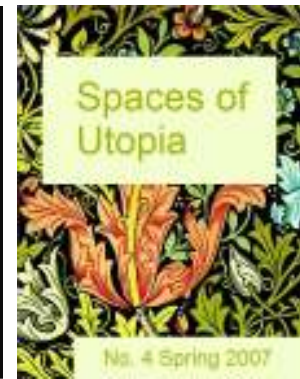


Utopia and Ecology¹

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To Hermínio Martins

A growing awareness of what is known today as ecological or environmental crisis has fostered a wider and better understanding of the complex and contradictory position of utopian discourse and utopian projects in the construction of modern identity.

In many contemporary intellectual milieus the utopian enterprise tends to be viewed with sympathy and condescension, as the projection of the best qualities in human condition. The truth, however, is that the critique of the contemporary world engendered by the emergence of the environmental crisis has made us aware of the "human, all too human" dimensions of utopian constructions, as well as of their close complicity with values that condition environmental deterioration, prolonging and intensifying it.

§1. The two utopias of modernity. As a rule, we resort to Thomas More's similarly named work (1516) to locate the genesis of a widespread utopian impulse deemed intrinsic to the constitution of modern identity. However, this perspective runs the risk of all excessively compact readings – it ignores its most interesting aspect, its richness of detail.

Indeed, one should not forget that amongst the most outstanding and influential works of the modern mind we find some powerful indictments of the utopian method, viewed as an idle escape from reality, an inability to face the

harshness of life's dictates. Such is the view adopted by Machiavelli, in Book XV of his immortal *The Prince* (written in 1513, three years before the publication of *Utopia*), as well as Spinoza's criticisms, in his *Political Treaty* (1677), a work left unfinished due to its author's premature death.

For the Florentine author, as much as for the Portuguese Jew of Amsterdam, political utopias revealed a double misconception. A cognitive misconception, inasmuch as utopias were incapable of dealing with the complex power play which is the essence of the fight for political power; an anthropological misconception, because they would not accept the objective data concerning human condition, thereby exiling themselves in the invention of ideal cities – cities whose inhabitants are not human beings of flesh and blood, but pious and virtuous creatures, who would never be found on the concrete level of existence.

However, if the political feature of modern utopia associated with More and Campanella, among others, is unfavourably viewed by certain key figures of modernity, the same does not apply to another facet of utopian thinking: the anticipation of the material means that might lead to a radically different future, to an altogether new way of life that would not require "social engineering" – since social engineering would be completely dependent on the notion of anthropological metamorphosis, and this was regarded, as shown in relation to Machiavelli and Spinoza, as an ontological alteration that only a miracle would allow – or, in other words, the disavowal of reason.

The work of Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis* (1624), stands as the perfect example of this second strain of modern utopia. In this essay, Bacon describes an insular society, located in the island of Bensalem, where the fundamental initiative lies in Salomon's House, in the description of which we find the embryo of what is known nowadays as scientific societies. This House, where numerous disciplines of learning are assembled and organised, was devoted to "the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (Bacon 1689: 71).

Descartes' project, which would be published thirteen years later, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), was, therefore, definitely present and operational

in Bacon's utopia. In fact, Descartes' goals were exposed, with the clarity of a program, in that short work dating from 1637:

(...) il est possible de parvenir à des connaissances qui soient fort utiles à la vie, et qu'au lieu de cette philosophie spéculative qu'on enseigne dans les écoles, on en peut trouver une pratique, par laquelle, connaissant la force et les actions du feu, de l'eau de l'air, des astres, des cieux, et de toutes les autres corps qui nous environnent, aussi distinctement que nous connaissons les divers métiers de nos artisans, nous les pourrions employer en même façon à tous les usages auxquels ils sont propres, et ainsi nous rendre comme maîtres et possesseurs de la nature (Descartes 1953: 168).

[it is possible to reach understandings which are extremely useful for life, and that instead of the speculative philosophy which is taught in the schools, we can find a practical philosophy by which, through understanding the force and actions of fire, air, stars, heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us as distinctly as we understand the various crafts of our artisans, we could use them in the same way for all applications for which they are appropriate and thus make ourselves, as it were, the masters and possessors of nature].

This second front of modern utopia opens up a new perspective, and an extremely clear and efficient one. The key to that future, to that unrealised place, that *u-topos*, cannot be found in an (impossible) transformation of human nature; on the contrary, it requires a revolution in the relation between human culture and nature. That radical change is based on a deeper systematic understanding of the causal processes inherent to forces and phenomena and on its technical replication in order to achieve out of natural phenomena useful purposes for humankind. In the discourse of the great minds of the seventeenth century we find the prospect and the promise of the techno-scientific society in which we have long been submerged. That was the real utopia of modernity, the techno-scientific world view, establishing a vigorous chain of continuity between Renaissance alchemists, the new post-Copernican physicists and the research teams in modern-day state-of-the-art research laboratories. That utopia, and no other, was responsible for the powerful and violent transformations on the Earth's landscape leading to the present ecological and environmental crisis. An effective utopia, because rather than confining itself to *a-topia*, completely divorced from reality, it was able to transform itself into an achievable project, into material world.

This techno-scientific utopia would not, however, prove to be politically neutral. On the contrary, with the emergence of the industrial revolution – in

itself no more than the transference of Bacon's and Descartes' expectations into the realm of concrete existence – the programme of techno-scientific conquest of nature became the foundation stone of the political rebuilding of society. We find this political enlargement of the techno-scientific world view in the pages of, for example, young Auguste Comte, in his *Plan of Scientific Studies Necessary for the Reorganization of Society* (1822). In this work, Comte divides the history of humanity in “the military aim” (*but militaire*) and “the industrial aim” (*but industriel*). Only the latter, defined as “acting on nature so as to change it for man's benefit” (*action sur la nature pour la modifier à l'avantage de l'homme*), should constitute the teleological foundation of the new social and political order, leading to the fulfilment of the techno-scientific utopia (Comte 1972: 68).

And so a new social pact, with fundamental material clauses, seemed ready to replace the earlier one, exclusively based on intersubjective premises. Peace and order, or progress and emancipation, were seen as dependent on the capacity of societies for ecumenical organisation, not in fratricide wars over the scant available resources but in a common endeavour aiming at global domination of nature, employing the means afforded by techno-science. And one should not assume that positivism was its sole proponent. No one better than Marx offered an enthusiastic apology for the potential of capitalism, specifically with regard to the exponential development of productive forces as means to appropriate natural resources, thereby establishing this improvement in the productive powers of humankind as an essential measure of historical progress.

Francis Bacon's utopia had become reality. The island of Bensalem had taken over the entire planet.

§2. From utopian irresponsibility to the utopia of responsibility. Utopia is a central theme of one of the most important and most neglected philosophical debates of the twentieth century. I refer to the way *The Principle of Responsibility* (1979), a work by Hans Jonas (1903-1993), one of the most profound thinkers in the field of the environmental crisis, establishes itself against the organising perspective contained in the most important book written by Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1959).

In his main work, Bloch defines and expands the leading categories of his thought, in different readings of history understood as the process of enactment of a utopian impulse, viewed as the essence of human condition.

These are a few of Bloch's central theses:

- a) The mobilising nature of utopia, defined as “dreaming forward” (*ein Traum nach Vorwärts*).
- b) The alert and inquisitive nature of consciousness, viewed essentially as “anticipatory consciousness” (*antizipierende Bewusstsein*).
- c) The historical march of humanity as a succession of horizons devised by hope and implemented by force of action – meaning the human capacity to adapt the ontological structure of the real to the plasticity of utopian representations – reproducing, in a lay and secular fashion, the messianic desire to build a new homeland, a “Heimat”, a kind of Just City of Men, a New Jerusalem. Hence Bloch does not hesitate to write, at the end of his cardinal book: “Der Mensch lebt noch überall in der Vorgeschichte[...] die wirkliche Genesis ist nicht am Anfang, sondern am Ende” [The human being is still living in pre-history everywhere (...) the real Genesis is not in the beginning, but in the end] (Bloch 1959: 1628).

Twenty years later, we come across Hans Jonas's criticism, whose work should be seen within a project of ethical reconstruction as new concerns are raised by the global advent of a technological civilisation. His central postulates, for the purposes of the present discussion, can be assembled around the following main points:

- a) That a critique of utopia (and of Bloch) implies a critique of technology's extreme possibilities as well.
- b) That the ethics of responsibility struggles against both scarcity of time and the euphoria of centuries of promethean and post-baconian expectations (including Marxism).
- c) That the ethics of responsibility does in no way imply a system of teleological imprisonment of history, but rather removing from its path all the threats left behind by many eschatological systems, focused on representing the concept of progress, in its multiple angles and features.

d) Refuting utopian systems built upon the fruitful and multifarious impulse of hope does not entail a mere analytical exercise of deconstruction. Jonas does not reject the practical tasks raised by the inevitable unfolding of history. He writes: “Against the principle of hope we raise the principle of responsibility, and not the principle of fear” (*Dem Prinzip Hoffnung stellen wir das Prinzip Verantwortung gegenüber, nicht das Prinzip Furcht*) (Jonas 1984: 390).

e) That Marx’s and Bloch’s mistake was to keep the realms of necessity and freedom apart. Freedom does not begin after necessity. Freedom is only possible in a responsible alignment with necessity, namely that which reveals itself, vital, in the natural rooting of the human condition, in our belonging to a fundamental primordial nature that is simultaneously place of residence and ontological limit.

§3. The ecological critique of modern utopias and the open way ahead. For nearly two hundred years the achievement of the technological and promethean utopia that prevailed in modernity was adopted by almost all the major social movements with active political agendas.

From nationalist movements strengthened in their reaction against the Napoleonic empire, to the socialist and social democrat movement, rooted in the II International, and the communist movement built upon the Bolshevik October Revolution, in 1917, all the leading political movements that held hegemonic positions in the world throughout the twentieth century, whether within imperial metropolises or, later on, in the new countries formed after the dismantling of colonial empires, shared a set of values common to modern utopia(s), described in table 1.

On the other hand, one of the main features we can detect when considering the manifold schools of thought founded on the diagnosis and therapy of the environmental crisis – mostly since the Second World War, but more visibly from the 1960s onwards – is the awareness of a gradual break up with those traditional values, although a clear consensus over alternative positive values is not yet discernible.

Values of modern utopia(s)	Values of the ecological critique
Belief in progress and in its vertical hierarchy of objectives	Plurality of aims, rejection of vertical hierarchy
Scientism, science and technique as ideology	Critique of science and technology
Idolatry of the State and its powers	Suspicion towards the State and its actual powers
Ideology of the “end of history”	Perception of the future as an open route
Politics as <i>conflict</i> (<i>Feind-Freund</i>)	Politics as cooperation, even if achieved by compulsory means

Table 1

From minority trends, such as ecocentrists, and those more or less turbulent activists who keep pharmaceutical companies in a state of constant alert because of their plight for animal rights, to the large environmental NGOs that attempt to interfere with and improve the political system from within, both at national and international levels, all these diverse examples prove that a deep and more or less conscious breach has occurred regarding the axiological consensus that dominated the long genesis of modern technological society.

The great classic utopias tried to encourage the creation of a sort of new humanity, or super-humanity (not to be mistaken with the similar concept in Nietzsche’s philosophy), resorting to unheard-of technological means enabled by the explosion of the scientific potential of societies as well as by the vitality of totally unregulated economic markets.

On a totally different plane, the discourse or discourses engendered while reflecting on and fighting the present global ecologic and environmental crisis, lack glamour and alluring prospects. In the literature and practice of ecological currents and movements we find not so much a new utopia, as a critique of the lack of sustainability lying at the heart of utopias. It is no longer a question of advancing a new version of the “assault on the skies”, to quote Lenin’s eschatological outburst on hearing the news of the success of the October insurrection, as much as a prosaic and urgent “return to the Earth”: this constitutes the substance of the program of ecological and environmental

intervention, characterised by countless proposals advising restraint and moderation of the conquering urges of human beings.

If any utopia survives at all in the discourse of ecological crisis it will be in reminding us that, considering current forces and trends, the very survival of humanity with some measure of dignity in the next hundred or two hundred years is in no way guaranteed. It is, indeed, a feat that will require more than our present capacities; the question, therefore, is far from being solved.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that there is little connection between the ecological critique of modern utopia(s) and the joyful deconstructivism of many a postmodern enterprise. For environmentalists and ecologists, the discourse of modernity has lost its attraction and legitimacy, but the tasks of modernity have not faded away into the mists of sheer representation. In this sense, the ecological discourse recovers a fundamental connection to the century of Enlightenment, in the crucial relevance attributed to sensorial experience, to the material nature of things, and to empirical reality.

To deal with the ecological crisis we need a body of thought that will not recoil from the clay of daily existence. We must be able to reason out of the mere prospect of indefinite continuance of life and history the strength to face the titanic confrontation that lies ahead, separating us from that difficult victory over civilisation's mortal enemies, those who once peopled our utopian dreams and now threaten to devour our future.

Note

¹ A version of this paper was published in *Ler*, nr. 48, Winter 2000, pp. 70-74, with the title: "Devouring our Future".

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