

Critique without Hope?

(or alternatively, *Critique without Optimism*, depending on how closely I want to stick with the hope/optimism distinction)

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In a recent piece entitled “On Stuckedness,” Ghassan Hage writes that during the first half of the century 20th century, critique hinged on hope, a hope that emanated from the centrality of the notion of crisis. Given critique’s key mission to expose the unsustainability of capitalism, the idea that economic and political crises were endemic and not exceptional to capitalism became a source of hope. A concomitant goal of critique was to goad into existence the kinds of political subjects “whose practices were no longer invested in the reproduction of the existing social structure, but who would engage in transformative practices instead.”

Already a problem with this diagnosis is the limiting of the realm of critique to critical theory, which, following D. Owen and D. Fassin, comprises only one key strand in the larger legacy of critique. But I want to follow through Hage’s diagnosis as a productive segway into problematizing the assumed correspondence between hope and critique. Hage proceeds to argue that from the mid-twentieth century onwards, in particular with the rise of fascism, the hope that animated critique began to dissipate. The core reason was a shift in the understanding of crisis: once viewed as an opportunity for seeing through the veil of capitalist ideology and for working towards social transformation, crisis increasingly came to be perceived as yet another mechanism for ensuring the reproduction of capitalist economy and society. Hage’s own contribution to the familiar narrative comes at this point: this shift in perspective on crisis resulted in “a depressed and depressing form of critique,” one in which the belief in social change and in the revolutionary subject were given up. The crisis of critique, therefore, is tantamount to a crisis in hope.

What Hage laments as the onslaught of a “depressed and depressing critique,” in which hope of social transformation and hope for the revolutionary subject have all but disappeared, might not be seen as so dire by others. According to Jonathan Lear, for example, the precondition for radical hope is an epistemological rupture so extreme that one confronts the essential ontological vulnerability of being and develops the tools to survive under such extreme indeterminacy. And for Terry Eagleton, faith in the certainty of structural transformation is not hope in the first place but mere optimism, which is characterized by a “bullishness about life.” Eagleton wants to salvage hope from what he views to be the optimism that pervades utopian hope with the latter’s insistence on a guaranteed future.

In this paper, I want to explore the possibilities for critique that does not rely on hope— in the sense of hope in a better future. But then, is the alternative to relinquishing hope from critique necessarily a form of cynicism? In thinking with hope as a category of analysis, I navigate between, on the one hand, the more optimistic line of thinking that attributes inherent goodness and a transformative potential to hope, and, on the other, the more suspicious perspective that views hope as deceptive, or at the very least, as complicit in constituting obstacles to (personal and political) flourishing. I ground my analysis in a specific case-study: the recent referendum in Turkey in April 2017. This was a vote, I argue, that was compromised from the outset not just because it was held under a state of emergency or because the government created a culture of fear targeting the no-campaign. It was compromised because the leaders and several members of the Kurdish party HDP had strategically been imprisoned in the months leading up to the referendum, an act that the main opposition party

participated in by acquiescing to lift the constitutionally protected parliamentary immunity of its members of parliament. Yet hope, both as strategic political discursive tool and an effusively articulated emotion, was rampant in the days leading up to the referendum, including among various factions of the left. Given the compromised conditions of the referendum, what would a refusal of hope have looked like? In probing this question, I want to unsettle the assumption that hope is self-evidently conducive to progressive or transformative political agendas at the same time as I want to avoid yielding to left melancholia.

A preliminary glance at the state of the art

In what may be characterized as the buoyant strand of thinking about hope, and one that is increasingly popular despite Hage's assessment, we are all summoned to recover and reclaim hope, especially in these dark times. And we are encouraged in this quest by being assured by the enthusiasts of hope that hopelessness is an ideologically produced condition; that hope is the real state of affairs if only we can see through the layers of mystification; and that hope's affective dimension is our best tool for aiding social transformation (there is a whole spectrum here from the more academic (Zournazi) to the activist-academic (Graeber) to political bestsellers (R. Solnit).

The first problem with the belief in an unadulterated form of hoping that can be rescued from the thrall of capitalist ideology— a belief whose fullest elaboration is in three Ernst Bloch's three volume magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*— is an unquestioned progressivist reading of history and assumption of a priori existing goodness in the world. Walter Benjamin, for one, would be appalled at such denial of the catastrophic character history.

The second problem is identified by Terry Eagleton: "hope is too pervasively immanent in reality, yet it is also too transcendent, too little of this world. It is an unreasonable end; and those who invite us to hope unreasonably risk plunging us into chronic disaffection." Eagleton's own remedy for rescuing hope from the excesses of the Bloch's— and other hyperbolic universes that characterize some of the leftist reclamation of hope— is through distinguishing hope from optimism and ridding the former of the latter (a precursor to the hope/optimism distinction is V. Havel).

However, while the salvaging move clears certain analytic ground, the hope/optimism distinction still leaves intact another deeply-seated assumption— whether hope is beneficent in the first place. This leads to the third problem, most effectively taken to task, on the one hand, by Hage's Bourdieusian perspective elsewhere in his writings on the unequal distribution of hope, and on the other hand, by those working under the rubric of public feelings (Berlant, Ahmed, Chetkovic,) and who attend to the ways in which governance takes place not just through fear but also through hope.

a few immediate questions:

- to what extent does Gramsci's famous dictum, pessimism of the intellect optimism of the will go beyond or replicate the existing dichotomies?
- how much do I have to pursue the Habermas-Honneth-Seyla Benhabib line of theorizing on hope, critique, norm, utopia?
- is my move to put a restraint on hope for the purposes of critique incompatible with prefigurative politics or is there a way to reconcile the two? Do I want to reconcile the two?