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The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies

I

Since the late eighteenth century a new time consciousness has been developing in Western culture.¹ Whereas in the Christian West the "New Age" [*neue Zeit*] had designated the future age that would dawn only on Judgment Day, from the late eighteenth century on the "modern age" [*Neuzeit*] means one's own period, the present. The present is understood at each point as a transition to something new; it lives with an awareness that historical events are accelerating and an expectation that the future will be different. The epochal new beginning that marked the modern world's break with the world of the Christian Middle Ages and antiquity is repeated, as it were, in every present moment that brings forth something new. The present perpetuates the break with the past in the form of a continual renewal. The horizon of anticipations opening onto the future and referring to the present also governs the way the past is grasped. Since the end of the eighteenth century, history has been conceived as a process that is world-encompassing and problem-generating. Time in that process is thought of as a scarce resource for the future-oriented mastery of problems left us by the past. Exemplary periods in the past that the present might have been able to use without hesitation for orientation have faded into insignificance. Modernity can no

This text is based on a talk given to the *Cortes* on November 26, 1984, at the invitation of the President of the Spanish Parliament.

longer derive the standards it uses for orientation from models offered by other epochs. Modernity sees itself as dependent exclusively upon itself—it has to draw on itself for its normativity. From now on the authentic present is the locus in which innovation and the continuation of tradition are intertwined.

This devaluation of an exemplary past and the necessity to extract substantive normative principles from one's own, modern experiences and forms of life accounts for the altered structure of the "*Zeitgeist*." The *Zeitgeist* becomes the medium in which political thought and political discussion will henceforth move. The *Zeitgeist* receives impulses from two contrary but interdependent and mutually interpenetrating currents of thought: it is ignited by the clash of historical and utopian thought.² At first these two modes of thought seem mutually exclusive. *Historical thought*, saturated with actual experience, seems destined to criticize utopian schemes; *utopian thought* with its exuberance seems to have the function of opening up alternatives for action and margins of possibility that push beyond historical continuities. But in fact modern time consciousness has opened up a horizon in which utopian thought fuses with historical thought. Certainly the movement of utopian energies into historical consciousness characterizes the *Zeitgeist* that has stamped the political public sphere of modern peoples since the days of the French Revolution. Infected by the *Zeitgeist*'s focus on the significance of the current moment and attempting to hold firm under the pressure of current problems, political thought becomes charged with utopian energies—but at the same time this excess of expectations is to be controlled by the conservative counterweight of historical experience.

Since the early nineteenth century, "utopia" has become a polemical political concept that everyone uses against everyone else. The accusation was first advanced against the abstract thought of the Enlightenment and its liberal heirs, then, naturally, against socialists and communists, but also against the conservative Ultras—against the former because they evoked an abstract future, against the latter because they evoked an abstract past. Because all are infected with utopian thought, no one wants to be a utopian.³ Thomas More's *Utopia*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*—these spatial

utopias conceived during the Renaissance could appropriately be called "*novels of the state*," because their authors never left any doubt about the fictitious character of the narratives. They had translated notions of paradise back into historical spaces and earthly antiworlds; they had transformed eschatological expectations back into profane life possibilities. As Fourier noted, the classical utopias of a better life, a less threatened life, were presented as a "dream of the good—without the means to realize the dream, without a method." Despite their critical relationship to their times, they had as yet no contact with history. That situation did not change until Mercier, a follower of Rousseau, in a novel of the future about Paris in the year 2440, shifted the Fortunate Isles from spatially distant regions into a distant future—thus depicting eschatological expectations for a future restoration of paradise in terms of a secular axis of historical progress.⁴ But as soon as utopia and history came into contact in this way, the classical form of utopia changed; the state novel lost its novelistic features. From now on those who were the most sensitive to the utopian energies of the *Zeitgeist* would be the ones who most energetically pursued the fusion of utopian with historical thought. Robert Owen and Saint-Simon, Fourier and Proudhon emphatically rejected utopianism; and they in turn were accused by Marx and Engels of being "utopian socialists." Not until this century did Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim purge the expression "utopia" of the association of "utopianism" and rehabilitate it as a legitimate medium for depicting alternative life possibilities that are seen as inherent in the historical process itself. A utopian perspective is inscribed within politically active historical consciousness itself.

This, in any case, is how things seemed to stand—until yesterday. Today it seems as though utopian energies have been used up, as if they have retreated from historical thought. The horizon of the future has contracted and has changed both the *Zeitgeist* and politics in fundamental ways. The future is negatively cathected; we see outlined on the threshold of the twenty-first century the horrifying panorama of a worldwide threat to universal life interests: the spiral of the arms race, the uncontrolled spread of nuclear weapons, the structural impoverish-

ment of developing countries, problems of environmental overload, and the nearly catastrophic operations of high technology are the catchwords that have penetrated public consciousness by way of the mass media. The responses of the intellectuals reflect as much bewilderment as those of the politicians. It is by no means only realism when a forthrightly accepted bewilderment increasingly takes the place of attempts at orientation directed toward the future. The situation may be objectively obscure. Obscurity is nonetheless also a function of a society's assessment of its own readiness to take action. What is at stake is Western culture's confidence in itself.

II

Granted, there are good reasons for this exhaustion of utopian energies. The classical utopias depicted the conditions for a life of dignity, for socially organized happiness; the social utopias fused with historical thought, the utopias that have influenced political discussion since the nineteenth century, awaken more realistic expectations. They present science, technology, and planning as promising and unerring instruments for the rational control of nature and society. Since then, this very expectation has been shaken by massive evidence. Nuclear energy, weapons technology, the penetration of space, genetic research and biotechnical intervention in human behavior, information processing, data management and new communications media are technologies which by their very nature have conflicting consequences. The more complex the systems requiring steering become, the greater the probability of dysfunctional secondary effects. We experience on a daily basis the transformation of productive forces into destructive forces, of planning capacities into potentials for disruption. It is no wonder, then, that the theories gaining in influence today are primarily those that try to show how the very forces that make for increasing power, the forces from which modernity once derived its self-consciousness and its utopian expectations, are in actuality turning autonomy into dependence, emancipation into oppression, and reason into irrationality. Derrida concludes from Heidegger's critique of modern subjectivity that

we can escape from the treadmill of Western logocentrism only through aimless provocation. Instead of trying to master foreground contingencies *in* the world, he says, we should surrender to the mysteriously encoded contingencies through which the world discloses itself. Foucault radicalizes Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason to make it a theory of the Eternal Return of power. His proclamation of a cycle of power that is always the same returning in discourse formations that are always new cannot help but extinguish the last spark of utopia and destroy the last traces of Western culture's self-confidence.

On the intellectual scene the suspicion is spreading that the exhaustion of utopian energies is not just an indication of a transitory mood of cultural pessimism but rather goes deeper. It could indicate a change in modern time consciousness as such. Perhaps the amalgam of historical and utopian thought is disintegrating; perhaps the structure of the *Zeitgeist* and the overall situation of politics are changing. Perhaps historical consciousness is being *relieved* of its utopian energies: just as at the end of the eighteenth century, with the temporalization of utopias, hopes for paradise moved into the mundane sphere, so today, two hundred years later, utopian expectations are losing their secular character and once again assuming religious form.

I consider this thesis of the onset of the postmodern period to be unfounded. Neither the structure of the *Zeitgeist* nor the mode of debating future life possibilities has changed; utopian energies as such are not withdrawing from historical consciousness. Rather, what has come to an end is a particular utopia that in the past crystallized around the potential of a society based on social labor.

The classical social theorists from Marx to Max Weber agreed that the structure of bourgeois society was stamped by abstract labor, by the type of labor for payment that is regulated by market forces, valorized in capitalistic form, and organized in the form of business enterprise. Because the form of this abstract labor displayed such power to penetrate all spheres and put its stamp on them, utopian expectations too could be directed toward the sphere of production, in short, to the eman-

icipation of labor from alien control. The utopias of the early socialists took concrete form in the image of the phalanstery, a labor-based social organization of free and equal producers. The communal form of life of workers in free association was supposed to arise from the proper organization of production itself. This idea of worker self-management continued to inspire the protest movement of the late 1960s.⁵ For all his critique of early socialism, Marx too, in the first part of the *German Ideology*, was pursuing the same utopian idea of a society based on social labor: "Thus things have now come to such a pass that . . . individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces . . . to achieve self-activity. . . . The appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of the individual capacities corresponding to the material instruments production. . . . Only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting-off of natural limitations." (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur, New York, 1970, pp. 92–93.)

The utopian idea of a society based on social labor has lost its persuasive power—and not simply because the forces of production have lost their innocence or because the abolition of private ownership of the means of production clearly has not led in and of itself to workers' self-management. Rather, it is above all because that utopia has lost its point of reference in reality: the power of abstract labor to create structure and give form to society. Claus Offe has compiled convincing "indications of the objectively decreasing power of matters of labor, production, and earnings to determine the constitution and development of society as a whole."⁶

Anyone who looks at one of the rare pieces of writing that dares to announce a utopian reference in its title today—I am thinking of Andre Gorz's *Paths to Paradise*—will find this diagnosis confirmed. Gorz bases his proposal to disengage labor and income through a guaranteed minimum income on the ending of the Marxian expectation that self-directed activity and material life could still become one and the same.

But why should the diminishing persuasive power of a utopia of social labor be of significance to the broader public, and why

should it help to explain a *general* exhaustion of utopian impulses? We should remember that it was not only intellectuals whom this utopia attracted. It inspired the European labor movement, and in our century it left its traces in three very different but historically influential programs. The political movements corresponding to these programs established themselves in reaction to the consequences of World War I and the economic crisis: Soviet Communism in Russia, authoritarian corporatism in Fascist Italy, in Nazi Germany, and in Falangist Spain; and social-democratic reformism in the mass democracies of the West. Only this latter project of a social welfare state has adopted as its own the legacy of the bourgeois emancipation movements, the democratic constitutional state. Although this project emerged from the social-democratic tradition, it has by no means been pursued only by social-democratic governments. Since World War II, all the governing parties in the Western countries have won their majorities more or less explicitly under the banner of welfare-state objectives. Since the middle of the 1970s, however, awareness of the limitations of the welfare state project has been growing—without as yet a clear alternative in view. Thus I will formulate my thesis as follows: the New Obscurity is part of a situation in which a welfare state program that continues to be nourished by a utopia of social labor is losing its power to project future possibilities for a collectively better and less endangered way of life.

III

In the welfare state project, of course, the utopian core, liberation from alienated labor, took a different form. Emancipated living conditions worthy of human beings are no longer to emerge directly from the revolutionizing of labor conditions, that is, from the transformation of alienated labor into self-directed activity. Nevertheless, reformed conditions of employment retain a position of central importance in this project as well.⁷ They remain the reference point not only for measures designed to humanize labor that continues to be largely heteronomous but also and especially for compensatory measures

designed to assume the burden of the fundamental risks of wage labor (accident, illness, loss of employment, lack of provision for old age). As a result, all those able to work must be incorporated into this streamlined and cushioned system of employment; hence the goal of full employment. The compensatory process functions only if the role of the full-time wage earner becomes the norm. For the burdens that continue to be connected with the cushioned status of dependent wage labor, the citizen is compensated in his role as client of the welfare state bureaucracies with legal claims, and in his role as consumer of mass-produced goods, with buying power. The lever for the pacification of class antagonisms thus continues to be the neutralization of the conflict potential inherent in the status of the wage laborer.

This goal is to be reached through social welfare legislation and collective bargaining on wage scales by independent parties. Welfare state policies derive their legitimation from general elections and find their social base in autonomous labor unions and in labor parties. It is of course the power and the capacity for action of an interventionist state apparatus that ultimately determine the success of the project. This apparatus is supposed to intervene in the economic system with the aim of protecting capitalist growth, smoothing out crises, and safeguarding simultaneously both jobs and the competitiveness of business in the international marketplace, so that increases are generated from which redistributions can be made without discouraging private investors. This throws some light on the *methodological* side of the project: the welfare state compromise and the pacification of class antagonisms are to be achieved by using democratically legitimated state power to protect and restrain the quasi-natural process of capitalist growth. The *substantive* side of the project is nourished by the residues of a utopia of social labor: as the status of the employee is normalized through rights to political participation and social ownership, the general population gains the opportunity to live in freedom, social justice, and increasing prosperity. The presupposition here is that peaceful coexistence between democracy and capitalism can be ensured through state intervention.

In the developed industrial societies of the West this precar-

budgets can be suggestively connected in the perception of the public with the costs of the welfare state, the structural limitations under which the welfare state compromise was worked out and maintained become quite evident. Because the welfare state may not interfere with the economic system's mode of functioning, it has no possibility of influencing private investment activity other than through interventions that conform to the economic system. Nor would it have the power to do so, because the redistribution of income is essentially limited to a horizontal reshuffling within the group of the dependently employed and does not touch the class-specific structure of wealth, in particular the distribution of ownership of the means of production. Thus it is precisely the successful welfare state that skids into a situation in which it becomes apparent, as Claus Offe has shown, that the welfare state itself is not an autonomous "source of prosperity" and cannot guarantee employment security as a civil right.

In such a situation the welfare state is immediately in danger of its social base slipping away. In times of crisis the upwardly mobile groups of voters who received the greatest direct benefits from the welfare state development can develop a mentality concerned with maintaining their standard of living and may ally themselves with the old middle class, and in general with the strata concerned with "productivity," to form a defensive coalition opposing underprivileged or marginalized groups. Such a regrouping of the electoral base threatens primarily parties like the Democrats in the United States, the English Labour Party, or the German Social-Democratic Party, which for decades have been able to count on a firm welfare state clientele. At the same time, labor unions come under pressure through the changed situation in the labor market; their power to make effective threats is diminished, they lose members and contributions and see themselves forced into a politics of alliances tailored to the short-term interests of those who are still employed.

Even if under more favorable conditions the welfare state could retard or completely avoid the side effects of its own success that are jeopardizing the very conditions of its functioning, a further problem would remain unresolved. Advo-

ious condition could, by and large, be fulfilled, at least under the favorable constellation of factors in the postwar and reconstruction periods. But what I want to deal with here is not the changed constellation that has existed since the 1970s, not external circumstances, but the internal difficulties that arise for the welfare state as a result of its own successes.⁸ In this regard two questions repeatedly arise. First, does the interventionist state have sufficient power at its disposal, and can it operate efficiently enough to keep the capitalist system under control as intended in its program? Second, is the use of political power the correct method for reaching the substantive goal of promoting and safeguarding emancipated forms of life worthy of human beings? Thus we are concerned first with the question of the degree to which capitalism and democracy can be reconciled, and second with the question whether new forms of life can be created through legal-bureaucratic means.

From the beginning, the national state has proved too narrow a framework to adequately guarantee Keynesian economic policies against external factors—against the imperatives of the world market and the investment policies of business enterprises operating on a worldwide scale. But the limits of the state's power and capacity to intervene internally are still more evident. Here, the more successfully the welfare state puts through its programs, the more clearly it runs into the opposition of private investors. There are many causes, of course, of a decreasing profitability of business, declining willingness to invest, and falling rates of growth. But conditions for the valorization of capital do not remain unaffected by the results of social welfare policies, either in actual fact or—and especially not—in the subjective perception of business enterprises. In addition, rising costs for wages and benefits strengthen the tendency to invest in rationalizing production, investments which—under the banner of a second industrial revolution—so substantially increase the productivity of labor and so substantially decrease the labor time necessary to society as a whole that despite the secular trend toward shortening the work week more and more labor power is unused. Be that as it may, in a situation in which insufficient willingness to invest, economic stagnation, increasing unemployment, and the crisis in public

cates of the welfare state project had always looked in only one direction. In the foreground stood the task of controlling quasi-natural economic power and diverting the destructive consequences of crisis-prone economic growth from the lifeworld of dependent workers. Government power achieved by parliamentary means seemed both an innocent and an indispensable resource; faced with the systemic inner logic of the economy, the interventionist state had to draw on that power for its strength and its capacity for action. The reformers had seen active state intervention, not only in the economic cycle but also in the life cycle of its citizens, as completely unproblematic—reforming the conditions of life of the employed was, after all, the goal of the welfare state program. And in fact a relatively high degree of social justice has been achieved in this way.

But the very people who acknowledge this historical achievement on the part of the welfare state and who refrain from cheap criticism of its weaknesses have come to recognize the failure that derives not from any particular obstacle or from a halfhearted realization of the project but from a specific narrowness of vision on the part of the project itself. All skepticism about the medium of power, which may be indispensable but is only seemingly innocent, has been removed from awareness. Social welfare programs need a great deal of power to achieve the force of law financed by public budgets—and thus to be implemented within the lifeworld of their beneficiaries. Thus an ever denser net of legal norms, of governmental and paraganovernmental bureaucracies is spread over the daily life of its potential and actual clients.

Extensive discussions of excessive legal regulation and bureaucratization in general and the counterproductive effects of government social welfare policy in particular, and of the professionalization and scientization of social services, have made one thing clear: the legal and administrative means through which welfare state programs are implemented are not a passive medium with no properties of its own. On the contrary, they are linked with a practice that isolates individual facts, a practice of normalization and surveillance. Foucault has traced the reifying and subjectivizing power of this practice down to

its very finest capillary ramifications in everyday communication. Certainly, the deformations of a lifeworld that is regimented, dissected, controlled, and watched over are more subtle than the obvious forms of material exploitation and impoverishment; but social conflicts that have been shifted over into the psychological and physical domains and internalized are no less destructive for all that. In short, a contradiction between its goal and its method is inherent in the welfare state project as such. Its goal is the establishment of forms of life that are structured in an egalitarian way and that at the same time open up arenas for individual self-realization and spontaneity. But evidently this goal cannot be reached via the direct route of putting political programs into legal and administrative form. Generating forms of life exceeds the capacities of the medium of power.

IV

I have discussed the obstacles that the successful welfare state puts in its own path in the context of two problems. I do not mean to say thereby that the development of the welfare state has been a misguided specialization. On the contrary, the institutions of the welfare state represent as much of an advance in the political system as those of the democratic constitutional state, an advance to which there is no identifiable alternative in societies of our type—either with regard to the functions that the welfare state fulfills or with regard to the normatively justified demands that it satisfies. In particular, nations that have lagged behind in the development of the social welfare state have no plausible reason for deviating from this path. It is precisely this lack of alternatives, and perhaps even the irreversibility of these still controversial compromise structures, that now confront us with the dilemma that the developed forms of capitalism can no more live without the welfare state than they can live with its further expansion. The more or less bewildered reactions to this dilemma indicate that the potential of the utopian idea of a laboring society to stimulate new developments in the political sphere has been exhausted.

Following Claus Offe, one can distinguish three patterns of

response to this dilemma in countries such as the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States.⁹ The more conservative wing of the social-democratic parties, which defends the legitimacy of industrial society and the welfare state, finds itself on the defensive. I intend this characterization in a broad sense, so that it can be applied, for example, both to the Mondale wing of the Democratic Party in the United States and to the second government under Mitterrand in France. The legitimists delete from the welfare state project precisely the components it had derived from the utopian idea of a laboring society. They renounce the goal of overcoming heteronomous labor so that the status of a free citizen with equal rights extends into the sphere of production and can become the nucleus around which autonomous forms of life crystallize. Today the legitimists are the true conservatives, who want to stabilize what has been achieved. They hope to find a point of equilibrium between the development of a welfare state and modernization based on a market economy. The disturbed balance between orientations to democratic use-values and a toned-down version of the intrinsic capitalist dynamic is to be restored. This program focuses on preserving the existing achievements of the welfare state. It fails to recognize, however, the potentials for resistance accumulating in the wake of progressive bureaucratic erosion of communicatively structured lifeworlds that have been emancipated from quasi-natural contexts. Nor does it take seriously the shifts in the social and labor-union base on which welfare state policies have hitherto been able to rely. With shifts in the structure of the electorate and a weakening of the position of the labor unions, these policies are threatened with a desperate race against time.

On the rise is neoconservatism, which is also oriented to industrial society but decidedly critical of the social welfare state. The Reagan administration and the government of Margaret Thatcher made their entrance under its banner; the conservative government in the Federal Republic of Germany has moved into the same position. Basically, neoconservatism is characterized by three components.

First, a supply-side economic policy is supposed to improve conditions for the valorization of capital and set the process of

capital accumulation back in motion. It is willing to accept a relatively high unemployment rate, which is intended to be only temporary. As the statistics in the United States show, the shifts in income are to the disadvantage of the poorer groups in the population, while only those who possess large amounts of capital realize definite increases in income. Hand in hand with this come definite reductions in social welfare services. Second, the costs of legitimating the political system are to be reduced. "Inflation of rising expectations" and "ungovernability" are the slogans of a policy that aims at a greater detachment of administration from public will-formation. In this context, neocorporatist developments are promoted, and there is thus an activation of the nongovernmental steering potential of large-scale organizations, primarily business organizations and labor unions. The transfer of normatively regulated parliamentary powers to systems that merely function, without normative regulation, turns the state into one partner among others in the negotiation. The displacement of jurisdiction onto the neocorporate gray areas withdraws more and more social matters from a decision-making process that is obligated by constitutional norms to give equal consideration to all who are concerned in any specific matter.¹⁰ Third, cultural policy is assigned the task of operating on two fronts. On the one hand, it is to discredit intellectuals as the social bearers of modernism, at once obsessed with power and unproductive; for postmaterial values, especially expressive needs for self-realization and the critical judgments of a universalist Enlightenment morality, are seen as a threat to the motivational bases of a functioning society of social labor and a depoliticized public sphere. On the other hand, traditional culture and the stabilizing forces of conventional morality, patriotism, bourgeois religion, and folk culture are to be cultivated. Their function is to compensate the private lifeworld for personal burdens and to cushion it against the pressures of a competitive society and accelerated modernization.

The neoconservative policy has a certain chance to gain ascendancy if it finds a base in the bipartite segmented society it is promoting. The groups that have been excluded or marginalized have no veto power, since they represent a segregated

minority that has been isolated from the production process. The pattern of relations between the metropolises and the underdeveloped peripheral areas that has increasingly become established in the international arena seems to be repeating itself within the developed capitalist societies: the established powers are less and less dependent for their own reproduction on the labor and willingness to cooperate of those who are impoverished and disenfranchised. But a policy has to be able to function as well as to simply gain acceptance. A definite termination of the welfare state compromise, however, would necessarily leave gaps in functioning that could be closed only through repression or demoralization.

A third and contrasting pattern of reaction is shown in the dissidence of the critics of growth, who have an ambivalent attitude toward the welfare state. Thus in the new social movements of the Federal Republic, for instance, minorities of the most diverse origins have joined in an "antiproductivist alliance"—the old and the young, women and the unemployed, gays and the handicapped, believers and nonbelievers. What unites them is their rejection of the productivist vision of progress that the legitimists share with the neoconservatives. For those two parties, the key to a modernization of society as free as possible from crisis lies in correctly distributing the burden of problems between the two subsystems, the state and the economy. The one group sees the cause of crises in the unfettered inner dynamic of the economy; the other sees it in the bureaucratic restraints imposed on that dynamic. The corresponding therapies are the social restraint of capitalism on the one hand, or the transfer of problems from the planning body back to the market on the other hand. The one group sees the source of the disturbances in a monetarized labor force; the other, in the bureaucratic crippling of private enterprise. But both sides agree that the interactive domains of the lifeworld that are in need of protection can adopt only a passive role vis-à-vis the actual motors of social modernization, the state and the economy. Both sides are convinced that the lifeworld can be sufficiently decoupled from those two subsystems and protected from encroachments by the system if the state and the

economy can be brought into the proper complementary relationship and can provide each other with mutual stabilization.

Only the dissident critics of industrial society start from the premise that the lifeworld is equally threatened by commodification *and* bureaucratization—neither of the two media, money and power, and is by nature “more innocent” than the other. Only the dissidents also consider it necessary to strengthen the autonomy of a lifeworld that is threatened in its vital foundations and its communicative infrastructure. They are the only ones to demand that the inner dynamic of subsystems regulated by money and power be broken, or at least checked, by forms of organization that are closer to the base and self-administered. In this context, concepts of a dual economy and proposals for the decoupling of social security and employment come into play.¹¹ This dedifferentiation is to apply not only to the role of the wage earner but also to that of the consumer, the citizen, and the client of the welfare state bureaucracies. The dissident critics of industrial society thus inherit the welfare state program in the radical-democratic components abandoned by the legitimists. But insofar as they do not go beyond mere dissidence, insofar as they remain caught in the fundamentalism of the Great Refusal and offer no more than the negative program of dedifferentiation and a halt to growth, they fall back behind *one* insight of the welfare state project.

The formula of the social containment of capitalism held more than mere resignation in the face of the fact that the framework of a complex market economy could no longer be broken up from within and restructured democratically by means of the simple recipes of workers’ self-management. That formula also contained the insight that an external and indirect attempt to gain influence on mechanisms of self-regulation requires something new, namely a highly innovative combination of power and intelligent self-restraint. At first this insight was based on the notion that society could act upon itself without risk, using the neutral means of political and administrative power. If not only capitalism but the interventionist state itself is now to be “socially contained,” the task becomes considerably more complicated. For then that combination of

power and intelligent self-restraint can no longer be entrusted to the state's planning capacity.

If curbs and indirect regulation are now to be directed against the internal dynamics of public administration as well, the necessary potentials for reflection and steering must be sought elsewhere, namely, in a completely altered relationship between autonomous, self-organized public spheres on the one hand and domains of action regulated by money and administrative power on the other. This leads to the difficult task of making possible a democratic generalization of interest positions and a universalist justification of norms *below* the threshold of party apparatuses that have become independent complex organizations and have, so to speak, migrated into the political system. Any naturally generated pluralism of defensive subcultures arising only on the basis of spontaneous refusal would have to develop separately from norms of civil equality. It would then constitute only a sphere that was a mirror image of the neocorporatist gray areas.

V

The development of the welfare state has arrived at an impasse. With it, the energies of the utopian idea of a laboring society have exhausted themselves. The responses of the legitimists and the neoconservatives move within the medium of a *Zeitgeist* which at this point can only be defensive; they are the expression of a historical consciousness that has been robbed of its utopian dimension. The dissident critics of a growth-oriented society also remain on the defensive. Their response could be turned to the offensive only if the welfare state project were neither simply maintained nor simply terminated but rather continued on a higher level of reflection. A welfare state project that has become reflective, that is directed not only to restraining the capitalist economy but to controlling the state itself would, of course, lose labor as its central point of reference. For it is no longer a question of protecting full employment, which has been raised to the status of a norm. A reflective welfare state project could not even limit itself to introducing a guaranteed minimum income in order to break the spell that

the labor market casts on the life history of all those capable of working—including the growing and increasingly marginalized potential of those who only stand in reserve. This step would be revolutionary, but not revolutionary enough—not even if the lifeworld could be protected not only against all the inhuman imperatives of the employment system but also against the counterproductive side effects of an administrative system designed to provide for the whole of existence.

Such barriers to the interchange between system and lifeworld would prove functional only if a new distribution of power arose at the same time. Modern societies have at their disposal three resources with which to satisfy the need for steering: money, power, and solidarity. The respective spheres of influence of these three resources would have to be brought into a new balance. By this I mean that the integrative social force of solidarity would have to be able to maintain itself in the face of the “forces” of the other two regulatory resources, money and administrative power. The domains of life that specialize in the transmission of traditional values and cultural knowledge, in the integration of groups and the socialization of new generations, have always been dependent on solidarity. But a political will-formation that was to have an influence on the boundaries and the interchange between these communicatively structured spheres of life on the one hand and the state and the economy on the other would have to draw from the same source. That, by the way, is not so different from the normative ideas of our social studies textbooks, according to which society influences itself and its development through democratically legitimated authority.

According to this official version, political power springs from public will-formation and flows, as it were, through the state apparatus via legislation and administration, returning to a Janus-faced public that takes the form of a public of citizens at the entrance to the state and a public of clients at its exit. This is approximately how the citizens and the clients of public administration see the cycle of political power from their perspective. From the perspective of the political system, the same cycle, purged of all normative admixtures, presents itself differently. In this unofficial version, of which systems theory

keeps reminding us, citizens and clients are members of the political system. In this description it is above all the meaning of the legitimation process that has changed. Interest groups and parties use their organizational power to create assent and loyalty to their organizational goals. The state administration not only structures but also largely controls the legislative process; it in turn has to make compromises with powerful clients. Parties, legislative bodies, and bureaucracies must take account of the undeclared pressure of functional imperatives and bring them into accord with public opinion—the result is “symbolic politics.” The government too must be concerned with supporting the masses and supporting the private investors at the same time.

In trying to fit these two contrary descriptions together into a realistic image, one can use the model, current in political science, of different arenas superimposed on one another. Claus Offe, for instance, distinguishes three such arenas. In the first, easily identifiable political elites within the state apparatus make their decisions. Beneath this lies a second arena in which a multitude of anonymous groups and collective agents influence one another, form coalitions, control access to the means of production and communication, and, already less visibly, preestablish through their social power the margins within which political questions can be thematized and decided. Beneath them, finally, lies a third arena in which subtle communication flows determine the form of political culture and, with the help of definitions of reality, compete for what Gramsci called cultural hegemony—this is where shifts in the trend of the *Zeitgeist* take place. The interaction among these arenas is not easily grasped. Up to now processes in the middle arena seem to have had priority. Whatever the empirical answer turns out to be, our practical problem can in any case be seen more readily now: any project that wants to shift the balance in favor of regulation through solidarity has to mobilize the lower arena against the two upper ones.

In the lower arena conflicts are not directly for money or power but rather for definitions. At issue are the integrity and autonomy of life styles, perhaps the protection of traditionally established subcultures or changes in the grammar of tradi-

tional forms of life. Regionalist movements are examples of the former, feminist or ecological movements examples of the latter. For the most part these battles remain latent; they take place within the microsphere of everyday communication, and only now and then do they consolidate into public discourses and higher-level forms of intersubjectivity. These forms permit the formation of autonomous public spheres, which also enter into communication with one another as soon as the potential for self-organization and the self-organized employment of communications media is made use of. Forms of self-organization strengthen the collective capacity for action beneath the threshold at which organizational goals become detached from the orientations and attitudes of members of the organization and dependent instead on the interest of autonomous organizations in maintaining themselves. In organizations that remain close to the base, the capacity for action will always fall short of the capacity for reflection. That need not be an obstacle to accomplishing the task that occupies the foreground in continuing the welfare state project. The autonomous public spheres would have to achieve a combination of power and intelligent self-restraint that could make the self-regulating mechanisms of the state and the economy sufficiently sensitive to the goal-oriented results of radical democratic will-formation. Presumably, that can happen only if political parties relinquish *one* of their functions without replacing it, that is, without simply making room for a functional equivalent—the function of *generating* mass loyalty.

These reflections become more provisional, indeed vaguer, the more they approach the no-man's-land of the normative. There it is already easier to mark off negative boundaries. When the welfare state project becomes reflective, it takes leave of the utopian idea of a laboring society. The latter had used the contrast between living and dead labor, the idea of self-determined activity, to orient itself. In doing so, it had to presuppose that the subcultural forms of life of industrial workers were a source of solidarity. It had to presuppose that cooperative relationships within the factory would even intensify the naturally operative solidarity of the workers' subculture. But since then these subcultures have largely

disintegrated. And it is somewhat doubtful whether their power to create solidarity can be regenerated in the workplace. Be that as it may, what was previously a presupposition or a condition of the utopian idea of a laboring society has now become a theme for discussion. And with this theme the utopian accents have moved from the concept of labor to the concept of communication. I speak only of "accents," because with the shift of paradigm from a society based on social labor to a society based on communication the form of linkage to the utopian tradition has also changed.

Of course, the utopian dimension of historical consciousness and political debate has by no means been completely closed off with the departure of the utopian contents of a laboring society. As utopian oases dry up, a desert of banality and bewilderment spreads. I hold to my thesis that the self-reassurance of modernity is spurred on, as before, by a consciousness of the significance of the present moment in which historical and utopian thought are fused with one another. But with the disappearance of the utopian contents of the laboring society, two illusions that have cast a spell over the self-understanding of modernity disappear as well. The first illusion stems from an inadequate differentiation.

In utopian conceptions of a well-ordered society, the dimensions of happiness and emancipation coincided with the dimensions of increasing power and the production of social wealth. Sketches of rational forms of life entered into a deceptive symbiosis with the rational domination of nature and the mobilization of societal energies. The instrumental reason released in the forces of production, and the functionalist reason developed in capacities for organization and planning were to pave the way for a life that was at once humane, egalitarian, and libertarian. Ultimately, the potential for consensual relationships was to issue directly from the productivity of work relationships. The persistence of this confusion is reflected even in its critical reversal, as for example when the normalizing achievements of complex centralized organizations are lumped together with the generalizing achievements of moral universalism.¹²

Still more fundamental is the abandonment of the method-

ological illusion that was connected with projections of a concrete totality of future life possibilities. The utopian content of a society based on communication is limited to the formal aspects of an undamaged intersubjectivity. To the extent to which it suggests a concrete form of life, even the expression "the ideal speech situation" is misleading. What can be outlined normatively are the necessary but general conditions for the communicative practice of everyday life and for a procedure of discursive will-formation that would put participants *themselves* in a position to realize concrete possibilities for a better and less threatened life, on *their own* initiative and in accordance with *their own* needs and insights.¹³ From Hegel through Carl Schmitt down to our day, a critique of utopia that has issued dire warnings against Jacobinism has been wrong in denouncing the supposedly unavoidable marriage of utopia and terror. Nevertheless, it is utopian in the negative sense to confuse a highly developed communicative infrastructure of *possible* forms of life with a specific totality, in the singular, representing the successful life.

Notes

1. I am following the outstanding work of Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt, 1979); English translation *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).
2. On this theme see J. Rösen, "Utopie und Geschichte," in W. Vosskamp, ed., *Utopieforschung* (Stuttgart, 1982), vol. I, p. 356ff.
3. L. Holscher, "Der Begriff der Utopie als historische Kategorie," in Vosskamp, *Utopieforschung*, vol. I, p. 402ff.
4. Reinhart Koselleck, "Die Verzeitlichung der Utopie," in Vosskamp, vol. III, p. 1ff.; R. Trousson, "Utopie, Geschichte, Fortschritt," in Vosskamp, vol. III, p. 15ff.
5. Oskar Negt has recently published another noteworthy study from this perspective: *Lebendige Arbeit, enteignete Zeit* (Frankfurt, 1984).
6. Claus Offe, "Arbeit als soziologische Schlüsselkategorie," in his *Arbeitsgesellschaft—Strukturprobleme und Zukunftsperspektiven* (Frankfurt, 1984), p. 20.
7. From this perspective see also the recent work of H. Kern and M. Schumann, *Das Ende der Arbeitsteilung?* (Munich, 1984).

8. On this theme see Claus Offe, "Zu einigen Widersprüchen des modernen Sozialstaates," in his *Arbeitsgesellschaft*, p. 323ff.; and John Keane, *Public Life and Late Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1984), chapter 1, p. 10ff.
9. Claus Offe, "Perspektiven auf die Zukunft des Arbeitsmarktes," in his *Arbeitsgesellschaft*, p. 340ff.
10. Claus Offe, "Korporatismus als System nichtstaatlicher Machtsteuerung," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10 (1984), p. 234ff.; on the systems-theoretical justification of neocorporatism see H. Wilke, *Entzauberung des Staates* (Königstein, 1983).
11. Th. Schmid, *Befreiung von falscher Arbeit. Thesen zum garantierten Mindesteinkommen* (Berlin, 1984).
12. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984). For a critical perspective, see Axel Honneth, "Der Affekt gegen das Allgemeine," in *Merkur* 430, December 1984, p. 893ff.
13. Karl-Otto Apel, "Ist die Ethik der idealen Kommunikationsgemeinschaft einer Utopie?" in *Voskamp*, vol. 1, p. 325ff.