

**Other Spaces Are Still Possible:
Marcuse, Theory, and 'The End of Utopia' Today**

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Abstract

In his 1967 lecture “The End of Utopia,” Herbert Marcuse confronted the anti-utopianism of the day by dialectically turning its arguments on their head. *Utopia*, as defined by its opponents, was indeed dead, but the critical function of utopia was powerfully alive in the struggles for liberation in the 1960s. Today, in the era of globalization, in which radical alternatives to the present political-economic organization seems all the more impossible or inconceivable, Marcuse’s argument gains renewed relevance, and the recent Occupy Wall Street movement’s struggle for new spaces of liberty offers one practical example of the utopian impulse in action. Based on a talk presented at the International Herbert Marcuse Society’s “Critical Refusals” conference, this essay revisits Marcuse’s argument over the end of utopia and argues for the vitality of critical theory in understand, and changing, the world today.

Utopia is commonly imagined as a far off place—an ideal society set off from the rest of the world like Thomas More’s famous island Utopia, or perhaps closer to home, like Thoreau’s Walden Pond—that stands apart from the debased or imperfect world that it expressly or implicitly criticizes. By the mid-twentieth century, utopia also was understood as an impossible, and perhaps also undesirable, condition. In the era of globalization, any space “outside” of the political economic system appears almost inconceivable. For example, as the global financial crisis continues to reverberate throughout the world, we are reminded of just how inextricably linked the economic and political forces are, and how such forces are capable of effecting even the most quotidian aspects of our lives. A defining characteristic of late capitalism or globalization appears to

be a profound sense of inevitability or inalterability, as it often appears to be easier to imagine the apocalyptic end of the world than a radical alternative to the political economic system in which we are immured. At such a moment, utopia seems even more fanciful or irrelevant, and one can once again imagine the end of utopia.

However, as the spontaneous protests of Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and other restless movements agitating for change demonstrate, the utopian impulse remains powerfully vital today. Especially in its critical vocation, as it highlights the failings of the present system rather than sketching the concrete parameters of a future alternative, this utopian impulse is a forceful response to an intolerable status quo and to the anti-utopian strictures upon the imagination. That is, even within the apparently total system of globalization, other spaces are possible. The task of critical theory is to aid in imagining such spaces, primarily through “the ruthless critique of all that exists,” as Marx put it. The present moment offers an apt occasion for revisiting an argument of perhaps the most significant utopian think of the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse, whose own ruminations on “the end of utopia” present a timely argument for our own postmodern condition.

In the concluding lines of his powerful and eccentric lecture “The end of Utopia,” Marcuse announces that critical theory, if it “does not wish to stop at merely improving the existing state of affairs,” must embrace its utopian vocation (Marcuse 1970, p. 69). Of course, that not exactly how he puts it, since the meaning of the word *utopia* as used in that essay is deliberately ambiguous. In his use of the term, Marcuse manages to include the sense intended by those dismissive anti-utopians, both of the right and of the left, while dialectically countering their argument by positing a post-utopian utopianism in the form of what he calls “the scandal of qualitative difference.” Marcuse shows how the

utopia as conceived by most anti-utopians has indeed ceased to exist, and he offers an alternative image of utopia that retains vitality, while also positing a utopian *end* (in the sense of aim or goal) for critical theory itself. Thus, even as he maneuvered around the sticky problems associated with the word and concept, Marcuse's meditation on utopia's "end" in technologically advanced, industrial societies becomes a call to action, an action fittingly called *opposition*. This oppositional action takes place not only in the streets, but in the arena of critical theory itself, which maintains its utopian function today.

Amid an increasingly technocratic, rationalized, and one-dimensional society, Marcuse championed utopian thought, especially as it can be recognized in productions of the imagination or in the aesthetic dimension, as a powerful countervailing force. For Marcuse and others in the Frankfurt School tradition, the seemingly pervasive triumph of the capitalist mode lay not only in the processes of production, distribution, and consumption, but in an ideological appearance of hermetic closure or totalization that it promulgates and fosters, which inevitably results in viewing the status quo *as* inevitable, immutable, and perhaps eternal, at least from the limited perspective of the present. As Fredric Jameson has famously observed, it is easier for many today to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine an end to capitalism; but, Jameson adds pointedly, "perhaps this is due to some weakness in our imaginations" (1994, p. xii). Jameson, a student of Marcuse, embraces this position with respect to the value of utopian thought, and here he locates the problem of utopia, simultaneously, in both the systematic totality of the capitalist mode of production itself and in our ability to make sense of such a system. That is, the supra-individual historical processes that structure the social spaces in which we live form one set of barriers to our ability to create radically alternative

spaces, but it is also the case that our own imaginations have been stifled. In Marcuse's view, the "productive imagination" discloses the utopian impulse that underlies our social being in the desire to escape from the all too mundane reality of the one-dimensional society we inhabit. This is the power of the *aesthetic*, in what Marcuse notes is "its original sense, namely as the form of sensitivity of the senses and as the form of the concrete world of human life" (1970, p. 68). Seeing the world clearly "as it is" is thus crucial for imagining alternatives to it.

Because it affords a powerful lens through which to make sense of this larger system of which we are necessarily a part, critical theory itself is all the more important for its utopian vocation. In Marcuse's view, philosophy or critical theory "elucidates the negativity of the Establishment (it's positive aspects are abundantly publicized anyway) and projects its alternatives" (1964, p. 199). This is also the dual function of utopia, of course: to call critical attention to the defects, sometimes systematic defects, in actually existing societies on the one hand, and to task the imagination with the frequently daunting, if not impossible, job of envisioning radical alternatives, on the other. This is perhaps one reason why the great literary *dystopias* of the twentieth century maintained such power over the imaginations of their readers. In depicting such imaginary "bad places," dystopias called to mind those very real problems in one's own society. But critical theory can also set aside the fundamentally ethical argument of "good" and "bad" places (or *eutopia* versus *dystopia*) in order to focus its critique more properly on the exigencies of the present moment. Rather than drawing up a blueprint for a more ideal society or set of circumstances, the critical theorist analyzes the actually existing reality and thereby effects an imaginative or aesthetic act by which other forms become visible.

In other words, *by* elucidating “the negativity of the Establishment,” theory is in effect projecting alternatives.

The utopian impulse is thus related to what Marcuse famously labeled the “Great Refusal” in the aesthetic realm: the imagination’s “refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, its refusal to forget what *can be*” (1966, p. 149). The limits to the imagination are thus mechanisms for maintaining the status quo, not merely as in itself as a reality in the world, but also as the absolute boundary of thought itself. Thus, the spaces of the imagination are limited to the spaces presented as already existing. The Actual and the Possible become identical, or, rather, new possibilities can only be conceived within the framework of a “realistic,” already existing set of conditions. However, as Marcuse argues more pointedly in *An Essay on Liberation*, these limits upon the imagination might be imposed by repressive forces in society or by broader historical constraints or both, but beyond the limits of the present, “there is also the space, both physical and mental, for building a realm of freedom which is not that of the present” and “which necessitates an historical break with the past and present” (1969, p. viii).

If Jameson is correct, and our present moment of postmodernism, late capitalism, or globalization is characterized by a profound inability to imagine any alternative, except in the apocalyptic image of the end of the world entirely, then the utopian function of critical theory as conceived by Marcuse remains an important part of any effort to understand or to change the world, perhaps more so than ever before. As I have argued elsewhere, the utopian impulse underlies the critical mapping project by which we make sense of our place in the world today (see Tally 2010a and 2010b). As Jameson notes,

with characteristic boldness, “all thinking today is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such” (1992, p. 4). The attempt to represent the unrepresentable totality is already an imaginative or aesthetic act which begins to transform it into something else, whatever that may eventually be revealed to be. In the seemingly closed space of the world system in the age of globalization, critical theory and utopian practice thus answer the urgent call to imagine other spaces.

Returning to Marcuse’s playful, dialectical double-entendre in acknowledging an “end of utopia,” then, we see the only “utopia” that has really come to its end is the one defined exclusively as an impossibility in the first place. As Marcuse puts it: “Utopia is a historical concept. It refers to projects for social change that are considered impossible” (1970, p. 63). But then Marcuse asks *why* it is impossible. Marcuse cites popular theories of unfeasibility, including those involving the linear, temporal progression which always seems to suggest that the socio-political conditions for possibility for the realm of freedom are either long past (e.g. as in those nostalgic visions of a pastoral, pre-capitalist, even Edenic “communism”) or not yet in place (as with the ever-vanishing horizons of the “ripe” historical moment for revolution). Marcuse also mentions those “utopian” visions that contradict the laws of nature, like the quest for eternal youth or the return of some alleged golden age, but “even this ‘ahistoricity’ has a historical limit” (63). In response to these commonplaces, Marcuse counters that, perhaps for the first time in world history, “All the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand” (64). As far as the old “realm of necessity” goes, this is certainly true by the late 1960s; scientists and economists would agree that the power to eliminate basic human biological needs, like food and shelter, is already

available. Hence, if utopia were defined as a project for social change that is considered impossible, and if the utopian “realm of freedom” seems technically achievable in the present moment, then “we can today actually speak of the end of utopia” (64). In a mischievous dialectical reversal, Marcuse shows that utopia ceases to exist the moment it becomes possible.

But of course, this is not the end of utopia. Marcuse rightly dismisses the linear, teleological, or progressive movement within Marxian or even liberal progressive thought, and urges critical theorists to re-imagine utopia not as the end point in a lengthy historical process, but as a radical alternative to the system itself. “[T]hese historical possibilities must be conceived in forms that signify a break rather than a continuity with previous history, its negation rather than its positive continuation, difference rather than progress” (65). This is what Marcuse means by the “scandal of qualitative difference.” Rather than viewing socialism (or utopia) in terms of quantitative tinkering with the system—that is, to facilitate *more* food, leisure, or health care or to cause *fewer* cases of hunger, poverty, and miserable living conditions—Marcuse urges us to imagine a world, where not just these needs are finally met, but where new needs are created and met, such as the need for peace, for calm, for pleasant company or aloneness, for beauty, and for happiness. In short, Marcuse calls for a new human being, and perhaps this is where the science-fictional elements of utopian discourse surface once more. As Marcuse points out, “needs developed and satisfied in a repressive society” will reproduce that society within the individuals themselves, so for a non-repressive society to emerge, a new form of individual is required. In this sense, utopia is technically possible, but what had previously been viewed as utopia is a false hope, as it must wind up reproducing the

conditions of the status quo. So Marcuse, who first attempted to undermine the arguments of the anti-utopian defenders of the status quo, now offers an argument against those who embraced the concept of utopia as a worthy goal, that is, as the *telos* of a progressive historical unfolding or goal toward which to strive in order to make the world a better place. This is thus another “end of utopia” for Marcuse.

Finally, the end of utopia for Marcuse is the “end” or aim of critical theory itself, whose fundamental task will be to think otherwise or, rather, to think alterity itself. This utopian practice is not a form of idle wish-fulfillment, as in the utopianism of something like the Brook Farm commune as presented with scathing irony in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*; nor is it in the form of some quasi-scientific bean-counting geared toward a progressive improvements of capitalism’s excesses, as in the model of social democracy, for instance, but rather “the determinate socio-historical negation of what exists.” As Jameson makes clear in another discussion of Marcuse’s utopianism, the anti-utopianism of Marx and Engels was tied to the fanciful, even frivolous schemes popular among the various utopians of their era, like Fourier and his imitators, but by the 1950s and 1960s, the situation is reversed:

For in the older society (as in Marx’s classic analysis) Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions, in our own time the very nature of the Utopian concept has undergone a dialectical reversal. Now it is practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself, and stands as a testimony to the power of that system to transform even its adversaries into its

own mirror image. The Utopian idea, on the contrary, keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is. (Jameson 1971, pp. 110–111)

Here, although the teleological vision of history is not the same, Marcuse's case for the utopian vocation of critical theory is squarely situated in the thinking of a young Marx.

In Marx's famous letter to Arnold Ruge (dated September 1843), the one in which he writes that "the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality," Marx acknowledges that the sort of blueprint versions of this or that form of utopian practice are utterly meaningless, and in any event useless, since the future cannot—and perhaps *should not*—be predicted. As Marx puts it,

although no doubt exists on the question of "Whence," all the greater confusion prevails on the question of "Whither." Not only has a state of general anarchy set in among the reformers, but everyone *will* have to admit to himself that he has no exact idea what the future ought to be. On the other hand, it is precisely the advantage of the new trend that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one. [...] But, if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to *ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be. (1975, p.142)

Marx concludes by noting that this task of the critic actively makes possible the desired social reform, not by elaborating a new system that will be fully put in place in some idealized future, but “by analyzing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself.” That is, the engaged critique of the false consciousness of the present moment can recall to it the fervent and restless passions of a distinguished past, but also make possible new thought concerning a break with that past and with the seemingly untranscendable present form.

In his updated, continuously refined but remarkably consistent conception, Jameson has followed Marcuse’s view of utopia as a radical break from the present state of things, rather than a vision of its resolved future state. In fact, Jameson has long understood utopia to be a critical limit, forcing us to think a possible rupture with the present system instead of trying, and inevitably failing, to imagine some fully formed alternative system to come. As he put it recently in an “outrageous proposition,” “Utopias do not embody the future but rather help us to grasp the limits of our images of the future, and indeed our impossibility of imagining a radically different future” (2010, p. 13). As such, critical theory performs its utopian mission insofar as it is involved in the ruthless critique of all that exists, which can be accomplished at least in part by means of “a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right.” This form of utopia, “by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break,” (Jameson 2005, p. 232), provides a example of critical thought that, in Marcuse’s words, “is free of all illusion but also of defeatism,

for through its mere existence defeatism betrays the possibility of freedom to the status quo” (1970, p. 69).

We might be so bold as to suggest that Marcuse’s brief lecture on “The End of Utopia” is itself a performance of this utopian function of critical theory. There Marcuse thinks the break, but also acknowledges that the work of a critical theorist must continue to grapple with “the extreme possibilities for freedom” in a qualitatively different social form. Among the problems of utopian discourse, with which Marcuse is forced to deal, is the problem of impossibility itself. As Jameson puts it, “insofar as the Utopian project comes to seem more realizable and more practical, it turns into a practical political program in our world, in the here-and-now, and ceases to be Utopian in any meaningful sense” (2010, p. 13). And yet, this commitment to a form of utopia is nevertheless essential to a critical theory that would “rattle the bars” of the present in a way to preserve the possibility of an as-yet-undreamed-of future (see Jameson 2005, p. 233). Or, as Jameson has suggested more recently, by our ruthless criticism of all that exists in the present, by our critical theory of the socio-historical and spatiotemporal situation we find ourselves stuck in, we may contemplate an alternative, utopian world, where “from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible” (2009, p. 632). A crucial task of theory involves a searching analysis of the apparently untranscendable space of the present moment, in which new spaces of liberty may be found in their emergence. Through the example of Marcuse’s “end of utopia,” and in the

critical tradition of which it is a part and which follows from it, we may begin to develop new ways of mapping such spaces.

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