Henri Lefebvre’s discovery of ‘modernity’ – a term he did not coin, but to the establishment of whose theoretical pedigree he made a significant contribution¹ – seems fully to confirm Fredric Jameson’s thesis that modernity can only be perceived as such from an ‘exterior’ which is identified with a ‘pre-modern enclave’;² or, more precisely, as an enclave facing its imminent modernisation, the devastating effects of its absorption into a world which, in the space of a final instant, it can confront in the manner of the ‘not yet’. In this sense, the primal scene, whose repetition and displacements punctuate the long course of Lefebvre’s life and thought, is none other than that of the ‘crucified sun’ which he himself retraced in some justly famous pages of La Somme et le reste.³ An urban adolescent on holiday in Navarrenx – the maternal village, embodiment of the traditional universe – and immersed in a rural world that is at once oppressive and communal, archaic

¹ See the pioneering endeavour of Lefebvre 1995. In particular, Lefebvre distinguished between modernity and modernism, the former referring to the self-reflexive moment of an epoch, while the latter constitutes its dominant cultural phenomenon. Modernity appears as the ‘shadow’ cast over bourgeois society by the failure of revolution, at once a compensatory substitute and the ineliminable trace of vanquished hopes.


³ See Lefebvre 1989, pp. 251–66.
and festive, is gripped by a primal fear at the sight of a disc stamped with a cross erected on a monument at the side of a country path: it is the ‘crucified sun’. And, via this allegory of religion’s oppressive function, he comes to feel, rather than understand as such, the internal gulf constitutive of the traditional social order, which is in the process of disappearing. The trauma at the centre of it, Lefebvre will discover later, refers to the destruction of a life-experience that is older still – an ancient pagan, solar, festive tradition, shattered by feudal power and its austere official religion. However, they will never entirely be rid of this prior form, which will find refuge in the subterranean strata of social existence, rising to the surface during each interruption of its normal course: festivals, carnivals, popular revolts.

With the aid of the retrospective obviousness typical of biographical constructions, it would doubtless not be difficult to ‘rediscover’ in the shock created by the discrepancy between two contradictory orders of experience the thematic core which the subsequent œuvre will seek to unfold – especially that ‘ambiguous, distrustful and fascinated, lucid and forewarned curiosity’ which Lefebvre brought to bear on a triumphant modernity. This curiosity underlay what Lefebvre himself referred to as a ‘new romanticism’ – an unstable, ambivalent and, by that very token, productive mixture of nostalgia for the past and enthusiasm for novelty, of active rebellion and a desire for harmony and reconciliation.

This is what is reactivated and revived during the traumatic shock – an obvious repetition of the primal scene – triggered by the construction, towards the end of the 1950s, of the new town of Mourenx alongside the Navarrenx of Lefebvre’s childhood and adolescence: the reflection on space and the urban phenomenon has its source here – in the brutal intrusion of an aggressive

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5 See the final ‘prelude’ in Lefebvre 1995 (pp. 239–388), entitled ‘Towards a New Romanticism?’.
6 The violence transpires more clearly in the freer, more settled terms of an interview that long postdates the event, than in the contemporary analysis of it in the nevertheless decisive chapter ‘Notes on the New Town’ (1960), in Lefebvre 1995, pp. 116–26: ‘at one point I saw a town being constructed, with extraordinary brutality: the town was decided in high places, the bulldozers arrived, the peasants were traumatised – it was a drama in the country: Mourenx. It was then that I got down to studying the urban phenomenon. I witnessed the creation of a new town on the spot’ (Lefebvre 1983, p. 56).