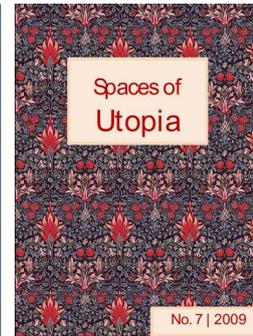


Utopia Matters

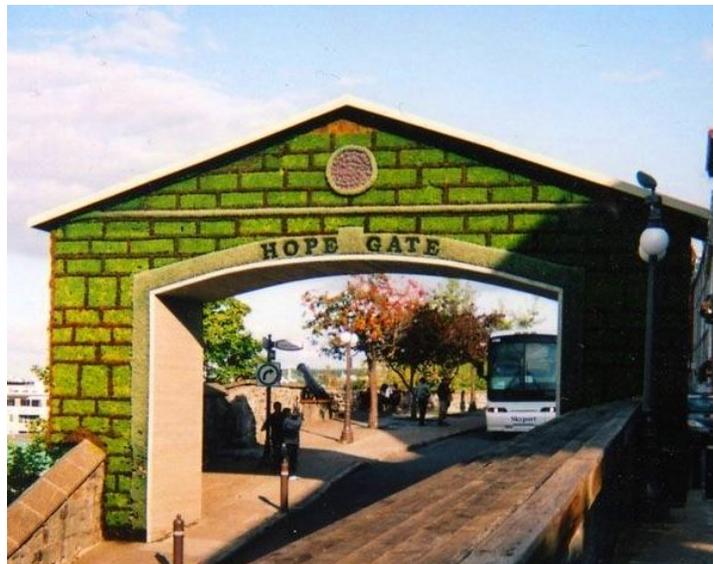
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The recent economic crisis has forced a discussion of the future of utopianism that had been declared pointless after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: What is the future of late capitalist society? How do we or indeed can we now imagine a post-capitalist, post peak-oil, post-industrial



Hope Gate, Quebec City, Canada

global society based on principles of sustainability, community and self-sufficiency? But then again, has the end of utopia, the end of history not already been declared after 1945, 1968 and again after 1989?¹ Why get entangled again in seemingly futile, fragmented and minimal utopian gestures? Wasn't Huxley right in *Brave New World Revisited* (1959) when he suggested that conspicuous consumerism would replace utopian dreaming?

Yet, the US election results on the 5th of November seem to indicate that Utopian hope can fuel political change. Barack Obama's victory and inaugural speeches tap into specifically American utopianism: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer" (Obama 2008). Like Columbia in Gast's allegorical representation of America's manifest destiny, the new US will update "the great experiment of liberty" and "reclaim the American Dream" for all (Weinberg 1935: 45).



John Gast, *American Progress*, ca 1872

Ironically, the libertarian Milton Friedman may have been correct in his assumption that only a crisis will promote true change (Friedman 1982 [1962]). Antonio Negri recently compared our postmodern, late capitalist condition to a "porcelain factory", a delicate and fragile construction that needs an alternative political practice, one that is truly utopian (Negri 2008). I would like to take this brief reflection as an opportunity to contemplate the many possibilities for utopian thinking that present themselves to us now (for a similar brief, see also Vieira /Freitas 2005).

One of the problems after 1945 and 1989 was that utopia was quite carelessly equated, on the one hand, with ideology, on the other, with a specific model of utopia; the classical utopia in the vein of Thomas More. Equally, as the modern age documents, utopias have had the tendency to turn into horrific dystopias and consequently are dismissed *a priori*. The end of history, the end of utopia means the end of ideology (and thus the end of a fundamental human desire). This is a problematic equation in itself.² On the one hand, we must acknowledge that utopias were written after 1989, integrating, in the case of Germany and Central Europe, the re-invention and creation of new nation states (Sargent 2005: 2). Utopian desire was thus never quenched. On the other hand, the equation of utopia with ideology assumes that neoliberalism is not an ideology but a science. But is neoliberalism nothing else than endless exploitation, wrapped in the coat of “ultra-logical Utopianism” which draws its persuasiveness from the basic structural elements of a cult religion?³ Thus, concludes Michael Winter: “Utopians do not dream anymore. In the affluent society of the modern Industrial West, Utopian Dreams have degenerated into advertising slogans” (Winter 1993: 300).⁴ The Disneyfication of utopia, the creation of “a supposedly happy, harmonious, and non-conflictual space” serves “to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent history and to cultivate nostalgia from some mythical past, to perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it” (Harvey 2000: 166-167). Capitalism is a naturalized but hidden ideology that governs every aspect of our world.⁵ As Margaret Thatcher concluded, ‘There is no Alternative’ (TINA).

In his recent book Robert Kagan pessimistically declares the 'end of dreams' in that the neo-liberalist doctrine of freedom and democracy has failed as a universal utopia – a problematic desire in itself. The current collision between emerging autocratic systems in China and Russia and Western democracies does not call for another dream or ideology (for Kagan, synonymous concepts) but for a 'concert of democracies' (Kagan 2008: 97). This is, to Kagan, the only pragmatic answer to the 'excessive optimism' of the 1990s (a relic of the Enlightenment) and the recent economic 'excessive pessimism' (*idem*, 99). Sally Kitch blames utopianism for a range of political fallacies and proposes a theoretical framework that is based on "post-utopian realism" to restart "humanity from scratch" (Kitch 2000: 9, 1). Ironically, to "restart humanity from scratch" is nothing else than an expression of utopian desire itself. In a similar vein, Anthony Giddens calls for a 'utopian realism' that creates the illusion of radical change within the existing system of social and economic exploitation (Giddens 1991: 154-158). Immanuel Wallerstein dismisses the idea of utopianism as politically useful and coins the term *utopistics* to highlight how reform based on rationality can be and indeed is the most constructive and historically possible (Wallerstein 1998). Klaus Kraemer thus argues for 'intertemporal rationality' that tailors market economy to ecological sustainability (Kraemer 1996: 234). What is missing in these responses is the aspect of utopia that propels visions of a different or better world beyond the existing status quo.

Considering this, the degenerate consumer utopias wrapped recently into marketing slogans of 'new frugality', 'new thriftiness' or 'simple living' are mere

mockery of a very important strand within the utopian tradition of voluntary simplicity.⁶ Weekend supplements of broadsheets, new magazines like *Simple Living* and a whole new blog and publishing range on living sustainable lives, downsizing and 'Living on a pound per day' (Kath Kelly) create a new 'green' and 'thrifty' consumer. Some years ago, Germany's *MediaMarkt* coined advertising slogans such as 'Geiz ist geil!' ['thriftiness is awesome'] and 'Ich bin doch nicht blödi' ['I'm not stupid'] to attract the 'new' thrifters. The desire of competing manufacturers to gain advantage in the new 'green' market causes them to ruthlessly exploit the ecological conscience of consumers that derives also from an erroneous conception of nostalgia for a simple life.

Our present economic-psychic constitution indeed is epitomized in the return of nostalgia.⁷ Some critics read the postmodern nostalgia as "historical inversion", a distortion of the present through "nostalgia-tinted spectacles", as a weak evasion of "the work of mourning" (Bakhtin 1981: 147; Jameson 1991: 290; Ricoeur 1988: 206). The 'backward look', warn sceptics, will exile us from the present, and turns us into lifeless pillars of salt in our attachment to the past. As the desired past (and a sense of home) never existed, the act of remembrance is illusion, fulfilment is never possible. This unreflected nostalgia conceals historical suffering and discord, real social relations and a privileged class, or turns the simple life into a heritage industry. The postmodern nostalgia fabricates a remembrance of times past ("armchair nostalgia") and of things that we never lost (Reiss 1983: 193; Appadurai 1996: 77-8).

Recent studies have emerged post-1989 from former Eastern Block countries where experiences of drastic and sudden political and social changes have also inspired this kind of nostalgia.⁸ “Ostalgia”, the counterfeit desire for a simpler, more straightforward past that never existed emerged fairly quickly after 1989.⁹ Talk was even of plans to build a GDR theme park in the Oberschöneweide district of Berlin. This problematic nostalgia has by now been questioned by more recent productions like *Der Rote Kakadu* (*The Red Cockatoo*, 2005) and *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006) which remind the audience of the violence and terror of living in the GDR beyond the Trabant, Spreewald gherkins and ‘Ossi Kitsch’.

The other response to the modern condition and certainly to the recent financial crisis is the reawakened Randian utopia of unfettered capitalism. Ayn Rand’s absolute belief in American Enlightenment ideals of technological progress and outright individualism (an equation of scientific and technological progress with social progress), the transformation of the capitalist producers into ‘Captains of Industry’ and her uncritical celebration of the American Dream that elevates the individual to the fundamental unit of American society have attracted prominent followers.¹⁰ “[M]an must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose*” (Rand 1964: 20). It is interesting that the *Ayn Rand Centre for Individual Rights* and especially its Executive Director Yaron Brook have been very active recently. Taking his cue from Rand’s novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Brook contends that “[w]hen America’s

markets are finally free of all coercion – in other words, when laissez-faire is achieved – financial crises such as the one we’re experiencing will never happen again” (Brook 2008). John Galt, in *Atlas Shrugged*, warns of the crisis turning point: “Yes, this *is* an age of moral crisis”, “Are you now crying: No, this was not what you wanted? A mindless world of ruins was not your goal?” (Rand 1999 [1957]: 929). The world in ruins is the world we have now and, according to Rand’s followers, can only be rescued by the Utopia of Greed.¹¹

In the above responses to late modernity, the radical potential of utopia is at best reduced to a mere means of socio-political critique, at worst abused as political spin. Whilst the classical utopia is outdated and has been overtaken, certainly since the eighteenth century by the temporal utopia and the critical utopia, a “contemporary utopianism (...) needs to resort to a *utopian heuristic* or *art of invention*” (Hudson 2003: 2). But how can we think a creative utopian heuristic that is radical and meaningful? As Jameson puts forward, “[w]e have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic” (Jameson 1983: 125).

Already Thomas More’s seminal *Utopia* (1516) remorselessly records the political and social ailments of early modern Europe. It echoes principal humanist

debates on the best state government, civic self-government, social equality, political wisdom in the light of the development of absolutism and early capitalism. Whereas in Book I, England is seen as held in the clutches of agrarian capitalism where “sheep (...) become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves” (More 1992: 26), the Utopians in Book II recognize the true value of material goods and class distinction: “for the smaller or finer thread of wool, which self-same wool (be it now in never so fine a spun thread) a sheep did once wear, and yet was she all that time no other thing than sheep” (*idem*, 82). Some of these issues were also discussed by More’s friends and contemporaries such as Erasmus in *Adages (Chiliades Adagiorum, 1502-32)* or his *The Praise of Folly* (1511). The paradigm governing the *Adages* was the principle of *amicorum communia omnia* (‘Friends hold all things in Common’), the spirit of true community that we also find in *Utopia*.

Nineteenth-century utopians and utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, William Morris and Henry David Thoreau, to name but a few, challenged the inherent flaws of industrial capitalism and offered different socio-economic blueprints. The ruthlessness of companies and nations under the pretext of liberty, wealth and transcendental freedom was noted by George Santayana. In the twenty-first century, Naomi Klein redefined this capitalist ruthlessness as ‘Disaster Capitalism’ that seeks to exploit political or economic disasters to pursue the ultimate realization of neo-liberalism (Klein 2007). Santayana saw the liberalist market economy as one stage of the life cycle of industrial capitalism. The paradigm of infinite progress, a problematic inheritance from the Enlightenment is,

according to Santayana, a mere superstition. His “Alternatives to Liberalism” (1934) points towards the Kantian project of perpetual peace in a cosmopolitical world (Santayana 1934: 761-762).¹²

The patriotic utopianism of the US, reignited by the recent elections of the American President, has thus long been countered by the Utopia of a United Europe.¹³ Victor Hugo’s speech at the International Peace Congress of 1849 called for “a common thought, common interests, and a common destiny” amongst the Europeans:

A day will come when there will be no battlefields, but markets opening to commerce and minds opening to ideas. A day will come when the bullets and bombs are replaced by votes, by universal suffrage, by the venerable arbitration of a great supreme senate which will be to Europe what Parliament is to England, the Diet to Germany, and the Legislative Assembly to France (Paris, August 21, 1849).¹⁴

Previously, Gottfried Leibniz, in *Corpus Juris Gentium* (1693), Abbé de St. Pierre and of course Immanuel Kant’s treatise on *Perpetual Peace* (1795) considered the reciprocity of a peace that ensures security, law and order in a ‘universal community’.¹⁵ Certainly Immanuel Kant envisaged a world community governed by cosmopolitan law, a “community [that] widely prevails among the Earth’s peoples” (Kant 2003 [1795]: 18). Whilst Robert Kagan describes Kant as a mere Utopian, we need to understand that Kant saw his essay as “an amendment to the unwritten code of national and international rights, necessary to the public rights of men in general” (Kagan 2004: 18). President Barack Obama’s utopian investment in the US as the promoter for change is interestingly supplemented by a reference to Thomas Paine in the inaugural speech. Obama’s quote from Paine’s *Crisis* pamphlets (1776-1783) underpins Obama’s gesture but should also remind us that Paine proposed a

'Congress of Nations' governed by common principles of equality, justice and peace. Cosmopolitan webs of co-operation are the only weapon against, as George Washington warned in his Farewell Address, the "baneful effects of the spirit of party" (Washington 1796: 16). Utopia is and must be flexible, heterogeneous, local yet global, located at the blurring boundaries of the aesthetic, ethical, juridical and political. Utopia demonstrates the continual exploration of that which is possible. But, "[u]nlike the fantasy of the Rapture, the apocalyptic erasure that allows the ethereal escape of true believers, local people's renewal movements begin from the premise that there is no escape from the substantial messes we have created and that there has already been enough erasure – of history, of culture, of memory" (Klein 2007: 466). To be 'shock resistant', to be truly Utopian, instead of starting from scratch, we need to start "from scrap, from the rubble that is all around" (*ibidem*).

Thus, to Margaret Thatcher, I would have answered 'TATA' – 'There are Thousand Alternatives'!¹⁶

Notes

¹ The film *Die fatten Jahre sind vorbei* (*The Educators*, 2004) addressed the 'sell-out' of the utopian ideals of 1968 generation in the character of Hardenberg. He had been a leader of the Socialist German Student Union and was once friends with Rudi Dutschke, before eventually marrying, getting a job in the financial business and abandoning his ideals.

² See Louis Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism", where he deals with a very different 'end of history' (Althusser 1964: 109-133); see also Sargent 2008: 263-273.

³ See Bourdieu 1998 and Benjamin (1991 [1921]): 100-103.

⁴ Translation mine. See also Jacoby 2005.

⁵ See Slavoj Žižek's *Organs without Bodies* (2003), which engages with the unspoken truths about capitalism and neo-liberalism.

⁶ See for instance the Quaker's *Testimony of Simplicity*, the principles of the Shakers, Amish, Mennonites, *The Fellowship of the New Life*, Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Richard Gregg's *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity* (1936), E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) or Duane Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* (1981).

⁷ It is also exemplified in the increase of mental health problems in the affluent world. For more popular work on this, see Oliver James's *Affluenza* (2007).

⁸ See the online magazine *n/osztalgia*, a joint project of two magazines, *Plotki* (Berlin) and *Anthropolis* (Budapest), and the publication *n/osztalgia – ways of revisiting the socialist past* (2007).

⁹ The films *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) and *Kleinruppin Forever* (2004) are such result of the 'failed utopia' of the GDR. More interesting, the film *The Architects* (1990; filmed in the latter half of 1989) depicts the struggles of a young architect to build a new utopian community outside of East Berlin within the decaying GDR socialism of the late 1980s.

¹⁰ See for instance Alan Greenspan, *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World* (2007).

¹¹ Interestingly, *Fortune* magazine prematurely asked if greed was dead in 1989 (Henkoff 1989: 40-46).

¹² Peter Glotz, in a fictitious economic history of the world from the viewpoint of the year 2080, also proposes an alternative, post-liberalist utopia that is based on social and bio capital (Glotz 2004: 21-33). See also Weber 2008.

¹³ See, most recently, Derrida 1991; and Habermas / Derrida 2003.

¹⁴ Hugo 1914. See also Malettke 2001: 51-60.

¹⁵ See Morgan / Banham 2007 for a discussion of the importance of Kant and Utopia.

¹⁶ This slogan was first used by the political scientist and writer Susan George.

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