

Utopia as a form of life

vol. I

How can we think of utopia today? Is there any location now for its «spirit»? How can we reflect on the traditions of utopian thought by starting with the question about an «elsewhere» placed by our present? And how can we reflect on the meaning of a *kairos*, of a *here and now which is other*, of a permanent «alternative history» redrawing the time starting from a waiting perspective?

Can utopia – through its various motifs but above all through its call to a world which is an alternative to a life which is otherwise – present a gap in relation to the forms of life of the present time?

The proposal of this issue is to continue the research developed by authors over the last few years – such as Miguel Abensour, Luciano Canfora and Pierre Macherey – which is to think through a different point of view within the modern utopian tradition. Also, via authors such as Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault and Emil Cioran, we are attempting to reflect on some of possible routes which oblige us to think again on modern utopias from the age of humanism in More, Campanella and Bacon to those of Fourier, Blanqui and Proudhon, and to the ones represented by the forms of life from the revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth century. What is also at stake is the tradition of «conversion» or the archaeology of «other» forms of living. Specific attention will be given to the relation between utopia and prophecy. This relation can be considered from a contemporary point of view – through the conflicted and fertile connection between these two concepts (starting from the study of the respective semantic fields to their theoretical projection in W. Benjamin, G. Lukács, A. da Silva, E. Buonaiuti, K. Löwith, P. Ricoeur, E. Cioran), and with the attempt of rewriting utopian and prophetic thought.

As explained by Ernst Bloch, a «spirit of utopia» always continues to exist where the horizons of history and existence appear as more static. In this sense, the fall of the great ideologies do not necessarily correspond (which is also due to the distinctions made by Mannheim) to the demise of that spirit. Here we can perhaps identify one of the main

elements of utopia which is that it can be embodied in forms of meditation about an «elsewhere». This helps us to think more about the «present» place – as it was conceived in 1516 when More wrote about the fantastic journey of the Portuguese sailor Hythlodæus, alongside with the much more real Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci. This can be incorporated into practices of literature and art. More's *Utopia* seems to be implying that an alternative form of society can be realized in the present vision of the «elsewhere», and of the constant becoming of a present looking to an unpredictable future. Through their connections with the ancient traditions, the Platonic *kallipoleis* or the «other worlds» of the religious experiences, utopia and modern chiliasm or messianism continue to «cause problems» or put in question the forms of every power and truth.

Moreover, at the threshold of modernity, utopia and apocalyptic prophecies meet. For example, in Joachimism (and also in the long tradition that is connected to it) and Thomas Müntzer, the ancient *beyond* is taken to an *elsewhere* that has to be realized on the earth, and this idea will emerge many times in the following centuries.

Thus, what is the relation, connection and difference between modern utopia and modern prophecy?

The positive notion of utopia, proposed for instance by Abensour and Macherey, is compared to the one that collapsed and was rejected at the end of the last century as the harmful remains of violent and authoritarian ages. In addition to being archaic, utopia was considered an accessory of the totalitarianism of the «short 20th century» (to use Hobsbawm's expression). Abensour attempts to restore its value to the utopian imagination which is connected to radical, critical thought. He does this by following an interpretation of Marx's thought that does not underestimate nor overlook utopian socialism; rather it acknowledges its influence and link by changing the images of dream into a political theory of historical action. In this sense, heretical Marxist communism does not reject utopia; it connects it with action and social transformation (also through a prophetic ground that never disappeared in Marx's thought – which was pointed out in Eduardo Sanguinetti's reading of some of Marx's key-texts). Also, in different ways than Abensour, Macherey reaffirms that utopia, which now becomes «concrete», is not simply contemplative, but rather it is an incitement to subversive action. In fact, it is opposed to the dystopic regime of modernity, and it imagines an alternative – which occurred in the

Paris Commune and all the historical and literary breaches whose utopian thought was somehow (as well as the lines of immanent prophetic thought) a driving force. In this sense, utopia and prophecy together are a call that does not go away but rather represents themselves in the shadows of the present.

What is at the stake is the challenge to respond again to the call of utopia, to understand how its spirit, although it does not expect the realization of forms, and be able to transform philosophy, politics, art, and the spaces where we live – such in as our cities and our bodies. Are we perhaps – as Abensour asked – something more than political, utopian animals? And how, as women and men of the 21st century, *do* we and *can* we live as utopian animals? How can we actually express it?

Our issue has an interdisciplinary vocation: political thought and philosophy are the background starting at the point in which it is possible to suggest theological, sociological and anthropological considerations in theories of art, literature, cinema, urbanism, and utopian and landscape architecture. The editors hope to stimulate and open up a point of view aimed to deconstruct a perspective that is often merely Eurocentric and Western.

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