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Marcuse Among the Technocrats: America, Automation, and Postcapitalist Utopias, 1900-1941

J. JESSE RAMÍREZ

ABSTRACT

The dominant narrative about the Frankfurt School during the 1930s and 1940s portrays the group as "permanent exiles," their cultural, conceptual, and linguistic differences from their American hosts perhaps equally as vast as their geographical distance from Germany. This essay seeks to revise this narrative through a historically contextualized reading of Herbert Marcuse's critical theory. Building on new histories of critical theory's American period, as well as on Howard Brick's recent work on the transatlantic postcapitalist vision, I show that early critical theory, Second International European Marxism, and American progressive thinkers such as Thorstein Veblen and the Technocrats shared a discourse on the utopian potential of systemic shifts in early twentieth-century capitalism. While Marcuse's colleagues saw their postcapitalist vision of rational economic planning perversely realized in the state capitalisms of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, and Roosevelt's America, Marcuse instead took inspiration from Technocracy's left wing, especially Lewis Mumford's vision of automatism in Technics and Civilization. By helping him imagine the possibility of full automation, of the abolition of (alienated) labor, and of a post-scarcity world, Left Technocracy contributed to making Marcuse one of the most remarkable utopian thinkers in modern America.

I. "No Critical Theory Without America"

As Herbert Marcuse lay dying in a hospital in Starnberg, Germany, he spoke English. It was a language he had barely known in the 1930s, the decade he had arrived in the United States along with the other Jewish-Marxist refugees clustered around the Institute for Social Research and its director, Max Horkheimer. Considering themselves champions of a European intellectual tradition that was degenerating into barbarism on the continent, and wary of what they regarded as the anti-theoretical grammar of Anglophone thought, the Horkheimer Circle did not publish their Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung in English until 1941, and perhaps even then only because their European publisher had fallen to the National Socialists (cf. Jay, Exiles 40). As Martin Jay has phrased it, the members of the Horkheimer Circle lived out much of the 1930s and 1940s as "[p]ermanent exiles," their cultural, conceptual, and linguistic differences from their American hosts perhaps equally as vast as their geographical distance from their homeland. In-

1 I have adopted the designation Horkheimer Circle from Thomas Wheatland and others in order to indicate that the object of my analysis will not be the 'Frankfurt School,' a rather amorphous term that too strongly emphasizes theoretical and political coherence among the Institute's members.
deed, the dominant narrative surrounding the so-called Frankfurt School during this period portrays the group as insular critics of American mass culture, forlorn over the death of radical alternatives, resigned to writing messages in a bottle (in German) to some unforeseeable future. What should we make, then, of the incongruent fact that, in his final hours, Marcuse “did not speak his mother tongue” (Habermas, “Thermador” 80)? What sort of homecoming was it when Marcuse died in his native land speaking an exile’s English, that all too un-Hegelian, immediate of idioms that, for the Horkheimer Circle, was supposedly little more than a vehicle for positivism?

The title—No Critical Theory without America—of a German collection of essays on the Horkheimer Circle serves as my starting point. Marcuse’s use of English points to the still under-appreciated role that America played in his thought. To be sure, recent work by David Jenemann and Thomas Wheatland has begun to fill gaps in the earlier histories of the Horkheimer Circle by Martin Jay and Rolf Wiggershaus, revising common assumptions about its anti-American, mandarin aloofness. Jenemann’s Adorno in America not only demonstrates that Adorno had a much more ambivalent relationship toward American culture than has been recognized, but even more surprisingly, we learn for the first time that Adorno and Horkheimer could have ended up working in Hollywood, had their attempts in the 1940s to pitch a script for an experimental film on anti-Semitism been successful (cf. 128-47). Wheatland’s The Frankfurt School in Exile, the most precise history of critical theory’s American period to date, uncovers previously unknown institutional and personal links among the Horkheimer Circle, the New York Intellectuals, and the Marxist pragmatist Sidney Hook, among others. Yet while Jenemann and Wheatland have contributed to a more accurate record of the Horkheimer Circle’s time in exile, the full story of Marcuse in America has yet to be told. Moreover, neither in Barry Katz’s aesthetically focused intellectual biography of Marcuse, nor in Douglas Kellner’s philosophically comprehensive one, is this topic covered sufficiently.

As Marcuse begins to make a long overdue return to scholarly attention, the time is ripe for a more historically contextualized account of his critical theory. Such an account would situate Marcuse not only within the German philosophical and sociological traditions—Schiller, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Heidegger, and Marcuse’s colleagues at the Institute have been the usual focal points here—but also within the discursive fields that shaped modern American intellectual life. From his first publications in English in the 1940s to his radical interventions during the 1960s and 1970s, Marcuse wrote his most significant works in American settings. We would do well to remember Peter Lind’s description of Marcuse in the 1950s: “Marcuse is now an American citizen, living in the USA, writing for American audiences and teaching American students” (178). As Marcuse’s son, Peter, sees it, by the end of World War II, following his governmental service in the Offices of War Information and of Strategic Services, Herbert was politically, culturally, and legally American (cf. 249-52). Thus, the statement that there would

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2 Claussen, Negt, and Werz, eds. Keine Kritische Theorie Ohne Amerika. Unless otherwise noted in the Works Cited, translations from the German are my own.
have been no critical theory without America is not sufficient in Marcuse's case. I will argue that America was even more vital for his project, and especially for what I consider to be his most enduring legacy: Utopianism. Following Fredric Jameson's lead, I would like to ask, regarding Marcuse, "why Utopias have flourished in one period and dried up in another" (xiv), that is, what are "the specific situations and circumstances under which their composition is possible, situations which encourage this peculiar vocation or talent at the same time that they offer suitable materials for its exercise" (11).

To answer these questions, we must begin by rethinking the way early critical theory has been historically framed. That the Horkheimer Circle took a decisive turn in the early 1940s has become a common thesis for historians of early critical theory. Central to this thesis is a tripartite periodization of the Horkheimer Circle's intellectual development according to the following research projects: interdisciplinary materialism (1930-37), the critical theory of society (1937-40), and the critique of instrumental reason (1940-45). Lead by Jürgen Habermas and his students, subsequent generations of critical theorists have narrated the transition from the critical theory of society to the critique of instrumental reason as a pivotal 'paradigm shift,' one whose starting point was the acceptance of Pollock's theory of state capitalism and whose aporetic conclusion was Dialectic of Enlightenment. "Pollock's theory," writes Helmut Dubiel, "provided [the Horkheimer Circle] with the economic justification for considering an economic analysis of society no longer necessary or even possible" (81). From the 1940s onward, so the narrative goes, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse developed Pollock's notion of the primacy of politics over economics into analyses of the totally administered, one-dimensional society, a project that forgoes empirical investigations into capitalism's potential for immanent crisis and tends instead toward a fundamental (and according to Habermas, normatively confused) critique of Western reason.

Instead of pursuing the admittedly important question of normative coherence in early critical theory, I want to recast the 1940s paradigm shift in more historically contextual terms. In Transcending Capitalism, a brilliant study of twentieth-century transatlantic intellectual history, Howard Brick traces the longue durée of the postcapitalist vision, a view held by European and American intellectuals which stated that a new type of social economy was emerging alongside phenomena such as state intervention and the modern corporation. Brick notes further that "the postcapitalist vision possessed a good deal of political liability," and thus spanned the political spectrum (8). The Horkheimer Circle's thinking on state capitalism and instrumental reason must therefore be placed within the early twentieth-century postcapitalist dreamscape. Along with Second International European Marxism and American progressive social thought, the Horkheimer Circle shared a vision of the end of capitalism's classical liberal phase, and while each formation differed in particulars, they generally agreed that a more rational-

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ly planned society would follow. For Marxists, the postcapitalist future belonged to the socialist planned economy, which would put an end to the contradictions of the free market. Eduard Bernstein, Rudolf Hilferding, and a host of other ‘traditional’ Marxists before and after them, including many Institute members in the 1930s, understood the root of these contradictions to lie between the social wealth generated by monopolistic industrial production (forces of production) and its private appropriation by capitalists (relations of production); their socialism was mainly a new mode of distribution that would complement industrial social production with social ownership of wealth. Similarly, in the American progressive view the Machine Age had unlocked technologies that rendered laissez-faire capitalism archaic. As long as the price system, as Thorstein Veblen called it, ruled the economy, the latter would be riddled with waste and inefficiency. The only solution was a “Practicable Soviet of Technicians” (cf. Engineers).

The Horkheimer Circle’s paradigm shift occurred when its members sensed that their postcapitalist vision of rational planning had been perversely realized in the state capitalisms of Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, and Roosevelt’s America. In place of rational socialism there arose what Horkheimer would call the “rationalized, automated, totally managed world” (Selected Essays vii). But for all their differences with American social thought, the Horkheimer Circle’s nightmare of total administration was but one valence of a common vision, the opposite pole of which was the right-wing Utopia imagined by Veblen’s followers, the Technocrats. Lead by the eccentric engineer Howard Scott, the Technocrats endorsed an elitist solution to the deadlocks of capitalism: Only scientific engineering from the top down could properly adjust society to modern industry. For both the exiled Horkheimer Circle and American leftists like James Burnham, it was precisely such ideologies of rational efficiency that proved the victory of total administration, instrumental reason, and the politicization of economics. For these theorists capitalist rational planning had stabilized the relations and forces of production, and, in doing so, had colonized the postcapitalist space that Marxism had reserved for socialism. Seen in this broader context, critical theory’s paradigm shift occurred at the moment when the Marxist postcapitalist vision was overtaken by its doppelgängers—that is, when technocratic capitalism remade Utopia in its own false image.

But if the Right Technocrats’ postcapitalist vision signified the corruption of the socialist ideal for some of Marcuse’s colleagues, it was Technocracy’s left wing, headed by Lewis Mumford and his vision of automatism, that helped spring Marcuse toward other utopian possibilities. The Left Technocrats’ analysis posited that the Machine Age had set in motion processes whose logical conclusion would be a rupture in the economic mode of production. When intellectual historians and critical theorists overlook Marcuse’s differences with Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock on the issues of automation and economic production, they lump them all together in a tale of the ‘Frankfurt School theorists’ (in the abstract plural) who abandoned Marxian immanent critique for the dialectic of enlight-
Marcuse Among the Technocrats

One of the most difficult legacies Marx and Engels bequeathed to their followers has been the problem of the transition from capitalism to socialism. Marx wrote remarkably little on the topic, and his most suggestive investigations were not widely available outside the Soviet Union until well into the twentieth century. Between Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917) and the publication of the second edition of the so-called *Grundrisse* in 1953, twentieth-century Marxists primarily looked for answers in the "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1875). The key feature of this letter to the German Social Democratic Workers' Party is Marx's outline of a two-phase transition. In the program for the 1875 Gotha

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5 The differences between Marcuse's and Pollock's interpretations of automation can be seen in Pollock's account of a conversation on the topic in the late 1950s; see Pollock, "To Herbert Marcuse." 8 December 1960. Pollock's more pessimistic view can also be seen in his *Automation: A Study of Its Economic and Social Consequences*. The most complete, if equally skeptical, history of automation is David Noble's *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation*. 
Congress, during the May of which the Party and Ferdinand Lassalle’s followers
would unite, the authors made the seemingly unproblematic demand for the “fair
distribution of the proceeds of labor” (“Critique of the Gotha Program” 83).
For Marx, though, such a claim committed the typically Lassallian mistake of
failing to recognize that distribution devolves upon production. Since socialism
must be the determinate negation of capitalism, Marx suggested that its initial
phase would be “in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still
stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerg-
es” (“Gotha” 85). Distribution in the new socialist society would be necessarily
founded on the inherited material conditions of capitalist production. Only in a
second, “higher phase of communist society,” in which a more advanced mode
of production had been achieved, could humanity fulfill the ideal embodied in
Marx’s statement “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his
needs” (87). The first stage of transition, then, retains significant elements of
capitalist society and is defined by proletarian revolution, the founding of the
workers’ state, and further centralization and intensification of production. As
Marx had already written in Capital, monopolization and intense concentrations
of wealth, accompanied by the growing misery of the international proletariat,
prepare the way for this initial step. The second—properly communist—stage
arises only after an even more radical transformation of the mode of production
about which Marx hesitated to speculate.

The birth of the modern corporation, of the regulatory state, and of finance
capital in the closing decades of the nineteenth century led European Marxists
to believe that theirs was the decisive moment of transition. The ‘golden age’ of
Marxist thought, the period around the Second International (roughly 1889-1914),
came about, in many ways, with the endeavor to document the end of the classical
liberal or competitive stage of capitalism, and, crucially, to theorize what these
changes meant for the transition to socialism. Eduard Bernstein’s Evolutionary
Socialism (1911) sparked the revisionism controversy within Germany’s Social
Democratic Party in the late 1890s by arguing against the view that economic
catastrophe and radical class polarization would incite the workers’ revolution.
Through joint-stock companies, Bernstein claimed, wealth was tending toward
equitable distribution and not concentration in fewer and fewer hands as Marx
had predicted. Since capitalism showed more signs of stability than crisis, Bern-
stein advocated a gradual transition to socialism through parliamentary politics
(cf. 41-48, 93-94, 203, 212-13). Rudolph Hilferding’s Finance Capital (1910) set out
from similar premises about economic stabilization and the new organizational
power of corporations, industrial monopolies, and banking (the latter two’s forms
of capital merging into finance capital). Against Bernstein’s relative optimism,
Hilferding posited that power and property were being concentrated ever more
completely into a “general cartel,” a “unitary power” that was regulating markets
and production and “exercise[ing] sovereign sway over the life process of society”
(234-35). Yet as Hilferding further developed this theory of organized capital-
ism, he came to echo Bernstein’s position that the new links between the state
and capitalism enabled a more rational, planned socialist economy over which the
working class could democratically assume control.
Attesting to what Daniel Rodgers calls the shared transatlantic "social landscapes of industrial capitalism" (33-34), powerful socializing tendencies emerged in the American economy during the Gilded Age, inspiring similar attempts among progressive intellectuals both to name, and look beyond, the capitalist system's newest stage. The last two decades of the nineteenth century had wrenched America into full modernity, disrupting local community life and its ethnic homogeneity, spurring the growth of sprawling immigrant cities, solidifying the national market and the federal government, linking scientific and technical knowledge to industry, and altogether forging a social reality that was more complexly interconnected than anything Americans had experienced before. In response to the unrest unleashed by drastic and swift change, a reformist and administrative mentality arose for which Progressivism would be the political form. At the intersection of progressive politics and a newly class-conscious engineering profession, the renegade economist Thorstein Veblen's social theory took shape. Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) laid the anthropological groundwork of his system by tracing the evolution of the leisure class from its origins in the elite strata of primitive predatory culture. As peaceful 'savage' culture developed into predatory culture, Veblen posited, a social hierarchy arose in which power and rank belonged to those who abstained from manual work and instead thrived on exploitation, aggression, and the desire for pecuniary gain. The modern leisure class was the progeny of the predatory elite, its conspicuous free time and consumption, its higher learning, religiosity, love of sports, and overall profligacy all continuing to display social rank through idleness. And yet these very values made the modern leisure class—or those of its members to whom Veblen referred simply as businessmen—unfit to lead in the modern world. Developing this view further in *The Instinct of Workmanship* (1914) and *The Engineers and the Price System* (1921), Veblen contrasted businessmen, who were "out of effectual touch with the affairs of technology and as such incompetent to exercise an effectual surveillance of the process of industry" (Instinct 222), with engineers and other technicians, who embodied the sound values of workmanship, rationality, and respect for the common good. Engineers worked directly in the production process, where they developed a properly scientific, matter-of-fact frame of mind. Whereas the pursuit of profit, or what Veblen termed the price system, drove businessmen to sabotage production, engineers were habitually disposed to the logical maximization of all technical capabilities. For Veblen, then, capitalist business had become defunct; as his Marxists counterparts would have put it, capitalist relations of production (the price system) were fettering new forces of production (modern industry). Echoing proponents of scientific management, and inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, Veblen concluded that the rational, equitable utilization of all available productive technologies demanded that power over the system be turned over to those with the technical know-how necessary to run it: a "Practicable Soviet of Technicians" (cf. *Engineers* 138–69).

In the years immediately prior to the Horkheimer Circle's arrival in the United States, Veblen's project for a soviet of technicians was taken up by the Right Technocrats, a group of engineers and scientists who had originally formed around Ve-
plen's seminars at the New School in the late 1910s. By now the nation was in the grip of the Depression, and a debate was raging over the social impact of technology. Was the Depression an effect of technological unemployment? Was new automatic machinery responsible for the breadlines? As the technological optimism of the roaring 1920s fell silent and Americans began to grapple with technological change more intensely than ever before in their history, the Right Technocrats so electrified public discussion from late 1932 to early 1933 that, for a brief moment, their project "overshadowed all other proposals for dealing with the crisis" (Akin x). The Right Technocrats' thesis was strikingly counter-intuitive. Amid spiraling deflation, high unemployment, bank failures, and severe drought across the Great Plains, they claimed they could demonstrate, with all the mathematical precision of the natural sciences, that the American economy already possessed the technical capacity to create a new civilization of abundance and leisure.

Abundance has a long intellectual history, but even for Marx, who held it to be the structural possibility haunting capitalism, true abundance was materially achievable only in the second, 'higher' phase of communism. The economists and science fiction writers who began to legitimize the idea of abundance in the American Gilded Age, such as Simon Patten, Richard Ely, and Edward Bellamy, set their sights primarily on the future. John Maynard Keynes, writing a year before the rise of the Right Technocrats, thought Western economies could eventually sit in the "lap of economic abundance," but not for another hundred years (Keynes 368). In contrast, Howard Scott, the leader of the Right Technocrats, asserted that a scientific analysis of available energy resources, equipment, and manpower showed that labor, if rationally organized, could already be reduced to fewer than two hours a day while preserving or surpassing the then current average income. From their headquarters in what would soon be the Horkheimer Circle's backyard—the Department of Industrial Engineering at Columbia University—Scott, Walter Rautenstrauch, and others announced that they were at work on an energy survey of the last hundred years of economic development, one that would demonstrate that productivity had been rising in inverse proportion to employment, and would continue to do so until the total collapse of the economy. The price system, they claimed in Veblen's old language, simply could not actualize the vast potential of modern machine production; technological unemployment, waste, inefficiency, and even the Depression itself were the evidence. As he spelled out the nation's dilemma, Scott's tone was prophetic:

Man, in his age-long struggle for leisure and the elimination of toil, is now at last confronted not only by the possibility but by the probability of this arrival. Such a new era in human life is technologically dependent only upon an extension of the physical sciences and the equipment at hand. But the pathway to that new era is blockaded with all the riffraff of social institutions. (31-32)

To this Veblenian problem—the conflict between business and industry—the radical engineer Scott proposed a Veblenian solution: all power to the technicians.

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6 The two main studies of Technocracy are Akin, Technocracy and the American Dream and Elsner, The Technocrats: Prophets of Automation. For a broader survey of the period, see Bix.
Otherwise, Scott predicted, runaway technologies would "bring about the collapse of the system" (qtd. in "Industrial Growth" 13).

The early 1930s saw a flurry of articles, books, pamphlets, and organizations examining the Right Technocrats' startling thesis on the actuality of abundance. While Scott's Technocracy group would eventually degenerate into a quasi-fascist organization, complete with its own insignia and dress codes, three of the period's most suggestive writers on the subject belonged to technocracy's left-wing: Stuart Chase, a sometimes radical New Deal economist and staunch critic of waste; Harold Loeb, co-founder of the socialist-leaning Continental Committee on Technocracy; and the cultural historian Lewis Mumford. Chase grasped that a profound fact lay behind the Right Technocrats' claims: The transfer of direct bodily energy onto machinery enabled the new century's mammoth increases in economic output. Machines were replacing workers, production costs were plummeting—a system based on wages and profits could not handle this new economic reality. "The technical arts cannot be halted," Chase stressed. "As they march they are exploding employment, money values, and vested interests" (Technocracy 24). Indeed, the economy was on track for "the full automatic process, where the machine does everything, the human muscle nothing. Such labor as is required increasingly takes the form of dial watching" (28). The proletariat was disappearing from the automatic factory. If Marx had lived through the Second Industrial revolution, Chase suggested, he would have been the first to recognize the increasing significance of the technical class. Chase thus offered a quasi-Marxist interpretation of technocratic engineering as a radical class formation appropriate to the Machine Age. Though disagreeing with some of its details, Chase believed that technocratic planning could "perhaps solve the economic problem for all time" (27).

In 1935 Chase wrote the foreword to a book that he thought afforded comprehensive empirical proof, "for the first time in our economic history," that an era of abundance was already possible (xiii). The book was The Chart of Plenty, an ambitious study directed by Harold Loeb and funded by Roosevelt's Civil Works Administration for the purpose of documenting the difference between the American economy's actual and potential output. It begins with a question that, in relation to its dark economic times, has profound implications: "[W]hat might the consumer expect in the way of goods and services if production were limited solely by physical factors and knowledge?" (15). In the book's opening pages, one finds a large graph that unfolds and exhibits an answer in amazing scope and detail. One line charts the actual production of all manner of items, including eggs, cotton, soap, iron, radios, cigars, shoes, medicine, education, and even movies; in almost every category, another line stretches beyond the first and into the unrealized domain of full productive capacity. From these figures, Loeb and others concluded that "an economy of abundance would result if production were directed toward the satisfaction of human needs and reasonable wants and restrained only by physical factors and the state of our knowledge" (164). Additionally, all public utilities, along with food, clothing, and shelter, could and should be socialized, freed from "the restrictive effect of the profit motive," thus establishing the foundation of "universal economic security" (163). The Chart of Plenty is what Michel Foucault would have called one of the largest American
biopolitical projects of the early twentieth century. Starting from the perspective of the technical scientist, the chart tabulates the raw materials and services available to liberate Americans from material need. Therein lies its historical peculiarity: By demonstrating the difference between an economy of use and one of profit accumulation, *The Chart of Plenty* attempts to verify the *imminent* possibility of freedom from the realm of necessity right at the monstrously ironic height of the Depression.

As a thinker radically committed to the utopian possibilities of the Machine Age, Lewis Mumford was in effect the Marcuse of the 1930s. Mumford belonged to the Young Americans, a group of early twentieth-century cultural critics who tried to rebuild an organic community from the ruins of modernity (see Blake). He initially rejected Veblen, with whom he edited *The Dial* in 1919, because he held that Veblen's soviet of technicians would simply reproduce and extend the hyper-rationalistic worldview of industrial civilization. In the 1930s, however, Mumford turned, like his close friend Stuart Chase, toward science, technology, and communism to formulate an unabashedly modern account of the possible redemption of organic community. While deriding the "political callowness, historical ignorance and factual carelessness" of Scott's *Introduction to Technocracy*, he nonetheless affirmed the "legitimate conclusions of the so-called technocrats" (*Technics* 469). Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* would further those conclusions through a sweeping narrative of the history of technology and culture. Though some scholars see the book as evidence that Mumford too readily accepted the "undemocratic progressivism of [...] 1930s liberal technocrats" (Blake 283), and while Mumford himself was later critical of its optimism, *Technics and Civilization* was one of the most powerful American works after Marx's death to envision fundamental change at the level of production as the precondition for achieving a new society.

Borrowing the terms of the biologist Patrick Geddes, Mumford divided the history of technology in the West into three stages: the eotechnic (Middle Ages to the first Industrial Revolution); the paleotechnic (roughly the eighteenth to the nineteenth century); and the neotechnic. The latter was Mumford's name for a possible future that had started to take shape in the new electricity and chemical industries of the early 1900s. "The electric power plant," Mumford wrote, "is in itself an exhibition of that complete automatism to which [...] our modern system of production tends" (*Technics* 226-27). Mumford, too, thought he was witnessing the disappearance of manual labor, and with it, the proletariat: "[T]he worker, instead of being a source of work, becomes an observer and regulator of the performance of the machines—a supervisor of production" (227). It was in this very process that Mumford saw the chance for a dialectical switch, an opportunity for the hyper-rationality of the industrial 'paleotechnic' age to open the door to its negation. The only way out of the Machine Age, Mumford stressed, was to pass through it; Utopia lay not in the lost agrarian past, but on the far side of industrialism, in new forms of social organization toward which industry itself prepared the way. Despite environmental destruction and human degradation, machines enabled collective liberation from drudgery for the first time in history:
When automatism becomes general and the benefits of mechanization are socialized, men will be back once more in the Edenlike state in which they have existed in regions of natural increment, like the South Seas: the ritual of leisure will replace the ritual of work, and work itself will become a kind of game. This is, in fact, the ideal goal of a completely mechanized and automatized system of power production: the elimination of work: the universal achievement of leisure. [...] the Athenians so properly despised—work in these degrading forms is the true province of machines. Instead of reducing human beings to work-mechanisms, we can now transfer the main part of burden to automatic machines. This potentiality, still so far from effective achievement for mankind at large, is perhaps the largest justification of the mechanical developments of the last thousand years. (279-280)

It should be no wonder that, as we shall soon see, Marcuse turned to *Technics and Civilization* in his first article in English. Not only is Marcuse's ideal of work as play already present in Mumford ("work itself will become a kind of game"), but even more importantly, so is his understanding of the ideal's socially objective prerequisites. Mumford and the Left Technocrats made striking claims about a new stage of American economic history, claims which would resurface during the post-World War II "automation hysteria" as premises of Marcuse's Utopianism: It is empirically the case, they argued, that socially necessary labor time can, through full automation, be radically reduced to almost nothing; labor is less a matter of direct physical exertion and more a matter of technical expertise and scientific knowledge; America is already beyond scarcity. After reading Marx's *Grundrisse* in the early 1950s, Marcuse surely noticed what this would all ultimately mean. Mumford said as much when he observed that workers were no longer the 'source' of work. Chase put it even more clearly: "[H]uman labor was beginning to pass out of the picture as the prime factor in the production of wealth" (Technocracy 9). In other words, the Left Technocrats had suggested that the new mode of productivity—the definitive aspect of Marx's higher stage of communism—was imminently available.

**III. The Two Faces of Critical Theory in the 1940s**

Although the members of the Horkheimer Circle certainly must have felt like strangers in a strange land when they arrived at Morningside Heights in the early 1930s, American progressive intellectuals in fact shared their task—and that of early twentieth-century European Marxism generally—of diagnosing the end of competitive capitalism and anticipating the transition to postcapitalism. At times the circle recognized their fellow travelers. Pollock, for example, lauded Chase and the Technocrats for having "steered general attention toward contemporary technical possibilities. [...] They prove correct insofar as they point to the gap between that which is technically possible today and the way the latter is put into the service of human beings" ("Bemerkungen," 339).

For most of the decade, Institute members interpreted economic change within Hilferding's Second International framework: Competitive capitalism had given way to monopoly, regulated markets, and state intervention. Pollock wrote in the
first issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* that “every overview of the process of the formation of cartels, business collectives, and trusts speaks a similar language” (“Gegenwärtige Lage” 11). “What is coming to an end is not capitalism,” he wrote in the following issue, “but rather only its liberal phase” (“Bemerkungen” 350). Marcuse followed suit in his first essay for the Institute, outlining “the transformation of capitalist society from mercantile and industrial capitalism, based on the free competition of independent individual entrepreneurs, to monopoly capitalism” (“Struggle” 18-19). Adorno wrote around the same time that music had been commodified “in the hands of powerful monopolies [with] unlimited control over the total capitalistic propaganda machine” (“Social Situation” 391). And at the level of monopoly capitalism’s ‘superstructure,’ Horkheimer and Erich Fromm pioneered a Freudian-Marxist social psychology for analyzing the transformation of liberal personality types and family structures.

As long as the Horkheimer Circle’s thought remained in this Second International economic framework, the future remained open to socialism. Indeed, although he shared the Horkheimer Circle’s general pessimism about the working class, Pollock’s analysis of the Depression during this period deployed the traditional Marxist schema of advancing industrial forces and outmoded bourgeois social relations, a model for which he found striking confirmation in Roosevelt’s policy of artificially restricting agricultural output. On this point he was essentially in agreement with Veblen’s critique of ‘sabotage,’ and his solution was identical with Loeb’s, namely, the abolition of private property (the price system) in order to achieve a more equitable and rational distribution of the abundant output of modern industry. In fact, in 1932 Pollock could still maintain that state intervention and centralization both showed the structural flaws of capitalism and made a socialist planned economy more possible: “[A]ll economic preconditions for its realization appear to be given” (“Gegenwärtige Lage” 27). Similarly, Horkheimer’s programmatic essay of this period, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), defined critical theory with respect to its commitment to overcoming reification and its recognition that society, as a product of human action, can be rationally planned (cf. 244).

It was in the midst of their debate over National Socialism in the late 1930s and early 1940s that the Horkheimer Circle came to a crossroads. Their thinking up to that point had resembled the official Comintern perspective that fascism was an excrescence of monopoly capitalism (though their studies of the psychology of authoritarianism were certainly much too Freudian for the Soviets). Speaking for most Institute members, Marcuse asserted in 1933 that “the total-authoritarian state brings with it the organization and theory of society that correspond to the monopolistic stage of capitalism” (“Struggle” 19). Franz Neumann, Arkadij Gurland, Henryk Grossmann, Otto Kirchheimer, and Marcuse remained (more or less) committed to this interpretation throughout the 1940s. A different perspective, however, started to emerge in a special 1941 issue of the *Zeitschrift* (by then renamed *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*) which

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7 On the Institute’s critique of fascism, see Jay, *Dialectical Imagination* 143-72. Wiggershaus 280-91. My own position closely follows Postone 84-120.
was dedicated to what Horkheimer described in his editor's preface as "problems implied in the transition from liberalism to authoritarianism in continental Europe" (195). The centerpiece of the issue, Pollock's "State Capitalism," presented a new Weberian ideal-type that was neither classical liberal nor monopoly capitalism. Pollock maintained that Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and New Deal America were models of a historically unprecedented system called state capitalism, the distinguishing feature of which was the direct political regulation of markets, prices, distribution, production, and even social life. "The primacy of politics over economics," Pollock wrote in a follow-up article, "is clearly established" ("National Socialism" 453). Crucially, whereas Pollock's earlier articles in the Zeitschrift were traditional Marxist critiques of the contradiction between relations and forces of production, his new reflections on the wartime economies led him to conclude that state intervention might permanently stabilize this very problem. Indeed, in an ironic way the rationally planned society that was supposed to succeed competitive capitalism had already arrived. James Burnham, the former Trotskyist, made the same point in The Managerial Revolution, published the same year as Pollock's essay. According to Burnham, the Right Technocrats' project of rationalistic social engineering from the top down had won, only the result was not socialism. By politically solving the tension that traditional Marxism predicted would be the downfall of capitalism and the entry point into socialism, state capitalism effectively colonized the first of Marx's two stages of Utopia. The paradigm shift in early critical theory, carried out further by Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment, was the evacuation of the colonized space of postcapitalism.

Although he was deeply influenced by his Institute colleagues, and while he certainly shared their pessimism at different points during his career, Marcuse's fundamental theoretical and political commitment to Marxism and socialism never wavered (cf. Kellner 151). In the very next installment of the newly renamed Studies in Philosophy and Social Science which followed the special issue on state capitalism, he was already charting a different course. Marcuse's "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology" (1941) marks not only his basic difference with Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock on political economy, but also inaugurated his separation from traditional Marxism and his emergence as a truly radical social philosopher. At least Marcuse implied as much when he wrote in his 1965 foreword to Kultur und Gesellschaft—a collection of his Zeitschrift articles that would serve as the basis for Negations (1968)—that his critical theory in the 1930s had not been critical enough:

But may not the abstract, "unrealistic" character of the theory at that time have lain in its having been attached too strongly to the society that it comprehended, so that in its concept of negation it did not go far enough in surpassing that society? In other words, did not its concept of a free and rational society promise, not too much, but rather too little? (Negations xvi)

The ideal that 1930s critical theory had held against capitalism as its determinate negation—that of the rationally planned socialist society—was actually fully within capitalism's orbit, and for this reason the latter could corrupt it with "bad
planning, bad expansion of the productive forces, bad organization of the working class, and bad development of needs and of gratification (xvii).” “Some Social Implications” was the first essay in which Marcuse gestured toward a different conception of the qualitative break with capitalism, and thus toward another socialism. To free itself from capitalism's gravitational field, socialism would have to be more than the replacement of the free market by conscious planning. Marcuse would now redefine socialism, at least as regards its objective requirements, as the radical overturning of the capitalist mode of production that Marx had reserved for his second higher stage.

What makes many of these points difficult to recognize in “Some Social Implications” is that the essay resonates with the sort of pessimism many would come to expect of Marcuse after his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). In fact, the earlier essay is largely a preview of the critique of the technological universe that would occupy Marcuse in the early 1960s. “Some Social Implications” opens with a distinction between technics and technology borrowed from Mumford's culturalist methodology. Citing *Technics and Civilization*, Marcuse defines technics as the “technical apparatus of industry, transportation, communication.” These apparatuses constitute, however, only one domain of the larger “mode of production [...] of organizing and perpetuating (and changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument of control and domination that is technology” (39). Marcuse devotes the rest of the text to an elucidation and critique of the emergent technological world, an almost seamless social totality in which subject and object, individual and institution, operate according to the same instrumental principles. Following Horkheimer and Fromm on the disappearance of the bourgeois individual, Marcuse describes the transformation of critical Enlightenment rationality, formerly embodied in the rebellious bourgeois ego, into submissive personality types for which adjustment to the monopolistically and bureaucratically regulated world is the highest form of intelligence: “[H]e is rational who most efficiently accepts and executes what is allocated to him, who entrusts his fate to the large scale enterprises and organizations which administer the apparatus” (60). Mumford's and Veblen's concepts of, respectively, the objective personality and matter-of-factness are among Marcuse's sources for defining the psychology of technological reason (although Marcuse mostly quotes Veblen out of context and incorrectly implies that Veblen was critical of the technical mentality). If it were not for the hint of a possible dialectical switch in the final pages, the essay would have been little more than a philosophical and psychological elaboration of Pollock's “State Capitalism” and its thesis on the total administration of the social sphere.

But Marcuse sticks with the dialectic, and as a result, his basic utopian ideas now appear in print for the first time:

Mechanization and standardization may one day help to shift the center of gravity from the necessities of material production to the arena of free human realization. [...] Technological progress would make it possible to decrease the time and energy spent in the production of the necessities of life, and a gradual reduction of scarcity and abolition of competitive pursuits could permit the self to develop from its natural roots. The less time and energy man has to expend
in maintaining his life and that of society, the greater the possibility that he can "individualize" the sphere of his human realization. (63-64)

As he would emphasize over and over again in his major works from this moment until his death—*Eros and Civilization* (1955), *Soviet Marxism* (1958), *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972)—full automation of production, already technically and intellectually achievable, would diminish socially necessary labor time and eliminate scarcity, freeing humanity from toil and need, and enabling the truly free development of the personality for the first time in history. Only such a radical break in the mode of production can overcome capitalism. Freedom would reign thereafter not only outside of the realm of necessity, but within it; work itself would become play. A new individuality would replace the submissive authoritarian personality. These are the very ideas against which Marcuse measured his radicalism in his 1965 foreword to *Kultur und Gesellschaft*, in which he contrasted his too uncritical theory of the 1930s with the new idea that

the growing automation of the labor process and the time that it sets free transform the subject himself. [...] Behind all inhuman aspects of automation as it is organized under capitalism, its real possibilities appear: the genesis of a technological world in which man can finally withdraw from, evacuate, and oversee the apparatus of his labor—in order to experiment freely with it. (*Negations* xviii-xix)

To be sure, Marcuse had advocated a distinctly philosophical Marxism devoted to the transformation of human reality ever since he had read and written a path-breaking review of Marx’s *Paris Manuscripts* in 1932, and soon thereafter he began to associate such a transformation with liberation from toil. Throughout the 1930s, he honed his dialectical thinking and looked for moments in which the worst elements of monopoly capitalism opened the possibility of new freedoms. But only in “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology”—that is, only in the essay in which he joined the already raging American discussion of technology’s social implications—did Marcuse root his philosophy of human flourishing in the dialectic of industrial technology, full automation, diminished labor time, and the end of scarcity. From then on, these would be the key words of his Utopianism.

Douglas Kellner has claimed that Marcuse’s uncited source in the above passage from “Some Social Implications” is Marx’s *Grundrisse* (cf. Kellner 6). Indeed, the similarities between Marcuse’s ideas and the so-called Fragment on Machines section in the *Grundrisse* are truly unmistakable:

The exchange of living labour for objectified, i.e. the positing of social labour in the form of the antithesis of capital and wage labour, is the ultimate development of the value relationship and of production based on value. Its presupposition is and remains the sheer volume of immediate labour time, the quantity of labour employed, as the decisive factor in the production of wealth. But in the degree in which large-scale industry develops, the creation of real wealth becomes less dependent upon labour time and the quantity of labour employed than upon the power of the agents set in motion during labour time. And their power—their POWERFUL EFFECTIVENESS—in turn bears no relation to the immediate labour time which their production costs, but depends, rather, upon the general level of development of science and the progress of technology, or on the application of science to production. [...]
In these now famous paragraphs, Marx sketched some of his most intriguing ideas about postcapitalism. Crucially, Moishe Postone observes in his perceptive reading of the *Grundrisse* that the cited passage contains a fundamentally different formulation of the basic contradiction of capitalism than that formulated by the early Horkheimer Circle (cf. Postone 193-200). Whereas traditional Marxism holds that this contradiction stands between industrial social production (forces of production) and private appropriation (relations of production), and can therefore be surmounted by a new mode of distributing wealth (e.g., by abolishing private property), the 'Fragment on Machines' instead indicates that the true contradiction of capitalism concerns what Marx called the value form. Capitalism generates wealth through value, which is itself a measure of the expenditure of labor time. Yet its structural drive to maximize value leads capitalism to replace workers ('living labor') with fixed machine capital ('dead labor'). For Marcuse, automation is precisely this exchange of living labor time for machinery, displacing proletarian labor from the site of production, and changing the worker who was formerly an appendage of the machine into an “overseer and regulator.” The decisive irony of this process is that advanced automation makes value (and thus capitalism itself) impossible. Full automation eliminates the proletarian labor time upon which value is founded. On the view shared by Marx and Marcuse (and the Left Technocrats), capitalism's true demise occurs not with the socialization of wealth, but with a revolution in the mode of production that abolishes value and the proletarian labor time that fuels it, replacing the latter with a more cooperative form of social production based on what Marx called the “general intellect” (“Economic Manuscripts” 92).

Yet for all that Marcuse's passage from “Some Social Implications” shares with the *Grundrisse*, it is highly unlikely that its source is Marx. Marcuse was often at the cutting edge of Marxist scholarship; he was among the first to incorporate the Paris Manuscripts and *The German Ideology* into his own system, for example, and did the same with the *Grundrisse* in the mid-1950s. The latter text's publication history, however, makes it almost impossible that Marcuse had read it at the time he wrote “Some Social Implications.” Although the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow published the *Grundrisse* in 1939, two years before Marcuse's article, only 3,000 copies were printed, and only a few ever reached the West. The British Library obtained two copies, the Library of Congress just one (see Arthur; Mohl; Musto). It was not Marx, then, but Mumford who activated the postcapitalist vision of automation for Marcuse. Recall Mumford's description of ‘automatism’ in *Technics and Civilization* and how uncannily it anticipates both Marcuse's writings and the *Grundrisse*: “[T]he worker, instead of being a source of work, becomes an observer and regulator of the performance of the machines—a supervisor of production.” Of course, Marcuse did not directly cite this passage, just as he made no mention of Chase's equally prescient remark that labor was increasingly taking the form of “dial watching.” But it also seems no mere coincidence that
the first appearance in print of the Marcusian utopian constellation—automation, reduced labor time, the end of scarcity, human flourishing—occurred in a text in which the radical Mumford of the 1930s is a major source. In any case, my point is not that Marcuse was a secret disciple of Mumford, but rather that the discursive field of Left Technocracy helped to activate Marcuse's core utopian ideas, many of them probably formed long before 1941, and to shift them from a modal to a concrete possibility, from dead to living hypotheses.

IV. The Death of Utopia

This essay has argued that early twentieth-century American progressive social thought was one of the pivotal contexts for the development of Herbert Marcuse's Utopianism. With respect to my opening question—"What are the historical conditions of possibility for utopian thought?"—I have attempted to reconstruct a left-wing strand of technocratic thinking that, to borrow Jameson's formulation, offered "suitable materials" (11) for Marcuse's postcapitalist vision of automation. The Left Technocrats argued for both the possibility that full automation would spell the end of a capitalist system in which wealth is generated through labor time—the value relation at the heart of capitalism—and for the emergence of a radically new mode of production, which they characterized in Marx's language as dial-watching, observing, and supervising. Taking direct inspiration, I claim, from Mumford, Marcuse shared the Left Technocrats' insight into the historical specificity of proletarian labor and its mutability in the face of automation. By helping him see the possibility of full automation, of the abolition of (alienated) labor, and of a socialism whose content could not be colonized by state capitalism, Left Technocracy contributed to making Marcuse one of the most remarkable utopian thinkers in modern America.

There is, however, another answer to the question of Utopia's historical conditions of possibility. The intellectual history of Utopia recounted in this essay is, in fact, the history of its defeat, or, as I have put it several times, of its colonization by rationalized capitalism. What made Marcuse's Utopianism possible was, paradoxically, its impossibility. For Marcuse, Utopia lived in its own wake, postmortem, after his postcapitalist dream had been co-opted and rendered grotesquely real. To remember Marcuse today is to remember his Great Refusal of the death of Utopia. Faced with seemingly unsurpassable developments, his imagination responded by once again beginning the quest for concrete transcendence of the present. In a world still imperiled by the earth-shattering power of capital, it is today more vital than ever to repeat Marcuse's radical gesture and declare that "freedom is only possible as the realization of what today is called utopia" (Negations xx).
Work Cited


