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THROUGH SARTRE AND MARCUSE: FOR A REALISTIC UTOPIA

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Federico SOLLAZZO¹

Abstract. *In this article I see the “realistic utopia” as a moral and political paradigm that can orient us towards a satisfactory life in our own society. I analyse the status of realistic utopia, the chances to build it and whether nowadays movements of protest (often juxtaposed with those of the ‘68) are credible subjects for its completion, or not. This is the reason why it is important to analyse Sartre and Marcuse. They were two of the ‘68 inspiring figures, but we have to unravel their thought from the exclusive reference to that period and vogue, because still today they can provide us the conceptual tools to comprehend, and therefore to shape, the world in a realistic utopian way.*

Keywords: *Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, realistic utopia, protest, movements.*

Nowadays we are immersed in a global cultural and economic crisis. Several movements of protest have been born in front of them (e.g. the so-called *Indignados* or Occupy Wall Street), sometimes also organized in parliamentary formations, which give rise to a global contestation that is often compared to 1968 movements. However, notwithstanding the deep cultural, social, political, economical differences between these two periods, in order to try to understand if and in which measure this confronting is possible, we have to analyze the conceptual tools proposed in the ‘68, seeing if they are still suitable nowadays, and also if the old and current movements of protest, have really grabbed the conceptual content of that thought. In order to analyze that conceptual background, we will take here in consideration the thought of two of the *maîtres-penseurs* of that time, Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse.

As it is known, the main slogan of May ‘68 was “power to imagination”: the idea that the empowered imagination would make possible a glimpse of authentic freedom; an idea led forward through existentialist and Marxist conceptual tools². However, the Modern development across all Western world, later increasingly extended almost

¹ University of Szeged, Hungary.

² See: G. Borghello, *Cercando il ‘68*. Udine: Forum, 2012, and G. Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*. Boston: South End, 1987.

coincides with the entire globe (and in all cases, affects the entire globe) of the capitalist mode of production and consumption and, especially and properly nowadays, the explosion of the technological rationality, on which we haven't been enlighten yet. The analyses of the first School of Frankfurt and of Martin Heidegger¹ show how the imagination resulted to be useful for industrial, technical, entertainment-based applications than for the liberation of man, for the so-called system instead of its alternatives.

Regarding this, it seems to me that it still remains to meditate accurately on two famous sentences, one by Marcuse and one by Heidegger. The one from Marcuse: «A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress»; and the one from Heidegger: «the essence of technique is nothing technical»².

Indeed, it is very interesting to note that if, as Foucault showed³, power (re)produces itself through individuals and so (re)produces life (*bios*), and if nowadays we are not in a society without creativity (like in the Fritz Lang's vision of *Metropolis*), this means that this society needs the creativity to maintain itself, but a controlled creativity, as a sort of oasis, functional for this system. A confirmation of the correctness of the Marcusean analysis about the issue of the efficiency and the rationalized society (according to the model of the instrumental rationality) can absorb, transform and redirect all forms of revolt, creativity, fantasy and imagination.

However, in its essence, May '68 was an ethos of claim and imagination of a better life. But – this is the philosophical point of view – not better, directly through political and/or economical strategies, but through a philosophy of life, which produces changes in politics and economy, just as

¹ See: C. Corradetti, *The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory*. “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy”, 21/X/2011: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/frankfur/>, and M. Heidegger (1953), *Die Frage nach der Technik*. Id., *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2000, and M. Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1947), *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. E. Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007, and H. Marcuse (1964), *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of the Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon, 1991, and F. Sollazzo, *Sulla questione della tecnica in M. Heidegger*. Id., *Totalitarismo, democrazia, etica pubblica. Scritti di Filosofia morale, Filosofia politica, Etica*. Roma: Aracne, 2011, and Id., *Tecnologia, politica e complessità*. “Critica Liberale”, 04/04/2013: <http://www.criticaliberale.it/settimanale/111591>.

² H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. *Supra*, p. 3, and M. Heidegger (*Die Frage nach der Technik*, 1953), *The Question Concerning Technology. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. W. Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 32.

³ See: M. Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir: Histoire de la sexualité I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, and Id., *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

aftermaths of itself. So the question was: how to live a «life without anxiety»¹, how liberate men and things from the *Angst*.

We know that there is a big difference between Sartre's existentialism and Marcuse's Marxism, since for the first anxiety remains an ontological condition of individual, which could at least be alleviated, for the latter angst is an historical element that oppress all individuals, and which could be historically exceeded, nevertheless, "power to the imagination" was for both a kind of utopian manifesto. Of course, not utopian because naïve and impossible to realize, but utopian in a dialectical sense: that of what is not yet present, but could be². In this way, imagination plays a central role which, however, is nowadays absorbed into and tooled from the current *status quo*, the established order of things, until the point in which alternatives become even unimaginable. This is the reason why it is interesting to analyze the utopian impulse in Sartre and Marcuse. Not to return to the conditions of May '68, which are in any event long gone and in some respects undesirable, but in order to see whether and how they can help us in understanding (and so, act on) the present situation.

In Sartre's elaboration anxiety (*Angst*) describes the individual's existential, ontological, condition, where "existence precedes essence". Sartre is profoundly influenced by Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, until he even claims that the inescapable characteristic of being-in-the-world is "just" that which exists, and cannot be otherwise³. The existent can only have a

¹ H. Marcuse (1955), *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon, 1966, p. 150.

² See: H. Marcuse, (*Die Permanenz der Kunst: Wieder einer bestimmte Marxistische Aesthetik*, 1977), *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Trans. H. Marcuse and J. Sheroover. Boston; Beacon, 1978, and J-P. Sartre, *Préface*. F. Fanon, *Le Damnés de la Terre*. Paris: Maspero, 1961.

³ Still, we have to note that Sartre misunderstands Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, by not understanding that for the German philosopher "*Sein ist Zeit*", being is time. It follows that for Heidegger the characters of the Being are absolutely not ontological as immutable, eternal, meta-historical, but ontological as part of the current *being* which is always *in fieri* because *is time*. See: M. Heidegger (1927), *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006. In his review of *Being and Nothingness*, Marcuse harshly criticizes Sartre for this misunderstanding of Heidegger, and also because the Sartrean *Pour-soi* does not differentiate between the individual level and the social one, and for the thought where the mismatch between the *Pour-soi* and the *En-soi* would be an ontological situation instead of an historical one. See: H. Marcuse, *Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's L'Être et le Néant*. "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", vol. VIII, n. 3, 1948, pp. 309-336. On the Marcusean critique of *L'Être et le Néant* see: B. Lightbody, *Death and Liberation: A Critical Investigation of Death in Sartre's Being and Nothingness*. "Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy", n. 13, 2009, pp. 85-98:

<http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie/vol13/Liberation.pdf>. Sartre and Marcuse had a confrontation

meaning because it is into the world, and cannot have one apart from it. So the only one way to have a meaningful existence is to project this by the individual.

Referring to this, Sartre writes:

What do we mean here by 'existence precedes essence'? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself [for this] man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.¹

From this condemnation to be free, arises the mood that Sartre calls "nausea" in the novel with the same name.

We can recognize, in this Sartrean elaboration, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* mark, in particular the concepts of "uncanny" (*unheimlich*) and "not-being-at-home" (*nicht-zuhause-sein*). Namely, the conception for which man never experiments the condition of the familiarity of the world, because the world in which we are thrown is not of our own making, and this produces anxiety:

In anxiety one feels 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, come proximally to expression: the 'nothing and nowhere'. But here 'uncannies' also means 'not-being-at-home' [*Nicht-zuhause-sein*].²

in the article *A propos du livre On a raison de se révolter*. "Libération", 07/VI/1964. On a possible similar background between Sartre and Marcuse see: A. Bene, *L'influence de Max Weber sur la philosophie de Jean-Paul Sartre*. *Újlatin nyelvek és kultúrák*. (Eds.) É. Osztetzky and K. Bene. Pécs: MTA and PTE, 2011.

¹ J-P. Sartre (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1946), *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. C. Macomber. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007, pp. 22 and 29. See also: Id., (*L'Être et le Néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, 1943), *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Trans. H. E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square, 1956.

² M. Heidegger (1927), *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 233. Under this regard, it could be interesting to note that in his work *The Theory of the Novel* György Lukács argues that the modern novel is the aftermath of the disintegrated or open modern civilization, which follows the integrated or closed civilization of the ancient world, and from which arises a character of "transcendental homelessness". See: G. Lukács (*Die Theorie des Romans*, 1916), *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. A. Bostock. Cambridge: MIT UP, 1971.

But this anxiety permits, or even obliges man to develop strategies for navigating through uncannies spaces, shaping the world, while he elaborates his project which defines his existence. Here, within this freedom, that for Sartre (but not for Marcuse) is absolute and ontological, the role of imagination takes place by determining consciousness to create a “real” world, insofar as it is a consciously understood world. «Thus imagination, far from appearing as an accidental characteristic, is disclosed as an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness»¹.

In Marcuse, as I have shown before, the existential situation in which the man is, is not ontological but historical. This means that the choice we are called to make marks “the realm of possibilities into the realm of reality”; indeed social theory

is opposed to all metaphysics by virtue of the rigorously historical character of the transcendence. The ‘possibilities’ must be within the reach of the respective society; they must be definable goals of practice.²

Therefore in Marcuse, unlike in Sartre, what matters is not ontology but history, until the point in which.

The way in which a society organizes the life of its members involves an initial *choice* between historical alternatives which are determined by the inherited level of the material and intellectual culture.³

It follows that, in order to give much freedom to the individual, it is fundamental to enlarge the borders of the social scenario in which individuals exist (starting with the conceptual ones), transcending the *status quo*, the established order of things.

Following this reasoning, Marcuse embraces the way of the power of negative (which was for him an intellectual militancy against the scientific positivism of mid-twentieth-century and the mainstream culture of the same period of the capitalist consumerism based on the technological rationality; problems which, being by far solved nowadays, have evolved into new forms): the “Great Refusal”. But this dialectic of the negative, of the refusal, based on an aesthetic foundation, establishes a social theory that is not the

¹ J-P. Sartre (*L'imaginaire, psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*, 1940), *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*. Trans. J. Webber. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 188.

² H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. *Supra*, pp. XLI-XLII.

³ H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. *Supra*, p. XLVI.

apprehension of the existing social formation but, through this comprehension it is a way to project realistic alternatives.

The *nomos* which art obeys is not that of the established reality principle but of its negation. But mere negation would be abstract, 'bad' utopia. The utopia in great art is never the simple negation of the reality principle but its transcending preservation (*Aufhebung*).¹

So for Marcuse the term utopia doesn't have a negative connotation; this degrading meaning playing throughout and in favour of the *status quo*. On the contrary, the utopian idea, as Marcuse sees it, is a negation or a refusal of the actual in favour of the *realistic possible*, and so it keeps alive the *possibility* of a world qualitatively distinct from this one by virtue of the permanent transcending of what is already given. And this commitment is a very urgent one in a world which believes that the liberty, without any distinction between the false and the authentic one, has already been achieved, without realizing the dynamics of increasing reification to which it is submitted². Philosophy, not as a particular subject among the others, an accumulation of specialised knowledge, but as a dialectical thinking, can show that things do not go this way. In fact, dialectical philosophy and imagination can present an alternative reality, which is in itself a critique of the established order of things, not merely because they imagine and speak about alternatives, but because imagination and dialectical thought can grasp reality as a whole and can delineate realistic possibilities by acting this way.

In other terms, imagination makes possible a more comprehensive, and therefore more "realistic", representation of the world. This way can draw an imaginative map reliable over the limits of the factual details (scientific realism) because it includes them in a more comprehensive overview, which is at the same time realistic (because it starts from reality) and critical (because transcends reality). This is the realistic utopia which Marcuse describes as the Great Refusal where the imaginative potential of art lies, the only authentic revolutionary potential.

¹ H. Marcuse, *The aesthetic dimension*. *Supra*, p. 73.

² See: H. Marcuse, *The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation*. Id., *One-Dimensional Man*. *Supra*, pp. 59-86. Also, modernity «reduce[s] the worker [and man in general] to the state of a thing by assimilating his behavior to [that of] properties». J-P. Sartre, *Materialisme et Révolution*. "Le Temps Modernes", I, nos. 9, pp. 1537-1563, n. 10, pp. 1-32, 1946, p. 15, my English trans.

The Great Refusal is the protest against the unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom - 'to live without anxiety'. But this idea could be formulated without punishment only in the language of art. In the more realistic realm of political theory and even philosophy, it was almost universally defamed as utopia.¹

By this way it is also possible to overcome naively objective aspirations in favour of more complicated mediations of representational forms of the world. Therefore, it would be possible to clarify that there can be progress, or even better dialectical advancement, only by virtue of the particular perspective in which we intend the world; under these circumstances, progress is not mere advancement in knowledge, but it is a change in it².

This is the reason why I believe that imagination, the realistic utopia, i.e. dialectical philosophy, always maintains its revolutionary potential, which is its fundamental critical power; also, and probably especially, in front of today globalized world.

Indeed, the present world is more complicated than the previous ones. It is an interconnected world where it is impossible to know and understand deeply and thoroughly all the interconnections and the way in which they interact between them. For example, an English citizen of the Commonwealth cannot have any clear idea about the Indian tea and the Jamaican sugar production that was required for his English ritual of tea-time, nevertheless he knows that they existed. Today, in front of the political and economic processes which set the course of the world, just few if any people (and in which measure?) can deeply decipher such processes which

¹ H. Marcuse (1955), *Eros and Civilization*. *Supra*, pp. 149-150.

² See: Th. S. Kuhn (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012. A very effective exemplification of how are the *Weltanschauungen* to build the world (notwithstanding the presence of an "already given" one) – and so more complex (which doesn't mean complicated) is an argumentation, at first giving account of its genealogy, and richer is the *Weltanschauung* in itself – is possible to find in these interesting lines: «the phenomenological experience of the individual subject – traditionally, the supreme raw material of the work of art – becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. *But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place*. The truth of that daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the entire colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people». F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991, p. 411, my emphasis.

move on different, complex and interconnected levels. The human condition in the present late capitalist and technological society is thus involved in a system that can be scarcely known and understood.

This is why it is possible and very important to use the imagination, grounded on reality but in order to transcend it (I refer to realistic utopia): we have to draw a map of reality according to world imagination and our condition in it. And what matters is not this map to be realistic in the factual details, but that it may provide us with a sense of the world that we can use for navigating through it; anyway, the factual details are always inserted in a certain paradigm of meaning, so if this were that of the realistic utopia this would ensure both a description of reality (the richer the more argumentatively complex) and its transcending¹. Due to this perspective it would be possible to have a sense of future neither optimistic (based on ingenuity) nor pessimistic (feeding conservatism), but which offers a ground for being-in-the-world: not a realistic or utopian ground, but a realistic *and* utopian one. Indeed, usually the critique directed to the utopia is the unrealistic one, but, as I tried to show, the way in which we represent the world is the way that drives our activity into the world, and this representation would be of a better quality if we were guided of an argumentative imagination which creates a “realistic utopian map” of the world; and this is not at all unrealistic. Of course, this does not mean that realistic utopia is fully achievable, if so it became blocked and lost its power of transcendence, but that it could be a very important element of the world and it cannot be absolutely dismissed as “unreal”.

To conclude, it is interesting now to quote two sentences about the movements of '68 protest, one of Sartre (based on the Parisian movements) and one of Marcuse (based on the American movements), in order to confront these remarks with the present status of the social movements of protest to which I referred myself at the beginning of this article.

Sartre:

¹ Related to the importance to have an intellectual chart of the world, is interesting to remember the Mercator's projection of 1569: it was not a true map in the sense of mimetically accurate depiction on the features figured on its surface, but the imaginary map allowed to the sailors to orientate themselves through a particular view of the world. On the importance of an intellectual mapping of the world, see: R. T., Jr., Tally, *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer*. New York: Continuum, 2009, and Id., *Radical Alternatives: The Persistence of Utopia in Postmodernism. New Essays on the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory*. (Ed.) A. J. Drake. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, pp. 109-121.

What is important is that the action took place, at a time when everyone judged it to be unthinkable. If it took place, then it can happen again.¹

Marcuse:

None of these forces *is* the alternative. However, they outline, in very different dimensions, the limits of the established society, of their power of containment. When these limits are reached, the Establishment may initiate a new order of totalitarian suppression. But beyond these limits, there is also the space, both physical and mental, for building a realm of freedom which is not that of the present.²

Sartre says that the value of the protest movements is to make to happen what is possible, and Marcuse – that their value is not that of being the alternative but that of showing it. Can we say the same about the present protest movements widespread in the world? Or maybe, are they either the manifestation of a “possible possible” (the realistic utopia) or, consequently, the representation of the alternative?

In the Seventies, Pier Paolo Pasolini labelled the Italian movements of protest as a bourgeois rebellion, and the same did Marcuse concerning the American movements of protest, after an initial hope in them³. The risk is that things be the same nowadays. It seems again that the protest movements are asking for the absorption of the protesters into the status quo, they protest just because they are out of it: they do not contest the power, they contest their exclusion from the power.

If things stay this way, and this is my opinion, an activation of the imagination aiming to the realisation of the realistic utopia becomes extremely urgent: in fact, a different world than this one can arise only «from *another* development [which be] Otherness (not simply alternative) which by its very nature excludes any possible assimilation of the exploited with the exploiters»⁴.

¹ Qtd. in K. Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2002, p. 1.

² H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon, 1969, p. viii.

³ See: H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*. *Supra*, and P. P. Pasolini (1968), *Il P.C.I. ai giovani! Bestemmia: Tutte le poesie*. (Eds.) G. Chiarcossi, W. Siti. Milano: Garzanti, 1993.

⁴ P. P. Pasolini (1976), *Lettere luterane: il progresso come falso progresso*. Einaudi: Torino, 2003, pp. 170 and 190, my English trans.

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