

Ernest Ženko*

Mapping the Unmappable: Dichotomies of Utopianism

Part 1

The 500th anniversary of the first edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*¹ was accompanied by a seemingly inexhaustible wave of discussions, conferences, and publications on utopianism and its innumerable well- and less- known forms. All this buzz around the topic showed, on the one hand, that there is plenty of interest in utopia at the beginning of the 21st century, most notably in academia given that utopian studies are thriving, and researchers are publishing books and articles on a regular basis. On the other hand, however, at least in developed countries, there has been a growing tendency toward dystopia for the last couple of decades, and utopia became predominantly a pejorative word—a way to insult someone for his or her political orientation.

This situation, at the surface level at least, implies a contradiction. As utopia becomes ever less important in our society, more thoroughly it appears a subject of the research. However, when it comes to utopia and utopianism, very little is straightforward and almost nothing is devoid of paradox. Five centuries after the publication of More's *Utopia*, not only the proper meaning of his book, but also the origin of utopianism itself remain controversial. Utopianism belongs to all historical periods and can be found in most known cultures, therefore transcending the limits of time and space and revealing an unambiguous human propensity. Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to claim that the utopian tradition as a whole could have been simply and straightforwardly related to one or more particular psychological features. Even less rigorous statements, according to which utopianism stems from a certain longing or specific desire shared by members of the human species, are rather difficult to confirm, even though they can have strong explanatory power.

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¹ Originally published in Latin in 1516. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Casell & Company, London 1901.

* Univerza na Primorskem

Ruth Levitas, one of the leading scholars in utopian studies, claims that the most useful kind of concept of utopia would be one, which would be broad enough and would therefore “not exclude from the field of utopian studies any of the wide variety of related work that currently is defined by practitioners as part of the field,” and consequently offers a definition of utopia, which recognizes precisely “the common factor of the expression of desire.”² Hence, “Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being.”³ Another important author in the field of matters utopian, Fredric Jameson, subtitled *Archeologies of the Future*,⁴ his well-known book on the subject, *The Desire Called Utopia [and Other Science Fictions]* pointing out the importance of the desire as a unifying and defining notion.

Contrary to this tendency, which strives to a single, though an all-encompassing and broad designation of utopia, following a single concept, we argue in this paper that utopia and utopianism as such can be, at best, grasped through a series of dichotomies, contradictions, or paradoxes. From early utopian strategies dating back millennia to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, utopias always feature contradictory tendencies, which require closer inspection. It may be that in this contradictory nature of the utopian lies the key to understanding not only our present, but probably the most important part of all of human history along with our future yet to come. The best way to find such dichotomies, however, is to look back in time.

Part 2

It seems that the idea that our world is the best of all possible worlds, as once indicated by Leibniz, has hardly been a part of common belief, regardless of an epoch, culture, or civilization. In most historical periods human beings considered their own time as inferior in relation to some invented past or imaginary future, leading to the invention of better places many centuries before Thomas More published his own description of utopia, and gave this endeavor its proper name.

² Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, Syracuse University Press, Hampstead 1990, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London & New York 2005.

All such efforts, however, did not share the same focus or strive to achieve the same goal. As pointed out by Lewis Mumford in the beginning of the twentieth century, utopias can be divided into two main categories: into ‘utopias of escape’ and ‘utopias of reconstruction’.⁵ Both categories were present in early utopianism and persisted through the history until today. For some commentators, however, only the second type qualifies as a utopia, because the first one “refers to the projection of desire without the consideration of limiting conditions,”⁶ and focuses mainly on bodily pleasure, often with plenty of available food, drink and sex. In some cases, such ‘utopias of escape’ or ‘body utopias’ are not social fictions, but only private and egocentric fantasies focusing on personal fulfilment, and frequently interpreted as primitive, excessive, and dangerous. This is probably easier to understand if we realize that utopias of this kind may also take the form of Carnival, the Feast of Fools, or Saturnalia, and that they can instantly turn against the established political or religious system.

Classic folk myths, appearing through centuries in different cultures all over the world, often take the form of ‘the utopia of escape’. We find this kind of utopia also in the description of biblical Eden, in stories of a golden age or the earthly paradise, present in Greek and Roman culture but also in similar myths in other ancient cultures, such as for example in Chinese ‘Peach Blossom Spring’.⁷ They may display differences on a level of a culture from which they develop, but they still share many common features. For example, many of those stories begin with a place in which gods and humans were close to each other, and as we read in Hesiod (8th century BCE):

They lived as if they were gods, their hearts free from all sorrow, by themselves, and without hard work or pain; no miserable old age came their way; their hands, their feet, did not alter. They took their pleasure in festivals and lived without troubles. When they died, it was as if they fell asleep. All goods were theirs. The fruitful grainland yielded its harvest to them of its own accord; this was great and

⁵ Cf. Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias: Ideal Commonwealths and Social Myths*, Harrap, London 1923.

⁶ Levitas, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷ Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & London 2010, p. 48.

abundant, while they at their pleasure quietly looked after their works, in the midst of good things.⁸

As pointed out by Tower Sargent, another influential utopian scholar, there is an important difference in focus between the Greek poet Hesiod and the Roman author Ovid (43 BCE to 17/18 CE). In Hesiod, the good life is all about abundance, equality and joy. His story appears to be completely out of time, and socio-historical reality is actually never reflected. Ovid, whose poetry made a much stronger impression, and influenced the Middle Ages' view of the golden age, stressed, on the other hand, pressing contemporary political issues. His description of the Golden Age is thus above all a negative image of his own epoch:

In the beginning was the Golden Age, when men of their own accord, without threat of punishment, without laws, maintained good faith and did what was right. There were no penalties to be afraid of, no bronze tablets were erected, carrying threats of legal action, no crowd of wrong-doers, anxious for mercy, trembled before the face of their judge: indeed, there were no judges, men lived securely without them. [...] The peoples of the world, untroubled by any fears, enjoyed a leisurely and peaceful existence, and had no use for soldiers.⁹

Many utopias of escape were in a similar way concerned with solving the problems of the present, and some of them also explained how and why the good life in a paradise turned into a vale of tears.

Two important modifications had yet to occur in relation to those myths before the approach to utopias in a proper sense was finally open, and both can be traced back to the Roman writer Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70-19 BCE). The first change is associated with the concept of *euconia*, the problem of the best possible time, as an analogue to *eutopia*, which designates the best possible place. Virgil was probably the first, who, in his *Fourth Eclogue*, moved golden age from the past to the future. Instead of looking backwards, one has to look forward, because the golden age is going to appear sometime in the future.¹⁰

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⁸ Hesiod, *Works and Days*; quoted in Doyne Dawson, *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford 1992, p. 13.

⁹ Quoted in Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ In the modern utopian tradition, it was probably Edward Bellamy's contribution that was the most important in this sense. He was the one who has associated the ideal society with

Nevertheless, and this is Virgil's second important modification, nothing in this better future world will be given as a gift from the gods. In their future utopia, people will still have to work, mostly as peasants or farmers. They will live simple lives, but they will be happy. Both Virgil's innovations, future oriented utopianism and simple rural life, still play an important role in numerous modern utopias and in culture pessimism of Walter Benjamin, escapism of Raymond Williams and postmodern nostalgia as well.

The distinction between 'utopias of escape' and 'utopias of reconstruction' as introduced by Mumford can be modified to form a list of categories that broaden our understanding of the concept of utopia and the nuances distinguishing various types of utopian strategies. Probably the most important in this sense is the delineation between myth, fantasy, and messianism, on the one hand, and political utopianism on the other.

This difference, as pointed out by Doyne Dawson,¹¹ is based mainly on the concept of realism; political utopias are more realistic than myths or fantasy albeit only to a certain extent—true political utopias are called utopias not because they are realizable, but because they are not. Therefore, not all political utopias are equal; some of them are more realistic than others, and the concept of 'political utopia' calls for a further refinement.

Drawing from complex utopian traditions of ancient Greeks, Dawson proposed a division of political utopianism, which comprises of the following two categories:¹²

1. 'Low' utopianism. In the center of this strategy stands a comprehensive program for an ideal city-state, which was meant to be put into action, but in the meantime also to provide a critique of existing state of affairs. This category is called utopian, because in its goals it reaches beyond regular political reforms and focuses on radical and total political transformation. It is also termed 'low'—and this is important to emphasize—because the program is

a relatively far-distant future instead of some unmapped space as did his predecessors like More, Bacon, Campanella and others. Cf. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York 2007 [1888].

¹¹ Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

nevertheless a real and practical program. In other words, it is too real to be (properly) utopian.

2. 'High' utopianism. Known also as 'classical utopianism,' or utopianism in a proper sense. In the center of the strategy is a plan for an ideal city-state that was not meant to be literally enacted. It may include a critique and a plan for reform, but only in an indirect way. Its plan cannot be implemented in reality; therefore, it can be understood as truly utopian.

Contrary to the traditions of utopian escapism, which go back to some indistinct past and can be found all over the world, political utopianism is a peculiarly Greek tradition that appeared in the late fifth century BCE. Consequently, the first examples of 'low' and 'high' utopias can be found among ancient Greek authors. Examples of 'low' utopianism can be found in Plato's *Laws*, Aristotle's *Politics*, in pre-platonic utopian authors Phaleas and Hippodamus and in some other authors' work as well. On the other hand, although there are several examples of 'high' utopianism in Stoic and Cynic traditions, nevertheless, the most important example of this kind of political utopianism is undeniably found in Plato's *Republic*.

Plato's best-known work is often regarded as the true origin of Western utopianism¹³ and for some commentators also the most influential example of classical utopian literature, which in its importance reaches even beyond More's *Utopia* itself. For others, however, Western utopianism begins in the Age of Renaissance as "a hybrid plant, born of the crossing of a paradisiacal, otherworldly belief of Judeo-Christian religion with the Hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth".¹⁴ In such frameworks, Plato (428/27-348/47 BCE) is not seen as an utopian author, even though his (at least indirect) role in the utopian tradition still remains undeniable.

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The society described in the *Republic* is "the closest possible approximation to the ideal society,"¹⁵ nevertheless still an approximation; since it is created by humans it cannot be more than a reflection of the ideal. As pointed out by Tower

¹³ Cf. Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Cf. Frank E. Manuel & Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 15.

¹⁵ Cf. Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Sargent: “The important thing here is not the theory but the underlying point that there cannot be a perfect society or human being on this earth. The best we can achieve is an approximation, which will inevitably collapse.”¹⁶

This essential and ultimate failure of utopia, described by Plato in the *Republic*, is somehow paradoxically the reason, why it counts as a form of ‘high’ utopianism. For Plato, but also for other Greek writers on utopia, it was inconceivable that an ideal society could be a large one, that is, one in which citizens could not regularly meet and discuss important political topics. Aristotle (448-380 BCE) even proposed that in a utopia citizens live in a state of self-sufficiency within the limits of small territory and population and that they possibly know each other.

Many commentators relate Plato’s ideal city-state, described in the *Republic*, to the Greek city of Sparta with which Athens fought a war, when Plato was writing his book. Sparta was a military regime based on the equality among citizens, who were to dedicate themselves completely to the state—a characteristic, found in many subsequent utopian narratives. In writings of Plutarch, who has described the plan of the supposed founder of Sparta, Lycurgus, the idea behind it was quite radical. For Lycurgus, a partial alteration of the laws would not be enough to induce true social change; citizens should be treated as patients, full of diseases, and what is needed is to “reduce and alter the existing temperament by means of drugs and purges, and introduce a new and different regimen”.¹⁷

“This strange society has never ceased to fascinate the world,” and played an important role in Western utopian tradition. Its secret, however, did not lay in Spartan political institutions, which were relatively ordinary, but above all “in the unique collectivist features of Spartan social and economic structure.”¹⁸ Two Greek authors contributed to the creation of this Spartan myth, mainly Critias, but also Xenophon, and they both believed that Spartan unique collectivist practices were the key to their political and military success. Xenophon pointed out that they “shared one another’s horses, dogs, servants, and provisions at need; that they shared wives freely for breeding purposes, and treated all children as their own; that their homogenous way of life and restrictions on money-making

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁸ Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

reduced distinctions between rich and poor and unified the citizens”.¹⁹ Many utopian writers to this day draw from the Spartan model and replicated above all its egalitarian and collectivist, or communist features, and Plato was only one of them, but definitely not the last.

Both Plato’s *Republic* and Spartan society, but also Aristotle, who is generally not considered a utopian author, share a common argument regarding equality. The best possible society provides the best life for their citizens, but to achieve it, it requires the existence of non-citizens (or, in fact, slaves) to do undignified labor, and free citizens from it. Utopia is therefore possible only if a large part of a population is excluded from it, and this inequality is the price to be paid for equality.²⁰ In contrast to modern utopias, which typically put the labor problem into the center of their concern, Plato or Aristotle do not consider it as a true problem at all.²¹

Ancient Greek culture, however, did not only invent a formal utopia, but also its important counter-part: anti-utopia. The first important anti-utopian was Aristophanes (445-375 BCE),²² the well-known writer of comedies, who wrote at the same time as utopians and examined comparable topics. The most important of his plays in this sense was entitled *Women in Parliament* (or *Ecclesiazusae* in Greek). In this play Aristophanes describes a situation in which a group of women succeeded in taking over the parliament (i.e. the legislative assembly) and enacting a form of communism.

In the development of the play, Aristophanes gives us a standard reason for rejecting utopias. Women legislature fails, but it does not fail because it is bad or irrational but because it requires altruism in order to function. Nevertheless, altruism is something that human race is not capable of, and therefore any utopia based on communism is doomed to fail, because egoism will always win. Aristophanes used a similar strategy in another play with the telling title *Wealth* (*Plutus*). There the blind god of wealth is given sight, and when he sees the inequalities in the world and those deserving, he redistributes the wealth to ac-

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¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ A theme that is reiterated in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

²¹ Cf. Mumford, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²² Aristophanes, *The Complete Plays*, New American Library, New York 2005.

compish equality among the people. However, in a way analogous to that of the former play, Aristophanes shows that equality cannot last forever—human greed soon takes over and rapidly redistributes the wealth again inequitably.

Part 3

There is a period of nearly two thousand years between Plato and Aristophanes, on the one side, and Thomas More on the other. During that time, at least in the Western World, utopia mainly disappeared from literature. There are several exceptions, such as Cicero’s essay on the state, Augustine’s *City of God*, but also, if one includes various forms of ‘utopias of escape’, medieval Carnival, the Feast of Fools, and different mythical stories, like the story of Cockaigne:

There are rivers broad and fine
Of oil, milk, honey and of wine;
Water serveth there no thing
But for sight and for washing.²³

These are, as the excerpt above shows, similar to those escapist and past oriented utopias, developed in the antiquity and in other cultures all over the world.

In the era of Christianity, social utopianism took a distinctive, albeit somehow similar, turn. In Lewis Mumford’s description, “the utopia of the first fifteen hundred years after Christ is transplanted to the sky, and called the Kingdom of Heaven. It is distinctly a utopia of escape. The world of men is full of sin and trouble. Nothing can be done about it except to repent of the sin and find refuge from the trouble in the life after the grave.”²⁴ The shift from a heavenly and escapist utopia to a worldly and social one, came during the decline of the Middle ages and the beginning of Renaissance and Reformation. The first expression of this change is the *Utopia* of Thomas More from 1516.

It is not realistic, however, to expect that this short book, which gave the name to the whole tradition, will harmonize various contradicting aspects and answer all our questions concerning utopianism. Quite the contrary, for *Utopia* is “a com-

²³ Quoted in Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

²⁴ Mumford, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

plex work, and More is a complex man”.²⁵ More’s *Utopia* with the full title *Utopia, A Fruitful and Pleasant Work of the Best State of a Commonwealth and of the New Island Called Utopia*, is contradictory, paradoxical and inconsistent from the beginning to the end. And, as Quentin Skinner, the famous Cambridge historian observes: “Almost everything about Thomas More’s *Utopia* is debatable.”²⁶

Even its title is a joke and it contains deliberate ambiguity: *utopia* is a combination of Greek words *eutopia*, i.e. the good or the best place, and *outopia*, i.e. the non-existing place. It therefore designates the place that is the best possible, but at the same time it does not exist. The text is full of word games, and if it appears to be straightforward on the surface, this is only an illusion that disappears on closer inspection. For example, the surname of the person describing Utopia, Hythlodæus (Hythloday), means literally ‘speaker of nonsense’, however, his first name, Raphael, means ‘healer from God’. If you put the two together, his whole name becomes inconclusive if not paradoxical. Or, in another example, the main river of Utopia is called Anydrus, which means ‘no water’.

More himself did shed the light on this problem, even though in a letter to Peter Giles, published in the 1517 edition, commenting on the play on words. More claimed that if *Utopia* had been fiction he would have indicated it: “Thus, if I had done nothing else than impose names on ruler, river, city, and island such as might suggest to the more learned that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the ruler without a people, it would have been much wittier than what I actually did. [...] I am not so stupid as to have preferred to use those barbarous and meaningless names, Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus.”²⁷ But the names he cites—Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus—do mean precisely the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the ruler without a people! Again, instead of solving the problem, Thomas More strengthens the ambiguity.

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The same problem appears on many different levels within the text, but also in its interpretation. Due to the lack of space here, let us focus on one, but signif-

²⁵ David James Sarty Hood, *A Place Called ‘Nowhere’: Towards an Understanding of St. Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’*, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa 2009, p. 30.

²⁶ Quoted in Hood, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁷ Quoted in Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

icant theme: “In the Utopia the root of all evil in society is the lust for possessions, a passion that leads men to behave like beasts toward one another.”²⁸ It seems quite straightforward that More is supporting a society without private property, and Hythloday, the main character in the book, states: “I do fully persuade myself that no equal and just distribution of things can be made, nor perfect wealth ever be among men unless their proprietorship be exiled and banished.”²⁹ This and similar statements convinced Marxist scholars that More was essentially a communist, and hailed his Utopia as “one of the earliest and greatest works of socialist theory”.³⁰ When, for example, a monument to the most influential thinkers who promoted the liberation of humankind from oppression, arbitrariness, and exploitation was suggested by Lenin and erected in Moscow in 1918, Thomas More was on the list (ninth from the top).

Yet again things in *Utopia* are never what they seem on the surface, and this interpretation again turns out to be problematic. Namely, More himself claims that he is of the contrary opinion, and actually strongly defends private property:

For methinks men shall never live wealthily there, where all things are held in common. For how can there be abundance of goods or of anything, where every man holds back his hand from labor? Where regard for his own gains drives him not to work, and the hope that he has in other men’s toil makes him slothful. Then when they are pricked with poverty, and yet no man can by any law or right defend for his own that which he has got with the labor of his own hands, will not there of necessity be continual sedition and bloodshed?³¹

It is clear from the statement above that More is expressing concern over the socialist foundations of the Utopian society, but also that Hythloday does not really offer any kind of substantive reply to these concerns. As pointed out by David J. S. Hood, there are several inconsistencies with a Marxist interpretation; the question of private property and communism is only one of them. For instance, there are slaves in Utopia. Utopians are willing to go to war to defend the private property of their neighbors. Religion in Utopia poses another problem, since its

²⁸ Manuel & Manuel, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

²⁹ Quoted in Hood, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

citizens abhor atheism and irreligion. Atheists are considered to be less than human, they are deprived of all honors, excluded from all offices and rejected from all public administration.

Inconsistencies and contradictions that pose a serious problem for a Marxist interpretation of *Utopia* do not vanish, when More's text is interpreted within other contexts. Since its publication, commentators mostly agreed that *Utopia* is a socio-political text. However, they commonly took one of two main positions, that either it was written as a serious treatise, or it was written to be a satire. The first school of interpretations is based on a traditional Catholic perception of More as a conservative defender of faith, who wrote *Utopia* to "provide Europe with real solutions to their social and political problems. The commonwealth of Utopia is therefore an example of the best state of a commonwealth".³²

The second school of interpretations is rooted in a more modern perception of More that emphasizes two different, yet interconnected, characteristics, his humanism and his love of the satire. According to their view, "More did not intend for his *Utopia* to be taken seriously. He wrote it as a satire to attack and mock various aspects of traditional and medieval English society, culture and religion."³³ Satire is in fact fundamental to both main utopian traditions, 'escapist' and 'political', and both use it to ridicule the present; in order to do so, and to intensify the contrast, they mostly use exaggeration.

The satire may be one of the keys to understanding More's *Utopia*, but also the problem of utopia in general. In its radical sense it enables its writer to build a narration without a positive position, leaving a reader to decide what to make out of it. In his book *Erewhon or Over the Range* (1872), English novelist Samuel Butler followed a pattern found in More's *Utopia*. Criminals, for example, are treated as sick and sent to doctors, but the sick are thrown to jail. A similar strategy is to be found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).³⁴ The good place in the book (*eutopia*) is inhabited by horses and humans. However, the horses, Houyhnhnms, are rational, whereas the humans, Yahoos, are animalistic. It follows from Swift and Butler that the idea is not to give a proper answer to a burn-

³² Hood, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The precise title of the book is *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*.

ing social or political issue, but to open space for a discussion and ultimately to enable a positive social change.

This seems to be a very important point. Since the nature of utopia is in its essence satirical, it cannot be taken literally. Exaggerations, inconsistencies, and paradoxes are a necessary part of a utopian strategy and should be accepted as such. This view, on the other hand, does not imply that one should not take utopia seriously, rather quite to the contrary. It should be taken seriously because of its inconsistencies, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Part 4

In centuries after the publication of More's *Utopia*, various writers gave birth to a number of utopian works, which more or less followed the path of the great master. Some of them appear on various lists of utopias, composed by utopian scholars, but there are only a few that belong to the agreed core texts and are considered as 'key' utopias.³⁵ These would be Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626),³⁶ Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1623)³⁷ and Étienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* (1845).³⁸ Some utopian works became even world-wide bestsellers, sometimes to the surprise of their own authors. *Looking Backward: 2000-1887 AD*, published by the American writer Edward Bellamy in 1888 opened a 'golden age of utopias', which lasted until World War I. At least two other great utopians of this period should be mentioned: British writer William Morris, who's most important utopian work was *News from Nowhere; or, An Epoch of Rest* (1890),³⁹ and H. G. Wells, probably the most prolific writer of utopias.

Wells, who is best described as a pessimistic utopian,⁴⁰ marks an important turn in the development of utopianism. His novels, such as *The Time Machine* (1895) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905),⁴¹ are the writings of an author, who believed that it

³⁵ Cf. Levitas, *op. cit.* p. 11.

³⁶ Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*, Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia 1998.

³⁷ Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun*, The Floating Press, Auckland 2009.

³⁸ Étienne Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie*, Bureau du populaire, Paris 1848.

³⁹ William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York 1995.

⁴⁰ Cf. Tower Sargent, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁴¹ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, Chapman and Hall, London 2010.

was possible to improve human life radically, but also doubted that the will to do so would ever be found. As a writer who wrote utopias as well as dystopias, Wells never lost hope, but he never stopped doubting either. History showed, unfortunately, that his pessimism was not unfounded, and negative utopias (or, dystopias) became the dominant form of utopian literature in the twentieth century.

The aforementioned turn is well expressed in an assertion found in the conclusion of Mumford's *Story of Utopias* (1922): "Our most important task at the present moment is to build castles in the air."⁴² Four decades later, he only wondered, how he could have expressed such upbeat sentiments in the wake of World War I. He had been writing, Mumford explained, under the "impetus of the great nineteenth century, with its fund of buoyant idealism and robust social enterprise. [...] I was still living in the hopeful spirit of an earlier age."⁴³ This age was now gone.

The word 'dystopia' was first used in 1868 by John Stuart Mill, who used it in a speech in Parliament, but became common only in the twentieth century. There is definitively more than one reason for the anti-utopian turn, but probably the most important role in this sense has been played by the possibility of the realization of old dreams. Ideas that seemed unrealizable a couple of centuries ago, gradually became not only a possibility, but a reality, achievable by technological means and social engineering.

This leads to the most outstanding paradox and also the mystery of utopianism. Utopia is something highly desirable, unless it becomes too close to reality itself. At that point, the 'sweet utopian dream' becomes the 'worst nightmare'. In his *Utopianism and Politics*, Jacob Talmon wrote that "the tragic paradox of Utopianism" is that instead of leading to freedom, "it brought totalitarian coercion".⁴⁴ For most anti-utopian writers, social Darwinism, eugenics, Auschwitz, Nazism and Stalinism, the A-bomb, and terror of the First and Second World Wars are sufficient cause for the denigration of the whole tradition of utopianism.

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⁴² Mumford, *op. cit.* p. 187.

⁴³ Quoted in Russell Jacobi, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, p. ix.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Jacobi, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

A series of writing appeared in the wake of the Second World War that defined contemporary anti-utopianism, which in the last decades of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st centuries only gained in strength. On the one hand, there was a growing tradition of dystopian literature defined by now well-known and well-read novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921),⁴⁵ and especially Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932)⁴⁶ and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).⁴⁷

On the other hand, there was a set of influential political philosophers, who made a compelling case about the dangers of utopian thought. Their major works include Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Jacob Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1951), Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), but also several essays of Isaiah Berlin and others. As pointed out by Russell Jacoby, "they saw Marxism and fascism as related phenomena, different versions of totalitarianism. Inasmuch as a utopianism informed Marxism [...] the theory of totalitarianism, which they developed, underlined the toxicity of utopianism. Presented by refugee scholars of great repute and allure, it carried the day. Their liberal criticism became the conventional wisdom of the our time; it damned utopianism as the scourge of history."⁴⁸

Both streams, literary and theoretical, thus successfully helped turning utopian hopes into dystopian fears. It cannot be claimed, nonetheless, that they were the ones actually responsible for this turn. More accurately, one could say that they sensed, articulated, and interpreted the sea change in the society in which they lived and tried to grasp it. In any case, this move opened a series of questions that has persisted to this day and which still demands answers, especially, the following. If utopia is a desire for a better life, why did it turn into dystopia? Why do we allow fear to dominate over hope? Is it true that we do not strive for a better life anymore, and, if not, why did utopia get its predominantly—pejorative meaning?

⁴⁵ Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, Random House Publishing, New York 2007.

⁴⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Rosetta Books, New York 2010.

⁴⁷ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Buccaneer Books, Cutchogue (NY) 1982.

⁴⁸ Jacoby, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

Part 5

The above questions and their context uncover probably the most challenging issue regarding contemporary utopianism—the contradiction between a positive orientation toward the future (interpreted as hope) and negative representations of this same orientation (in the sense of fear). This contradiction calls for an approach that is divided in its core and based on the difference between two distinct utopian traditions. Several authors have frequently pointed out the difference between the ‘true’ and ‘false’ utopia; some of them within the framework of utopian studies, others in contexts that only border on utopianism. Nevertheless, they both made contributions important for our case.

In a classical discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno from 1964, published as *Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing*,⁴⁹ the latter pointed out the distinction between the “cheap utopia, the false utopia, *the* utopia that can be bought,”⁵⁰ and the ‘negative utopia’ understood as the only ‘true’ utopia. What Adorno calls the ‘cheap utopia,’ is above all the fulfillment of many so-called utopian dreams through technological development and culture industry: “television, the possibility of travelling to other planets, moving faster than sound” etc., but “insofar as these dreams have been realized, they all operate as though the best thing about them had been forgotten—one is not happy about them. As they have been realized, the dreams themselves have assumed a peculiar character of sobriety, of the spirit of positivism, and beyond that, of boredom.”⁵¹ The result of this positivism of the ‘false’ utopia is therefore that one sees oneself always deceived, and that is also the reason why its opposite, the ‘true’ utopia can be discussed “only in a negative way, [...] in the determined negation,” which in Adorno’s view leads to “the commandment not to ‘depict’ utopia or the commandment not to conceive certain Utopias in detail”.⁵²

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Even though it is not so difficult to recognize philosophical ideas of Hegel and Marx that are hidden behind these claims, their true origin lies elsewhere. What

⁴⁹ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988, pp. 1-17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 10-11.

“is meant here is the prohibition of casting a picture of utopia actually for the sake of utopia, and that has a deep connection to the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not make a graven image!’⁵³ As in a form of apophatic theology, utopia must remain defined and experienced only negatively.

Two important consequences follow from this assertion. The first one is that it is not even possible to state positively what is the essential concept of utopia. What is more, utopia does not even consist of a single category, because categories change themselves in the process. Even categories that played a crucial role in the utopian tradition, such as happiness or freedom, may be subject to a change or even subversion. The second consequence concerns a maintenance of utopian consciousness, because, as Adorno states it, “insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia, insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is”.⁵⁴ To put it simply, even if we do not know how to change the situation in order to make it better, we still may (and should) criticize the existent one, when we find it to be bad.

In his *Picture Imperfect*, Russell Jacobi follows a similar approach, and divides utopias and utopianism in two distinct classes. On the one hand, there are ‘blueprint utopias,’⁵⁵ and virtually all attention in the utopian tradition is focused on them. “From Thomas More to B. F. Skinner, the blueprint utopians have detailed what the future will look like; they have set it out; they have elaborated it; they have demarcated it. [...] The utopian blueprinters give the size of rooms, the number of seats at tables, the exact hours at which to arise and retire.”⁵⁶ There are several problems regarding ‘blueprint’ utopias: they are static, rigid, frozen in time, and they rapidly become dated. However, they are also authoritarian and repressive. “They say: this is the way people *must* dress; this is the hour they *must* eat.”⁵⁷

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 12.

⁵⁵ The first blueprint utopia was probably that of Hippodamus, one of the first city planners known to history, who achieved fame in the ancient world by designing cities. *Cf.* Mumford, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵⁶ Jacobi, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, there is a tradition of utopians, who were less noticed and not so easy to define. They form the opposite class, anti-blueprint utopians, or, as Jacobi called them, the iconoclastic utopians. “Rather than elaborate the future in precise detail, they longed, waited, or worked for utopia but did not visualize it. The iconoclastic utopians tapped ideas traditionally associated with utopia—harmony, leisure, peace, and pleasure—but rather than spelling out what could be, they kept, as it were, their ears open toward it.”⁵⁸

To address the problem of utopia today, therefore, means above all to grasp the dichotomy between the two aforementioned strategies. In the center of this rift stands the problem of image construction as the central preoccupation of contemporary societies. In traditional societies, wrote Daniel J. Boorstin, people had their ideals and they strove to follow them, even if they knew that they could not achieve them. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, this changed: “We came then to distrust the very concept of an ideal, as an abstraction. We distrusted any standard of perfection toward which all people could strive.”⁵⁹ Moreover, continues Boorstin, human aims and motives lost their relation to ideals, and the image took this role instead. In the process, the way of thinking about the relation between ideals and images has been reversed: “Instead of thinking that an image was only a representation of an ideal, we came to see the ideal as a projection or generalization of an image.”⁶⁰

In a process, similar to the one described by Boorstin, the ‘false’, or blueprint utopia, based on image production, became the mainstream utopian tradition. However, due to development of technology and society, it turned either into dystopia, which denigrated utopianism as a whole, or to escapism in the form of popular culture or, as Adorno and Horkheimer called it, culture industry. Both ‘solutions’ are devastating in the sense that they do not offer thinking of a different (possibly better) society in the future, since they both contribute either to fear of the future or of the *status quo*. The only way to a different and possibly better future, therefore, seems to be offered by the ‘true’, iconoclast utopia, which keeps alive probably the most important trait of human existence: hope.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Vintage Books, New York 2012, p. 201.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Not a 'hope' in the sense of an image within some slogan in a political campaign, but in the sense of a true utopian spirit. However, even so, one should not forget, as the ancient Roman poet Virgil pointed out, that nothing in this better future world will be given as a gift from the gods.

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