

Hope and Critical Theory

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Abstract

In the first part of the paper I consider the relative neglect of hope in the tradition of critical theory. I attribute this neglect to a low estimation of the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral value of hope, and to the strong - but, I argue, contingent - association that holds between hope and religion. I then distinguish three strategies for thinking about the justification of social hope; one which appeals to a notion of unfulfilled or frustrated natural human capacities, another which invokes a providential order, and a third which questions the very appropriateness of justification, turning instead to a notion of ungroundable hope. Different senses of ungroundable hope are distinguished and by way of conclusion I briefly consider their relevance for the project of critique today.

Key words

social hope, social criticism, Frankfurt School, humanism, Rorty, postmodernism.

Hope and Critical Theory

1. The Aversion of Theory to Hope

For all their differences and disagreements, critical theorists presumably have at least one thing in common: hope for a better world. And yet, in comparison to concepts such as critique, rationality, justice, and even desire and memory, the idea of hope has received little attention. Kant, if we consider him for the moment as a founding figure in the tradition of ‘critique’, is exceptional in this respect. For Kant, the question ‘what may I hope’ is as fundamental to our cognitive predicament as the questions ‘what can I know?’ and ‘what ought I to do?’: it unifies the basic ‘interests’ of human reason.¹ But the philosophical significance Kant attached to hope usually goes unremarked, as much in discussions of Kant’s continuing relevance for critique as elsewhere. Ernst Bloch, of course, is another critical theorist who can hardly be accused of neglecting to deal with hope. But Bloch is a marginal figure in the history of the Frankfurt School and in any case his masterpiece, *The Principle of Hope*, is seldom read as an exemplar of critique today.² Erich Fromm’s *The Revolution of Hope*, admittedly an occasional and much less substantial study, has no contemporary presence at all.³ Looking beyond the Frankfurt School tradition, over the past couple of decades some excellent work has been done on hope -- amongst philosophers, by Ronald Aronson, Joseph J. Godfrey and John Patrick Day especially – but the impact of this literature has been minimal.⁴ Certainly, it has done nothing to shape the course of contemporary debates in critical theory.⁵

Why does hope strike so many theorists as unworthy of serious consideration? Perhaps one reason is that there is something intellectually unsatisfactory about being in

hope. We often express a hope in contexts where we are hesitant, uncertain, not fully convinced, or lacking in confidence about our ability to convince others. When my editor asks me if I will submit my typescript by a certain deadline, the honest answer may be ‘I hope so’, but I’d like to give a better, more definitive response. We tell our students to avoid using locutions like ‘in this essay I hope to show that...’ because, however truthful, it reads too much like ‘I can’t really say what the essay shows’. In intellectual matters, recourse to hope often reflects a lack of conviction, and in some contexts it can amount to an avowal of ignorance. To acknowledge that one merely hopes is to concede that one doesn’t really know. From the point of view of theory, then, hope can look very much second rate. Hopes lack the justification that self-respecting theorists demand of their convictions and beliefs. The realm of hope is vague and imprecise, and for that reason uninteresting.

Hope’s lack of refinement is objectionable not only from a cognitive point of view, but from an aesthetic one. There is something common, unsophisticated, *amateurish* about it. Think of the way expressions like ‘hit and hope’ or ‘the hopeful ball’ are used in football talk. If you kick the ball hard enough up-field, there’s a chance it will find one of your players. The long, hopeful may not be pretty but its effective, as the saying goes. The contrast here of course is with a skillful, controlled and self-possessed style, one that leaves minimum scope for luck, and hope. The hit-and-hoper, or the player of the hopeful ball, amateurishly leaves things to chance. Here, hope seems to mark the threshold of ability: a player, as much as an actor, musician or writer, starts to hope as she approaches and crosses (what she believe to be) the limits of her powers. ‘Those who

can, do', we could say, 'those who can't, hope'. Hope and hopefulness in these and other contexts signifies something crude, ugly and vulgar.

Aesthetic aloofness about hope easily merges with moral qualms. Hope and hopefulness are often associated with a naïve and superficial optimism, acceptable perhaps for children and women but unbecoming for a philosopher.⁶ From the point of view of the philosopher, whose arduously attained freedom from illusion is such a cherished source of pride, hope can seem a lowly and demeaning form of comfort. Hope and hopefulness, from this perspective, are regressive dispositions that allow fantasy to predominate over reality. This is not only unedifying, it also has bad consequences for the hopeful person. By prolonging attachment to desires that cannot be satisfied, hope generates frustration, resentment, and a proneness to disappointment that can easily result in reactive violence and destruction. This is the reason for the Stoics' negative evaluation of the hopeful disposition in ancient times, and it stands behind Nietzsche's often quoted modern indictment of hope.⁷ One might also question the value of hope on the grounds that it deals with an unsatisfactory present not by practically engaging with it, but by projecting an imaginary future in which satisfaction is miraculously secured. The problem here is that, in functioning as a form of compensation, hope lends itself to passivity and indifference towards instigating change. To the extent that the hoper relates to a given desirable outcome simply by waiting for it, hope becomes problematic not just from an ethical but from a political point of view.⁸

For these reasons amongst others, hope has been regarded as something of a false friend by philosophers, and this not just in modern times but throughout the ages.⁹ It is not surprising, then, that critical theorists in our day should feel uncomfortable with talk

about hope and want to distance themselves from it. But the most significant reason for the general neglect of hope in critical theory is surely something more specific: namely, the close association between hope and religion. There are too many interesting and important aspects of this association to explore in any detail here. But briefly to mention a few: there is the conceptual affinity (though of course not identity) between hope and prayer of petition (does the expression ‘hope and pray’ refer to two states of mind or one?). Second, the hoper, like the religious believer, acknowledges a dependence on a power beyond him. Hope features prominently in the Christian lexicon; it is of course one of the three theological virtues identified by St. Paul and Thomas Aquinas. In articulating for the first time the systematic philosophical significance of hope, Kant took himself to be at once spelling out the rational content of religion. Besides Bloch, the main writers on hope in the twentieth century have been the Christian existentialists Gabriel Marcel and Josef Pieper.¹⁰ Bloch himself was accused of crypto-Christianity on account of the philosophical significance he accorded to hope. The dialect philosopher Manfred Buhr denounced Bloch for embroiling Marxism with pseudo religious problems.¹¹ Max Scheler allegedly accused Bloch of “running amok with God”, a minor offence compared with the “fornication with God” of which Siegfried Kracauer found Bloch guilty.¹²

Now Bloch, like Kant, was certainly impressed by the capacity of religion to frame or give form to human hope. Kant and Bloch also shared the thought that the idea of hope was as fundamental to philosophy as it was to religion. But it was precisely for this reason that the *critique* of religion was so important to them. The centrality of the idea of hope to their thinking does not of itself make their thinking religious or theological, at least as those terms are usually understood. But both thinkers have found

the charge of regressive backdoor theism hard to shake off, so close is the association in our minds between religion and hope.

I began by asking why critical theorists rarely attend explicitly to the idea of hope. I've tentatively suggested some reasons: a low estimation of the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral value of hope, together with an unwillingness to be saddled with the disreputable baggage of religion. At the same time, however, no critical theorist would like to think of himself or herself as *without* social hope. Leaving career critical theorists to one side, what's the point of doing critical theory if there's no hope society can be better? Critical theory must give expression at some level to at least some residue of social hope for it to be more than an academic exercise. I now want to ask what strategies are available for justifying this hope.

2. The Grounds of Social Hope

We should first distinguish the question of grounding social hope from two related problems. First, there is the task of describing the kind of society one hopes for. It seems proper to undertake this task before turning to the justification of social hope, since in describing the object of the hope we are giving the hope content, and without knowing the content of the hope it is hard to see how we can go about justifying it. Clearly, we have to have some idea of the kind of society we hope for before we can assess the grounds of that hope. But for present purposes, which only concern strategies for grounding social hope, it will suffice to work with a minimal formulation of the content of the hope, one that just about all critical theorists could assent to. Let me propose, following Rorty, that the object of this hope is "a global, cosmopolitan, democratic,

egalitarian, classless, casteless society”.¹³ More minimally still, we can formulate it as a just and peaceful social order in which individuals are able to realise their capacity for autonomy. It is worth noting that such general, abstract formulations are hardly like to activate or arouse social hope, though this may be the effect of more richly articulated conceptions of utopia. In any case, the imaginative articulation of the content of social hope is clearly an important task for critical theory, though I won't say anything more about it here.

Second, the question of grounding social hope should be distinguished from the task of grounding social *criticism*. The grounds of social hope complement but do not necessarily coincide with the grounds of social criticism, and the task of reconstructing the latter should not be conflated with the task of elucidating the former. The rational basis of social criticism has of course been systematically examined by Habermas and a generation of critical theorists inspired by his work.¹⁴ But it is clear from the results of those investigations that they do not in themselves address the grounds of social hope. It makes sense to appeal to notions like the unforced force of the better argument, or unavoidable structures of linguistic interaction oriented to reaching understanding, or the performative contradiction involved in denying such structures, if the justifiability of basic communicative norms is at stake. It also makes sense to appeal to such norms for justifying the moral point of view. But it is far from clear what the reconstruction of the rationality potential of discourse – and so the justification of basic moral norms -- tells us about the kind of society we can hope for. There is of course a utopian dimension to Habermas's critical theory, but this is distinct from that aspect of it concerned with the rational basis of social criticism.

Assuming that the content of the critical theorist's social hope can be expressed minimally as a classless, casteless society, one in which individuals are able to realise their capacity for autonomy within a just and peaceful social order, is this a hope to which we are *entitled*? Is hope for such a society justified? Does it really matter if the hope is justified or not?

Let me now distinguish three broad strategies for dealing with these questions.

1. One strategy, deployed in a variety of ways in the tradition of critical social theory, is to ground social hope in *natural human capacities*. We are entitled to hope for a society radically better than the one we currently inhabit, this mode of argument runs, because human beings are by nature capable of creating such a society, and *would* create it if it were not for the existence of powerful countervailing forces that appear beyond their control. On account of these forces, natural human capacities for a social life fail to develop and human beings are unable to realise themselves through the exercise of those capacities. According to this approach – brilliantly summarized by Alasdair MacIntyre in his essay on Marxism and Christianity -- the hope upon which Marxism (and critical theory more generally) rests concerns the ability of human beings to transform themselves, as MacIntyre puts it, once 'certain barriers and frustrations are removed'.¹⁵ The persuasiveness of this strategy turns on its ability to identify precisely those barriers that prevent the development and exercise of the capacities in question: paradigmatically, of course, the domination of capital over labour that corrodes social bonds and foreshortens human expressive powers. But the strategy also requires, as MacIntyre

points out, some sort of ‘humanistic belief in the possibilities and resources of human nature’.¹⁶ That is to say, it rests on a conviction that human beings would organise themselves into something like a casteless, classless society given the chance. It is historically imposed impediments to the development of the relevant human capacities that frustrate our social hopes. We can legitimately hope for society to become better, according to this argumentative strategy, because of the natural but as yet unrealised human potential for social life organised by the principles of justice, peace and autonomous self-realisation.

This ‘humanist’ approach to grounding social hope has many attractions, but it is currently out of favour amongst many philosophers and political theorists. In part this is due to scepticism about the very idea of human nature. If one rejects the notion that there is something ontologically distinct about human beings, or if one denies the validity of the distinction between actuality and potentiality, one will see little point in resorting to human nature to ground social hope. Again, if it is the human capacity to put in question and move beyond what is given to us ‘by nature’ that impresses us most, we may wonder why we need a notion of ‘human nature’ to back up hopes of what human beings may become. Other theorists, when pressed on the issue, may not so much deny there is a human nature as reject the idea that social life without classes or castes is within its power. Some argue that it is precisely the social inhibition of human nature that enables us to avert dystopia, and that’s as much as we may hope for. Others maintain that social hope should be separated from all talk of human powers and capacities, as it is the very rapaciousness of human agency that underlies the worst social fears. According to this line of thought, not only is the classical humanist model an inappropriate basis of social

hope, it is actually responsible for the very phenomena the critical theorist hopes to overcome.

2. A second strategy, distinct from but related to the first, is to ground social hope by appealing to something like a *providential order*. The central feature of this strategy is the idea that history unfolds in a way that inherently tends towards the hoped for aim. The source of this tendency may be human nature, but it may equally be God's will or some 'invisible hand' mechanism that operates behind the back of rational agents. The crucial point is to interpret the passage that history would have to undergo in order to realise radical social hopes as the culmination of a process that is already underway. It is the historical process as a *totality* that justifies social hope. The strategy thus involves the construction of narratives that connect present society with future utopia in a way that at once makes intelligible the relation between present society and its past. Radical social hope, justified in this way, could be called historical hope. It is hope grounded in a conception of history as having a course and being on course. As a strategy of justification, it relies on the availability of convincing narratives that reveal the underlying direction of the historical process as a whole.

It has become a cliché to say there is 'incredulity' towards such 'grand narratives' or 'metanarratives' amongst philosophers and critical theorists.¹⁷ Postmodernists typically criticize narratives of progress on account of their supposed 'linearity', a feature that allegedly makes them hopelessly naïve from an epistemological point of view. Whatever the merits of that particular objection, there is no doubt that it reflects deep and widespread disenchantment with the providentialist strategy for justifying radical social

hope. And it is just as certain that this disenchantment is fed as much by political developments as by epistemological reflection. As Jonathan Rée has suggested, the ‘crisis of narratives’ of which postmodernists speak has its roots in the failure of a certain kind of politics and a reevaluation of what politics in general can achieve.¹⁸ Rée points out that belief in the inherent progressiveness of the historical process provides a powerful motivation for militant political activism. The militant could be reassured that despite the high personal costs of political action, long-term success was secured by the progressive movement of History. The thought that history has a definite, knowable, controllable and progressive shape is certainly an effective motivator of action, capable of overriding doubts that might otherwise debilitate the militant political agent. Where such a model of politics seems desirable and appropriate, epistemological and historical optimism is the order of the day. It is incredulity towards this *fusion* of political activity and historical hope – as manifest in Marxism as well as other ‘modernist’ political movements - which Rée suggests is characteristic of our ‘postmodern’, ‘post-socialist’ times. And rightly so, he argues, because what progress there has been owes little to this fusion of political action and historical hope (if it owes much to intentional action at all), and because action motivated by historical hope -- while admirable – has, overall, been disastrously counter-productive. Realization of this has ‘fractured’ the ‘whole structure of modern political hope’, leaving the epistemological and historical pessimists to pick up the pieces and ‘mourn the end of a deluded hope’.¹⁹

On this account, then, its not so much incredulity towards metanarratives, disbelief in linear stories of progress, or skepticism about universal history that define the postmodern, post-socialist condition, as disillusionment with the political projects that

take orientation from such notions. This is an important point. It is less clear, however, why the development sketched here amounts to a fracturing of social *hope* as such. The motivational structure that seems so dubious from the ‘postmodern’ or ‘post-socialist’ point of view involves the presence of an infeasible, cast-iron certainty that the laws of history – the existence of which the epistemologically and historically optimistic activist has no doubt -- are on the activist’s side. But such a psychic structure hardly deserves to be called hope. The hoper, like the militant activist, can have a desire for the ideal, and a belief that the future realization of the ideal is really possible. But the hoper is precisely not sure that the ideal will come to pass. It is part of the structure of hope not to see the future as under one’s control. If it were not for the belief that the future is open, that it contains more than one possibility, there could be no hope. The hoper sees the future unfolding in multiple possible directions, *one* of which will satisfy the hoper’s desire. But the militant activist powered by historical hope, in the sense Rée rightly describes as problematic for postmodern and post-socialist sensibilities, conceives the future as already set on its pre-determined course, as bound to unfold in a way that, in the long run, will realize the political ideals.

If historical hope is to have any meaning it has to be divorced from the historicist belief that history is on an unalterable, if zigzag course to human perfection. One doesn’t hope for something one knows will happen anyway. To be hopeful is to have a more modest, and we are all inclined now to say more realistic, relation to a desired future than historicism allows. Hope is attuned to the ineradicable contingency of human affairs. As such, it is a disposition that seems well-suited to the epistemological pessimism that Rée advocates. And it points to a third strategy for dealing with the grounds of social hope,

one that deflates the significance of justification and emphasizes instead the interconnections between hope, skepticism, contingency, anti-historicism and socialist ideals.

Before moving to this third strategy, let me quickly observe that scepticism about historicism, or ‘philosophy of history’ that relies on the notion of a self-realising universal subject, is by no means limited to postmodernism: it features in several strands of critique developed within the Frankfurt School, and is a defining characteristic of the paradigm shift Habermas urges for critical theory.²⁰ Habermas’s proposals for a differentiated model of historical change, observing a strict division between the logics and dynamics of development and between system and lifeworld rationalisation, are aimed at undermining the ‘teleological’ conception of history as pre-destined for utopia. And more generally, the providentialist strategy for justifying social hope on the basis of the direction of history as a whole is uncongenial to many political theorists who see it as tending to privilege the ‘story of the victor’, or the historical self-understanding of culturally (but also politically and militarily) dominant groups.

3. Ungroundable Hope

Providentialism and reliance on a conception of natural human capacities probably represent the two dominant strategies for grounding radical social hope within critical theory. Their decline, however, has led some theorists to reassess the whole philosophical significance of social hope. The third strategy for thinking about social hope I briefly want to look at takes its departure from the failure of traditional attempts to provide a philosophical foundation for social hope; not with a view to *correcting* the means of

justification, but with the idea of dropping the project of justification altogether. In other words, this third strategy denies that social hope can be grounded by appeal to human nature, the end of history, providence, or anything else. But this lack of justification should not be a source of concern: it is only what an epistemological and historical pessimist would expect. Far from blocking off hope, scepticism about its rational ‘groundability’ and attentiveness to the contingency of its fulfilment are just what we need to have hope, and it is what we need to have a proper understanding of the relation of social hope to philosophy and critical theory.

Richard Rorty is the most eloquent and influential advocate of what we could call this ‘deflationist’ strategy for thinking about social hope. One of the central ideas of his work is that a pragmatist philosophical vocabulary – one that emphasizes human finitude, sociality, contingency, and so forth – is better suited for thinking about the ‘liberal’ utopia of a classless, casteless society than one that has recourse to so-called ‘Platonist’ notions of human nature, the inherent progressiveness of history, etc.²¹ He invites us to acknowledge and embrace the contingency of liberal / socialist ideals, so as to see them *as* hopes rather than as written into the nature of things. For ‘hope’, Rorty says, ‘doesn’t require justification, cognitive status, foundations, or anything else’.²² The great merit of pragmatism, according to Rorty, is that it ‘allows room for unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity’.²³

Even though we usually think of a pessimist as someone who expects the worst, and so as someone who lacks hope, Rorty’s unjustifiable hope fits the profile of the epistemological and historical pessimist well. The person with unjustifiable hope is not under the illusion that things must turn out for the best, that history is unfolding

according to some secret principle of the best, or that the best is written into the nature of things. This kind of hope is not supported by dubious notions of a providential order or a perfectible human nature. Nor is such hope diminished by the realisation that history is not on the hoper's side (it is not, from a pragmatist perspective, on anyone's side). The person who grasps the philosophical ungroundability of social hope is also less prone to disappointment than the person who bases the hope on human nature or the inherent progressiveness of history. Rorty's notion of ungroundable hope is meant to bring out the practical *irrelevance* of rational justification for social hope. Talk of grounding social hope in human nature or a providential order is at best a diversion that, in Rorty's view, barely touches on the more important tasks of proposing concrete social ameliorations and imagining new liberal utopias.

Rorty is not so much of a pessimist that he denies there are grounds for social hope, though this is an impression his effort at making room for ungroundable hope can give. His point is rather to free up the utopian imagination while advocating meliorism over what he considers to be the misguided metaphysical notion of utopia as transfigured humanity. This is why he calls his version of pragmatism 'romantic utilitarianism'.²⁴ In Rorty, the romantic (or existentialist) idea that radical social hope is in some sense hope in spite of probability, a kind of defiant resistance to what we have rational grounds to expect, only occasionally finds expression, being for the most part secondary to utilitarian, meliorist, liberal concerns. Other writers, however, have been less cautious in formulating their conceptions of ungroundable hope. John D. Caputo, for instance, taking his lead from Derrida and St. Paul, has suggested that hope is 'really hope only when things begin to look hopeless and it is mad to hope.'²⁵ His paradoxical formulation that

‘hope is hope only when one hopes against hope’ is meant to capture the radical absence of grounds that, in Caputo’s view, gets to the essence of hope.²⁶ According to this (deconstructionist) line of thought, ungroundable hope has a purity *qua* hope which is alien to hope based on likelihoods, demonstrable potentialities or historical evidence. Deconstructionist thinking about social hope shares Rorty’s pessimism about the possibility of philosophical grounding, but it departs from pragmatism in taking the *impossibility itself* as revelatory of the meaning of such hope. The deconstructionist ‘strategy’ in regard to social hope is thus to affirm its ungroundability in a form which intensifies our sense of ‘the ungroundable’ or ‘the impossible’. By making manifest the paradoxes and aporia attendant upon radical social hope, it seeks not to ground it but to elucidate its meaning as transcending conceptuality and possibility. Messianic hope for ‘the impossible’ has thus assumed a prominent place in deconstructionist discourse on social hope.²⁷

One can grant a place for ungroundable hope without going so far as to say that only hope without reason is ‘really’ hope or that considerations of probability exclude or count against hope.²⁸ As should already be apparent, the notion that social hope is ‘ungroundable’ can mean several things with different implications for the tasks of critique.²⁹ First, there is a sense in which all hope is ungroundable insofar as it involves an act or a *stance* which is ultimately a matter of decision. However justifiable (in terms of probability) the object of hope may be, the subject may resolve to be hopeful or to maintain an attitude of hope if that is what seems appropriate. Perhaps critical theorists have a responsibility to sustain an attitude of social hope whatever justification they are able to muster for the object of hope. Talk of ungroundable hope can then serve as a

reminder that what matters about social hope is a certain attitude to the present as open to the future. To the extent that simply keeping this openness in view has become an issue for us, it at least makes sense to consider the justification of specific future scenarios as of secondary significance.

We can arrive at a sense of ungroundable hope by abstracting the subjective aspect of hope (the willing, desiring, and deciding aspect which is not amenable to rational grounding) from the objective aspect (the probability or rational desirability of the hoped-for thing). But such abstraction would not be required if there were a mode of hope which did not have an objective aspect at all. That is to say, if there were a kind of hope which did not aim at any state of affairs in particular, it clearly would not be justifiable in terms of reasons for believing the state of affairs would (or ought to) obtain. Being without an object, such hope would *a fortiori* be without a justifiable object. Now the philosophical and theological literature on hope does contain repeated references to ‘ungroundable hope’ in this sense. Marcel, for instance, distinguishes ‘hope that...’ which aims at particular objects and an objectless, unconditional hope which expresses an existential orientation of the subject over and above its particular engagements.³⁰ The latter, which Marcel designates ‘absolute hope’, is said to transcend ‘every kind of representation whatever it might be’.³¹ Pieper articulates a similar thought when he distinguishes mundane hopes from a ‘fundamental hope’ aimed at something ‘nameless’ rather than representable, conceivable, or imaginable goals.³² This fundamental hope, Pieper writes, is possessed by someone who ‘holds himself in readiness for a fulfillment which goes beyond every imaginable human postulate’.³³ The expression ‘fundamental hope’ is also a key term in Godfrey’s account of hope. Drawing on the work of Marcel

and others, Godfrey persuasively argues for a distinction between hope as an untargeted openness to the future and a refusal to despair (fundamental hope) and ‘ultimate hopes’ that have various degrees of soundness or justification.³⁴

What is the relationship between ungroundable hope as fundamental hope and social hope? The connection is not obvious since social hope as we have defined it does have an object (classless, casteless society) whereas fundamental hope does not. Nor is it clear how the idea of fundamental ungroundable hope connects with critique. Such hope is distinct from ultimate social hope, or hope for utopia, which is how hope typically features as a theme in critical theory. But there may be indirect ways in which ungroundable hope as fundamental hope is relevant for the project of critique. I have already alluded to the importance of keeping alive the very idea of social possibility, of society seen from the standpoint of its openness to the future. In addition, the notion of fundamental hope is suggestive of a philosophical anthropology according to which hope is a basic human capacity for positive self-relations over time. If, as Axel Honneth has shown, positive self-relations and a capacity for autonomy emerge through structures of mutual recognition, perhaps the ability to relate to the future as a horizon of possibility through hope is also a formal requirement of the good life. Perhaps objectless hope has an ontological significance analogous to that claimed of objectless fear (*angst*). These are matters for further enquiry. It is unfortunate that till now the existential and anthropological significance of hope has only been considered at the margins of critical theory.³⁵

The emergence of a discourse of ungroundable social hope, and the greater comfort many theorists seem to have dealing with this notion than with positive justificatory strategies, no doubt reflects a reduction in the sum of social hope circulating amongst theorists (and elsewhere).³⁶ But it would be a mistake to discount such discourse as empty, merely subjective, or ideological. It gives expression to traces of social hope that might otherwise disappear. It would be an even bigger mistake, however, to abandon the project of positively grounding social hope, as if that project were irremediably corrupted by essentialism, foundationalism, providentialism or whatever. The task of grounding social hope that previous generations of critical theorists tackled remains with us today: namely, to understand the possibilities for progress inherent the present and to identify the barriers that frustrate humane social life.³⁷

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¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith, London, Macmillan, 1933, A805/B833.

² See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

³ See Eric Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: towards a humanized technology*, New York, Harper and Row, 1968.

⁴ See Ronald Aronson, *Dialectics of Disaster: A Preface to Hope*, London, Verso, 1983 and by the same author "Hope after Hope," *Social Research*, Vol. 66, No. 2, Summer 1999, 471-94; John Patrick Day, *Hope. A Philosophical Inquiry*, Acta Philosophica Fennica, Vol. 51, Helsinki, 1991; Joseph J. Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhof, 1987.

⁵ The situation may be changing. Ghassan Hage has outlined a sketch for a critique of the present organised around the idea of hope that is powerful and provocative in the current Australian context. See Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism. Searching for hope in a shrinking society*, Annandale, Pluto (London, Merlin Press), 2003. There also seems to be a renewed interest amongst sociologists and political theorists in the utopian dimension of critical theory, as the articles by Craig Browne and Pauline Johnson in this volume reflect.

⁶ The association of hope with women, weakness and an anodyne finds its archetype in the Pandora tale. For discussion see Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope* and Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol.1.

⁷ “Hope is the worst of all evils, for it protracts the torment of man”, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human all too Human*, vol. 1, trans. R.J. Holland, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986 (1878), p. 45.

⁸ For further discussion (drawing on Bloch’s influential views on this matter) see Ruth Levitas, “Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on abstract and concrete utopia’ in Jamie Own Daniel and Tom Moylan eds, *Not Yet. Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, London, Verso, 1997, pp. 65-79.

⁹ See Day, *Hope*, p. 36.

¹⁰ See eg. Joseph Pieper, *Hope and History*, trans. Richard and Lara Winston, London, Herder and Herder, 1969 ; Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator. Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Crawford, London, Victor Gollancz, 1951.

¹¹ See Manfred Buhr, ‘A Critique of Ernst Bloch’s Philosophy of Hope’, *Philosophy Today*, vol. 14, Winter 1970, 259-71 (a translation of ‘Der religiöse Ursprung Charakter der Hoffnungsphilosophie Ernst Bloch’, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 4, 1958, 576-98. In a concluding endnote, Buhr writes: “What remains to be done in reference to Bloch is to prove that the philosophy of hope is a manifestation of religious thought forms... and to point out the affinities and common points between philosophy of hope and similar currents in contemporary late bourgeois philosophy,” n. 49, p. 271.

¹² See Rolf Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School*, trans. Michael Robertson, Cambridge, Polity, p.65, 69.

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1999, p. xii.

¹⁴ See eg. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* 2 vols, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge, Polity, 1984, 1987; Kenneth Baynes, *The Normative Basis of*

Social Criticism: Kant, Rawls, Habermas, Albany, SUNY Press, 1991; Maeve Cooke, *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas's Pragmatics*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1994; William Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, Shane O'Neill, *Impartiality in Context*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1997.

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, second edition, London, Duckworth, 1995 p. 89.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁷ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

¹⁸ See Jonathan Rée, 'Marxism and Hope', in Faleh A. Jabar ed., *Post-Marxism and the Middle East*, London, Saqi Books, 1997, pp. 203-11.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 211.

²⁰ See eg. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Polity, 1987.

²¹ See eg. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

²² R. Rorty, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies*, Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press, 1998, p. 58.

²³ R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 208.

²⁴ See Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism', in M. Dickstein ed., *The Revival of Pragmatism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1998, pp. 21-36. For further analysis of

Rorty's 'romantic utilitarianism' and its approach to social hope see Nicholas H. Smith, 'Rorty on Religion and Hope', *Inquiry*, vol. 48, no. 1, February 2005, 76-98.

²⁵ See John D. Caputo, 'The experience of God and the axiology of the impossible', in M. Wrathall ed., *Religion after Metaphysics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 123-45, 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁷ See eg. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997.

²⁸ 'If we follow probability there is no hope', Isabelle Strengers, interview with Mary Zournazi, in M. Zournazi ed., *Hope – new philosophies for social change*, Annandale, Pluto Press, 2002, p. 245, cited by Craig Browne in his contribution to this volume of *Critical Horizons*.

²⁹ I have examined the sense Rorty gives to the idea of unjustifiable hope in 'Rorty on Religion and Hope'.

³⁰ See Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p. 32f.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46

³² J. Pieper, *Hope and History*, p. 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁴ See Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, esp. pp.133-154.

³⁵ Eg, by Hinrich Fink-Eitel in 'Das rote Fenster. Fragen nach dem Prinzip der Philosophie von Ernst Bloch', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, Vol. 95, no. 2, 1988. I thank Axel Honneth for alerting me to this piece.

³⁶ As Rorty himself has remarked, ‘philosophy is responsive to changes in amount of political hope’, and the preoccupation amongst contemporary political philosophers with notions of ‘the impossible’ reflects a lack of social hope, and ‘an inability to construct a plausible narrative of progress’. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 229, 232.

³⁷ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2004 Philosophy and Human Sciences Colloquium in Prague and the 2004 Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy at Macquarie University. I thank everyone who discussed the paper with me on these occasions for their helpful comments.