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The dimensions of utopia

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INTRODUCTION

An examination of the dates of publication of the writings on utopian thought in this century shows that frequencies thicken round the Twenties, Fifties and Seventies, i.e. after two world conflagrations and an ideological shake up caused by student revolts and labour unrests. The study of utopia¹ seems then to coincide with the symptoms of deep social and political upheavals.

In these last years the literature on utopian thought seems to have an enormous editorial success on both sides of the Atlantic: papers on the concept of utopia are published, stories of utopian thought are translated, some utopian texts of the past centuries are reprinted, full university courses are devoted to this matter. Even the philologists have busied themselves with utopia and have done two linguistic interpretations of the word. The first one asserts that it derives from the Greek ou (no) and $\tau \circ \pi \circ s$ (place), whereas the second one deems that the vocal u is a contraction of the particle $\varepsilon \upsilon$ (good), so that utopia should be the place of the good.² Or, more ambiguously, utopia designates the perfect happiness that does not lie anywhere.³ The coinage of the word is unanimously assigned to Thomas More, so that the date of birth of this term is the publication of the "Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia" in the year 1516.

THE LITERARY CONCEPT OF UTOPIA

Utopia can be defined as the description of "an imaginary world which possesses institutions different and better than those really in use, imbued with ethical and social principles usually considered impossible to be fulfilled." Some authors tried to flush out the main structural features of these descriptions. Among the most well-known endeavours we remember that of Dahrendorf⁵ who first of all dwells upon the absence of change: utopian constructions have but a nebulous past and do not have a future. They are then uchronic besides being utopian. A second structural characteristic seems to be uniformity, or rather "the existence of universal consensus on the prevailing values and institutional arrangements": such a consent can be spontaneous or enforced and entails the "absence of structurally generated conflict." The outsiders cannot be products of the social structure of utopia, but they are deviant cases, injured by some exceptional disease. Lastly, the utopian settlements seem to be curiously isolated from the rest of the human society.

Mumford asserts that the following attributes make up the utopian city: isolation, stratification, fixation, regimentation, standardization, militarization.

Ruyer singles out a large number of utopian characteristics.⁷ The first is symmetry: the utopian worlds are laid out with garden-like regularity. Another factor of the utopian situation is the uniformity. True, there are also "aristocratic" utopias, which maintain the social classes, but these groups, guided by the central power, are rather the organs of social functions than classes in literal sense i.e. able to be autonomous and conflictual. In Utopia there are no dissenting or opposite parties fighting one another. The passion for uniformity entails the belief in the power of education: education is a fetisch and the "pedagogical utopia" holds a prominent position in most utopias. Although a small number of utopias are anarchic, most social utopias are planned. They often abolish the private property and enforce family planning. An approach retraceable in several utopias is the reversal of reality so that the old grow young again, gold is despised and the women court the men.

A widespread characteristic is the self-sufficient isolation, with the ban of luxury. Utopian morale is eudaemonistic and humanistic.

The genres of utopian writings are varied. One of the favourite kinds is the imaginary journey in places scarcely known, in the moon or under the sea, with institutions astonishingly different from those in force in the place of departure. There are also projects of ideal legislation or visions of little ideal communities, isolated by the existing society because of their virtues and ways of life. The description of the new social order can be detailed or accent only the values and principles that must be realized. The ideal state described by the utopian writer can be presented as the work of a great lawgiver or of a great king founder of the perfect social structure that the utopian writer would see fulfilled.

The literary tradition of these "imaginative projects of optimal societies" belongs not only to the Mediterranean and North Atlantic area 10 but also to oriental areas, particularly to China and Japan. 11

THE UTOPIAN MIND

All the utopian writings allegedly arise from a style of thinking, a "mental exercise over the possible laterals." ¹²

The utopian process then would be like the usual procedures of scientific invention. But, while the scientific hypothesis is abandoned as soon as it is falsified, the utopian process can continue to work over an openly illegitimate postulate because utopia "looks less for the truth than for the raising of consciousness."¹³

This utopian "forma mentis" lies therefore in the disposition to subdue the reality of the world to a closed scheme of perfection, clearly detached from the set of human experience, but which offers a particular satisfaction, both emotional and intellectual.¹⁴

THE INTENTIONAL—CRITICAL CONCEPTION OF UTOPIA

We should now come back from the field of the subjective gnosiological attitude of the writer to that of the objective results of his work; utopia

can challenge the prevailing order. The utopian conscience indeed categorically denies the present condition and wants to overcome it by setting out for a new, not yet fulfilled, but possible kind of life.¹⁵

Its task appears then destructive and, in the same time, constructive. It clashes with all institutions, openly denouncing the faults of the present situation. Utopia therefore is intentionally critical of the existing social structure, and expresses itself "not just in the positive statement of what it wants, but in the denial of what it does not want." If the existing reality is the negation of a better reality, utopia becomes the negation of the negation. Utopian thought then "claims serious purposes and original goals that can contribute to the progressive ripening of men's social conscience."

UTOPIA AS A TRANSFORMING IDEA

Both ideologies and utopias are, following Mannheim, categories of ideas transcending the present reality. But whereas the ideologies are situationally transcending ideas that do not manage "de facto" to carry out the projects implicit in them, utopias are conceptions that succeed in transforming the existing order in one more suitable with one's conceptions.¹⁹

The criterion of distinction between ideology and utopia is just their fulfilment in history.

Thus, ideologies are the ideas that afterwards proved to be merely representations concealing a past social order; whereas relative utopias are the ideas that carry positively themselves into effect in the following social situation.²⁰

Therefore utopia, because of its breaking off with the existing reality, represents a revolutionary phenomenon, whereas ideology is a phenomenon which helps strengthening the existing order. Mannheim then assigned to utopia a creative value, because it was able to achieve a real change of the existing world, by creating new forms of society and of behaviour, by establishing original values and by directing towards new goals the development of society.²¹

The recognizability of a utopia is then determined by its historical fulfilment.²² Utopia therefore seems to clash with the historical move-

ment whenever an event "appears dominat 1 by a vision or by an absolute, all-comprehending pretension."23

Mannheim singles out four ideal types or utopian mentality: the orgiastical chyliasm of the Anabaptists, the humanitarian liberal idea, the conservative ideal and the social communist utopia. The analysis of the historical development of these four forms of utopian mentality leads him to point out to a withering away of the utopian element.²⁴

UTOPIA IN WRITINGS AND IN PRACTICE

Mannheim's conception of utopias has been developed by Seguy, who considers as utopian "every ideological total system tending implicitly or explicitly, in imagination or in practice, to radically transform the existing social systems": 25 the former one is the case of the written utopia, the latter of practised utopia. In the second type are to be included, according to Desroche, the utopian experiences in communities based on non-religious socialism or on non-conformist religion. 28 Usually the written utopia precedes the practised utopia. The origin of the written or the practised utopia is referred to a need which seems to arise when the dissatisfaction with a given situation spurs the desire not only for partial changes, but for a total transformation of the situation.

This can stay on the level of imagination or develop into a practical decision. In the first case we have the utopia as literary genre; in the second we have the attempts to bring the literary utopias into reality.

These endeavours are represented by the different utopian communities.27

UTOPIA AND ITS ENEMIES

This yearning for transformation has aroused the opposition of several critics of utopia. We can find three kinds of these critiques. The first one is the conservative critique based on a "pessimistic-static anthropology," according to which the social relations shall be able to change only if men will change beforehand, whereas the utopian thought pre-

supposes that man can change, if the relations change.²⁸ The conservative critique appears dominated by the fear of the social and political efficacy of the utopian impulses.

The second pattern of objection is the suspicion of totalitarianism turned against the possible utopian achievements. According to Dahrendorf, the endeavour to fulfil the utopias leads to totalitarianism because only through terror can the appearance of the won paradise be conjured: behind the rose-coloured veil of the utopia is hidden "the perfection either of terror or of absolute boredom." According to Popper utopia does not procure happiness but only the well-known miseries of life under despotism.

The third critique is eschatological and includes "the refusals, on religious or philosophical grounds, of earthly activities inclined to the practical fulfilments of ends that are known to be beyond human possibilities."³¹

THE DYSTOPIAS

In the course of the modern age, beside utopian literary constructions, we witness the emergence of a way of thinking that mocks the hopes for a future, different and better social order, or that emphasizes the danger inherent in the realization of utopian perspectives.³² The dystopian writer uses "the utopian convention to express a mood of dread and despair provoked by the results or the implications of utopian dreams."³³

As a literature of sceptical disillusion, dystopia is a secondary phenomenon "that follows and does not precede the utopian manifestation, whether expressed in literary terms or embodied in a social process."³⁴ The expressions of dystopian thought are rather rare in the carly centuries of the modern age, whereas they acquire a remarkable extent in the twentieth-century in the sphere of the science fiction.³⁵

The decrease in our century of utopian production and the contemporary proliferation of dystopias, the shift then of perspective "from optimism to pessimism, from confident prediction of a happy future to forecasts of coming social disasters could well foreshadow a radical shift in the basic beliefs and attitudes of our culture."³⁶ Walsh has made a list of some historical factors that may have contributed to the eclipse of utopia by dystopia.³⁷ Among these, Walsh recalls the Freudian psychology, which, with its emphasis on unconscious motivation and irrational impulses seems to rule out the possibility (or desirability) of a perfectly rational society; the decline of the optimistic social theology; the Nazi and Stalinian experiences; and, overall, the widespread disenchantment that, according to Max Weber, constitutes the peculiar character of modern civilization.

The dystopian tendency can be viewed either in literary works or in scientific essays. "Two major tendencies tend to describe the dystopian end: one may be called the 'bang theory' where all will end up in some fiery crash, in some apocalyptic cataclysm resulting from the backlash of a widely abused nature. The second may be described as the 'whimper theory' and places more emphasis on gradual erosion, small but cumulative changes, a loss of élan vital and of the will to continue." These changes are concerned with the process of environmental pollution, overpopulation, urban cancerous growth and depletion of energy resources. In front of this tide of pessimistic forecasts there can be the temptation to fall into apathy, to look at the past with regret, at the present with contempt and the future with fear. Nevertheless, man must actively wrestle with these worries so that his concerns about the future do not turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

UTOPIAN MODELS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The analysis of the relations between utopia and futurology shows two opposite positions.

Some authors think that futurology is the rightful heir of the utopian tradition, while others maintain on the contrary the inconsistency between utopian and futurologian thought.³⁰

According to Nuita, futurology differs from utopia in that "it lacks a thoroughly critical attitude towards society." Others single out a common feature in the object: utopia deals with the "no-place" and futurology with "what is not yet"; the difference allegedly is in the fact that the futurologists stick, in principle, to the canons of scientific research. 41

According to Winthrop, "current work on studies of the future has tended to sound the death knell to serious efforts at utopian versions of social order."

The future forecaster, having escaped the trap of utopian holistic thinking, seems however to wander through a labyrinth created by uncoordinated, piecemeal predictions. The provision of a coherent picture requires intellectual teamwork, because of the complexity of the modern world and the accelerated pace of technological development, whilst utopias constitute a product of an individual vision.⁴³ Moreover, while the future-forecaster seeks to avoid value-biases, the utopian writer has to justify in moral terms his particular choice of goals. As a result of these considerations, Winthrop summarizes that "most of the work in the new field of studies of the future is completely different from global utopian writing and efforts to project improvements in the condition of man."

THE FRIENDS OF UTOPIA

Several voices arose in the last times on the necessity of reawakening the dwindling utopian tradition. Among these supporters we ought to count the American anthropologist Margaret Mead, who urged the necessity of creating more vivid utopias, considered as "those visions of future possibilities which lead the minds of men forward into the future, giving life a meaning beyond the simple domestic perpetuation." The American philosopher Horsburgh maintains the indispensability of the utopian element in social life, to entrust it with the fundamental task of stimulating attention to generally neglected problems and of introducing new values in the life of the community. 46

Also Mumford assigns the same function to the utopian writings, to "attempt to uncover potentialities that the existing institutions either ignored or buried beneath an ancient crust of custom and habit." A similar position is supported by Giordani, according to whom utopia helps "in concentrating the attention on long period aims; whether or not oriented by utopian imagination, incrementalism could easily degenerate into little arrangements because of the fear of the future, into a renouncing tolerance of the present uneasiness."

The utility of utopias, according to Moore, rests in the fact that they determine the course of present action, i.e. they orient the behaviour of some people towards a given direction. According to the Japanese Nuita, utopia is "the greatest of all the manifestations of man's energy of consciousness. And Adriani supports this statement by saying that "no authentic culture can be imagined, that has no utopia. Utopia appears at the same time as one of the most pregnant symbols through which man "can express his confidence about the future, so that man is not only homo faber and homo sapiens, but also homo utopicus."

Consequently "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing" (Oscar Wilde).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research on utopia is to verify the hypothesis of the synonymic correspondence of utopia to "design apparently excellent, but not feasible, fantasy too beautiful to be true," and the utopian thinker as "a man, who builds an ideal world where all is good, but at the cost of a coarse ignorance of the conditions of the reality, and even at the cost of a certain masking of economic psychological and social laws." In this sense, utopia assumed a negative meaning as "something unfeasible, therefore useless and even dangerous, for it takes attention and will off the achievable." 55

The first doubts on the adequacy of this interpretation already arose when we recalled the critical intention attributed to utopia by Neusüss and others, and when we reported the interpretation, by the Mannheimian sociology of knowledge, of utopia as an instrument of global modification of the social system, as a "revitalizing myth, that proclaims and hallows a radical departure; a society at once distinctively different from and better than the old one."⁵⁶

The continuation of research, with the distinction between written and practised utopia, carried out by Seguy and Desroche, points out that the authentic structure of the utopian project is the *metamorphosis*, i.e. the will to radical transformation of the social and political experience.⁵⁷

According to these interpretations, and bearing in mind the invocation of utopia by several social movements, the reading of utopian writings may fascinate but at the same time worry us, as a thing that, however strange and unreal, does appear logically possible."⁵⁸

References and Notes

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- 9. M. Desroche, op. cit., 225.
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- 12. R. Ruyer, op. cit., 9. Freund too considers utopia as "an intellectual approach that extrapolates some traits of the reality, some yearnings and wishes regarded as essential, in spite of the heaviness that reality will go on exerting on human nature" (J. Freund, "Théorie du besoin," in L'Année Sociologique, 38 (1970)).

- 13. R. Ruyer, op. cit., 14.
- 14. A. Kolnai, "La mentalité utopienne," in La Table Ronde 153, 62 (1960).
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- 16. A. Neususs, "Utopie—Begriff und Phänomen des Utopischen," Luchterland, Neuwied, 1968. See also M. Plattel, Utopia and Revolution, in Sociologia Neerlandica 2, 66 (1970). The Italian philosopher Perlini says that the function of the utopian thought is the "denunciation of the evil and the unpitiful description of the negative hidden in the positive" (T. Perlini, "Metafisica e utopia in Bloch," in Aut Aut, No. 125, 1971: 81-82).
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- 20. Ibidem, 206.
- 21. C. Mongardini, "L'utopia dal punto di vista sociologico," in Cultura e Scuola 11, 196-203 (1964). According to Lyon, the constituent aspect of the utopia is the idea that "the true life is not the waiting and that one must urgently and brutally transform the situation and the mentality" (J. Lyon, Les utopies et le Royaume (Paris: Le Centurion, 1973), 38).
- 22. Mumford makes a distinction between the utopias of escape and the utopias of reconstruction. The first ones seek a release from the frustrations of real life, the others flow into a program to an ideal reconstruction of the human environment (L. Mumford, The Story of Utopias, cit.: 15—23). We can find the privilege of the active aspect of utopia also among its denigrators, as, for instance, B. Croce, who thinks that utopia translates into images "the gratification of the ever reviving thirst of our desires and it would remain a mere sentimental impulse if it didn't mistake its dream for the actuality and the feasibility or if it didn't set about, as it sometimes happened, the dangerous and vain toil of carry it out" (B. Croce, La storia come pensiero e come azione (Bari: Laterza, 1954), 264).
- 23. V. Melchiorre, La coscienza utopica (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1970), 8. According to Melchiorre, the lonely, incredible designs of ideal cities would be nothing but an expression, maybe the more limited and less lucky one, of a "tension of conscience much more wide and decisive, that we could call utopian and that after all will appear determinative for the most significant processes of history."
- 24. The process of exhaustion of the utopian element in contemporary reality, negatively considered in "Ideology and Utopia," was later on positively considered as a phenomenon of "progressive rationalization of the Western conscience."
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- 37. C. Walsh, From Utopia to Nightmare (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). See also: M. R. Hillegas The Future as Nightmare; H. G. Wells and the autiutopians (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).
- 38. E. Vlachos, Doomsday and Ecocatastrophe—Dystopia today, VIIIth World Congress of Sociology, Toronto (1974), 16.
- 39. A. Baldissera, op. cit. 158. According to Baldissera, "the fact that utopian thought is future-oriented does not necessarily imply that every form of anticipation or of forecast constitutes an authentic utopia. Whereas these may consider the future as a mere repetition of the present, utopia turns to the future only because there the fulfilment of its dream is possible: a society happier than the existing one. Therefore a coincidence between utopia and futurology seems improbable."
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