

## Redeeming Society: Critical Theory and the Re-imagining of Politics.

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§1 My paper establishes that when we consider any project of re-imagining politics, we must recognise it as one constituted by a particular *content* – envisioning new economic systems and principles, political structures and institutions, novel environmental policies and practices – but also by a particular *form*, in which such re-imagining can unfold. Put simply; we must ask who is doing such re-imagining, and in what way? I hope to offer a few initial gestures toward understanding the importance of these questions, and specifically, how the broad tradition of critical theory might help elucidate the philosophical tensions that underlie them.

§2 Our first question, of *who* is re-imagining politics, is explored because it's necessary to recognise that any re-imagining is always a concrete, situated activity; because we know, to apply Rahel Jaeggi's recent expression, that we cannot proceed from some 'imagined Archimedean point outside of the reality to be criticised'.<sup>1</sup> As I outline in the paper, our re-imagining is contoured by the systems – capitalist, racialised, gendered, ableist, colonial – that we lie within and thus can be prone to reproduce even in our attempts to think beyond them; I therefore take seriously that 'the imagination can be afflicted by the spirit of facticity'<sup>2</sup> and that we must think through the way our world limits and corrupts, but also enables divergence within, our political imaginations.

§3 A second question, of *how* we re-imagine politics, is posed so as to reflect on the multiple forms that imagination can take, and the difference they can make. I juxtapose a paradigmatic act of re-imagining politics, central to recent liberal thinking and ideal theory, of John Rawls' Original Position and his abstract formulation of the principles of justice, with positions which express *concrete* acts of re-imagining politics, so as to follow Benhabib's articulation that 'we discover the potentials of the present only by acting toward the future.'<sup>3</sup> I engage this comparison through exploring how the re-imagining of politics develops in historical accounts like Kristin Ross' analysis of the intellectual revolution that developed within the Paris Commune of 1871<sup>4</sup>, and Robin Kelley's cultural history of emancipatory black surrealism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jaeggi, R., 2018. *Critique of Forms of Life*, Harvard University Press. p.239

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, T. W., 2019. *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*. Polity Press. p.19

<sup>3</sup> Benhabib, S., 1986. *Critique, norm, and utopia: A study of the foundations of critical theory*. Columbia University Press. p.352

<sup>4</sup> Ross, K., 2015. *Communal luxury: The political imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso.

<sup>5</sup> Kelley, R.D., 2002. *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination*. Beacon Press.

§4 So with these limits and binds on any act of re-imagining politics acknowledged, how are we to proceed? A substantial answer is beyond the scope of this brief blog post, but in my paper I argue that two things are certain; first, we should draw any attempt to re-imagine politics under the imperative that Marx and Nancy Fraser demand of critical theory more broadly – that it aid the ‘self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’.<sup>6</sup> I go onto outline how any meaningful re-imagining thus must deal with the potential paradox of having both a genuine relationship to political struggles of its time, but also attempt to overcome these movements’ theoretical blind-spots.

Secondly, I propose that we should echo Adorno’s reflection, however ambiguous it seems, that we should only contemplate re-imagining politics if we do so ‘from the standpoint of redemption’<sup>7</sup>. To do so is to grasp that society might one day reach a state such that the grave contradictions, serious violence, and opaque hierarchies that currently distort our world, will be seen as they truly are - absurd.

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<sup>6</sup> Fraser, N., 2013. What's critical about critical theory?. In *Feminists Read Habermas*. Routledge. p.97

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, T.W., 2005. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a damaged life*. Verso. p.247