power lies less in its environmental impacts than in its role in further insulating the technoinfrastructures of the modern state from democratic deliberations. Relatedly, through a discussion of a best-selling official report on "The Computerization of Society" by two elite governmental advisors, Simon Nora and Alain Minc (1978), Lefebvre interprets computer technology as an invasive weapon of state surveillance and capitalist power over everyday life. Lefebvre's apparent anxiety, at the moment in which the French formation of Fordism was being systematically dismantled, that the power of the modern state was being still further entrenched may appear rather unfounded in the contemporary period of global neoliberalism, in which major utilities' infrastructures are being privatized and in which information technology is more frequently equated with an erosion of state regulatory capacities than with their oppressive extension (see, for instance, Castells 1996). However, Lefebvre's more general point is less to engage in speculative futurology than to emphasize the profoundly *political* implications of these apparently technocratic developments within diverse fields of state power. In this sense, Lefebvre's remarks in this section of "Comments on a New State Form" bear direct comparison to the critique of instrumental rationality and technology

developed by the early Habermas and other writers in the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

Lefebvre's analysis of the role of the SMP in mediating national/global interactions—which builds upon his more extensive treatment of this issue in volume four of *De l'État* (1978:325–441)—remains particularly salient in the contemporary period, insofar as it questions both left-wing and right-wing forms of "global babble." On the one hand, Lefebvre rejects instrumentalist understandings of the state, such as that embraced by the Red Brigades in Italy, as a direct tool of manipulation by multinational corporations. On the other hand, he dismisses state decline arguments and conceptualizes the national state as the major institutional framework in and through which the contemporary round of globalization is being fought out. Much like Poulantzas—whose final book, *State, Power, Socialism*, was published the year before "Comments on a New State Form"—Lefebvre insists that the state is a deeply contested institutional arena in which diverse sociopolitical forces struggle for control over everyday sociopolitical relations.[10] Consequently, Lefebvre argues, the relation of national states to multinational capital is never predetermined but is the object and expression of nearly continual sociopolitical contestation, conflict, and struggle. If the risk persists that the state might be subordinated to the demands of global corporations, so too, according to Lefebvre, does the possibility of a state controlled by an anti-imperialist, popular-democratic coalition oriented towards radically antiproductivist goals.

Autogestion, Radical Democracy, and the Critique of the State

These considerations enable Lefebvre, in the final pages of "Comments on a New State Form," to articulate two central political conclusions. First, he argues that a critique of the modern state form is a crucial prerequisite for any viable radical-democratic political project: "Such is the danger that menaces the modern world and against which it is necessary to struggle at all costs. There is no 'good State'; today there is no State that can avoid moving towards this logical outcome: the state mode of production; that's why the only criterion of democracy is the prevention of such an outcome" (Lefebvre 2001:774). Lefebvre's claim, however, is not that a critique of the SMP could or should somehow *replace* the project of a critique of political economy. Rather, he is suggesting that, in an era of entrenched state productivism, the former project has today become a particularly essential *component* of any viable critique of capitalism. According to Lefebvre,

therefore, there is today a direct contradiction between state productivism—which is increasingly premised upon what Poulantzas (1978) termed "authoritarian statism"—and the existence of substantive forms of democracy and democratic participation.

Second, in some of the most rhetorically impassioned passages in the essay, Lefebvre advocates a generalized project of *autogestion* through which all social institutions—including those of capital, the modern state, political parties, urban and regional administration and everyday life—would be systematically democratized. As noted previously, Lefebvre (1976d:120) recognized the degree to which *autogestion* had become a "hollow slogan" within the French Left as it was appropriated by pseudoradical political organizations that were committed substantively neither to democratization nor to democratic socialism. Nonetheless, Lefebvre (2001:779) concludes "Comments on a New State Form" by embracing *autogestion* as the "one path and [the] one practice" through which the SMP—in both its Stalinist and its social-democratic forms—might be opposed and transcended.

Particularly in light of his critique of the mainstream Left political parties within France, this is a provocative assertion. For Lefebvre, *autogestion* is not only a project of democratic governance but also a conflictual, contradictory process through which participants continually engage in self-criticism, debate, deliberation, conflict, and struggle; it is not a fixed condition, but a level of intense political engagement and "revolutionary spontaneity" (Lefebvre 1966:62) which must "continually be enacted" (*se gagne perpétuellement*) (Lefebvre 2001:780). Lefebvre therefore firmly distances himself from the various meanings and associations that were linked to projects of *autogestion* within France, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. *Autogestion*, Lefebvre insists, is not a magic formula, a system, a model, or a panacea; it is not a purely technical or rational operation; it will not solve all the workers' problems; it encounters countless obstacles and threats; and it is constant danger of degenerating or being assimilated into considerably less radical projects of "co-management" (*co-gestion*) (2001:779–780). In this manner, Lefebvre promotes *autogestion* less as a fully-formed postcapitalist institutional framework than as a political orientation through which various sectors of social life—from factories, universities, and political associations to territorial units such as cities and regions—might be subjected to new forms of decentralized, democratic political control through the very social actors who are most immediately attached to them.

The roots of Lefebvre's approach to *autogestion* during the 1970s arguably lie in his lifelong concern with elaborating a critically revised

Marxian approach to the philosophy of praxis in the context of 20th-century industrial capitalism (Müller 1986). Lefebvre articulated the foundations for this project in his writings on the critique of everyday life (1971, [1958] 1991), in his detailed historical analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871 (1965), and in his interpretation of the French student revolts of 1968 (1969), as well as in his various critical commentaries on Marxian theory (eg, 1968a). Lefebvre's remarks on *autogestion* in "Comments on a New State Form" illuminate the ways in which this philosophy of praxis may be extended to include a critique of the modern capitalist state: *autogestion*, in this sense, is a form of grassroots political practice that "is born spontaneously out of the void in social life that is created by the state" (Lefebvre 1976d:120). To the extent that the apparatuses of the SMP are redefined into mechanisms of grassroots democratic political practice, Lefebvre argues, the state is "withering away in the Marxist sense" (Lefebvre2001:778). The issue here, however, is less the erosion or disappearance of state power as such—a matter about which Lefebvre does not attempt to speculate—than the possibility of its qualitative transformation into a nonproductivistic, radically decentralized, and participatory institutional framework that not only permits social struggles and contradictions but actively encourages and provokes them (Lefebvre 2001:778, 780; see also 1966:68–69). The political utopia envisioned by Lefebvre is one in which the state would serve, not as an instrument for endless capital accumulation, bureaucratic domination, and everyday violence, but rather as an arena for—as he put it at the end of *De l'État* (1978:324)—"spatial (territorial) *autogestion*, direct democracy and direct democratic control [and the] affirmation of the differences produced in the course of and through this struggle."[11]

Unfortunately, Lefebvre provides very few clues about how such a project might be pursued under contemporary conditions, and he left to others the monstrously complex task of translating this *vision autogestionnaire* into viable, sustainable social institutions and practices.[12] Apparently, Lefebvre's more immediate concern in his concluding remarks in "Comments on a New State Form" was merely to suggest that the notion of *autogestion* can and should be reappropriated from the social-democratic and communist Left in the name of an alternative socialist project grounded upon antiproductivism and radical grassroots democracy. In this sense, Lefebvre's essay can be read as a spirited defense of utopian thinking during a period in which, as Habermas (1984) would argue a few years later, the utopian energies associated with classical Marxism appeared to have been exhausted.

However, as Kipfer (1996:37–38) has noted, Lefebvre's political utopianism was profoundly dialectical, grounded upon the method of "transduction" which "entails detecting and transforming the possible within the real, the symbolic forms and fragments of an alternative future within everyday life."[13] Lefebvre's interest in the diverse experiments in *autogestion* that were percolating throughout French society during the post-1968 period—in factories, schools, universities, trade unions, cities, regions, and so forth—stemmed from his conviction that they represented the elements of a "social pedagogy" (Lefebvre 1969:86, 1976d:121) within everyday life that pointed beyond the extant and towards alternative futures grounded upon more progressive, democratic, and egalitarian ways of organizing social space and time. Lefebvre's concluding discussion of *autogestion* in "Comments on a New State Form" thus simultaneously presupposes and reinforces the initial strategic hypothesis with which he (2001:769) opens the essay: "In political thought and in political theory, the category (or concept) of the 'real' should not be permitted to obscure that of the possible. Rather, it is the possible that should serve as the theoretical instrument for exploring the real." To proceed otherwise, Lefebvre believed, would be to engage in a fetishism of the present that merely perpetuates the unquestioned power of capital and the state to foreclose political possibilities and to dominate everyday life.

Beyond Fordist Marxism? Lefebvre in the Age of Neoliberalism

The Eurocommunist movements of the mid-1970s in France, Italy, and Spain may be viewed as the high point of a distinctively Fordist form of western Marxism which prevailed throughout much of the postwar period. In Western Europe and North America, the main reference point for this Fordist crystallization of Marxist theory and practice was the specific framework of social, political, and economic organization consolidated between the early 1950s and the early 1970s. Under these conditions, the critique of capitalism was articulated as a critique of the Fordist regime of accumulation, the closely associated bureaucratic apparatuses of the Keynesian welfare national state and the entrenched patterns of everyday power, class domination, and popular alienation with which those institutional forms were intertwined.[14]

Like those of many of the major critical theorists of the postwar period, Lefebvre's most important works were tightly embedded

within the theoretical grammar of Fordist Marxism. While Lefebvre's initial analyses of the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption were explicitly focused upon the political-economic order of the 1950s and 1960s, even his later studies of neocapitalism implied that the restructuring processes of the 1970s represented a consolidation and intensification of the postwar capitalist order, rather than its destabilization or dissolution. In his mature works, Lefebvre occasionally mentions the politics of neoliberalism, but in so doing he more frequently refers to a specific ideological strand within the French Right than to the worldwide capitalist class offensive that has underpinned the successive waves of state retrenchment and economic restructuring of the post-1970s period. Although the four volumes of *De l'État* and the essay "Comments on a New State Form" were published while the basic institutional foundations of French "state Fordism" were being dismantled, Lefebvre does not systematically attempt in these works to examine the global economic crises of the 1970s or their ramifications for the forms, functions, and territorial organization of the modern state.

These serious contextual limitations of Lefebvre's theoretical framework have not been acknowledged by many of his commentators and arguably deserve to be examined much more closely in scholarship devoted to or influenced by Lefebvre. Nonetheless, recognition of the contextual boundedness of Lefebvre's theoretical framework also points towards a number of potentially fruitful questions about its possible applications and redeployments under the *after*-Fordist conditions of the present day. What, we might ask, would a Lefebvre-inspired interpretation of the current round of global sociospatial restructuring entail? More specifically, in what ways might Lefebvre's political writings help illuminate the strategic dilemmas of the radical-democratic Left under conditions of global neoliberal domination and authoritarian statism? In the present context, it is not possible to examine these demanding questions at any length. Instead, I shall conclude by noting four possible ways in which the specific arguments developed by Lefebvre in "Comments on a New State Form" might remain relevant to the concerns of left-radical scholars and activists under contemporary conditions.

Neoliberalism as a New Form of the SMP

Lefebvre's analysis of the SMP can be fruitfully redeployed to decipher the neoliberal forms of state restructuring that have been unfolding on a world scale throughout the last two decades. As we have seen,

Lefebvre interprets the social-democratic form of the SMP as the outgrowth of an historical class compromise that was consolidated during the mid-20th century and grounded upon a complex combination of aggressive state productivism and a class-based politics of redistribution and decommodification. The post-1970s round of state restructuring can be plausibly understood as a systematic *assault* upon the state's redistributive functions, coupled with a marked *intensification* of the productivist, commodifying aspects of the SMP—its role in promoting, financing, subsidizing, and regulating capitalist growth. Indeed, as contemporary analyses of competition states (Cerny 1997; Hirsch 1995), Schumpeterian workfare states (Jessop 1993), and entrepreneurial urban governance (Harvey 1989; Peck and Tickell 1994) imply, we may currently be witnessing the emergence of an historically new form of the SMP, in which the state's function as an agent for the commodification of its territory—at once on national, regional, and urban scales—has acquired an unprecedented supremacy over other regulatory operations within the state's institutional architecture. Although this productivistic function of state power was clearly evident within the social-democratic form of the SMP during the postwar period, the currently emergent *hyper*productivist form of the SMP appears to signal: (1) an intensified role for the state in "developing the productive powers of territory and in producing new spatial configurations" (Swyngedouw 1992:431); (2) an increasing *dissociation* of state productivism both from mechanisms of social redistribution and from historically attained relays of democratic accountability (Gill 1998; Röttger 1997); and (3) a massive deepening of uneven geographical development within and between national territories as states target specific cities, regions, or technopoles as globally competitive "development areas" to the detriment of others (Poulantzas 1978:213).

From this point of view, then, currently emergent patterns of authoritarian statism entail a significant enhancement of the state's role in mobilizing space as a productive force—coupled with a major recalibration of the social power relations mediated in and through the state apparatus—rather than the supposed "rolling back" of state power which is commonly invoked in mainstream discourses on globalization.[15] In an era in which public discourse on the state is dominated by the neoliberal utopia of free, deregulated markets, powerless states, hypermobile capital, and unlimited exploitation, Lefebvre's theory of the SMP provides potentially a powerful analytical lens through which the evolving political, institutional, and geographical dimensions of actually existing state productivism can be critically decoded.

Beyond Left Productivism

The social-democratic form of the SMP was grounded upon the assumption that egalitarian redistributive goals could be attained within the parameters of a political system that was structurally dependent upon capital for its own systemic reproduction. However, as the current period of capitalist restructuring has rather brutally illustrated, this assumption was deeply problematic insofar as it was premised upon historically and geographically contingent socio-institutional conditions and power relations that now appear to have been largely superseded through the destructive forward movement of global capital. While many traditional Left political parties struggled throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s to defend the redistributive arrangements associated with the Fordist-Keynesian settlement, today much of the centrist or mainstream Left appears to have embraced some version of the politically reactionary and intellectually vacuous program of the so-called Third Way, whose economic policy repertoire is almost indistinguishable from that of the neoliberal Right.

Under these conditions, Lefebvre's analysis of the SMP provides a timely warning against the tendency, quite rampant even within contemporary left-wing political discourse, to narrow the field of political discussion to the issue of *how* to promote capitalist growth and thus to vacate the problematic of criticizing and ultimately transforming the logic of capitalism itself as an objectified form of abstract domination (Postone 1996). Clearly, the politico-institutional frameworks within which capitalist growth occurs have massive ramifications for everyday life and must remain a key focus of any progressive, egalitarian, and democratic politics. Nonetheless, from a radical-democratic socialist perspective, it would be politically fatal to accept the capitalist form of development as an unquestioned or self-evident end in itself. In an era in which putatively left-wing parties across Europe and North America have become powerful agents, enforcers, and apologists for various kinds of soft neoliberalism, Lefebvre's dissident critique of the French Left over two decades ago provides a welcome reminder of one particularly essential ingredient within any radically democratic socialist politics: the ruthless critique of the capitalist growth dynamic—production for production's sake, accumulation for accumulation's sake—in the name of alternative frameworks for the production of everyday life.

Radical Democracy and the Critique of the State

While the project of a critique of the state was a central agenda of left-wing, socialist, and radical theory throughout the 1970s, today this

project appears to have been monopolized almost entirely by the neoliberal and neoconservative Right. In a paper originally published in 1979, the same year as Lefebvre's "Comments on a New State Form," Claus Offe (1984) noted the apparent convergence between leftist and neoconservative accounts of the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state: at that time, the critique of the state was one of the major ideological battlegrounds on which the politics of capitalist restructuring were being fought out in Western Europe. Today, over two decades later, the right-wing critique of the state in the name of efficiency, lean-management, fiscal discipline, market rationality, and the putative "rights" of capital has become the dominant political response to the most recent round of capitalist globalization—a monolithic state of affairs to which Erik Swyngedouw (2000:66) aptly refers as "*la pensée unitaire*." Meanwhile, the left-wing critique of the state seems to have all but disappeared, as progressives struggle desperately to salvage the remaining vestiges of the Keynesian settlement and to manage the highly polarizing socio-economic effects of neoliberal policies within their respective political contexts.

Such struggles no doubt remain significant, even essential. However, as Lefebvre's analysis indicates, they need not be premised upon a wholesale retreat from the project of a critique of the state. Indeed, as we observe state institutions becoming leaner, meaner, and increasingly undemocratic as they indulge in the "dangerous obsession" (Krugman 1994) of promoting global territorial competitiveness, a critique of the state must surely remain central to any radically democratic politics. Although Lefebvre's conceptualization of *autogestion* is quite multifaceted, one of its core components is the affirmation of grassroots democracy as an ongoing, limitless project at all geographical scales and within all sectors of social and political life—including, crucially, within state institutions themselves. During the last two decades of authoritarian statism, neoliberal regimes have systematically undermined mechanisms of democratic accountability and political legitimation that were won over a century of popular struggle. Currently, this US-dominated "new constitutionalism" of corporate capitalist power, fiscal austerity, heightened social polarization, intensified exploitation, and untrammeled financial speculation is being extended onto a global scale through the initiatives of any number of autocratic, unaccountable institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Economic Forum, and so forth (Gill 1995, 1998). Under these circumstances, the project of a democratization of the state—at

all scales, from the global and the supranational/triadic to the national, the regional, and the local—remains particularly urgent. Lefebvre's sustained critique of the state in the name of a politics of social and territorial *autogestion* could potentially provide an important normative reference point for the rejuvenation of political struggles oriented towards a comprehensive redemocratization of state institutions and other governance institutions within contemporary capitalism.

Towards a Dialectical Utopianism

One of the hallmarks of neoliberal politics is the appeal to the supposed "external constraints" of the global economy, which are generally represented as being objective, abstract, and quasinatural forces that are autonomous from political decisions and independent of human control. This neoliberal political program is perhaps most concisely expressed in the infamous Thatcherite dictum, "There is no alternative." A number of Left intellectuals have recently written stinging critiques of this neoliberal politics of "false necessity" (Unger 1987) with its "utopia of unlimited exploitation" (Bourdieu 1998: 94–105). Lefebvre's writings on the state likewise contain a systematic critique of this necessitarian logic, while emphasizing the need to excavate everyday life for political possibilities that could point towards alternative, more progressive, democratic, and egalitarian futures. For Lefebvre (1965, 1969), the formation of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the French student revolts of 1968 represented defining political conjunctures within capitalist modernity that revealed such latent possibilities for radical democracy and *autogestion*, even if they were realized only fleetingly and incompletely.

In an epoch in which the apparent "exhaustion of utopian energies" (Habermas 1984:141–166) continues to dog the radical Left, Lefebvre's dialectical utopianism (on which see Harvey 2000) provides a salient reminder that everyday life under capitalism is permeated with utopian possibilities and strivings, of both reactionary and progressive variants and with foreboding, benign, or emancipatory ramifications. Whether we look to the recent worldwide proliferation of anti-globalization protests, to the living wage and "justice for janitors" campaigns in a number of major US cities, to the antisweatshop movement in North American universities, to the efforts of European progressives to establish a Europe-wide welfare net, or to the struggles of left-wing urban social movements to create more socially just, democratic, and sustainable forms of urbanism, plenty of evidence

suggests that progressive, potentially emancipatory forms of everyday utopianism, grounded in and expressed through diverse forms of political struggle, persist unabated in a broad range of institutional sites and spaces within contemporary capitalism. Against the background of these ongoing struggles, it seems to me that Lefebvre's dialectical utopianism continues to provide an extraordinarily useful intellectual and political orientation for the work of radical scholars and activists—even in a dramatically different political conjuncture than that to which his critique of the state was a response.

Endnotes

[1] According to Rémi Hess' bibliography (1988:333), the fourth volume of *De l'État* has been translated into Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Serbo-Croatian.

[2] See Lefebvre (1975) for an article-length summary of *De l'État,* based upon the introduction to volume one, that was published before any of the four volumes were completed.

[3] The essay was originally published in a special issue of the New Left journal *Dialectiques* devoted to the theme of "The Left confronts social democracy," in which various prominent left-wing theoreticians commented upon the ongoing transformation of the European and French Left. In addition to Lefebvre's essay, the other contributions to the special issue were those by Robert Fossaert, Jean Rony, Serge Lewisch/Yves Roucaute, Christine Buci-Glucksmann/Göran Therborn, and Jean-François Corallo.

[4] Lefebvre (1980a:23) consistently rejected the notion of a single interpretation of Marx, arguing that "the correct line of thought is to situate the works and the theoretical or political propositions within the global movement of the transformation of the modern world."

[5] Shortly after the defeat of the Left alliance in March 1978, Althusser (1978) wrote a particularly blistering critique of the PCF's rigidly authoritarian organizational structure and called for greater internal democracy and pluralism within the party—to no avail.

[6] See Lafont (1976). These strands of the French *autogestion* debate bear comparison to the municipal socialist movement in the UK and the *Kommune als Gegenmacht* (municipality as counterforce) discussions in West Germany, which raised similar demands in their respective national political contexts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For useful case studies of these and other left-radical urban social movements during this period, see the texts included in Mayer, Roth, and Brandes (1978).

[7] Elsewhere, Lefebvre (1976d:120) argued that the PCF and other "worshippers of the total state economy" were "just playing with words" in their adoption of the slogan of *autogestion* in the 1970s. For a similar judgment, see Lefebvre (1969:84–85).

[8] Lefebvre's theory of the SMP has occasionally been understood as an attempt to decipher the state's role in organizing capital accumulation within state socialist social formations. Although this reading is not entirely incorrect, it is seriously one-sided. While Lefebvre does apply the SMP concept to the Stalinist state, he deploys it more extensively to examine the transformation of state institutions within Western European countries. It can be argued, therefore, that Lefebvre's essential concern in developing this concept is the problem of state *productivism*—that is, the mobilization of state institutions to promote the endless accumulation of capital—rather than the question of property relations per se. From this point of view, the extremely interesting

interpretation of Eurocommunism developed by Szelenyi (1981) is nonetheless flawed, due to its transformation of Lefebvre's concept of the SMP from a critical category into an affirmative one. For another important critique of productivism—including the Stalinist variant of the latter—see Lefebvre (1970:11–52).

[9] Lefebvre articulates this argument most explicitly in *The Survival of Capitalism* with reference to the postwar period (see Lefebvre 1976d:113–117). As Lefebvre (1976d:118) argues in that context, "On the whole, European socialists and communists simply propose to take over the baton from the bourgeoisie, though they differ on the modalities of achieving growth." See also the first two epigraphs to the present essay.

[10] On Poulantzas' approach to globalization and the state, see Jessop (forthcoming). On Lefebvre's approach to globalization and the state, see Brenner (1997b).

[11] Here, too, there are some interesting parallels between Lefebvre's position and the arguments developed by Poulantzas in his final work (1978). Much like Gramsci, both authors reject the traditional binarism of reform versus revolution, as well as the established opposition between top-down (statist) and bottom-up (civil-society-based) strategies of political transformation. Poulantzas (1978:251–265) examines the problem of *autogestion* and the possibility of a democratic road to socialism in the final chapter of *State, Power, Socialism*.

However, one significant difference between Poulantzas's positions in that book and Lefebvre's views in his writings of the late 1970s is worth noting here. Poulantzas (1978:255–256) explicitly argued that the institutions of representative democracy, as inherited from the epoch of bourgeois rule, must be radicalized rather than replaced and subsequently *combined* with multiple forms of direct, rank-and-file democracy and *autogestion*. For Poulantzas (1978:260–261), therefore, the preservation of certain achievements of bourgeois/liberal democracies—such as universal suffrage, political and civil liberties, and ideological pluralism—is an essential precondition for the realization and protection of any substantively democratic form of *autogestion*. By contrast, Lefebvre remained highly ambivalent about the institutional framework of representative democracy, which he analyzed and criticized extensively in volume four of *De l'État* (Lefebvre 1978:97–170). As Lefebvre noted in a footnote to that chapter (1978:170), he had not originally planned to include an analysis of political representation in *De l'Etat*, but decided to do so following his discussions of the issue with various audiences during a visit to post-Franco Madrid in the autumn of 1976. For Lefebvre (1977:19–36, 1986:27–30), one of the major operations of the modern state is to impose and enforce an equivalence upon nonequivalent social relations; representational democracy and bourgeois law are said to play constitutive roles in this "homogenizing" and "identitarian" dynamic of state domination. Consequently, in his accounts of social transformation, Lefebvre repeatedly emphasizes the need to democratize existent state institutions, but consistently deploys the language of *autogestion* rather than that of representation. Lefebvre may well have believed that an effective radicalization and decentralization of liberal-democratic institutions would eventually reach a "threshold of socialism," at which point they would be qualitatively transformed into a framework for large-scale territorial *autogestion*. However, many of his formulations also seem to recycle a version of the Leninist notion of "dual power," in which the bourgeois state apparatus is to be superseded entirely by workers' councils or other units of *autogestion*. In short, despite his explicit disdain for Stalinism and his consistent endorsement of a politics of radical-democratic pluralism, Lefebvre's remarks on this crucial issue are tantalizingly ambiguous.

While Jessop (1985) has examined Poulantzas's "left Eurocommunist" approach to socialist strategy at considerable length, a more detailed inquiry into Lefebvre's

unorthodox positions on these matters—including his critical appropriations of theoreticians such as Lenin, Luxemburg, and Gramsci—remains to be pursued. To my knowledge, the only sustained analysis of this aspect of Lefebvre's political theory can be found in Hajo Schmidt's (1990:283–304) doctoral thesis.

[12] To my knowledge, Lefebvre's most detailed discussion of these issues is in his little-known but extremely important essay, "Problèmes théoriques de l'*autogestion*," published in 1966 in the inaugural issue of the journal *Autogestion*. This text appears to be the very first publication in which Lefebvre discussed revolutionary praxis in the terminology of *autogestion*; it also anticipates many of the central themes of his work on urban theory and state theory during the subsequent 15 years.

[13] In *The Explosion*, his analysis of the student revolts of May 1968, Lefebvre (1969: 57–63) introduces the theme of *autogestion* through an imaginary dialogue between a "possibilist"—someone "who viewed or views the 'realm of possibilities' as still open" —and "someone more practically oriented." The dialogue ends when the possibilist proposes *autogestion* as the most appropriate strategic response to the crisis of existent political and economic institutions—at which point Lefebvre (1969:62) interjects: "Starting point: contestation opens the field of the possible, as the philosophers put it. The boundary between the possible and the impossible is difficult to establish, but always easy to cross. Especially in the realm of the imaginary. Long live, therefore, the possible-impossible." The remainder of *The Explosion* can be read as an extended analysis of this "boundary" and the experience of its transgression in the midst of the events of May 1968. See also Lefebvre (1980b:240–243).

[14] The term "Fordist Marxism" is derived from Röttger (1997); see also Castree (1999) and Postone (1996). It can be argued that Fordist Marxism also assumed distinctive politico-ideological forms in Eastern Europe, where it culminated in the Prague Spring and in the work of dissident writers such as Rudolf Bahro, and in the imperialist/ postcolonial periphery, where it was expressed in the form of Left critiques of the national-developmentalist projects associated with the Bandung alliance.

[15] For this reason, I prefer the label "hyperproductivist" to "neoliberal" as a description of emergent state forms.

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