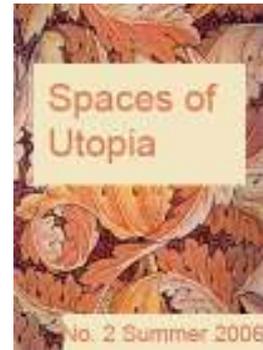


Socio-political Utopianism and the Demands of the 21st Century

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I.

If we trusted the seismograph of current trends, we would concede that the political utopia has left its future behind by now. Already in 1985, Jürgen Habermas declared the "crisis of the welfare state and the exhaustion of utopian energies" (Habermas 1985: 141 ff). Four years later, a few weeks after the opening of the borders between East and West Germany, Günter Kunert mercilessly rebuffed the utopia of a democratic socialism. Instead of being inspired by this utopia, "after forty years of wretchedness, the impatient majority reaches for the obvious: the bananas at super markets". Utopian dreams seem nothing else than the expression of discontent with industrial civilization. But its mechanism, that is functionality, productivity and consumption, cracked all variants of the ideal of collectivism that feeds utopia. "In that, the mammoth machinery, which contemporary socialism is turning into, a 'free association of free people' is nothing other than an evening club or a traditional association where one reads the *Communist Manifesto* together to prevent waking up" (Kunert 1989: S. 33).

In March 1990 Hans Magnus Enzensberger celebrated the spontaneous unification of East and West Germany, brought about by the masses, as evidence that there is only one possibility left to talk about political utopias: in the form of a literary obituary. The masses have, according to Enzensberger,

crossed the border on November 9 and thus rocked the waves in Germany. "With the pace of a deserter, not the millennium but everyday life dawned upon us that does not need a prophet" (Enzensberger 1992: 74). What Enzensberger seems to say is that the lack of utopian impulse in the changes in East Germany revealed only that which had been hushed up for such a long time: that utopian thought is not a constant factor in human anthropology. He argues that a specific product of European thought had been exported to other countries since Antiquity, but this should not deter from the fact that "from the stone age to the Meso-American and Asian civilizations, thousands of human societies survived without utopias". It would be of utmost significance when Europeans would give up the *idée fixe* of utopia but we could not, according to Enzensberger, talk about a 'loss'. What would be sacrificed would be first of all "the fatal moments of utopian thought: expansionist megalomania, the demand for totalitarianism, finality and novelty" (*idem*, S. 69).

It would be wrong if one ignored the truth embedded in this obituary of the political utopia. As much as its blueprints were taken over by social reality during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its disenchantment progressed. In fact, the classical tradition of utopian thought has shaped modern civilization more than seems apparent at first sight. Therefore, whoever stigmatises Campanella's *City of the Sun* as a precursor to totalitarianism, should consider that he also pre-empted that which spread through the democratic Western hemisphere. "Chronometers and weather vanes play an important role in his state, things that mark an increasing regulation of time, control and behaviour in the Renaissance and that are characteristic for the age of trains and factories" (Gustafson 1985: 286). In Morus' *Utopia*, forests are cut down on a large scale as they stand in the way of human progress. Human's relationship to nature is completely instrumental, as is reflected in the geometric structure of the utopian

city: it anticipates the technological functionality of architecture and urban planning that nowadays is part of everyday world civilization.

This relates to the fact that the committed defenders of industrial capitalism, actually the spokespersons for the so-called “technocratic conservatism”, could openly or implicitly relate to the premises of nineteenth-century utopian thought (see Saage 1991: 95 ff.) They saw in the “rigid” structures of the hierarchical world of work that characterised quite a few utopian blueprints of the Industrial Revolution, an “order of life” that was more stable than the pre-industrial feudal society. The ending of class-warfare, indicative of the absolute dominance of productivity – a classical principle of nineteenth-century utopian thought – was confirmed in the social partnership of highly industrialised Western countries after WWII. The conviction of utopians that due to the increasingly complex division of labour dependencies within the respective production levels would increase was confirmed as the inevitable emergence of “economic pressures” and socio-technological “superstructures”.

These utopian blueprints of technocratic standardisation also shaped Soviet societies. They too stood under the spell of infinite quantitative economic growth and an unbroken confidence in the universal possibilities of technology of which nineteenth-century utopianists expected the solution to all emancipatory problems. But the Soviet socialists came closer to the classical utopian thought of Plato and Morus than any capitalist countries of the West. Although Friedrich Engels rejected any “recipes for the cook-shop of the future”, a strand within Marxist tradition, especially the Bolsheviks, dismissed this anti-utopian iconoclasm. This was emphatically described by Johannes R. Becher, who wrote in 1942:

I have to be grateful to the Soviet Union for everything that I owe life; an elevated life. This is *Vita Nuova*, the other or the new life, which all poets of all times have dreamt, the birth of the “Kingdom of Man”, blueprint and building site of a dawning epoch of Man after millennia of idolatry and the twilight of the gods, the timely realisation of Plato’s rationalistic state, of Campanella’s *City of the Sun*, the dream of the “perfect man” or the “Utopia” of Thomas More. (Lukács *et al.* 1936: 25)

Becher's now farcical 'salute by a German poet to the Soviet Union' cannot distract from the fact that it is based on an accurate premise. The societies of the Soviet and the classical utopian model assumed that the ideal society can only be realized if politics took precedence over economy, bureaucracy and party discipline over individual civic and human rights, collectivism over personal spontaneity and creativity, surveillance and regimentation over self-determination and, finally, isolationism – skilfully symbolized in the 'Iron Curtain' – took precedence over unobstructed freedom of movement. Other structural features need to be added. The Communist Party that had claimed the monopoly of truth and politics modelled its utopian blueprint on the philosopher class of the Platonic *Politeia* and its heirs in the elite classes of early modern utopias. The self-appointed 'Avant-garde of the Proletariat' – as the actual motivating force of historical progress – founds its justification of power not in principles of democracy, but, similarly to eighteenth-century utopians, in a philosophy of history. And finally, the vision of the 'new man' is also an essential element of the classical utopian tradition. Trotzki refers to it when he wrote in 1924 that in the perfected socialism, the common man is elevated to the level of Aristotle, Goethe and Marx (Trotzki 1968: 215).

But why has this etatist-authoritarian line within utopian thought come to its end with the collapse of the Soviet-type societies? In addition to many historical reasons of internal and external political nature, there are explanations that are specifically grounded in the model of the authoritarian utopia. I want to identify three aspects: 1) A system that grants a small elite the monopoly of truth and policy is incapable to react to new challenges innovatively as new doctrines and findings are often articulated by minorities outside of the established state apparatus. 2) In a state where all individual civic and human rights are repressed, the talents of millions of people will

necessarily vanish. The result is a cultural, scientific and especially economic stagnation as exemplified in the former Soviet Union. 3) A society which is based on the regimentation of the majority of the population and which destroys the individual liberty through a gigantic surveillance system delegitimizes its political power. The moment the order is momentarily disrupted by mass actions and demonstrations, the complete system collapses as we witnessed in 1989 and 1991.

II.

There is no doubt: the end of the authoritarian-etatist utopia is irrevocable. Even if dictatorships are established that refer back to Campanella's *City of the Sun*, they will not be able to offer that which is so characteristic of utopian thought: hope. On the other hand, I would argue that utopian thought has not completely been discredited by the collapse of state socialism in Europe because the set of problems that created utopias since Thomas More are still existent. I believe that it is wrong to equate utopianism with either ideal communities or future dystopian scenarios. Equally important to the utopian blueprint is the socio-political context that creates utopias. As they constructively create counter worlds with the aid of secularized reason, political utopias are essentially reactive. Since Thomas More, utopias have responded to contemporary crises in social, and nowadays even global contexts.

The utopianists of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods reacted to the arbitrariness of absolutism, to the privileges of rank and to the exploitation of human work by feudalism and early capitalism. Nineteenth and twentieth-century utopias have retorted constructively to the social miseries of the Industrial Revolution. Since the early 1920's the so-called 'black' utopias have defined themselves as visionary warnings about the looming totalitarianism in East and West. Modern utopianism after WWII was greatly

inspired by the increasing destruction of the natural environment by technology and industrialisation with mass consumerism in the highly developed countries of the Northern hemisphere that accepts the pauperization of the southern hemisphere and the still-existing oppression of women. Thus, to put it provocatively, the set of problems that created utopias since Thomas More are still existent. However, globalization has transformed them even in comparison to the early 20th century so that the solutions of classical utopianism, especially 19th century utopianism, will necessarily fail. Today, utopian thought needs to create a new profile. But what is its uniqueness made of?

I have already discussed the outdated elements of utopia. Their failure was announced long before the collapse of the Soviet model of society. Already in 1967, M.I. Finley pointed out that utopian thought could only liberate itself from its paralysis if it broke with its past and would adapt to the new needs of human society of the second half of the 20th century (Finley 1967: 29 f.). This demand has been – at least partially- fulfilled. I categorized the fundamental revisions of the original utopian paradigm in Skinner's *Walden Two*, Huxley's *Island*, LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and Callenbach's *Ecotopia* as 'postmaterialist'. I suggest that despite their differences in envisioning alternative futures, they all share similar structural characteristics.

First of all, they set great store by a far-reaching decentralisation of political and economic institutions to allow a greater share for all in the formation of the commonwealth. Then, science and technology are separated from the necessity of unchecked economic growth. Science and technology are furthered selectively and only then, if they are compatible with sustainability. In addition, physical labour is elevated to such an extent that it seems equal at least to intellectual work. At the same time, the strict division between work and leisure is dissolved. Concepts of self-determined work replace disciplining hierarchies of work. Moreover, one can detect a tendency towards the

renunciation of consumerism. The revalorization of sexual and artistic needs replace the predominance of conspicuous consumption. Also, more importance is given to the emancipation of women than ever in classical utopianism. And last but not least, postmaterial utopianism dissociates itself from a progressivist philosophy of history and its materialist essence that enforces the dominance of nature through technology.

The weak points of postmaterial utopianism in terms of political science are easily named. As pointed out above, postmaterial blueprints aim to allow a possibly direct share of citizens in the political and economic decision processes by decentralizing institutions on all levels of society. However, there is no indication that a mass society, uncoupled from global markets, without, for instance, large-scale enterprises with centralising superstructures, can survive. Also, it is not clear how postmaterialist utopianism can achieve majority votes given the hegemony of possessive individualism. On the other hand, it would be wrong to reject them as mere escapist utopias. Their pragmatic elements have long left the esoteric exclusivity of literary escapism behind, as the 1991 report authorised by the 'Club of Rome', *The Global Revolution*, has plainly shown (Spiegel 1991).

Is it at all possible to connect the members of the 'Club of Rome', whom Richard von Weizsäcker called 'the conscience of humanity', with utopian discourse? Those who have read the report will not deny that we have to answer in the affirmative. The authors of the report and contemporary utopias share the principle that the world, as it is, cannot be projected in its mere factuality. This corresponds to the conviction that the future is essentially indeterminate. Thus, humans have to decide for themselves what they mean by 'the good life' and how they want to attain it. The authors of the 'Club of Rome' report agree with the great utopian writers that the mere extrapolation of existing trends is no realistic answer to contemporary problems (Spiegel 1991:

11). They demand explicitly “a vision of the world, in which we like to live” (*idem*, 10f, 65). Elsewhere they admit their “utopian” quality (*idem*, 33).

At the same time, the authors confirm another essential to the utopian paradigm. If the future is indeterminate, then we need realms of thought and fantasy that are unburdened by political and social responsibility or the enforcing of specific interests. Only then it seems possible to conceive future scenarios that are more than the mere projection of contemporary conditions (see Bermbach 1992). This conviction frames the distinctiveness of the ‘Club of Rome’. Because “its members (...) represent a diversity of cultures, ideologies, professions and industries”, the ‘Club of Rome’ creates free spaces that are unfettered by immediate political objectives (Spiegel 1991: 6). And finally, the authors of the report have banked on a resource that had been the fundament of the utopian alternative. It is not by accident that the authors see their report as a “call to global solidarity” and they also indicate that the project only has a chance if it meets people that cling to secularized reason as their final reference point (*idem*, 128).

III.

Although there are important overlaps between the ‘Club of Rome’ report and the formal structure of the early modern utopia, it is also evident that the report breaks away from the fundamentals of the authoritarian-etatist tradition of utopian discourse since Thomas More. This tradition configured solidarity as an expression of collective reason, which did not seek or only partially seek to balance collectivism with the unalienable rights of the individual. In accordance with postmaterialist utopias, the authors of the ‘Club of Rome’ report demand a form of solidarity that does not quench but indeed generates the well-understood self-interest of the individual. The aim is to make egotism a powerful ally of solidarity. This objective could be achieved as we are not only

talking about our own survival but about the survival of our children and grand children (*idem*, 129). The universalist values that spring from such a novel concept of solidarity make a further break with the anti-individualist ideal of social homogeneity of the classical utopian tradition. They comprise not only liberty but individual human rights and personal responsibility (*idem*, 124). At the same time, they denounce another correlation of utopian anti-individualism: equalizing egalitarianism (*idem*, 33f).

But it is not only this intellectual foundation that relates the 'Club of Rome' report to the postmaterialist orientation of contemporary utopian thought. Both also agree in the representation of the contemporary. Many (however not all) classical utopianists believed that material poverty and exploitation could be ended by replacing a free economy by a centralised, planned economy that would regulate the production and distributions from 'above'. In opposition, the 'Club of Rome' report assumes that we cannot give up the effectiveness of a free economy as a social institution that organises human productivity to satisfy human needs (*idem*, 16). Its importance to the preservation of economic vitality and innovation is indisputable (*idem*, 33). But nevertheless, with all utopianists, the authors highlight the limits of the market economy. If this type of economy is fixed merely on the short-term satisfaction of needs or the maximization of profit, then one cannot establish long-term mechanisms (*idem*, 14, 30) that are based on the preservation of energy, the environment, fairness and basic research (*idem*, 16).

Furthermore, such an economic system is determined by the perspective of infinite economic growth that has resulted in counterproductive effects that need to be fought (*idem*, 120). The report suggests that in an economic system "that is based on the motivating force of conspicuous consumption and the ready availability of credits, the general expectation remains that wealth and material prosperity will constantly increase" (*ibidem*). In short: The authors of

the 'Club of Rome' report do not plead for the abolition of market economy but for the normative restriction of such an economic system. In the context of anti-trust, anti-dumping and price-protection laws, credit controls as well as codes of business practice, the authors demand "clear ethical principles that are established by society but with which industry and commerce can live, though with compromises" (*idem*, 128).

However, the report does not only indicate the "limits of market economy" in tackling the global problems of humanity. Perhaps more importantly, it agrees with the postmaterialist reassessment of the essential triad of 'science and technology', 'work' and 'human needs'. To the same effect, the authors of the 'Club of Rome' report "fit in with the needs of the moment to apply technology to the needs of humanity and shape it so that it contributes to the general and lasting welfare of all peoples of today and future generations and that it submits itself to a holistic, global, even cosmic awareness" (*idem*, 121). Thus, a very clear rule emerges from the increasing CO₂ concentration and the greenhouse effect, the desiccation of the Ukrainian breadbasket and the American Midwest to the, until now, unthinkable German flood disasters of the summer 2002: "The economical and efficient use of energy and the development of sustainable energy sources are tasks that need to be tackled immediately if the disruption of industrial production and individual suffering is to be avoided" (*idem*, 36).

The 'Club of Rome's' report also agrees with the postmaterialist utopian discourse on the re-evaluation of work. The organisation of alienated work following the example of military discipline and hierarchical authorities of command, that were admired by the great utopians such as Campanella, Saint-Simon or Bellamy, is replaced by the concept of self-determined work as Fourier suggested in the 19th century. Problems such as long-term unemployment resulting from the automation of factory and office work can only

be solved through the even distribution of work through reduction of working hours. With shorter working hours, it is possible to introduce “measures to create socially necessary occupations on a voluntary basis” (*idem*, 47). If the increasing leisure time can be used creatively and satisfactorily, then, so the authors of the ‘Club of Rome’ report, “a Golden Age is dawning where machines are working for us, instead of dominating us” (*ibidem*).

And finally, the essential principle to renounce consumerism unites the report with postmaterialist utopian thought. It is only possible to have a sustainable global society of the future if we “change the extravagant life style of industrial countries – and slow down consumerism – changes that would be enforced anyway given the requirements of environmental production” (*idem*, 128). Even if the authors do not subscribe to zero-growth – the South needs quantitative, the North qualitative, economic growth –, it is not acceptable in the long run that the average usage of energy and natural resources in the Northern hemisphere is 40 times higher – in some extreme cases even 100 times – than in the undeveloped countries in the South. “This disproportion does not only reflect social inequality but it suggests the degree to which the exploitation of nature has been perfected”, especially then if one adds together individual consumerism with the “criminal waste of human, material and energy resources for military purposes” (*idem*, 33).

However, not only the ‘system of human needs’ and its correspondent, technology and work, relate to the postmaterialist utopian paradigm. It is also the political system that is relevant in its essential structures. Actually, a critique of the parliamentary democracy has run like a red thread through modern utopian tradition since at least the 19th century. This is where the authors of the ‘Club of Rome’ report pick up the threads when they question if representative democracy is able to correct global maldevelopment. Governments, according to the criticism, that are forced to act under the pressure of the next elections,

only concentrate on immediate problems. They ignore those concerns that seem less pressing, but are generally of fundamental importance (*idem*, 14). “In its current form”, states the report, “democracy is not adequately suited to solve our immediate concerns. The complex and technological nature of many of today’s problems does not permit elected representatives to make competent decisions at the right time” (*idem*, 69). It is not in Parliament but in the media where generally informed discussions about the important political, economic and social problems are taking place (*ibidem*). The interest of parties to maintain their power base is so strong that the gap between public opinion and elected representatives is increasing. We have to be aware that “democracy is hollowed out and restricted” (*ibidem*). In short: The answer to the question if the new world in which we find ourselves is governable is “probably not with the existing structures and attitudes” (*idem*, 70).

In the context of a global threat to humanity, does not such an analysis legitimate the return of a utopian state such as Campanella’s *City of the Sun*? Does not such an analysis justify a utopian *Leviathan*, who, in the name of the survival of humanity, installs an iron dictatorship over the individual needs? It is conspicuous that the ‘Club of Rome’ report excludes such alternatives. Instead, like the classical postmaterialist utopias, its authors bank on a wide-ranging decentralization of political systems. “In the contemporary world, the decision making cannot be the monopoly of governments and ministerial departments who work in a vacuum anyway”. Many partners must be part of the process: trade and industry, research institutes, scientists, NGOs and private organisations (*idem*, 104). This pluralistic approach is complemented by a fundamentally democratic corrective that has already established itself as a central motif of the postmaterialist utopian paradigm. A dynamic world, states the report, needs “a sensitive nervous system at the basis, not only to

guarantee a possibly wide-ranging input, but to assure that all citizens identify with the common process of governing" (*idem*, 105).

First and foremost, the authority that the authors of the 'Club of Rome' report associates with a "vision of a world in which we like to live", largely echoes postmaterialist utopian thought. It is not a progressivist philosophy of history that is expected to execute the vision: a simple plea to the existentialist interest of humanity to secure its own survival replaces the appeal to a "historical necessity". And even the vision of the "global society" itself, in which the contemporary maldevelopments on a global scale need to be corrected, is indeterminate. It has the status of a regulative principle, not a closed system, that determines life in its minute details. In many ways, the 'Club of Rome' report goes beyond the horizon of a postmaterialist utopia. It is perhaps even more utopian. In the fictional blueprints of Huxley, Callenbach and Le Guin are elements that are alien to utopian thinking as they refer back to myths of nature or ideas of religious totality.

In Huxley's *Island-Utopia*, the European, classical, anti-individualist ideal of harmony is essentially modified. Its regulative principles, bound to secularized reason, are replaced by the ideal of transcendental holism, influenced by Buddhism, clearly breaks with the rationalism of Enlightenment thought of the early modern period. In Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, individual spirituality results from the relationship with nature: Here, spirituality echoes Native American rites that worship nature in small shrines spread around the country. After all, the self is nothing else than a derivative of a holistic myth of nature that generated it and where it will return to. A similar belief is proposed in LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*. In as much as the Cartesian division of subject-object is replaced in favour of a holistic understanding of nature that includes humans, the ground is cut from under the idea of the independent self as autonomous rational being. "There are souls", says LeGuin's hero, "whose

umbilicus was never cut. They will never separate from the universe. They do not see death as an enemy but look forward to decompose, so that new life can grow from them” (Le Guin 1974: 158).

Compared with this, the analyses and visions of the ‘Club of Rome’s’ report never leave the domain of rational viability. To simplify it, it would be possible to say that the report strives for that which the future of political utopianism makes possible: to use the method of secularized reason to demand strategies for a world that is still threatened by nuclear holocaust, by environmental destruction and climate catastrophes of the global kind, by the exploitation of non-renewable raw materials, the dominance of irrational governments in form of new nationalism and religious fundamentalism, as well as an unchecked population explosion in undeveloped countries.

Translation: Nicole Pohl

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