

WHITHER UTOPIAS?

“FAILED AGAIN: THE FAULT-LINES IN UTOPIA”
(NEWCASTLE WORKSHOP), 10/11 SEPTEMBER 2024

Dr. Thomas Telios
(University of St. Gallen)

Introduction

- “Whither Marxism?”
- “Where is Marxism going?”
- “Is Marxism dying?”

- “Whither Utopias?”
- “Where are Utopias going?”
- “Are Utopias dying?”

Opening Questions & Remarks

- Isn't the refusal to accept that utopias can fail indicative of a **linear, progressivist** and **futurist** mindset that has always haunted utopias, if not **condemned them to failure**?
- Shouldn't we rather stop considering utopias as **images** of a prospective, better world and transform them into **methods** of how to achieve such a better, prospective world?
- What are the **goals** that utopias should strive to achieve in order not to fail?
- Ultimately: Which are the **normative criteria** that allow us to judge whether the goals of utopian projects have been achieved?

Opening Questions & Remarks

1. My first argument is that **utopias need to fail**.
 - A utopia's truest proof of its utopian character is the fact that it cannot but dramatically fail since it demands so much from the reality it needs to change.
 - Utopias – even when they fail – always live a **reminder** of what was hoped for and what was attempted. As such, they are processes of learning, unlearning, relearning.
 - Concept of **Tragic Process** (Catherine Lu).

Opening Questions & Remarks

Catherine Lu defines as “**tragic process**” a type of progress that:

„focuses on progress as a **disruptive** and often **painful** process of **self-examination** in contexts of **crisis**, both for **individuals** and for wider **collectives**. Tragedy as a genre imitates the **difficulties** we encounter in such a process, as well as the **barriers** to making progress, and its consequences. In tragedy, making progress is not so much a matter of **learning** how to be more empathic or cooperative, but requires that we confront the challenge of **unlearning** the norms, practices, reference-points, psychological dispositions, habits and assumptions that condition and mediate agency in unjust social structures. Focusing on the multiperspectival structure of tragic narratives, tragic reversals, and the moments of recognition they invite, I argue that the devices of tragedy direct our attention to **mechanisms for unlearning**, and stimulate **the pursuit of self-knowledge** and **transformation** in contexts of crisis as a basis for social change.“

Catherine Lu, „Progress, Decolonization and Global Justice: A Tragic View”,
International Affairs, 99.1 (2023): 145.

Opening Questions & Remarks

2. My second argument is that only **monosemantic** utopias fail; **intersectional** utopias cannot, do not – maybe even must not – fail.
- **Monosemantic** Utopias: Utopias that are characterized by the pursuit of one goal, the satisfaction of one interest, utopias that are driven by one need and desire, or that address one identity.
 - **Intersectional** Utopias (or **Koinotopias**): Utopias that pursue more than one goal, address more than one interest, are the co-efficient of a series of needs and desires and seek to emancipate more than one identity from their heteronomous production within contexts of oppression.

Opening Questions & Remarks

- **Intersectional** Utopias (or **Koinotopias**) are aware of the fact that:
 - they have to move **sideways** (instead of forward) and meander right and left, back and forth in order to accommodate **all** goals, interests, needs, desires and identities;
 - the different struggles are **intertwined** and **co-dependent** on one another, and that therefore
 - all **struggles** need to be taken into account **irreducibly** and **unhierarchically**.
- These type of utopias leave always a **remainder** behind of what was achieved, what was not achieved because our attention was turned to another equally fundamental struggle, what had to be sacrificed or abandoned in order to achieve the goals of another struggle etc.

Opening Questions & Remarks

3. My third argument is that only utopias that strive the realization of an **image** that comes along with a preset **blueprint** and a prefabricated and a dictated toolkit of **means** that are to be utilized can **fail**. On the contrary, utopias that connote a **performative method do not fail** since they are open to (re-)signification and they exist in the onto-temporal mode of the “not-yet” (though not in the mode of the “to come”).
- From the Greek μέθοδος (μέτα+όδός: the path) utopias that reenact themselves performatively do not depict what needs to be achieved but how it is to achieved.
- As such, they render the **ideas, means** and **normative criteria** that allow us to judge whether what was achieved was achieved in accordance with what was supposed to be achieved **contestable** from and **depending** on the utopian process per se.

The necessity of utopian thinking

- Sophistry or necessity?
- The current democratic pathologies and backlashes (populisms, political dissociation, apathy) are the result of the abandonment and unwillingness to conceptualize a “better” radical future.
- Urgency for **re-utopianization** or **re-enchanting** (cf. Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, 2019).
- Utopias become a matter of **Realpolitik**.

The necessity of utopian thinking

■ Sophistry or necessity?

1. There is **no radical action** without a **radical imaginary**: As Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe argue:

“Without ‘utopia’, without the possibility of negating an order beyond the point that we are able to threaten it, there is no possibility at all of the constitution of a radical imaginary”.

Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 1985, 190.

2. Without a **radically alternative future**, societies **stagnate** and **regress**: cf. August Comte’s concept of “retrogradation” as a type of conservative thinking that seeks to uphold the status quo and avoids engaging in or furthering the political-theoretical struggle of its era.

August Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 1853, 25-28.

The necessity of utopian thinking

- Sophistry or necessity?

3. Without a forward-looking utopia, societies will not just not move forward, stagnate or regress, but will also start **reproducing** mistakes or **ideologies** of the past that seemed **overcome** and **obsolete**.

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "**retrotopia**": It describes a reactionary, restorative and populist type of utopia that aims at the

"rehabilitation of the tribal model of community, return to the concept of a primordial/pristine self predetermined by non-cultural and culture immune factors, and all in all retreat from the presently held (prevalent in both social science and popular opinions) view of the essential, presumably non-negotiable and sine qua non features of the 'civilized order'."

Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 2017, 6.

The necessity of utopian thinking

- The paper argues that utopia is **indispensable** for carving out a **radical democratic imaginary** that mobilizes and collectivizes the precarious subject (Butler 2010; Lorey 2015). As such, I am critical of the ongoing scepticism among recent tendencies in Critical Theory that still seek to avoid the concept of utopia (Allen 2015; Azmanova 2020).
- Instead, I argue that utopia needs to be recalibrated as a **collective/relational** and **performative** utopia. To that extent I suggest an **intersectional** concept of utopia, or **koinotopia**.
- **Koinotopia**: From the Greek *κοινός* (common, shared) + utopia, *koinotopia* is a type of performative enactment of doing utopia that transforms utopia from a solipsist narratology to a *koinotopian* method that seeks to open up and create a space that is common (*koinos*) to us all and excludes no one.
- Thus, the lines of demarcation no longer run between “us” and those who are different to us. On the contrary, they run **between those who seek the exclusion** of some and **those who base their present and construct their future in recognition of the mutual and reciprocal constitutivity of everyone**.
- “Togetherness in Diversity”; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1973, 150.

On Failure

- **Miguel Abensour's Concept of Utopian Persistence:**

„a stubborn impulse toward freedom and justice – the end of domination, of relations of servitude, and of relations of exploitation. Despite all its **failures**, **disavowals**, and **defeats**, this impulse is reborn in history, reappears, makes itself felt in the blackest catastrophe, resists as if catastrophe itself called forth new summations. The successive names of utopia are of little importance; what matters is the orientation toward what is **different**, the wish for the **advent of a radical alterity here and now.**” (407)

- **Persistent Utopia vs Eternal Utopia:**

- Eternal Utopia was a term introduced by the counter-revolutionary publicists in the aftermath of the failed 1848 revolutions. Were utopia eternal, this would mean the production of “a closed, static, authoritarian society that negates temporality and does violence to plurality and individual singularity.” (407)

- This is not to say, that there is no eternity in utopia. However, for Abensour, this eternity manifests itself in the **discreditation of utopia**. As he writes:

“Truth be told, there is no eternal utopia, but there is an eternal denunciation of utopia, an eternal hatred of utopia, as if the defenders of different existing orders joined hands across time to denounce the various forms of alterity to which the desire for freedom, conjugated with the desire for justice, has given birth through the course of history.”

Miguel Abensour, “Persistent Utopia”, *Constellations*, 15.3 (2008): 406-421.

On Failure

- **Miguel Abensour's 3 Forms of Utopian Persistence:**

1. The first is a form of labour that he calls **playfulness** and **agonistic**:

“the concept of utopia, its content, its signification, its orientation, is the object of a struggle that is unrelenting, in a sense interminable.” (412)

2. The second is what he calls **a new utopian spirit**:

“The spirit of this new intelligence of utopia can be grasped in the following proposition: only a thought of utopia that **does violence to itself**, that includes the **critique** of utopia, acquires the hardness necessary to destroy the myths that ruin utopia.” (415)

3. The third form of utopia's persistence pertains to **utopia's tense relation with democracy**. On the one hand, **utopia utopianizes democracy** by keeping it open, fluid, anti-institutional, and anti-formalistic. On the other hand, **democracy democratizes utopia** by guaranteeing that it will not backlash in formalist, institutionalized/proceduralist, authoritarian, totalitarian, and excluding policies (cf. 415).

Miguel Abensour, “Persistent Utopia”, *Constellations*, 15.3 (2008): 406-421.

On Failure

- **Ernst Bloch's Concept of Disappointability [*Enttäuschbarkeit*]**
- Bloch differentiates between 6 types of hope:
 - Hope based on narrow interests;
 - Hope based on conformism and escapism;
 - Hope based on faith;
 - Hope based on dreams;
 - Hope based on uncontrollable hope based on abstract real events (like fascism) (abstract hope); and, ultimately,
 - Well-Educated hope (*docta spes*).
- Well-educated hope – as is the case with all other forms of hope – does not dispose of better prospects. Hope will be disappointed.
- However:

“Well-educated hope too can be, and will be, disappointed; indeed, it **must** be so, as a matter of honor, **or else it would not be hope.**” (340)

“As something that does not, in spite of all, make peace with the existing world [...] hope must be **unconditionally disappointing**.” (341)

Ernst Bloch, “Can Hope be Disappointed?”, *Literary Essays*, 339-345.

On Failure

- **Ernst Bloch's Concept of Disappointability [Enttäuschbarkeit]**
- There are 3 reasons for hope's disappointability:
 - i. because it is open, forward-looking, future oriented, and **does not address or attach itself to that which already exists;**
 - ii. because "it can never be mediated by solid facts." (341) **Facts** are, similarly to Georg Lukács and Western Marxism, "merely **subjectively reified moments** or objectively reified stoppages within a historical course of events" (341). What was materialized is open to ideological interpretation and evaluation and the realization of utopia in factuality does not mean that this particular fact is the end of the utopian process (which N.B. is characterized by the ongoing modality of the Not-Yet; T.T.);

Ernst Bloch, "Can Hope be Disappointed?", *Literary Essays*, 339-345.

On Failure

▪ Ernst Bloch's Concept of Disappointability [Enttäuschbarkeit]

iii. because it is **indeterminable**:

"Nothing has been [or can be; T.T.] settled yet as an irrevocable fact, completed in its becoming. Consequently, not only hope's affect (with its pendant, fear) but, even more so, hope's methodology (with its pendant, memory) dwells in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy." (341)

Ernst Bloch, "Can Hope be Disappointed?", *Literary Essays*, 339-345.

▪ Indeterminacy/Uncertainty ≠ Contingency ≠ Performativity:

- **Indeterminacy/Uncertainty:** They point out to the onto-epistemological qualifications of utopias;
- **Contingency:** Utopian projects have more than one outcome and it is conditional on a series of factors which one of them will at the end prevail, i.e. to which one's realization it will come to.
- **Performativity:** Utopias cannot be a preset blueprint that must be followed through. If so, then it would be an authoritarian project that once dictated needs to be implemented. Rather, utopia seems to be a matter of open practice.

"Not only if we travel there, but in that we travel there the island utopia arises out of the sea of the possible" (3).

Theodor W. Adorno & Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing", 1-17.

On Utopias' Collectivist Performativity

- José E. Muñoz's Concept of "Queer Utopia":
- Bloch's Legacy: **Collectivity** and **Performativity**:
 - **Collectivity**, because a utopian project cannot be a solipsist projection of the individual's desires, needs, interests, and identities, but needs to necessarily **include the Other's**, i.e. **all Others'**, needs, desires, interests and identities.
 - “Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated collective struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential.” (7).
 - **Performativity**, because utopia is not a blueprint, an image, or a messianic vision, but an **open/queer/fluidifying reappropriation of time and space**.
 - It implies that utopias are results of a type of practice throughout which the **images *what*** a utopia should look like, the **means *how*** to achieve, and the **normative presuppositions *whether*** it had been achieved are generated ***throughout the execution of utopian practices***. As Munoz puts it, a queer performativity, utopia
 - “suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished” (99).
 - José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 2009.
- **Collectivity** and **Performativity** condition each other and transform utopias to **intersectional utopias** or **koinotopias**.

On Utopias' Collectivist Performativity

Intersectional Utopias or Koinotopias:

1. Inclusivity:

- **Koinotopias** underlines the necessity that the subject considers **all modes of its production** when crafting its utopian futurity.
- **Koinotopias** incorporate and coordinate in their programming the identities, ideals, needs, desires and/or interests of both the subject and the Other.
- **Koinotopia** is a **negative epistemological utopia** (i.e., the search for “either a perfect certainty or an ultimate source of cognitive values” and the assertion that both are possible;): It owns up to the **impossibility** of ever being able to assume that it has included everyone.
 - **Koinotopias** stay on the lookout for new sets and forms of demands that will need to be included.
 - **Koinotopias** need to conceive of, introduce, and guarantee practices that will promote visibility and enable visibilization.
- **Anti-Reductionism** of the different utopian projects.

On Utopias' Collectivist Performativity

Intersectional Utopias or Koinotopias:

2. Collectivity/Relationality:

- **Quantitative and Qualitative Collectivity:** More than one individual – More than one goal, interest, need, desire, and identities: Koinotopias guarantee that the **different** projects remain **different**: “The singularity that marks a singular existence is coterminously plural – which is to say that an entity registers as both particular in its difference but at the same time always relational to other singularities.” (Muñoz, 11)
- **Relational, Interrelated, and Interdependent:** The satisfaction of the one struggle depends on the satisfaction of the other/Other's/Others' struggles.
- **Collective Futurity:** There is no imagination of the future without the Other who had co-subjectivated the subject and with whom the subject shares its world.
- **Temporal Relativity/Relationality:** Utopian projects enjoy different temporalities. The past of the one(s) is/can be the future of the Other(s).
- **Interwovenness:** The different struggles do not just depend on each other to be satisfied but are also conditioned from each other in the way they **appear**.
- **Holism:** “Whatever utopia is, whatever can be imagined as utopia, this is the transformation of the **totality**” (3); Adorno in “Something's Missing”, 1-17.

On Utopias' Collectivist Performativity

Intersectional Utopias or Koinotopias:

3. Performativity:

- **Anti-Metaphysicism:** The source of the subject's *utopian agency*, i.e. its capacity to think the future, is not its innate creativity, but its **conditioning from the Other**. Through every **encounter** with the Other, thanks to the Other acting in/through the subject, the subject **reconfigures** and **in-forms** its conceptualization of the future.
- **Conflictuality:** The utopian projects are ***not* consensual**, i.e. do not strive for a consensus that curtails/relativizes the different demands. Rather, they are **absolutist/maximalist**: They need to be satisfied as such.
- **Experimentalism:** Koinotopias are a study on difference. They are “an extraordinary state of permanently heightened attention”; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, 2008, 168.
- **Synergetic:** There needs to be deliberated with every political actor/Other within the given circumstances. This creates **transspatial** and **transtemporal synergies**. It is through **doing**, rather than through contemplative imagining, that utopia becomes possible. In doing so, “the commonplace is transformed, too.”; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, 2008, 168.