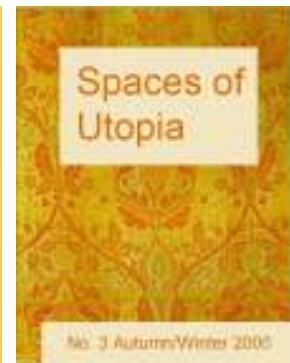


## **The End of Utopia: Imminent and Immanent Liberation**

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### **Introduction**

My point of departure is Herbert Marcuse's lecture "The End of Utopia" in Berlin in 1967 (Marcuse 1970: 62-82). I recapitulate Marcuse's argument, and note a difficulty raised by a question from the floor as to how tomorrow's needs are established today. Marcuse finds himself unable to say how this happens, but in subsequent work seeks an exit from the impasse in a biological need for freedom, and emphasis on the role of an intelligentsia in the production of an imminent utopia. My question is whether it is viable to understand utopia as immanent – pervasive and inherent.

### **Marcuse in Berlin**

Marcuse's lectures at the Free University, Berlin, took place during a four-day event from July 12, 1967, arranged by the SDS (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund). His lectures were followed by a paper to the Dialectics of Liberation Congress at the Roundhouse, London (July 15 to 30). In both events, he delineates a New Left which combines Marxism with new political, social and cultural currents.

Douglas Kellner, introducing volume 3 of Marcuse's *Collected Papers*, writes that "[t]he New Left includes neo-anarchist tendencies, is anti-authoritarian, and is not bound to the working class as the sole revolutionary force" (Marcuse 2005: 18). Other forces include the student movement, to a lesser extent the Hippies, and adherents of a counter-culture. Noting the influence of Maoism and

national liberation movements, Kellner adds that the New Left is distinct in its “total opposition” to “imperialism, racism, sexism, and manifold forms of oppression”, and in “the multiple forms of resistance it advocates ranging from peaceful non-violent sit-ins and demonstrations to militant opposition to institutions and practices of violence within the system itself” (*ibidem*). At the Roundhouse, Marcuse’s paper was delivered alongside a Living Theatre performance, a reading of mantras by Allan Ginsberg, and a call for Black power from Stokely Carmichael. But for Angela Davis the 1960s are “a point of origin (...) rather than an historical moment (...) a place that we evoke with wonder and joy, but one that is forever beyond our reach” (*apud* Marcuse 2005: 1).

In Berlin, Marcuse argues that utopia, as a non-realizable dream, has ended, and is now a real-possibility. A capacity for destruction reveals its opposite, “the end of utopia, that is, the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities” (Marcuse 1970: 62). He foresees a rupture of the historical continuum, the inception of a qualitative difference in social organisation:

All the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand. That they are not used for that purpose is to be attributed to the total mobilization of existing society against its own potential for liberation. (*idem*, 64)

This leads Marcuse to propose qualitatively new human needs “as a biological necessity” (*idem*, 65).

I find this difficult, being wary of biological approaches in urbanism (as in E. W. Burgess’s use of anabolic and katabolic processes of metabolism in his account of transitional zones of migration). The shift into biology puts matters outside history and human agency. Marcuse argues that needs are historical, however, hence mutable, as if to say that biology, too, is *produced*.

This may (my reading is insufficient) link to reconsiderations of Darwinism by Elizabeth Grosz. It would suggest a gradual, incremental change, of the kind Grosz reads in Darwin’s use of linguistic development as analogy for evolution: “This inherent drift or movement of change within language (...) eventually results in the production of new dialects, which may eventually, over time, further differentiate themselves to become distinct languages” (Grosz 2004: 27). It is

unclear in Darwin what is meant by origin, but clearer that a process of minor and gradual differentiation takes place continuously. If, for the sake of argument, that occurs in a human awareness of needs, it is a lengthy process (longer than Raymond Williams' long revolution), and as if self-propelling.

To return to Marcuse, "the break with continuity (...) is not a mere invention but inheres in the development of the productive forces themselves" (Marcuse 1970: 65). This might appear a biological model, but reiterates the Marxist idea that conditions contain the seeds of their undoing. Among factors which produce new needs are technological advances which end toil and scarcity. But Marcuse then speaks of "the vital biological need for peace, which today is not a vital need of the majority, the need for calm, the need to be alone, with oneself or with others whom one has chosen for oneself, the need for the beautiful, the need for 'undeserved' happiness" (*idem*, 67). It sounds like the mythicised ivory tower. Elements of this are developed in Marcuse's later work on aesthetics (1978), but there is a reflection, too, of his 1945 essay on Aragon which sketches a literature of the intimate – love stories – as a refuge from oppression in darkest times (Marcuse 1998: 199-214). Marcuse retains the term socialism for a society in which he foresees a "convergence of technology and art and the convergence of work and play" (Marcuse 1970: 68). Is that which inheres also presented as having direction? Or does this re-state a leap of faith in an underlying capacity for freedom which, like hope for Bloch (1959), is latent and can be shaped (not least in culture)? The theme is extended at the Roundhouse: liberation from the affluent society is identical with socialism if socialism is defined as "the abolition of labour, the termination of the struggle for existence – that is to say life as an end in itself and no longer as a means to an end – and the liberation of human sensibility and sensitivity, not as a private factor, but as a force for transformation of human existence and its environment" (Marcuse 1968: 184).

He then introduces an old dream:

It means that the creative imagination (...) would become a productive force applied to the transformation of the social and natural universe. It would mean the emergence of a form of reality which is the work and the medium of the developing sensibility and sensitivity (...) And now I throw in the terrible concept: it would mean an "aesthetic" reality – society as a

work of art. This is the most Utopian, the most radical possibility of liberation today. (*ibidem*)

In Berlin, however, Marcuse ends with a call for a pragmatic opposition, and a refusal of defeatism. Among questions after the Berlin lecture was:

It seemed (...) the centre of your paper today was the thesis that a transformation of society must be preceded by a transformation of needs. For me this implies that changed needs can only arise if we first abolish the mechanisms that have let the needs come into being as they are. (...) you have shifted the accent toward enlightenment and away from revolution. (Marcuse 1970: 80)

Marcuse replies:

You have defined what is unfortunately the greatest difficulty in the matter. Your objection is that, for new, revolutionary needs to develop, the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them. That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it. (*ibidem*)

There are clues in Marcuse's paper at the Roundhouse for a partial exit. I would hold particularly to the idea of life as its own end, as the means which *is* the desired (but never completed) end – the means as the new society. More generally, Davis writes of “the obstinacy of maintaining that emancipatory promises are still entangled in the terrifying and ever-expanding system of global capitalism” and in continuing to expose present conditions as they are (Marcuse 2005: x). Then there is art's potential to fracture codes of perception, developed by Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978).

But the difficulty posed by the questioner in Berlin is, as stated, insurmountable: like needing a ticket to board a bus when tickets are sold only on board the bus; needing to enter tomorrow to fix its preconditions today.

In the aftermath of 1968, Marcuse works through the difficulties. He claims, in *An Essay on Liberation*, a biological foundation for socialism (Marcuse 1969: 17-30). From a fostering of interests vested in the system “in the instinctual structure of the exploited”, he asserts that radical change exceeds traditional Marxian theory in a biological dimension “in which the vital, imperative needs and satisfactions of man [*sic*] assert themselves” (*idem*, 25). This reads like an objectively given end of history, or Bloch's efforts to establish hope as

equivalent to a Freudian drive. The difficulty here is a requirement for faith in that redemptive (and Benjaminesque) possibility.

But if New Jerusalem does not magically descend from a Heaven in which human agency does not occur, the new society is produced in struggle; and in dialectics, in the conditions in which the subject is conditioned but in which the subject can intervene. Marcuse recognises that a revolution of the proletariat is “not on the agenda”, but sees a new political consciousness “among the nonconformist young intelligentsia; and the (...) very life of the ghetto population” (*idem*, 61). He realises that while democratic structures require defence against encroachment, they reproduce the status quo; and that radical change depends on a mass public from which the struggle as played out is isolated (*idem*, 71-72). Then there is the discussion of aesthetic form as autonomous, redeeming and transcendent; and the intelligentsia: “The development of a true consciousness is still the professional function of the universities” (*idem*, 49, 65). As it happens I agree. But I do not see that as an entirely adequate response to Marcuse’s aporia as it loomed in Berlin in 1967.

### **The Realisation of a Dream or Dreams of Realisation?**

Yet things happen. At the Roundhouse, Marcuse cited Benjamin’s remark that in the Paris Commune, Communards shot at clocks “consciously or half-consciously expressing the need that somehow time has to be arrested” (Marcuse 1968: 177). And in *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse notes the importance of subverting the dominant language: “If the radical opposition develops its own language, it protests spontaneously, subconsciously, against one of the most effective ‘secret weapons’ of domination” (Marcuse 1969: 77). Kellner notes Marcuse’s formative experience in the German Revolution, and admiration for Rosa Luxemburg’s idea of a totality of upheaval; but also his pessimism that there is more than a fragmentary opposition, devoid of remedy, lapsing into hopelessness (Marcuse 2005: 7-8). On his paper at the Roundhouse, Kellner remarks:

This unabashedly utopian notion articulated counterculture desire for an entirely new society and way of life with alternative values, sensibilities, relationships, and culture. Yet Marcuse used Marxist terminology to critique existing capitalist societies and insisted that

socialist revolution was the most viable way to create an emancipated society (...) Creating a freer, happier, and more just society (...) required education, political organisation, and solidarity with Third World revolutionary struggles and movements for radical change within the affluent society. (*apud* Marcuse 2005: 19-20)

But it did not happen as dreamed. In 1968, the project was left in mid-air.

A number of aspects can be drawn out. There seems no difficulty in using Marxian theory to critique capitalism, the purpose for which it was designed, though there is a need to update it now in face of globalisation and immaterial production. But the imagined sensibility raises the previous question as to how it occurs. If it is really new, not a reform, how is it produced? Is it – to borrow from Ernesto Laclau's 1996 essay on Emancipation(s) – a refusal of an existing sensibility, hence on its terms, or separated by a chasm? Laclau ends with this note:

the quest for an absolute freedom for the subject is tantamount to a quest for an unrestricted dislocation and the total disintegration of the social fabric. It also means that a democratic society which has become a viable social order will not be a totally free society, but one which has negotiated in a specific way the duality freedom/unfreedom. (Laclau 1996: 19)

This fits with Marcuse's call for pragmatic resistance. It means the project never ends, and never reaches its desired end. But there is more, and here Bloch – on whom I take Ze'ev Levy's commentary – is helpful.

Levy reads Bloch as describing history as “a totality that ought to be conceived and explicated by its end (in the twofold sense of this word) (...) a future which opens up ‘endless’ new possibilities” (Levy 1997: 176). As he also remarks, Bloch introduces a “real possibility” of utopia, which is unconditioned. That is, “what is conditioned (...) cannot be included in what Bloch calls utopia” (*idem*, 178). Excluded from it, then, is the inverse reproduction in which capitalism automatically leads to socialism as a product of its contradictions. As Levy writes, “Utopia can become an objective and real possibility only when it is not bound by predetermined conditions. Only an unconditional utopia can become a realisable utopia” (*idem*, 179). He explains that Bloch adds to Marxism a layer of a primordial hunger – “a more or less natural motive” which remains questionable – and a layer of hope – “atheistic religiosity” (*ibidem*). All this is problematic, but leads Bloch to the following considerations:

Freedom – the ultimate end of hope – is not an abstract, empty freedom, but one that is concrete and real. This means that it is possible to reach and realize it. It will be freedom from hunger and distress, from fear and anxiety; at the same time it will be freedom to develop, without restraints, the manifold inclinations, capabilities and potentialities concealed in humanity's inner being. (*idem*, 180)

I think that can be compared with Grosz's reading of Darwinism as the development, without restraints other than those of survival, of difference.

I still worry that it sounds like a natural history. But the issue is brought into focus by Bloch's writing on Joachim of Fiore's declaration of a dis-integrated social order:

He was not trying to purge the Church, or even the state, of their atrocities; they were abolished instead. And the existing gospel was rekindled, or rather the *lux nova* within it (...) Connected with this (...) was the complete transfer of the kingdom of light *from the other world and the empty promises of the other world into history*, even though to a final state of history. (...) Joachim's chosen few are the poor, and they are to go to paradise in the living body, not just as spirits. In the society of the third Testament there are no classes any more (...) The body too thereby becomes guiltlessly happy, as in the original state of paradise, and the frozen earth is filled with the appearance of a sacred May. (Bloch 1959: 509-511)

Laclau's pragmatism contrasts with Bloch's recklessness. Marcuse is poised between the polarities. His call for pragmatic intervention uses a different language but is not worlds away:

Only when [concrete philosophy] influences existence in the public sphere, in its daily being, in the sphere where it really exists, can it hasten the movement of this existence in the direction of truth (...) At the end of every concrete philosophy stands the public act. (*apud* Wolin 2001: 149)

Marcuse's lectures and his talk at the Roundhouse were such public acts, however, the means of an intellectual class.

Bloch is helpful in drawing attention to the continuity of hope. I would add to his millenarian examples that of the Diggers in the English Revolution (see Petegorsky [1940] 1999: 153-228); and alternative settlements today, in eco-villages and intentional communities where the means of living is the end, always extending, of revolutionary thought. At this point, suggesting a new society concretely exists, I wonder if Lefebvre offers another exit from Marcuse's aporia. Rob Shields views Lefebvre's theory of moments as overlooked compared to his work on space, by which Geography reinvented itself as an academic discipline



(while Sociology flirted with consumption) (Shields 1999: 58). The theory is not separate from Lefebvre's theory of space, but an earlier form of it. It says, briefly, that moments, like flashes of liberating consciousness, occur within the banal and alienating routines of daily life. Such moments are revelatory, in an ordinary rather than transcendental sense.

Shields glosses: "This would bring a revolution into the mundane and trivial details of everyday life" (*idem*, 58-59). He continues that Lefebvre formulated this idea in reaction against Bergson's emphasis on time, the moment interrupting the progression of time and its affirmation of a status quo. Moments are glimpses of utopian consciousness, everyday, everywhere, immanent, and inherent in the situation. What this might do – I do not know if it is a conceit – is to shift the ground of the problem from time to space.

Shields cites Michael Gardiner on a similarity between Lefebvre's moments, Bloch's *novum* and Benjamin's idea of an optical unconscious (Gardiner 1995: 118 n9). Gardiner writes later of Lefebvre's critique of everyday life as requiring attunement to every facet of human existence: "the poetic, irrational, corporeal, ethical and affective" and that, from Bloch, there is a possibility for a warm stream of creative speculation beside a cooler social analysis (Gardiner 2000: 19). I suppose it is like Joseph Beuys's over-cited assertion that everyone is an artist, by which he meant, not a salaried fine artist like himself, but able to imagine a future other than that prescribed.

I am left wondering if the turn to biology is irrelevant, as the turn to aesthetics reflects despair. If the new society is extant it needs no invention, only recognition, and of course to be understood in all its complexities, as a process which has no end and will never be completed. Perhaps, after all, the image of a society as a work of art is not entirely fanciful.



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