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# The Meaning of Utopia

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The category of the Utopian, then, besides its usual and justly depreciatory meaning, possesses this other meaning – which, far from being necessarily abstract and turned away from the world, is on the contrary centrally preoccupied with the world: that of going beyond the natural march of events.

— *Ernst Bloch, “The Principle of Hope”*

Even among bourgeois economists, there is hardly a serious thinker who will deny that it is possible, by means of currently existing material and intellectual forces of production, to put an end to hunger and poverty, and that the present state of things is due to the socio-political organization of the world.

— *Herbert Marcuse, “The End of Utopia”*

The modern world was inaugurated by two books with opposing perspectives, published at the same time in the early years of the 16th century: Machiavelli’s “The Prince” and Thomas More’s “Utopia.” Modernity came to a close with the collapse of all those attempts, both collective and liberal, that had been made to bring utopia about in history. Here I should like to reflect on that beginning and that end, insofar as they involve the status of utopia.

Utopia is often spoken of in a general, imprecise way, to characterize any conception of the state that is considered an unrealizable ideal. Thus Plato’s

“Republic” is commonly described as the first philosophical utopia. But this usage of the notion of utopia is quite illegitimate, because utopia, by its very etymology, means without-place, whereas Plato’s republic absolutely does not correspond to this definition. It is, in fact, that which *par excellence* has a place in the intelligible world.

By contrast, for Plato what has *no* place is the perceptible society of the here and now, in perpetual change, subject to all sorts of evils and incapable of taking human beings to where their true essence leads them. For Plato the organization and laws of the republic have to be inscribed in the perceptible world, however difficult this may be.

But utopia can be thought of only when the relationship is reversed, when the real appears overloaded and offers no way out of war, violence, cupidity, exploitation, hunger and injustice. Faced with a reality which is overloaded in this way, we have to look for an elsewhere.

This is what Thomas More says in the first book of “Utopia”: “It seems to me that where private properties exist, where all men measure all things in relation to money, it is hardly possible to establish, in public affairs, a regime at once just and prosperous, unless you esteem it just that the best things belong to the worst persons, or unless you judge it well that all goods be shared among the fewest people who even then are not entirely satisfied, whilst all others are in the direst poverty. This is why I reflect upon the Constitution of the Utopians, so wise, so morally irreproachable, among whom with the fewest possible laws all is regulated for the good of all, in such a way that merit is rewarded; and that, in a sharing from which no one is excluded, everyone has nonetheless a large part.”

Thinking about utopia has been possible only when the historical reality of situations, societies and states has appeared totally overloaded, i.e. providing no opening, no way out towards a different horizon. One had therefore to look elsewhere. An island. No one knows precisely where, but somewhere other than here and now. The island of Utopia is somewhere else, not only because it has no assignable location in the known world, even if its spatial and local dimensions are clearly marked, but also because it is a perfect city. All its characteristics are signs of perfection: uniformity, symmetry, transparency, an exact hierarchy, quasi-immobility.

Like Aristotle's heavenly bodies, fixed to the celestial vault, the island of Utopia is of a quite different nature from the cities we know, subject as they are to growth and corruption. It is perfect, and has no concern other than maintaining itself, as closely as possible, as it is.

So one can see why utopia, in this sense, is not political: it does not offer the means of achieving the end that is nonetheless sought. The way to get there is by a leap which is not just qualitative but also anthropological, even ontological. In short it is *here*, or it is *there*. Unable to accept the immoral, unjust laws which determine politics here, Thomas More directed his thinking elsewhere, to Utopia.

In terms of the diagnosis he gives of the societies of his day and corruption in politics, Machiavelli is very close to More. Some of the political considerations in the first book of "Utopia" agree with the analyses in "The Prince" or "Discourses on Livy." Machiavelli thus shared More's pessimism about the march of political things. But for Machiavelli there is no elsewhere. It is no use escaping, dreaming about imaginary states. One has to stay here and now, and return to the "effective truth of the thing" in politics.

Machiavelli's business is to know the laws that govern politics – i.e. the laws of power – and to define an art of governing that completely abandons any moral dimension, since politics is of a different order from morality. For him it is only when the political dimension has been recognized as the order of conflict and the struggle for power and domination, that one can conceive conditions for creating a republican regime, based on good customs and laws, that can defend freedom.

At the beginning of the modern world, the idea of utopia was more of a theologically-based critique of politics than a political theory, even if it defined the organization of a perfect state with maniacal attention to detail. At the end of the modern world, in the 20th century, utopia became political. It entered history in order to transform it. No longer the imaginary representation of a perfect society, it entered history, in Ernst Bloch's words, in the shape of a "spirit of utopia" which provides the content of the "hope principle," i.e. the idea of a better future for people in this world.

In a certain way Herbert Marcuse takes on the same idea, speaking of "the

end of utopia” only in the sense that all the conditions appear fulfilled in our world for a political shift that is at once qualitative, anthropological and ontological: “However, it seems to me that a valid criterion does exist: when material and intellectual forces capable of achieving the transformation are technically present, even though their use is prevented by the existing organization of productive forces. It is in this sense, I believe, that one can truly speak today of an end of utopia.”

Henceforth utopia is no longer the counterpart of a overloaded reality without opening or any way out; on the contrary it is that which *in* reality opens ways to the possible, to events, to the new, the ultimate. The spirit of utopia becomes a way of thinking about becoming as opposed to what has become; what is emerging, as opposed to what is fixed and static. Bloch wrote: “Expectation, hope and intention, directed towards the possibility which has not yet arrived, constitute not only a fundamental property of the human consciousness but also, provided they are rectified and grasped in their concrete aspect, a fundamental determination at the heart of objective reality itself.”

This insertion of utopia into history gives it a social and a political content. For Bloch it was the thinking of Marx, dialectical materialism, his theory-praxis, that both revealed the utopian dimension of reality and provided the horizon in whose name the transformation of the world was to be achieved.

Bloch was perfectly aware of the religious, messianic, even millenarian aspects of this conception. An achieved utopia is nothing other than the secularized version of a religious belief; religion turned into philosophy. Marcuse, on the other hand, entirely rejects this theological dimension, which is no doubt why he rejects the notion of utopia. Achieving the qualitative transformation in the world testifies to the fact that utopian cities and all Judeo-Christian morality are equally obsolete.

But even if Marcuse rejects the notion of utopia, even if the qualitative transformation which ought to lead human beings to freedom and happiness is conceived by him as a rejection of utopia, he nevertheless conceives this transformation in anthropological terms: the production of human beings with new needs and new desires. This anthropological transformation is produced by new human beings with new needs along two dimensions – one ethical-vital, the other “aesthetic-erotic.”

Marcuse was not the first – far from it – to conceptualize such an anthropological transformation, which is at the center of the very first historicized conception of utopia. Here I am referring to Campanella who, in the early 17th century, attempted to think out a historicization of utopia. His “City of the Sun,” one of the great utopias of the modern era, is well-known, but less familiar are Campanella’s theological-historical writings, in which he attempted to set up a sort of geopolitics of utopia, through which he sought to make possible, in this world, and under the aegis of the Pope, the transformation that would carry human existence to perfection and happiness. With Campanella, we have an explicitly theological version of what Marcuse (despite his protestations) and of course Bloch were to give in a secularized form.

Now these collectivist utopias (and the same could be said of liberal utopias) have collapsed. In the 20th century collectivist utopias showed their true face: totalitarianism. In the 21st century liberal utopias are showing theirs: belief in deregulation, freedom of the market and the drastic reduction of the place of the state have led our world to the brink of a general disaster that we are still far from sure of having overcome – the financial and economic crisis, and now a political crisis with the ruin of states.

Ought we to despair of utopias? I believe so, inasmuch as utopias aim, in one way or another, at perfection in the form of efficiency, happiness and justice and by calling for a qualitative, anthropological and ontological transformation in order to get there. In this they deny human finiteness – that is, the always imperfect, chaotic, irregular and accidental character of the human condition.

*Translated from the French by Edward Hughes.*

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