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Utopia

Gerry Canavan

First coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 philosophic treatise and pseudo-travelogue, the word *utopia* may well be the most enduring pun in the history of English literature.

Simultaneously connoting *eu-topos*, the good place, and *ou-topos*, nowhere or no place, utopia is the paradise that doesn't exist—the perfect location for any number of fantastic speculations, brutal satires, pie-in-the-sky political programs, and desperate dreams of other ways of life. In another era these utopian speculations were (like More's own) literally hidden lands or lost islands on the other side of the world—but as the world has become more and more completely mapped the site for utopia has typically shifted instead to alternative (usually future) time (*uchronia*). Likewise, as the term has gained currency it has developed a number of useful counterterms:

1. *dystopia* (dys-topos, the bad place): the opposite of a utopia, which typically serves as a warning to the present; a paradigmatic dystopian narrative would focus on a wicked state that one must overthrow or seek to flee.
2. *anti-utopia*: the negation of a utopia, which serves as the disproof of utopian possibility; rather than keeping open the possibility of historical mutability (as in the possibility of overthrowing or fleeing the dystopia), the anti-utopia argues instead that meaningful historical difference is impossible and all human social structures will necessarily exhibit hierarchy and exploitation.
3. *anti-dystopia*: a less-used fourth category to suggest the negation of dystopian possibility, i.e., that despite what appears to be a world of avoidable misery and needless pain we are actually living out a divine plan in which all things happen for the best (as in most Christian theology).

Other key terms in contemporary utopian thinking include the idea of *the break* (the superhistorical rupture that separates the utopian society from the ordinary outcomes of history) and *the enclave* (the tendency of utopias to eliminate internal barriers while bulwarking external ones). In some cases the break and the enclave become the same thing; the foundational gesture of More's original Utopia, for instance, was King Utopus's digging of an immense trench that turned Utopia from a peninsula into an island.¹

In Marx's own time, it was the tension between *perfectability* and *plausibility* in utopian political transformation that motivated him to speak so negatively of the thinkers on the left that he called, derisively, the "Utopian Socialists." In the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels' critique of the

utopian socialists is relentless; they devote an entire section to demolishing utopian idealism and implied refusal to link a critique of society to class antagonism:

The undeveloped state of the class struggle, as well as their own surroundings, causes Socialists of this kind to consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without the distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society?

Hence, they reject all political, and especially all revolutionary action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel. (Marx 1969: n.p.)

The “fantastic pictures of future society” promulgated by the utopian socialists correspond to the “first instinctive yearnings” of the proletariat “for a general reconstruction of society” but at the same time interrupt the development of class consciousness by redirecting that critique in unhelpful directions. Thus they are “purely,” or merely, “Utopian”; “these fantastic attacks on [capitalism], lose all practical value and all theoretical justification ... They, therefore, endeavour, and that consistently, to deaden the class struggle and to reconcile the class antagonisms” (Marx 1969: n.p.). In ignoring the practical questions of how the utopian future society might be brought about through revolution, and how it might be organized and sustained afterwards, the Utopian Socialists propose only “castles in the air” that ultimately speak to the sentimentality of the bourgeois rather than any practical or collective effort to transform society. And yet, despite this failing, the Utopian Socialists are “fanatical and superstitious” in their commitment to “the miraculous effects of their social science” (Marx 1969: n.p.)—perhaps most infamously registered in Charles Fourier’s claim that under his utopian system the North Pole would turn tropical and the seas would turn to lemonade.²

This sort of negative utopianism was contrasted in Marx and Engel’s writings with their own “scientific socialism,” a term used primarily by Engels but reflecting the thinking of both. In contrast to the idealism of the Utopian Socialists that would hold that “Socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and has only to be discovered to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power” (Engels 1970: n.p.), the scientific socialists commit themselves to the material analysis of power relations in the class antagonism and the need for revolutionary thinking grounded in class struggle. Without this materialist grounding socialism becomes reactionary and doomed, running counter to its stated purpose by reinforcing the ungrounded dreams and self-protective wishful thinking of the bourgeoisie.

And yet, despite this key theoretical distinction, it cannot be denied that Marx is certainly something of a utopian thinker after all, both in the positive sense of positing a future state in which the toxic class antagonism of actually existing history has been resolved and also in the

more negative sense of not providing sufficient details about either the emergence of that state or its general organization. Even in Engels's famous "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," which elaborates on the distinction between the two varieties of socialism in the *Manifesto* at length, the end state of "Proletarian Revolution"—ostensibly the fulcrum of the entire discussion—is reduced to a single paragraph at the end:

III. Proletarian Revolution. Solution of the contradictions. The proletariat seizes the public power, and by means of this transforms the socialized means of production, slipping from the hands of the bourgeoisie, into public property. By this act, the proletariat frees the means of production from the character of capital they have thus far borne, and gives their socialized character complete freedom to work itself out. Socialized production upon a predetermined plan becomes henceforth possible. The development of production makes the existence of different classes of society thenceforth an anachronism. In proportion as anarchy in social production vanishes, the political authority of the State dies out. Man, at last the master of his own form of social organization, becomes at the same time the lord over Nature, his own master — free (Engels 1970: n.p.).

Marx and Engels' futurological imagination fares little better in the *Manifesto* itself, which similarly names communism primarily through a sort of negative theology: communism will not possess this and that feature of contemporary capitalism, and indeed "can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of *all* existing social conditions" (Marx 1969: n.p., emphasis mine). Beyond that sense of communism as radical opposite, the *Manifesto*—like most of Marx and Engels's writings—is itself notoriously light on specifics.

Perhaps because of this internal tension many thinkers working in the Marxist tradition have been attracted to the study of utopia and its central place (as the theoretical classless end-state of history called communism) within socialist thought. Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) saw this dialectic between idealism and materialism as the feature that distinguished Marxism from all other systems of thought, nearly all of which (he argued) are constituted by what he called "the principle of hope" (Bloch 1995 *q.v.*); Marxism is unique only insofar as it provides a concrete blueprint for how that hope might be actualized. The highly influential work of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), while not organized around utopia per se, nonetheless replicates the concept in the messianism that runs throughout Benjamin's thought and provides the antidote to his otherwise deeply grim diagnosis of society: the promise that each terrible moment of class domination and exploitation also contains within itself the possibility of its own supersession, just as "every second of time," however miserable, is yet "the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (Benjamin 1969: 264).

In the contemporary moment the literary critic and cultural theorist Fredric Jameson (1934-) is likely the thinker best associated with this strain of utopian Marxism. Jameson's work has elevated Bloch's "principle of hope" and Benjamin's messianism to the kernel of optimism that undergirds all artistic, philosophical, and futurological cultural production. "[A]ll contemporary works of art," Jameson declares provocatively in "Reification and Utopia in Mass

Culture,” “whether those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture—have as their underlying impulse... our deeper fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived” (Jameson 1979: 147). In his *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson replicates Marx and Engels’s attack on the Utopian socialists with the distinction he draws between *the utopian program* and *the utopian impulse* (Jameson 2005: 3-5 and *ff.*). Utopian programs are imagined blueprints for Utopia, always hopelessly compromised and corrupted by the limitations of their origins in the pre-Utopian mind—and indeed in practice are frequently ludicrous, despite the seriousness with which they are proposed and discussed. But the preposterous nature of most utopian scheming does not detract from the importance of the utopian impulse—the utopian form—the Blochian dream of a better world in the abstract that animates and motivates all human creativity, perhaps especially the genre of science fiction (sf).

Jameson’s former student, Carl Freedman, likewise extends this notion to see it as the constitutive tension at the heart of Marxism. Freedman juxtaposes the deflationary, demystifying tendencies of film noir—which shows us the dirt and grit of the fallen world in which we live—with the inflationary, inspirational ambitions of sf—which shows us other, better possible worlds we might yet create. He further argues that this dialectical push and pull between deflation and inflation is what animates Marxist thought. “The deflationary dimension,” Freedman writes, “is represented by the attempt to destroy all illusions necessary or useful to the preservation of class society in general and of capitalism in particular” (Freedman 2009: 72)—it is, in Engels’s, terms the “science” of “scientific socialism.” But deflation by itself risks bitterness and despair, even a sort of philosophical-theoretical suicide; it requires an inflationary countermove to prevent hopelessness. “For Marxism, visionary transcendence”—the Blochian principle of hope, Jameson’s utopian impulse—“is the necessary completion of astringent demystification” (Freedman 2009: 73). The synthetic union of these two tendencies produces a Marxism that can be optimistic without succumbing to idealism and materially grounded without succumbing to despair—the dialectic engine necessary to *change* the world, and not just interpret it, as Marx once famously proclaimed (Marx 1969-2: n.p.).

In his two-part preface to the 500th-anniversary edition of More’s *Utopia* in 2016 China Miéville notes the urgency of this spirit of change in an era that is already filled with too much. In a time of climate change, desertification, ocean acidification, and mass extinction, our dreamers find themselves producing not visions of utopia but *apocatopia*, *utopalypse*: “a culture of ruination, dreams of falling cities, a peopleless world where animals explore... It’s as if we still hanker to see something better and beyond the rubble, but lack the strength” (Miéville 2016: 21). Miéville’s Anthropocene utopianism reproduces Marx’s original divide between the Utopian socialists and the scientific socialists; he concedes that the longing for utopia comes from good intentions but that it needs to be disciplined by material conditions to be anything more than just the fantasy of the “exoneration of entrenched power” (Miéville 2016: 23). Thus “We should utopia as hard as we can. Along with a fulfilled humanity we should imagine flying islands, self-constituting coralline neighbourhoods, photosynthesizing cars bred from biospliced bone-

marrow. Big Rock Candy Mountains.” But for this hope to be “tempered into a weapon,” as it needs to be, it must be animated by the spirit of class antagonism, by total revolution, even perhaps by revenge: “We need utopia, but to try to think utopia, in this world, without rage, without fury, is an indulgence we can’t afford. In the face of what it is done, we cannot think utopia without hate. ... To believe otherwise would be quaint if it were not so dangerous.” (Miéville 2016: 26-27). Here again is utopia, as Marx and Engels had it: not wishful thinking, not the emergency exit, not some last-minute miracle escape, but rather “the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat... support [of] every revolutionary movement against the existent social and political order of things... the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions” (Marx 1969: n.p.). Especially in our bad times, a properly Marxist utopia can have political value only insofar as it is also utterly ruthless, in the sense Marx once conveyed to Arnold Ruge: utopia for us can only be the “*ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be” (Marx 1843).

Notes:

- 1 This summary of contemporary utopian theory has been distilled largely from the work of Fredric Jameson, discussed below, especially his 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future*. For anti-dystopia, see Rob McAlear, “The Value of Fear”: Toward a Rhetorical Model of Dystopia.”
- 2 Of course in our moment of ecological crisis Fourier’s proposed climate changes sound fiendishly apocalyptic, rather than utopian—a problem I return to in the closing discussion of Miéville.

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