

**The *Promesse du Bonheur*:
Marcuse's Political Eros—Ecosocialism as the
Aesthetic Form of Commonwealth Happiness**

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Abstract: This is an essay on Marcuse's theory of the political Eros which has the power to help us attain our happiness-in-common by learning to live with dignity, freedom, and gratitude on planet Earth. Ecosocialism, in Marcuse's view, possesses the erotic potential to bring beauty and sensuous satisfaction to an abundant socio-economic order, fulfilling our natural and political essence as human beings.

Key-words: Marcuse; political Eros; ecosocialism.

Resumo: Este é um ensaio sobre a teoria do Eros político de Marcuse, que tem o poder de nos ajudar a alcançar nossa felicidade em comum, aprendendo a viver com dignidade, liberdade e gratidão no planeta Terra. O ecossocialismo, na visão de Marcuse, possui o potencial erótico de trazer beleza e satisfação sensual a uma ordem socioeconômica abundante, cumprindo nossa essência natural e política como seres humanos.

Palavras-chave: Marcuse; Eros político; ecossocialismo.

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[W]hat is at stake in the socialist revolution is not merely the extension of satisfaction within the existing universe of needs, nor the shift of satisfaction from one (lower) level to a higher one, but the rupture with this universe, the *qualitative leap*. The revolution involves a radical transformation of the needs and aspirations themselves, cultural as well as material; of consciousness and sensibility; of the work process as well as leisure. The transformation appears in the fight against the fragmentation of work, the necessity and productivity of stupid performances and stupid merchandise, against the acquisitive bourgeois individual, against the servitude in the guise of technology, deprivation in the guise of the good life, against pollution as a way of life. Moral and aesthetic needs become basic, vital needs and drive toward new relationships between the sexes, between the generations, between men and women and nature. Freedom is understood as rooted in these needs, which are sensuous, ethical, and rational in one.

– Herbert Marcuse (*Counterrevolution and Revolt* 1972, 16-17).

A full decade before his famous 1955 volume, *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse introduced what has become a signature notion:

“Sensual love gives a *promesse du bonheur* which preserves the full materialistic content of freedom Sensuality ... preserves the goal of political action: liberation” (Marcuse [1945] 1998, 204).

Eros and Civilization proposed that the sensuous power of beauty could aid in the subordination of humanity’s destructive instincts to the non-aggressive life instincts; that sensuous beauty heralds a logic of gratification that civilization needs precisely because of its societal absence. In his subsequent writings Marcuse would speak of the “erotic quality of the Beautiful” (*The Aesthetic Dimension*, 1978, 62). He would see “Beauty in its perhaps most sublimated form: as political Eros” (AD, 64). Thus, he connected the *promesse du bonheur* to the capacity of art and beauty to convey an erotic sense of political happiness.² Marcuse takes

² Beauty offers both the promise of happiness and a criterion of progress: In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964, 210) the *promesse du bonheur* is a token of the historical reality of a fully liberated human future.

the phrase from the romantic French writers, Charles Baudelaire,³ and Stendhal.⁴ The latter held that this sense of aesthetic elation could at times abruptly convert into complete exhaustion and debilitation, giving rise to the legend of the Stendhal Syndrome.⁵

The promise of *bonheur* also occurs decades earlier in modern political thought in Europe: the first article of *The Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1793) traditionally signifying the well-being of all, the general good. “The aim of society is the common welfare [*bonheur commun*].”⁶ My argument in this essay is that Marcuse clearly understood the *promesse du bonheur* as embracing also the *bonheur commun*. Art and beauty proclaim the possibility of our communal happiness, and prompt us to work to fulfill our natural and political needs as non-alienated human beings.

[A]rt retains its critical cognitive function.... the development of the productive forces renders possible the material fulfillment of the *promesse du bonheur* expressed in art; political action—the revolution—is to translate this possibility into reality (*Soviet Marxism* 1958, 115).

In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse worked out what he understood as Freud's depth-psychological analysis of social life as well as an elaboration of it anew: civilization does *not* have to be based wholly on repressive sublimation, but can also be based on free libidinous (though predominantly non genital) relationships within a community. He claims, also on the basis of Fourier's philosophy, that work itself, due to the pleasant togetherness, could become attractive.

³ Thanks to Malcolm Miles (2017) for reminding me of this reference.

⁴ Apparently from Stendhal's 1822 *On Love*.

⁵ Some particularly sensitive visitors to Florence's Uffizi Gallery are said swoon from an overdose of beauty.

⁶ “Le but de la société est le bonheur commun. Le gouvernement est institué pour garantir à l'homme la jouissance de ses droits naturels et imprescriptibles.” *Déclaration Française des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen du 24 juin 1793*. http://dcalin.fr/internat/declaration_droits_homme_1793.html I owe this insight to Domenico Losurdo (2021, 46). In this historical form the idea of the *bonheur commun* drew upon and reflected the rights of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” as highlighted in the US Declaration of Independence (1776). The “pursuit of happiness” in the documents of 1776 and 1793 invites our political imagination still today, yet it was then actually a proxy for John Locke's defense of the right to one's own property privately.

Marcuse did not think socialism could liberate Eros from Thanatos (AD, 72), but that Eros could help us attain our happiness-in-common by learning to live with dignity and freedom on planet Earth. Socialism's minimal standards require the provision of adequate social-needs-oriented programs and services such as housing, health care, childcare, and education, to everyone, as well as government policy, law enforcement, and public media ensuring the optimization of the human material condition. But, even more importantly we must "revive the *radical* rather than the *minimum* goals of socialism" (CRR, 1972, 5, emphasis added). For Marcuse, the radical goals of socialism go beyond the elimination of want and poverty through efficient production and distribution of use values: they involve a "qualitative leap" against "the fragmentation of work, the necessity and productivity of stupid performances and stupid merchandise, against the acquisitive bourgeois individual, against the servitude in the guise of technology, deprivation in the guise of the good life, against pollution as a way of life" (CRR 1972, 16–17).

The emergence of human beings as 'species beings'—men and women capable of living in that community of freedom which is the potential of the species—this is the subjective basis of a classless society. . . .

[T]he revolutionizing of the instinctual structure is a prerequisite for a change in the system of needs, the mark of a socialist society as qualitative difference (AD, 16-17).

Like Marcuse, during the period of anti-Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., famously also called for "a radical revolution of values." This is because, American ideals of democracy and equality notwithstanding, the US has developed a predatory adulation of plutocracy and power. It has been filled with religious zealotry and militarism, and has continually been or threatened to be intimidating, menacing, pathologically aggressive, violent, sado-masochistic and punitive, denying legitimate authority in science and government. US-American *culture* is often enough sinister and exploitative, while also delusional: seeing itself as free and democratic! Racial animosity, anti-immigrant scapegoating, and resurgent nationalism/patriotism are being orchestrated today in the troubled system of American/global capitalism—as neopopulist/neofascist instrumentalities of social

control and economic stabilization. Langman and Lundskow's *God, Guns, Gold, and Glory: American Character and its Discontents* (2016) makes a strong case several times over that, as a religiously inspired colonial settler society, US-American culture is authoritarian, malicious, monstrous. Their research explicates the American historical record: genocide against Native people; slavery; property qualifications to vote and govern; predatory adulation of plutocracy and power, religious zealotry; militarism, and the denial of science. They demonstrate the development of a reactionary national character type that is pathological model of American manhood: masculinist and aggressive, sado-masochistic, punitive, tough, heroic, and white supremacist and antisemitic.

If today's gods are money, fame, thrills and power, and this reveals the dominant side of the American character, Langman and Lundskow's work (2016) recognizes that it is but *one* side. On the other side, the US has witnessed significant historical struggles, even if these have been generally repressed: progressive social forces struggling against slavery, for women's suffrage, a populist anti-monopoly radicalism, socialism, co-ops, collectives, communes like New Harmony and Oneida. During the 1960s "New Sensibilities" of the sort Marcuse described in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969, 23) emerged that prefigure a sane socialist society in 21st Century America. By 1972, Marcuse recognized that even a one-dimensional society could sometimes see protest groups emerge among students, women, and civil rights activists, who developed an oppositional philosophy and politics that represented a New Sensibility. Marcuse's essentially hopeful activism (which enabled him to be heralded as the philosopher of the student revolts of the 1970s) was rooted in the "transvaluation of values," which he considered to have been represented by the radical opposition forces of the late 1960s.

Marcuse emphasizes that despite the violence of domination and this destructive institutional context, an emancipatory "radical character structure" emerges from advanced industrial society in which subversive needs come to supersede the repressive compensatory needs of the established order: "the potential forces of social change are there" (Marcuse [1979] 2011, 209–210).

Such emancipatory needs include at least the following. First, the need for drastically reducing socially necessary alienated labor and replacing it with

creative work. Second, the need for autonomous free time instead of directed leisure. Third, the need for an end to role playing. Fourth, the need for receptivity, tranquility, and abounding joy, instead of the constant noise of production. Evidently, the satisfaction of these emancipatory needs is incompatible with the established state capitalist and state socialist societies That an alternative quality of life is possible has been proven (Marcuse [1979] 2011, 211).

The environmentalist Eros “is political because it confronts the concerted power of big capital, whose vital interests the movement threatens The struggle [is] to change those objective, economic, and political conditions which are the basis for psychosomatic, subjective transformation” (Marcuse [1979] 2011, 212).

The Commonwealth Promise of Sensuous Living Labor

The critical analysis of the concept of work in political economy and ethics is crucial to the philosophies of Marx and Marcuse. Marcuse sees the necessity of work in society as "ontological." It is the basis and fundamental form of every social formation and applies to the life of every human being. Marcuse, like Marx, asserted a radically materialist conception of the essence of socially active human beings: seen from the outside, we are the ensemble of our social relations; seen from the inside, we are sensuous living labor. Sensuous living labor is the substrate of our being as humans. It is the foundation of our affective and intellectual capacities (and vulnerabilities), bio-ecologically developed within history. I am stressing Marcuse's underappreciated insight into the power of sensuous living labor to liberate itself from commodification and exploitation in order to make commonwealth a universal human condition. As a species we have endured because of our sensuous appreciation of our emergent powers: *the power to subsist cooperatively; to create, to communicate, and to care communally within that form of society that we may rightly call a commonwealth.* In Marcuse's ecosocialist view, *the radical transformation of the labor process itself*—the liberation of laboring humanity from commodification and alienation—*stands centermost.* I expand this ontological understanding with a historical adaptation of that perspective.

The first explicitly ethical maxims of humanity emerged as proverbs that generally regulated life in the earliest African partnership cultures. These cultures focused on the

traditional habit and feeling of *Ubuntu* or showing "humanity to others." This was done through empathy and principles of reciprocity and solidarity in community life, in teamwork, modesty and reciprocity. Those who worked (nearly every able-bodied member of the society) also created the first ethical maxims: "Many hands make light work;" "To raise a child, it takes an entire village;" "Only as a braided cord can the cotton carry the stone." African proverbs contained the first formulations of the golden rule as embodying the *bonheur commun*. Of course, conflicts could arise within and between communities. Nevertheless, these proverbs constituted universalizable humanist, i.e. not narrow tribal teachings to guide practical life and cannot in any way be confused with purely religious teachings. When human beings, as sensuous living labor, act in accordance with an egalitarian and partnership sense of the *bonheur commun*, beauty becomes an "aesthetic ethos" (EL 1969, 24).

Released from the bondage to exploitation, the imagination, sustained by the achievements of science, could turn its productive power to the radical reconstruction of experience ... the aesthetic ... would find expression in the transformation of the *Lebenswelt*—society as a work of art (EL 1969, 45).

Commonwealth has the power to reclaim our common humanity. Its fundamental goal is decommodification: public work for the public good. Humanity's rights to a commonwealth economy, politics, and culture reside in our commonworks. This involves sensuous living labor authentically actualizing itself through humanist activism and creativity—humanity remaking itself through a social labor process in accordance with the commonwealth promise at the core of our material reality. This requires a new system of shared ownership, democratized ownership, common ownership. Commonwealth is humanity's (that is, sensuous living labor's) aesthetic form: workmanship and artistry, emancipated from repression, taking place not only according to the labor theory of ethics and ecological responsibility.

Marcuse believed that among the most radical goals of socialism are the aesthetic ones. Our lives need to embody the aesthetic. Not the kind of aesthetic that we could say distinguishes the architecture of Haussmann's Paris or the Venetian Piazza San Marco from that of everyday life at home. However beautiful and emblematic of freedom, these architectural jewels are nonetheless ornaments in high culture that cover societies that are still generally

characterized by economic, political, and libidinous oppression of the workforce and (even if the rulers were allowed transgressive excesses in their lives as less limited individuals).

Paris and Venice do not stand for the deeper aesthetic satisfactions that Marcuse envisions as needed for a truly liberated social formation in which all human lives, associated in egalitarian partnership, must be able to access nonrepressive gratification and freedom as the norm in political life. In the chapter on "The Aesthetic Dimension" in *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse combines the aesthetic theories of Kant and Schiller with Freud. From Kant's treatment of imagination as a source of free creativity, he turns to Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, in which Schiller, like Kant, describes human *sensuality* as the basis of aesthetics and as an impulse for a "new kind of civilization." Marcuse seeks a new civilization where it is possible to realize the non-alienated self. And what he means here as "self" is our *species-self* or species-essence in which humanity's nature and freedom meet. Schiller's *Letters* are also the source of Marx's statement in the *Paris Manuscripts of 1844* about future production in a perfected communist society occurring beyond the commodity form and "according to the laws of beauty."

Ecosocialism, in Marcuse's view, possesses the erotic potential to bring beauty and sensuous satisfaction to the humanity, fulfilling our natural and political essence as human beings. It delivers on art's *promesse de bonheur* and nature's promise that we can attain our happiness-in-common by learning to live with dignity and freedom on planet Earth. Marcuse regarded the environmental movement of his day as a critical intervention against institutional destructiveness and as the embodiment of a life-affirming energy directed towards the protection of Earth and the pacification of our human existence. "A successful environmentalism will, within individuals, subordinate destructive energy to erotic energy" (Marcuse [1979] 2011, 212). Marcuse saw this energy as a political eros in a twofold sense. First, it is the true labor of love—a Platonic, higher level, selfless regard for other humans as humans. Secondly, as the true love of learning, a Platonic desire that culminates in a political struggle against institutional forces of destruction.

Marx's *Paris Manuscripts of 1844* saw communism as represented in two ways: first, new possibilities of production and life occur in a kind of "raw communism"—people liberated from the formerly alienating conditions caused by private property and the private

accumulation of the social product. This essential communism is intended to safeguard and increase the income of all workers—as a minimum standard of society. The *fuller development of communism is more radical*: labor is freed from its commodity form (as wages or salaries) to become *commonwork* for the *commonwealth*. The qualitative difference in the community of freedom thus entails the radical transformation of the labor process itself to meet the new social needs as Marcuse stresses. For Marx, the a fully perfected communism represents a “*true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between producing products and producing self-confidence, between freedom and necessity, between individual and genus. It is the solution to the riddle of history, and knows itself to be this solution*” (Marx [1844] 1970, 76). Labor’s liberation from the *commodity form* and sublation as a *commonwealth form* would make it possible for beauty to infuse human life at its foundation and for the entire society to be a work of art.

Marcuse's ecological writings emphasize how both the earth and human life are stressed under the conditions of global financial capital. His little-known essays "Ecology and the Criticism of Society" (1979) and "Ecology and Revolution" (1972) need to be taken to heart and regarded as politically decisive. Marcuse is the only figure of the Frankfurt School who has developed writings with ecological problems and strategies as such. His essays on ecology are eminently cognizant of the interconnectedness of the biosphere and the negative impacts of the capitalist political economy. He found that environmentalist criticisms of extractive and polluting economic policies implicitly or explicitly involved system-negations and epitomized the Great Refusal.

Ecology as a methodological tool provides a critical insight into the generative mechanisms underlying persistent natural injuries and their effects over time and a strategy for a new world system. The methodology of ecology focuses on the complex and central underlying structures in nature and the economy. Marcuse's *Paris Lectures of 1974* (2015) advocate for a “new form of socialism . . .”

namely socialism as in any and every respect qualitatively different and a break with capitalism . . . and it seems to me that only a decisive redirection of production itself would in this sense be a revolutionary development. A total redirection of production, first of all, of course, towards the abolition of

poverty and scarcity wherever it exists in the world today. Secondly, a total reconstruction of the environment and the creation of space and time for creative work; space and time for creative work instead of alienated labor as a full-time occupation (*Paris Lectures at Vincennes University* [1974] 2015, 69).

Ecosocialism represents the real unification of free people: 1) within a democratic society that satisfies universal human needs; 2) based on our communal work; and 3) having a determination to restore nature. Also 4) a realm where Eros can be embodied within the material and sensual human condition in aesthetic form. This calls for the elimination of capitalism's fetish with exchange value and the commodity form in the capitalist economy. Instead of the sovereignty of the rich, the military industrial complex, and Wall Street, revolutionary ecological liberation promises socio-cultural equality and sustainable political-economic wealth. It means the abolition of private property in the productive system: only the whole group has legitimate ownership rights to the common wealth. What is needed is the transformation from oligarchic capital to the *affirmation* of a new world system of partnership and multicultural democratic equality.

As is well known, Marcuse sought a *universalization of resistance*, a "Great Refusal." Marcuse was aware that the development of the women's movement and the intensification of the student anti-war protests were in harmony with ecosocialism and that they could protest together against the capitalist "violation of the earth." The extraordinary value of Marcuse's strategy is that of a "united front," against the sociopathic political disregard for our future—and for our common humanity. The multiplicity of possible refusals could and should become a *systemic negation*. System negation in this sense has the appeal of a new *general interest*, and Marcuse called upon us to actualize the *promesse du bonheur* of ecosocialism through a *global alliance of transformational forces*.

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