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## THE POLITICS OF UTOPIA

UTOPIA WOULD SEEM to offer the spectacle of one of those rare phenomena whose concept is indistinguishable from its reality, whose ontology coincides with its representation. Does this peculiar entity still have a social function? If it no longer does so, then perhaps the explanation lies in that extraordinary historical dissociation into two distinct worlds which characterizes globalization today. In one of these worlds, the disintegration of the social is so absolute—misery, poverty, unemployment, starvation, squalor, violence and death—that the intricately elaborated social schemes of utopian thinkers become as frivolous as they are irrelevant. In the other, unparalleled wealth, computerized production, scientific and medical discoveries unimaginable a century ago as well as an endless variety of commercial and cultural pleasures, seem to have rendered utopian fantasy and speculation as boring and antiquated as pre-technological narratives of space flight.

The term alone survives this wholesale obsolescence, as a symbolic token over which essentially political struggles still help us to differentiate left and right. Thus 'utopian' has come to be a code word on the left for socialism or communism; while on the right it has become synonymous with 'totalitarianism' or, in effect, with Stalinism. The two uses do seem somehow to overlap, and imply that a politics which wishes to change the system radically will be designated as utopian—with the right-wing undertone that the system (now grasped as the free market) is part of human nature; that any attempt to change it will be accompanied by violence; and that efforts to maintain the changes (against human nature) will require dictatorship. So two practical-political issues are at play here: a left critique of social-democratic reformism, within the system; and on the other hand a free-market fundamentalism. But why not simply discuss those issues directly and openly, without recourse to this, seemingly

literary, third issue of utopia? Indeed, one could turn the question around and say that we are perfectly free to discuss utopia as a historical and textual or generic issue, but not to complicate it with politics. (In any case, has the word not always been used by some of the most eminent political figures on all sides as an insulting slur on their enemies?)

Yet the waning of the utopian idea is a fundamental historical and political symptom, which deserves diagnosis in its own right—if not some new and more effective therapy. For one thing, that weakening of the sense of history and of the imagination of historical difference which characterizes postmodernity is, paradoxically, intertwined with the loss of that place beyond all history (or after its end) which we call utopia. For another, it is difficult enough to imagine any radical political programme today without the conception of systemic otherness, of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive, however feebly. This clearly does not mean that, even if we succeed in reviving utopia itself, the outlines of a new and effective practical politics for the era of globalization will at once become visible; but only that we will never come to one without it.

### *Banishing evil*

Let us begin again, then, with the textual utopias themselves. Here we encounter two alternate possibilities of analysis, which can be designated respectively as the causal and the institutional, or perhaps even the diachronic and the synchronic. The first of these has to do with the utopian world as such; or better and more precisely, with the way in which this or that 'root of all evil' has been eliminated from that world. In Thomas More, for example, what every reader famously takes away—as from Plato, too—is the abolition of private property. This allegedly makes both More and Plato precursors of communism. But a closer look, and an inquiry into the theory of human nature that underpins both these assaults on the institution of private property, discloses a rather different position: that the root of all evil is to be found in gold or money, and that it is greed (as a psychological evil) which needs to be somehow repressed by properly utopian laws and arrangements in order to arrive at some better and more humane form of life. The question of hierarchy and egalitarianism is, on this interpretation, primed in More by the more fundamental question of money. This kind of utopianism has had a long and illustrious descendency, to Proudhon and Henry

George and on down to Major Douglas and the famous stamp-script dear to Ezra Pound; but such names already suggest that it may not be altogether correct to read the denunciation of money as the direct ancestor of communism.

More was concerned to eliminate individual property relations; Marx's critique of property was designed to eliminate the legal and individual possession of the collective means of production; and the elimination of that kind of private property was meant to lead to a situation in which classes as such disappeared, and not merely social hierarchies and individual injustices. I would want to go further than this and assert that what is crucial in Marx is that his perspective does not include a concept of human nature; it is not essentialist or psychological; it does not posit fundamental drives, passions or sins like acquisitiveness, the lust for power, greed or pride. Marx's is a structural diagnosis, and is perfectly consistent with contemporary existential, constructivist or anti-foundationalist and postmodern convictions which rule out presuppositions as to some pre-existing human nature or essence. If there have been not just one human nature but a whole series of them, this is because so-called human nature is historical: every society constructs its own. And, to paraphrase Brecht, since human nature is historical rather than natural, produced by human beings rather than innately inscribed in the genes or DNA, it follows that human beings can change it; that it is not a doom or destiny but rather the result of human praxis.

Marx's anti-humanism, then (to use another term for this position), or his structuralism, or even his constructivism, spells a great advance over More. But once we grasp utopianism in this way, we see that there are a variety of different ways to reinvent utopia—at least in this first sense of the elimination of this or that 'root of all evil', taken now as a structural rather than a psychological matter. These various possibilities can also be measured in practical-political ways. For example, if I ask myself what would today be the most radical demand to make on our own system—that demand which could not be fulfilled or satisfied without transforming the system beyond recognition, and which would at once usher in a society structurally distinct from this one in every conceivable way, from the psychological to the sociological, from the cultural to the political—it would be the demand for full employment, universal full employment around the globe. As the economic apologists for the system today have tirelessly instructed us, capitalism cannot flourish

under full employment; it requires a reserve army of the unemployed in order to function and to avoid inflation. That first monkey-wrench of full employment would then be compounded by the universality of the requirement, inasmuch as capitalism also requires a frontier, and perpetual expansion, in order to sustain its inner dynamic. But at this point the utopianism of the demand becomes circular, for it is also clear, not only that the establishment of full employment would transform the system, but also that the system would have to be already transformed, in advance, in order for full employment to be established. I would not call this a vicious circle, exactly; but it certainly reveals the space of the utopian leap, the gap between our empirical present and the utopian arrangements of this imaginary future.

Yet such a future, imaginary or not, also returns upon our present to play a diagnostic and a critical-substantive role. To foreground full employment in this way, as the fundamental utopian requirement, allows us, indeed, to return to concrete circumstances and situations, to read their dark spots and pathological dimensions as so many symptoms and effects of this particular root of all evil identified as unemployment. Crime, war, degraded mass culture, drugs, violence, boredom, the lust for power, the lust for distraction, the lust for nirvana, sexism, racism—all can be diagnosed as so many results of a society unable to accommodate the productiveness of all its citizens. At this point, then, utopian circularity becomes both a political vision and programme, and a critical and diagnostic instrument.

I have developed this suggestion—which is, to be sure, already present in More,<sup>1</sup> and in which I also believe; although we have yet to decide what the term ‘belief’ might mean when we are talking about utopias—in order to distinguish it from that second and rather different conception of utopia to which I now turn; returning in the process (as one apparently always must) to Thomas More. Suppose it were said that what is

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that in More, Christianity and the monastic tradition inflect the concept of work towards duty rather than, as here, towards activity and productivity. In *Utopia*, indeed, the overt Epicureanism of the humanist text (‘all our actions, and even the very virtues exercised in them, look at last to pleasure as their end and happiness’) seems to spring more from aversion to Christian asceticism (which More however *also* practised) than from any very positive pleasure-loving source. See Thomas More, *Complete Works*, New Haven 1965, volume IV, p. 167.

truly utopian about More's text has nothing to do with his thoughts about money and human nature, but everything to do with his account of utopian arrangements and daily life: how the thing works politically—the division of the island into fifty-four cities, the organization into groups of thirty households each, the syphogrants, the phylarchs, the senate, the transibors, the elected prince, the functioning of the households (and their dining arrangements), marriage, slaves, farming duties, laws and the like. If this is our focus and our interest, then I believe we must first and foremost observe that it involves an utter transformation of the previous perspective on utopia. I venture to suggest that our attention in the first or 'root of all evil' version of utopia was an essentially existential one: we as individuals entertain a relationship with money and greed, with property, and we are thereby led to wonder what life would be like without these things. This perspective is, I think, retained even in my own example: for we are most of us employed, but familiar with the fear of unemployment and the lack of income, and not unacquainted with the psychic misery involved in chronic unemployment, the demoralization, the morbid effects of boredom, the waste of vital energies and the absence of productivity—even if we tend to grasp these things in bourgeois and introspective ways.

### *Anonymous bliss*

But when we turn to the utopian political schemes and arrangements I have mentioned, the perspective is utterly anonymous. The citizens of utopia are grasped as a statistical population; there are no individuals any longer, let alone any existential 'lived experience'. If More tells us that the utopians are 'easy-going, good-tempered, ingenious, and leisure-loving', or that, following Aristotle, 'they cling above all to mental pleasures, which they value as the first and foremost of all pleasures', this simply enhances the statistical impression rather than individualizing it.<sup>2</sup> The whole description is cast in the mode of a kind of anthropological otherness, which never tempts us for one minute to try to imagine ourselves in their place, to project the utopian individual with concrete existential density, even though we already know the details of his or her daily life (nowadays the notion of the everyday having more or less superseded that of private life). It may be objected that when we get to utopias of the type of William Morris (*News from Nowhere*) this depersonalization will

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<sup>2</sup> More, *Complete Works*, vol. iv, pp. 179, 175.

no longer obtain; but perhaps his formulaic characters are, as Victorians, merely a little closer to us in time.<sup>3</sup> Still, it is an important objection, since I want to argue that this effect of anonymity and of depersonalization is a very fundamental part of what utopia is and how it functions. The boredom or dryness that has been attributed to the utopian text, beginning with More, is thus not a literary drawback nor a serious objection, but a very central strength of the utopian process in general. It reinforces what is sometimes called today democratization or egalitarianism, but that I prefer to call plebeianization: our desubjectification in the utopian political process, the loss of psychic privileges and spiritual private property, the reduction of all of us to that psychic gap or lack in which we all as subjects consist, but that we all expend a good deal of energy on trying to conceal from ourselves.

Let's now return to the distinction I have been making between the two utopian perspectives, that of the root of all evil and that of the political and social arrangements. We should probably see each of them in two distinct ways: as wish-fulfilment and as construction. Both of these approaches clearly involve pleasure: almost by definition the wish-fulfilment has something to do with pleasure, even though it may involve a long detour and a multiple mediation through substitutes. Thus Ernst Bloch taught us long ago that advertising for patent medicines drew on the stubborn core of a longing for eternal life and the body transfigured. Such wishes are even more obvious when we come to the various utopias where old peasant dreams of a land of plenty, of roasted chickens flying into the mouth, as well as more learned fantasies about paradise and the earthly garden, linger close to the surface.

But the pleasures of construction may not be so evident: you have to think of them in terms of the garage workshop, of the home-mechanics erector sets, of Lego, of bricolating and cobbling together things of all kinds. To which we must also add the special pleasures of miniaturization: replicating the great things in handicraft dimensions that you can put together by yourself and test, as with home chemical sets, or change and rebuild in a never-ending variation fed by new ideas and information. Model railroads of the mind, these utopian constructions convey

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<sup>3</sup> I suspect, however, that depersonalization in such modern utopias is secured by mortality and the meaningless biological succession of the generations in a society which no longer knows either the meaning of History or the metaphysics of religion.

the spirit of non-alienated labour and of production far better than any concepts of *écriture* or *Spiel*.

### *Genres of political will*

Yet each of these perspectives—construction fully as much as wish-fulfilment—knows constraints. Wishes cannot always be successfully fantasized: such is the operation of the constraints of narrative as well as of the Real. Constructions cannot always be built: such are the constraints of raw materials and the historical situation, which stand as the statics and dynamics, the elementary laws of gravity and locomotion, of the building of imaginary collectives. And some of these structural constraints can be identified by way of a comparison with related genres or types of discourse.

I count four of those with which utopia seems closely related: the manifesto; the constitution; the ‘mirror for princes’; and great prophecy, which includes within itself that mode called satire, the denunciation of the fallen and sinful world—which Robert C. Elliott saw as the modal opposite number of the utopian text, and which is inscribed in Book One of More’s *Utopia* itself.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, two of the other genres leave specific traces there as well. Book One relates the conversation of the traveller Hythloday with More and his friends, a conversation that will eventuate in Hythloday’s description of Utopia itself in Book Two (written, however, earlier than Book One). For Book One offers a savage satire on the evils of the age, one that verges on prophecy.<sup>5</sup> It rules out the mirror for princes, insofar as Hythloday refuses the opportunities of the court and the possibility of being an advisor to the monarch; it fails to identify any fundamental agency for radical change, and thus falls generically short of

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<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia*, Chicago 1970; see also *The Power of Satire*, Princeton 1960. It is, however, important to distinguish between the anti-utopia (the expression of the fiercely anti-utopian and anti-revolutionary ideology for which utopias inevitably lead to repression and dictatorship, to conformity and boredom) and the dystopia (termed ‘critical dystopia’ by Tom Moylan in his useful *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Boulder, CO 2000), which is necessarily a critique of tendencies at work in capitalism today. Perhaps we need to add the ‘revolt against utopia’ to this generic system.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Your sheep . . . which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, begin now, according to report, to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses, and towns’: More, *Complete Works*, vol. iv, p. 67.

Althusser's prescription for the manifesto (which included Machiavelli's *Prince*, a text written almost at the same time as More's *Utopia*).<sup>6</sup> And as for the writing of constitutions—a pastime which reached its zenith in the revolutionary eighteenth century, but which is apparently still practised today (by Giscard d'Estaing, for example)—the institutions of Book Two faintly echo such practices, but with what seems to me a basic difference. If individual laws are composed to rule out or prevent certain specific actions, performatively identified as crimes, I would hazard the proposition that constitutions are also composed in order to prevent certain events from happening; but that those events are collective rather than individual. Indeed, it is enough to cast a glance at the most successful of all constitutions, namely that of the us, to understand what kinds of collective events it is designed to prevent. Constitutions come into being in order to forestall revolutions as such, and to prevent disorder and radical social change. It was clearly a generic category mistake for Jefferson to try to incorporate the right to rebel into this kind of document; but as utopia is already beyond history, the qualifications and provisions that the genre of constitution-framing takes to prevent it are superfluous. It is only in the present age that narratives have emerged in which characters stage a revolution against utopia itself—and in which this process is felt to be more satisfying than the founding of utopia in the first place.

There is no space here to explore the properly literary analyses—discursive, structural or semiotic—of these diverse genres and modes, or to report more concretely on what they tell us about the one in question: the utopian text. What can be said is that such analysis helps to determine the particular relationship to the political as such, entertained not only by utopia as a text but by utopian thinking and impulses generally. It is a peculiar and a paradoxical relationship, as I have already hinted; utopia is either too political or not political enough. Both reproaches are common and current—and recall the ominous moment in Hythloday's chronicle in which he tells us that political discussions outside the Senate are punishable by death, something fortunately not so common in our world.<sup>7</sup> But the reasons are clear enough: in utopia, politics is supposed to be over, along with History. Factionalism, parties, subgroups, special interests, must be excluded in the name of the General Will. For the one

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, London 1999.

<sup>7</sup> More, *Complete Works*, vol. iv, p. 125.

thing that cannot be challenged or changed is the system itself: and this is in fact the fundamental presupposition of all systems, of democracy fully as much as of communism. You cannot abolish parliamentary representation in a parliamentary system; you cannot decide to go back to free enterprise in a communist one; cooperatives cannot flourish within a capitalist market system; nepotism, inheritance and *nomenklatura* cannot be tolerated within a society committed to equality. A social system, in order to continue to function, must include its own built-in immunities: how much the more so, in the case of the system to end all systems? Yet this exclusion of politics is not at all incompatible with the 'permanent revolutions' of another kind of politics: the eternal squabbling and bickering, the never-ending debates and discussions, that fill up Kim Stanley Robinson's town council sessions<sup>8</sup> or Ernest Callenbach's Survivalist Party meetings; the interminable airing of differences that inspired Raymond Williams to observe that socialism would be much more complicated than capitalism, and caused Oscar Wilde to complain that the former 'took too many evenings'. Though when we come to the dialectics of utopia, we will see that these very differences, which seem to oppose More to Callenbach and to *Ecotopia's* 'enormous army of lawyers', can also be read in a rather different light.<sup>9</sup>

### *Mental play*

How should we then formulate the position of utopia with respect to the political? I would like to suggest the following: that utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political; I am almost tempted to say of its excision, or better still, borrowing Lacanian jargon to convey its strange externality from the social field, its extimacy; or even, to borrow the figure that Derrida derives from the Abraham-Torok analysis of Freud's Wolf-Man, its 'encryptment'.<sup>10</sup> But are figures really the right way of conveying this peculiar autonomy of the political, sealed and forgotten

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<sup>8</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Pacific Edge*, New York 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*, Berkeley 1973, p. 110. Or compare Edmund Burke on the social background of the revolutionaries: 'The general composition was of obscure provincial advocates, of stewards of petty local jurisdictions, country attorneys, notaries, the fomenters and conductors of the petty war of village vexation. From the moment I read the list, I saw distinctly, and very nearly as it has happened, all that was to follow': *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

<sup>10</sup> Thus, it seems possible to ground Stephen Greenblatt's well-known account of Thomas More's sense of irreality in just such an isolation or 'encryptment' of the political. See *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, London 1980.

like a cyst within the social as such? Perhaps it will be easier to start by saying: politics is always with us, and it is always historical, always in the process of changing, of evolving, of disintegrating and deteriorating. I want to convey a situation in which political institutions seem both unchangeable and infinitely modifiable: no agency has appeared on the horizon that offers the slightest chance or hope of modifying the status quo, and yet in the mind—and perhaps for that very reason—all kinds of institutional variations and re-combinations seem thinkable.

What I am calling political institutions are thus the object and the raw material of a ceaseless mental play, like those home-mechanics construction sets I spoke of; and yet there is not the slightest prospect of reform, let alone revolution, in real life. And when I suggested that this reality paralysis might, in fact, be the precondition of the new, purely intellectual and constructivist freedom, the paradox might be explained this way: that as one approaches periods of genuine pre-revolutionary ferment, when the system really seems in the process of losing its legitimacy, when the ruling elite is palpably uncertain of itself and full of divisions and self-doubts, when popular demands grow louder and more confident, then what also happens is that those grievances and demands grow more precise in their insistence and urgency. We focus more sharply on very specific wrongs, the dysfunctioning of the system becomes far more tangibly visible at crucial points. But at such a moment the utopian imagination no longer has free play: political thinking and intelligence are trained on very sharply focused issues, they have concrete content, the situation claims us in all its historical uniqueness as a configuration; and the wide-ranging drifts and digressions of political speculation give way to practical programmes (even if the latter are hopelessly unrealizable and ‘utopian’ in the other, dismissive sense).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Perry Anderson reminds me that in fact some of the most extreme utopianisms emerge from the very centre of the revolutionary upheaval itself: yet Winstanley's vision (in the English revolution) may be said to form the ideological guidelines of what is today called an ‘intentional community’; while Sade's ‘*Français, encore un effort*’ (*La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, 1795) could more accurately be described as a counter-cultural thought experiment; and Babeuf's was a political programme as such. We might also want to reflect on the differences between utopias which, emerging within a so-called bourgeois revolution, implicitly denounce the latter's inevitable limits; and those which prolong socialist revolutions in what they believe to be the latter's own direction and spirit (Chayanov; Platonov's *Chevengur*; even Yefremov's *Andromeda*).

Is this to say any more than that, when it comes to politics, utopianism is utterly impractical in the first place? But we can also frame the conditions of possibility for such impractical speculation in a positive way. After all, most of human history has unfolded in situations of general impotence and powerlessness, when this or that system of state power is firmly in place, and no revolts seem even conceivable, let alone possible or imminent. Those stretches of human history are for the most part passed in utterly non-utopian conditions, in which none of the images of the future or of radical difference peculiar to utopias ever reach the surface.

### *Periodizing imagination*

We need, then, to posit a peculiar suspension of the political in order to describe the utopian moment: it is this suspension, this separation of the political—in all its unchangeable immobility—from daily life and even from the world of the lived and the existential, this externality that serves as the calm before the storm, the stillness at the centre of the hurricane; and that allows us to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem on the cards. I am trying to characterize the situation of Thomas More, on the eve of capitalism (in Louis Marin's account), or on that of the absolute monarchies and the emergence of the new nation states (in Phillip Wegner's);<sup>12</sup> to characterize the eighteenth century itself, and Rousseau's endless fantasies about new constitutions—fantasies that seem to have absorbed him as completely as the romantic and libidinal ones we also associate with his name, but which emerge in a situation in which the great revolution, only a few years away, is still utterly unimaginable. I am thinking, too, of the great utopian production of the populist and progressive era in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century; and finally of the utopianism of the 1960s. These are all periods of great social ferment but seemingly rudderless, without any agency or direction: reality seems malleable, but not the system; and it is that very distance of the unchangeable system from the turbulent restlessness of the real world that seems to open up a moment of ideational and utopian-creative free play in the mind itself or in the

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<sup>12</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopiques*, Paris 1973; Phillip Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, California 2002. See also J. C. Davis's disturbing yet suggestive notion that utopias proleptically express the future 'total' welfare state: *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, Cambridge 1981.

political imagination. If this conveys any kind of plausible picture of the historical situation in which utopias are possible, then it remains only to wonder whether it does not also correspond to that of our own time.

So utopianism involves a certain distance from the political institutions which encourages an endless play of fantasy around their possible reconstructions and restructurations. But what is the content of those fantasies? As in Freud's analysis of dreams, there is the satisfaction of secondary elaboration or interminable overdetermination; but there is also the implacable pressure of the unconscious wish or desire. Can we neglect that wish, without missing everything that gives utopia its vitality and its libidinal and existential claims on us? Probably not; and I therefore hope to offer a very simple answer to this question, one that does not use the words 'more perfect' or 'the general good', happiness, satisfaction, fulfilment, or any of those other conventional slogans.

First, though, it is necessary to explain a second complicated position, one that has perplexed both my readers and those of Louis Marin's great book on the subject which inspired many of my own thoughts. It is that utopia is somehow negative; and that it is most authentic when we cannot imagine it. Its function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined. This is, to be sure, a peculiarly defeatist position for any self-respecting and full-blooded utopian to take, let alone defend, and one is tempted to evoke nihilism or neurosis; it is certainly rather un-American in spirit. Yet I think I can defend its essential reasonableness by dealing with it under two heads: ideology and fear.

### *Standpoint of dreams*

The point about ideology is not a particularly complicated one: it sets out from the conviction that we are all ideologically situated, we are all shackled to an ideological subject-position, we are all determined by class and class history, even when we try to resist or escape it. And for those unfamiliar with this ideological perspectivism or class standpoint theory, it is perhaps necessary to add that it holds for everyone, left or right,

progressive or reactionary, worker as well as boss, and underclasses, marginals, ethnic or gender victims, fully as much as for the ethnic, race or gender mainstreams.

This situation has an interesting consequence in the present context: it means, not only that all utopias spring from a specific class position, but that their fundamental thematization—the root-of-all-evil diagnosis in terms of which they are each framed—will also reflect a specific class-historical standpoint or perspective. The utopian, to be sure, imagines his effort as one of rising above all immediate determinations in some all-embracing resolution of every imaginable evil and misery of our own fallen society and reality. Such was, for example, the immense utopian imagination of Charles Fourier, the Hegel of socio-political speculation and a figure whose fantasy-energy sought to encompass all possible characterological variants in his extraordinary system. But Fourier was a petty bourgeois; and even the farthest *épicycle de Mercure*, even the most capacious Absolute Spirit, remains an ideological one. No matter how comprehensive and trans-class or post-ideological the inventory of reality's flaws and defects, the imagined resolution necessarily remains wedded to this or that ideological perspective.

This explains much about the various debates and differences that have peopled the history of utopian thought. Most often they come in pairs or opposites, and I would like to recapitulate a few of them—beginning, perhaps, with some of the examples already touched on: my own fantasy about universal employment, for instance. For an equally strong utopian case can be made for the elimination of labour altogether, for a 'jobless future' in which the absence of labour is joyously utopian: did not Marx's own son-in-law write a book called *The Right to Be Lazy*? And was not one of the central ideas of the 1960s (Marcuse's) the prospect of a wonder-working technology that would eliminate alienated labour worldwide?<sup>13</sup> We can see the same opposition at work in the very deployment of the terms 'politics' and 'the political' in the utopian context: for have we not demonstrated that some utopians long for the end of the political altogether, while others revel in the prospect of an eternity of political wrangling, of argufying promoted to the very essence of a collective social life?

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<sup>13</sup> See *Eros and Civilization*, Boston 1974.

*City and country*

Are such oppositions to be taken as mere differences of opinion, characterological symptoms, or do they betray some more fundamental dynamic in the utopian process? A few years ago—when nature still existed and our unevenly developing societies still knew such a thing as the countryside and a vocation of farmers and peasants that was not mere industrial field-work in agribusiness—one of the most durable oppositions in utopian projection (and Science-Fiction writing) was that between country and city. Did your fantasies revolve around a return to the countryside and the rural commune, or were they on the other hand incorrigibly urban, unwilling and unable to do without the excitement of the great metropolis, with its crowds and its multiple offerings, from sexuality and consumer goods to culture? It is an opposition one could emblemize with many names: Heidegger versus Sartre, for example, or in SF LeGuin versus Delany. Perhaps its more contemporary form involves a relationship to technology and a correspondingly diminishing nostalgia for nature; or, on the other hand, a passionate ecological commitment to the prehistory of the earth and an ever-feebling pride in the Promethean triumph over the non-human. At this point, gender also enters the utopian picture, and it is worth noting the abundance of feminist utopias since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s; whether the utopias of male bonding have anything as rich to offer may not be exactly the right question to ask, although I would think that the recrudescence of military SF and the hierarchical satisfactions of warrior communities might be one place to look.

Perhaps the most momentous specification of this opposition between the country and the city—a shift into another register, which does not guarantee that the proponents of each term remain ideologically committed to the same position when they change floors, so to speak—is that between planning and organic growth. It is of course an old staple of political and ideological argument, which goes back at least as far as Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; indeed, as far back as that revolution itself, which seemed, for the first time in human history, to assert the primacy of the human will over social institutions and the power of human beings—of one human being? or of a party? of a class? of a general will?—to reshape and fashion society according to a plan, an abstract idea or ideal. Burke's thunderous denunciation of this hubris affirms the power of time, of slow growth, of

culture in its etymological sense, and therefore seems to come down firmly on the side of the country. But today perhaps things stand otherwise, and it is the city and the urban that grows wild like the state of nature (when did the expression 'jungle' begin to be applied to its 'mysteries?'); whereas it is nature which has, in late capitalism and the green revolution—but perhaps all the way back to the original neolithic revolution itself—been subject to careful planning and engineering. In any case, the notion of the market as an untrammelled natural growth has returned with a vengeance into political thinking, while Left ecology desperately tries to assess the possibilities of a productive collaboration between political agency and the earth. Time and space are equally at stake here: for the plan is also pre-eminently an organization of that time which the Burkean conservative wished to abandon to its own inner tempos and rhythms, letting it be in its being, as Heidegger might have said; even as its infernal machine—the temporality of the market—steadily devours the space that ecological planners wished to isolate and release in turn to the logic of its own spatiality. As we have known since Polanyi's classic *Great Transformation*, the establishment of untrammelled market freedom requires enormous government intervention; and the same can more obviously be affirmed, and by its own admission, for any ecological politics.

The weaker alternative, in our time at least, is the term standing in for nature, affirmed unacceptably as human nature in the free-market idiom. Ecology seems to count ever more feebly on its power—unless it be in the form of the apocalyptic and of catastrophe, global warming or the development of new viruses. Everything that today seems outmoded in traditional utopias seeks to redress this balance—to strengthen versions of Nature that are no longer persuasive, in an age when lawns and landscapes and the other archetypes of natural beauty have become commodities systemically manufactured (and when the former 'human nature' has proven equally malleable and fungible).

Two more characteristic oppositions shape present-day utopian thought: one is the intelligent fantasy of what we may call a Franciscan utopia, that is to say, a utopia of scarcity and poverty, based on the obvious fact that the planet is less and less able to support human, let alone other forms of life; and on the conviction that rich societies like the us will need to convert to another kind of ethic if the world is not to end up, as it currently seems destined to do, in the spectacle of a First-World

gated community surrounded by a world of starving enemies. Indeed, the assessment itself reawakens the old antithesis between asceticism and pleasure, so deeply rooted in the revolutionary tradition as well as the utopian one. But even this opposition should not be grasped ethically or characterologically. My proposal will involve neither a choice between these extremes nor some 'synthesis' of them; but rather a stubbornly negative relationship to both, whose groundwork I laid in speaking of ideology.

For it will be understood that, taken individually, in isolation from its opposite number, each of these utopian positions cannot but be profoundly ideological. Taken one by one, each term is substantive; its very content reflects a class standpoint which is ideological by definition. Or, if you prefer, each finds itself necessarily transmitted through, and expressed by, the social experience of the utopian thinker, which cannot but be a class experience and reflect a particular class perspective on society as a whole. Nor does this inevitable class perspective in itself imply a political judgement: for the utopian fantasies of the poor and disadvantaged are as ideological and as laden with *ressentiment* as those of the masters and the privileged.

But what these utopian oppositions allow us to do is, by way of negation, to grasp the moment of truth of each term. Put the other way around, the value of each term is differential, it lies not in its own substantive content but as an ideological critique of its opposite number. The truth of the vision of nature lies in the way in which it discloses the complacency of the urban celebration; but the opposite is also true, and the vision of the city exposes everything nostalgic and impoverished in the embrace of nature. Another way of thinking about the matter is the reminder that each of these utopias is a fantasy, and has precisely the value of a fantasy—something not realized and indeed unrealizable in that partial form. Yet the operation does not conform to that stereotype of the dialectic in which the two opposites are ultimately united in some impossible synthesis (or what Greimas calls the 'complex term'). If dialectical, then this one is a negative dialectic in which each term persists in its negation of the other; it is in their double negation that the genuine political and philosophic content is to be located. But the two terms must not cancel each other out; their disappearance would leave us back in that status quo, that realm of current being which it was the function and value

of the utopian fantasy to have negated in the first place; indeed—as we have now been able to observe—to have doubly negated.

### *Terror of obliteration*

Is this to say that we can form no substantive or positive picture of utopia, short of embracing all the multiple contradictory pictures that coexist in our collective social unconscious? I want to conclude by looking at the fear of utopia, of the anxiety with which the utopian impulse confronts us. But first I want to inscribe the one answer to the substantive question that seems to me sober and to have the appropriate solemnity owing to its incorporation of the very problem of this unanswerable question itself: something like a zero-degree utopian formulation. Predictably this thoughtful answer is Adorno's, and it runs as follows:

He who asks what is the goal of an emancipated society is given answers such as the fulfilment of human possibilities or the richness of life. Just as the inevitable question is illegitimate, so the repellent assurance of the answer is [as] inevitable [as it is ideologically dated] . . . There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more. Every other seeks to apply to a condition that ought to be determined by human needs, a mode of human conduct adapted to production as an end in itself.<sup>14</sup>

In another place, Adorno clarifies the self-interest implicit in this final judgement philosophically, by suggesting that the ideological prejudices and characterological deformations of class society are the mark of the so-called instinct of self-preservation with which it indoctrinates us.<sup>15</sup> Utopia will then be characterized by the falling away of that imperious drive towards self-preservation, now rendered unnecessary.

This is no doubt a frightening thought, and not only on account of the vulnerability and the mortal dangers to which it exposes us. And it is to that fear that I would now like to turn. It is a discussion that needs to go well beyond introductory lessons in ideological analysis, demanding that we confront the more all-encompassing anxieties that necessarily greet or overwhelm any prospect of total systemic change.

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<sup>14</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, London 1974, pp. 155–6.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford 2002, pp. 22–3.

The science-fictional figure for such change is the situation in which a prisoner, or some potential rescue victim, is warned that salvation will be possible only at the price of allowing the entire personality—the past and its memories, all the multiple influences and events that have combined to form this current personality in the present—to be wiped away without a trace: a consciousness will alone remain, after this operation, but by what effort of the reason or imagination can it still be called ‘the same’ consciousness? The fear with which this prospect immediately fills us is then to all intents and purposes the same as the fear of death, and it is not for nothing that Adorno evoked self-preservation.

### *Pleasures and compulsions*

Something like this is the anxiety with which utopia confronts us, and it is not unproductive to pursue its paradoxes for a moment longer. Is it not possible that the achievement of utopia will efface all previously existing utopian impulses? For as we have seen they are all formed and determined by the traits and ideologies imposed on us by our present condition, which will by then have disappeared without a trace. But what we call our personality is made up of these very things, of the miseries and the deformations, fully as much as the pleasures and fulfilments. I fear that we are not capable of imagining the disappearance of the former without the utter extinction of the latter as well, since the two are inextricably and causally bound together. In matters of existential experience there is no picking and choosing, no separation of the wheat from the chaff. I want to offer two more figural examples of this dilemma here: the lessons of addiction and of sexuality.

Indeed, no society has ever been quite so addictive, quite so inseparable from the condition of addictiveness as this one, which did not invent gambling, to be sure, but which did invent compulsive consumption. The postmodern, or late capitalism, has at least brought the epistemological benefit of revealing the ultimate structure of the commodity to be that of addiction itself (or, if you prefer, it has produced the very concept of addiction in all its metaphysical richness). What would it be for the addict to desire a cure? Surely only this or that form of bad faith or self-deception: like that neurotic (I think it is Sartre’s example) who begins analysis only in order to break it off after a few sessions, thereby demonstrating to his satisfaction that he is in fact incurable.

As for sexuality, since it is apparently more natural than addiction, an even more dramatic case can be made by quoting those anthropological commentators who suggest that, although omnipresent—probably even because of its omnipresence—sexuality in tribal societies was not a very significant matter; comparable in fact to that very glass of water to which the modern proverb cynically compares it. In other words sexuality, itself a meaningless biological fact, is in such societies far less invested with all the symbolic meanings with which we modern and sophisticated people endow it. What would it mean, then, from within our own sexualized existentiality, to imagine a human sexuality that was so unrepressed, yet so utterly divested of the multiple satisfactions of meaning as such? LeGuin usefully dramatizes the consequences the other way round, by way of the planet Winter, inhabited by an androgynous population that differentiates sexually only at fixed temporal periods (the way animals go into heat). The reflexions of the first visitor to this planet are instructive:

The First Mobile [Ambassador], if one is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience.<sup>16</sup>

Something is to be said for the proposition that the fear of utopia is intimately linked with the fear of aphanisis, or loss of desire: the sexlessness of utopians is a constant in the anti-utopian tradition, as witness John Boorman's well-known film *Zardoz*. But something is also to be said for the idea that the features I have mentioned, addictiveness and sexuality, are the very emblems of human culture as such, the very supplements that define us as something other than mere animals: competitiveness and passion or frenzy—are these not what paradoxically make up the mind or spirit itself, as opposed to the merely physical and material? In this sense, it is only too humanly comprehensible that we might draw back from that utopia which Adorno described as a community of 'good animals'. On the other hand, it also seems possible that a genuine confrontation with utopia demands just such anxieties, and that without them our visions of alternative futures and utopian transformations remain politically and existentially inoperative, mere thought experiments and mental games without any visceral commitment.

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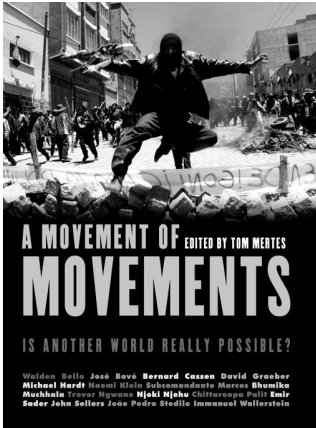
<sup>16</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, New York 1969, p. 95.

I have hoped to convey something that I have not yet said: namely that utopias are non-fictional, even though they are also non-existent. Utopias in fact come to us as barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being. I leave the articulation of that message to Marge Piercy's Mattapoisett utopians—time-travellers from a future which, they warn us, without ourselves and our own present, may never come into existence:

You may fail us . . . You individually may fail to understand us or to struggle in your own life and time. You of your time may fail to struggle altogether . . . [But] we must fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens. That's why we reached you.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York 1976, pp. 197–8.

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