

## 4.4. Spatial-Historical Waypoints in the Possible: Generating Sociological Knowledge by Walking between Manchester's Forty-Four Post Offices

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### **Abstract**

In this essay, I outline how notions of social possibility and utopian theory were incorporated into the ethnographic portion of my sociology PhD, "Postcapitalism and the Post Office: The Role of Public Services in Utopian Futures" (Greenwood, 2023). The PhD aims to contribute to the understanding of how public experience of social possibility is affected by the condition of public services and to consider the strategic role that public services might play in bringing about a more utopian society. The project takes the UK's Post Office as its main case study and subjects the institution to a utopian social-historical and empirical investigation. The institution was chosen for the project for two primary reasons. Firstly, its prolonged existence (with roots stretching back to early modernity) makes it an institution through which changing relationships between the state, economy, society, and changing ideas about public services, can be read across key historical periods to the present day. Secondly, the institution's presence as routinely encounterable post offices presents a means of empirically investigating the way these relationships and ideas have arrived at the living moment, and of assessing the effects they have on social experience — including senses of social possibility. To aid theoretical consistency in the move from a utopian-social history of the Post Office to empirical investigation of its spatial presence, Henri Lefebvre's "spatial triad" has been utilized as a means of "spatializing" the utopian theory that forms the project's theoretical core. In what follows, I will outline the project's empirical strategy and summarize its main utopian concepts, before presenting an example of how these were spatialized.

**Key words:** Bloch, Benjamin, Marcuse, Lefebvre, ethnography

Post offices can be seen as spatial manifestations of an historic institution moving into an as yet undetermined future. Their presence will emanate something of this history and this future to people as they encounter them. Something of the futures that could come about for post offices will be to an extent implicit, given how relatively valued or vital, struggling or flourishing they seem to be. The specifics of the history of the institution may be more or less known to people, but their sense of how it has arrived at this point and why a post office in a particular location looks like it does, who its customers are, how well they and the post office staff seem to be doing will be enmeshed in the context of a general conception of social change over time. This sense of change will also have a dimension of locality to it. How does this place seem to be getting on relative to other places in the city, the country, the world?

Along with an awareness of being situated in a spatial-historical context of social change will be some awareness of what the conditions of possibility are within it. Different things are evidently more or less possible in some places and some times than in others. The different ecologies of possibility that people find themselves enmeshed in will be related to others that they perceive of as existing, having existed, or as having the possibility of existing in other places and times. People move house, migrate, or wish they had been born in other countries or at other periods in history, because they have the sense that they might stand a better chance of flourishing within a different ecology of possibility. Viewing post offices as sites of interest within particular ecologies of possibility presents a starting point for their investigation in a utopian-oriented ethnographic strategy. Pertinent utopian sociological data could plausibly be generated through making observations about the sorts of possibility evident in and around these sites, and by considering what would need to change to dramatically improve them. Relating this to the history and possible future of the Post Office, considering its possible role in connecting and contributing to improved ecologies of possibility would begin to tie these data to the main utopian social-historical trajectory of the project.

## Into the Empirical

To initiate the empirical aspect of my PhD, I identified each post office within a three-mile radius around Manchester City Centre (currently forty-four post offices), and devised three walking routes via which I could visit each of them over the course of two and a half days of walking. Each route would be walked several times over the course of several weeks and copious ethnographic audio notes would be taken en route to and at each post office visited.

This part of the fieldwork was devised to familiarize me with the neighbourhoods the post offices were located in, to develop my own sense of how these neighbourhoods were “getting on” and to try to gain some sense of the ways that different, shifting qualities of possibility might be detectable in the city, and the roles post offices might be playing within these. It was also devised as a means of preparing for a second part of the empirical strategy: possibility-focused walking interviews with post office customers between post offices in different Manchester neighbourhoods.

The use of possibility to bridge the utopian social-historical and empirical/spatial dimensions of the Post Office provided the beginnings of a way to make the move from theory to ethnographic investigation. But imagining “improved ecologies of possibility” does not yet address the underlying normative basis for making claims about what would constitute such improvement. As Ruth Levitas has argued, sociology ought not to shy away from making normative claims, and speculative sociology can usefully extend this normative/critical reach into future social possibilities (2013: 98–114). Such claims require some justification. In this project, the work of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse has been key to building a case for utopia as a project that *ought* to be engaged in, and to providing some sense of what qualitative changes this would entail. Below, I briefly summarize a selection of concepts from their work which I have utilized in the project. I then address the matter of their spatialization for empirical use.

## Key Utopian Concepts

Ernst Bloch’s concept of “concrete utopia” involves his understanding of Marxist praxis as being the first means by which humanity can — with full consciousness — intervene in the historic process and usher the world towards the real utopian possibility that is present within reality (Bloch, 1995a: 206; 1995b: 623). This sense of utopia as a process and a project, something undertaken from a particular concrete circumstance connects action with utopia, not as a hazy, inspiring vision, but — however distantly — as the real ultimate object of the action. This is important, for Bloch, not just in terms of the need for the action to occur, but in that something of its utopian orientation should be understood. For Bloch, Marxism that neglected to emphasize its implicit utopian purpose risked failing to connect with key motivating aspects of humanity: desire, longing, a sense of belonging, the affective power of art, the sense of profundity associated with myth and religion. If Marxism focused on a cold, critical, and deterministic interpretation of society

and class struggle, it risked ceding such profound territories of human experience to the right, which is what he saw as having occurred in the rise of fascism (Bloch, 2018: 54–229; Hudson, 1982: 45).

For Walter Benjamin, capitalist modernity had seen a significant degradation in the quality of human experience. In pre-modernity, Benjamin viewed experience (*Erfahrung*) as having had an intersubjective, mutually-woven, communal aspect to it, the qualities of which he associated with the social prevalence of storytelling and artisanal production. This was experience that had a kind of narrative grandeur; it was experience that was always a continuation of something (Benjamin, 2006; Miller, 2014: 40). Benjamin saw in modernity a retreat of experience into the subject where it took on an individualized and psychological character (*Erlebnis*). This was effectively an enclosure of experience. In place of the rich narrative continuity of pre-modern experience, experience was now characterized by shock and sensation, boredom and repetition, and given little coherence or meaning by the rise of information, the hubbub of urban life, and the clatter of production lines (Benjamin, 2006: 329; Salzani, 2009). Even though Benjamin does not make a specific proposal for a restitution of *Erfahrung* through a reordering of society, the sense of an urgent need to halt capitalist “progress” and to construct a world that redeems the suffering endured under progress’s brutal march, as elaborated in “On the Concept of History” (Löwy, 2016) implies a need to construct a future society in which this form of experience would once again be afforded the possibility to flourish.

For Herbert Marcuse, utopia was something that was no longer “utopian” but now realizable. Developments in technology and productive capacity meant utopia was no longer objectively impossible (Marcuse, 2014). What remained in the way of such a realization was the surplus repression that kept people trapped into the reproduction of capitalist civilization. Marcuse agreed with Freud that the development of civilization had required a necessary repression of human drives, but saw the extent of this repression as far beyond what was necessary now that civilization had developed the capacity to provide all with the requirements for a flourishing life (Marcuse, 1998: 91; Marcuse, 2014). The erotic, for Marcuse, was the key drive which had had to be repressed for civilization to develop and endure. The erotic, experienced as the drive to sexual gratification, was — as the desire for sexual gratification alone — an immature and constrained manifestation of what was in fact a drive to an intense engagement with the world, a creative and playful urge to build, secure, and expand the conditions for gratification (Marcuse, 1998: 212). If capitalism’s surplus repression could be pushed back, systems built to sustain qualitatively new forms of pleasurable living could expand into the space it had been ejected from. A libidinal investment in the institutions which constructed and sustained such systems would be a

feature of life in the society that arose through such a dynamic. This raises the prospect (if we accept Marcuse's reasoning) of the existence in the future of such a thing as the erotic post office.

## Spatialization

These concepts each provide a justification for utopia as a project to be engaged in, and offer some sense of which human capacities ought to be given the means to flourish through the world that the project would set about establishing. Although they are usefully relatable to a narrative of the historical emergence of, and changes to, ideas about public services and their possible futures, and thus easily situatable in the theoretical/narrative core of the PhD, the means by which they might be employed in an empirical, spatial context is less immediately evident. Assistance with this problem was provided by using Lefebvre's spatial triad to bring focus to the spatial aspects of these concepts, and frame these such that they became more readily empirically witnessable. Before providing some examples of how this was undertaken, I will summarize Lefebvre's ideas about space and his understanding of its three key aspects.

For Lefebvre, space (under capitalism) was something socially produced, with the reality of its production being mystified in ways analogous to Marx's understanding of the fetishization of commodities. Space was something conceived, perceived, and lived, but the level of conception — the level at which space was enlisted by those who intended to utilize it for profit or for ideological ends — tended to obscure its lived and perceived aspects. To begin the work of demystifying the production of space, Lefebvre devised his spatial triad, not as a means of identifying in space three ontologically separate arenas by which elements of space could be rigidly categorized, but as a conceptual tool that could help us maintain vigilance against space's reification, and to push back against the obscuring of space's lived and perceived dimensions (Merrifield, 2003).

In brief, Lefebvre's spatial triad comprises: (1) "Representations of space": this is space as conceived by those at the strategic level with a material or ideological interest in its production: town planners, developers, the council, police; (2) "Representational spaces": this is space as lived, imagined, sensed — the qualitative, experiential aspects of spatial being; (3) Spatial practices: this is what is going on between people and between physical objects in space (1991: 38). This includes the shifts in kinds of activity that occur in different spatial zones, how people make their ways between them, and the forms of competence that these various goings-on require (Merrifield, 2003; Degen, 2015: 18).

To use this conceptual tool as a means of spatializing the utopian concepts noted above, I created a table which helped me to sketch out what their spatialized implications could be. A truncated version of this table demonstrates how the process worked for Benjamin’s understanding of experience, *Erfahrung* versus *Erlebnis* (Table 1).

Utopian concept	Spatial triad	Spatialized utopian/antiutopian output
Experience ( <i>Erfahrung</i> vs. <i>Erlebnis</i> )	Representations of space	How is experience represented and how is any desire for richness and depth in experience handled (misdirected) strategically? How is intersubjective experience repelled by built environments? What messages, implicit or explicit, may be contributing to its individualization?
	Spatial practices	What sorts of enduring meaning can attach to the “doing” that occurs here? What narratives might arise from these? How might narratives be fractured/individualized by these? What spaces/opportunities are there here for activities that grow beyond those generally encouraged/sanctioned?
	Representational spaces	How is affective experience cultivated or thwarted here? What stories, myths, senses of significance are present for people as they move through space here? How do people feel in relation to their communities and — specifically — how do they sense their ability to shape or make impressions on this locality?

Each of the key utopian concepts at the project's core was subjected to the same process of spatialization, and through this process it was possible to generate sets of cues for empirical observations for the first walking (ethnography) stage of the empirical plan, and to generate questions and conversational prompts for the second, walking (interview) stage. This improves the chances that the observations made and the discussions had with participants would speak to (and present challenges to) the normative and qualitative aspects of the project's core utopian themes.

## Conclusion

Through focusing on the aspects of possibility empirically detectable at and around Manchester's post offices, and through spatializing the key utopian concepts underlying the project's theoretical core, it became possible to embark on the empirical part of the PhD with some confidence that the data produced would speak to these key concepts, the narrative of the development of the Post Office and public services, and the paths these might take to a utopian future. There are likely to be many other ways in which such utopian concepts could be fruitfully spatialized, and there are aspects of each theorist's work which might present more direct routes to spatialized utopian insights. For this project, this somewhat instrumental use of Lefebvre's spatial triad provided a means of finding such insights, while usefully bringing together its main theoretical and empirical aspects.

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