

HAL FOSTER

“How can one who refuses the present nevertheless act with force within it?”<sup>1</sup> Anthony Vidler posed this paradoxical question in an essay on utopia in 1975, the pretext of which was an exhibition, curated by Emilio Ambasz at the Museum of Modern Art, of “visionary projects” by twenty-three studios and architects, including Archigram, Superstudio, Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk, and Rem Koolhaas. Nineteen seventy-five was a time of scant building in this country, which is also to say a time of paper architecture of the kind on view at MoMA. Precipitated by the oil crisis, a deep recession had stalled Western economies, New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy, and the United States was exhausted from the torturous endgames of the Nixon presidency and the Vietnam War (which concluded, officially, during the MoMA show). It wasn’t a utopian moment, to put it mildly, yet Vidler insisted on the critical value of utopia nonetheless—insisted on it all the more, perhaps, because it seemed even more impossible than usual. Maybe there is a lesson here for us today.

In his insistence on utopia Vidler was at odds with his Marxist colleague Manfredo Tafuri, whose dystopian account of modern design, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, had been published two years before, in 1973 (it appeared in English in 1976). Vidler and Tafuri did agree on one thing, however: Utopia is critical only if it remains apart. For both critic-historians, if it is somehow inserted into the world, utopia becomes sheer ideology or outright oppression. Certainly the historical evidence is on their side, but I want to demur on this point below.

The account of the avant-garde given by Tafuri was caustic. Incited by intensive industrialization, imperialist war, and economic catastrophe, Dada and Surrealism, on the one hand, and de Stijl and the Bauhaus, on the other, constituted a “dialectic” of “Chance” and “Form.” The Chance team aimed to exacerbate

1. Anthony Vidler, “Architecture, Poetry, and Everyday Life,” *October* 187 (Winter 2024), p. 73. The present text was delivered at the conference “Utopia x Psychopathology,” organized by Beatriz Colomina, Spyros Papapetros, and Mark Wigley in honor of Tony Vidler and held at Princeton University on November 7–8, 2024. I dedicate this text to the memory of Tony Vidler as well as Fredric Jameson, each of whom thought deeply about the topics of the conference.

the manifold shocks of this heightened stage of capitalism, while the Form side worked to ameliorate them, even to assimilate them. In doing so, however, the two camps only served, in tandem, to advance the interests of capitalist reconstruction. “By means of the absurd,” Tafuri argued, Dada and Surrealism “demonstrated—without naming it—the necessity of a plan,” which “De Stijl and the Bauhaus introduced . . . into a design method that was always closely related to the city as a productive structure.”<sup>2</sup> Anarchism calls out for Order: Marxism has always made this critique of its old frenemy.

In 1973, when Tafuri looked back on the avant-garde of the previous fifty years, a reduced version of modern architecture was well established as the international style of corporate capitalism. Just as importantly, he wrote in the wake of 1968, in bitter disappointment over another revolution gone bust. Naturally, then, the Tafuri story was one of recuperation and resignation, and in this respect it was paralleled by the nearly contemporaneous account of Dada and Surrealism by the German literary critic Peter Bürger. As is well known, his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, published in 1974, argued that the postwar avant-garde merely repeated the transgressions of the prewar avant-garde. In so doing, the “neo” version effectively reversed the “historical” one, rendering it conventional, even institutional—the passive stuff of art museum and art market alike.

These arguments are still bracing. However, though Tafuri and Bürger purported to be dialectical about “the dialectic of the avant-garde,” neither truly was: Both accounts are shot through with defeatism, which is never dialectical. Yet this was hardly a failure of analysis alone. By the mid-1970s the dialectical energy of the avant-garde was indeed sapped, and the locomotive of history (as Marx called revolution) had run into the sand. Already in 1960 Daniel Bell anticipated “the end of ideology,” which Francis Fukuyama confirmed triumphally after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Between these declarations Lyotard presented the Left version of this discourse when in 1979 he declared the grand narratives of modernity to be done and dusted.<sup>3</sup> More locally, modern architecture was taken to have imploded with the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis in 1972, and postmodern architecture to have risen on its rubble. In 1975, the year of the MoMA show of visionary projects, the museum also presented an exhibition of Beaux-Arts designs, which provided postmodern architecture with its preferred references. For many of us, however, this recovery of history was only another version of its foreclosure, from which moment it could be rummaged through for ornamental scrap.

This, roughly, was the ideology of the time, which was still framed by the Cold War, and it cut across the political spectrum. From Right to Left a prime

2. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1976), p. 93.

3. See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

object of contempt was utopia, which *nouveaux philosophes* like Bernard-Henri Lévy, who had suddenly discovered Solzhenitsyn, had begun to equate with the Gulag. Socialism was reduced to Stalinism, and Marxism became synonymous with totalitarianism. This was the first article of neoconservative faith, which was soon hegemonic in France as well as the United States: Revolution—be it of the French, Russian, or almost any other variety—can only lead to Terror.

Nineteen seventy-five is fifty years ago, the same distance from which Tafuri and Bürger looked back on the historical avant-garde. What can we learn about that moment from our vantage today, in a way that is neither defeatist nor reactive? Here are a few propositions I can only assert. First, the very idea of utopia is socialist *avant la lettre*. This association was already nascent in the foundational text of Thomas More, who in 1516 anticipated two socialist staples to come: an insistence on central planning (as it came to be called) and a rejection of private property (More railed against the enclosures of his time). The connection became explicit, of course, in the “utopian socialism” of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Robert Owen in the early nineteenth century, even if the term retains the derogatory inflection given it in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Although Marx and Engels understood utopian socialism to be a product of the Enlightenment principles of reason, equality, and justice, they also saw this idealism as its limitation. Even as they took utopian socialism to be an early expression of radical discontent with industrial capitalism, they derided its belief that social transformation could occur outside of class struggle. I want to return to this point below as well.

Vidler was more benevolent in 1975. Utopian schemes, he wrote, “represent the strong desire on the part of those trapped within a reality that denied them fulfillment at any level to re-create an order, to re-establish a harmony/balance, to re-constitute a society that had been rent apart by the combined trauma of political and industrial revolution.”<sup>4</sup> This was as true of early-twentieth-century utopias as it was of early-nineteenth-century ones. Just as the prior utopias signaled an initial reaction against industrial capitalism, the later sought a late escape from it—and from the catastrophe of World War I (the glass architecture of Paul Scheerbart and Bruno Taut spanned the war years).<sup>5</sup> Rather than a romantic flight from industrial capitalism, some utopian projects aimed to adapt it; the pivot of the Bauhaus from the first position to the second in 1923 is telling in this respect. For Tafuri this turn was fatal; it marked the moment when utopian thinking succumbed to capitalist design. However, in his defeatism he misconstrued other projects, such as Russian Constructivism, which conceived a different order altogether.

My second proposal, then, is to rewrite the Tafurian dialectic of Chance and Form as a Vidlerian opposition between Psychopathology and Utopia, and to frame it as an antinomy, not a dialectic—that is, as a matter of two strategies that

4. Vidler, “Architecture, Poetry, and Everyday Life,” p. 73.

5. To take a contemporary example, Josiah McElheny has long insisted on the value of this utopianism in his own art.



*Josiah McElheny. Bruno Taut's Monument to Socialist Spirituality (After Mies van der Rohe). 2009. Photograph by Jason Mandella.*

emerged in the same historical period but had afterlives that extend beyond it, in part because they contradicted one another without resolution and in part because subsequent moments have reanimated them in unexpected ways. We can still associate the Chance or Psychopathology side with Dada and anarchism (Hugo Ball wrote his dissertation on Bakunin), but for the Form or Utopia team we might substitute Constructivism, which makes the connection to socialism explicit (Moholy-Nagy once defined Constructivism as “the socialism of vision”).<sup>6</sup>

Again, these two projects were antinomic. Put simply, Dada worked to destroy the old conventions and institutions of art and architecture, while Constructivism sought to invent new ones for a society in transformation. But they developed without the grim complementarity outlined by Tafuri, and again they had divergent afterlives. Already by the early 1930s Stalinists had condemned Constructivism in favor of Socialist Realism, while in the West Constructivism was either absented from art history or replaced with formalist versions that could be absorbed within it. At the end of the Cold War Boris Groys gave it one last kick when, in *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1989), he presented Stalin as the only true Constructivist, that is, as the artist-engineer who did indeed restructure society completely, that is, catastrophically (this was the art-historical version of the all-utopia-ends-in-the-Gulag story). After the fall of the Wall, the Constructivist project became a thing of the past, a dead letter as a set of practices (its reduction to a distorted style in the “deconstructivist” architecture of the time only supports this point).<sup>7</sup>

The afterlife of Dada is quite different, and here I mean not Dada à la Duchamp, the familiar genealogy from the readymade to institutional critique, but Dada as defined by Hugo Ball in his diary of his Zurich years: “The Dadaist suffers . . . from the dissonances [of the age] to the point of self-disintegration.”<sup>8</sup> This Dada is a practice of mimetic exacerbation, whereby one takes a bad thing, such as the becoming machine and/or commodity of the human, and makes it worse, embodying it excessively so as to expose it, even to explode it performatively. After Vidler we might call this strategy a psychopathology—the psychopathology of everyday life under capitalism—which postwar artists from Claes Oldenburg to Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison have adapted in their own ways, acting out the derangement of subject-object relations in urban environments roiled by economic upheaval.

Again, the Constructivist project was terminated long ago; meanwhile, the Dadaist genealogy was trumped only recently. Once the weapon of leftist culture,

6. László Moholy-Nagy in *Ma* (May 1922), reprinted in *Moholy-Nagy: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 186.

7. By the same token, once archives were opened, Constructivism became an object of brilliant scholarship by Leah Dickerman, Maria Gough, Christina Kiaer, and others.

8. Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimés (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 66. Also see my “Dada Mime,” *October* 105 (Summer 2003). This Ball-Duchamp distinction hardly exhausts the genealogies of Dada. Certainly the present calls out for its own John Heartfield.

transgression has become the tool of rightist demagoguery, and the ghost of Hugo Ball is no match for a flesh-and-blood Ubu like President Trump.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the anarchism of Dada pales before the nihilism of MAGA, which is the nihilism of neoliberalism turned nativist. In short, the anti-statism of the anarchist Left is outdone by the anti-statism of the libertarian Right. And yet, just as Vidler argued for utopia at a moment when it seemed to be invalidated, why not do the same with the Dada-Constructivist and anarchist-socialist antinomies? Why not double down on both sides, or at least on certain aspects of both? If early twentieth-century utopias were prompted by a world war that seemed to threaten human civilization (as it was grandly declared then), early-twenty-first-century utopias will be provoked by an environmental collapse that endangers most forms of life.

This doubling down is not so far-fetched. The 2008 crash revived Marxism, and three years later the Arab Spring and Occupy movements reanimated anarchism, in particular its insistence on horizontal organization and prefigurative politics (whereby the desired ends are anticipated in the actual means taken to achieve them). Several years later the COVID lockdown revived another anarchist practice—mutual aid; and Black Lives Matter revived yet another—spontaneous rebellion in the pursuit of social justice. Nevertheless, there is a limit to anarchist anti-statism (apart from the rightist trumping just noted). Both the Arab Spring and Occupy movements faded in large part because of their refusal of hierarchical leadership, programmatic policy, and hard power.

Certain aspects of anarchism such as mutual aid must be retained, but a state, a strong state, is required to address environmental collapse. Since capitalism is the primary agent of this collapse, and because environmental repair must be both cooperative and international, this state must be socialist. We need such a state, indeed a federation of such states, in order to tax the super-rich, to turn fossil-fuel corporations into public utilities that also spearhead carbon removal, to eliminate deforestation, to undertake rewilding, to limit meat consumption, to govern destructive patterns of trade, to cut air travel, to extend mass transit, to mandate green architecture, and on and on. Such states are also required to carry out the necessary projects of infrastructure and geoengineering (to reduce greenhouse effects, the rising of the seas, the bleaching of coral reefs, and again on and on). It would be a wondrous ruse of history if the Trumpist “deconstruction of the administrative state” prepared the way for its reconstruction along these socialist lines.<sup>10</sup> In any case, we must be prepared to make such a leap of faith (a tiger’s leap into the future), for the old ultimatum, delivered by Rosa Luxemburg from prison in 1915, is with us once again: socialism or barbarism.<sup>11</sup>

9. See my “Père Trump,” *October* 159 (Winter 2017).

10. Although I criticized Tafuri and Bürger as defeatist, my own call for socialist reconstruction borders on “revolutionary defeatism,” but the problem with this position (as first articulated by Lenin) is that it overlooks who it is that must bear the brunt of that defeat.

11. In his final text, “Concept of History” (1940), Walter Benjamin calls for a “tiger’s leap into the past.” He also suggests that radical change is driven by the memory of oppressed ancestors more than by the hope for liberated descendants. But surely this is not an either/or.

From this perspective anarchism and socialism are no longer at odds, any more than demands for immediate degrowth and new infrastructure are contradictory. They seem to be opposed, the former against all investment, the latter nothing without it, but both are needed. And effective degrowth requires a strong state too. The state showed what it could do with the COVID suspension of “nonessential” production and consumption. The same must be mandated with respect to fossil fuels. None of these measures can be undertaken within a corporate model of investors and shareholders; rather, as Holly Jean Buck has argued, it must be framed as a “global public project.”<sup>12</sup> One term already in circulation is “ecological Leninism”; it shouldn’t frighten us, though I prefer “socialist Constructivism.”<sup>13</sup> Not long ago, global capitalism invested in massive interstate infrastructure (remember the project of the “New Europe” after 1989?). Compelled by the climate crisis, global socialism will have to do the same, in direct opposition to the nativism of the international Right. Today, then, *pace* both Tafuri and Vidler, utopia *must* be plunged into the world; to adapt the Vidlerian line, one must “refuse the world” *and* “act with force within it.”<sup>14</sup>

The need to both refuse *and* act is one point I wanted to recall; the other is the old critique that utopian socialism was oblivious to class struggle.<sup>15</sup> Adorno once said that Marx saw the entire world as a factory, but in fact this was the plan of an industrial capitalism that Marx sought to redirect, as much as possible, to the advantage of labor. He held that only in the factory might a great mass of workers come together, only there might they develop class consciousness as a proletariat, only then might this class represent the revolutionary spirit of universal equality (as the bourgeoisie had pretended to do after 1789), and only then might a society not riven by class conflict be imagined. Of course, Marx told a more complex story; my point is simply that, despite his skepticism about utopian socialism, his vision was utopian in its own way too.

Today the factory is fragmented and dispersed around the globe, as is labor, which is often made precarious in the process, when not redundant by automation. If capitalism didn’t turn the world into a factory, it has turned the world into a furnace, and, unlike the old factory, *we are all inside it*. In very unequal positions,

12. Holly Jean Buck, *After Geoengineering: Climate Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), p. 41.

13. See Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-first Century* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).

14. The grandiose ultimatum pronounced by Le Corbusier a century ago, “Architecture or Revolution,” might be updated to the even more portentous “Utopia or Extinction.”

15. Again, the term is derogatory in *The Communist Manifesto*, less so later in Engels. Here he is in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880): “The newly-created gigantic productive forces, hitherto used only to enrich individuals and to enslave the masses, offered to Owen the foundations for a reconstruction of society; they were destined, as the common property of all, to be worked for the common good of all. . . . Three great obstacles seemed to him especially to block the path to social reform: private property, religion, the present form of marriage,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/>.

to be sure, with the poor most at risk and the Global South most subject to catastrophe. Without repair, however, the oceans, the droughts, the floods, will come for everyone, including the one percent; obviously this has already begun to happen. One immediate task, then, is to see climate refugees not as invaders who must be repelled at all cost but as vanguards of newfangled forms of sociality. Another step is to establish a “Ministry for the Future” (as Kim Stanley Robinson has imagined it), a transnational agency to represent the interests of generations newly and not yet born. The climate crisis is “a revolutionary problem without a revolutionary subject,” Andreas Malm has argued, but not for long. We know the famous motto that Gramsci coined in prison under Mussolini: “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” Several years ago Fredric Jameson offered this revision: “Cynicism of the intellect, utopianism of the will.”<sup>16</sup> That is what is required now.

16. Fredric Jameson et al., *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), p. 22. Trevor Stark asks a pointed question in an emailed response to the present essay: “What would it mean to link the Dada spirit up to a renewed claim for utopian socialism, one appropriate to the ‘global furnace’ and the ‘vanguards of newfangled forms of sociality’ represented by the coming forced migration of humans at a scale likely greater than any other in world history?” I take him to suggest thereby that the Dadaist genealogy is not as kaput in the present, or as antinomic to the Constructivist project, as I make it out to be, and that the cynical (or “kynical”) intellect of Dada calls out for the utopian will of Constructivism and vice versa *to this day*. (In *Valences of the Dialectic* [2009] Jameson does define dialectical thinking as “the unmasking of antinomy as contradiction” through which we come to recognize “the interpenetration of opposites” in any given situation.)