

9.3. Reaffirming the Negative Function of Utopian *Praxis*

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Abstract

It goes without saying that the visionary work enabled by the utopian problematic and the utopian form yields positive results in political-existential anticipation, in theoretical articulation, and indeed in the instances of realized utopian practice throughout history. In *Becoming Utopian*, I argue strongly for the importance of the positive function of utopia (Moylan, 2020). As Peter Fitting argues (1998; 2021), the work of the utopian imaginary provides inspiring scenarios for steps toward a better world that are crucial to motivating humanity to move on from the oppressive and unfulfilling conditions of the present existential and structural reality. There is no doubt that the articulation, exploration, and activation of utopian possibilities is a crucial praxis. In this essay, I want to reaffirm the negative function that must be at the core of any authentic utopian project. Challenging the positive utopian possibilities and manifestations evoked by some essays in this volume, I argue, with due respect for these constructive efforts, that such positive practices can only be articulated and moved toward realization by their having emerged out of a critical negation of the present order of things.

Key words: becoming utopian, negation, politics of form, Peter Fitting, Fredric Jameson

Let me begin with two quotations familiar in utopian discourse: first, Karl Marx's "ruthless critique of all that exists", from his letter to Arnold Ruge (Marx, 1975); and second, Fredric Jameson's statement: "The deepest vocation of utopia is to remind us of our constitutional inability to imagine utopia itself: and this, not due to any individual failure of imagination but as a result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (1982: 157).

In his letter to Ruge, Marx boldly calls for a “ruthless critique” as a primary step in the transformative work of overcoming the hegemonic regime of his time (namely, the capitalist system). For Marx, this first step must be taken, lest the critic or activist get caught up in the terms and conditions of the very system requiring revolutionary change.

While Marx’s assertion is perfectly clear (provoking adherence or rejection depending on the standpoint of the reader), Fredric Jameson’s Zen-like declaration that utopia’s primary concern is that of declaring its own impossibility often produces confusion and dismay as it appears to dismiss the entire utopian project, relegating it to its eponymous nowhere. However, as much as this koan appears to dismiss utopia, Jameson has no intention of doing so. Rather, his aim is to clarify its status in relation to the given present reality out of which this or that utopian impulse develops. Jameson developed this argument for utopia’s fundamentally negative quality as early as 1977. He argued that, rooted in the historical situation, utopia’s trajectory moves from a negation of that moment into the figuration of another possibility, one not attainable in the world as it is but one that carries humanity into a not yet existent reality. In his articulation, and before him, in Ernst Bloch’s, only such totalizing destruction and transformation can lead to the future reality that utopia (working with the raw material of the physical and ideological world) can prefigure, in immediate action or in the evocation of a better horizon.

As I argue in *Becoming Utopian*, we humans need to remember that the first move in this process of producing utopian scenarios and actions must be one that refuses the ruling order’s totalizing enclosure. Only from this negative standpoint, only by deploying deep interpretive critique and radically transformative intervention can we begin to articulate the negation of the negation: generating the projects, the nova, that enact the better world which humans, nonhumans, and the entire planet so direly need.

Saying this, asserting the primacy of the negative does not erase the necessity of positive utopian thought and action. Indeed, it strengthens authentic steps in the production of utopian possibilities. In addressing the “double-bind” of trying to work between Jameson’s argument about the negative vocation of the utopian problematic and his own reluctance to give up on utopia’s ability to portray and enact alternatives, Fitting makes a strong argument for the motivational power of the utopian imaginary in positing a collective sensibility and behaviour. He recalls the long tradition of utopian texts written by authors who intended their radical content to be taken seriously and adopted as actual alternatives within political or social movements, and he recaptures the history of activists who first came to utopian literature because of the politically instructive, challenging, and empowering content encountered on its pages. He grants that Jameson’s

focus on utopia's critical or negative function is fundamentally important, but he equally argues that "it does not satisfactorily acknowledge the positive aspects which brought us to utopias in the first place. For many of us became interested in literary utopias precisely insofar as they *were* visions of alternatives." In attempting to resolve this dilemma, he argues not so much against Jameson but through him, in a dialectical twist that not only retains Jameson's sense of radical figuration but also incorporates the pedagogical impact of utopian content. In catalysing radical change, he argues, the work of the utopian text lies not only in reminding us of the "insufficiency of our own lives" but also in providing an exploration of "the look and feel and shape and experiences of what an alternative might and could actually be, a thought experiment ... which gave us a sense of how our lives could be different and better, not only in our immediate material conditions, but in the sense of an entire world or social system" (1998: 14–15).

Thus, I am not arguing against cognitive and political articulations or manifestations of utopia, but I am saying that they must concretely grow out of the spirit of negation and then move into strategic negotiation with the tendencies and latencies in the present (including authentically reformist possibilities that lead into systemic transformation). This line of argument accords with Jameson's claim that, for the utopian method to fully function, a "Marxist negative hermeneutic" should be exercised simultaneously with a "Marxist positive hermeneutic" (1981: 296).

Here, I want to stress the importance of the "political epistemology" (as Darko Suvin terms it, for example, in his essays published in 2010) of Ernst Bloch's hermeneutic method of deep interpretation. Bloch (1986) (and Jameson, Ruth Levitas, Phillip Wegner, and others) assesses historical and present-day realities not just in terms of the dominant order but also in terms of the alternative and oppositional tendencies and latencies that are suppressed or not yet available, and yet offer immanent "traces" (*Spuren*) of forward movement toward a utopian horizon within that very moment. Thus, utopian possibility must be understood as a complex anticipatory figuration, wherein previously undeveloped transformations are imagined and exercised in provisional actions, while always standing open to unknown formations and practices that will only emerge when such a utopian way of being is attained.

This deep interpretive work requires a robust encounter with the overdetermined complexities of the present condition and not simply a one-dimensional assessment of the dominant order of things based in an abstract, static "realism" rather than a concrete, anticipatory "realism". Thus, utopian praxis is, and must be, radical and revolutionary, cutting to the roots of what is to be done in order to move toward totalizing transformation into what is Not Yet (Bloch). In this context, apparent reforms within the present system, usually growing out of a surface empiricism complicit with the reigning power

structure are not sufficient, for they are gestures that never break through such a structure. Indeed, such restricted practices only serve an artificial negativity that manages the conditions of what Bloch terms the “provincial present” rather than oppose what Herbert Marcuse termed the “affirmative culture” of the totally administered society. Only in a dialectically engaged manner can utopian praxis push at the edges of what is known, what is unforeseeable, or what is just looming into sight.

Hence, articulated utopias can be usefully understood in terms of the politics and mechanics of form: as figurative scenarios, thought experiments, performative or prefigurative communal and political action, rather than as empiricist agendas or blueprints declared by either a ruling regime, a self-nominated central committee, or a singular thinker. This, then, is the collective and transgressive materialist exercise that estrangement and cognition produces within a long-term revolutionary process that unleashes new progressive energies as it cuts through the knots of structural and ideological atrophy, by means of ruthless destruction and anticipatory practice (practice which can range from strategic compromise, to outright opposition, or to creative alternatives). This is what I meant in *Becoming Utopian* as I wrote of utopia’s “strong thought” as it is mobilized against all accommodation with the present system to challenge the dominant ideologies that fear and absorb utopia — often doing so by proffering limited reforms or ameliorations that preserve the system rather than interventions that aim to radically alter the existing order of things.

Parenthetically, I want to note that the radical alternatives made possible by utopian praxis are not simply to be understood as a project of the Left, although that is the one with which this paper is concerned. As Fitting has aptly described, right-wing utopias are also part of the utopian project, insofar as they too break with the established order of things in their reach toward their version of a better world. So too, proto-utopian religious projects proffer alternative visions that are “not of this world” (Fitting, 1991).¹

Therefore, it is important to reaffirm that authentic utopian undertaking (political, artistic, scholarly, pedagogical, material, textual) must begin with a deep analysis of present conditions that negates those conditions before prefigurations of transformative alternatives can be developed out of, and beyond, present contradictions and possibilities. For utopia, at its radical core, cannot be complicit with the present order of things, cannot facilitate that order, and cannot serve to produce or manage that order — even as it can work in a strategic and nurturing manner with progressive achievements and possibilities within that order. Indeed, if a utopian project is simply or uncritically legitimated within the enclosure of the present, it can only be compensatory. That is, of the three functions of utopia identified by Ruth Levitas in *The Concept of Utopia* (transformative, alternative,

compensatory), the last is utopia's attenuated role when developed in an unmediated, one-dimensional fashion in the given present; for in this pseudo form, utopia is nothing but an abstract representation of something better that does not grow out of a destructive and emancipatory break with the ruling order. Without negation, the development of positive programmes and visions will be instrumentally recaptured by any present ruling order.

At this point, I want to stress that even after ruthless critique, even after negation of the present, even within a realization of an authentic utopian programme in the present moment or one leading toward an unknown horizon, this primary function of negation must continue. For when realized, a new utopian reality (at the micro level of an intentional community, a forward pulling reformist achievement, an ongoing political movement, or ultimately, at the macro level of a postrevolutionary society) will still fall prey to further decay. Whether attacked and/or suppressed by externally antagonistic forces or compromised by internal power struggles or habituated laziness or opportunism, an achieved utopian programme must always require further negative engagement to overcome the entropy or half-life of its foundational energy, in order to reignite the powerful utopian impulse that will fuel the re-energizing and refunctioning that will provoke the revolution in the revolution.

Utopian positivity is, then, to be known and experienced, created and explored, as it arises out of a negation that breaks with the present. We see this in the textual scenarios and narratives of the literary utopia and dystopia, in the imagery of visual utopias, in the prefigured political practice of intentional communities and radical political movements, and in radical utopian design which proffers a reconfiguration of the built environment that makes a better existence possible. We see this in all utopian articulations as they disturb the universe out of which they arise, as they march to the beat of a different drum, even as they speak back from a sense of the utopian achievement embodied in a radical horizon. We see again and again that the only hope for realized utopian programmes, be they communities or official practices or movements, is found in the constantly reignited negative impulse at the core of the process of becoming utopian. If we humans (in all our intersectional diversity) are effectively to engage as utopian practitioners and scholars, we must take care to work from this negation, in order to move into the next, positive, steps of utopian achievement in a triple motion that is totalizing, transgressive, and transformative.

Utopia must at its core reach for something better, for that something which is "missing" in the present, as Adorno put it in conversation with Bloch (1988). Without this fundamental function of the negative, no authentically engaged utopian project (scholarly or sociopolitical) is possible.

Note

1. For a compelling narrative exploring radical utopianism as existentially and politically lived by individuals within an Islamic caliphate, see Norman Spinrad's science fictional thought experiment, *Osama The Gun* (Cabin John, MD: Wildside Press, 2016); the approach taken in the book, and the struggles involved in publishing it, are captured by the author in his comments on the back cover: "I wanted the reader to hate the sin, but love the sinner, because I felt it had to be done, and since no one else seemed to be willing to do it, and try to do it myself, come what may. Because Islam was being confused with its radical Middle Eastern jihadis, and Arabs in general with terrorists, and it seemed to me that the alien jihadist consciousness had to be experienced from within and empathetically understood. Which was why *Osama The Gun* had to be written, and why, as one foaming at the mouth rejection letter predicted, no American publisher would touch this book." All readers should be grateful to Wildside for choosing to publish it.

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