Modernity and World Democracy as Utopias

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At least since the fall of the Soviet Union we are told that the era of utopias is past. Mankind has allegedly entered into a new temporal dimension, a post-utopian time. It is supposed to have left behind its pubertarian delusions and reconciled itself to the reality principle. It proves its adulthood by recognizing the inevitability of global capitalism. Man is said to have given up all forms of transcendence. He has finally seen the light: utopias are dangerous, because they are all potentially totalitarian, and redundant, because the global economy is already the fulfillment of utopia. In short: utopia, so the anti-utopian narrative goes, has left the stage of history.

Or has it? Unfortunately for the those who think that utopia was an infant disease of mankind, there are no

signs that the patient has recovered for good. Religious utopias are thriving, as is shown by the millions who believe in a Muslim paradise, with or without virgins waiting to reward the faithful, in the second coming of Christ and in the ultimate arrival of the Messiah. And even if the credibility of social utopias has been somewhat undermined by continuing economic problems in Cuba and the transformation of China into a capitalist economy, the utopian vision survives in anti-globalization movements and in the World Social Forum, which has contributed to the culture of utopia an impeccably utopian motto: "another world is possible."

There is no reason to be surprised with the longevity and robustness of the utopian idea. Those who decreed the end of utopias simply ignored all the thinkers who saw in utopia a permanent feature of the human condition.

These authors can be divided into two groups: those with an academic sociological background and those with a Marxist *and* Freudian point of view.

Foremost among the sociologists is Karl Mannheim, author of a dichotomy between ideology and utopia that fascinated Brazilian intellectuals in the forties and fifties. He saw in utopia a mode of thought which aimed at the supersession of the existing society, in contrast with ideology, that tried to justify it. In this sense, utopia was the blueprint for a just society, formulated by minorities and social classes unsatisfied with the *status quo.*

The other group framed an utopia of its own, on the basis of two existing utopias: those of Marx and of Freud.

The Marxian utopia pointed at a future society beyond the division of labor and the realm of necessity, in which all class contradictions that fragmented men and opposed states to each other would disappear. The Freudian utopia was that of individuals able to manage their psychical conflicts through reason, rather than through unconscious mechanisms, and of a state of affairs which would not exact *Unbehagen*—discontent, unhappiness, *malaise*—as a necessary price to pay for the advantages of social life. The freudo-marxists combined both utopias.

Let us dwell briefly on some of these authors: Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas.

For Bloch, every form of thought that is not guided by the perspective of utopian thought is opaque. This is why all past philosophies, including the most dialectical ones, like that of Hegel, were unable to see authentic reality. For them, reality is always seen in the form of anamnesis, that is, Being is the correlate of a retrospective consciousness, turned back to origin, and not that of a prospective consciousness, looking forward to what does not yet exist. Truly dialectical thinking, on the contrary, is linked to desire, to hope, to future-oriented dreaming: *träumen nach vorn*. Its intra-psychical prototype is fantasy—the daydream—which builds castles in the air, but with materials extracted from the future, as opposed to night dreams, which reproduce on and on archaic materials. The unconscious of fantasy

is therefore different from the unconscious of dream. The latter has its roots in the past, while the former is rooted in the future. The dream-unconscious is made up of repressed contents, of what has already been lived, which lingers on in a subterranean manner. The content of the fantasy-unconscious is that which has not yet been lived. Consciousness has therefore two limits: a lower limit, which is the no longer conscious, and an upper limit, which is the not yet conscious. The unconscious is an amnesia with regard to the old and a lack of knowledge with regard to the new. Consciousness turned to the not-yet conscious is the anticipating consciousness, which is the *organon* of utopian hope. This anticipating consciousness can interpret the past, finding in it unfulfilled futures, crippled hopes. From this point of view, culture is the historical sedimentation of hope. A history of the utopian project would look at the whole of human culture in order to identify in every one of its manifestations an "utopian surplus," whatever is left after immediate needs are attended to, whatever goes beyond mere personal or class interests. The hope principle, *Prinzip Hoffnung,* is a colossal *afresco* of the history of culture, in its mediocre and grandiose moments, in great art and in the *kitsch,* in the best-selling novel and in the epic, in *The Enchanted Flute* and in pop music, in baroque architecture and in the *Bauhaus,* in the pantomime and in the film, in the geographical utopia of Eldorado as well as in the political utopia of the

City of Sun, in every ideal in which man has attempted to transcend himself, in all paradigms in which he has projected his longing for perfection: Ulysses and Faust, D. Juan and D. Quijote.

For Adorno, contemporary capitalism has eliminated completely the dimension of transcendence, reducing the ideal to the factual, and has expelled utopia, in so far as it sees itself as the embodiment of utopia. As a result, Adorno sees in the attempt of maintaining the contradiction, even if merely at the level of theory, even if the attempt proves to be futile, the task and the dignity of critical thought. Hence the concept of a negative utopia, which can neither be given up, because man would become hopelessly reconciled to existing reality, nor fulfilled, because fulfillment would betray the radicality of the utopian project. Adorno looks at Freud for a model of this utopia. Man is condemned to discontent, to *Unbehagen,* and in this sense utopia is impossible; but he is also condemned to freedom, to the ceaseless journey towards the *focus imaginarius* in which every determinism is suspended—and in this sense, utopia is necessary. Utopia lies in this tension, in this necessity, in this impossibility. Every attempt to think, under present conditions, the realm of freedom, would abolish in thought the same contradiction that late capitalism has already abolished in reality.

Marcuse's critique of culture is similar to that of Adorno. He too believes that present society lead to the

end of transcendence, a process which he calls unidimensionalization, the absorption of the sphere of the virtual by the sphere of factuality. He too takes utopia seriously, and he too seeks in Freud the main lines of his utopia. But here all similarities cease. While Adorno uses Freud to construct utopia negatively, almost as a reverse of is own impossibility, Marcuse uses psychoanalytical categories in order to construct utopia as a positive concept. He distinguishes, in the reality principle, an invariant component, which sets to man's drive structure limits which are justifiable from the point of view of the survival of the individual and of the species, and a historical component, over-repression, which sets biologically unnecessary limits, imposed in the exclusive interest of the power system. The overthrow of this system would abolish the part of *Unbehagen* occasioned by over-repression. What about the other part, induced by necessary repression? Marcuse thinks that with the high level of development reached by present capitalism, even this necessary repression would take a different form. A new reality principle could be established, allowing man to enter a pacified order, beyond scarcity and domination. It would be an orphic-narcisistic world, in which the liberated libido would re-sexualize things and beings, without negative consequences to social life, and in which the death drive would no longer be hostile to Eros, but would mean rest, absence of tension, *stasis* in a non-antagonistic order.

Finally Habermas, the last representative of the Frankfurt School, discusses the normal conditions under which communication takes place. His model is that of a linguistically mediated interaction, in which man makes refutable statements over matters of fact, recommends norms which he is able to justify and represents himself (*Selbstdarstellung*) in a truthful manner. Communication ceases to be normal when there are systematic blockages in the communicative process. These can be either of an external origin, when power relationships prevent actors from participating as free and equal agents, or internal, in the form of false consciousness, which prevents the subjects from distinguishing between reality and appearance, authentic motives and rationalizations, truthfulness and lying. The subjective distortion of the communicative process is conceived by Habermas on the model of neurosis, in which one part of the subject is unable to communicate with the other. Habermas's utopia is the reverse of distorted communication: it is the ideal communicative situation, in which all factors blocking the communicative process have been removed. It is an utopia, because this situation has never been realized in the past nor is likely to be realized in the future. But it is a necessary utopia, because of it is not pre-supposed as already realized, the interlocutors would not enter a communicative relationship with each other, but in a relationship based on violence. This utopia can be reformulated in a psycho-analytical language. Internally,

the end of the treatment will coincide with the end of obstacles impeding the self-transparency of the subjects. Externally, when "our God logos" comes to power, drives will be administered by the conscious Ego, and not by the irrational defense mechanisms, and the Super-Ego will become largely superfluous. In practice, we know that this will never happen, but we must act as if the reign of transparency had already arrived, because daily communication would otherwise become impossible.

If what all these authors say is true, there is no reason to be surprised with the survival of utopia in today's world. We may answer with full confidence to those who announce the demise of utopia: "les morts que vous tuez se portent à merveille." Or we may invoke the authority of Mark Twain: "The news about its death are grossly exaggerated." And we may explain the unexpected good health of utopia having recourse either to sociologists such as Mannheim or to the freudo-marxistas. To Mannheim, because the global economy has sharpened the assymetries of power and wealth that have always been the characteristic of capitalism, its massively excluding tendency, and therefore enhanced its ability to create not so much a reserve army as a reservoir composed of all those who will never been assimilated into the economic mainstream. These marginalized strata are an excellent breeding-ground for utopia. And to the freudo-marxists, because globalization has pushed so far the process of unidimensionalization, excluding so radi-

cally all realistic alternatives, that only utopian hope can provide a perspective of transcendence.

Ideally, rejection of the global system should take the form of rational criticism. But as long as this does not materialize, it is quite natural that it should take an utopian form. We would simply be repeating, at a higher threshold of complexity, what has happened in the 19th century, in which the critique of capitalism was at first utopian. It was only later that it received a more rigorous theoretical content.

I have therefore no wish to disqualify utopian thought as such, but it is necessary to separate good from bad utopias.

Retrospective utopias belong to this category—those that project into the future a golden age based on old structures.

It would be the case of an anti-industrial utopia, a primitivistic eco-utopia, constructed by regression to a pre-capitalistic Arcady.

It would also be the case of a totalitarian utopia, rejecting some of the most valuable contributions of modernity, such as the notions of legal domination, rule of law, and popular sovereignty. An especially threatening instance of this regression is represented by the revival of eugenistic ideas, so characteristic of the Third Reich. Pushed to their logical consequences, these ideas lead to a bio-utopia, to the conception of a society in which scientists are entitled to program human beings genetically,

creating a "new man" with certain attributes regarded as desirable, such as absence of aggressivity and a high IQ. However modern the technologies in question, this utopia is based on the archaic idea of a society ruled by wise men, rather than by the will of the majority, and in this sense represent a regression to platonic logocracy, to the conception of a herd, whose leaders not only shepherd their cattle but breed it. For those who want to go deeper into this zoological view of the state I advise the reading of Peter Sloterdijk's well-know essay on the genetic park.

Another serious regression is represented by the reappearance of ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic particularisms, which had apparently been "domesticated" by the modern state. One of the great achievements of modernity was its success in organizing the peaceful coexistence of these particularities through their subordination to a common political culture, embodied in a democratic constitution. Today this co-habitation strategy has lost much of is effectiveness. The consequence is the explosion of inter-communal conflicts, which are leading to the re-tribalization of the planet. Underlying this trend is the utopia of racial and cultural purity, the vision of a world divided into self-sufficient ethnicieties, according to pre-modern borders, based on blood or language affinities.

These eco-utopias, bio-utopias or ethno-utopias are the main "dystopies" of our time. They are counter-uto-

pias, as terrifying as those formulated by Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New Word*, by George Orwell, in *1984,* and by Ray Bradbury, in *Fahrenheit 451.* They have in common the fact that they are regressive, drawing their materials from the past.

Our predicament seems to be insoluble. We need an utopia to enable us to resist to global modernity, but we don't know where to find it. Should we look for it in the future, as recommended by Ernst Bloch? It would run the risk of being an arbitrary construction, without any support in reality. Should we inspect the materials available in the past? After our criticism of retrospective utopias, the risk here would be that of creating our own retrospective utopia, expressing a childhood fantasy, the immature wish to restore an original happiness.

I suggest we should do neither. Our utopia is neither in pre-modernity nor in post-modernity, but in modernity itself. For modernity has a Janus face. It has a functional side, turned to instrumental rationality. But is has also a humanistic side, turned to communicative rationality. On the functional level, the goal is effectiveness. A social system is more modern than another one when its structures are more effective. On the communicative level, autonomy is decisive. A social system is more modern than another when it opens up more space for the autonomy of individuals.

Our view of utopia derives from this second meaning of modernity. Its origin is the philosophy of the Enlight-

enment, as summarized in Kant's concept of autonomy: freedom from all laws that are not self-given, from all forms of coercion that keep man in a condition of minority. In this highly idealized sense, the Enlightenment aims at the emancipation of all human beings, irrespective of race, gender and nationality, in the threefold dimension of economy, culture and politics. In other words, in its search for autonomy the Enlightenment is universalist in its scope and individualizing in its focus. Its horizon is mankind as a whole. And as subjects of universal rights, men and women should be emancipated as individuals, and not as members of a culture or a nation.

As a historical realization of this heritage, humanistic modernity embodies the several values of the Enlightenment, every one of which points at a corresponding utopia. The universalistic value tends to the conception of a world society. The individualizing value alludes to a state of affairs in which human beings are valued in themselves, and not as members of a collectivity. The value of economic autonomy refers to a world in which all individuals are able to acquire, through their labor, all goods and services necessary to ensure their livelihood, and are free to co-determine the policies that influence their decisions as economic agents. The value of cultural autonomy refers to a system in which all human beings have access to knowledge and are able to think for themselves, far from the dictates of authority: Kant's *sapere aude*. The value of political autonomy refers to a situa-

tion where all citizens are able to carry out an effective self-determination, in a democratic society subject to the rule of law, and in which no person can be obliged to suffer the collateral impact of norms and laws which he or she has not contributed to formulate.

Nevertheless, the dream of autonomy, the core of the modern utopia, seems to be wildly improbable in the present circumstances.

Economic autonomy is a fiction, in a globalized market where the volatility of speculative capital makes any long-term planning impossible, where strategies of multinational corporations may counter-act the policies of national states, where the main economic decisions are guided by interest rates decreed by the Federal Reserve Board, and where all relevant technological innovations have an external origin.

Cultural autonomy is a fraud for those who remain defenseless before the ideological messages built into culture industry and are passive consumers of cultural goods over whose production and distribution they have no control.

Lastly, political autonomy has become purely rhetorical, if we take into account that the foundation of democracy, according to Rousseau—the unity of the people who commands as sovereign and who obeys as a body of citizens—is disrupted by the power asymmetries that prevail in the international relations today. As the sovereign nowadays is mainly the hegemonic country, the

rest of the world is forced to suffer passively the effects of decisions taken elsewhere. This is the very essence of tyranny—to oblige human beings to submit to the consequences of policies in the framing of which they have not participated. This was illustrated dramatically in the war against Iraq, a unilateral decision by the United States and Great Britain that had economic and political repercussions in all countries. Among the persons who were affected, but no heard, were the Iraquian people, who gave no mandate to President Bush to liberate it from the tyranny of Sadam Hussein, and the rest of mankind, the trifle of nearly 6 billion people.

In all these cases, the ideal of autonomy seems to have been replaced by its opposite—heteronomy. Before Iraq, we were subject to the heteronomy induced by globalization. At least we had the consolation of thinking that this was an automatic process, without any direct intervention of old-style imperialistic villains. This was a slight progress in relation to the time when we had to face the war ships of Queen Victoria. Even for Marxists, globalization seemed to represent a post-national phase of capitalism, in which the role of national states was virtually non-existent, and in which there was no space for classical imperialism, which presupposed a dispute among national states for territory, markets and raw materials. The idea that national imperialism was extinct was defended even by radical thinkers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who thought that domination

was now exercised by an empire, composed not only by the United States but by a directory that included other members of the Group of 8 and international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank.

The invasion of Iraq has demoralized this modest optimism. The United States made it clear that it was prepared to assume the heritage of old European imperialism, with all its ingredients, including jingoist provocation and the appetite for raw materials—let us not forget that oil was a very important factor in the war. The difference was that the multipolar imperialism of the 19th century was replaced by single-power hegemony.

The structure of our heteronomy now two strata. If we were subject before to the anonymous forces of globalization, we are subject now to a more direct form of subordination, a kind of re-feudalization of the world, a regression to concrete forms of serfdom, which does not mean the end of our subjection to the abstract powers of capitalism.

The fact is that unregulated globalization and the raw exercise of imperial power seem to make a mockery of the ideal of autonomy. Defending this ideal by reactive measures, of a nationalistic character, is not realistic, because we cannot give national solutions to processes which by definition do not take place in a national framework. It seems more logical to look for a solution in the very terrain in which globalization and hegemonic power unfold: the international sphere.

In order to clarify this idea, we have to come back to our dual modernity, with a functional side, aiming at effectiveness, and a humanistic side, aiming at autonomy. Modernity goes through an internationalization process in both directions.

In its functional direction, it wants to submit the whole planet to the goals of effectivenes and profitability. Technically, this is what we call globalization. In its humanistic direction, it seeks to extend to all of mankind the values of autonomy. Let's call this process universalization. The agents of globalization are the executives of mega-corporations and conglomerates. The agents of universalization are democratically elected Governments and Parliaments, unions, non-governmental organizations. Globalization is ruled by the logic of the market, and tends to the abolition of all differences that stand in the way of productivity. Universalization is ruled by communicative rationality, and tends to the preservation of cultural and national particularities, subject only to a minimum set of universally valid principles.

If this is true, it is along the axis of universalization that we must look for an authentic autonomy. In this perspective, economic autonomy would be facilitated by a re-structuring of international flows of trade and investment, allowing Governments and individuals to orient their action according to the goal of autonomy, and by generally agreed schemes of international income redistribution. Cultural autonomy would be promoted by

enhancing the inter-change of artists and intellectuals, by making available to all peoples the cultural goods produced everywhere, and by strengthening the cultural production of peripheral countries, thus reducing the *de facto* monopoly exercised the culture industry of hegemonic nations. Finally, all these articulations of autonomy would come to their full concreteness in political autonomy, in the form of a world democracy, in which all individuals would become active participants of world-wide decision-making processes, instead of remaining helpless victims or passive spectators of decisions taken in the great centers of power.

To speak of world democracy means to exclude, by definition, the several authoritarian schemes designed to establish a world state, in which unification would be promoted from above, *ex parte principis*, and not from below, *ex parte populi*. But the actual form of bringing about this democracy remains open. Several alternatives are possible.

At one extreme, there would be a reasonable degree of institutionalization. It would be a world system composed of a civil society, with institutions such as churches, unions, associations of artists and intellectuals, non-governmental organizations in general. There would also be a political society, with a constitution having in its preamble the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (or equivalent documents.) The constitution would regulate the functions of the different

organs. Among them, there would be a two-chambers Parliament—one Assembly with representatives chosen by the Governments, and another one with representatives chosen by direct election. There would also be an executive power able to apply the laws formulated by this Parliament, including the right to make legitimate use of force whenever necessary and to submit to some kind of order the field of international economic relations, thus correcting the pathologies of globalization. There would finally be a Court, endowed with the power to judge violations of human rights and other norms established by the Parliament.

At the other extreme, there would be a weak degree of institutionalization. One example would be what David Held has called "*cosmopolitan governance,*" an interconnected web of regional and sectoral institutions, ruled by what he calls the "principle of autonomy."

Popular sovereignty and national sovereignty are different things, which only recently have come together. In Antiquity, popular sovereignty was exercised in the framework of the city-state. In the 19th century, it was exercised in the framework of the national state. This framework has now become too narrow. If we want to fill the gaps of autonomy resulting from anarchical globalization and from unilateral power politics, we shall have once again to dissociate popular from national sovereignty. Popular sovereignty requires now a wider framework. The *demos*, the political community from

which all legitimate legislation springs, would be expanded from the national to the international level, just as it had been previously expanded from the municipal to the national level.

What is important to point out is that in all its variants the world democracy we have in mind would never become a monolithic Leviathan. National and local levels of governance would continue to be vitally important. Even the "strong" version, characterized by a substantial degree of institutionalization, would be based on the principle of subsidiarity, which relies on *all* instances of government. Thus, issues would be treated at the national level only when they cannot be treated at the local level, at the regional level only when they cannot be treated at the national level, and at the universal level only when they cannot be treated at the regional level.

But would a world democracy be able to generate forms of integration and solidarity comparable to those existing in national democracies? Conservatives deny this possibility: they argue that we cannot identify with a coldly rational constitution, welding together people of different languages and national backgrounds, but only with a community with which we share the same history, with a cultural tradition that has taken centuries to consolidate, with the glory and suffering of our ancestors. This is true, but only in part. In fact, there are two forms of collective identity, one resulting from identification with a culture, and another from identifica-

tion with a political community. The latter is related to what Habermas calls "constitutional patriotism" (*Verfassungspatriotismus*)—an attachment to our country as citizens, and not as members of a culture, a historical entity, or a community of fate. It is a "republican" identity, based on principles, and not a cultural identity, based on birth, blood or territory. A world democracy would require a republican identity. But it would not require the giving up of existing cultural identities. The example of the European Union shows that this duality is possible. On the basis of this experience, we may assume that when the time comes, concrete attachment to one's birthplace, family, ethnicity and language will be able to coexist with the more abstract attachment to the universal civic community.

Let me give you an example from my own country. When Brazilians were fighting to restore democracy through direct elections, both identities came into play. Cultural identity made them weep when democratic speakers in public meetings sang the national anthem. And republican identity made them identify rationally with arguments in favor of democracy. But in practice both identities tended to merge. "Republican" symbols were also a source of deep emotion. I remember a meeting in Rio in which the grand champion of Brazilian democracy, Sobral Pinto, made one million people cry when he read, article by article, in the crackled voice of a very old man (he was nearly 100 at that time) the

preamble of the democratic constitution of 1946: "article 1—all power emanates from the people and shall be exercised in its name…"

Why did we frame this theoretical construction in the language of utopia? Why do we speak of economic, cultural and political modernity, in their emancipatory meaning, as the utopia of economic autonomy, of cultural autonomy and political autonomy? Why have we called utopian one of the ideals most deeply imbedded in the universalistic philosophy of the Enlightenment, the ideal of a world democracy?

Clearly because there no immediate signs that these goals are attainable now. There is no indication that globalization, cultural colonialism and hegemonic imperialism are about to withdraw gracefully from the stage of history.

Yes, the idea of translating humanist into actual modernity is a utopian project. But there are abstract and concrete utopias. Abstract utopias have no support in reality. They are subjective phantasmagories. Concrete utopias are guided by objective trends already present in the world. Ours is a concrete utopia, impelled by hope, in the sense of Ernst Bloch, but a *docta spes*, educated hope, rather than empty wish-fulfilment. After all, despite its perversions, globalization has at least the merit of diluting frontiers, thus contributing to the realization of the Enlightenment's dream of a single humanity. Globalization is a parody of this dream, maybe its transfor-

mation into a nightmare, but sometimes a *pastiche* may conserve and bring back the memory of the original. Universalization is moving forward in areas such as culture, human rights, sustainable development. Even the disaster of Iraq, showing the impossibility of unilateral action, may have created more favorable conditions for an internationalistic perspective. World democracy is already foreshadowed in the United Nations and especially in the institutions of the European Union.

The themes contained in the utopia of modernity have not begun in the Enlightenment. They are echoes of the oldest wish-fantasies of mankind, of all ideals through which man has from the very beginning dreamt of a better life. Thus the universalistic utopia is linked to the stoic ideal of world citizenship, the *civitas maxima*; the individuazing utopia is linked to the personalistic ideal of Saint Paul, through which all children of God establish with the Creator a direct relationship, as creatures, and not as Romans or Greeks, Jew or Gentile; the utopia of economic autonomy is linked to the Rabelaisean ideal of material abundance, of the *pays de cocagne,* where wealth and the means for its reproduction are available to all; the utopia of cultural autonomy is linked to the Faustian ideal of absolute knowledge; and the utopia of political autonomy is linked to Spartakist ideal of total freedom and unlimited self-determination.

But these echoes from the past are just that: echoes. In their historically pregnant form, there is no doubt that all

these themes were absorbed in the utopia of humanistic modernity, as shaped by the values of the Enlightenment. This, I suggest, is the utopia of our time: not a parochial counter-utopia, escaping from the present either through a leap backward (pre-modernity) or a leap forward (post-modernity), but the utopia of modernity, drawing its materials from the part of the modern project that has remained unfulfilled and will perhaps remain forever unfulfilled.