

## THE FOLLY OF UTOPIA

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*Bruno Gulli*

### A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL DISORDER

*for John (the Frisco kid), in memory*

#### 1. IN LIEU OF AN INTRODUCTION: WILLIAM BURROUGHS' POLITICS OF SUBVERSION

*I won't be seeing that Bay of Pigs again.*  
William S. Burroughs

THE SENTENCE ABOVE is from William Burroughs' novel *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (Burroughs, 1969, 142). The whole book is highly political, though of course not in the mainstream sense of politics: who, for instance, will be the next president of this or that country. In fact, this latter sense of 'political' is a miserable caricature of what it should be, though a caricature with often nefarious consequences. The nefarious nature of such consequences clearly showed itself on a worldwide scale during the last four years of American governance, and it will become even more resonant and clear after the recent US presidential elections, for we are now advancing into a zone and a time of great danger, into the dark of the sleep of reason, where the secular and enlightened endeavors by means of which we grew out of barbarism (as Leopardi says) will be completely annihilated and monstrous forms of thought, or more poignantly of non-thought, will emerge instead. The recent events in Fallujah (the word means 'the terrain is ready for sowing') already say this loudly: 12,000 troops, to be able to speak of a miserable success, which amounts to the decimation of a city population.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, after the 'end of imperialism', the Ivory Coast becomes the scene of French intervention again; those French (*franciosi*) who, for Machiavelli, always start as "more than men" and end as "less than women". Instead, Burroughs' book is political in the subversive sense of presenting a world that doesn't really exist, perhaps a world between utopia and dystopia, certainly not the empirically given, although at the same time not the non-empirical. (We shall go back to the

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<sup>1</sup> As of today, 11/25/2004, more than 2,000 people have been killed in Fallujah in the US-[Iraqi(?)] operation against that stronghold of insurgency.

concept of the empirical below). It is a world which doesn't really exist, yet it exists in an eminent way. Thus it is political in the sense that it recreates culture as a whole: from the question of production (self-production) to that of desire (which always, as Hegel shows, implies destruction) and pleasure; in any case, a recreation of the culture of everyday life. The whole book is political, but the sentence in question appears in the most politically charged section of the novel, "Mother and I Would Like to Know". It begins with the words: "The uneasy spring of 1988." What follows is a description of a regime of everyday life with which we are dangerously becoming more and more familiar:

Under the pretext of drug control suppressive police states have been set up throughout the Western world. The precise programming of thought feeling and apparent sensory impressions by the technology outlined in bulletin 2332 enables the police states to maintain a democratic façade from behind which they loudly denounce as criminals, perverts and drug addicts anyone who opposes the control machine (138).

The forms of counterpower and resistance to this state of affairs are unequivocal: "Our aim is total chaos" (139).

It is in the construction, in the invention of an alternative, that Burroughs' *radical imagination* works, penetrating into the ontological dimension of utopia. It is here that the question of the empirical must first be addressed. In Burroughs, all is experience, and of the most sublime form. Yet, this experience is always defiant of the empirically given. It always goes beyond, behind, under or above the narrowness of the empirically given; it is, as we shall see at the end of this essay when speaking of Ernst Bloch, *transcendent* within the order of immanence. For who cares for what is so dully present, really all too present? In fact, it is that which is present and absent at the same time, like Pascal's hidden god, which constantly defies, in Burroughs, the control machine. But what is present and absent, what is and is not, what can be but can also not be, constitutes, when grasped, a form of experience inclusive of the potential, all possibilities, what-could-be in our otherwise miserable world. But *what* could be?

In Mexico, South and Central America guerrilla units are forming an army of liberation to free the United States. In North Africa from Tangier to Timbuctu corresponding units prepare to liberate Western Europe and the United Kingdom. Despite disparate aims and personnel of its constituent members the underground is agreed on basic objectives. We intend to march on the police machine everywhere. We intend to destroy the police machine

and all its records. We intend to destroy all dogmatic verbal systems. The family unit and its cancerous expansion into tribes, countries, nations we will eradicate at its vegetable roots. We don't want to hear any more family talk, mother talk, father talk, cop talk, priest talk, country talk or party talk. To put it country simple we have heard enough bullshit (Burroughs, 139-140).

Real liberation then is what's possible, liberation from what keeps the potential, not merely from actualizing itself, but from showing itself *as* potential; liberation from the empirical shackles which keep concealed the ontological roots of a higher form of experience – experience of the 'yes' and 'no' of presence, of action (inclusive of passion), of *this* action, inclusive of the universality and commonality which bestow upon 'this' the whole significance of being ('this' being a contraction of being), of the body's transformation into the forest's body (see, for instance, the story "The Dead Child", Burroughs, 102-120), from which the city arises and to which it must still listen, the spirit of the forest to which it must return, the poetic experience without which all praxis is nothing but a mechanical, bureaucratic routine, a deadly business, constrained within what is given, without the fundamental support (the work of art, poetry, what-is-not-given, that is, unconstrained labor) without which not only the humanness, but even the animalness of 'man' is lost, the vital force, the unconstructed *labor power* (that is, not construed as a commodity for the labor market of capital) able to agreeably transform the earth into a world, a different world, inclusive of the earth which includes it. This Southern liberation of the North of the world, as Burroughs imagines it, was not simply a tendency present in the first part of the twentieth century, when Burroughs was writing this, when guerrilla movements such as the one led by Che Guevara were numerous and really threatening the established order, but it is also present now, with the important qualification, however, that this 'South' is also contained in the North (as the North is contained in the South). It is then a worldwide movement, a movement which contains many movements,<sup>2</sup> a world which contains many worlds (as the Zapatistas say), which must liberate the territories occupied by the Northern control machine, "the police machine everywhere". The armies of liberation, made of wild boys for Burroughs, reach into the commonality of any 'this' which remains in touch with the ontological structure of what is not given, what is indeed denied at the level of the merely empirical, yet is always present and absent as possibility. The being everywhere of the police machine is

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<sup>2</sup> In this sense, see Hardt and Negri (2004).

thus countered by the being everywhere (and nowhere) of wilderness and revolutionary potential: "I have a thousand faces and a thousand names. I am nobody I am everybody. I am me I am you. I am here there forward back in out. I stay everywhere I stay nowhere. I stay present I stay absent" (Burroughs, 140). The movement of positing and not positing the elements of presence does not imply a both/and logic: 'I am not *both* nobody *and* everybody, *both* me *and* you, etc. Rather, what is here at work is a logic of neither/nor: in staying everywhere and nowhere at the same time, in being present and absent at the same time, 'I *actually* withdraw into what is 'only' potential. But the potential is not only, indeed not at all, what *can* be. What can be is the *content* of the potential, which is actualized or not actualized as *this* form. Yet, the potential as such (that which can be and not be) always and fundamentally *is*. To remain within the potential, as Agamben repeatedly shows,<sup>3</sup> is to withdraw from the act, that is, to perform the apparently paradoxical act of withdrawal, the act of not acting, to remain within the potentiality not to (an Aristotelian category, without which potentiality is not adequately understood).<sup>4</sup> To take this position *in actuality* is to step onto the ontological structure of potentiality, which remains a *no place* only from the point of view of the empirically given (which is in itself a mere reduction of the totality of the real), but not at all from the point of view of reality as a whole. From this latter point of view, what is usually taken as a no place is instead already there, everywhere and nowhere, present and absent, but as neither this nor that actuality. I think we have reached the ontological structure of utopia, which is the structure of the potential, and which is also the topic of this essay, that is, showing that utopias are already present in the structure of the real. This is Marcuse's concept of utopia as well, as defined, for instance, in the introduction to *An Essay on Liberation*, and according to which utopia is "no longer that which has 'no place' and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies" (Marcuse, 1969, 3-4).

The logic of neither/nor, which we have pointed out in Burroughs' text with reference to the revolutionary potential of the Southern army of liberation, the *wild boys*' 'I' dissolving into the neutrality and commonality of the revolutionary subject, or more precisely in the flow of revolutionary practice (for even the subject seems to be dissolving in Burroughs, giving way to the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, his essay on *Bartleby* (Agamben, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Agamben (1999, 177-184).

act, the repetition of the act, the confusion of the many repetitions of the act, or the suspension of it), is the most important structure of ontology. Its classic locus is to be found in the metaphysics of John Duns Scotus, where it appears as a definition of the univocal concept of being. For Duns Scotus, being is neither finite nor infinite, neither created nor uncreated, though it acquires either one or the other qualifying notions in empirical or divine reality; yet being as such, in its simplicity and commonality, the concept of being, is the most common concept, neutral and univocal: "Whatever [predicates] are common to God and creatures are of such kind, pertaining as they do to being in its indifference to what is infinite and finite. For insofar as they pertain to God they are infinite, whereas insofar as they belong to creatures they are finite" (Duns Scotus, 1987, 2). In Burroughs, in the confusion arising from the repetition of the act, commonality and univocity remain as the most certain (and most solid) elements of reality: an 'I' which is 'not-I', a 'this' which is 'not-this'. What remains is *a situation* in which all differences partake, a situation which is similar to the *active space* theorized by Henri Lefebvre (1991). Often, in Burroughs, in the middle of the description of a sexual encounter, a character is revealed as not being there, as in the story "The Frisco Kid", where the kid who "never returns" (Burroughs, 99) is present and absent from the scene: "I turned and looked at him. His eyes were open in the grey milky light and I felt a shiver down the spine. He wasn't there really. Pale the picture was pale. I could see through him" (95-96). Yet, as Lefebvre says, "no space disappears completely." Rather: "'Something' always survives or endures – 'something' that is not a *thing*" (Lefebvre, 1991, 403). In Burroughs, the moment of doubt is accompanied by the certainty of a vision which *sees through* the sensuous, which is only given as 'this', and reaches a plane where all the different 'thises' come together and dissolve to make graspable *the* situation as such. It is through the dialectic of certainty and doubt that the logic of neither/nor bears fruit. For instance, Duns Scotus says:

Every intellect that is certain about one concept, but dubious about others has, in addition to the concepts about which it is in doubt, another concept of which it is certain. ... Now ... a man can be certain in his mind that God is a being and still be in doubt whether He is a finite or an infinite being, a created or an uncreated being. Consequently, the concept of 'being' ... is different from the other two concepts but is included in both of them and therefore is univocal (Duns Scotus, 20).

To reach the point of indifference to this or that particular aspect of the empirically given, is to experience difference as such, that which has no

place within the empirically given, and thus to *see through* the situational elements which are at hand and grasp the situation as such, in its most elemental and structural character, which is precisely *not* given, where everything confusedly *returns* to ground that which (like Burroughs' Frisco kid) never returns because it has *not* yet been there.

## 2. AMARTYA SEN'S CONCEPT OF POVERTY AS CAPABILITY DEPRIVATION

—*Que haga una locura.*  
*Y esto no fué posible.*<sup>5</sup>

César Vallejo

Some theorists believe that it is a sheer folly to imagine a radically different world. This is what for instance, speaking about the market, Amartya Sen implies in his book, *Development as Freedom*, in some aspects an excellent book. For Sen, “we have to avoid resurrecting yesterday’s follies that refused to see the merits of – indeed even the inescapable need for – markets” (Sen, 1999, 112). In this sense, Sen can also appreciate Friedrich Hayek’s “chastising description of the communist economies as ‘the road to serfdom’” (*ibid.*); a description which was to play a key role in the ‘revolutionary’, neoliberal policies of Thatcher and Reagan. One of these ‘follies’ is contained in Karl Polanyi’s book, *The Great Transformation*, where it is clearly shown that the problem is not the market *per se*, that is, the practical institution whereby useful things are exchanged, but an economy “controlled by markets”, which Polanyi calls a “self-regulating system of markets” (Polanyi, 1944, 43). The latter is no longer simply a *practical reality*, but one which has a *formal and political* set of institutional moments and apparatuses; we are tempted to say: an *institutional institution*. From this point of view, Sen’s critique of the critique of the market economy institution loses validity, for it is difficult to see how the programmatic and humanitarian moments of his interesting study still hold if an economy geared toward profit, and profit only, is not completely done with. To be sure, Sen argues that profit is not the only motive behind capitalist production, and this is “not a new point”, as he himself says (Sen, 264). He also argues that there

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<sup>5</sup> “—Let him do something crazy. / And this was not possible.” (Vallejo, 1978, 3).

are ethical requirements and values that capitalism, as well as any other system, needs to meet (279). However, I am not convinced that this is really the case. Ultimately, what we find in Sen's book is a defense of capitalism on the basis of a shift from the emphasis on human capital and economic growth to a new emphasis on human capability and freedom (292-297), where the former modality is not replaced but only *supplemented* by the latter. Below, I will discuss the very positive concept of capability of which Sen makes use. However, it is difficult to see how this capability can become actual in a system which, in order to function, needs to reduce or annihilate it in the first place. Certainly we cannot take the 'communist' societies of the past as models for the dream of utopia, the desire of a different world, of justice (even as fairness, in Rawls' sense), equality, and fundamental freedoms. Yet, at the same time, it is not by initiating a course of action approaching a "middle path" (as Sen implies with an elegant reference to Buddha) that the world's destiny of genuine freedom can be regained (Sen, 112). Not if this middle path implies the act of trying to reconcile the particularistic interests of capital, its will to impose a partial and fake totality on everything, with the totality of social, political, and economic exclusion. What is 'middle', the mode of the synthesis, or rather, as Balibar shows, the terrain of *transindividuality* (Balibar, 1993, 30-31), is universal and, above all, common. The *practical* market certainly has this characteristic of being common: people exchange useful things within the plane of everyday life; the middle and common is where production and consumption 'naturally' (if we are allowed this word) meet. This practical market is simply based on the impossibility, as Marx shows, of pure Robinsonades (Marx, 1970, 188), for even Robinson Crusoe's life, on his island "bathed in light", is determined by a *relational set* of structures which, even in isolation and solitude, imply the concept of the transindividual (see Marx, 1977, 170). Yet, the market economy dominated by capital is external and superimposed to the plane of everyday life: the plane of immanence and concretion is lost: labor becomes abstract, useful things become values and money. An economy controlled by markets, or a society in which the economic sphere plays the preponderant role by declaring itself independent from the totality of the social and cultural fact, loses sight not simply of the middle path and the middle *term* (where production and consumption meet), but also of the telos, the *end*; so that the end of housebuilding, to use Aristotle's example, is no longer a house, but profit.

Curiously, Sen stays away from an indictment of the logic of profit, let alone of the specificity of the capitalist mode of production, and lays the blame for the deficiencies of the market societies on political situations

and categories that today are highly equivocal, for instance on the presence or absence of democratic institutions. Speaking of the question of famines, he goes as far as to make a correlation between democracies and the possibility of poverty and the corresponding correlation between famines and totalitarian regimes (Sen, 179). Of course, the importance of market relations cannot be altogether ignored; thus, when he speaks about the Irish famine of the 1840s, during which “ship after ship –laden with wheat, oats, cattle, pigs, eggs, and butter—sailed down the Shannon bound for well-fed England from famine-stricken Ireland”, he needs to say: “The market forces would always encourage movement of food to places where people could afford to pay a higher price for it” (172). However, he soon adds: “One must not jump from this to the conclusion that stopping market transactions would be the right way to halt a famine” (173). Yet, the truth of the matter is that the question of the market does not present itself as an either/or: we either have the market or we don’t. The question is, first of all, one which is posited at the level of the logic of neither/nor – a logic of exit from the dominant figures of institutional economic and political thinking. Second, but directly following from this logic, the question is: What kind of market do we need? And this question we have already answered above when we spoke of the difference between the institutional and the practical market. It is very simple: if, in times of trouble, the available food is distributed among the people who need it most, certainly famines are curbed or even prevented. And if, as a general rule, the available food is distributed fairly, even the possibility of poverty will be eradicated. But for this to happen, the market, as we understand it, must disappear; the logic of profit, which alters the end and the good of things, must be abolished. No one would really maintain the thesis that the market, as a modality and practice of exchanging necessary and useful things, not for the sake of profit and economic growth, but for the sake of use and general well-being, is the problem. That famines do not take place in the advanced capitalist world does not imply that they do not belong to its concept – and poverty certainly does. Something approaching a famine is always present in extreme indigence and homelessness, and in fact, as Sen notes, a famine happens in the midst of plenty of food. Profit and economic growth are essential characteristics of the logic of capital, but they are not metaphysical necessities. Inevitably, the capitalist paradigm, dominant in the modern world, drives to that end even the societies that call themselves socialist or communist. Thus, when, for instance, Sen mentions the Chinese famines of 1958-1961 during the period of the Great Leap Forward –famines which, Sen notes, killed close to thirty million people—he should also take notice of the fact that what the Great Leap Forward intended to achieve was precisely an incredible level of economic growth. The

“sense of distance between the ruler and the ruled” which for Sen is a “crucial feature of famines” (175) is really the history of the class struggle which has divided and divides societies; with reference to today’s world, whether these societies are totalitarian or democratic, capitalist or socialist, makes no substantial difference, for, when measured from the standards of a radically different and better world, the difference is only one of degrees.

What is really important in Sen’s book, which centrally relates to our discourse on the ontology of utopia, is the concept of *capability*, a conscious and practical application of Aristotle’s dual structure of the concept of potentiality as the form of *freedom*, that is, potentiality itself and the potentiality not to, which we have mentioned above with reference to the work of Agamben as well. It is in this Aristotelian sense that Sen defines capability as “a kind of freedom” (Sen, 75), although he invokes Aristotle particularly in relation to the concept of “functionings”, to be understood with that of capability. It can be said that the relationship between capability and functionings in Sen’s book reproduces that between potentiality and actuality in Aristotle: “While the combination of a person’s functioning reflects her actual *achievements*, the capability set represents the freedom to achieve: the alternative functioning combinations from which this person can choose” (*ibid.*). The emphasis on the apparently only negative moment of potentiality, the potentiality not to, without which genuine freedom is made null and void, becomes evident when Sen says that it is “possible to attach importance to having opportunities that are *not* taken up” (76), just as in *Bartleby’s* celebrated “I would prefer not to”. He then shows the actuality of the potential, that is, the truth that potentiality is a constituent part of reality as a whole, not something which, unless it becomes actual in this or that way, remains unreal: “Indeed, ‘choosing’ itself can be seen as a valuable functioning, and having an x when there is no alternative may be sensibly distinguished from choosing x when substantial alternatives exist” (*ibid.*). He concludes with a concrete example, still of Aristotelian flavor: “Fasting is not the same as being forced to starve. Having the option of eating makes fasting what it is, to wit, choosing not to eat when one could have eaten” (*ibid.*). The concept of capability becomes very important, from a political point of view, when, distinguishing between income inequality and economic inequality, poverty is seen by Sen as *capability deprivation* rather than merely as the result of low incomes (87-110). What is taken away in poverty is then not simply the possibility, in itself very important, of making use of the immediate economic means necessary to improve one’s life, or simply to manage to have a good or even decent life; taken away or reduced is also, and more fundamentally, the *ontological* structure

of the potential, in its twofold form of potentiality and the potentiality not to, and thus freedom. This does not mean that the structure of potentiality or the freedom which generates freedoms is completely annihilated, for freedom remains the most irreducible fact of human life, as Sartre constantly shows. Thus, even in a situation of total captivity and slavery, there remains the freedom and the potential to rebel, but here our fundamental freedom will only engender, at a very high price, the conditions of possibility for the implementation of the many freedoms without which the good life, or even a decent life, becomes impossible – conditions which an enlightened society should absolutely guarantee and which all members of that society should be able to take for granted. Yet, if it is not annihilated, if it still remains as the fundamental movement capable of righting an absolute wrong, potentiality or freedom is certainly blocked from exercising itself and bearing fruit in a quotidian environment, which does not have to be that of a continuous and herculean struggle. In this sense, we cannot accept Hardt and Negri's quasi-glorification of the poor (2004). For them, the poor, in the four corners of the world, and that is, in the global scene, would almost be privileged, for, by virtue of their status, they are closer to the essence of revolutionary agency. But as Sen's distinction indicates, by way of implication, this poverty cannot be confused with Franciscan poverty: being forced and attached to poverty is different from choosing it as a way of life. The latter type, a poverty which is the result of focusing on the common use of necessary wealth, rather than on possession, specifically in the form of private property, certainly constitutes a very high ethical ideal: a way of life shared by many radical forms of thought, from the Franciscan to the Taoist to the Marxian paradigm. A better world is certainly one in which the category of *use* takes the place of that of possession. Yet, because of the actual and potential wealth of today's societies, poverty as such, as deprivation of fundamental capabilities (whether it is caused by lack of food or education, or both), could be completely eradicated. Amartya Sen often refers to the horrible and abusive practice of child labor, which produces poverty and is a result of poverty. The story of Iqbal Masih, the young Pakistani boy who was sold into slavery by his parents to a carpet factory owner, very tragically exemplifies this truth. Iqbal, who was murdered in 1995, when he was only thirteen years old, by the Carpet Mafia and corrupt Pakistani authorities, went from being a bonded-debt-slave to political and revolutionary action, when, escaping from the prison-factory he was tied to, he joined the Bonded Labor Liberation Front.<sup>6</sup> When we consider the story

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<sup>6</sup> Francesco D'Adamo, *Iqbal: A Novel*, trans. Ann Leonard. Hachette: 2002. See also Kuklin (1998).

of Iqbal, or the question of child labor in general, of exploitation and poverty, it is difficult to come to the conclusion that “we are the poor” – a confusing conclusion, to say the least. To be sure, Hardt and Negri specify: “We do not mean to suggest that the poor or the migrants are better off and that we should all give up our wealth and hit the road. On the contrary, every kind of poverty brings its own special suffering. ... But besides their poverty and their lack of material resources, food, housing, and so forth, the poor do have an enormous wealth in their knowledge and powers of creation” (2004, 134). Fundamentally, “the poor embody the ontological condition not only of resistance but also of productive life itself” (133; italics removed). If we contrast this with Sen’s notion of poverty as capability deprivation, it seems that Hardt’s and Negri’s category of the poor (really at odds with their other concept of immaterial labor) does not reach into the true region of poverty, but it is something different from it. When poverty has the form of capability deprivation and exclusion from the distribution of social wealth, where exclusion becomes the only form of inclusion, for, under the rule of capital, one can participate in the production of social wealth yet be excluded from the forms of substantial reappropriation of it, then it is difficult to see in it an active ontology of liberation, as if that situation were, by virtue of its nature, identical with a winning modality of the political and social struggle. On the contrary, that inner potentiality is blocked from freely exercising itself, often submerged by the duress of the everyday struggle for reasons of mere survival and for the reproduction of those very modalities of oppression and exploitation without which even exclusion is excluded (as, but from another point of view, it should be). This does not mean, of course, that fundamental ways of resistance and exit are not constantly sought and practiced, ways which are capable of upsetting and bringing to ruin the whole system of inequality and injustice, the present world system, the system of capital. These are ways whereby the reappropriation of the capabilities one has been deprived of becomes possible, and thus the path to the ontological structure of freedom, the no place of potentiality, opens up again. Yet, this is not a good reason for praising poverty, for that is a path of blood and sorrow. As labor, poverty is the source of the constitution of wealth (and thus the substance of wealth), which means that it also possesses the capability of abolishing itself as poverty. It is only when it succeeds in abolishing itself, and that means, when it is no longer poverty, that it acquires a positive status. The bottom line is that being poor is never a good thing.

### 3. THE QUESTION OF LABOR

*Ma tra loro, partendosi l'offizi a tutti e le arti e fatiche,  
non tocca faticar quattro ore il giorno per uno;  
sí ben tutto il resto è imparare giocando, disputando  
leggendo, insegnando, camminando, e sempre con gaudio.*<sup>7</sup>

Tommaso Campanella

Campanella continues his description of utopia saying that no game played during so much free time from work takes place while being seated. In order to emphasize the character of labor as a general and joyful activity, that is, the labor beyond necessary labor, and to contrast it with the idea of contemplative life which, adequately or not, characterizes the most typical picture of life we have of the Middle Ages, Campanella, who like many Renaissance thinkers is critical of the Middle Ages, says that all doing involves movement and is done while standing up. In this essay, I am not discussing the classical presentations of utopia, that made by Plato or those typical of the Renaissance, such as the descriptions of Campanella and Thomas More (who coined the term 'utopia'); nor the later Romantic or socialist utopias of the nineteenth century. In fact, I am here dealing with a different concept of utopia, present in the work of Herbert Marcuse, as we have seen, of Ernst Bloch, as we shall see, but also in the work of Marx. This is, I repeat, a structure of potentiality already present within the real, although more often than not left unrecognized. Yet, Campanella's description, as an example among others, is very interesting not only from the point of view of intellectual history, but also conceptually. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (*The City of the Sun* was written in 1623), Campanella reduces the working day to four hours, and, as he shows in the next paragraph, he sees in this the condition for the abolition of poverty. He continues: "They also say that great poverty makes men cowards, shrewd, thieves, deceitful, lawless, liars, false witnesses; and wealth makes them insolent, proud, ignorant, traitors, loveless, presuming to know what they don't know. Yet, communal life makes them both rich and poor: rich because they have and possess everything; poor, because they do not attach themselves to things, as if they were their servants, but all things are of use to them" (51).

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<sup>7</sup> "Yet among them, as everyone has a share of official tasks and arts and manual labor, each one needs only to work four hours per day; whereas the rest of the time is spent playing, debating, reading, teaching, walking, and all these activities are always performed with joy" (*La città del sole; The City of the Sun*).

When labor is looked at as a common concept and a general life activity, covering the spectrum from the necessities of everyday life to the joyful activities, as Campanella has it, its twofold character, whereby value comes into existence, cannot be developed. The market, as the communal meeting point of simple exchange – an exchange which is not merely economic, but also social and cultural – cannot develop into the form which institutionalizes the gap between wealth and poverty, thus the antagonism between the classes. It is rather the place where “playing, debating, reading, teaching, walking” also occur. Perhaps this is something close to today’s popular concept of the public sphere. Certainly, it is the common ground where labor is not hidden within the things it has produced, but it is free with respect to them and ever-productive: living rather than being reduced to one commodity among others; using the things it has produced, which include space, time, and ideas, rather than being used by them.

Campanella’s description is similar to the famous passage from *The German Ideology* where Marx and Engels say that “in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (53). This means that becoming never turns into being, the “fixation of social activity” (*ibid.*), which denatures labor. Some say that this passage from *The German Ideology* shouldn’t be taken too seriously for, written in 1845-46, it was never repeated by either Marx or Engels.<sup>8</sup> However, this is not entirely true. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx makes a similar point, though in a much more sophisticated way, when, speaking of the difficult question of machinery, he says:

The more this contradiction develops [between the creation of *disposable time* and its conversion into surplus labor], the more does it become evident that the growth of the forces of production can no longer be bound up with the appropriation of alien labour, but that the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour. Once they have done so – and *disposable time* thereby ceases to have an *antithetical* existence—then, on one side, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that, even though

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance the recent volume by Jonathan Wolff (2002), a useful reminder of the importance of Marx today.

production is now calculated for the wealth of all, disposable time will grow for all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time (708; brackets added).

I quoted at length because of the importance of this passage. Marx's emphasis on the meaning of *real wealth* (an emphasis given by the shortness of the sentence) should be given some consideration. If disposable time is now the measure of real wealth, that is because this wealth is not limited to the economic order. It follows that the "developed *productive* power of all individuals" is no longer productive in the sense of capital, that is, productive of capital, but in a more generic sense: it is *creative*. The difference is that, whereas under capital productive labor is highly compulsive, in communist society there is very little compulsion, or rather no compulsion at all, for there is no "fixation of social activity" and thus there is ample choice among many activities – a condition for creative labor. This is real wealth.

The reappropriation of surplus-labor does not entail a reappropriation of surplus-value, but its abolition. Surplus-labor is what produces surplus-value, but when the former goes back to itself as disposable time, surplus-value (and thus capital) simply ceases to be produced. Real wealth does not lie in the fact that now all surplus-value belongs to the workers rather than to the capitalists; instead, real wealth lies in the fact that everybody has the time for meaningful activities, that necessary labor is reduced to a minimum (thanks also to machinery), and that everyone is, as Campanella says, not merely poor, but rich and poor at the same time, which is the same as saying that everyone is neither rich nor poor.

Some say that value is not created by labor and that, as a consequence, surplus-value is not created by surplus-labor. Therefore they deny the formula of exploitation contained in the labor theory of value as applied by Marx. The labor theory of value was not Marx's discovery, but it was already present in the work of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and before them is also found in John Locke. In fact, Marx's original contribution lies in the formulation of the dual character of labor and thus in the idea that surplus-labor creates surplus-value. For Marx, this explains the mystery of the origin of profit, as well as of the exploitation of the working class by capital. One of the strongest and most typical counterexamples to show that this logic doesn't really work is that of the value of uncultivated land. How is it possible that uncultivated land is at times so immensely valuable if it contains no labor whatsoever? This is a typical counterexample in the literature of

'analytical' Marxism, one which apparently incontrovertibly shows that labor has nothing to do with value.<sup>9</sup> Yet, this might appear correct only from the point of view of the empirically given, that is, the positivist point of view which thinks that reality begins and ends with the *positum*, with what is simply there – a point of view which absolutely excludes from consideration the possible or the potential. It is obvious that uncultivated land is immensely valuable only when it is potentially profitable, for instance, as a construction site. In any case, it is never valuable in itself, but only insofar as labor will be put into it. The fact that the value of the land in question is not only potential or ideal but actual does not mean that it is independent of the labor to come: this labor is anticipated as if it were already contained in it. Without this anticipation, the land would have no value whatsoever. It is not my intention to enter the debate over the correctness, in economic and mathematical terms, of the labor theory of value, for that would be far beyond my competence and, in any case, I do not think it's an interesting or fruitful discussion. I simply want to point out, once again, the fact that labor is the most common concept of the social, and this is a philosophical and cultural truth that no calculation or apparently subtle reasoning could deny. The capitalist class knows that very well, so do the useless politicians who are always busy creating 'more jobs', pretending (or actually believing?) they are doing labor a favor.

#### 4. THE NEW LABOR AS THE BARELY VISIBLE

*...these people have neither King, nor Lord, nor do they yield obedience to any one, for they live in their own liberty ... they have no judicial system, nor do they punish the ill-doer ... they use no trade, they neither buy nor sell. ...The wealth that we enjoy in this our Europe and elsewhere, such as gold, jewels, pearls, and other riches, they hold as nothing: and although they have them in their own lands, they do not labour to obtain them, nor do they value them*

Amerigo Vespucci

If it were only a question of words, we might as well disregard this word 'utopia' and terminate the present discussion. However, the question is not at all terminological, but, at one and the same time, theoretical and practical. The word 'utopia' itself, which means 'no place', can be seen as a literary expedient; there are so many in More's book, from the last name of the

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, Wolff (2002, 113-118).

character, Raphael Hythloday (apparently meaning ‘nonsense-peddler’), who, introduced to More, gives him an account of the commonwealth of the new island of Utopia, to the other names usually designating peoples, such as the Polylerites, who live in the Persian area, and whose name means ‘much nonsense’. It is not the fantastic aspects of classical utopias that are of interest today, although they are interesting from the point of view of the history of ideas and of literature, and also because they were certainly instrumental in the constitution of revolutionary discourse. In fact, in a very figurative, yet not concrete, way, they made the essential point: that the world could be a different place. The point was made by means of accounts showing or pretending to show that a different social and political state of affairs actually existed in distant lands and islands, as the explorers from the end of the Middle Ages through the whole period of the Renaissance never tired to repeat, mixing their accounts to memories of things read in the bestiaries. But this didn’t show that this different place could indeed be the world itself, in its entirety; that, in other words, what-could-be was in fact already present in what-is – present in potentiality, not in ideality: not a ‘no place’ but a place *not yet posited*. Thus, Ernst Bloch calls attention to the concrete utopia of Marxism, a critical totality (Bloch, 1991). The difference between the social utopias of the classical age or of the socialists and anarchists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the concrete utopia of Marx’s communism lies in the absence, in the former, of an adequate concept of subjectivity. In what Marx calls “crude communism” in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, referring to the ideas of the utopian thinkers of his century, there is a leveling down of the individual personality, “the category of the *worker* is not abolished but extended to all men” (Marx, 1975, 346), poverty is extended to all, and “the community is simply a community of *labour* and equality of *wages*, which are paid out by the communal capital, the *community* as universal capitalist” (346-347). This kind of communism is a mere extension of what-is, not at all the coming to be of what-could-be; this extension is the hidden and distant ‘no place’ of ideal utopias; whereas in the concrete utopia what-is and what-could-be coincide, so that there is no longer a ‘no place’ left somewhere.

Moreover, the boredom that one finds in the classical and ideal utopias, together with the strict moralistic requirements and values (and this, notwithstanding Charles Fourier’s attack against morality and his emphasis on attraction, passion, and love) – moral values from which one usually excludes the idea of a community of women (but not of men) – shows the limits of this kind of utopian thinking. It is really not radical enough in its

vision and imagination. The flattening of subjectivity to the requirements of labor, however attractive that may be made to be, “*labour* as the condition in which everyone is placed and *capital* as the acknowledged universality and power of the community” (347), reduces the solitude of labor to ashes, and that solitude is a condition for labor’s return to itself. Who would want to live in this kind of utopia? Or in the one described by Thomas More? It sounds very much like ‘actually existing socialism’.

The return of labor to itself cannot be a return to the condition, accurate or not, of the Amerindians described by Vespucci, for that would be a return to the “*unnatural* simplicity of the *poor*” (Marx, 1975, 346). This means that a radically different world cannot be constructed by the rejection, or the “*abstract negation*” (*ibid.*), of the historical determinations of the present; nor, of course, can it be constructed by way of extending the most visible tendencies of the posited present, without looking at those tendencies which, beyond the *positum*, are barely visible. For instance, the issue of same-sex marriage would be the development of a very visible tendency within the posited present; but the constitution of a culture that is genuinely free from a sexual point of view remains barely visible. Another example: exporting or enforcing values and systems of what goes under the name of democracy (e.g., useless if not altogether flawed elections, parliamentary systems from which most people are excluded, freedom as free-trade, police machine, control, etc.) also belongs to the posited present; but a world in which everyone can develop fully and thus also contribute meaningfully and substantially to what is common, in which war and poverty are eliminated and all children can and do get an adequate, good education and attain happiness (in the Greek sense of *eudaimonia*, that is, in the sense of *living well*) – this is barely visible.

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The Pindaric style of this essay is deliberately chosen, for it gives me the possibility of going from place to place, or rather from place to ‘no place’, from water to fire, without the fixation of a subject-matter, from what-is to what-could-be, from the empirically given, or posited present, to what is also present, yet absent at the same time. It is then, I must confess, not by chance that I started this essay with a discussion of William Burrough’s stories. In them we find some of those tendencies which are barely visible, lurking behind the posited present, in the same way in which nothing is said to be lurking behind being. Yet, for all the flight, there is no exit, no escape into a beyond. All is from the absolute rigor of immanence.

## 5. REMARK ON MORALITY AND RELIGION

The advent of the Christian God, as the maximum god attained so far, was therefore accompanied by the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth. Presuming we have gradually entered upon the reverse course, there is no small probability that with the irresistible decline of faith in the Christian God there is now also a considerable decline in mankind's feeling of guilt; indeed, the prospect cannot be dismissed that the complete and definitive victory of atheism might free mankind of this whole feeling of guilty indebtedness toward its origin, its *causa prima*. Atheism and a kind of second innocence belong together.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

In this passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche shows too much 'optimism'. In fact, either we have entered upon a reversal of the reversal or this "irresistible decline of faith" has actually never begun. I tend to believe that the former situation might more correctly describe what has taken, and is taking, place: The reverse course we had entered upon, certainly with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, has been halted, and we have now regressed to the superstitious and primitive way of thinking and living which crowns itself with false ideas of moral values and virtue. In Nietzsche's terms, we are simply witnessing the triumph of slave morality. This kind of morality, to which Nietzsche counterposes the noble kind, is based on the feeling of *ressentiment* and on the practice of mere reaction. Nietzsche says: "While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'; and *this* No is its creative deed" (36). In another important passage he says:

At least to represent justice, love, wisdom, superiority – that is the ambition of the 'lowest,' the sick... They monopolize virtue, these weak, hopelessly sick people, there is no doubt of it: 'we alone are the good and just,' they say, 'we alone are *homines bonae voluntatis*'<sup>10</sup> (123).

If Nietzsche was too optimistic in his assessment of the decline of faith and of the liberating effect of atheism, his critique of morality is an important tool for understanding the cultural situation (one of impasse and regress) in which we live today. The recent presidential elections in the US, whose outcome was determined by this monopolization of virtue, by religious

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<sup>10</sup> Men of good will.

and moral values, show this very well. An alternative, progressive thought, on the other hand, which is usually referred to as 'the Left', a category which can no longer be unconditionally accepted, given its highly problematic nature: e.g., the fact that it remains within the reduction of political and ethical thinking brought about by the exclusive emphasis on the empirically given and also the fact that it very often shows itself to be not progressive at all – this thought seems to be without resources in this respect. In fact, one of its fundamental tasks is the formulation of a thoroughly secular philosophy, which might be accepted by all human beings. This philosophy, which as Marx says in *On the Jewish Question*, constitutes a way of "resolving superstition into history", strives, beyond the politics of rights, toward *human emancipation* (Marx, 1975, 217). However, it is precisely this form of emancipation, the fundamental fact of human freedom, which remains mostly unheeded in today's world, in which we often live as if the Enlightenment had never happened. It is this reality which makes the Peruvian poet César Vallejo exclaim, in the first part of the twentieth century: "¡Oh alma! ¡Oh pensamiento! ¡Oh Marx! ¡Oh Feuerbach!"<sup>11</sup> And yet, thinking and living differently is not enough, for one may think of a thousand ways of doing that. Instead, a requirement for enlightened and progressive, 'leftist', thinking is that it move toward the open space of the universal and common without, however, renouncing subjectivity; this thinking (and practice) strives to bring about fundamental changes in the economic sphere, but also at the general level of society and culture; it changes, to refer to Marx again, the social and cultural individual, not by neutralizing her personality, but by making possible the full development of her capacities; in a word, it strives for *the good life* – not just for some (for instance, Aristotle would only include the citizens), but for everybody. For this to take place, one fundamental aspect of life must be regained: the world of the spirit, which must be subtracted from the monopoly of religion and faith. This is easily done when labor ceases to be a compulsory and exploited activity and becomes productive at the level of a fundamental and general social ontology. In this sense, it becomes creative. When labor moves from the narrow sphere of the economy to the totality of the social, it includes, as its most central characteristic, an artistic component. It is precisely this artistic production which is also spiritual, as we will stress below when discussing E. Bloch. When all labor produces artistically, when creativeness is included in all life activity, which is identical to a

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<sup>11</sup> "Oh soul! Oh thought! Oh Marx! Oh Feuerbach!" (Vallejo, 43).

liberated concept of labor, then the world of the spirit is not a supplement to, and an exit from, the tiresome business of everyday life; rather, it becomes a practical structure of the everyday life, attended to, as Campanella says, "always with joy". Then, the immanence of society in art, with which Adorno concludes his *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno, 1997, 232), becomes a real possibility.

One important question is: does this new way of thinking possess virtue and a sense of ethics? Even today, or perhaps particularly today, many people make the association between being godless and being evil. Of course, the solution to this problem cannot be lowering the standard of this new thinking in order to make it acceptable to the ignorance pervading society. Rather, one aspect of the solution may lie in showing the hypocrisy (in this sense see Kierkegaard) of mainstream culture and morality, its incoherence and actual indifference to the common good; another aspect may lie in the simple affirmation of a noble morality (to use Nietzsche's phrase), that is, in the constitution of theoretical and practical structures within everyday life where *the good* which is beyond good and evil becomes manifest. One does not have to sound puritanical in order to be ethical, and indeed very often those who show severe outward morality are also deeply immoral. We see this everyday when the official moral discourse bulks in front of the reality of war and poverty with a sense of pathetic impotence or with the excuse borrowed from the ideology of the necessary evil. Thus, moral discourse is used, in a 'biopolitical' sense (to use a term perhaps made too popular after Michel Foucault), to regulate people's lives, beginning from sexuality, which is eminently regulated.

There can be no radical change or real cultural revolution without liberation in sexuality. At least since Freud this has been a well-known fact. And in the second half of the twentieth century, with the theoretical work of Marcuse and Foucault among others and a practical movement, some real progress was made in this respect. Today's emphasis on traditional moral values (e.g., family values, the sanctity of marriage, etc.) represents a real backward movement which, if on the one hand acknowledges, by its very existence, the force of a culture of liberation, on the other hand shows its own force by uniting half of this country's population, and many more people at a worldwide level, in a form of *resistance* to what this new century might deliver. More than ever, morality and culture enter the scene of politics, narrowly defined. However, it is important to note that this backward movement is, as I have said, mainly in a position of resistance. Certainly, aspects of a crusade against liberation

are present, but these belong to the concept (and the arrogance) of the powers-that-be. Only what is genuinely progressive possesses real force.

Sexual liberation is fundamental because it entails a total reform of one's being: the way in which one perceives oneself, the others, the world; it is the liberation of the spirit. The reform works at the individual as well as at the social level, and the two levels are really never dissociable. In this sense, Michel Foucault has worked out the structure of the care of the self, as a condition for one's usage of one's power and for the avoidance of a typical feature (not necessarily an aberration) of today's mainstream culture: the abuse of power. When sexual liberation is feared and repression becomes omnipresent, when the rhetoric of moral discourse and religious values (whether these are naively sincere or outright spurious, as in the case of Fascist ideologies and regimes) triumphs, then the practice of abusive power also becomes widespread. Pasolini shows this in his last, unfinished movie, *Salò, or the One Hundred Days of Sodoma*, as well as in his last and unfinished novel, *Petrolio*. In these works of the mid-seventies (Pasolini was murdered in 1975), which, in describing the death of the political, stress the crisis of the movement for political emancipation, let alone human emancipation, we see a lucid portrayal of our own days. Indeed, today, the emphasis at the official level on moral-puritanical values (e.g., abstinence education, campaign against same-sex sex, sacrifice in war as well as a non-Kantian giving to charity, where the praise of poverty is heard once again) yields the same type of pathological convictions and forms of behavior described by Pasolini in his last masterpieces. Thus, on the one hand, under the 'moral' leadership of G.W. Bush, we have the abuses at the Abu-Ghraib prison and at Guantanamo (a logical consequence of the "We don't need permission" uttered in response to the UN reluctance to accept the inevitability of the war against Iraq); on the other, we find the many episodes of police brutality in American cities and elsewhere: typically, under the (once again) 'moral' leadership of Rudolph Giuliani in New York, the case of Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant brutalized by cops in 1997 in a vicious case of sodomy – a case in which racist and homophobic motives equally played a role.

## **6. THE QUESTION OF SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL LIBERATION: BURROUGHS AGAIN**

*Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.*  
Herman Melville

Indeed, what is immoral is not that two men or two women love each other, nor can be immoral the form of sexual intercourse people may choose to practice. Typically, under attack is the practice of sodomy, and homosexual sodomy in particular, which, until the US Supreme Court ruled that sodomy laws were unconstitutional on July 26, 2003, was considered illegal in nine states within the US, as it still is in many countries around the world. In fact, as an Italian gay magazine's ad used to say many years ago, the only immoral thing in sex is not to respect hygiene, to which we can add the requirement that all sexual acts be consensual. Instead, what is really immoral is that children go hungry everywhere in the world and that people die in useless conflicts. But before going back to our main question, we have to say more about the concept and practice of sodomy.

As any dictionary will show, sodomy (to use, playfully, Aristotelian phraseology) can be said in many ways. The word itself comes from the city of Sodom, mentioned in Genesis as the place where this practice was widespread – a practice which caused its destruction. In another definition, the Webster Dictionary says that sodomy is the practice of “copulation with a member of the same sex or with an animal” – the latter also known as ‘bestiality’ – but it is obvious to anyone with some critical sense, *pace* Aristotle, how these two forms of sexual behavior cannot belong together in definition or in practice. Only in the last given meaning is (anal or oral) sex with a member of the opposite sex also mentioned, which means that sodomy is mainly seen as a homosexual activity.

Aristotle classifies homosexual acts as a form of bestiality, which is in general “most often found in foreigners” (1145a 31) (these foreigners are always the same!), and which includes all those things that “are not naturally pleasant, but deformities or habits or base natures make them pleasant” (1148b 17-18). He says that “in some people these result from [a diseased] nature, in others from habit, as for instance, in those who have suffered wanton [sexual] assault since their childhood” (1148b 30-32). For Aristotle, this goes beyond incontinence, which is in itself a vice; but states of ‘bestiality’ such as these are “outside the limits of vice” (1149a, 1); or rather: “One sort of vice is human, and this is called simple vice; another sort is called vice with an added condition, and is said to be bestial or diseased vice, but not simple vice” (1149a 18-20). To support his thesis, Aristotle makes a reference to the ‘nature’ of women, which is worth considering. He says: “If nature is the cause, no one would call these people incontinent, any more than women would be called incontinent for being mounted rather than mounting. The same applies to those who are in a diseased state because of habit” (1148b

32-35). This means that habit has changed an individual so much that his or her bad actions can no longer be imputed to incontinence, which is the state in which a person “knows that his actions are base, but does them because of his feelings” (1145b 13-14). Of course, rather than the description of an aberration, we are here looking at an aberrant consequence of Aristotle’s otherwise great philosophy of freedom, based on the idea that we are responsible for the construction of our character. What seems to worry Aristotle, among other things, is the modification of a ‘natural’ capacity or disposition. Women are seen, as a translator notes, as “by nature the passive partners in sexual intercourse” (Aristotle, 263). When men are ‘mounted’ rather than ‘mounting’, they enter into the position which is naturally occupied by women and become passive, which is against their nature.

The concept of passivity is very problematic, and this not only with respect to sex. For instance, the ancient Taoist philosophers Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu present the concept of *wu-wei* (often translated as non-action, but better rendered as effortless action), which gives the concept of passivity (or what is usually taken as such) a radically different meaning, capable of altering the usual way in which *praxis* is understood. At the end of a brief, but dense and interesting, article on some thematic correspondences between Gramsci and Buddhism, Giangiorgio Pasqualotto applies the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* to Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, to his theory of the action which entails, not a frontal and rigid opposition to the enemy, but the ability to draw the enemy into ruin on the basis of the enemy’s own force. This is done, Pasqualotto says, by means of a “non passive patience” (a Buddhist concept similar to the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*), which is a characteristic of the will, and which has the form of a *capacity of resistance* (Pasqualotto, 452-456).

A similar understanding of the concept of passivity, this time with respect to something closer in content to the above remarks on Aristotle, is found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s great, yet problematic, book on Jean Genet. For Sartre, the conflict of the will against itself, which emerges from the life and work of Genet, is a clear example of a strongly willed passivity which turns into willfulness (Sartre, 65). In this sense, he says that no one is more active than a homosexual who is called passive (112). Here I am not interested in refuting or endorsing Sartre’s statement; what I am interested in is pointing out the need we experience today to rethink some fundamental categories of everyday life (such as sexual roles, in sex proper and more in general) and thus alter the course of culture; that is, abolish the trends of mainstream culture and invent radically new ways of looking at things: a political, but also an ontological and ethical project.

In this context, it is perhaps also interesting to look at the way in which Dante deals with the question of sodomy within the general framework of what can be called his *principle of ethical difference*. This principle is formulated by Beatrice in Canto II of the *Inferno*, when, in answering Dante's question as to why she doesn't fear the fires of hell (for she belongs in heaven), she says: "One ought to be afraid of nothing other / than things possessed of power to do us harm, / but things innocuous need not be feared";<sup>12</sup> yet the principle can be broadened to the point that it becomes a measure of the difference between the divine and the human order. In Canto XV of the *Inferno*, we find the Sodomites, among whom Dante's putative mentor, Brunetto Latini. Of course, what Dante is describing here is a sin, to which he refers with words like "eternal sorrows" and being "stained" by sin. And when Brunetto Latini mentions, among the sinners in his company, the Bishop of Florence Andrea dei Mozzi, who, because of his scandalous life, was transferred by Pope Boniface VIII from Florence to Vicenza, he says that he soon died in his new city, where "he left his tendons strained by sin" (*Inf.*, XV, 114) – an obvious expression of disapproval for the practice of sodomy, coming from Brunetto Latini himself. Yet, when Brunetto leaves Dante, hurrying to join again the company to which he is tied "by one same sin", Dante describes him as a winner rather than a loser: "And then he turned and seemed like one of those / who race across the fields to win the green / cloth at Verona; of those runners, he / appeared to be the winner, not the loser" (*Inf.*, XV, 121-124).<sup>13</sup> This description is certainly in contradiction with the situation of "eternal sorrows" to which Brunetto is condemned because of his sin upon earth, and it is here that we can see the *principle of ethical difference* at work. In fact, the bottom line is that Brunetto, who taught Dante "how man makes himself eternal" (*Ibid.*, 85), still lives in his work, *Le livre du tresor*, as he himself says: "Let my Tesoro, in which I still live, / be precious to you; and I ask no more" (*Ibid.*, 118-119). The contradiction I am pointing out here has to do with one of those moments in Dante in which, as Erich Auerbach has argued reading the tenth canto of the *Inferno*, "The image of man eclipses the image of God" (1953, 202), so that the "Christian-figural" reality created by the poem is destroyed by the same stroke. Yet, this foreshadows the earthly and secular ethics of Boccaccio (226-227), and then, in general the humanist ethics of the Renaissance.

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<sup>12</sup> "Temer si dee di sole quelle cose / c'hanno potenza di fare altrui male; / de l'altre no, ché non son paurose" (*Inf.*, II, 88-90).

<sup>13</sup> "Poi si rivolse e parve di coloro / che corrono a Verona il drappo verde / per la campagna; e parve di costoro / quelli che vince, non colui che perde".

Sartre, too, ultimately describes Genet as a winner. As Genet becomes his own God (Sartre, 144), he moves toward the realization of the impossible, a total overturning of his original project and situation, with “failure becoming a token of victory” (399). And Sartre has already said that “[s]uccess entails a secret failure” (189). However, the problem with Sartre’s view, perhaps vitiated by a form of psychologism (though of an existential type), is that he still sees homosexuality as a form of pathology, not of the individual, but of the society in which the individual finds herself. For instance: “A person is not born homosexual or normal [?]. He becomes one or the other, according to the accidents of his history and to his own reaction to those accidents” (78; brackets added) – a position which ultimately entails a form of essentialism, notwithstanding Sartre’s (‘mere’, for Heidegger) reversal of the Platonic relationship of essence and existence. It is also important to note that the absence or death of God does not necessarily entail the fact that the human being now takes his place, as Sartre often says. Indeed, who would want to be God when there is already so much to do being human? The destruction of the Christian-figural form, according to Auerbach’s expression, already initiated by Dante and brought to completion by Nietzsche, only yields the plane of immanence, that is, of a secular and earthly plenitude.

With William Burroughs, this new plane, devoid of moralism, psychologism, and other similar hang-ups, becomes a *fait accompli*, the exclusive terrain of occasions, and they are all there is. Thus, in Burroughs’ stories we don’t find the dark and convoluted set of motives and drives which characterizes Sartre’s reading of Genet (more than Genet’s own work, to be sure).<sup>15</sup> What we find is the most transparent occurrence of things, which, as we have seen, because of their transparency, always make manifest the structural situations supporting them, or rather fade in those situations. There is then no question of being active or passive, masters or slaves, and so on. What we find instead is the simple occurrence of what has *not yet* occurred, even when this occurrence is, as we have seen, infinitely repeated. It is not a question of *saving oneself*, as in Sartre’s reading of Genet, and of thus becoming a saint or even God, for there is no damnation either, but rather a question of living the only possible life, and of becoming, if anything, an animal.

Listen, for instance, to one of Burroughs’ descriptions of a sexual encounter,

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<sup>15</sup> A different interpretation of Genet’s work, closer to Genet’s own sensibility, can be found in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s last movie, *Querelle*.

from "The Frisco Kid". The two characters meet in a restaurant in Alaska. As they happen to be seated at the same table, they start talking: "Didn't I see you someplace?" and "You got a place to stay?" (Burroughs, 94). When they get to the Frisco Kid's room, the situation is already defined, in a very matter-of-fact way: "Why waste money on some sucker trap" (95). And later: "Why waste money on a whore?" (96). In a way similar to the opening chapters of *Moby Dick*, when Ishmael meets Queequeg and is lodged with him, with the difference that in Melville the sexual dimension is not made explicit, Burroughs' story unfolds as if the extraordinary is a matter of routine and practical convenience, when all thought of a beyond is eliminated because it falls within the immanence of the situation at hand, the inner dynamics of that active space. However, all this is not a clumsy way of justifying a sexual act which is not brought to consciousness; there is therefore violence neither against oneself nor against another; there is no stress on whether one is a homosexual or not or on who is performing the active or the passive role, for the dichotomy is overcome:

I was lying on my back the Frisco Kid close behind me one leg sprawled across my crotch. Under the leg my cock was stiff and standing out of my shorts. I turned and looked at him. His eyes were open in the grey milky light and I felt a shiver down the spine. He wasn't there really. Pale the picture was pale. I could see through him. He smiled slow and rubbed his leg back and forth. I sighed and moved with it. He brought his hands up under the covers where I could see and made a fist and shoved a finger in and out. I nodded. He put his hands down and shoved his shorts off. I did the same. We lay side by side our breath hanging in the air. He hitched an arm under my shoulders. With the other hand he turned me on my side. He spit into his hand and rubbed it on himself. Slow pressure I took a deep breath and it slid all the way in. Ten strokes and we came together shuddering gasps his breath on my back. Where from? Frisco. A kid he never returns (Burroughs, 95-96).

I quoted this highly poetic passage at length in order to show the extra-moral (that is, neither moralistic nor immoral) and at the same time "loving and affectionate" (Melville, 24) presentation of a sexual practice which is today particularly under attack – a practice which, as we see in the above-quoted passage, might very easily fall under the category of casual encounter and friendship.

The question of sex proper is certainly very interesting and important. I have briefly discussed the instance of sodomy, highlighting its equivocal nature. To that discussion it might be added that other sexual practices, such as the

use of sexual toys, or the practice of fist fucking, can also fall under the category of sodomy, thus widening the pool of subjects possibly involved, by way of including women in the so-called active role (not to speak of the possibility at times of having the two 'roles' reconciled, as a univocal measure, in one and the same person) – although the first-mentioned practice (the use of sexual toys) might more naturally fall under the category of fetishism. However, as Michel Foucault says, what mainstream culture really fears is not the kind of sex people practice, but rather the modification of established values and norms regulating the way in which we relate to each other.<sup>16</sup> It is only when these are modified, or rather during the process of their modification (and I mean, all our relations, not simply at the sexual level), that we enter, in body and spirit (an earthly spirit), the terrain of utopia proper.

## 7. CONCRETE UTOPIA

*Too much still persists all around us, and ultimately we still are not.*  
Ernst Bloch

The line above is from *The Spirit of Utopia*, where Bloch fears that the spirit may become a "baseless and basically odious cliché" (2000, 267). The hope of an ethics and a philosophy "open to the extraordinary" (268) remains the essential and total reality "including the other side which is not yet" (276). Bloch says: "There will still come the inevitable emancipation of humanity by technology, and its now irresistible consecration of life, namely the potential abolition of poverty and the emancipation, compelled by the revolutionary proletariat, from all questions of economics" (267).

The last chapter of the third volume of *The Principle of Hope* is a meditation on Karl Marx and humanity. Here Bloch says that the greatness of Marx lies in the fact that he "cultivates not a general and abstract but an *addressed* humanity, one which is directed towards those alone who need it" (1995, 1357). He also calls this a "concrete humanity". And it is in this sense that the utopian discourse becomes one of a *concrete* utopia. Bloch also mentions

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<sup>16</sup> In the passage I have in mind, Foucault speaks of homosexuality in particular, but certainly his general discourse suggests that this statement can be applied to all forms of sexual behavior, even transcending the rigid dichotomy of homosexuality and heterosexuality. He says: "I think that's what makes homosexuality 'disturbing'; the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself" (Foucault, 1997, 136). I would also like to note that Foucault, who died in 1984, had perhaps put too much hope into the inherent radicality of an emerging gay culture.

the problem of poverty, saying that in it Marx sees “the revolting element”, the “active force of revolt against what is causing [poverty]” (*ibid.*). I need to add that here we should understand poverty not simply in an economic, but, as we have seen above while discussing the work of Amartya Sen, also in an existential and ontological sense. It is only when poverty “realizes its causes” (*ibid.*), that is, when it abolishes itself as poverty, that it “becomes the revolutionary lever itself” (1357-1358). Of course, this cannot mean that one has to become wealthy before being revolutionary, certainly not so in an economic sense; what this means, and we are here approaching the territory of consciousness and education, a territory in which the philosophy of Gramsci becomes an essential tool (but we can only make a passing reference to it in this paper), is that poverty realizes its causes when, as labor, it returns to the constitution of a different type of wealth. This is the return of labor to itself, which implies the end of the production and valorization of capital, the beginning of the end of capital’s falsely autonomous wealth, and the constitution of the wealth of labor. This is identical with the abolition of poverty. Thus, what is revolutionary is not poverty per se, but poverty on the way to its self-abolition and dissolution. This is the path shown by Marx when, as Bloch says, “together with Müntzer, [he] took up the scourge with which Jesus chased the money-lenders out of the temple” (1357). For this to happen, labor must stop being merely an economic activity and become something much broader than that, return to its original vocation as a life activity, destroy the accumulated wealth driven by profit (to whose concept the concept of poverty also necessarily belongs), and move toward that *real wealth* which Marx mentions in the *Grundrisse*, as we have seen above. This is the concrete utopia, the other side, the not yet.

The point is going beyond the empirically given, into what-could-be, in order to transform the concept of what-is; it is bringing into *this* all the possibilities, the principles of occasion, which left in the mere beyond delimit the given as a world of alienation. It is in this sense that Bloch speaks of *transcendere*<sup>17</sup> without transcendence, and thus of immanence. It is the same as the *seeing through* we have seen when discussing William Burroughs’ stories, or, to borrow a concept from Whitehead, the *translucency of realization* whereby what is indeterminate enters an actual occasion (1967, 171). Bloch says: “Certainly everything, and above all human life, is a kind of *transcendere*, a venturing beyond the given, but this *transcendere*, as concrete-utopian, also certainly does not involve any transcendence” (1995, 1373).

I would be tempted to end this Pindaric flight on Bloch’s quote, for we are

brought back by it where we needed to be: the point where transcendence is abolished, and on the other hand, the not yet, the world of the spirit, is recuperated within the only possible sphere, the sphere of the possible (which is the core of reality) – the plane of immanence. After all, the concept of transcendence is nothing but the distancing of the possible from its natural site, that is, the denial of its actual presence within the concrete. Religion arises, the world beyond, another life. Yet, the end of religion, the end of the system of transcendence, does not imply the end of the spirit, but its true beginning.

What we learn from this reflection is that there are three fundamental structures of the real which need to be completely dismantled in order to have the concrete utopia show itself in full visibility. The first structure is the logic of productivity which necessarily entails the exploitation of labor; the regime of capital which will never be able to solve class antagonism, for that solution entails its own dissolution. Instead, the liberation of labor, accomplished through the return of labor to itself and the fall of the rule of capital, will also determine the end of poverty (a reality which could be eliminated overnight) and the coming of the world of the spirit as the identity of production and creation. This means that all labor could be artistic, rewarding, 'attractive' (as in Fourier's expression), once it is freed from the burden of productivity and the illusion of economic growth. The second structure is that of transcendence, which fundamentally denies the spiritual dimension contained in the 'this', the everyday, the concrete, by reducing the 'this' to a mere *positum* and opening up the illusion of a world other than this. The abolition of transcendence brings to the fore a reconstituted totality, where what-is is inclusive of what-could-be, where the tension between these two constitutive moments of reality is not one of antagonism and death, but a creative tension, an ever-grounding power of new relational measures in the finitude of potentiality, for, as Descartes shows, potentiality pertains to the finite and imperfect, to that which remains in tension. Finally, the third structure which needs to fall is that supporting the regime of the heterosexual. This does not mean that exclusive homosexuality will be the answer, for the 'heterosexual' is present there too; rather, what it means is that this obsolete and annoying sexual dichotomy will cease to have currency. Indeed, the regime of the heterosexual *is* the regime of the male principle –not always and not necessarily present only in men; and

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<sup>17</sup> Bloch uses the Latin infinitive 'transcendere', 'to transcend'.

this is the regime that must end. The production of the *emancipated* senses (as in Marx's analysis) will be all that counts with respect to this. The concept of the family as the hearth of emotional and creative life, the place of memory and healthy solitude, where one feels that one's body reaches into the fabric of what is common – this does not need to cease; for it resembles the Heraclitean *ethos*, that is, the sharing of what is common without renouncing one's integrity and solitude. This shows to work when, even in total solitude, one feels the presence of the other(s), and theirs is a presence of difference. Thus, one upholds the idea of the family *as* a body, but not the family as an institution. Indeed, what needs to be eliminated is the latter, with all hypocritical talk of family values and the like, which turns that commonality into a private thing. Then, we don't see a thousand faces, but only one face, infinitely reproduced. Nor do we see the other, who, paling and glistening, opens the door to the barely visible, but the same – all too visible.

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