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HOW TO USE UTOPIA (1999-2000, 1,940 words)
CONSIDERATIONS SPARKED BY ANSWERS TO New York Public Library
QUESTIONNAIREFOR A BRIEF-LIVED "UTOPIA" WEBSITE

<u>Preliminary note DS.</u> How little the New York Public Library either understood or cared for utopia/nism is revealed in the fact that out of their 5 questions 4 were about the Internet. I therefore refrain from citing the ideological nonsense of Question 3 to 5, which in fact I didn't answer but appended my entry on "Horizon (Utopian)," from "Lexicon: 20th Century A.D.," in *Public* [Toronto] no. 19 (Spring 2000): 72-75.

1. Of the utopias that have been conceived -- in theory, in literature, in reality, on the Internet -- which do you find the most appealing, and why? Of the dystopias that have been conceived, which   do you find the most terrifying or unpleasant, and why?

Most appealing to me would be the diametrical opposite to present-day capitalism without a human face (or is it showing its real face now that it fears communism no longer?). That is, a type of relationships between people which would use the stupendous productivity developed by capitalism to ensure a by now quite possible life of dignity for each human being. Dignity means first and foremost getting rid of the totally unnecessary starvation, epidemics, druggings, and other brainwashings enforced by the war of each against each, breaking out into innumerable small wars (such as in the streets of many US cities) and medium wars between states. In my opinion this could only come about by a rigorous introduction of direct democracy from below, extending Jeffersonian ideas to all genders, ages, and races. The nearest one can today get to obviously abbreviated depictions of such states is in the "warm" utopian tradition of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, supplemented by more practical economics as in Ursula K. Le Guin's Anarcho-Communist planet in *The Dispossessed* or Marge Piercy good future in *Woman at the Edge of Time*. A number of practical attempts should also be mentioned, from utopian colonies in the US of the last 200 years to the popular socialist beginnings of major revolutions of this century, from Lenin and Trotsky's Russia to Castro's Cuba, which were however all ossified and more or less stifled by poverty from within and military and economic pressure from without.

    I'm not sure whether the worst dystopia is the one in which 85% of people in today's world live physically and perhaps 98% psychically, or what is to come after its not too distant breakdown. Being an optimist, I opt for the earlier. Again, approximate descriptions can be found in Science Fiction, from the US New Maps of Hell in the 1950s to the present.

2. Is an ideal "community" made of virtual identities worth calling a utopia? Are physical bodies necessary to the creation of a utopian society, or can one be populated solely by alternate online identities? Does the Internet provide a "place" where a utopian community can be created? Why or why not?

While "virtual" or "cyberspace" is an interesting and potentially promising, as well as a badly misusable, invention, I cannot imagine a purely ratiocinative bliss, one without sensory and motor feedback to the brain. As you know, beside the sense of a "radically better place" or "place with radically better relations between its inhabitants", the term of utopia can also be used in the negative sense of unreal cobwebs in the brain, what Lord Macaulay--an expert on colonies--sneeringly referred to when he said that an acre

near London is better than a principality in the land of Utopia. For one thing, the Internet excludes the three quarters of humanity who do not have proper electricity and phone supply lines--say all my former students from India, China or Africa--nor can they hope to have it in the present organization of economics that enforces widening division between the relatively rich, mainly in the North, and the abysmally poor, mainly but not only in the South of our globe. I use the Internet in my professional work, and I have nothing against isolated and alienated individuals (as all of us are in this hugely privatized age) getting succor from wherever they can. But to pretend it is a Messiah coming to save us all, in lieu of focussing on how it could be used for lightening life outside the Internet, seems to me utopian in the bad sense: unrealistic and misleading. We should refrain from using this bourgeois or capitalist sense.

My counterproposal on how to use utopia/nism follows:

HORIZON (UTOPIAN)

The concept and image of horizon comes from phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur) and it was refunctioned by Ernst Bloch into a consciously sociopolitical tool within his "warm stream" Marxism. It is a spatial metaphor necessarily associated with the cognate spatial concepts and images of *locus* and *orientation*; these are "the Ur-form[s] of theoretical work," with etymological roots in astronomy (Negt and Kluge 1002) and geography. Beyond that, the roots reach into the desire for understanding and the ancient metaphoric cluster in which seeing stands for cognition. "Locus" is the place of the agent who is moving; "horizon" that toward which the agent is moving; and "orientation" a vector that conjoins locus and horizon. The horizon changes with the location of the moving agent, as was exhaustively argued by Giordano Bruno. But orientation can through all the changes of locus remain a constant vector of desire and cognition.

The use of these terms is predicated on an analogy with the empirical world. The claim of the "Possible Worlds" approach to fiction, as well as to all other forms of social imagination, is that the social types' imaginative structures are necessarily taken from "natural worlds" (i.e. dominant conceptions thereof). For "the term of `world' is not a manner of speaking: it means that the `mental' or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life" (Merleau-Ponty 225), our here-and-now has a preferential status. "The natural world, as an organized and perceptually structured spatiotemporal ensemble, constitutes the original text... of all possible discourse, its `origin' and its constitutive environment.... All possible discourse is enunciated only against the ground of the perceived world's significant space, by which it is surrounded..." (Marin 167 and 175). The fact that we can meaningfully effect this metaphoric analogy from practice to signic constructs constitutes itself a highly significant meta-meaning.

The freedom of the users (originators and addressee-modifiers) of Possible Worlds consists in the fundamental fact that these can be and are expressly modified in the newly articulated signic constellations. I shall discuss this further on the example (valid with suitable modifications for other uses too) of utopian fiction and imagination.

The goal of utopia is in principle not a defined, localized or fixed humaneness but a not-yet-manifest type of human relationships, a hominization in Engels's or Teilhard's sense. This is "a depth dimension of the Onwards" (Bloch 147); from which it follows that there can be no final, "classical" or canonic locus of utopianism. This can be systematized as *the dominance of Horizon over Locus*. Locus does not coincide with but interacts with Horizon: this makes for a dynamic, open utopia (e.g. Platonov's *Chevengur*, Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*). Action & agents embodies here the orientation toward a moving (in these cases, an anarcho-communist) utopian horizon.

The second possibility is that *Locus coincides with or swallows Horizon*: this makes for a dogmatic, static, closed utopia (e.g. Campanella's *Civitas Solis*, Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie*): Such a doctrinaire or *dogmatic* text "asserts the utopian focus as 'ultimate' and drastically limits

the possibilities of the utopian horizon; an *open-ended* text, on the other hand, portrays a utopian locus as a mere phase in the infinite unfolding of the utopian horizon, thereby abolishing the limits imposed on it by classical utopian fiction" (Somay 26).

The third possibility is *Locus alone*, i.e. without a utopian Horizon (which makes it a pseudo-utopian locus): this makes for heterotopia. The best theoretical example is of course Foucault, and the best fictional one his explicit disciple's Samuel Delany's *Triton*, also a direct – and to my mind mistaken -- polemic with *The Dispossessed'*s "ambiguous utopia." While both these novels refuse "the doctrinaire identification of the utopian locus with the utopian horizon[,] Delany... also does away with the utopian horizon itself.... [The utopian] horizon and the urge are [in Delany] absent, and that absence leaves his characters purposeless and confused." (Somay 33)

The final logico-combinatorial possibility is to have in a text *Horizon alone*, without a utopian Locus. This is where non-localized "utopian thought" belongs, such as all the abstract blueprints, utopian programs, etc. I have difficulty in seeing how a horizon without concrete locus--without Bakhtin's chronotope -- can be a fictional narration in any strict (not ironic or loosely metaphoric) sense.

To resume the above locus/horizon combinatorics:

1/ H > L: *open-ended or dynamic utopia;*
2/ L = H or L > H: *closed or static utopi*a;
3/ L (H = 0): *heterotopia*;
4/ H (L = 0): *abstract or non-narrative utopia(nism)*.

These terms (as well as a further set of agential terms--see Suvin) might be applied as analytic tools to the whole range of utopian studies--fictions, projects, and colonies.

Finally, the interaction of locus and horizon in the dynamic utopia constitutes it as not too dissimilar from--possibly as a special case of--Eco's definition of a semiotic encyclopedia:

> It appears not as a finished object but rather as an open project: not a utopia as **terminus ad quem**, i.e. a state of perfection to be reached, but a utopia as a regulating idea, as a project **ante quem**, whose force stems precisely from the fact that it *cannot* and *should not* be realized in any definitive form. (Eco, "Quattro" 108)

Eco himself identifies such an open utopia with a rhizomatic encyclopedia only, which I would rather liken to my possibility #3. I would not share the Post-Modernist taboo on global (or indeed provisionally, here-and-now total) organization of knowledge as in my utopia #1 above: *on condition* that this globality is conscious of itself as a synchronic cross-cut for well-defined interests and with a limited pertinence. There is no reason that would necessarily prevent such a dynamic utopia from defining strategically central cognitive trees available for action aimed at radical change at any given point.

Thus I would conclude, with Bloch, that we should hold a steadfast orientation toward the open ocean of possibility that surrounds the actual and that is so immeasurably larger than the actuality. True, terrors lurk in that ocean: but those terrors are primarily and centrally not the terrors of the not-yet-existing, but on the contrary simple extrapolations of the existing actuality of war, hunger, degradation, and exploitation of people and planets. In order to understand how to approach such open adventist possibilities, we may have first to learn the lesson of the dynamic utopias, where locus constantly tends toward and yet never fuses with

horizon.

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