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Glenn Wallis
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Concrete Utopia and...Hope?

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In an age of despair. . .

The practice of “concrete utopia” might offer a glimmer of hope.

Despite the brutalist Soviet-era images it evokes, the term “concrete utopia” has nothing to do with architecture. Rather, it names an organizational *process*. It makes an intentional play on the term from which “concrete” the Latin *concrecere*, “to grow together,” originates. As the standard connotation of concrete as *solid, actual, real* indicates, concrete utopia signifies a *material* growth, or a growth with and out of our present material conditions. For this reason, it is to be distinguished from the idealized utopias found in literature, beginning with Thomas More’s *Utopia*. “Concrete utopia,” by contrast, is a dynamic practice that “*contains within it the forward surge of an achievement which can be anticipated.*”

It is crucial to note at the outset that, consistent with the anarchist refusal to prescribe pre-packaged solutions, *can be anticipated* does not entail “will be achieved.” Yet, to add another twist, a strong, if somewhat counterintuitive dollop of *hope* is mixed in as well. In this post, I would like to offer this seemingly paradoxical notion as a vital resource for educators.

The idea of “concrete utopia” originated with the Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch (1885-1977). But since Bloch was so irritatingly heretical in the eyes of his fellow Marxists, I think it’s okay for us anarchists to claim his concept as our own. (He was expelled from his East German university position for his idiosyncratic interpretations of Marx.) The title of his eccentric, majestic, somewhat apocalyptic three-volume book provides a clue as to the aim of the a concrete utopia: *The Principle of Hope*. “It is a question of learning hope,” Bloch begins. Significant for our classroom purposes, hope is not a spontaneous emotional quality; it is a *condition* that must be *learned*.

We are in the domain here of *praxis*, that is, of *doing, acting, forming, creating*. Bloch argues that hope must be *learned* because our default mechanism is precisely to act reflexively, unthinkingly in the world, as mere spectators of what he terms the *What Is*. Bloch argues that the status quo blinds our imaginations to the *Not Yet*, to, that is, a possible creation adequate to our utopian hypothesis. This is the reason that hope, for Bloch, is not primarily an emotional affect, but rather a species of action, one which “requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming.”

So, to summarize, while “real utopia” refers to a feasible formation on the current plane of the status quo, “concrete utopia” refers to *practice in becoming*. In literally *practicing* within a utopian anarchist project, say, the classroom, participants are at the same time literally *making practicable/practical* the desired realization of a transformed communal formation.

So, like the allied anarchist concept of *prefiguration*, the idea of *concrete utopia* holds that there exists a direct relationship between means and ends. The classrooms that we find ourselves in did not “organically” emerge. They are neither natural nor inevitable. They are, rather, *productive*. They are the result of numerous processes unfolding over time. These processes require *agents* — teachers, professors, and administrators, students, parents, and the general population — who uphold, re-

produce, and thereby perpetuate them. So, it follows that the classroom, school, or university to come will be the product of the manner in which those processes continue to operate and unfold...or *not*.

As Bloch says, “everything starts up and begins with a No, the No contains already the not yet within it.” The “No” is, of course, the refusal to answer the interpellation of the educational status-quo. The “not yet” gives positive impetus to the No precisely through concrete actions in the world. Thus, it bears repeating, hope, for Bloch, is not an emotional state or attitude: it is a specific type of *action*, one which “requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming.”

I’m sure that my readers are all-too aware of the enormous obstacles facing our desire for change within education (and, of course, beyond, within society, politics, the entire world-order). For, the logic driving this very desire is that our concrete utopia is a potentially perpetual *not-yet-being* — at every turn, an obstacle is lying in wait. So, I would like to suggest that, at this seemingly inevitable juncture of the impossible, we view our position as an ethical one.

Consider: What is the alternative to persisting with the stultifying present, the concrete dystopia? What is the alternative to learning hope? Bloch presents a divided pathway: the alternative is to remain locked in the ruts of “anxiety about life and the machinations of fear” perpetuated by those who benefit from the current status quo, and who thus insist on the impossibility of the Not Yet. Might *refusal* be an ethical obligation for those of us whose eyes cannot unsee the damage to the student caused by education?

Let Bloch and his comrades of the Frankfurt School be your allies. Their “concrete utopia” had the clarity and realism of a dream cleansed by the fire of fascism and of the catastrophic failure of communism. Bloch’s concrete utopia decisively distinguishes itself from the “fraudulent hope” that is relentlessly hocked in our political and spiritual self-help malls, a perverted

“hope” that is “one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race.” Not flinching from “informed discontent,” concrete utopia is founded on an equally relentless creation of “knowledge as conscious theory-practice.” This creation requires collective thought and action in actual, lived, *concrete* situations.

We can conclude with an evocative passage from *The Principle of Hope*:

How richly people have always dreamed of this, dreamed of the better life that might be possible. Everybody’s life is pervaded by daydreams: one part of this is just stale, even enervating escapism, even booty for swindlers, but another part is provocative, is not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation. This other part has hoping at its core, and is teachable. It can be extricated from the unregulated daydream and from its sly misuse, can be activated undimmed. Nobody has ever lived without daydreams, but it is a question of knowing them deeper and deeper and in this way keeping them trained unerringly, usefully, on what is right. Let the daydreams grow even fuller, since this means they are enriching themselves around the sober glance; not in the sense of clogging, but of becoming clear. Not in the sense of merely contemplative reason which takes things as they are and as they stand, but of participating reason which takes them as they go, and therefore also as they could go better. Then let the daydreams grow really fuller, that is, clearer, less random, more familiar, more clearly understood and more mediated with the course of things. So that the

wheat which is trying to ripen can be encouraged to grow and be harvested.