THE FIVE LANGUAGES OF UTOPIA

THEIR RESPECTIVE ADVANTAGES AND DEFICIENCIES

WITH A PLEA FOR PRIORITISING SOCIAL REALISM

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What do we mean when we attempt to define the set of traditions which come under the rubric of "utopia", the word embracing two Greek terms, the "good place" and "no place"? Though it is used generically to refer to so-called "ideal societies" of various types, the term has been utilised in a wide variety of conflicting ways, embracing positive as well as negative ideal societies or dystopias, myths of golden ages and earthly paradises, imaginary constitutions, and much else.[1] To expect consensus across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines, from literature, history and sociology to archaeology, art history and urban planning, may be over-ambitious. No single definition can satisfy the demands of every angle of scholarly enquiry, though there is broad agreement that there are three main components or "faces" (as Lyman Sargent terms them) of the tradition: the literary, the communal, and the ideological [TOWER SARGENT : 1994 and VIEIRA : 2010]. Nonetheless a plea can be made for some re-ordering of the more prominent existing definitions; for the dismissal of others; and for a plausible re-ranking of some of the more important. I want here to argue ultimately for a "social realist" definition of utopia which prioritises a historical reading of the various components which comprise the utopian tradition. This avoids a reductionist account of utopia which restricts usage of the term to a literary tradition, a psychological impulse, a synonym for "progress", or an aspect of religious consciousness, belief or practice. It also avoids the very common problem of defining utopia so broadly as to lose any sense of its particularity, which renders the term analytically worthless.

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[1] I here dismiss the common language definition of utopia as "impossible", a project pursued recently by John Gray among others, who insists that "A project is Utopian if there are no circumstances under which it can be realised" [GRAY : 20].

It does however risk the charge of dogmatic exclusionism, and perhaps of substituting one brand of essentialism for another. I apologise in advance for the fact that brevity forces me to assert more than to defend a number of propositions here.

When I speak of "language", here, then, I mean the broad approaches we adopt when assessing the subject of utopia. The five "languages" I propose briefly to explore here are those of literature, religion, progress, psychology and history. Each of these constitutes a mode of perception into its complex nature. Taken together they present us with a babel of contending tongues in which much is lost in translation. Reconstituted and prioritised, I will argue, they can give us a much clearer sense of the subject.

Let me begin, then, by suggesting that there are four things utopia is *not* which it is commonly assumed to be. Firstly, it is not an *exclusively* literary tradition, regardless of its close association with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Despite the assertions of writers like Frederic Jameson, it is moreover emphatically *not* a branch of science fiction [JAMESON : 2005]. It is not therefore reducible to a set of texts as such, to be subjugated by the imposition of literary technique. Utopianism has given rise to an extraordinarily interesting literary tradition, but it is not itself reducible to that tradition. Within literary utopianism, however, we find a rich spectrum of fantastic projections. Some of these indeed verge on the utterly impossible, through scientific and technological projection in particular. Such speculations are themselves indeed a sub-genre in some respects of utopia, rather than the reverse. But in the degree to which they are implausible, they are also paradoxically, as we will see, unutopian, that is, insusceptible of any definitive realisability. This implausibility, then, remains an important definitional barrier between utopia and other forms of imaginative discourse.

Secondly, utopia is not a branch of theology. It is not an account of the "perfect" (and hence unattainable) society, as is so often still presumed [CHURCHMAN : 44]. The languages of perfection, totality, salvation, emancipation, wholeness, unity, enlightenment, and liberation all share a common religious origin. They are fatefully intertwined with utopianism from well before More – indeed for twenty centuries – to the present. Most successful forms of communitarianism have been based upon religion. The problem of the extension of religion into secular utopian forms, notably Marxism, and of the relationship between religious and secular

perfectibilism, is complex and fascinating. Indeed it might be described as the most vexed issue in utopian studies generally. It might be contended that much of what produces dystopia out of utopia, notably in the suppression of individuality, in intolerance, in extreme and militarised egalitarianism, results primarily (though not exclusively) from mistaking utopia for religion, and demanding perfection where none is to be had. But the City of God is not that of real people, who are at best only rebellious angels, and rarely even that. Utopia is often about perfectibility, thus, but not the perfect society [CONDORCET : 173].

Thirdly, utopia is not a state of mind, a psychological impulse or principle, an aberrant, deviant or pathological form of extreme fantasy. The psychology of utopia is extremely interesting, but to reduce utopia to its psychology, or to explaining the appeal of the concept and of a more communal way of life, would be mistaken. Buber, Bloch and others have posited a "principle of hope" or "wish-picture" in which utopia functions a fantastic longing or urge or desire [BUBER : 1949 and BLOCH : 1986]. "The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire – the desire for a better way of living" another prominent account tells us [LEVITAS : 191]. In Bloch's case, utopia is a partial substitute for an idea of God which is natural to humanity, and partly an "anticipatory consciousness" akin to Mannheim's idea of utopia as the critique of the dominant ideology of a given period [MANNHEIM : 1936]. This is not merely, I think, semantic nitpicking. Speculation from realistic premises, rather, is more akin to the definition I have in mind, though the imaginary nature of much utopian thought needs to be addressed in any definition. Again, then, we need to avoid reducing utopia to one component of its composition.

Fourthly, utopia is not simply a synonym for social improvement, no matter how far-sighted or extreme such proposals for amelioration may be. The long tradition of thinking about "ideal cities" notably often includes projections of beautiful, symmetrical and harmonious designs of plazas, towers and squares conceived on a dramatic scale, ecological plans for self-sufficient environments, and so on. These are only "utopian", however, in the degree to which they are married to psychological proposals for the modification of human behaviour *as a consequence* of such designs.[2] The re-organisation of space as such, no matter how extensive, is not itself

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[2] The same argument holds against current proclamations that the internet is somehow "utopia".

sufficient to trigger the "utopian" label – indeed we see here another instance of the use of the term as synonymous with "bold", "ambitious", "far-sighted", and so on. These embody concepts of progress indeed, but not of utopia. The same may be said of temporary or episodic modifications of behaviour, which either intentionally or accidentally increases sociability, whether via the sublimity of the idealised garden, the fervent loss of self in the religious ceremony or festival, or the carnival or musical or sporting event. These represent, perhaps, utopic moments and/or spaces. But their limited temporality precludes using the term "utopia" to describe them, because the creation of newly-socialised beings *en permanence* is not intended.

To reject the exclusively literary, religious, psychological and progress-centred definitions of utopia is not to dismiss the relevance and importance of these components to the utopian tradition as a whole. It is, as I suggested earlier, to plead for the avoidance of reductionism in definition. But I do not want merely to reshuffle definitional cards here. I want rather to revert to a well-established, but undernourished, account which centres on More's text but assumes the text to reflect an understanding of real social relations and a realistic reorganisation of society which utilises institutional and legal means to enforce greater equality and sociability. I leave aside here the question, of course, as to whether or when utopias actually achieve this. For just as the monastic existence may result in an enforced sociopathy and individual isolation – mandatory silence at mealtimes, and so on – so totalitarian communism ultimately stifled sociability and friendship ruthlessly, producing what Orlando Figes has strikingly termed, in reference to Stalinist Russia, a "nation of whisperers" (FIGES, 2008).

This definition of utopia, then, as offered in J.C. Davis's *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, juxtaposes utopia to the Land of Cockaygne, Arcadia, the perfect moral commonwealth and the millennium. By contrast to these, utopia "accepts deficiencies in men and nature and strives to contain and condition them through organisational controls and sanctions" [DAVIS: 370]. It constitutes itself primarily as an ideal of enhanced social order, and of communal cohesion and focus, achieved not by the abolition of ranks, but by the separation of wealth from power, a disdain for luxury, and the rejection of plutocracy. Satirically, it presents itself as a discourse on corruption and degeneration, and at times as a depiction of the consequences of extreme, especially militarised, equality, the suppression of individuality, and the demonisation of the alien, foreign and "other" as

a means of reinforcing utopian communal bonds. It organises urban social life in particular with the specific aim of moralising space; that is, reinforcing its civic, social or communal as opposed to more narrowly utilitarian or practical qualities. The setting for such a portrayal may be an idealised past or future, a colony in the present, or assume many other forms. In the precise degree to which these are unrealistic, however – such as imagining winged people in Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751), they are according to this definition unutopian.[3]

This is the first, "social" component of my definition and it brings me to the second, "realistic" aspect. This entails a presumption that Thomas More thought a system like that described in *Utopia* might indeed be introduced, because it had been partly realised already in various forms, notably the monastery system, and in primitive societies. It has long been suggested that More was inspired in particular by several accounts, notably by Vespucci, by Columbus, and Peter Martyr, of the New World, and of the communal arrangements, and disdain for luxury, displayed by its inhabitants. Such descriptions involved communal property ownership, the state supervision of labour, and paternal care for the ill and elderly. They provided plausibility for the view that such regulations had been seen to be workable not only in the monastery and small-scale community, but might be practised much more widely, on a national scale. These arrangements, then, were not *only* imagined, but were equally *discovered* in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, and believed to be actually functioning, thus reinforcing a variety of Christian as well as classical precepts. In the degree to which More thought such arrangements actually existed – and this remains of course controversial – the world portrayed in *Utopia* was not satirical as such, but rather represented a reworking of Christian, commonwealth, humanist and anthropological themes to suggest that community of property organised nationally was a viable proposition. In this view More felt that the Europe of his day had fallen from virtuous to a corrupt state, but might return to more satisfactory arrangements. So, then, Utopia, far from being permanently *nowhere*, was always *somewhere*: in Sparta, in primitive Christianity, in monasteries, amongst the indigenous peoples of the New World. It was never merely

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[3] In this period, of course, both witches and angels were assumed to be capable of flight; a contextual or relational conception of belief-systems would therefore concede that flight would be a reasonable possibility in the circumstances. What is plausibly describable as realistic in one period may not be in another, thus. I owe this angle of inquiry to Quentin Skinner, to whom thanks.

imaginary or fantastic, a mirage or unattainable ideal. The problem was always how to recapture it once lost, how to go back, or forward, from a degenerate state to one of greater order and virtue. While "natural society", then, where contentment is achieved relatively effortlessly, and not sustained by artifice, remains a source for both *Utopia* and utopian thought, its intention of enhancing sociability relies more upon divine than human intention. The point, then, is not the much-vexed issue of More's intentions, but of the plausibility of his vision. Whether he recommended it is less important than whether he believed such arrangements were actually workable. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, of course, would face a similar dilemma in the 18th century. (I leave aside here the question as to whether utopias can only be created by those who intend to create them. But it may be suggested that only an intentional community can properly speaking be a utopia, and that ideal city plans accordingly are only utopian when they fulfill this moral requirement.)

What then is utopia? Following More, Davis, Skinner, and others, we may primarily portray utopia as part of a tradition of the ideal commonwealth or best city-state, an historical discourse, in other words, respecting the restraint and control of behaviour. Utopia portrays a system of enhanced sociability (and often suppressed individuality) in which institutionally-enforced communalism mitigates the effects of excessive social inequality. Such sociability may be described in a literary or more ideological manner, and practiced in a variety of ways. Commonly it involves the abolition of luxury or its regulation by sumptuary laws, the sharing of a substantial amount of property in common, and the universalisation of labour. Crucial to separating it from religious efforts at human improvement is its this-worldly quality, and its acknowledgement of human imperfection. Utopia is not merely fantasy, but has been, and has been believed to have been, integral to human life across the world across the ages; indeed it has been widely assumed to have been the "golden age" or starting-point of human existence. Plausibility, even if remote, is central to its definition. Its realisation, however, may paradoxically often assume dystopian forms, the intensivity of the communal bond producing an intolerance of difference, and enforcing a paranoid system of surveillance in which privacy, family life, and individuality are virtually eradicated. Dystopia is the asylum, prison, panopticon or barracks writ large, and usually governable, because of its larger scale, by terror alone. And for some, of course, these implications lie latent in the concept of utopia itself.

But I will conclude on an optimistic note. The realistic definition of utopia permits us to reappropriate the concept as a mode of conceiving a realisable future. It functions as a map for avoiding less desirable outcomes, and achieving the more optimal. The reason for this is simple. Research has proven that extreme social inequality both harms individual well-being and ultimately undermines any society. Utopia stands for the avoidance of plutocracy, the limiting of inequality, and the management of common resources for the common good. These are goals proven to be worth attaining and preserving, but which neither capitalism nor communism can deliver us. In that sense utopia remains a defensible concept, provided we limit it sufficiently.

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