The Possibility of Another Island: Utopian Discourse in the Age of Dystopia
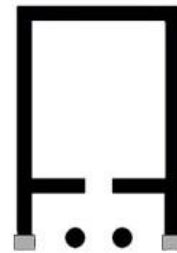
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Five hundred years ago, Thomas More set an island on the world map that would become the most fascinating place for people who were looking for a better life: not in an obscure hereafter, but in the here and now. The island was a place of justice, equality, and political participation in which money and property played no role. Its very existence was a demonstration that other societies, other ways of living, other political and economic arrangements were possible. More used a word game for the name of the island, out of the Greek words eu-topia ("good place") and ou-topia ("no place") he created Utopia. In the following centuries, people looked for Utopia, wrote descriptions of it, made political programmes, revolted, and decided to gather in intentional communities to find More's island. His strict and rather homogeneous version of society on Utopia shifted and transformed into more open, local, less authoritarian versions. The possibility for this island gave strength to political battles that aimed to improve the existing conditions in which people live together. In the twentieth-century, the last large-scale upheaval in Western societies to be fueled by the utopian mental images aimed at the creation of a society based on different political, economic and cultural values was in 1968.

In the same year when More's utopian island had its last reemergence in the West, another island, located far away in the Central Pacific, became independent from the colonial power of Australia. As Naomi Klein points out, within a short time the island, with the modest surface of 21square kilometers, prospered and, by the early 1970s, had the second highest GDP per capita in the world.[1] The new state on this island was seen as a model for economic development, and the economic wealth of the 10,000 inhabitants became considerable. The source of the wealth of the small nation state was found in the rocks in the very middle of the Pacific paradise: phosphate. In a world where soils became more and more exhausted due to agricultural over-exploitation, phosphate was in high demand as a fertiliser that would make the soils more exploitable. What fertilised the soils elsewhere gradually turned the island, previously known for its lush vegetation and exotic fauna ,into a wasteland. At the end of the eighteenth-century, the first Western visitors named the place "The Pleasant Island", now called Nauru.

The money flushed into Nauru, and the phosphate was mined out of the rocks in the center of the island. What brought Lamborghinis and Dollars to the people gradually contributed to a big hole in Nauru, which became bigger the more phosphate was extracted. Today the island can be likened to a ring, a circle with a hole in the middle of it; the island's natural beauty is largely destroyed and the phosphate has been mined out of the rocks. The imperative to

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[1] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything—Capitalism vs. the Climate* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), p. 141.

maintain the economic development at a high level drove the Nauruan government to find new solutions and, once the mining was over, they went into off-shore banking for Russian oligarchs. As Klein writes, in the years following the break-down of the Soviet Union, the island hosted approximately four hundred phantom banks that laundered 470 billion dollars through the island nation.[2]

International banking regulations put an end to the offshore business in Nauru. Refugees who were heading for Australia in the beginning of the new millennium opened a new source of income. The Australian government aimed at drastically restricting immigration and they needed a place where the refugees could be sent to, a place that was not in Australia. The citizens of Nauru offered their version of *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture) and found a way to recycle the gigantic phosphate hole in the heart of their island: it became a big refugee camp run in the service of the Australian state. A report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on Nauru concludes that the 'harsh physical conditions at the centres not only do not meet international standards—they also have a profound impact on the men, women and children housed there'.[3] David Marr describes the situation of the refugees as prisoners who 'threaten death by hanging, jumping, swallowing razor blades, slitting wrists, cutting throats, overdosing, refusing medication and walking into the sea. At any time a cohort of prisoners toys with death by refusing to eat'.[4]

Through this *offshore processing* which is part of the Pacific Solution that is designed to keep refugees away from the Australian mainland, Nauru manages to generate income, badly needed after the end of phosphate and offshore banking. After the relentless attempts to find new sources of income to sustain the economic development of the island, Nauruans now must face an unanticipated challenge: the island is projected to sink in the ocean due to global warming (and the resulting higher water levels) before the end of the twenty-first century. Klein explains that:

> now the country faces a double bankruptcy: with 90 percent of the island depleted from mining, it faces ecological bankruptcy; with a debt of at least $800 million, Nauru faces financial bankruptcy as well. But these are not Nauru's only problems. It now turns out that the island nation is highly vulnerable to a crisis it had virtually no hand in creating: climate change and the drought, ocean acidification, and rising waters it brings. Sea levels around Nauru have been steadily climbing by about 5 millimeters per year since 1993, and much more could be on the way if current trends continue.[5]

Nauru, which applied all the neoliberal strategies for economic success, including extensive extraction of raw materials, the development of consumption-based economy, deregulation of the banking sector, and the development of the (offshore processing) service sector, is now

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[2] Klein, p. 12.

[3] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Men, women and children suffering from harsh physical conditions and legal shortcomings at Pacific Island asylum centres: UNHCR reports*, 26 November 2013. See <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5294ab544.html>. [Accessed 22 April 2017].

[4] David Marr, 'The Nauru files are raw evidence of torture. Can we look away?', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-are-raw-evidence-of-torture-can-we-look-away>. [Accessed 22 April 2017].

[5] Klein, p. 165.

facing financial and ecological bankruptcy. Nauru, the island of Neoliberalism, is going to disappear as a consequence of global warming; but what are the prospects of the island of Utopia in this political and ecological context? Is Thomas More's island enclosed off the imagination of contemporary thinkers in the contemporary century?

Utopia, especially eu-topia, has mostly been a no-go area for contemporary thinkers. The dominant tendency in the political, philosophic and cultural field is dystopian. Symptomatic for the dystopian version of the utopian islands is Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island*. Daniel, the protagonist and a successful comedian who starts to hate laughter and finds solace and despair in his sexuality, is cloned and lives an eternal life as a neo-human in a post-apocalyptic world. The old-fashioned humans are largely extinct, with the most resilient homo sapiens surviving in a state of primitive existence reduced to their most basic survival instincts. The neo-humans all live separately from each other, everyone on his own 'island'. Houellebecq's novel testifies the ultimate defeat of any society project, of any meaning, of any connection between humans with the ultimate apocalypse as the final outcome.

Daniel, the comedian, in his own way contributes to this outcome by ridiculing any kind of alternative approach to the status quo of the early twenty-first century. For the sake of a short laughter of his audience, he launches attacks against 'all forms of rebellion, of nationalist or revolutionary struggle, and in reality against political action itself'—only to become, in a later stage of his life, disgusted by laughter in itself.[6] He instinctively understands the limits of his own version of the contemporary nihilism:

> [W]hat I could no longer stand was laughter in itself, that sudden violent distortion of the features that deforms the human face and strips it instantly of all dignity. If man laughs, if he is the only one, in the animal kingdom, to exhibit this atrocious facial deformation, it is also the case that he is the only one, if you disregard the natural self-centredness of animals, to have attained the supreme and infernal stage of cruelty.[7]

This cruelty is not remedied by a new civilisational project, such as how the sixteenth-century cruelty against English peasants in the process of enclosure found its expression in More's Utopia, but by an attempt to produce more laughter and thereby make the status quo more acceptable. Daniel understands that:

> Like the revolutionary, the comedian came to terms with the brutality of the world, and responded to it with increased brutality. The results of his action, however was not to transform the world, but to make it acceptable by transmuting the violence, necessary for any revolutionary action, into *laughter*… To sum it up, like all clowns since the dawn of time, I was a sort of collaborator.[8]

In times of Nauru, the absence of a utopian project and the predominance of dystopian undertones in cultural and political discourse do not fuel the emancipatory struggle for a *eu-topia* but strengthen the nihilism of neoliberalism and the reactionary nostalgia of right-wing populism. On the left side of the political spectrum, in the aftermath of postmodernism, utopia

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[6] Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island* (London: Phoenix, 2009), p. 45.
[7] ibid, p. 47.
[8] ibid., p. 134.

has been classified as a dangerous meta-narrative and thereby labeled as *ou-topia*. Instead of setting out protagonists on journeys to discover islands where a better life is possible, the contemporary critique of the status quo mostly refrains from positing the mental image of a better society and instead propagates passive resistance. The astonishing career of Bartleby illustrates this anti-utopian mindset.

Bartleby versus Barthélemy

Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street', written in 1853, became an influential reference point for some twentieth-century philosophers. Bartleby, a scrivener who works in a law office and copies documents, has henceforth been interpreted as an incorporation of silent resistance. The shy and grey man likes to refuse services to his employer (the narrator of the story) giving chiefly one explanation: "I would prefer not to". As the story unfolds, Bartleby prefers not to work at all anymore, and prefers not to leave the law office—which he also uses as a sleeping place and in which he spends most of his time staring out of the window. Whenever someone approaches him with any request his answer is perennially "I would prefer not to". When the lawyer decides to take a new office because his Christian ethics forbid him to extrude Bartleby, the new owner removes the fatalistic old man and, ultimately, Bartleby dies in prison.

More than a century later, philosophers like Gilles Deleuze or Giorgio Agamben made extensive comments on the Melville story; Deleuze even saw Bartleby as the 'new Christ'.[9] Agamben interprets Bartleby's behavior as an 'experiment' and asserts that the scrivener 'calls into question this supremacy of the will over potentiality'.[10] Potentiality is also understood as the option to say "I would prefer not to", or as Agamben states:

> To believe that will has power over potentiality, that the passage to actuality is the result of a decision that puts an end to the ambiguity of potentiality (which is always potentiality to do and not to do)—this is the perpetual illusion of morality.[11]

By disconnecting potentiality from actuality and moving it into the sphere of the contemplative, Agamben gives an explicit political connotation to Bartleby's attitude. Advocating inactivity or passive refusal to participate, Agamben's ontology of potentiality is in the very last consequence an affirmation of the status quo. Franco Berardi echoes Bartleby by asking: 'Should we not free ourselves from the thirst for activism that fed the 20th century to the point of catastrophe and war?', and wonders if a 'withdrawal into inactivity, silence, and passive sabotage' might not be the better option.[12]

Passive sabotage, silence, and the ultimate withdrawal from activism are attitudes that cannot fundamentally challenge the status quo. While Beradi's fatigue of activism reflects the

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[9] Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby; or, The Formula', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1997), pp. 68-90, p. 90.

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 254.

[11] ibid.

[12] Franco Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), p. 9.

disenchantment of the (ex-)activist, what he fails to see is the reason why activism thus far had too little impact on the political decision-making process. As the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Indignados or Nuit Debout have shown, a surge of activism dissolves when there is no utopian mental picture that sustains the movements after the first rush of energy has evaporated. In the 21st century, a protest movement can be easily turned into just another "event" if there is no common project.

A spectre is haunting the critics of capitalism world-wide, the spectre of resignation! David Graeber argues that we 'cling to what exists because we can no longer imagine an alternative that wouldn't even be worse'.[13] Russel Jacoby sees the emergence of a new consensus: 'There are no Alternatives. This is the Wisdom of our time, an age of political exhaustion and retreat'.[14] Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish state that people used to dream big but 'such dreams now seemed smothered by the rampant individualism, claustrophobic cynicism and reactionary backlash engendered by neoliberal social engineering and shrill neoconservative moralism'.[15] Frederic Jameson famously summed up the resignation of the imagination: 'Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism',[16] while Jacoby describes the consequence of the political resignation: 'a utopian spirit—a sense that the future could transcend the present—has vanished'.[17] And Haiven and Khasnabish add that the crisis has been rendered so banal that, instead of 'functioning as a rallying cry for collective action, it often serves to obfuscate rather than illuminate, demobilize rather than inspire', and criticise that 'the crisis trope encloses our collective imagination of what is possible, narrowing it to focus on the crisis'.[18] The question will be whether the current menace of the rise of reactionary populism and the gradually renewed interest in utopian ideas will result in a mental escape from the crisis trope.

Crisis in lieu of collective imagination, crisis instead of utopia, the permanent crisis that does not only seem to be a defining structural characteristic of the economic system but also of its critics. The downsizing practice of Western business is mirrored in the downsizing of the political ambitions of the left. Jacoby describes the mindset of the 'new radical':

> At best radicals and leftist envision a modified society with bigger pieces of pie for more customers. They turn utilitarian, liberal and celebratory. The left once dismissed the market as exploitative; it now honors the market as rational and humane. The left once disdained mass culture as exploitative; now it celebrates it as rebellious. The left once honored independent intellectuals as courageous; now it sneers at them as elitist. The left once rejected pluralism as superficial; now it worships it as profound. We are witnessing not simply the defeat of the left, but its conversion and perhaps inversion.[19]

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[13] David Graeber, *Debt: The first 5,000 years* (New York, NY: Melville House, 2012), p. 382.
[14] Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), p. xi.
[15] Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014), p. 30.
[16] Frederic Jameson, *Future City* (London: New Left Review, 2003). <http://newleftreview.org/II/21/fredric-jameson-future-city>. [Accessed 22 April 2017].
[17] Jacoby, p. xi.
[18] Haiven and Khasnabish, p. 31.
[19] Jacoby, p. 10.

While Jacoby's judgement mirrors the deep disappointments with the Blair/Schroeder reconfigurations of Social Democracy in the 1990s ("New Centre"), the current situation of social-democratic interpretations of emancipatory politics (Hollande in France, for instance) shows that presently democratic left-wing parties are not celebrating the market anymore, but have silently accommodated to it.

To return to Bartleby: what did his "I would prefer not to"-attitude ultimately lead to? A (self-afflicted) lonely death in prison. In the context of twenty-first century capitalism, Bartleby's story seems like a remote glimpse of a bygone age: as Wall Street lawyer, Bartleby's employer, inspired by Christian charity, torments himself over what the right attitude towards the mild and friendly, despite the obstinate attitude of his squatting employee, might be. In the current situation, Bartleby would be removed by a security service within a day, and the employer would go home and not spend a single thought on the strangely-behaving worker who refuses to do his job. In addition, the scriveners of the nineteenth-century have been replaced by the scanners of the twenty-first. While the Bartlebys of today would prefer not to do anything, the Wall Street lawyers of today (co-) shape the world.

It might be instructive to look at another figure from the nineteenth-century, who was Bartleby's real life contemporary, Barthélemy. Born Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin in 1796, as a young man he worked for a time in a similar business to that of Barleby's, as a cashier in a small bank. Unlike the latter, he preferred not to work for the bank anymore and reorganised his life. The main inspiration was a meeting with the French social reformer Saint-Simon, who deeply impressed Barthélemy with his utopian socialism. Saint-Simon died in 1825, a few years after this first meeting. In 1830, then, Barthélemy quit his job and organised centers of action for the Saint-Simonian movement in which he gathered thousands of followers. Together with Amand Bazard, Barthélemy became the leader of this movement, which blended Christian elements with socialism, utopianism and social experimentation. But the two "Pères Suprêmes" (Supreme Fathers) of the movement split over different visions of how to effectuate political change and, after Bazard and his disciples left, Barthélemy was the sole leader.

According to Enfantin's claim, the movement had 40,000 followers in the beginning of the 1830s. At that time, Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin moved with forty disciples to Ménilmontant, a working-class district in Paris, and tried to put in practice their ideas about intentional community. No private property, free love and everyday solidarity. The idea of common dependence was even reflected in their clothing. Barthélemy and his disciples wore shirts that had the buttons on the back so that they could only get dressed and undressed with the help of others. Often they ran through the streets singing and were ridiculed by the locals, but the French government took the threat to "public morality" seriously and banned the movement. Barthélemy and his disciples fled to Egypt and, among other things, advocated the construction of the Suez Canal in 1833. Their project was rejected, and they were sent back to France. Until his death in 1864, Enfantin was involved in the construction of railways and actively published books on politics, political economy and philosophy. The Suez Canal was opened five years after his death: the project was then realised by a French diplomat whom he met during his time in Egypt, Ferdinand de Lesseps.

A comparison of the life story of Barthélemy with the fictional story of Bartleby could be reduced to the question: what is the more suitable attitude towards the ongoing political challenges: activism or fatalism (although the potential not to do something and resignation to fate can be ultimately seen as the same in this context)?

Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin's activism can be seen through contemporary eyes as ridiculous and, ultimately, while he did not succeed in changing French society in his lifetime, left an important political legacy. But what Hannah Arendt calls the 'unpredictable outcome of action', in this case of Enfantin's action, has challenged some basic assumptions of his time, forced the public to confront his ideas and, most likely, given meaning to his followers.[20] In his own way, Enfantin (somewhat ironically, his family name means "childlike" in French) proved that individual and collective agency has the potential to challenge actuality if the will and the political imagination are strong enough. "I would prefer not to", an unused potential, is a simple act within the mind, a glorification of passivity, and in the very end the unused potential of agency, might, as an irony of fate, result in the actual loss of potentiality, a situation where it is impossible to say: "I would prefer not to".

In Houellebecq's novel, Daniel 25, the clone of Daniel in the faraway future, sums up his analysis of the life accounts of the early twenty-first century:

> A violent savage future was what awaited men, many were aware of it even before the unleashing of the first troubles… This anticipatory awareness, however, did not enable men in any way to put into action, or even to imagine, any kind of solution.[21]

The anticipatory awareness that Daniel 25 depicts is at odds with contemporary notions of realism. What is considered to be realism today is to retreat into the private sphere, which is a twenty-first century version of utilitarianism as understood by Thomas Babington Macaulay, who famously stated that '[a]n Acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia'.[22] Russel Jacoby (1999) replied to this:

> An acre in Middlesex is better than an estate in Utopia, but is a dreary flat in Middlesex the goal of life? Is it worth surrendering all desires – "all that about liberty, and so forth" – that go beyond the immediate possibilities? A materialism that values the here and now may be beyond reproach, but a utilitarianism that swallows imagination may not be.[23]

The problem is that this trade-off with the principality of utopia is one with diminishing returns. Today, the 'dreary flat' in Middlesex would cost around 300,000 British pounds and, for the average British citizen, would need to be financed with a sizable bank loan. Thus, from a utilitarian point of view, the question would be: is a dreary flat in Middlesex, which is in large parts owned by the bank and obliges the "owner" to service loan payments for the next two decades of their life, worth renouncing a principality in utopia?

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[20] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 220.
[21] Houellebecq, p. 390.
[22] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Lord Bacon, Part II, His Character and Writings* (Richmond: Thos W. White, 1838), p. 78.
[23] Jacoby, p. 176.

If the history of modern utopia started with countryside dwellers being excluded from their property by enclosure acts (and here an important detail Macaulay overlooked: the principalities in utopia were developed because the acres were taken away), today the enclosure has been expanded from the physical world to the mental; what is additionally enclosed is the imagination. Whereas in More's time the answer to social injustice, political transformation and a new world system was to send Hythloday on a discovery trip to Utopia, today's reaction would most likely be to send him on a tour on the market merry-go-round, let him swallow a xanax to calm down the vertigo, give him a short lesson on the "fact" that there is no outside and no alternative, and let him drive back in his leased car to the shoebox in Middlesex.

In *The Possibility of an Island*, Daniel 25, the clone in the faraway future, concludes his journey to the outside world, and his reflection on the life story of his faraway ancestor of the 21st century with the words: 'The future was empty. (…) Life was real'.[24]

Utopia Disconnected

This atmosphere of defeat could be only countered by the emergence of a new utopianism which picks up all the left-over imagination that has not yet retreated or been co-opted by the market merry-go-round and attempts to convert it into a dynamic and open perspective for the future. The problem is that even those who acknowledge the importance of utopian thinking, as does, for instance, Frederic Jameson, are often more critical of utopia than of the status quo. He writes:

> Let's recapitulate our findings at this eleventh hour. We have come laboriously to the conclusion that all ostensible Utopian content was ideological, and that the proper function of its themes lay in critical negativity, that is, in their function to demystify their opposite numbers. The examination of the anti-Utopia, then, of the fear of Utopia, has led us to identify a fundamental source in the very form of Utopia itself, in the formal necessity of Utopian closure. In addition we have been plagued by the perpetual reversion of difference and otherness into the same, and the discovery that our most energetic imaginative leaps into radical alternatives were little more than the projections of our own social moment and historical and subjective situation.[25]

In short: utopia is ideological, largely reduced to its critical function and a mere projection of an individual longing for something that is lacking in his life. Jameson describes his approach towards utopianism by underlining that 'the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy'. His contemplative attitude can be best summed up by his assertion that, while expecting new forms of political agency to develop, in 'the meantime, to adapt Mrs Thatcher's famous dictum, there is no alternative to Utopia, and late capitalism has no natural enemies'.[26] Jameson's irony cannot distract from the underlying defeatism of his premise.

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[24] Houellebecq, p. 423.
[25] Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 211.
[26] ibid., pp. xvi, vii.

In this understanding, utopianism is reduced to vague expectations. But, of course, Jameson is not the only one who is keeping a careful critical distance to the idea of utopia. Rachel Weiss sees utopia not as a vision but as 'a point of departure, a structure through which to approach the possibility of transformation'.[27] For Weiss, the reason for this reserved attitude is that the (present) time

> seems, on the face of it, to be a time when utopianism would be scarce: memories of false utopias are still too fresh, and the kinds of fervent belief that utopias have required of their adherents seem now a harsh anachronism. Idealised formations hold little value, and utopia's romantic aspirations, its tilting at the impossible, fit poorly in a moment of posthistory, posthumanity, ideological implosion and radical doubt.[28]

T.J. Demos lists more contemporary critics that are warning about Utopia:

> Rancière warns about "misguided utopian metaphyics", and Étienne Balibar explains that owing to its disastrous twentieth-century history "we need a vacation from utopia, while at the same time freeing the powers of the imagination." According to theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "One primary effect of globalization... is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no "outside".[29]

On the face of it, the critique presented here is rather weak depending on whether the question of what is more needed is answered as either a vacation from capitalism or a vacation from utopia (a visit to Nauru might be instructive). And the Hardt and Negri premise that there is no outside (of the Empire) is approximately as categorical as the omnipresent claim that "There is no Alternative". The real question is not whether there is an "outside" or not but what is (and not whether there is) "otherwise".

But the contemporary warnings against utopia come from all ends of the spectrum. Anthony Giddens calls for a 'utopian realism' which is basically an acceptance of the status quo,[30] while Robert Kagan simply declares the 'end of dreams', essentially another end in the end of the end of history.[31] Critics like Rachel Weiss mourn 'the immense emptiness that trails these events exists amidst a general climate that insistently and for good reasons disavows ideas of truth, of legitimacy, and authority and "rightness" and good'. But despite the emptiness, she underlines that 'one of the givens of the new landscape seemed, more than the end of history, the end of utopia and, moreover, an angry insistence that such ideas were always ridiculous, cruel, stupid'.[32]

Jacoby describes the current state of utopianism: 'Thomas More dreamed of a utopia without war, money, violence or inequality. Five centuries later the most imaginative futurists foresee

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[27] Rachel Weiss, 'Utopiary', in *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*, ed. by J. Rüsen, J. Fehr, and T.W.M. Rieger (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 190-204, pp. 202-3.
[28] ibid.
[29] T.J. Demos, 'Is Another World Possible? The Politics of Utopia and the Surpassing of Capitalism in Recent Exhibition Practice', in *Art Production and Social Movements*, ed. by G. Grindon (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), pp. 52-82, p. 56.
[30] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 154.
[31] Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p. 97.
[32] Weiss, p. 191.

a utopia with war, money, violence and inequality'.[33] And Peter Thompson diagnoses a loss of hope (due to the privatisation of hope) and writes that, in the context of the work of Bloch, at the present day the 'apparent loss of hope for change or improvement seems to have become a self-fulfilling and debilitating condition'.[34]

What is the common thread among these thinkers, in times of a downsized expectations towards possible social, political and economic change? Among the contemporary thinkers quoted here, three basic attitudes—in relation to social alternatives, agency, possible reality-transcending political concepts and their manifestation through utopian mental images—can be detected. These basic attitudes can be described as contemporary *ou-topia*, contemplative utopia, and activism without utopian mental picture.

1) *Contemporary ou-topia* (Berardi, Hardt & Negri, Agamben):

The attitude towards social alternatives is critical because the contemporary *ou-topia* is implicitly based on the premise that social change is not possible in an all-englobing system. The world is more likely to change for the worse, become a non-place, an *ou-topia* where the political imagination is forever locked in the present framework. There are no discernible utopian mental images to be found in the contemporary *ou-topia* and the general attitude toward it is in most cases fatalistic. The TINA premise (There Is No Alternative) is largely accepted.

2) *Contemplative u*topia* (Jameson, Weiss, Jacoby, Thompson):

The attitude towards social alternatives is generally positive, the need for utopian transformation is recognised, and social change is considered to be theoretically possible; however, no concrete agency is articulated or even identified. The general positive function of utopia as a reality-transcending political concept is recognised; often, however, with an ambiguous angle because of the historical failures of certain utopian concepts. The utopian mental image for the contemplative utopia would be a map drawn with the intention to better frame the complex realities. The need to draw a map indicates also a general uncertainty about the direction and shape of possible political change.

3) *Activism without utopian mental picture* (Graeber, Haiven and Khasnabish):

The attitude towards social alternatives is positive, activism is recognised as a way of changing the framework of society, theory is important but action is primordial. The activism is motivated by reality-transcending political concepts but they are largely rooted in anarchism (or anarcho-syndicalism) and feminism, in some rarer cases still (none of the above-mentioned authors) from Marxism. The reality-transcending concepts generally do not contain a concrete image of utopian futures but are more ideological orientation points, which conceptually frame the political struggle.

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[33] Jacoby, p. 161.

[34] In *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*, ed. by Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 3.

The classification indicates that agency and utopia are largely disconnected from each other in contemporary perception of the possibilities of social change. For any social transformation to be conceivable the two domains of agency and utopian thinking would have to be explicitly connected to each other. Thus far, this "retopian" project that would connect political agency with a utopian mental image has not yet taken shape. As the example of Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin has shown, the most efficient ground for this connection between agency and utopian mental picture is social experimentation on a local level.

Lost Islands and Castles in the Air

The contemporary nihilism of Houellebecq's Daniel (whether in the version of Daniel 1 or in the neo-human version of the future Daniel 24 and Daniel 25), and the disconnection of potentiality from actuality exemplified in Bartleby, are not offering any potential for social change. Without this potential for social change, without the understanding of utopia as *eu-topia*, Naomi Klein's description of Nauru will be a future prospect for many other places. Klein explains:

> Reviewing the island's painful history, it strikes me that so much of what has gone wrong on Nauru—and goes on still—has to do with its location, frequently described as "the middle of nowhere" […]. The nation's remoteness made it a convenient trash can—a place to turn the land into trash, to launder dirty money, to disappear unwanted people, and now a place that may be allowed to disappear altogether.[35]

The case of Nauru is an extreme illustration of what happens when a *ou-topian* understanding of the world is at the centre of the political, economic and cultural paradigm of what Klein labels extractivism. Whereas Klein defines this as a 'dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking', the understanding of extractivism can be expanded to the human sphere.[36] In the absence of a utopian mental image, activism against the possible Naurusation of the planet becomes a futile attempt without a utopian mental image. A response to extractivism cannot be found in activism when the only mental image is Nauru and when agency is reduced to the occasional flare-ups of protest movements that can agree what they are against but not what society they actually stand for.

Nauru will be gone. What will happen to the other island, Utopia? It has produced a different kind of fertiliser than phosphate, a fertiliser for the imagination, a world of ideas to fill the hole inside, a model for living that creates pleasant islands instead of destroying them. Oscar Wilde once remarked that a map of the world without Utopia is not even worth glancing at.[37] In hindsight of the developments in Nauru, in order to preserve the possibility of another island, it is time to put Utopia back on the world-map of the twenty-first century.

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[35] Klein, pp. 167-8.
[36] ibid., p. 169.
[37] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man* (London: Arthur L. Humpreys, 1900), p. 36

As Lewis Mumford remarks: 'Our choice is not between eutopia and the world as it is, but between eutopia and nothing—or rather nothingness.' His conclusion resounds: 'Our most important task at the present moment is to build castles in the air'.[38]

Mumford referred to what he called a reconstructive utopia, which he described as 'a reconstituted environment that is better adapted to the nature and aims of the human beings who dwell within it than the actual one'.[39] In the present context, the idea of human nature is too problematic, and the reconstructive utopia hence does not make claim on human nature but believes in the power of reality-transcending eutopian images can be termed "retopia". It could be that the most fertile ground for reality-transcending concepts in the retopian mode are the places that were left behind by the global markets, or, to recall the comments of Mumford: 'It should not surprise us therefore if the foundations for eutopia were established in ruined countries; that is, in countries where metropolitan civilization has collapsed and where all its paper prestige is no longer accepted at paper value'.[40] In the present context, the topos of the retopia could thus be abandoned villages in Spain, derelict industrial areas in Latvia, or post-industrial metropolitan areas such as Detroit. The retopian experiments in these places could be based on a return to the commons and thereby practically reanimate the idea of society on a small scale.

While the island of Nauru has lost its core and is doomed to vanish, the islands of retopia are yet to take shape.

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[38] Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York, NY: Boni and Liveright, 1922), pp. 180, 186.
[39] ibid., p. 14.
[40] ibid., p. 184.

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