BLACKOUT ((poetry & politics))

" A revolutionary movement does not spread by contamination / But by resonance / Something that constitutes itself here / Resonates with the shock wave given off by something that constituted itself elsewhere / The body that resonates does so in its own way / An insurrection is not like the propagation of the plaque or a forest fire a linear process spreading little by little from a spark / But rather this / It becomes embodied in a MUSICAL way / and whose focal points / Dispersed in / time and space manage / To impose the rhythm of their VIBRATION / To get

ever more dense / to the point where one can no longer desire to turn back"
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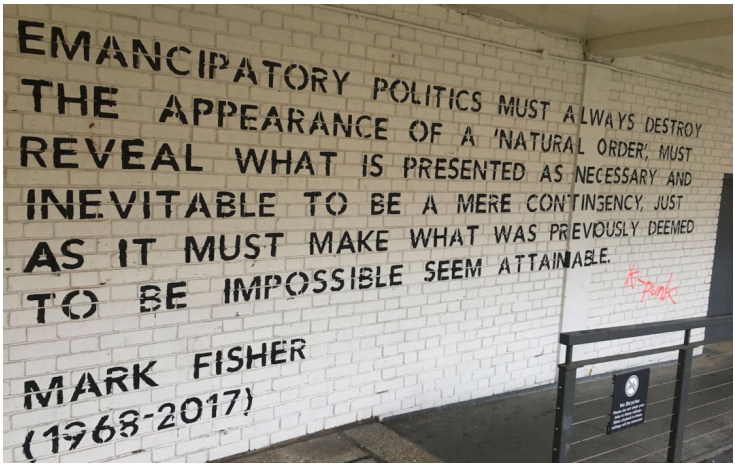
Mark Fisher | Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)



“The spectre of a world which could be free”

> **"[T]he closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity, the greater the need for maintaining and streamlining these constraints lest the established order of domination dissolve. Civilisation has to protect itself against the spectre of a world which could be free.**
> **[…] In exchange for the commodities that enrich their lives […] individuals sell not only their labour but also their free time.**
> **[…] People dwell in apartment concentrations — and have private automobiles with which they can no longer escape into a different world. They have huge refrigerators stuffed with frozen foods. They have dozens of newspapers and magazines which espouse the same ideals. They have innumerable choices, innumerable gadgets which are all of the same sort and keep them occupied and divert their attention from the real issue — which is the awareness that they could both work less and determine their own needs and satisfactions."**
> **— Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civlisation* 2**

The claim of the book is that the last forty years have been about the exorcising of "the spectre of a world which could be free". Adopting the perspective of such a world allows us to reverse the emphasis of much recent left-wing struggle. Instead of seeking to overcome capital, we should focus on what capital must always obstruct: the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy. We on the left have had it wrong for a while: it is not that we are anti-capitalist, it is that capitalism, with all its visored cops, its teargas, and all the theological niceties of its economics, is set up to block the emergence of this Red Plenty. The overcoming of capital has to be fundamentally based on the simple insight that, far from being about "wealth creation", capital necessarily and always blocks the production of common wealth.

The principal, though by no means the sole, agent involved in the exorcism of the spectre of a world which could be free is the project that has been called neoliberalism. But neoliberalism's real target was not its official enemies — the decadent monolith of the Soviet

bloc, and the crumbling compacts of social democracy and the New Deal, which were collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions. Instead, neoliberalism is best understood as a project aimed at destroying — to the point of making them unthinkable — the experiments in democratic socialism and libertarian communism that were efflorescing at the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies.

The ultimate consequence of the elimination these possibilities was the condition I have called capitalist realism — the fatalistic acquiescence in the view that there is no alternative to capitalism. If there was a founding event of capitalist realism, it would be the violent destruction of the Allende government in Chile by General Pinochet's American-backed coup. Allende was experimenting with a form of democratic socialism which offered a real alternative both to capitalism and to Stalinism. The military destruction of the Allende regime, and the subsequent mass imprisonments and torture, are only the most violent and dramatic example of the lengths capital had to go to in order to make itself appear to be the only "realistic" mode of organising society. It wasn't only that a new form of socialism was terminated in Chile; the country also became a lab in which the measures which would be rolled out in other hubs of neoliberalism (financial deregulation, the opening up of the economy to foreign capital, privatisation) were trialled. In countries like the US and the UK, the implementation of capitalist realism was a much more piecemeal affair, involving inducements and seductions as well as repression. The ultimate effect was the same — the extirpation of the very idea of democratic socialism or libertarian communism.

The exorcising of the "spectre of a world which could be free" was a cultural as well as a narrowly political question. For this spectre, and the possibility of a world beyond toil, was raised most potently in culture — even, or perhaps especially, in culture which didn't necessarily think of itself as politically-orientated.

Marcuse explains why this is the case, and the declining influence of his work in recent years tells its own story. *One-Dimensional Man* , a

book which emphasises the gloomier side of his work, has remained a reference point, but *Eros and Civilisation* , like many of his other works, has long been out of print. His critique of capitalism's total administration of life and subjectivity continued to resonate; whereas the claims Marcuse's conviction that art constituted a "Great Refusal, the protest against that which is" 3 came to seem like outmoded Romanticism, quaintly irrelevant in the age of capitalist realism. Yet Marcuse had already forestalled such criticisms, and the critique in *One-Dimensional Man* has traction because it comes from a second space, an "aesthetic dimension" radically incompatible with everyday life under capitalism. Marcuse argued that, in actuality, the "traditional images of artistic alienation" associated with Romanticism do not belong to the past. Instead, he said, in… formulation, they "recall and preserve in memory belongs to the future: images of a gratification that would destroy the society that suppresses it." 4

The Great Refusal rejected, not only capitalist realism, but "realism" as such. There is, he wrote, an "inherent conflict between art and political realism". 5 Art was a positive alienation, a "rational negation" of the existing order of things. His Frankfurt School predecessor, Theodor Adorno, had placed a similar value on the intrinsic alterity of experimental art. In Adorno's work, however, we are invited to endlessly examine the wounds of a damaged life under capital; the idea of a world beyond capital is despatched into a utopian beyond. Art only marks our distance from this utopia. By contrast, Marcuse vividly evokes, as an immediate prospect, a world totally transformed. It was no doubt this quality of his work that meant Marcuse was taken up so enthusiastically by elements of the Sixties counterculture. He had anticipated the counterculture's challenge to a world dominated by meaningless labour. The most politically significant figures in literature, he argued in *One-Dimensional Man* , were "those who don't earn a living, at least not in an ordinary and normal way". 6 Such characters, and the forms of life with which they were associated, would come to the fore in the counterculture.

Actually, as much as Marcuse's work was in tune with the counterculture, his analysis also forecast its ultimate failure and incorporation. A major theme of *One-Dimensional Man* was the neutralisation of the aesthetic challenge. Marcuse worried about the popularisation of the avant-garde, not out of elitist anxieties that the democratisation of culture would corrupt the purity of art, but because the absorption of art into the administered spaces of capitalist commerce would gloss over its incompatibility with capitalist culture. He had already seen capitalist culture convert the gangster, the beatnik and the vamp from "images another way of life" into "freaks or types of the same life". 7 The same would happen to the counterculture, many of whom, poignantly, preferred to call themselves freaks.

In any case, Marcuse allows us to see why the Sixties continue to nag at the current moment. In recent years, the Sixties have come to seem at once like a deep past so exotic and distant that we cannot imagine living in it, and a moment more vivid than now — a time when people really lived, when things really happened. Yet the decade haunts not because of some unrecoverable and unrepeatable confluence of factors, but because the potentials it materialised and began to democratise — the prospect of a life freed from drudgery — has to be continually suppressed. To explain why we have not moved to a world beyond work we have to look at a vast social, political and cultural project whose aim has been the production of scarcity. Capitalism: a system that generates artificial scarcity in order to produce real scarcity; a system that produces real scarcity in order to generate artificial scarcity. Actual scarcity — scarcity of natural resources — now haunts capital, as the Real that its fantasy of infinite expansion must work overtime to repress. The artificial scarcity — which is fundamentally a scarcity of time — is necessary, as Marcuse says, in order to distract us from the immanent possibility of freedom. (Neoliberalism's victory, of course, depended upon a cooption of the concept of freedom. Neoliberal freedom, evidently, is not a freedom from work, but freedom *through* work.) Just as Marcuse predicted, the availability of more consumer goods

and devices in the global North has obscured the way in which those same goods have increasingly functioned to produce a scarcity of time. But perhaps even Marcuse could not have anticipated twenty-first-century capital's capacity to generate overwork and to administer the time outside paid work. Maybe only a mordant futurologist like Philip K. Dick could have predicted the banal ubiquity of corporate communication today, its penetration into practically all areas of consciousness and everyday life.

"The past is so much safer", observes one of the narrators of Margaret Atwood's dystopian satire, *The Heart Goes Last* , "because whatever's in it has already happened. It can't be changed: so, in a way there's nothing to dread". 8 Despite what Atwood's narrator thinks, the past hasn't "already happened". The past has to be continually re-narrated, and the political point of reactionary narratives is to suppress the potentials which still await, ready to be re-awakened, in older moments. The Sixties counterculture is now inseparable from its own simulation, and the reduction of the decade to "iconic" images, to "classic" music and to nostalgic reminiscences has neutralised the real promises that exploded then. Those aspects of the counterculture which could be appropriated have been repurposed as precursors of "the new spirit of capitalism", while those which were incompatible with a world of overwork have been condemned as so many idle doodles, which in the contradictory logic of reaction, are are simultaneously dangerous and impotent.

The subduing of the counterculture has seemed to confirm the validity of the scepticism and hostility to the kind of position Marcuse was advancing. If "the counterculture led to neoliberalism", better that the counterculture had not happened. In fact, the opposite argument is more convincing — that the failure of the left after the Sixties had much to do with its repudiation of, or refusal to engage with, the dreamings that the counterculture unleashed. There was no inevitability about the new right's seizure and binding of these new currents to its project of mandatory individualisation and overwork.

What if the counterculture was only a stumbling beginning, rather than the best that could be hoped for? What if the success of neoliberalism was a not an indication of the inevitability of capitalism, but a testament to the scale of the threat posed by the spectre of a society which could be free?
It is in the spirit of these questions that this book shall return to the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of capitalist realism could not happened without the narratives that reactionary forces told about those decades. Returning to those moments will allow us to continue with the process of unpicking the narratives that neoliberalism has woven around them. More importantly, it will enable the construction of new narratives.
In many ways, re-thinking the 1970s is more important than revisiting the 1960s. The 1970s was the decade that neoliberalism began a rise that it would retrospectively narrate as irresistible. However, recent work on the 1970s — including Jefferson Cowie's Stayin' Alive: *The Last Days of the Working Class* , Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out* and John Medhurst's *That Option No Longer Exists* — has emphasised that the decade wasn't only about the draining away of the possibilities that had exploded in the Sixties. The Seventies was a period of struggle and transition, in which the meaning and legacy of the previous decade was one of the crucial battlegrounds. Some of the emancipatory tendencies that had emerged during the Sixties intensified and proliferated during the Seventies "[F]or many politicised Britons", Andy Beckett has written, "the decade was not the hangover after the Sixties; it was the point when the great Sixties party actually started". 9

The successful Miners' Strike of 1972 saw an alliance between the striking miners and students that was echoed similar convergences in Paris 1968, with the miners using the University of Essex's Colchester campus as their East Anglian base.
Moving far beyond the simple story that the "Sixties led to neoliberalism", these new readings of the 1970s allow us to apprehend the bravura intelligence, ferocious energy and improvisational imagination of the neoliberal counter-revolution.

The installation of capitalist realism was by no means a simple restoration of an old state of affairs: the mandatory individualism imposed by neoliberalism was a new form of individualism, an individualism defined against the different forms of collectivity that clamoured out of the Sixties. This new individualism was designed to both surpass and make us forget those collective forms. So to recall these multiple forms of collectivity is less an act of remembering than of *unforgetting* , a counter-exorcism of the spectre of a world which could be free.

Acid Communism is the name I have given to this spectre. The concept of acid communism is a provocation and a promise. It is a joke of sorts, but one with very serious purpose. It points to something that, at one point, seemed inevitable, but which now appears impossible: the convergence of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness-raising and psychedelic consciousness, the fusion of new social movements with a communist project, an unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life.

Acid communism both refers to actual historical developments and to a virtual confluence that has not yet come together in actuality. Potentials exert influence without being actualised. Actual social formations are shaped by the potential formations whose actualisation they seek to impede. The impress of "a world which could be free" can be detected in the very structures of a capitalist realist world which makes freedom impossible.

The late cultural critic Ellen Willis said that the transformations imagined by the counterculture would have required "a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude". 10 It's very difficult, in our more deflated times, to re-create the counterculture's confidence that such a "social and psychic revolution" could not only happen, but was already in the process of unfolding. But we need now to return to a time when the prospect of universal liberation seemed imminent.

No More Miserable Monday Mornings

Let's begin with a moment that is all the more richly evocative because of its apparent modesty:

> **It was July 1966 and I was newly nine years old. We had holidayed on the Broads and the family had recently taken possession of the gorgeous wooden cruiser that was to be our floating home for the next fortnight. It was called *The Constellation* and, as my brother and I breathlessly explored the twin beds and curtained portholes in our cabin built into the boat's bow, the prospect of what lay ahead saw the life force beaming from us like the rays of a cartoon sun. […] I […] made my way up to through the boat to take up position in the small area of the stern. On the way, I pick up sister Sharon's teeny pink and white Sanyo transistor radio and switched it on. I looked up at the clear blue afternoon sky. Ike and Tina Turner's "River Deep, Mountain High" was playing and a sort of rapturous trance descended on me. From the limitless blue sky I looked down into the churning, crystal-peaked wake our boat was creating as we motored along, and at that moment, "River Deep" gave way to my absolute favourite song of the period: "Bus Stop" by the Hollies. As the mock flamenco guitar flourish that marks its beginning rose above the deep burble of the Constellation 's engine, I stared into the tumbling waters and said aloud, but to myself, "This is happening now. THIS is happening now." 11**

This account comes from *Going To Sea in a Sieve* , the memoirs of the writer and broadcaster Danny Baker . It ought to go without saying that this was nothing more than a snapshot, one sun-saturated image from a period that contained more than enough misery and horror. The Sixties were not a realised utopia, just as the opportunities that lay ahead for Baker would not be available to most working-class people. Similarly, it would be easy to discount Baker's reverie as nostalgia for lost childhood, the kind of golden memories that practically anyone from any historical period or social background might have.

Yet there is something very specific about this moment, something that means it could have only happened then. We can enumerate some of the factors that made it unique: a sense of existential and social security that allowed working-class families to take holidays at all; the role that new technology such as transistor radios played in both connecting groups to an outside and enabling them to luxuriate in the moment, a moment that was somehow *exorbitantly sufficient* ; the way that genuinely new music — music that wasn't imaginable a few months never mind a few years before — could crystallise and intensify this whole scene, imbue it with a sense of casual but not complacent optimism, a sense that the world was improving.

This sense of exorbitant sufficiency could be heard in the Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon", which Baker might well have also heard on the same transistor radio that day, or in the Beatles' "I'm Only Sleeping", which would come out a month later; or in later releases like the Small Faces' "Lazy Sunday". These tracks apprehended the anxiety-dream toil of everyday life from a perspective that floated alongside, above or beyond it: whether it was the busy street glimpsed from the high window of a late sleeper, whose bed becomes a gently idling rowing boat; the fog and frost of a Monday morning abjured from a sunny Sunday afternoon that does not need to end; or the urgencies of business airily disdained from the eyrie of a meandering aristocratic pile, now occupied by working-class dreamers who will never clock on again.

"I'm Only Sleeping" ("stay in bed, float upstream") was the twin of *Revolver* 's most self-consciously psychedelic track, "Tomorrow Never Knows" ("switch off your mind, relax and float downstream"). If the lyrics to "Tomorrow Never Knows", minimally adapted from *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* , seem somewhat pat, the music, the sound design, retain the power to transport. "It wasn't like anything else we'd ever heard", John Foxx recalls of "Tomorrow Never Knows",

> **but somehow seemed instantly recognisable. Sure, the words were a bit suspect, but the *music* , the sound — organic electricity, disintegrated transmissions, lost radio stations, Catholic/Buddhist mass from a parallel universe, what being stoned ought to be like — weightless, timeless, revelation, moving over luminous new landscapes in serene velocity. It communicated, innovated, infiltrated, fascinated, elevated — it was a road map for the future. 12**

These "luminous new landscapes" were worlds beyond work, where drudgery's dreary repetitiveness gave way to drifting explorations of strange terrains. Listened to now, these tracks describe the very conditions necessary for their own production, which is to say, access to a certain mode of time, time which allows a deep absorption.

The refusal of work was also a refusal to internalise the systems of valuation which claimed that one's existence is validated by paid employment. It was, that is to say, a refusal to submit to a bourgeois gaze which measured life in terms of success in business. "I didn't come from a background where people had 'careers'", Danny Baker writes. "You went to work, you had different jobs at different times, but it was all in a jumble. It did not define you or plot your course in life — and thank God for that." Baker left school in South East London with no qualifications. Yet he is careful that his picaresque journey from record shop assistant, to fanzine producer, music journalist and television and radio presenter should not be seen as either a hard luck nor a hard work story. He doesn't tell it as a petit-bourgeois narrative of "betterment", but of recklessness rewarded. This "recklessness" came out of a sense that fulfilment wasn't to be expected from work, and from an immense confidence, which allows him to consistently rebuff bourgeois imperatives and *anxieties.* The two volumes of Baker's memoirs lay out very clearly the factors which allowed this confidence to grow: the comparative stability of his father's work, in thriving docks that seemed as if they would remain at the heart of British economic life forever; the family's embedding in a working-class network that supplemented

wages with "bunce"; its acquisition of a brand-new council flat with a garden. His own movement into writing and broadcasting was facilitated not by any entrepreneurial drive, but by a newly emerging public sphere — constituted out of parts of television, radio and print media — in which working-class perspectives were validated and valued. But this was not a working class which could be understood according to the protocols of kitchen-sink or socialist realism anymore than it was limited by ruling-class caricature. It was a working class that no longer knew its place, that had gotten above itself. Even the old redoubts of the bourgeoisie were no longer secure. In the Sixties, Ted Hughes had become one of Britain's leading poets, Harold Pinter one of its most exciting new dramatists, both of them producing work which reflected working-class experience in challenging and difficult ways, and taking it — via television — into the living rooms of a mass audience.

In any case, we are a long way from the disappearance of class later that would later be trumpeted by neoliberal ideologues. The settlements that labour and capital had come to in societies like the US and the UK accepted that class was a permanent feature of social organisation. They assumed that there were different class interests which had to be reconciled, and that any effective, not to mention just, governance of society would have to involve the organised working class. Trade unions were strong, emboldened in their demands by low unemployment. Working-class expectations were high — gains had been made, but more were surely on the way. It was easy to imagine that the uneasy truces between capital and labour would end, not with a resurgence of the right, but with an embrace of more socialistic policies, if not quite the "full communism" that Nikita Krushchev thought would be in place by 1980. After all — or so it seemed — the right was on the backfoot, discredited and perhaps fatally damaged in the US because of the protracted and horrific failure of the Vietnam War. The "establishment" no longer commanded automatic deference; instead, it came to seem exhausted, out of touch, obsolete, limply awaiting to be washed away by any or all of the new cultural and

political waves which were eroding all the old certainties.
Where the new culture was not being driven by those from working-class backgrounds, it seemed that it was being led by class renegades such as Pink Floyd, young people from bourgeois families who had rejected their own class destinies and identified "downwards", or outwards. They wanted to do anything but go into business and banking: fields whose subsequent libidinisation would have boggled the expanded minds of the Sixties.
Working-class aspiration did not equate to class mobility, where the dubious reward was gradual and grudging acceptance by "betters". Instead, the new bohemia seemed to point to the elimination of the bourgeoisie and its values. Indeed, it was the conviction that this was imminent which was one of the few areas of overlap between the counterculture and the traditional revolutionary left, who seemed in many other respects to be at variance with one another. Ellen Willis certainly felt that the dominant forms of left-wing politics were incompatible with the desires and ambitions triggered and tranduced by music. While the music that she listened to spoke of freedom, socialism seemed to be about centralisation and state control. The counterculture's politics might have been opposed to capitalism, Willis thought, but this did not entail a straightforward rejection of everything produced in the capitalist field. Her "polemic against standard leftist notions about advanced capitalism" rejected at best only half-true the ideas "that the consumer economy makes us slave to commodities, that the function of the mass media is to manipulate our fantasies, so we will equate fulfilment with buying the system's commodities". 13 Mass culture — and music culture in particular — was a terrain of struggle rather than a dominion of capital. The relationship between aesthetic forms and politics was unstable and inchoate — aesthetic forms did not simply "express" some already-existing capitalist reality, they anticipated and actually produced new possibilities. Commodification was not the point at which this tension would always and inevitably be resolved in favour of capital; rather, commodities could themselves be the means by which rebellious currents could propagate:

> **the mass media helped to spread rebellion, and the system obligingly marketed products that encouraged it, for the simple reason that there was money to be made from rebels who were also consumers. On one level the sixties revolt was an impressive illustration of Lenin's remark that the capitalist will sell you the rope to hang him with. 14**

In the UK, Stuart Hall felt similar frustrations with much of the existing left — frustrations that were all the more intense in his case because he thought of himself as a socialist. But the socialism that Hall wanted — a socialism that could engage with the yearnings and dreamings that he heard in Miles Davis' music — was yet to be created, and its arrival was obstructed as much by figures from the left as from the right.

The first obstructive figure of the left was the complacent steward of Cold War organised labour or social democracy: backward-looking, bureaucratic, resigned to the "inevitability" of capitalism, more interested in preserving the income and status of white men than in expanding the struggle to include…, this figure is defined by compromise and eventual failure.

The other figure — what I want to call the Harsh Leninist Superego — is defined by its absolute refusal of compromise. According to Freud, the superego is characterised by the quantitatively and qualitatively excessive nature of its demands: whatever we do, it's never enough. The Harsh Leninist Superego mandates a militant ascesis. The militant will be single-mindedly dedicated to the revolutionary event, and unflinchingly committed to the means necessary to bring it about. The Harsh Leninist Superego is as indifferent to suffering as it is hostile to pleasure Lenin's phobic response to music is instructive here: "I can't listen to music too often. It affects your nerves, makes you want to say stupid nice things and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile hell."

While the complacent leaders of organised labour were invested in the status quo, the Harsh Leninist Superego stakes everything on a world absolutely different to this one. It was this post-revolutionary

world which would redeem the Leninist, and it was from the perspective of this world that they judged themselves. In the meantime, it is legitimate and indeed necessary to cultivate an indifference towards current suffering: we can and must step over homeless people, because giving to charity only obstructs the coming of the revolution.

But this revolution had little in common with the "social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude" that Ellen Willis thought was seeded in the counterculture's dreamings. The revolution as she conceived of it would at once be more immediate — it would fundamentally concern how care and domestic arrangements were organised — and more far-reaching: the transformed world would be unimaginably stranger than anything Marxist-Leninism had projected. The counterculture thought it was already producing spaces where this revolution could already be experienced.

To get some sense of what those spaces were like, we can do no better than listen to the Tempations' "Psychedelic Shack", released in December 1969. The group play the role of breathless ingénues who have just returned from some kind of Wonderland: "Strobe lights flashin' way till after sundown… There ain't no such thing as time… Incense in the air…"

For all the familiarity of these signifiers, listening to "Psychedelic Shack" now can actually bring us up short. Invited to think about the psychedelic, our first associations might be with solipsistic withdrawal (the lyrics of a track like "Tomorrow Never Knows" invite just such an association). Yet "Psychedelic Shack" describes a space that is very definitely collective, that bustles with all the energy of a bazaar. For all its carnivalesque departures from everyday reality, however, this is no remote utopia. It feels like an actual social space, one you can imagine really existing. You are as likely to come upon a crank or a huckster as a poet or musician here, and who knows if today's crank might turn out to be tomorrow's genius? It is also an egalitarian and democratic space, and a certain affect presides over everything. There is multiplicity, but little sign

of resentment or malice. It is a space for fellowship, for meeting and talking as much for having your mind blown. If "there's no such thing as time" — because the lighting suspends the distinction between day and night; because drugs affect time-perception — then you are not prey to the urgencies which make so much of workaday life a drudge. There is no limit to how long conversations can last, and no telling where encounters might lead. You are free to leave your street identity behind, you can transform yourself according to your desires, according to desires which you didn't know you had.

The crucial defining feature of the psychedelic is the question of consciousness, and its relationship to what is experienced as reality. If the very fundamentals of our experience, such as our sense of space and time, can be altered, does that not mean that the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable? Understood in individual terms, this quickly leads to the facile relativism and a naïve voluntarism that the Temptations themselves had targeted on their first psychedelic soul single, "Cloud Nine". Sure, you can be what you want to be, but only by being a million miles from reality, only by leaving behind all your responsibilities. This superegoic appeal could have been endorsed by conservatives as well as a certain brand of radical: conservatives, who wanted everyone to knuckle down to work; militants, who demanded commitment to revolution, which — they said — entailed an attention to the horrors of the world, not a quick fix flight from the real.

Yet the claim that altered states of consciousness took you a "million miles away from reality" was question-begging. It foreclosed the idea that altered state of consciousness could offer a perception of the systems of power, exploitation and ritual that was more, not less, lucid than ordinary consciousness. In the Sixties, when consciousness was increasingly besieged by the fantasies and images of advertising and capitalist spectacle, how solid was the "reality" from which psychedelic states fled in any case? Wasn't the state of consciousness susceptible to spectacle more like somnambulance than alertness or awareness?

In retrospect, one of the most remarkable features of the psychedelic culture of the 1960s was the way it mainstreamed such metaphysical questions. The psychedelic was not new — many pre-capitalist societies had incorporated psychedelic visions and the use of hallucinogens into their ritual practice. What was new was the break out of the psychedelic from particular ritualised spaces and times, and from the control of particular practitioners, such as shamans and sorcerers. Experiments with consciousness were now in principle open to anyone. Despite all the mysticism and pseudo-spiritualism which has always hung over psychedelic culture, there was actually a demystificatory and materialist dimension to this. Widespread experiments with consciousness promised nothing less than a democratisation of neurology itself — a newly widespread awareness of the brain's role in producing what was experienced as reality. Those on acid trips were externalising the workings of their own brain, and potentially learning to use their brains differently. Yet psychedelic experiences were not confined to those who had taken drugs. The very mass media which mainstreamed psychedelic concepts along with the Vietnam War was itself a massive experiment in altering consciousness. With television, the breakdown of the distinction between dreams and waking life that film had begun now entered "private" domestic space. Television was at the centre of a media landscape that was still only just assembling, and which no one understood because nothing like it had ever existed before. The Beatles released their first album only a few months before the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Television was channel for contagion (Beatlemania!), trauma and hysteria as much as paternalistic messages or commercial huckstering. No one had been as famous in their own lifetime as the Beatles, because the infrastructure for such a fame was only just being created, and the Beatles themselves were playing a part in building it, as if — at one and the same time — the world had become an extension of their own electronic dream, and they had become characters in everyone else's dream.

You might say that the Beatles' own psychedelic turn was an

attempt to convert all of this into a lucid dream. This is the quality of *Sgt Pepper's* "A Day in the Life", which plays out the difference between Lennon's lucid dream calm and the urgencies of work life (McCartney's breathless commuter, who reaches the bus in seconds flat). Yet escape from urgencies is always achingly proximate — once on the bus, McCartney's immediately character falls into a dream.

Lennon sounds dispassionate but not detached; there is humour but no blokish familiarity. His vocal seems to intimate that the ordinary somnambulance of the workaday world can only be properly apprehended from the perspective afforded by a different kind of trance. Or is it, rather, that a voice disconnected from the imperatives of working/waking life comes off as catatonic? The tracks shows us the inside seen from outside, as Lennon takes us on journey through the different ways in which consciousness is electronically mediated (by newspapers, film, television): "I read the news today, oh boy".

This contrast between urgency and lucidity was everywhere in Jonathan Miller's television adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It was broadcast on BBC television in December 1966, and reflected the influence of the Beatles even as it would go on to influence the Beatles in turn. Shot in black and white, the film has a strangely sober, almost austere visual style, devoid of any special effects or florid imagery. This fits with the adaptation's most striking innovation, its rendering of the characters not as animals, but as human beings. "Once you take the animal heads off", Miller told *Life* , "you begin to see what it's all about. A small child, surrounded by hurrying, worried people, thinking: 'is this what being grown up is like?'"

The film is pervaded by an atmosphere of lassitude, of languor and catatonia that sometimes lurches into sudden panic and helplessness. Miller again: "The book, by dressing things up in animal clothes, presents a disguised — a dream-disguised — domestic charade. […] All the levels of authority and order-giving and obedience are reflected." 15 The ordinary world appears as a

tissue of Nonsense, incomprehensibly inconsistent, arbitrary and authoritarian, dominated by bizarre rituals, repetitions and automatisms. It is itself a bad dream, a kind of trance. In the solemn and autistic testiness of the adults who torment and perplex Alice, we see the madness of ideology itself: a dreamwork that has forgotten it is a dream, and which seeks to make us forget too, by sweeping us up in its urgencies, by perplexing us with its lugubrious dementia, or by terrifying us with its sudden, unpredictable and insatiable violence.

The laugher that this *Alice* provokes — sometimes uneasy, sometimes uproarious — is a laughter that comes from the outside. It is a psychedelic laughter, a laughter that — far from confirming or validating the values of any status quo — exposes the bizarreness, the inconsistency, of what had been taken for common sense. Is this not the laugher that Michel Foucault describes in a justly renowned passage from the Preface to *The Order of Things* , a book that was originally published in the same year that Miller's version of Alice was broadcast? Foucault refers there to a story by Borges in which

> **he quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies". In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that . 16**

This perspective, this laughter from the outside, runs through all Foucault's work. For all its intricacy, its density and opacity, Foucault's major work from *The History of Madness* at the beginning of the 1960s, in the… through to the books on sexuality he would

publish after the Death Valley seem to revolve around and repeat a fundamental insight, or outsight. … the arbitrariness and contingency of any system, its plasticity.

If this outside vision was consonant with the psychedelic consciousness, in Foucault's case it did not have its origins in drugs. Foucault wouldn't consume LSD until nearly a decade later, when he headed out to Death Valley and took acid at Zabriskie Point, the site of Michelangelo Antonioni's film about the counterculture. Foucault, seldom comfortable in his own skin, was always looking for a way out of his own identity. He had memorably claimed that he wrote "in order not to have a face", and his prodigious exercises in rogue scholarship and conceptual invention, the textual labyrinths he meticulously assembled from innumerable historical and philosophical sources, were one way out of the face. Another route was what he called the limit-experience, one version of which was his encounter with LSD. The limit-experience was paradoxical: it was an experience at and beyond the limits of "ordinary" experience, an experience of what cannot ordinarily be experienced at all. The limit-experience offered a kind of metaphysical hack. The conditions which made ordinary experience possible could now be encountered, transformed and escaped — at least temporarily. Yet, by definition, the entity which underwent this could not be the ordinary subject of experience — it would instead be some anonymous X, a faceless being.

Much of the music that came out of the counterculture gave voice to this entity from the outside, and Foucault's turn to the limit-experience paralleled popular experimentations with consciousness. "[T]he problem", Foucault said, in one of the interviews collected in the book *Remarks on Marx*,

> **is not to recover our "lost" identity, to free our imprisoned nature, our deepest truth; but instead, the problem is to move towards something radically Other. The center, then, seems still to be found in Marx's phrase: man produces man. […] For me, what must be produced is not man identical to himself, exactly as nature would have designed him or according to his essence; on the contrary, we must produce something that doesn't yet exist and about which we cannot know how and what it will be. 17**

In a commentary on Foucault's text, Michael Hardt has argued that "the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous production of humanity — a new seeing, a new hearing, a new thinking, a new loving." 18

A new humanity, a new seeing, a new thinking, a new loving: this is the promise of acid communism, and it was the promise that you could hear in "Psychedelic Shack" and the culture that inspired it. Only five years separated "Psychedelic Shack" from the Tempations' early signature hit "My Girl", but how many new worlds had come into being then? In "My Girl", love remains sentimentalised, confined to the couple, in "Psychedelic Shack", love is collective, and orientated towards the outside.

With "Psychedelic Shack", the Temptations were a year into the new sound that the group's unofficial leader, Otis Williams, had persuaded producer Norman Whitfield to develop. Whitfield had initially been reluctant to change the Temptations' sound but his eventual conversion would lead to some of the most stunning productions in popular music history: productions that would build on the promise that "Tomorrow Never Knows" evoked, but which the Beatles themselves would rarely make good on. Whitfield became so entranced by the psychedelic soundscapes he worked on in the studio that he would push for The Temptations to release tracks that were eight or nine minutes long, with space for extended instrumental passages. He formed the group the Undisputed Truth specifically as a lab to try out these long-form lysergic productions.

Whitfield's experimentation with the studio as a compositional tool paralleled what Lee "Scratch" Perry was doing in Jamaica with dub. The sonic spaces they opened up were also about a particular experience of time: a distended time, a time that was at once denuded, and populated with strange audio unlike forms, which enticed the listener into a deep immersion in the moment, even as they enfolded us into rhythmic patterns and pulses. This new space-time would later be revisited and refurbished by new explorers such as Tom Moulton, Larry Levan and Walter Gibbons: the inventors of the extended dance track, which would in turn form the basis of the psychedelic genres such as house, techno and jungle.

The template for the new Temptations' sound had been Sly and the Family Stone, with traces of James Brown and Jimi Hendrix: a febrile matrix, composed of elements which were already interacting with one another. The change in sound was more than a shift in style; it was also responded to a new set of demands and expectations of what music could be. No longer confined to love-song balladeering or good-time cheerleading, popular music could now be social comment; even better, it could feed off and feed back into the social transformations that were dissolving former certainties, prejudices, assumptions. It could take its bearings from the confidence, anger and assertiveness that was brimming out of the Civil Rights movement, and it could perform a new set of social relations that gave a heady taste of what the world might look like once the movement had succeeded. That is what Greil Marcus heard and saw in Sly and the Family Stone in his great 1975 essay, "The Myth of Staggerlee":

> **Sly's real triumph was that he had it both ways. Every nuance of his style, from the razzle dazzle of his threads to the originality of his music, made it clear that we was his own man. If the essence of his music was freedom, no one was more aggressively free than he. Yet there was also room for everyone in the America made up of blacks and whites, men and women, who sang out "different strokes for different folks" and were there on stage to show what such an idea of independence meant. 19**

Sly and the Family Stone did indeed seem to have it every way: with a sound that was somehow ramshackle, improvised, and yet sinuously danceable; a music that was neither sentimental, nor sanctimonious, but humorous and deadly serious all at the same time.

The laughter of *Alice* , the ludic freedom and daring embodied by Sly and the Family Stone: they might have been performed by an advanced guard, but there was no necessity for them to be confined to an elite. On the contrary, the question that their presence on radio and TV insistently posed was: why shouldn't this bohemia be open to everyone?

Despite much of the traditional left's deafness and hostility to these currents, the counterculture did have an impact on the workplace, in struggles conducted by a new kind of worker. "It's a different generation of workingmen", explained J.D. Smith, a union treasurer at the Chevy Vega plant in Lordstown, Ohio. "None of these guys came over from the old country, grateful for any job they could get. None of them have been through a depression. They've been exposed — at least through television — to all the youth movements of the last ten years and they don't see the disgrace of being unemployed." 20

In 1972, the Lordstown Plant was embroiled in a struggle over working conditions which reflected the new intolerance towards drudgery and authoritarianism. "The Lordstown workers", Jefferson Cowie writes,

> **became a collective national symbol for the new breed of worker and emblematic of a widespread sense of occupational alienation. People gravitated to the refreshing vision of youth, vitality, inter-racial solidarity hidden from the public behind the likes of television's Archie Bunker, prowar labor leadership, and the growing politics of the blue-collar backlash. 21**

Lordstown was part of a wave of activism in which this "new breed of worker" struggled for democratic control of their own trade unions and of the places in which they worked. Seen in the light of such struggles, the egalitarian social space projected in "Psychedelic Shack" could not be dismissed as a passive pipe-dream or a distraction from actual political activity. Rather, music such as this was an active dreaming which arose out of real social and cultural compositions, and which fed back into potent new collectivities, and a new existential atmosphere, which rejected both drudgery and traditional resentments. "The young black and white workers dig each other", said the Lordstown Local president Gary Bryner, "There's an understanding. The guy with the Afro, the guy with the beads, the guy with the goatee, he doesn't care if he's black, white, green or yellow." These new kinds of workers — who "smoked dope, socialised interracially, and dreamed of a world in which work had some meaning" 22 — wanted democratic control of both their workplace and their trade unions.

Something of the same ferment was building in Italy, where a new kind of worker was increasingly visible. "This new generation of workers did not have so much to do with the old tradition of the labor parties", says Franco Berardi of the situation in Turin in 1973. "Nor anything to do with the socialist ideology of a state-owned system. A massive refusal of the sadness of work was the leading element behind their protest. Those young workers had much more to do with the hippy movement; much more to do with the history of the avant-garde." 23
By 1977, a whole new social mix, a "mass avant-garde", was in place

in Bologna. It was here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that acid communism came together as an actual formation. The city seethed with the energy and confidence that erupts when new ideas commingle with new aesthetic forms.

> **The university was filled with terroni (people originating from the South), Germans, comedians, musicians and cartoonists like Andrea Pazienza and Filippo Scozzari. Artists were squatting houses in the center of the city, and running creative places such as Radio Alice and Traumfabrik. Some people were reading books like Anti-Oedipus , some were reciting poems by Majakovski and Artaud, listening to the music of Keith Jarrett and The Ramones, and inhaling dream inducing substances. 24**

As In February, *A/traverso* , the zine published by Berardi and others young militants, produced an issue entitled "The revolution is just, possible and necessary: look comrades, the revolution is probable":

We want to expropriate all the assets of the Catholic Church
Cut the working hours, increase the number of jobs
Increase the amount of the salary
Transform production and place it under workers' control
Liberation of the huge amount of intelligence that is wasted by capitalism: Technology has been used so far as a means of control and exploitation.
It wants to be turned into a tool for liberation.
Working less is possible thanks to the application of cybernetics and informatics.
Zerowork for income
Automate all production
All power to living labor
All work to dead labor.

In 1977, such demands seemed not only realistic but inevitable — "*look comrades, the revolution is probable*". Of course, we now know that the revolution did not happen. But the material conditions for such a revolution are more in place in the twenty-first century than they were in 1977. What has shifted beyond all recognition since then is the existential and emotional atmosphere. Populations are resigned to the sadness of work, even as they are told that automation is making their jobs disappear. We must regain the optimism of that Seventies moment, just as we must carefully analyse all the machineries that capital deployed to convert confidence into dejection. Understanding how this process of consciousness-deflation worked is the first step to reversing it.

Notes

1. This is the previously unpublished introduction to a proposed new book project, written in 2016. It is all that remains of this proposed work.
2. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* , (Routledge, 1987), p. 93
3. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* , (Routledge, 2002), p. 66
4. Ibid., p. 63
5. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Beacon Press, 1979), p. 36
6. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* , p. 62
7. Ibid.
8. Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* , (Virago, 2016), p. 189
9. Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* , (Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 209
10. Ellen Willis, *Beginning To See The Light: Sex, Hope and Rock-and-Roll* , (Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p. 158
11. Danny Baker, *Going to Sea in a Sieve* , (Phoenix, 2012), pp. 49-50
12. John Foxx, "The Golden Section: John Foxx's Favourite Albums", Quietus , (3 October 2013), http://thequietus.com/articles/13499-john-foxx-favourite-

albums?page=5 (http://thequietus.com/articles/13499-john-foxx-favourite-albums?page=5)
13. Willis , *Beginning To See The Light* , p. xvi
14. Ibid.
15. Jonathan Miller, cited in *Life* , (25 November 1968), p. 100
16. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* , (Routledge, 2001), p. xvi
17. Michel Foucault, *Remarks On Marx* , (Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 121
18. Michael Hardt, "The Common in Communism", in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds), *The Idea of Communism* , (Verso, 2010), p. 141
19. Greil Marcus, "The Myth of Staggerlee", in *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* , (Penguin, 1997), p. 82
20. Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* , (The New Press, 2012), p. 46
21. Ibid., p. 48
22. Ibid.
23. Franco Berardi, *After the Future* , (AK Press, 2011), p. 48
24. Ibid., p. 23

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