Trade unions, important schools for working class consciousness, continue to decline in terms of density and power, sapping any fighting spirit left in the working class. Perhaps even more tellingly, the entire meaning of “social” and “collective power” is changing. As virtual links between people become more ubiquitous, collective power becomes more voluntaristic, affinity-based, and ephemeral. Temporary on-line movements spring up constantly, attracting people from diverse walks of life who happen to feel allegiance to some goal.

Marx speculated that under communism a person could hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, and criticise after dinner without ever becoming a hunter, a fisher, or a critic. That goal has not been realized, but in a farcical distortion wired capitalism allows one to be an advocate for feral cats in the morning, a proponent of human rights in Syria in the evening and a gamer all-night, without becoming (i.e., permanently determining one’s identity by identification with the goal) a cat advocate or a human rights crusader. Identity remains fluid, something to play with and not commit to, unlike Marx’s understanding of class consciousness, which would bind individual goals to the collective project. Assuming that there will be no catastrophe that impedes the further development of communication technologies, and that younger generations will be shaped in their sense of self by the changed work and social relationships that on-line environments make possible, nineteenth and twentieth century forms of working class consciousness and struggle seem impossible to revive, at least in the Global North.

If work identities are being weakened in the Global North, (which is not to say that the need to work is being weakened—if anything, it becomes more important in the age of precarious labour) then what we might call, following Henri Lefebvre, the construction of identities in everyday life is becoming more important. Critics might conclude from this turn towards the everyday that since there is little talk of socialism in the Global North, and since what explicit struggles there are for it appear to be failing, all the sociological, political, and historical evidence suggests that it is finally time to stop thinking about the alternative to capitalism as socialism.

Perhaps that is true, if we think of socialism in some doctrinaire way, as the liberation of the productive forces from the fetters of capitalist relations of production achieved through working class revolution led by a vanguard party. But why should anyone think of socialism as it was defined in the nineteenth century as applicable to the twenty-first?

One answer that I do not share is that socialism was conceived as the antithesis of capitalism. Therefore, if the problems that capitalism causes are still the same, (and they are), then, if socialism means anything definite at all, it must mean what it meant when it was demonstrated (by Marx and Engels) to be the necessary antithesis of capitalism. If socialism cannot be realised in that form, then we should simply stop talking about socialism and give another name to the alternative which society struggles against capitalism and seeks to build. I see the sense in this argument, but I will not heed its advice. Nor, however, will I seek to rescue the doctrinaire definitions of socialism from what I regard as the passing of its historical moment of possibility. Instead, I want to defend a conception of socialism (which we can also find in Marx and Engels, although I will not focus on their texts here) as a value
system (leaving open the question of institutionalization) which is grounded in certain permanent needs of social individuals, needs which capitalism systematically fails to satisfy (or satisfies only in distorted form). Since capitalism cannot satisfy these needs in any ultimately satisfying way, it will never be fully stable or its future permanently secured.

Thus, rather than see public health care, for example, as part of a reformist agenda for a better capitalism, my position sees it as an element of socialist society existing within capitalism, albeit in inadequate under-resourced and bureaucratic form. If my view is correct, then the process involves, but is not reducible to, political struggle against specific, structural blockages to further development. Beneath these particular explosions is a deeper process of structural and normative change across time carried forward by rejection of socially enforced beliefs in the superiority of one group of people vis-à-vis another, and therefore loss of legitimacy of the institutions of socially enforced exclusion and deprivation. The vehicle by which this goal is carried forward, therefore, is not class-consciousness in the narrow sense, but recognition of the life-ground, that is, attunement to the needs all human beings share. The reality of these needs is daily pressed home for the majority of people because their lives under capitalism are unsatisfying and unhealthy (in the broadest sense of the term).

The point of shifting focus, from the day to day of political struggle to the depth sociality of human being and the life-capital that it produces and which sustains it is to sustain hope in the midst of the defeat of particular experiments and movements. There is a politics of the day to day and a politics of the longue durée of life-development. Of course, the politics of the longue durée does not alleviate the need for the politics of particular struggle.

Given that the third of Lefebvre’s three volume work was published in 1981 and the first in 1947, it might be immediately objected that whatever interest the book may once have held, the extraordinary changes to everyday life since the late 1980’s caused by globalization and communication technology have rendered his analyses obsolete. Such an objection takes too shallow a view of everyday life. While there no doubt have been changes to the structure of everyday life, the underlying values that steer our ordinary relationships with each other, our expectations, and the social threats to those values remain the same. Lefebvre would be the first to accept that everyday life has a history (that is why he wrote three volumes each separated by roughly twenty years).

Lefebvre saw clearly the opposition between capitalist consumer technology and spontaneous freedom of the human personality:

Assimilation, repetition, equivalence (calculable, predictable, and hence open to rational administration)—such are the characteristics daily life tends towards … Everyday life managed like an enterprise within an enormous, technocratically administered system—such is the first and last word of the technocratic ethic: every moment anticipated, quantified in money terms, and programmed temporally and spatially.

On the one hand, capitalism is proclaimed as the liberator of the human imagination, on the other hand, we are told that everything about us down to our most intimate desires may be inferred from quantifiable patterns of purchasing activity. In a sense, both are correct: if we mean by freedom "freedom to buy" and our purchases are subject to tracking, patterns can indeed be detected, and predictions (strategic advertising interventions) made. Yet this paradox of consumer freedom only reinforces the truth of the criticism that everyday life in capitalism alienates the human personality, substituting for the spontaneity of experience and activity programmed simulacra which might amuse in the moment, but fail to satisfy over the long term of life.

The dissatisfactions of everyday life under capitalism fuel on-going discontent. For many, of course, the discontent is born of real deprivation, i.e., genuine lack of the fundamental life-requirements that all people depend upon. Yet even where there is abundant wealth and basic needs are satisfied, there is a deeper malaise: a universal boredom and directionlessness that only a radical transformation of everyday life could cure.

As Derrida explains by way of commentary, Levinas thought that the primary duty of human beings "is to welcome the other in his alterity, without waiting, and thus not to pause to recognise his real predicates," welcoming which is not, he points out without risk.[22] This capacity to recognize unmet needs and to welcome the one who requires their satisfaction also underlies the forms of everyday sociality of traditional societies, in which people cooperate and share the product of their labour, practices which live on even in capitalism in institutionalised (public provision of goods like health care and education) and non-institutionalised (sharing amongst friends) ways.

To argue that this capacity to recognize and respond to harm in others is universal is not to say that it is always expressed without regard to cultural particularities (that the other is always welcomed in his alterity). Its very universality makes it vulnerable to exploitation by divisive political powers in conditions of crisis or scarcity. Of course, everyday dispositions can be mobilised to support war efforts, even when there is absolutely nothing at stake for the majority of the population (the support of the American population for the First and Second Gulf Wars is a case in point). This example is also proof that what goes wrong in cases where a population is moved to cheer the defeat of an "enemy" even when nothing is at stake for them is the alienation of the everyday disposition towards peace. In both cases, support for the war had to be built by convincing the American populations that Saddam Hussein was a threat, not only to their lives, but the lives of Iraqis (and Kuwaiti’s, in the First Gulf War), and that human fellow feeling required intervention. In other words, support is built on the basis of an alienated
form of the underlying disposition towards peace: supporters believe that war is not with the Iraqi people, to whom a duty to assist is owed, but with their murderous oppressor who is blamed for the conflict.

That transformation, as Lefebvre made clear, cannot just be a structural transformation, but must embrace everyday life. That means it must include as essential elements changed relationships between sexes and genders, between races and ethnicities, between neighbours and citizens; it must involve changed attitudes towards the environment and other living creatures, i.e., the express concerns of the multiple social movements that have dominated the radical agenda since the nineteen sixties. The conditions for the success of any of these movements involves, in addition to whatever particular cultural and psychological barriers they must confront, freeing life-resources that all oppressed people require to live fully, freely, meaningfully, in harmony with the natural world and each other.

Bernie Sanders’ campaign is an exception, but anywhere in the world where there is a tradition of social democracy, i.e., the whole Global North outside of the United States, Sanders would not be called a socialist but a social democrat. On the other hand, the fact that Sanders is attracting such large numbers of young people to his message of “democratic socialism” is a telling rebuke of the political, economic, and ideological status quo of the United States.