The Ends of Utopia

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The Literary Utopia

There is a deliberate ambiguity—or perhaps duality—in the title of this essay. I wish to discuss the various pronouncements of the “end” or the “death” of utopia. But I also want to consider some of the many purposes of utopia. I want to look at the kind or kinds of thing that utopia has been, and to set these against the claims currently being made about its condition, and its possible future. If utopia is at an end, what is it precisely that is ending?

It is important to separate out the different forms and meanings of “the end of utopia.” One of them relates to utopia as a literary genre. This refers us back to the very origin of the literary utopia, in Thomas More’s eponymous Utopia (1516). More’s own libellus vere aureus, his “truly golden little book,” has continuously been in print, in one language or another, ever since its publication (it is hard to think of many other works that can claim this distinction—the Bible, in its various vernaculars, is of course one obvious one). Its immediate success, and its widespread imitation, established a tradition of writing utopias that continued well into the twentieth century. With some exceptions—Portugal being one—virtually every European country entered enthusiastically into the enterprise.¹ An incomplete bibliography lists over six thousand titles in English alone.² Rarely can a genre have attracted such a variety of talents, or encouraged such a multiplicity of efforts, ranging from the glowing sensuousness of William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890) to the run-of-the-mill potboilers of a host of science-fiction writers, including the scriptwriters for the long-running TV series Star Trek.³

It is this tradition, the tradition of utopia as a literary genre, that many claim has been exhausted. Certainly it is difficult to think of a utopia in recent decades that has commanded much attention from either literary critics or the general reading public. The one group of writers that still seems to make fertile use of the utopia are feminists
of one kind or another. Works such as Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) are powerful exploitations of the utopian genre. But it is revealing too that many women writers—just as male—have preferred the dystopia to the utopia, as in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009); and while it is true that the dystopia uses many of the same literary devices as the utopia, the unwillingness to essay the literary utopia suggests a distinct lack of confidence in its capacity to be effective, as well perhaps as a failure of the utopian imagination.

Much the same can be said about the other group of writers that still occasionally turns to the utopia, writers of an ecological turn of mind. Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) made something of a splash when it first came out, but it has not been followed by anything of a comparable kind; whereas fictional accounts of ecological disasters abound. Once more it seems far easier to imagine dystopia than utopia; and where ecologists try to sketch out utopian prospects, these are much more likely to take the form of social-science speculation than anything in a literary or imaginative vein.

It is considerations such as these that must make one skeptical of Fredric Jameson’s recent claim that not only is utopia—in its literary form—necessary at the present time but that it is indeed responding to that need. The credibility of the claim is in any case somewhat diminished by discovering that most of the utopias that Jameson considers are those couched in the genre of science fiction. Indeed Jameson, following Darko Suvin, calls utopia “a socio-economic sub-set of science fiction.” This odd narrowing has the unfortunate consequence of limiting utopia’s history to the short period since the late nineteenth-century writings of H. G. Wells, generally considered to be the father of modern science fiction. Since Jameson does not wish to exclude earlier writing, he is forced to consider earlier utopias, the utopias since More, within the genre of “fantasy,” in the manner of Lucian or Cyrano de Bergerac. But that too has the equally unfortunate result that in Jameson’s handling most earlier utopians turn out to be, as he puts it, “maniacs and oddballs.” Margaret Cavendish’s bizarre *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666), with its creation of an “immaterial world” peopled by “immaterial creatures,” is treated as emblematic of the fantastic utopia. If that is utopia, one might well be tempted to think of it, as Jameson occasionally suggests, as no more than a form of play, showing “some affinity with children’s games.” While undoubtedly there is a playful element in many utopias—More’s Utopians use gold only for chamber pots—this characterization would seem to consign the genre to the
more frivolous margins of literature. It makes it hard to understand the enormous influence of More’s *Utopia*, Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun*, or Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*.

Even when Jameson comes to consider the science-fiction utopias of the recent period, it is telling that nearly all his examples come from the earlier part of the twentieth century. The writers he mostly considers—H. G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Olaf Stapledon, Jerome Bruner, Stanisław Lem, Ursula Le Guin, Brian Aldiss, Philip K. Dick—all wrote before the 1980s, mostly well before. The only truly recent example he discusses is Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, which, while undoubtedly utopian in intent, seems to have more the character of “fancy” or whimsy than the structured elements of the “imagination” that make up a new world (to use the Coleridgean opposition that Jameson employs). If, as Jameson claims, utopia is alive and reasonably well, it seems strange that he cannot find more current examples to substantiate the claim.

In fact Jameson shows himself uneasy at several points on this very point. Utopia, he argues, tends to be at its most vigorous during “transitional periods,” when major social changes are accompanied by a kind of political stasis, where the political will or means are lacking to give shape and direction to the changes. Utopia then appears as an “imaginary enclave within real social space,” such as the court in the early-modern utopia, which “offers the figure of a closed space beyond the social, a space from which power distantly emanates but which cannot be itself thought of as modern.” This is in contrast to, and in abeyance from, the “bustling movement of secularization and national and commercial development” that is hurrying the society forward. Utopian enclaves then are “something like a foreign body within the social: in them, the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer the space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on.”

Leaving aside the problematic character of the concept of transition—which period cannot be called “transitional”?—this is an attractive and plausible view of at least the early-modern utopia, in its great period of expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It may also apply well to the other great period of utopian writing, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Western societies were being convulsed and transformed by powerful currents of urbanization and industrialization while still being ruled largely by archaic political forms. But it then poses a problem for Jameson’s view of the present. For with the fall of communism and the worldwide spread of capitalism, on an unprec-
edented scale and with marked intensity, we are once more according to him in a transitional state, without the commensurate political forms (clearly for him, socialist) to manage the change. Disabled by the loss of the socialist project in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the Left has no practical agenda and no programmatic philosophy. The “consolidation of the emergent world market,” he asserts, thus for the moment leaves us with “no alternative to Utopia.” For “what is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief . . . that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systematic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.”

Jameson therefore rejoices that today “Utopia seems to have recovered its vitality as a political slogan and a politically energizing perspective.” But why then does he find it so difficult to show convincing evidence of this? Where are the utopias that are performing these functions? There is a hint of the difficulty in the statement that, just as Jean-Paul Sartre called for an “anti-anti-communism” as an alternative to a “flawed communism” and “an even more unacceptable anti-communism,” so the need of the hour, to counter despair and a sense of futility is “the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism.” Sloganizing might itself suggest a degree of desperation, an expression of a felt need that is not currently finding much of a response. It is easier to make anti-anti-Utopian statements than to imagine a utopia, in all the fullness of a realized vision of an alternative society. Utopia needs its defenders, no doubt, just as communism did, but it seems to be proving as difficult to create a literary utopia as to construct an acceptable version of communism (the two problems are of course linked, given the close connection of the modern utopia and modern socialism).

Jameson suggests another and different cause for—what he more or less has to admit—the paucity of utopias today. That is the degeneration of the very genre, science fiction, that he looks to as the vehicle of utopia. The great days of the science-fiction utopias seem to belong to the period before the last third of the twentieth century, the latest or last appearing in the 1970s with Le Guin, Piercy, Dick, and others. What has taken over since then, according to Jameson, is the weaker form of fantasy, exemplified in the popularity of such works as J. R. R. Tolkien’s (“posthumously”) and the Harry Potter series (“very actual
Unlike science fiction, fantasy lacks any sense of history and tends to play upon nostalgia. It is especially caught up in magic, thereby eschewing the elements of science and reason that ultimately—whether in technological innovations or the scientific organization of society—underpin the science-fiction utopia. While magic had a creative role to play in medieval fantasy, as in the Arthurian romances, in modern fantasy—in a “disenchanted world of prose, of capitalism and modern times”—it degenerates into nostalgia.

There may be other reasons why the science-fiction, feminist, and ecological forms of the literary utopia appear so weak, so incapable of setting the social or political agenda. One surely has to do with the radical fragmentation of readerships and audiences today. This applies not just to literature but to radio and television—no longer “broadcasting” but “narrowcasting”—music, sport, and most other form of “leisure” activities. These no longer, in most respects, have a common national constituency but appeal to and involve particular groups, segregated by age, sex, class, and sometimes race. The readership for feminist fiction is largely women, of ecological utopias largely other ecologically minded persons, of science fiction the fans that form the science-fiction societies and consume the “fanzines.” There are occasional crossovers, as for instance when science fiction is made the basis of Hollywood spectaculars such as the *Star Wars* films. But mostly we act and consume within our own cultural enclaves. The idea, say, of the “nation speaking to itself,” common in the era of national broadcasting from the 1930s to the 1970s, is less and less a reality. Except at moments of crisis, such as after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, it is hard to create a national forum of debate and discussion.

So far as utopia is concerned, we can compare this with the situation, say, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here no doubt is a “transitional period” such as our own, at least one in which momentous changes were under way. Industrialization had thrown up in particular “the social problem,” one relating to the condition of the new working class and the question of how to ameliorate or resolve the acute social conflicts that threatened to split society apart. Sociologists such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber had all offered their sustained reflections on this and related questions of democracy and social organization. But it was the utopian writers of this period who most seized the public imagination and gave to this thinking its most persuasive form. There was Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), wildly popular not just in the United States but also in Europe and indeed beyond. So popular was Bellamy’s utopia of state socialism that the more libertarian William Morris felt the need to counter it
with his anarchistic, pastoral *News from Nowhere* (1890). That arcadian vision in turn provoked the brisk riposte of the more technologically minded H. G. Wells in his *A Modern Utopia* (1905). And the argument continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. Yevgeny Zamyatin, in his dystopia *We* (1924), cleverly drew upon the dystopian fiction of the early H. G. Wells to oppose Wells’s later more optimistic visions. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) was also a response to the Wellsian utopia of science and socialism (and his later utopia, *Island* [1962] was his reversal of his own *Brave New World*). And in 1949 came George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, also, but in a darker mood, coming to terms with the modern forces of technology and state power.¹⁶

Here was a pattern of “challenge and response,” conducted through utopias and antiutopias, that absorbed the attention of a good part of the literary and political intelligentsia of the time. No educated person could be unaware of the issues, nor abstain from having a view on them. Moreover, these were works that, though mostly concerned with socialism and science, went beyond the immediate questions of social and political organization to reflect on wider aspects of modernity. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* was not simply a socialist utopia. It was also couched in a “planetary” form, on a worldwide stage (“no less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern Utopia,” says Wells). Morris’s *News from Nowhere* was not simply a medievalized vision of communism; it was also in many ways the first “ecotopia,” an ecological utopia (“We have made the world a garden,” says Old Hammond of the new society). In our own era of globalization and ecological crisis, we might expect these utopias to be something of models, or at least to inspire a like response. Why have these responses not been forthcoming?

It is by comparison with periods and works such as these that we need to judge the contemporary condition of utopia. By this standard we clearly fall very short. There is quite simply nothing that commands the attention of the educated reading public in the way that those works once did. By some sort of quantitative measure, no doubt scholars of utopias could produce long lists of utopias being produced today. But they would nearly all be buried in isolated genres and subgenres that have their devoted readers and critics but that rarely engage with each other or with a wider public. Not that the “privatization” of utopia is unique, of course; it goes along with a much wider and deeper privatization of society that is driven by powerful forces, and that has marginalized or “ghettoized” public debate.¹⁷

With the loss of the literary utopia has gone the loss or weakening of certain functions that it performed in past times. These have been many and varied. Ruth Levitas has suggested that they are principally
“compensation, criticism and change,” agreeing that many utopias encompass all three or that, at the least, different readers may well find any of them in the case of any one utopia. But she also wishes to add utopia’s function in “the education of desire,” à la Morris and Ernst Bloch, as well as its capacity to produce a bracing “estrangement.”\[18\]

There is also the uncomfortable fact that what may be utopia to one person might seem its opposite to another, and vice versa—for example, for Morris, Bellamy’s utopia appeared a soulless, mechanical dystopia; for many American college students of the 1950s and 1960s, Huxley’s *Brave New World* (all that sex and drugs) appeared a veritable utopia.\[19\] Moreover for many people *all* utopias have seemed a totalitarian nightmare, whether of evil or simply of ennui.\[20\] The range of purposes for which utopias have been written, the different forms in which they have been couched—golden ages, ideal cities, perfect societies, etc.—and the differential responses of readers, all make it very difficult to ascertain what may have been lost, and the reasons for that loss, in the decline or death of utopia.

What we may say with at least some degree of confidence is that, for whatever reason, writers no longer turn to the utopian form or genre for imagining a better or more perfect future: whether as a satirical or critical contrast with the present or as the literary embodiment of some prescriptive theory or as simply an attempt to disturb thought into alternative paths. The “imagination of disaster” fares infinitely better, and this at least means that utopia’s cousin—or alter ego—the dystopia, continues to flourish. But whatever the overlaps of utopia and dystopia, there is a fundamental difference in the impulse or temperament that drives them. Joseph Conrad once wrote to H. G. Wells: “The difference between us is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity, but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not.”\[21\] Wells wrote utopias, many of them; Conrad never wrote a dystopia, in the strict sense, though it is not difficult to discern what we might call a dystopian streak in his writing. But he was right to stress the radical differences between them. It is Wells who has had no real successor.

**Thinking Utopia: Utopia as Social Theory**

The literary utopia has been the predominant form of utopia since More. It can also claim to perform better than any other form what utopia mostly aims to do, namely to present a “speaking picture” of the good society, to show in concrete detail what it would be like to live in such a society, and so make us want to achieve it.\[22\] It is even possible
to argue that the literary utopia is the only true utopia—that is, that Thomas More with his *Utopia* more or less single-handedly invented a new form, and that anything that deviates too much from it really ought to call itself something else. But there is another tradition of thought that many wish to include in any concept of utopia. This can indeed claim a longer pedigree than the literary utopia, stretching back to Plato’s *Republic* and other accounts of the “ideal city” in the Hellenic literature. But its more recent manifestation is to be found in the tradition of social thought that includes such works as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762), Nicolas de Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793), Robert Owen’s *A New View of Society* (1813), and the works of “utopian socialists” such as Henri Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier. None of these are what the Manuels call a “speaking-picture” utopia, but they are undoubtedly imbued with a certain sort of utopian impulse, the reflection of what we might call a utopian temperament. Such a spirit also arguably informs much of the thinking of Marx and Engels, despite their well-known hostility to utopianism in the strict sense.

What we find in all these works is a diagnosis of the ills of the present society, together with more or less elaborate schemes for its transformation and perfection. The intent is to convince us not only that the present is intolerable but that we can do something about it, that we can change it—change it, moreover, not simply for the better but for the best. Unlike the premises and prescriptions, say, of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* or Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, human nature in these thinkers is seen as perfectible, given the right kind of social environment, and human society therefore can achieve a more or less final form for the fulfilment of the goals of happiness and freedom. In that sense we can speak of “utopian social theory” as a conjoint genre with the literary utopia.

What links these two species of utopia is the temperament of the thinkers; what divides them is the form of their thinking. Like the literary utopians, Rousseau, Owen, Fourier, Marx and the others are passionately convinced that humans are perfectible, and that with the right kind of social organization something approaching perfectibility can be realized. But they are equally convinced that the time of fictitious accounts of the good society are past, that now is the time for serious, “scientific” schemes of social reformation. Especially with the French and industrial revolutions, the conviction grew that the good society was on the point of realization, that the intellectual and material resources were now to hand with which to construct the new society. What was needed now was good social science, not the literary imagination. It was only with the
slowness of change, and the apparent reluctance of society to commit itself to the necessary social readjustments, that the literary utopia—which, in the face of the “social-science utopia,” fell into abeyance in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century—made a reappearance at the end of the century.26

But, despite this history of divergence, and the occasional expression of hostility by social theorists towards “pie-in-the-sky” imaginings of utopia, it is by no means improper for scholars to treat the two types of utopia as part of the same movement of thought, or as part of the same tradition. Many respectable histories of utopia do just that.27 The clear link between distinct kinds of social theory and certain literary utopias—for example, between socialism or Marxism and the utopias of Bellamy, Morris, and Wells—is perhaps sufficient justification of that practice. There will be differences of treatment, of course, appropriate to the different genres (a failure to acknowledge that is one of the besetting sins of the field of utopian studies). But it may be no more than a matter of particular interest or concern which directs us to one or other of these forms.

Another way, therefore, in which utopia may be said to have “ended” is in the decline or death of utopian social theory. If that is so, we have to note a striking difference with the literary utopia. For while the literary utopia lost its vitality fairly soon after the Second World War—Wells was still writing utopias up to his death in 1946—utopian social theory received something like a shot in the arm with the remarkable recovery of the economies of the industrial societies after the war, and the onset of the trente glorieuses, the thirty or so years of unprecedented economic growth that only faltered in the 1970s. During these years social science abounded with theories of “modernization” and “convergence” which held up the West as the model to which all other societies were tending, and which proclaimed the “end of ideology” and the solution of all fundamental problems of politics and social organization. A synthesis of liberal democracy, social welfare, and “managed capitalism” was producing a social order based on a high degree of consensus. The conflicts of the old industrial society were at an end; orderly progress, without any obvious limits, was now possible for the indefinite future. Moreover, such a rosy future was available not just for the capitalist West but also for the communist East which, after the disavowal of Stalinism, was also now proceeding in the direction of a less ideologically and more pragmatically governed society. “You’ve never had it so good,” proclaimed the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in the 1950s; and intellectuals as well as voters seemed inclined to agree with him. Here was utopia of sorts, not in some faraway world or in some far-fetched scheme, but in the accomplishments of present-day industrial civilization itself.28
The social conflicts of the 1960s in Western industrial societies, the brutal suppression of the Hungarians in 1956 and the Czechs in 1968 in the Eastern bloc, the “oil shock” of 1973 and the realization that industrial societies were dependent on a diminishing supply of fossil fuels had contradictory effects on utopian social theory. On the one hand there was an end to the complacency of the 1950s, and a greater awareness of the deep-seated problems of all industrial societies. Modernization theory, with its assumptions of Western superiority, came under sharp attack. The “end of ideology” was denounced as itself ideological. There was a widespread resurgence of Marxism, with its stress on inequality and conflict. But, as Herbert Marcuse and a host of other thinkers showed, Marxism was itself ultimately utopian in its expectation of a final resolution of conflict and the establishment of the good society. The revival of Marxism, crossed often with exotic varieties of Freudianism or Surrealism, produced a vibrant crop of writings that, for all their excoriating of the alienation and exploitation of industrial societies—East and West—nevertheless had a pronouncedly utopian flavour. Much of this utopianism surfaced, in a dizzying form, in the writings and events that surrounded the “May Events” in Paris in 1968.

In addition, a flourishing literature developed showing how salutary had been the oil shock of the 1970s, allowing us to rethink the whole future of the industrialized world. The Ecologist’s *Blueprint for Survival* (1972) was only one of the many tracts that put the ecological utopia on the map, in social theory at least if not very much in the form of the literary utopia. Ecological social theory is indeed one of the great inheritances of the 1970s, a storehouse of ideas and attitudes that feeds much of the ecological consciousness of today, however unacknowledged.

More recently, the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union have had equally contradictory effects on utopian social theory. On the one hand, intellectuals in Eastern Europe loudly announced the end of utopia, utopia for them being the now discredited Marxist experiment. On the other hand, intellectuals in the West proclaimed, with some complacency, the “end of history” and the worldwide victory of Western-style capitalism and liberal democracy. Once more, now more completely than ever before, the West was identified with utopia. Even the post-Communist East, with its rejection of the Marxist utopia, seemed willing to accept the free-market utopia and the consumerist paradise associated with the West.

In the event, the euphoria seems to have been short-lived on both sides of the former iron curtain. Free-market capitalism had a devastating effect on the lives of many ordinary people in East European societies. For the West, there were the terrorist attacks in America, Spain, Britain, and
a number of other Western countries, announcing the arrival of a long-
drawn-out struggle against shadowy and not-so-shadowy groups whose
purpose seemed to be to produce the maximum degree of insecurity
and fear in the population. For the world as a whole, there were wars in
Iraq and Afghanistan, and a virtual civil war in Pakistan, a nuclear power.
Seemingly to cap all this was a global financial meltdown that began in
the United States in the autumn of 2008 and soon spread throughout
the global economy—the worst economic downturn since the Great
Depression of the 1930s. Far from a prosperous and peaceful new world
order following on the end of the Cold War, what had supervened was a
new world disorder. Not since the Second World War had the prospects
for utopia, in whatever form, seemed so bleak.

Actually, social theory had begun its retreat from utopia some time
before the cascading crises of the early twenty-first century. Following
the high-point of modernization theory of the 1950s, and the elevation
and exaltation of Western modernity as the end point of social evolu-
tion the world over, there had, from the 1970s onwards, been a sharp
reversal. Modernity seemed to have overreached itself, to have shown an
intolerable degree of self-certainty, rigidity, and dogmatism. Its “grand
narratives” of reason, science, progress, even revolution, were increasingly
questioned. The “postmodern” turn that followed had many varieties,
but common to them all was an attitude of skepticism or irony in the
face of the certainties of modernity.

None of this was conducive to utopia, which in its modern form at
least has been inescapably tied to reason and scientific organization.
In other ways too the modern underpinnings of the utopia, in its defin-
ing form, seem to have been eroded. Utopia, argues Zygmunt Bauman,
generally reflected the form of the modern nation-state, a territorially
bounded entity which provided the necessary sovereign space for uto-
pian imagining. It also reflected the nation-state’s search for a managed
order, preferably one fixed and final and not subject to disruptive or
disorderedly change. Both these conditions have disappeared, as global
multinational entities and elites have seized center stage, marginalizing
the nation-state and its territorial space, and as global capitalism sets in
train a constantly destabilizing search for new forms of satisfaction, one
that is present rather than future oriented. “Happiness means now a
different today rather than a more felicitous tomorrow, as it did in the
past.” In our condition of “liquid modernity,” as described by Bauman,
the “territoriality” and “fixity” of both the modern state and the classic
utopia are undermined. “‘Utopia’—in its original meaning of a place
that does not exist—has become, within the logic of the globalized
world, a contradiction in terms . . . The ‘u’ of ‘utopia’ bereaved by the
'topos,' is left homeless and floating, no more hoping to strike its roots, to 're-embed.' In the “transgressive imagination of liquid modernity the ‘place’ (whether physical or social) has been replaced by the unending sequence of new beginnings, inconsequentiality of deeds has been substituted for fixity of order, and the desire of a different today has elbowed out concern for a better tomorrow.”

Charting the decline of the utopian impulse in social theory over the past few decades, Russell Jacoby calls for its renewal, in the spirit of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s appeal to his friend William Wordsworth to counter the pessimism that had come to attend the course of the French Revolution: “I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary philosophes.” Jacoby wishes to respond to this sharp rebuke that seems to speak so directly to our current condition, to fashion his own utopia to rally the faint hearted of our own times.

But he betrays his own uncertainty about the feasibility of the enterprise by eschewing what he calls the “blueprint utopia”—the classic utopia from More to Bellamy and beyond—in favour of the “iconoclastic utopia,” one that “dreams” the superior future society but “declines to give it precise measurements.” “In the same way that God could not be depicted for the Jews, the future could not be described for the iconoclastic utopians; it could only be approached through hints and parables.” Ernst Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) is seen as the classic expression of this genre. It gives no concrete details about the future but aims rather to trace the utopian “spirit” in various works of music, poetry, folklore, fairy stories, and other forms of literature.

It is one thing to “resist the modern seduction of images,” as Jacoby says approvingly of the iconoclastic utopians. It seems quite another, if one wishes to claim them for the utopian tradition, to champion their “resistance to representing the future.” There are many ways in which modern culture can be read as a culture of resistance, a culture that criticizes modern society while hinting at alternatives, a culture that refuses to compromise and asserts instead a spirit of transcendence that many have seen as more or less inseparable from the human condition. But it seems peculiarly unhelpful to bundle all these together as in some way “utopian,” as if any and perhaps all forms of resistance or wish fulfilment can be considered utopian. For what then defines the specificity of the utopian? Jacoby appeals especially to a strand of “Jewish utopianism” that includes such figures as Bloch, Gershom Scholem, T. W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. Theirs is a “utopianism that listens for, but does not
look into the future,” that “pines for the future, but does not map it out,”
that “teeters on the edge of silence about what could be.”40 Apart from
the obvious fact that these are figures from the past, and that Jacoby is
hard put to find any recent exemplars of this species of utopianism, it is
not at all clear that the thinking of this group of writers is best captured
by describing it as utopian. A resolute refusal to sketch a picture of the
ideal society may be a commendable choice, especially in the conditions
of twentieth-century society. But it then quite explicitly distances these
thinkers from the utopian tradition that did, rightly or wrongly, consider
the task as precisely one of imagining, often in very great detail, what it
would be like to live in a quite different society, one that had overcome
the problems and predicaments of their own society.

“Apocalyptic,” rather than utopian, may be a more accurate and ac-
ceptable designation of the thought of Benjamin and others of his kind.
But even then something seems to be missing. Traditionally apocalypse,
or the sense and expectation of an ending, was linked to the millen-
numium, the hope and expectation of a new beginning, one that would
inaugurate an age of peace, plenty, and righteousness. To that extent it
could be linked to utopian thought, though there remained significant
differences between these forms of the ideal society (one being the
generally secular nature of utopia). But apocalyptic thought today seems
singularly unhopeful of, or indifferent to, a new beginning. It proclaims
 endings without beginnings, apocalyptic struggles or global catastrophes
without any real hope that we will survive these. Once again Wells seems
a relevant figure to recall. Wells used the apocalyptic mode brilliantly,
but it was always accompanied, often in the same story—as in The World
Set Free or Men Like Gods—by an account of renewal and reconstruction,
a utopian rebirth out of the ashes of global catastrophe. Our latter-day
apocalypticists wring their hands over the impending collapse—the effects
of climate change, pandemics of killer diseases, civilizational wars—but
are reluctant to speculate about what, if any, transformations might be
wrung out of what Wells called “the cleansing disillusionment.”41

The Glocalized Utopia?

The literary utopia seems to have reached some sort of impasse, per-
haps connected to problems of the prose novel as such, of which it is a
species.42 Large-scale social speculation also seems to be in a decidedly
antiutopian phase, even where it dares to hope. In response the friends
of utopia have been ingenious in hunting down utopia in all sorts of
places—TV “soaps,” films, chat sites on the Internet. Winning the lottery
and buying a new home with the proceeds (“the creation of a personal
The long arm of Ernst Bloch, and his *Principle of Hope* (1955–59), shows in this overgenerous embrace of the utopian cause. For Bloch, anxious to show the universality of the unquenchable *Hoffnungsprinzip*, all was grist to the utopian mill: daydreams, fairy stories, myths, traveller’s tales, fairs and circuses, dance, music, film, and theatre—as well as the more conventional literary utopia, which Bloch, however, was inclined to play down. “Wishful thinking” much of this might be, but for Bloch the phrase does not carry the usual pejorative overtones. It is all part of the “anticipatory consciousness” that prepares the way for the Not-Yet-Become, the realized material reality of the future which however cannot yet be described, only hoped-for and willed-for. This “Not-Yet” (*noch nicht*) is “the unfinished forward dream, the docta spes” that does not just emotionally prepare the way for the future but, as “a directing act of a cognitive kind” is itself an agency of change.

Once again, one can appreciate the value of this kind of approach while regretting its influence on the study more generally of utopia, especially as it becomes a recourse for an increasingly desperate attempt to find the signs for the persistence or revival of utopia. When utopia, in a travel brochure, becomes the experience of staying in a particular *pousada* or when advertisements for medicines promising perfect health or the perfect body are styled utopian or when Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday* is discussed as a “bourgeois utopia,” then one begins to wonder whether the approach isn’t straying beyond useful limits. The territory of utopia, as a cultural device, is broad but it is not limitless. Nor does it have to be restricted to utopia as a form of writing, imaginative or theoretical, though this might not be a bad starting point. It is certainly helpful for certain purposes to talk about the architectural or urban utopia, or about utopia in art or even music. But one needs to be very careful to specify one’s terms, to justify the use of the concept “utopian,” and to show why it helps in the particular discussion. The looser the use of the term the more difficult this becomes, and the greater the conceptual inflation that gradually debases it.

There is however—to end on a happier note—perhaps one form of present-day utopianism that, while departing significantly from the traditional utopia, seems worth noting. This accepts the difficulties and dangers of large-scale utopian projects—even if only in the imagination—and promotes instead local designs and projects that offer small-scale models of the good life. In one sense this is not new: utopian communities, from seventeenth-century England to nineteenth-century America and beyond, offer many examples of “intentional communities” designed
to stimulate similar experiments elsewhere without in any way attempting to impose any kind of uniform pattern. But the newer thing is the context in which these experiments now take place. All their participants are acutely aware of the global dimension of their lives, of the need to take into account global forces but also of the opportunities offered by transnational actors and of the resources, intellectual and material, that can be drawn upon from like enterprises elsewhere. These may be local utopias, but they are done very much, and very consciously, within a global environment. The unlovely term “glocalization” has been coined to refer to this global-local nexus, both as an idea and as a lived reality.

A good example of this “glocalized utopia” might be the ecocommune set up in the early 1990s by a group of British, French, and Spanish men and women in the mountains of Asturias in northern Spain. Part of their activity, and of their thinking, derives from fairly familiar ecological theory and practice. Making full use of the local resources of land and timber, while maintaining a careful balance with their environment, they have been able to maintain a relatively large community of some forty people over a period of two decades. What distinguishes them from traditional communes of this kind is their global consciousness and global activism. They have established, through the Internet, a network of connections with like-minded communards across the world, sharing experiences and advice, including advice on new techniques and technical innovations. Above all, they have not remained restricted to their locality. These communards—finding the resources in mysterious ways—travel on a remarkable scale and across vast distances, attending conferences, speaking at universities, visiting each other, and sharing their reports on Internet sites. They are found at antiglobalization rallies around the world, in Seattle, Prague, Washington, and Porto Alegre. Their base remains firmly local—it is where they live and work, and to which they return; but in their minds and in the mobility of their bodies they are truly cosmopolitan.

The “glocalized utopia” has not yet found its theorist or chronicler, nor has anyone attempted to delineate imaginatively, as a fully realized utopia, a glocalized world. But there are some descriptions now of the various intentional communities, ecovillages, permaculture plots, religious and secular retreats, cohousing projects, projects for “low-impact” housing, and squatters projects in town and country, to give us some flavor of these modest but yet self-consciously utopian ventures. What these show are designs for a better world in full consciousness of the failures of the past and the need to heed those lessons. What they also show is that the scaling down of ambition, the move to the local in the light of the global, needs not less but more imagination, more thought. And is it not also a nice idea that such a move might represent a return
to the past, to the very origin of the modern utopia, in More? Such at any rate is the view advanced by Ruth Eaton, who says that “the territory More projected was the size of his homeland, whose local conditions he knew well, not that of the entire world. The utopian ambition, though it may function within the global guidelines of certain principles, in today’s case those necessary for sustainable development, must acquire a new modesty, responding specifically to local conditions, creating a heterogeneous collection of context-sensitive projects that transcend a multitude of realities.” More’s “project”—an imaginative rendering of a whole society—was not perhaps that of today’s local activists. But what we might call their “banal utopianism,” the utopianism of mundane, everyday existence, thought through in the form of a whole way of life, must surely have a place in the utopian tradition. What is needed now is for someone to imagine a whole world based on a plenitude of such local utopias. Then we would have, in a new form, Wells’s “planetary utopia,” and the wheel would indeed have come full circle.

Utopian communities are one thing, the tradition of writing and thinking utopias another. Is the decline of the literary utopia, and of utopian thought more generally, something to be mourned? We might feel that the times get the works they deserve, that, the world being what it is at present, it would be unreasonable to expect the production of utopias. There would be something unnatural, almost unseemly, about the attempt. Jameson might think we need utopias now more than ever; but the need has never guaranteed the supply. Something more is needed, something that relates more directly to the condition of intellectual and cultural life. For a number of reasons, thinking and writing about the perfect society has gone out of fashion. Trying to whip it back into life, without the springs that spontaneously produced the utopias of old, is likely to result in the creation of ungainly and highly unattractive forms.

The loss of utopia—if only for the time being—must nevertheless be a cause for regret. For over four hundred years it was one of the main vehicles for the expression of the hopes, aspirations, and schemes of humanity. It was a principal way of attempting to tame the future. The occasional eccentricity of the vision—think of Fourier’s lemonade seas—only added to the charms of utopia. It is hard not to wish for more of the same. But even if we cannot resurrect utopia today, we have plenty to reflect on in past visions. The study of past utopias is perhaps the best way to ensure that the form survives, awaiting—who knows?—its time again.
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1 See the survey in Paolo Spinozzi, ed., *Utopianism/Literary Utopias: A Comparative Perspective* (Bologna: COTEPRA Univ. of Bologna, 2001). One might speculate that the reason that the Portuguese did not get into the game in the early days at least was that they were too busy discovering new lands—“utopias”—of their own, during their golden age of exploration, lands that they had already imagined or mythologized. As Fátima Vieira says, “the real Portuguese utopia was the attempt to prove that the imagined geography was the real geography.” As she further says, the same could probably be said about Spain, which like Portugal has a relatively sparse utopian tradition. “Portuguese Literary Utopias: A Contribution to the Study of the Geography of Utopia,” in *Utopianism/Literary Utopias*, ed. Paolo Spinozzi, 58. See also José Eduardo Reis, “The Sea, ‘that Great Utopian Substance’: For an Ideal Maritime History in Portuguese Literature,” in *Nowhere Somewhere: Writing, Space and the Construction of Utopia*, ed. José Eduardo Reis and Jorge Bastos da Silva (Porto: Editora da Universidade de Porto, 2006), 43–53.


5 Though one should note Tom Moylan’s distinction between the “anti-utopian” work—*Brave New World, Nineteen Eighty-Four*—and what he calls the “critical dystopia” to be found in some recent science-fiction, which even as it “lingers in the terrors of the present” gestures hopefully towards alternative worlds: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 199.


16 For these works, see Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*.
21 Quoted in Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, 168.
23 This is a highly contentious matter. For a defense of this view, see Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open Univ. Press, 1991), 20–27; and Kumar, “Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition,” *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 1, (2003): 63–77; see also


25 There is also the vexed question of a third type, what are often referred to as “utopian communities,” these being “intentional communities” of the kind set up at Oneida, or by the Shakers and the Owenites, in nineteenth-century America, as well as several varieties in the 1960s in Europe and America, for example, Twin Oaks in Virginia. For a good collection of sources on these see Peyton Richter, ed., *Utopias: Social Ideals and Communal Experiments* (Boston: Holbrook, 1971). See also, on nineteenth-century America, Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, 69–98. A recent reader on utopias combines all three kinds—literary, social theoretical, and communal: Gregory ClaeyS and Lyman Tower Sargent, eds., *The Utopia Reader* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1999). Utopian communities raise all sorts of questions of the relation between theory and practice—for some thoughts on this, see Krishan Kumar, “Utopian Thought and Communal Practice: Robert Owen and the Owenite Communities,” *Theory and Society* 19 (1990): 1–35; Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 164–81.


29 On the utopianism of May 1968, and the related utopian writings of the 1960s, see Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, 393–402. Among the most important items are various writings by Herbert Marcuse (for example, *Eros and Civilization, An Essay on Liberation*), and the works of the “Freudo-Marxists,” mostly influenced by Freud’s radical disciple Wilhelm Reich, such as Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959). One should mention also the influential work of the International Situationists, an active presence in May ’68; a key text here would be Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

30 For a discussion of this literature, see Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, 405–19. It is fair to mention that the ecological social theory of this decade was indeed paralleled by some impressive literary works in the same vein, such as Ursula Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975).

31 See on this Kumar, “The End of Socialism? The End of Utopia? The End of History?”

33 There are indeed utopias with arcadian or pastoral features, even those which seem to question the tenets of western science and rationality. William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) might stand for the first, Aldous Huxley’s *Island* (1962) for the second. But I would argue that both of these do indeed fall back on a more complex and complete sense of reason, and in that sense are very much within the utopian tradition. As for the utopias of “hippies” and others of a like kind, at least as practiced in their communities, their lack of organization and attention to everyday practicalities are the main causes of their ephemerality—as compared, for instance, with the highly rationalistic Twin Oaks, based on Skinnerian principles of behavioral psychology. For some incisive thoughts on all this, see Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972).


37 For some complementary thoughts on “the Utopian or transcendent potential . . . of even the most degraded type of mass culture”—such as the popular movies *Jaws* and *The Godfather*—see Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 130–48. But Jameson does warn against “a method that would celebrate Utopian impulses in the absence of any conception or mention of the ideological vocation of mass culture” (145).

38 Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect*, xvi, xvii.

39 “The urge to transcend is a nearest to universal, and arguably the least destructible attribute of human existence,” Bauman, “Utopia with No Topos,” 12. For a study of modernism that sees it as an (ultimately failed) protest against capitalist modernity, see T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1999).

40 Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect*, 119, and, generally on these thinkers, 113–44.


42 This is, I would argue, the dominant tradition. It would not prevent one—with the necessary reservations and qualifications—from talking about the utopian features of dance, music, painting, or poetry—or even of “utopian art” music, etc. See on this Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*; Selected Essays, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). See Levitas, “For Utopia,” 28–29. One might also see Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia”—unlike utopias these are real places, “counter-sites,” spaces of “otherness,” alterity and difference in which alternatives can take shape—as giving rise to the same over-generous embrace of wildly heterogeneous phenomena, ranging from cemeteries and colonies to ships, saunas, brothels, and prisons. See Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27; Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London: Routledge, 1997).

45 For the literature on this, see note 25, above.


47 There is a brief description of this community in Kolya Abramsky, ed., *Restructuring and Resistance: Diverse Voices of Struggle in Western Europe* (London: New Worlds, 2007), 534–64. But I have learned most about it through conversations with Kolya himself.


49 Eaton, *Ideal Cities*, 141.

50 David Harvey spiritedly opposes those who proclaim the “death of utopia.” But his own utopianism, and especially his own sketch of the utopia of “Edilia”—a crude mix of Bellamy and Morris—rather tellingly show how imitative and barren the utopian imagination currently is. See *Spaces of Hope*, 257–81.