

Existential Utopia



EXISTENTIAL UTOPIA

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON UTOPIAN THOUGHT

Edited by
Patrícia Vieira
and
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INTRODUCTION

Utopia: A Political Ontology

Michael Marder and Patrícia Vieira

Is there still any space, whether conceptual or practical, for the thinking of utopia—which from the outset announces a certain negation of place, *topos*—in a world marked by a chronic dystopian outlook? After more than a 100 years of what Nietzsche first diagnosed as “European nihilism,” dystopia has now firmly established itself as the current *Weltanschauung*, a lens through which we filter historical reality. In the West, the sense that all viable alternatives for a different political organization have been exhausted led to widespread voter apathy, resignation, and nonparticipation in the political sphere. Aesthetically, this dystopian mood has given rise to countless novels and films, the most emblematic of which is perhaps George Orwell’s *1984*, that project into the future, or into an alternative reality, a society based on an exacerbation of the darkest traits and tendencies prevalent in the contemporary world. An interpretation of world history not as a triumphant march of Reason but as an unmitigated disaster has been a hallmark of some of the most influential currents of thought, including the writings of Walter Benjamin and of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. A veritable manifesto of an all-encompassing dystopia in this context is Herbert Marcuse’s 1964 bestseller *One-Dimensional Man* that thematized the flattening, impoverishment, and integration into a paralyzing totality of every sphere of life and human activity. Thanks to its insinuation into every facet of reality, dystopia turns into another name for social ontology, in that it becomes the default description of the world and gets identified with the totality of *what is*.

And yet, dystopia heralds a promise of its own: in replacing the fake neutrality of social facts with a negatively charged value judgment, built into the very interpretation of the world, it evinces an intense sense of discontent with, and indeed a rejection, of the status quo. In this, it curiously shadows the utopian impulse, which is born of a similar negative valuation of actual existence but, unlike dystopia, is entwined with the hope of overcoming the oppressive actuality and constructing a perfect and just society.

The supplement of redemptive hope in utopia is a part of the inheritance bequeathed to early modernity, when this concept first germinated, by the Judeo-Christian worldview. As the process of European secularization unfolded, the belief

in science and progress gradually replaced the idea of an other-worldly Paradise with the notion that the modern version of the Kingdom of Heaven could take root on earth, provided that the right social, political, and economic structures were created. The utopian impulse culminated in the nineteenth century, with thinkers such as Hegel, Fourier, Proudhon, and Marx imagining a utopian end of history, where a rational organization of human activity would create a world free of unnecessary suffering and conducive to human fulfillment. Nonetheless, the utopian imagination exhausted itself as faith in transcendental ideals waned in the aftermath of “the death of God,” the increasing irrelevance of divinity and of all its replacements that used to serve as the guarantors for the meaningfulness of reality. The historical significance of utopia turned out to be limited to a concrete period of Western history when God was *dying* but not yet *dead*, that is to say, when the closed system of theology lost its monopoly on the paradisiacal vision of salvation, which, extended to the immanent domains of human life, such as economics and politics, was transformed into the idea of social and scientific progress. The death of God, as a *fait accompli* constituting the first milestone of Western nihilism, spelled out the absurdity of externally imposed metaphysical standards for thinking and acting, be it in religion or in its secularized avatars. A feeling of disappointment with multiple injustices suffusing human reality remained, even as the hope for a better future faded; Kafka’s statement to Max Brod emphasizes this relegation of hope to the theological past: “Plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us” (75). Dystopia is an apt instantiation of discontent without hope; it is, we might say, a utopia adapted to the age of nihilism.

The project of overcoming nihilism and its attendant dystopian malaise does not mean that these negative phenomena are to be left behind; instead, this task would require deepening or working through them. To work through nihilism and dystopia is to harness their negative and critical energies for the project of social and political change, preventing their fossilization into a pessimistic and resigned outlook where all possibilities have been preemptively foreclosed. It is also to search for meaning and sources of hope that would not be tethered to metaphysical authorities but that would rather be embedded in the texture of existence. In this respect, we may envision, for the first time, a hope detached from its divine or messianic roots and placed in the hitherto unforeseen possibilities of human togetherness. It is this hope that fuels existential utopia, so dissimilar to the original utopian imagination of the early modern age, starry-eyed about the seemingly unlimited potential of scientific progress, and to the dystopia of the twentieth century.

A post-metaphysical, existential utopia hinges upon a reconfiguration of the concept of truth, which is neither immutable nor transcendently guaranteed but is, rather, the result of contestation and permanent struggle among competing interpretations. What is desirable—in other words, the Good and utopia itself—becomes a matter of dispute and political disagreement that, in the absence of an external arbiter (i.e., God or the teleological idea of progress), open the door to relativism and to a recasting of utopia in the banal guise of an individualistic and oft-times

hedonistic “private paradise.” Against this background, the challenge facing the thinking of utopia today is, on the one hand, to avert the traps of relativism, which occludes a common horizon for social action, and, on the other, to avoid falling into the temptation of the totalizing grand narratives of the past. Positively put, a revived utopian thought enjoins us to search for meaning in the immanence of collective life and to fashion a common space devoid of an overarching unity, a malleable and plastic space, where shared existence is interpreted each time anew. Far from being magically erased, hermeneutical tensions and an ongoing polemical and practical contestation of “truth,” “justice,” and indeed “utopia” would play a formative role in this version of post-metaphysical coexistence. This is because existential utopia discloses to us the unprecedented possibility—wholly compatible with the space of separation, difference, and dissensus—of being-together without the mediations of the sovereign body of the Leviathan, the State, or religious association. The dissolution of institutional and essential ties allows existential relations to come to the fore of sociality no longer incarnated in a determinate locale or body politic. It is this enabling placelessness, at the level of life itself and not of a transcendent ideal reality, that distinguishes the political ontology of existential utopia.

Any political ontology presupposes an organization of the common *topos* spanning a national territory, social striation, and collective imagination. In the age of nihilism the transcendental grounding and justification of the political *topos* were eroded to such an extent that the danger of *anomie*, the loss of intellectual bearings in the shared space of coexistence, loomed large on the horizon of the West. The explosive potential of this sweeping experience of groundlessness had to do with putting into question the preset and ostensibly stable parameters of the political *topos* in its various instantiations: anarchism initiated a critique of exclusive sovereignty over national territory; communism prompted rebellions against the stratification of social space into classes; and the movement for radical democracy called for previously marginalized groups to reshape, beyond recognition, the topography of collective imagination. The unhinging of the political *topos* constituted the minimal condition of possibility for utopia, a glimmer of hope that the oppressive power formations of the past were about to crumble.

Nevertheless, the tenacity of the status quo should not be underestimated: in the absence of metaphysical justifications, the increasingly unjust political topology was naturalized, presenting injustice as a mere and brute fact of life—as, indeed, our collective fate—to which there is no alternative. As defense mechanisms against the corrosive effects of nihilism, the forces of naturalization imparted to political subjects a sense of helplessness in the face of seemingly predetermined historical events, and so attempted to maintain the semblance of an unshakeable order immune to any concrete occurrence. In the course of the twentieth century, technocracy became the avatar of naturalization, having replaced, in this capacity, the natural law. It forged, above all, an illusion of depoliticization, whereby citizens were led to believe that there was no more place for meaningful political decisions suffocated under the piles of statistical data and that governance was a mere reaction to, and the management

of, the circumstances as they presented themselves—an illusion banishing the unavoidable acts of decision-making to a realm shielded from public scrutiny. Along with the utopian impulse, the political *qua* political was concealed, while the *topos* of communal life turned into a frozen landscape amenable to nothing more than cosmetic modifications. Utopia, on the other hand, discloses the structure of the political *topos* in all its artificiality by demonstrating that no political space must be the way it is (one of the possible meanings of the ambiguous prefix *u-* is “not,” and hence, a negation of any immutable topology). By de-constituting the formalized, institutionalized, and regimented arrangement of the public sphere and by representing, in the collective imagination, flashes of a better world, utopia takes us back to the drawing board and reactivates the constituting moments of politics when the possibility of reinventing the *topos* of our existence gains a new lease on life.

The essays gathered in this collection envision utopia for the twenty-first century, in light of the shift from an essentialist notion of politics and of communal being to the priority of collective existence in its perpetual becoming and constituting character. Consequently, each author is mindful of the open-ended character of utopia, which would correspond to the changing nature of political life and which would, therefore, reconstitute itself in response to the events shaping the community. In opposition to a utopia understood in terms of a “trans-historical transcendence,” of a supra-temporal ideal that can never be realized in the time of human existence, the essays comprising this book hint at a utopian movement beyond history within historical temporality, an “intra-historical transcendence” that implies an existential conception of time as the opening up of the possible within the actual. This configuration of utopian transcendence that cuts across the texts of *Existential Utopia* arises as a fold in immanence itself, rupturing the continuum that extends from potentiality to its realization, from an abstract ideal to its teleological fulfillment. The chapters, therefore, represent snapshots of *possible utopias* and invite the reader to engage with the *possibility of utopia* inseparable from its existential grounding.

The intra-temporal nature of existential utopia puts in flux the idea of universality, or, more specifically, the idea of a universal common Good, as it pertains to the possible and desirable ways of organizing social and political life. If existential universals are no longer abstract and eternal ideals, then their political analogues preclude blueprints for a perfect society, applicable everywhere and in every epoch. Such blueprints would merely reproduce the excessive formalization of politics, with its empty institutional molds, *a posteriori* filled with living content and translating abstract universality into the actuality of existence. *Existential Utopia* will, instead, put forth a series of fleeting and precarious universals, faithful to their singular context and amenable to being changed or scrapped altogether, once they overstep their limited usefulness. At the intersection of the two terms, this book stages an encounter, where the utopian impulse takes its cues and learns from the here-and-now, while collective existence gets liberated from the straightjacket of the present, orients itself toward possibilities that are not constrained by what is, and overflows itself, such that this excess constitutes the movement of utopia. If nihilism can only be

overcome from within by preserving its negative and critical edge, then the encounter of existentialism and utopia should not yield a rigid determination of new parameters for thinking and action but should rather serve as a compass for finding one's bearings within the frequently disorienting landscape of contemporary politics.

As a precondition for such an encounter, it behooves us to unbind the notion of utopia from its intellectual history, which, despite eschewing sociopolitical *stasis* and holding up the promise of social justice, rotated around a largely essentialist core and entailed a strict separation between the ideal and the real, as well as the intelligible and the sensible. A double inheritor of messianic theology and Platonism, utopian thought must strive to abandon the metaphysical legacy, to which it is irreducible, and take stock of what remains in the aftermath of metaphysics: the aspirations toward justice stripped of an ideal or transcendent dimension. At issue in the unbinding of utopia, a process that is interminable and that metonymizes the thinking of utopia today, is its very survival as a pertinent category for social and political change. The uncertainty surrounding the fate of this concept is attributable to the fact that, in the minds of some skeptics, it is indelibly branded by the tradition, wherein it originated and, therefore, should be discarded along with the other metaphysical illusions akin to it. If utopia is to survive the ceremonial proclamations of its demise, contemporaneous with the persistent announcements of the end of history, it will be only as a trace of its former self. The essays comprising this book put their faith in this self-transformative, self-reinventing potential of existential utopia, which is not merely another utopia but the other of utopia, rid of the weightiness of essence and tradition and thus allowed to permeate the fabric of life itself.

In the interminable process of getting unbound from its provenance and from the tradition marked by its early modern origins, utopia—which is, in itself, unbound, in that it is dissociated from any given place—can, in turn, unbind political life and *topos* from the exigencies of institutionalization and formalization. This gesture of unbinding is not entirely negative, since it signifies the existential relevance of utopia to singular historical situations, where it is put to work. In this sense, the unbound existential utopia is simultaneously theoretical and practical, singular and universal, present and future, which is to say that it is put to work without any external mediations, without the need for bridging the *apriori* principles, maxims, or ideals and political actuality. What replaces the normative guidance, provided by traditional utopia, is the hermeneutical attention to existence that focuses on the lacks, lacunae, and deprivations, in the midst of life's ostensible plentitude. Existential utopia resists the temptation to fill the gaps of existence and to project the image of fulfillment elsewhere, onto a reality that does not and could not take place. Instead, it lingers with and within these gaps, treating them as those instances of immanent possibility, where practical political interpretations are set to work for the purpose of reshaping the here-and-now. Deriving from a variety of theoretical backgrounds and intellectual traditions, the chapters of the present collection may, therefore, be seen as hermeneutical exercises that glean the living potential of utopia discernable in the interstices of existence.

The opening chapter of *Existential Utopia*, titled “In Place of Utopia” by Jean-Luc Nancy, sets a philosophical tone to the treatment of the subject by raising many of the themes that will recur in the rest of the book, such as “world,” “presence/absence,” “representation,” “finitude,” and “possibility.” This text is followed by a brief interview with the French philosopher, in which he reconsiders the relevance, or the irrelevance, of utopia today. In “Utopia, Counter-Utopia, Irony,” Gianni Vattimo links the dystopic cultural productions of the twentieth century to the dark underside of occidental rationality and of the metaphysical imagination subtending technocratic forms of government. Irony is then presented as a political-existential strategy to ward off the force of dystopic negativity and to project a future no longer committed to the metaphysical values of authenticity and objective truth but conditioned by an ironical-hermeneutic understanding of history. Alexandre Franco de Sá, in his “From Modern Utopias to Contemporary Uchronia,” also departs from a critique of modern, teleological rationality that has led contemporary societies to believe they have reached the end of history. The author argues that these societies seem to establish themselves in a time outside of time, which could thus be defined as “uchronic”, their only glimpse into the future being an indefinite continuation of what they already are, a situation that precludes the activation of the utopian drive inherent in collective life. To counter this tendency, de Sá calls for a rethinking of the experience of time at the individual and political levels in such a way that a future qualitatively different from the present would again become possible.

“Existential Utopia—Of the World, the Possible, the Finite,” by Michael Marder and Patrícia Vieira, contrasts essentialist-prescriptive utopias, grounded in teleological, instrumental rationality, to the concept of “existential utopia.” The authors specify the latter in terms of the crucial categories of the world, understood in the phenomenological sense of a tense coexistence of diverse lifeworlds; possibility, removed from the continuum of potentiality and actuality; and finitude, acknowledging the absence of eternal and immutable truths or normative-transcendental ideals. In “Still / *Encore*,” Márcia Cavalcante-Schuback explores the existential dimension of utopia in poetry, particularly in T. S. Eliot’s poem “Ash Wednesday.” She situates utopian place in the unidentifiable “in-between,” where absence inexorably percolates into the hidden core of pure presence. Understood in the terms of existential temporality, the utopian time of “Ash Wednesday” is, in turn, the coalescence of “before the beginning” and “after the end,” whereby the continual flow of time is disrupted. Cláudia Baracchi, in “The Theater of Utopia: Deleuze on Acting and Politics,” concentrates on a different aesthetic medium, namely theater. What Baracchi calls “the theater of utopia” is a double representation—theoretical and practical, theatrical and political—of that which does not exist: the collective subject, the people. Utopia is, once again, imagined here as the crossing, the placeless meeting point, or the conjunction of philosophy and art, where concepts are enacted and dramatic action puts thought in motion.

In “Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique,” Douglas Kellner undertakes a close reading of Bloch’s masterpiece, *The Principles of Hope*, in an attempt to

demonstrate that even the most hegemonic and conservative social and cultural artifacts of late capitalism hold, despite themselves, the utopian promise of a new world. An immanent critique of ideology will, therefore, benefit from a thematization of the irrepensible utopian aspirations that always percolate into its object. Ruth Levitas uncovers another facet of Blochian thought in her chapter, “Secularism and Post-Secularism in Roberto Unger and Ernst Bloch: Towards a Utopian Ontology.” She argues that the model of secular humanism involves a debased humanism, or what Bloch referred to as “stupid materialism.” In opposition to this debasement, which often leads to political and religious fundamentalism, Bloch insists on a deeper humanism that reclaims from religion matters of spirit and grace. Bloch, as well as Roberto Unger, prefers an ontology that is historicized rather than essentialist and that is centered on becoming and therefore existentially open to the future. In that respect, the author contends, Bloch and Unger put forth a utopian ontology.

The three concluding chapters of *Existential Utopia* describe what has become of utopia in late modernity and what it could signify in the twenty-first century. Josep Ramoneda, in “At the End of Utopia—Indifference,” diagnoses the permutations of utopia in the age of nihilism. From the standpoint of power and domination, utopia turns into the invisibility of the victims of historical, social, and economic injustices, their erasure from the radar screens of the mass media and collective consciousness. In “History, Politics, and Utopia: Towards a Synthesis of Social Theory and Practice,” Laurence Davis continues the exploration of a contemporary contestation of utopia, with reference to the experience of radical democratic grassroots movements. According to Davis, we need to conceive of utopia not as a transcendent ideal but as an empirically situated feature of the world, representing the claims for justice of the dispossessed.

Robert Albritton’s “A Practical Utopia for the Twenty-First Century” lays out the key principles of a practical utopia founded upon lived collective experiences and memories of failed political experiments, such as the Soviet Union. Albritton takes as his starting point one of the three basic tenets of the French Revolution, namely equality, transforms it into an existential scaffolding for the proposed utopia, and argues that the ideals of freedom and community are undermined unless all people are viewed as sufficiently equal as to have the material resources that make human flourishing possible.



PART I

Utopia Unbound



CHAPTER 1

In Place of Utopia¹

Jean-Luc Nancy

The word *utopia* has a very peculiar history. It is one of those considerably rare terms that entered language through an individual invention meant for a very circumscribed usage, which was not only literary but also came under the guise of a proper name. In this respect, it is similar to the name Robinson, to which utopia is, actually, not unrelated, if only due to its insularity. *Utopia*, the name of the imaginary island where Thomas More places his communitarian republic, ended up assuming the real existence of a common name or a concept, an existence that is as real as that of an earthly island. It is a very small island with a perfectly contemporary meaning that is active within language and thought. Moreover, this word imposed itself across many languages, and its meaning was imprinted at the heart of a thought that was henceforth recognizable at the world scale. A thought concerned with the reality of the world as such, with worldhood as awaiting and anxiety [*angoisse*], as the necessity that one experiences, or as a desirable utopia.²

Let us recall that the word is composed of the Greek *τοπος* (a place, in the precise sense of a determined place, a location, a particular region) and the negative prefix *ου*, in the same way that *ουτις* means “nobody, not a someone.” This artificial Greek term forged by an Englishman in the fifteenth century is used today by everyone to designate a notion or a question, the absence of which from the world horizon of the philosophical and political reflection is unimaginable, regardless of the meaning and the specific values—sometimes opposed to one another—that particular kinds of reflection associate with it. (One might say that a world where utopia would be neither a notion nor a question is for our world . . . a utopia.)

* * *

Utopia, a word that did not originate in ordinary language, that arose out of nothing in language as though by an act of creation *ex nihilo*, is given the task of designating a nothing-of-place [*rien-de-lieu*], a non-place [*non-lieu*], as though occupying the place of a wholly other place, or rather of an other in every place; a word that made concrete, within language, something that truly has a place in the space of meaning. It does not fail, at least, to occupy its place in all the dictionaries. From that place, it