FG4LM and anarchism, 
Lefebvre and the Situationist International 
and the politics of protecting the place of alternative culture

Deakin CHCAP seminar, 15 December 2004

On a cold evening in late May last year over one thousand people gathered in the ballroom at Trades Hall to protest the loss of live music venues in the inner-city. The organisers of the FG4LM campaign and the gathered musicians, performers, sound and light engineers, roadies, venue owners, music writers and punters were pretty clear about why they were there: gentrification and urban redevelopment were producing warehouse conversions and new, poorly-insulated dwellings, right up against the city pubs and bars that are the base of the independent (that is non-commercial) music scene. The new residents from the 'burbs (attracted by the cachet of 'inner-city living') were complaining about the music and pushing up the rents, making cheap living, working and performing space in the city increasingly scarce. The alternative cultural scene in Melbourne is shifting to the outer suburbs and country towns, some of which—like Castlemaine and Daylesford, and most of the coastal townships from the Peninsula to South Gippsland—are also showing signs of gentrification.

By alternative cultural scene I mean the myriad, self-consciously marginal subcultures that are premised on a rejection of various permutations of straight white male-dominated mass-produced consumer society. “Near the core of the radical project is the artist”, says David Ley (1996:188) and it is true that alternative cultures are very often centred around music and art. But all have in common their framing in opposition to the dominant ‘mainstream’. Dick Hebdige in his seminal work on Subcultures (1979) saw alternative cultures in general as “symbolic forms of resistance” (p.80). They are counter-cultural, what used to be called the avant-garde: innovative, experimental, challenging and devoted to the overthrow of orthodoxies (McAuliffe 2004:103). Many alternative cultures advocate radical social change; at the least, according to Leonie Sandercock and Iris Young, they claim “to be allowed to be different within an inclusive society” and to have the right “to give expression to difference in the public sphere” (Sandercock 1998:124-5)—not insignificant challenges in their own rights.
FG4LM called on the Victorian State Government to do something—invoke a principle of first-occupancy rights, require better sound-proofing in new buildings, introduce special planning and heritage controls to protect existing venues—anything to protect the place of alternative culture in the inner-city. Before we go on, let me make it clear we are NOT talking about Richard Florida’s comfortable white-collar ‘creative class’ here. We’re talking about the musos and artists whose relative financial disadvantage—according to a report by the Australia Council last year called “Don’t give up your day job”—has worsened over the past 15 years. The report says that a very few artists in Australia earn high incomes and that most artists earn very low incomes. Half Australia’s artists have a creative income of less than $7,300 a year. And for a gender perspective, the median creative income of male artists for 2001 was $9,400 compared with $4,500 for women. Almost 2/3 of all artists work at more than one job, and their median total income (totalling arts and non-arts income) is $30,000 annually.

The economic benefits of the independent music industry and its spin-offs to the city are quite another thing, and FG4LM quantified these, pointing out also the marketing and tourism opportunities of a ‘vibrant cultural inner-city scene’, and within weeks the State Government announced a taskforce to assess possible solutions. The Live Music Taskforce included music, housing and building industry representatives along with a serious number of government planners and lawyers.

* * *

Opposition to heritage and planning strategies to protect the place of alternative culture comes from a number of sources. One line of opposition comes from what we would call the usual suspects: the beneficiaries of an unregulated market—the investors, developers and real estate agents.

A slightly more surprising line comes from a rather more politically progressive, middle class audience (Florida’s creative class?). In the ensuing discussions about ‘cultural vitality’ and what cities can do to retain or gain it, one high profile academic came out saying that, because alternative cultures in particular are by definition oppositional, experimental and challenging, any policy that seeks a place for them is doomed. It ‘defuses their challenge’, dilutes their ‘bohemian frisson’; almost
inevitably, ‘the cultural vitality you expected, or planned, isn’t the vitality you wanted’. Chris McAuliffe, director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, observed that within the ‘classic subcultural model’, popularisation of symbolic resistance is ‘the beginning of the end’, therefore formal recognition, which marks the entry of an alternative subculture into the broader cultural domain, destroys it. This critique prefers that the cultural activity be displaced rather than institutionalised: McAuliffe says, ‘it’s not the dissemination of subculture as such that is the problem, it’s the stage-management of it’.

Given that it is this politically progressive, middle class audience that personally values and benefits from the products of alternative culture, I’m not sure this critique stands up too well to close scrutiny. In essence, it requires the on-going marginalisation of marginal cultures. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the high cultural but low economic capital of the alternative artist allows those with a calculating eye to turn art into commodity—a conversion that would be devalued with increasing popularity of the product in a “systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economics” (Bourdieu 1993:39). In other words, the art collections and musical choices of ‘those in the know’ are so much more valuable if only a few people know where to source them. This position, perhaps unwittingly, tends towards a response that neo-liberal decision-makers would not be averse to. Whatever the merits of the free market for cultural production, it maintains in the inner-city the old exclusions of the memories, meanings and place of the marginal, and the same old inequitable representations of history.

But there is a third opposition I find much more interesting. When FG4LM was invited to participate in the Live Music Taskforce, a series of unanticipated, but perhaps not surprising, responses began to emerge from within the scene itself. While high profile musicians like Mark Seymour and Paul Kelly publicly supported the campaign, a lot of indie musicians wanted no part in the negotiations. They said: the very nature of the alternative scene is uncertain; it defies identification and desires ethereality. A key element of the story of alternative subcultures is that they shift and evaporate and reappear around the city, the impossibility of pinning them down an aspect of their presence. And they do have a presence. Be they rave parties on the docks (although in Melbourne these have gone), spontaneous drum ‘n’ bass in some small club, art on the
streets, such as the city lights project of art in laneways in the city (although it does get funding from the council), alternative culture is a rich element of a city's cultural diversity. What to do? Should we even try to protect their place?

A frustrated FG4LM organiser wrote to me saying that 'people in the industry are addicted to an image of themselves as outcasts, on the fringe of society. They simply couldn't get involved in a process of working with government towards change, because it doesn't suit their image of themselves'.

It is a response not unique to Melbourne:

In Berlin—a number of districts where the alternative scene congregates are gentrifying, and there is resistance to the growing pressure on low-cost uses to leave the city centre. A major redevelopment of the banks of the river Spree for the 'new media' industry, for example, is currently involving the establishment of the European headquarters of MTV and Universal Studios, not coincidentally right in the place where the most of the clubs and squats are now. The development is privatising both public land and the planning process, and displacing the heart of the alternative music scene in the process.

In response to local mobilisations, the City of Berlin is looking at ways of protecting some of the places used by the alternative scene. A little further away there is a half-bombed-out squat that has been a centre for alternative culture since the Wall came down: the City has already given it heritage protection, preventing the place from being demolished for redevelopment, and has designated it a 'culture house' in the city plan, ensuring continuity of its use.

But the local neo-punk scene (which is made up largely of Western Europeans) strongly opposes co-operation with the state—even if the image of the state is a repressive fascist or communist one appropriated from their eastern compatriots. Actually the East Berliners in the alternative scene who I spoke to—who have long struggled against interventionist and repressive government—find it quite reasonable that government policy is used to protect place. East Germans are finding life under capitalism not as comfortable as they had hoped, and appear less concerned about cultural policy interventions than about the current state support for corporate real estate developments (that justify cuts in social services).
Nevertheless the arguments are hard.

Ingo Bader, a clubber and researcher in Berlin, says of the city’s alternative culture that “the specific conditions such as low rents made possible or at least facilitated experimental music ... the abandoned buildings offered the proper ambience for this kind of music and partying. Particularly the illegalization, the rapid change of clubs and their sites that were often hard to find ... temporary use, sometimes only for a few parties, [is] very important for the activists’ self-perception”. But, he notes later, “the real estate dominated development that is taking place in this area is about to destroy the special Berlin music scene” (Bader 2003:2-3).

The City of Amsterdam is openly using cultural policy to protect places of low-income cultural production. It has a five year program of buying former squats and old warehouses on the gentrifying docks for use as cheap living and working space for artists. The program is explicitly premised on the fact that these places are disappearing and that if there is no intervention it will be the market alone that shapes Amsterdam’s space and culture. Again, the critique is fierce: some anarchist squatters are more opposed to the program to retain places for alternative culture than are the conservative politicians.

Of itself such a breeding ground policy would be a praise-worthy endeavour if it weren’t that the idea goes completely contrary to the manner in which these places have always existed and developed themselves. It is, after all, about independent free zones in which people of various disciplines and backgrounds create and develop their own forms of living, working and culture. The top-to-bottom creation of such places by means of government policy is at first sight a contradiction in terms. It cannot be that municipal policy dictates the content and construction of free zones. On principle, all cooperation with the intended breeding ground policy could be refused. Real breeding grounds cannot be created by government interference, because they often exist in opposition to such interference. Nothing will stop the true free-thinkers from going their own way.

On the other hand, it must be stated that in spite of the fact that here and there in the city new initiatives continually arise, there are scarcely any that can shake off the spectre of eviction for more than one or two years. Free zones that want to survive for a somewhat longer term will need sooner or later to find more structural solutions
which in one way or another direct their sights on authorities. (Ot301 Amsterdam 2003)

There is a real tension here. How do subcultures defined by images of opposition, and self-consciously marginal, deal with the increasing compulsion to claim a right to the city—or be moved on?

*

The problem puts me in mind of the Situationists International and Henri Lefebvre.

The Situationists formed in 1957, building on the tradition of the French surrealists and dadaists: precursors to contemporary alternative culture. Their work constituted a series of negations of modern society, a critique of consumerism, appropriation, commercialisation—not so much a precursor to post-modernism as stemming from the same social and cultural context. Unlike many post-modernists, situationists were passionately critical of the world in which the accumulation of images had become even more important than accumulation of commodities. Through the creation of ‘situations’ they unleashed free and spontaneous creativity that led to small revolutions in everyday life. They used artistic practices such as detournement (diversion, subversion, corruption) which involved for example the creative alteration of advertisements, and derive (drift) which referred to ‘locomotion without a goal’: an exploration of the city on foot to investigate its ‘psychogeography’ and find those symbolic, highly charged places that produce particular emotions or which resonate with some desire, subverting the passiveness of the ‘society of the spectacle’.

Henri Lefebvre was a French philosopher forced from his university post after the Nazi invasion of France, and who lived out the war as a resistance fighter in the south. He became one of the French Communist party’s most heralded intellectuals, but as the cold war closed in he chafed more and more at the party’s Stalinism and, by the late 1950s was, as Greil Marcus—author of A Secret History of the 20th Century—puts it, a communist in name only and a situationist lacking only the name.

Instead of examining institutions and classes, structures of economic production and social control, one had to think about ‘moments’—moments of love, hate, poetry, frustration, action, surrender, delight, humiliation, justice, cruelty, resignation,
surprise, disgust, resentment, self-loathing, pity, fury, peace of mind—those tiny epiphanies, Lefebvre said, in which the absolute possibilities and temporal limits of anyone’s existence were revealed. He came to focus on the need for creative activities: those specific needs, to be added to basic anthropological needs, “which are not satisfied by those commercial and cultural infrastructures which are somewhat parsimoniously taken into account by planners” (Levebvre 1996:147). Through these specified needs, he said,

lives and survives a fundamental desire of which play, sexuality, physical activities such as sport, creative activity, art and knowledge are particular expressions and moments, which can more or less overcome the fragmentary division of tasks. Finally, the need of the city and urban life can only be freely expressed within a perspective which here attempts to become clearer and to open up the horizon. Would not specific urban needs be those of qualified places, places of simultaneity and encounters, places where exchange would not go through exchange value, commerce and profit? (Levebvre 1996:147-8)

Lefebvre’s theory of moments converged with the situationists’ creation of ambiance. In the late 1950s they began “a sort of unfinished love affair” (Kofman and Lebas, in Lefebvre 1996:13): “in an atmosphere of passionate oneness we would talk far into the night ... we drank ... sometimes there were other stimulants ... it was more than communication, it was communion” (Lefebvre 1975, cited in Marcus 1989:146). Together Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, Raoul Veneigem and other situationists invented the notion of urban struggle as a rejection of ‘boredom’ in favour of the ‘festival’. All are credited in different ways with having inspired the French student revolts in May 1968 (Levebvre having resumed teaching after the war at Nanterre, a university on the outskirts of Paris).

Lefebvre and the situationists built on the proto-revolutionary moment of the Proclamation of the Paris Commune in 1871 when, early in the period of the Third French Republic, the Communards—an extraordinary co-operation of anarchists, Marxist socialists, libertarian republicans and various other brands of revolutionary, with a high degree of workers’ control—banished the conservative government to Versailles and established their own council for Paris for two full months (in which time they put a moratorium on unpaid rents, separated the church from the state, made all church property state property, excluded religion from schools, postponed debt
obligations and abolished interest on the debts, amongst other things) before the French army shot 147 leaders of the Commune against the Communard’s Wall, killed a further 30,000 citizens, arrested 30,000 more, and regained control.

Lefebvre called the actors of May 1968 the ‘new Communards’. As in 1871, students, workers and immigrants asserted their radical claims by attempting to reclaim the historic centre of Paris from the outskirts—the suburban university campuses, factories and housing projects—where they had been relegated by the dominant urban strategies of the time: Haussmann’s ‘urban renewal’ in the mid-1800s, and the state-sponsored ‘clean up’ of the remaining popular Parisian quarters in the mid-1900s. As in 1871, the claim to the city in 1968 was in part an attempt to transform the relationship between the socio-spatial centre and the periphery.

The situationists considered ‘urbanism’, or what we today call urban renewal or gentrification, “a rather neglected branch of criminology” (Kotanyi and Vaneigem 1961, cited in Marcus 1989:139). They said:

Modern capitalism dissuades people from criticising architecture with the simple argument that people need a roof over their heads, just as television is accepted on the grounds that people need information and entertainment. People are made to overlook the obvious fact that this information, this entertainment, and this kind of dwelling place are not made for them, but without them and against them. The whole of urban planning can be understood only as a society’s field of publicity-propaganda—that is ... as the organisation of participation in something in which it is impossible to participate. (Knabb 1981, cited in Marcus 1989:139)

Lefebvre and Debord agreed that the Paris Commune had created, even just for a few months, a city “free of planning, a field of moments, visible and loud, the antithesis of planning: a city that was reduced to zero and then reinvented everyday” (Marcus 1989:147). They looked to play, spontaneity and festivity as “necessities of daily life, oppositional forces to bureaucratic planning. Above all, they sought to understand that moment when people gain insight into the rationalised and alienated patterns of their everyday lives” (Sadler 1998:44).

The breach between them came down to ‘praxis’. Lefebvre thought the situationists were romantics. They thought he was insufficiently revolutionary. They thought art on
the level of utopia was life itself. "'Realised art' was a situationist catchphrase; what it meant was 'realised life'" (Marcus 1989:147). Lefebvre, more pragmatic, thought utopia was art, only. He wrote:

The situationists propose not a concrete utopia, but an abstraction. Do they really believe that one fine day, or one decisive evening, people will look at one another and say, 'Enough! To hell with work, to hell with boredom! Let's put an end to it!'—and that everyone will then step into the eternal Festival and the creation of situations?

Marcus says: 'let me hear you say yeah!'

If this happened once, at the dawn of 18 March 1871, this combination of circumstances will not happen again. (Lefebvre 1967, cited in Marcus 1989:142)

Lefebvre argued that revolutionary transformation requires the working class to take charge of "planning and its political agenda... Until then transformations remain superficial, at the level of signs and the consumption of signs" (Lefebvre 1996:179). But the situationists were deeply suspicious of organised politics and into socialist self-management and autonomy. They accused Lefebvre of "failing to go beyond the present order" (Kofman and Lebas, in Lefebvre 1996:13)—and of plagiarising their work (which he did). They criticised him for "failing to appreciate the revolutionary potential of their own tactic of creating 'situations' as opposed to what they saw as Lefebvre's more passive stance of experiencing 'moments' when they happened to arise" (Harvey, in Lefebvre 1991:430).

By the mid-1960s they had parted ways, but David Harvey says that the situationists' critique played a crucial role in Lefebvre's continuing development: that the 'moment' as Lefebvre initially conceived it was purely temporal, and that his later work on urbanisation and the production of space introduced a 'spatio-temporality' more akin to the 'situation' (ibid.). During the events of 1968, Lefebvre "came to recognise the significance of urban conditions of daily life (as opposed to narrow concentration on work-place politics) as central in the evolution of revolutionary sentiments and politics" (Harvey, in Lefebvre 1991:430): Harvey says, "The significance of the outbreak in Nanterre—a suburban university close to the impoverished shanty-towns of the periphery—and the subsequent geography of street action in Paris itself, alerted
him to the way in which these kinds of political struggle unfolded in a distinctively urban space. (Harvey, in Lefebvre 1991:430)

Lefebvre called for, “apart from the economic and political revolution (planning oriented towards social needs and democratic control of the State and self-management), a permanent cultural revolution” (1996:180). The right to the city, he argued in response to the situationists, “signifies the constitution or reconstitution of a spatial-temporal unit, of a gathering together instead of a fragmentation. It does not abolish confrontations and struggles. On the contrary!” (p.195)

He argued for the introduction of a ‘right to the city’ into the ‘urban system’—a right not to be excluded from centrality and its movement. But he call also for imagination, and worried about the ‘strange impasse that architectural and urbanist thought has come up against. It is as if their projects were under the influence of some strange curse … the imagination is hampered in its flight. [They] have clearly not succeeded in locating the intersection of the following two principles: (a) there is no thought without u-topia, without an exploration of the possible, of the elsewhere; (b) there is no thought without reference to practice’ (Lefebvre 2003:182).

* * *

Lefebvre continued to write until his death in 1991. There has been a recent resurgence in Europe of his notion of the right to the city, invigorated perhaps by the most recent wave of gentrification and urban redevelopment which has swept low-income people out of the city more comprehensively than any previous wave.

While I am not instilling the FG4LM campaign with the revolutionary commitment of Lefebvre—nor for that matter with that of the mobilised working class—it is interesting to reflect that the enormous political swing to the neo-liberal right in western democracies does allow a kind of parallel. There is virtually no working class in the inner-city anymore: the workers cottages have been comprehensively gentrified. The only ungentrified places that remain are the small pockets, the protected lands and the dark industrial quarters that till recently were left alone because of the economic risks in their development. This is where the remaining marginal subcultures have clustered: in the city interstices. These are the places of the underworld, the alternative scene, the gay beat, the informal economies, the hangouts for indigenous people and
gypsies and homeless and others who don’t fit in—the squats and clubs and pubs and bars. When these places are redeveloped and gentrified, their occupants scatter: there are no other places in the city to go. This situation is precipitating mobilisations throughout the Western world for the right to the city.

After 1968 the Situationist International evaporated. But their legacy lives on too: in Barbara Kruger, and Adbusters, the Billboard Liberation Front, BUGA UP, Guerilla Girls, Naomi Klein’s No Logo, and our own S11 protests outside Crown casino in September 2000.

Those indie musos who will never co-operate (and will always find somewhere else to play) and the anarchist neo-punks in Berlin, and the ratbag squatters in Amsterdam, continue to be inspired by the ideas of the situationists—even if they don’t know it—via punk and the fine lineage preceding it that travels through dada and way beyond. And they continue to feed into and inspire the activists they made, and make, the city a more interesting place for as long as they hang in there, and I would not be without them.