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Utopia: The Elsewhere and The Otherwise

Introduction

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Introduction

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- 1 Why talk about utopia in a journal dedicated to critical thinking? In fact, the reasons are plenty. The first one, which is always worth reminding, is that we still have to resist the negative overtone of the word. This overtone sweeps away the rich history of utopia and its many significations. Let us then start by reaffirming that utopia equates neither with the project to impose an oppressive society (the Stalinist “utopia” from yesterday, the Jihadist “utopia” from today), nor with the unrealistic dreams of disorientated minds (the patronising reproach of “utopianism” addressed to many projects of social transformation).

The many historical forms of utopia

- 2 Utopia is not what we all too often believe it to be, but it is many other things. Originally, it is a literary genre created by Thomas More in the sixteenth century. It is also a political tradition that culminated in the nineteenth century with the so-called “utopian socialism” (Fourier, Saint-Simon, Claire Démar...). In the beginning of the twentieth century, it became a philosophical concept in the works of Bloch, Benjamin, Mannheim, and others. And now, the term can refer to social experiments (“Cité radieuse” by Le Corbusier, back-to-the-landers of the sixties, “zadistes” opposing the Notre Dame des Landes airport project in France) as well as to techno-scientific narratives (cyber-utopias, human enhancement projects, posthumanism). Cut-off worlds, paradise lost, millennial futures, underground societies: these different figures display the many significations of utopia. They also make one wonder whether it is relevant to use a single word to name such a variety of things. Preparing an issue on utopia is thus first and foremost an attempt to organise and make sense of all the different meanings associated with the word.
- 3 With that in mind, we republish a text by **Pierre-François Moreau** taken from his 1982 book *Le récit utopique*. Moreau aptly defines and circumscribes utopia as a literary genre, distinguishing it from analogous narrative or philosophical structures: Plato’s Republic, the myth of the Golden Age, Jewish messianism, Christian millenarianism, the

Celtic Otherworld. Although Moreau's meticulous characterisation is precious, it does not imply that the notion of utopia should be limited to this specific literary genre that has accompanied the birth of the modern State. The work of Moreau should rather help us to differentiate the various historical incarnations of the aspiration to build a different society.

- 4 There is, indeed, a history of utopia, which includes the history of the literary genre but also stretches much further. When considering the history of the genre alone, it is worth noticing – as many already have – that a shift from space (a distant island) to time (a distant future) occurs between the classics (More, Campanella, Bacon, etc.) and the moderns (Mercier, Fourier, Morris, etc.). The significations of utopia become more complex when the notion acquires a sociological and philosophical meaning, in the works of Karl Mannheim, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse among others. According to these thinkers, utopia is not just a literary genre evolving over time. It is the existence within the world of a longing for an *elsewhere* and an *otherwise*. When Mannheim analyses the metamorphoses of “utopian consciousness”, he considers the historical transformations of a subjective attitude (the rejection of the world as it is) and the historical consequences of that attitude.¹ And when Benjamin tries to decipher the utopian images within the architecture of everyday life – be it urban spaces or advertising slogan – it is to free them from the iron cage where the capitalist productive order has locked them.²
- 5 It has thus become impossible to simply look at the many different utopias from afar, as if they were part of the same homogeneous and never-changing landscape. We should instead talk of a variety of utopias, of a variety of utopian impulses; in short, of an alterity that never stops cracking the crust of the socio-economic order. As we benefit from the work done by numerous thinkers to differentiate the notion of utopia from notions of myth, ideology or even fantasy (at the individual level) and phantasmagoria (at the collective level), we should not consider utopia only as a literary genre but – more ambitiously – as a *force operating within the existing world*. Utopia has an ontological dimension, in the sense that it is inseparable from what Ernst Bloch has named the not-yet-being (*noch-nicht-sein*), i.e. the fact that reality is laden with possibilities that have not yet been actualised. In this respect, utopia is at work in the world, or maybe we should say that the world is “haunted” by utopia, as **Avery Gordon** puts it in the beautiful and panoramic essay we republish for this issue. The historical alternatives “are already here in our given present-time, haunting what's established, making the present waver, making it not quite what we thought it was”.³
- 6 Such a perspective on the utopian is obviously at odds with a standard analysis of literary utopias. Utopia does not refer to a fictional and enclosed elsewhere anymore, but becomes a dimension of the world, as the world calls for its own transformation. In other words, the present is full of utopian thoughts and practices, which call for a brighter future and seek to radically transform the dominant social institutions.

Global vision, local practices

- 7 Considering utopia in this light bears another consequence. In classical literary utopias, the author builds a *global political fiction*, a vast institutional machinery where everything falls into place. The utopian projects of the nineteenth century still share this totalising and harmonious vision, even Fourier's phalanstery, where “explosive”

conflicts create a boisterous machine fuelled by dissent. On the opposite, we have gradually been accustomed to consider as utopian, not only global visions of alternative political orders, but also parcels of reality that are loosely connected to society as a whole: local community projects, non-conformist lifestyles, temporary practices or events. The utopian thus seems to reach almost everywhere, but it appears scattered in pieces and a bit disconnected from the ambition to build a radically different society. Maybe this is temporary, but we have to be aware of the risk of what Marx called “Robinsonades”, i.e. small scale utopias incapable of transforming the whole social structure and thus doomed to fail, to be neutralized and reintegrated in the “normal” course of society.

- 8 Whether the utopian vision is local or global, utopia cannot be associated – as its critiques often have – with a proto-totalitarian world. On the contrary, utopia invites us to free our political imagination and to let individual and collective projects develop. Miguel Abensour has endlessly written about this, sometimes with a bit of lyricism: “May utopias in their diversity, with their eccentricity, become part of the democratic debate and open up, in thousand different forms, the question of social alterity”.⁴ Indeed, although it is important to be aware of the importance of a global approach, it is impossible to overlook the local practices and struggles that have blossomed on the ruins of existing communist regimes – those totalitarian bureaucracies that eventually managed to make every sparkle of hope disappear. The networking of these practices could transcend the local level, as it is made clear in the interview with **Oliver Ressler**, the co-creator of the *Utopian Pulse* project, i.e. seven temporary salons where various artists from different countries presented interventions on subjects ranging from the gentrification of Hamburg to worker-owned companies in the context of the global economic crisis.
- 9 It would be wrong to think of these local utopias as absolutely disconnected from any global vision of social change. The historical and philosophical analysis carried out by Ernst Bloch in his masterpiece, *The Principle of Hope*, shows that there is always a dialectical relation between pieces of utopia and the totalising image of a human existence completely freed from alienation. Thus, the totalising perspective does not imply a totalitarian perspective, but rather appears as the permanent strive for the universal that exists within society.⁵ As **Catherine Moir** brilliantly reminds us in the article she wrote for this issue, in Bloch’s writings the totalising image is named *Heimat* (“homeland”). This notion should not be conflated with the positive description of a reconciled society, but figures the attempt to adumbrate the contours of such a society, “by emphasising what all those previous attempts to picture it have in common”.⁶ In other words, by putting together multiple fragments of utopia, it is possible to bring out a global vision of social change. And this vision should be understood as a dialectical image – as a mixture of reality and of the aim to overcome this reality – rather than as the perfect machinery of an ideal society, as classical utopias display it.

Utopia as method

- 10 It is also worth insisting on the fact that utopia is tightly connected to the epistemic and political characteristics of critical thinking. Partly because of the mainstream reception of Adorno and Horkheimer (on the one hand) and Bourdieu (on the other hand), critical theories are often considered as concerned solely with the denunciation

of alienation and the uncovering of domination, without a glimpse of what a more desirable future could look like. Their *épistèmè* and main focus on oppression seems to refrain them from noticing, naming and accompanying the practices of resistance or escape. They thus seem to favour a kind of lucid resignation: being aware of the reality of domination is not enough to carry the hope of overcoming this domination.

- 11 The notion of utopia might help us to move beyond this resignation or, at least, to articulate the necessary denunciation of oppression, domination and alienation, and strive for emancipation. It is indeed one of the defining characteristics of utopia to tightly connect negativity – breaching the evidence of the existing social world – and positivity – creating images of the future, like slivers of a different society. Utopia stems from a deep dissatisfaction with the current state of the world and, reciprocally, critique can be fuelled by the conviction that we are not bound to the existing reality.
- 12 During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the various forms of socialism opened up many utopian possibilities. Even if many such projects proved impracticable for the time being, they have nonetheless torn the authoritarian image of a social and political order presented as eternal. The writings of Antonio Gramsci are an example of this, as **Stephanie Roza** shows in her article. Although the Italian philosopher never thought of himself as a utopian thinker, his thoughts on education – first and foremost targeted at the fascist project of turning schools into propaganda offices for the regime – clearly evoke the utopian tradition, for instance the way Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella reflect on the education of citizens. Many of these thoughts, put together by Gramsci behind the walls of his prison, might still be relevant today.
- 13 Rediscovering a utopian impulse could also help to renew anthropology. Since the 1960s, anthropology has ceased to consider its objects as merely “exotic” and has gradually acknowledged the violence of the colonial order. But anthropology may still need to supplement its critical analysis of domination with an ethnography of the political imagination. This is the main argument of **Martin Hebert**, who develops a thorough methodological reflection, grounded in a long-term fieldwork in the Chiapas. He contends that we are in need of an anthropology of utopian horizons, by which he means a political anthropology that would be able to integrate both an account of the way individuals suffer and a story of their hopes.
- 14 The work of **Irving Wohlfarth** exhibits a somewhat similar political demand. Drawing lines between Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, he shows the relevance, and even the urgency, of a utopian approach to modern technology. Associated with a critical analysis of domination, such an approach could pave the way for an anthropo-technique of liberation of the relations between man and cosmos.
- 15 Those various articles make clear that utopia is also a method, and a method of particular interests for thinkers and scholars who do not believe that social sciences could, or should, be purely descriptive and “axiologically neutral”. To give the notion of utopia the credit it deserves is to consider that the social world could be otherwise, that current social relations are in no way necessary, and that many possibilities remain unexplored. The notion of utopia is not some kind of asymptotic ideal, totally separated from reality, only likely to give us abstract directions. Utopia – if we follow what thinkers like Bloch or Benjamin have written, as suggested earlier – is immanent to reality. It is a tendency already at work in the world.

- 16 This is not a way of saying that all utopian possibilities will happen. The category of “possibility” is neither the predictable, nor the probabilistic; and reflecting on utopia(s) is not a work of futurology or anticipation. We should think of utopia within a non-predetermined conception of history, and be aware that nothing can assure us beforehand that one particular possibility will be realised. Utopia is a method because it inclines us to pay attention to counter-hegemonic ways of acting, thinking and feeling. This method stems from the conviction that history is a never-ending creation and that the role of intellectuals, be it modest, is to question the existing society and to help formulating the alternatives that this society represses.
- 17 This is why we have also included in the “Varia” section an article by **Stéphane Douailler** (“Situation de la philosophie contemporaine – Guerre et culture”), which reflects on this method, and more specifically on the cracks in historical temporality and on the uses of the past and the future in the construction of present discourse. Douailler tackles the subject of cultural works stemming from periods of war. He contrasts Ernst Friedrich’s extremely pessimistic description of humanity with Ernst Junger’s aestheticised and warmongering use of images from the First World War. Douailler highlights the uncritical reassembling of those two diverging takes on the war (the painful reality of photographs showing disabled soldiers and the making of a bellicose ethos) during the celebrations of the French-German reconciliation in the 1990s. He reminds us that if the future is likely to be the free space where possible worlds can be projected (thus negating the present), the critical arrangements of the past can also be used by the dominant political forces of the present.
- 18 The work of **Anna Artaker and Meike Schmidt-Gleim** presented in the “Materialist Experiment” section is also an assembling of diverging images, but in this case they are images of the same architectural shape caught in various historical settings and social contexts. It thus presents four pairs of images – figuring pyramids, spheres, ornaments, and atrium – , which are just a glimpse of an extensive project, “Atlas of Arcadia”, directly inspired by Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. In a striking juxtaposition of similarities and opposites, these images make us aware of the gap between technological progress and social progress, of the sometimes frightening proximity between utopia and dystopia, but also of the possibility of utopia within the given world.

Reviews

- 19 In this issue of *Anthropology+Materialism* we also include two book reviews in Spanish, about two books recently edited in Argentina: Roque Larraquy’s *Informe sobre ectoplasma animal* (Buenos Aires: Eterna cadencia, 2014) with illustrations by Diego Ontivero, and a republication of the famous novel *Ferdydurke* (Buenos Aires : El cuenco de plata, 2014) by Witold Gombrowicz.
- 20 **Elsa Brondo**'s review displays the convergence between science, photographic techniques and political interests that shapes the background of Larraquy’s singular novel: *Informe sobre ectoplasma animal*. In a certain way, the word “*ectoplasma*” (*ectoplasm*) epitomises the confrontation between the ancient beliefs in ghosts and the instrumental use of photography, and the tension between scientific research on life and search for political domination. Brondo draws our attention to the political events of the 1930s (Uriburu's *de facto* government), although Larraquy never explicitly

mentions them. These events rather appear as ghosts in the background of the novel. Larraquy also follows the scientific experimentations on animals and describes the belief according to which it was possible to discover spectres in the first photographic registers. These spectres were considered as clues, or proofs, of the existence of ghosts, whereas in the same time modern scientific practices were used politically to increase government control. Larraquy thus shows us how Argentina was torn apart between modern science and ancient beliefs, and how photography managed to link these two diverging polarities.

- 21 **Soledad Nívoli's** review narrates the life in Argentina of Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who arrived in Buenos Aires on a transatlantic liner in 1939, shortly before the beginning of the Second World War. The Spanish translation of *Ferdydurke* – a consequence of the encounter between Gombrowicz, who could hardly speak Spanish, and a group of young Argentinians, who knew nothing about the Polish language – is now part of the writer's mythology. Gombrowicz stayed twenty years in Argentina and became immensely popular when he returned to Europe; a popularity that has continued to grow ever since. His life and work have been much studied in Argentina (as shown by the big conference that took place in Buenos Aires in 2014) and his leitmotifs (immaturity, monstrosity, the mediocrity of culture) have had a deep influence on contemporary Argentinian literature.

NOTES

1. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Mariner Books, 1995
2. Walter Benjamin, *Paris, capitale du XIX^e siècle. Le livre des passages*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1989
3. Avery Gordon, « Some Thoughts on the Utopian », *A+M*, n° 3.
4. Miguel Abensour, *L'homme est un animal utopique (Utopiques II)*, Arles, Les Éditions de la Nuit, p. 230.
5. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, MIT Press, 1995
6. Catherine Moir, « Casting a Picture: Utopia, *Heimat* and the Materialist Concept of History », *A+M*, n° 3.