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THE TROUBLE WITH UTOPIA

UTOPIA AND HESITATION

the word 'utopia', it seems, is one we tend to use without due deliberation or modesty. We find it surprisingly easy to qualify something as utopian, and extremely rarely do we question the utopian denomination. This 16th-century neologism has swollen over time with innumerable meanings; it became an argument in fundamental disputes, and finally, found its way to colloquial speech. Is the term really so methodologically clear, and so scientific

ally precise, that it does not require additional explanation, not even deserve a moment of hesitation? "Inhabiting utopia," "Utopia made real," "myths and utopias of 20th-century architecture," "urbanism: utopias and reality," "between utopia and tradition" – Utopia 'works' in a title which is usually bipartite, dialectic, somewhat deceitful. Here – 'hard' truth and reality; there – (fascinating in its own way) day-dreaming and naïveté. Utopia is a slightly bitter seasoning that provides intellectual work with a flavour of methodical confrontation between abstract vision and reality. Finally, is the researcher able to stand on the winning side? From the perspective of historical experience, he will become the voice of reason, speaking for pragmatic solutions, and passing judgement on the

feasibility of social and aesthetic projects. He will be wise after the event.

Therefore we are hunting utopias with undiminished zeal, we keep discovering their fantastic structures, relishing in their paradoxes. In the process of the concept 'swelling', each utopia gains its counter-utopia: socialist – liberal, progressive – conservative, godless – god-fearing, futuristic – pastiche. There are enough utopias to please everyone, and to be used in any discussion according to need. As Jerzy Szacki wrote: "in fact, the borderline between utopia and anti-utopia is to some extent flexible, depending on a point of view, as what some would call utopian, others would consider a program, a projection, or a mental experiment." "The utopian denomination is not merely an analytical tool, but it includes an element of judgement, betraying the researcher's intentions and the direction of his personal bias. Thus not only a positive or negative assessment of systems considered utopian is problematic, but so is the very fact of considering them as such.

UTOPIA AND SPIRITUAL STATE

when the concept of utopia was conceived, precisely in 1516 when Thomas More

¹ J. Szacki, *Utopia*, [encyclopaedia entry in:] *Encyklopedia socjologii*, vol. 4, ed. K. W. Frieske, Warszawa 2002, p. 285.

published his “Truly Golden Little Book, No Less Beneficial Than Entertaining, of the Best State of a Republic, and of the New Island Utopia,” utopia in the meaning we attach to it today – of a project which is impossible to realise – had no reason for existence, because at that time, anything was possible. In the 15th century, the horizon had been breached. European ships began to penetrate the boundless universe. Geographic discoveries endlessly expanded the possibilities of imagination. Humanism has broadened the field of human competencies – until recently, the social order was considered as God-given, and authority had sacred legitimisation. Now people started to believe that a world order may be constructed based on human reason. Nothing is given *a priori*, and nothing is invulnerable to change. An image of a happy land of the past was replaced with one of a happy land which may be built in the future. “More’s premise lies in demonstrating that another world derives from this world: thenceforth all the paradoxes, all the deceptions of this rational utopia, this realistic fiction, this serious fantasy. Thence also derives the fact that he conceives one of the founding elements of modernism, based on what enlightenment shall dub ‘the human capacity of self-perfection’ (*perfectibilité humaine*, human perfectibility)”². Utopian thinking is a spiritual state of a kind – an expres-

² *Utopia* – a virtual exhibition prepared by the National Library of France <http://gallica.bnf.fr/dossiers/html/dossiers/Utopie/> (accessed 10 May 2011).

sion of faith in the possibility to augment the conditions of human life. Utopias are always comprehensive systems, designed with the future in mind. By criticising present conditions, they place themselves (as if) outside time. Rarely do we find a prescription for how exactly should this new order be implemented. The critics of utopia charge that its proponents (who after all did not consider themselves the authors of unrealistic ideas), even with their great faith in progress, dreamt of systems frozen in eternal perfection, systems which would no longer evolve.

With the abundance and variety of proposed ideal social systems, all projects of this kind share certain similar and rather obvious features: the division of wealth and property, the form of government, the organisation and division of labour, the forms of public life. We often associate utopias with egalitarian systems, which abolish private property, but in fact, there is a great variety of social systems represented therein. To quote Jerzy Szacki: “whether a certain set of beliefs is utopian or not, depends not upon its content, but the manner of its presentation, of advocating it as a radical and final solution of all problems which a society perceives as perturbing and significant.”³ Utopian radicalism is expressed above all in the attempts to make utopia reality. Any project, and literary fan-

³ J. Szacki, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

tasy in particular, is never merely ‘infeasible to realise’. Each project is potentially possible, in favourable circumstances. The utopian character of a project is revealed in its implementation – when a certain ideological whole is forced upon and against reality and its participants. From today’s perspective, it seems we are more eager to name the failed implementations ‘utopian’, that is those in which we register (or sometimes, merely guess) particular ideological premises rather than merely unrealistic ideas. It is as if utopia – a certain intellectual construct of literary origin – became utopian only after its utopian quality has been verified in practice.

UTOPIA AND A SPECTRE

another difficulty in using the term utopia in the analysis of a project, an idea, or a system, derives from the concept’s entanglement in the fundamental, historical debate upon the evaluation of the modern era’s heritage. When choosing the utopian argument, we necessarily place our reasoning in this extremely broad, interdisciplinary context. The temperature of polemic, in which the legacy of the era of grand social undertakings is hotly disputed, calls for a degree of caution. The dispute continues even now, burdened with emotions and the need for revenge.

The image of the last two centuries is often painted as touched by spiritual leadership of mad utopists – failed eccentrics and frustrated theoreticians, whose projects, their

offer to humanity, had been doomed to fail from the start.

Texts concerning utopias tend to leave plenty of room for the analysis of their authors' profiles and circumstances of their inception. Comte de Saint-Simon, ruined by the publication of his writings, and kept by his own butler; Fourier, a salesman living with his mother in a flat filled with potted plants; Marks, sponsored by Engels. How many model social systems were born at the time of their authors' personal failures: when they were imprisoned, forgotten, or reaching a turning point. On one hand, the need for change is often linked with a moment of crisis, with a feeling of reaching a point in which one has nothing to lose. On the other hand, concepts by Robert Owen (New Harmony colony in the US) or by Jean-Baptiste Godin (familister – a community building, based on Fourier's idea, active between 1858-1968) were realised thanks to financial successes of these wealthy industrialists. A marked distance with a hint of irony, heard in the tone of contemporary critics of utopia, proves that the phenomenon is still open to debate.

When playing the card of utopia, we are playing for high stakes: questioning the very foundations – ethical, ideological, and political – of modernity. The game concerns grave and important matters: the order of reality, the functioning of human society; gambling for basic human values, the abolition of power systems, the rise of

new ones. The polemic against utopia is in fact a political debate. Do we like the world in which we live? Which side are we on? Where do we perceive the limit of changes we are able to accept, beyond which lies the boundlessness of dangerous fantasy? What do we consider utopian?

UTOPIA AND CHANGE

Immanuel Wallerstein⁴ – the sociologist known as a radical critic of the existing world-system – analyses a scheme according to which societies reorganise. Each system is based upon some social legitimisation of government, which constitutes “an effect of a long-standing process, aimed at convincing those who live poorly today that they will be better off, much better off, in the long-run, due to the structure of the system. (...) Creating a social system is not just a question of constructing an alternative system, but largely, of its legitimisation.” Legitimation of government is also a process of building the conviction that change would not be desirable. The French revolution is a good example of that – a great social overturn, which (gradually) gained its legitimisation. “We are all familiar with French revolutionaries' basic ideas,” says Wallerstein who continues: “They opposed hereditary privileges. They preached the moral and legal equality of all people. They believed in the principle of citizenship, that is, participation in the community called a nation. (...) French


⁴ I. Wallerstein, *Utopistyka*, Poznań 2008, pp. 34–35.

revolution – with its violence and radicalism – brought those views out of the sphere of marginal, uncivilised ideas, and made them into normal, even obvious elements of all political systems.”⁵ We would not call the French revolution a ‘realised utopia’, although many of its founding ideas compose overall contemporary critique of utopia as post-enlightenment heritage. It is worth noting, however, that the very real world we know today, and from the perspective of which we often oppose radical change, is built upon the foundations of that violent overturn. Perhaps, then, utopias are alternative systems, which never found their legitimisation or, like communism and the artistic avant-garde, lost their legitimisation, while their advocates (whether inspired or vicious) did not acquire a lasting power or impact upon reality?

UTOPIA AND THE RHYTHM OF WINDOWS

Modernism – the era of constant change and its affirmation, of trust in the future, as well as the name of style in visual arts. We still remain fascinated with huge concrete containers for despised social functions, remnants of those times, of pus-ridden walls surrounding mysterious modernist machines, we are in awe of row after row of rationalist apartment blocks. A certain fascination with modernist ruins emerged. Has the utopian quality of modernism – the tendency to encompass

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 40.



the social program in a consistent picture, frozen beyond time and beyond place – found its visual form? Is there something we might call the utopia of form, or utopia of architectural landscape? Perhaps, on the contrary, what today seems to be an expression of utopian thinking – like social housing estates, or public utility buildings – is the monument to the struggle for power, technical provisionality, and aesthetic ignorance of local decision-makers? Contemporary architects, contrary to their intentions, had no good rapport with either the ideologists, or the politicians, or the utopists. Many utopias feature a reflection upon the organisation of space, however this is not always, not necessarily the reflection upon architecture. As Thierry Paquot notes: “In the architectural field, the most important utopian texts include very scarce descriptions, and it is an enormous challenge to develop any sort of a plan on the basis thereof. Not all utopias are urban in character, and even if they are, they exhibit a surprising lack of imagination as relates to the form of the city, or more broadly, to spatial planning.”⁶ Charles Fourier’s *falanster* – an urban system developed to serve 1600 people – follows the format of an architectural compound: a palace of the *entre cour et jardin* type (bearing a deliberate resemblance to the plan of Versailles). Inner commu-

⁶ T. Paquot, *La ville et la maison en utopie*, [in:] *Habiter l'utopie. Le familistère Godin à Guise*, ed. T. Paquot Thierry, M. Bédarid, Paris 2004, p. 9.

nication routes via glazed passages (the so-called internal streets) which provides the vital circulation system, rather like in a modern city; the discipline-introducing elements: the central ‘tower of order’ or the external manoeuvre court borrowed from the architecture of military barracks – these are counterbalanced with the presence of inner gardens, hiding replicas of antique statues among the green, evoking municipal parks, as well as the grandiose gardens of Versailles. In order to achieve this level of harmony, society is given a compound, which is an amalgam of quotations from traditional architecture, relating to the common visions of luxury and comfort, efficient organisation, and social advancement. Etienne Cabet’s mythical Icaria is a stage set for society organised according to egalitarian principles, rejecting any form of private property. The principle of a centralised administration system, as well as uniformity and standardisation, are embodied in the description of the country’s capital: Icara. Dominating the picture is the preoccupation with hygiene, the streets’ layout is geometrical, and the glass-roofed walkways protect inhabitants against whims of the weather. Rows of one-family houses were based on model solutions, which predict the advent of prefabricated elements. In this context, other examples worth noting include Jules Verne’s Franceville, the town of hygiene, or Robert Owen’s famous ‘moral rectangle’, with a factory, dining rooms, games and leisure zones, and lodgings prescribed on

its respective sides. Utopias are typically enclosed within one self-sufficient compound, the autonomy of which is guaranteed by the co-existence of living space and production space. A city is the most obvious form describing social relations. According to Lewis Mumford: “Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban form conditions mind. (...) The city is a material instrument of community’s existence, and simultaneously a symbol of this community, its goals and contracts, born in favourable circumstances. Next to language, it is perhaps the most important human invention.”⁷ From the society described in terms of an urban structure, reflection is not necessarily derived upon architectural form, which is all but missing from the works of 19th-century utopists.

In the 20th century, the so-called Urban Utopias emerged, designed by professional architects and city planners. What they have in common with utopias is the construction of an overall picture – they are designed outside historical towns, in flat, otherwise undeveloped areas, in a random place, and a random time. Françoise Choay⁸, following Mumford’s concept, subdivided these into two groups: progressive and pascistic. The first kind, deriving from the longing for the future, starts from the

⁷ L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, New York 1938, as quoted in: Aldo Rossi, *L'Architecture de la ville*, Gollion 2001, p. 63.

⁸ F. Choay, *L'urbanisme, utopies et réalités. Une anthologie*, Paris 1979, pp. 31–46.

concept of an individual as a type (therefore its proponents research typical human needs, open to a methodical, scientific analysis). This kind of concept of a human being corresponds with an open city plan, with a 'scattered' composition – with buildings distributed freely throughout the landscape, illuminated abundantly and evenly with sunlight (the significance of nature and hygiene). The buildings are treated as prototypes, and built out of basic modules. Here we shall find designs by Le Corbusier and other representatives of CIAM.

The other kind – the cultural utopia – derives from the nostalgia for the past, Choay argues. The man is perceived as a part of a certain community. The city's borders are clearly defined, geometrically delineated, with asymmetry ruling inside, while the buildings – which recall blueprints of the past – merge into one with nature. There are no prototypes here, no standard solutions – the stress is upon the individual dwelling (as in concepts by William Morris, or Ebenezer Howard).

The form of space is therefore appropriate to a certain defined vision of man, and it is expressed in his relationship to nature. Is typology of man or community and attempt at a definition of their needs enough to speak of an overall vision of social relations, characteristic of utopia? While stressing the circulation system and organisation of functions in the city, urban utopias rarely fall within the frame of a particular

finite ideology. Furthermore, architects are keen to modify their social ideas, if representatives of a certain ideology seem to become promising investors for their daring planning concepts. Le Corbusier starts with a concept of a city managed by an elite of industrialists (following the ideas of Saint-Simon) – “a modern city for 3 million inhabitants,” while at the time, Le Corbusier's model investor is Gabriel Voisin, to whom the architect dedicates his programme of rebuilding the centre of Paris. Disillusionment with industrialist elites then leads Le Corbusier to turn to the concept of a strong state government, with an enlightened individual as a leader, combined with ideas of communal management at the level of residential units, deriving from a short-lived fascination with syndicalism of George Sorel's persuasion (Sorel, initially interested in Marxism, turned to authoritarian principles of the far Right, merging syndicalism with the idea of a strong government).⁹

What follows is the project of *Ville radieuse* and independent residential units. Social ideas of Le Corbusier's are in fact quite shallow – just as with many other town planners – and they are limited to planning the communication routes and the layout of various functions, while chosen

⁹ More about ideological grounds for Le Corbusier's planning concepts, compare: R. Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*, Cambridge, MA – London 1982.

aspects of ideology provide a convenient packaging for the planning concepts. Fishman notes: “Le Corbusier argued that his plan was directed neither towards bourgeois capitalism, nor towards communism, as it was applicable to both cases. When one of his collaborators in *L'Humanité* charged that he did not specify who should the ruling class be; the proletariat, or the great administration, Le Corbusier replied: “I have marked administrative institutions, and public institutions in the plan; that should suffice.”¹⁰

On the one hand, architects seem to be perfect clients of utopian systems – they often postulate that division of wealth should be revised – as only the change in the structure of property would allow the reconstruction of vast areas according to new planning principles. An architect's ideal would be a system with no private property, in which investment decisions would be made by enlightened authorities, open to his ideas. That is the reason why artists often call for a contemporary Colbert to serve a contemporary Louis XIV, and in my opinion, also the reason for their shameless sympathies with totalitarian systems. However, the utopian character of architecture is paradoxically pragmatic and surprisingly opportunistic. Despite appearances to the contrary,

¹⁰ R. Fishman, op. cit.; after the French edition: *L'utopie urbaine au XXe siècle: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*, Bruxelles 1979, p. 148.



social programme is more often an artistic issue, not an ideological or a political one (the same discrepancy as in the constructivism versus productivism dispute in Russia). After all, modernist schemes were applied with equal enthusiasm both in socialist and capitalist countries. We might argue that classical utopias are fairly insensitive to architectural issues, while architectural utopias treat social issues in a manner far too cursory to speak of any clear uniformity between architecture and utopia, other than qualities of an unconstrained imagination and a certain state of spirit, characteristic for the heroic age of modernism.

UTOPIA AND THE MODEL

Numerous authors have noted vast differences between Le Corbusier's theoretical concepts (which seemed inhuman, authoritarian, malevolent even), and his actual works (considered poetic, visionary, of high artistic quality). This discrepancy, I believe, is important for the understanding of a certain conflict between architecture and utopia. Rober Fishman notes an important feature of those designs by Le Corbusier, which we today consider utopian – the comprehensive visions of future cities, enclosed 'outside time': "Just as Howard and Wright, he undertook to draw his plan for a future society at the time, when he himself was alone, despised, insignificant, and definitely powerless. Le Corbusier stands in clear opposition to theoreticians of Bauhaus (Gropius, Mies, Hilbersemer), who shared many of his ideas. Their links to the socialist party,

however, furthered pragmatic thinking. They created many fragmentary plans, but no plan for an ideal city."¹¹

When examining the circumstances accompanying the realisation of modernist visions, each time we find certain flexibility in adjusting to the given situation, coupled with ideological opportunism. In Le Corbusier's work, we can distinguish three types of plans: comprehensive, rhetorical visions of cities, with accompanying theories written in extremely suggestive and persuasive style; ideal projects for particular, defined locations, not destined for implementation; and finally, the least numerous of all, realised projects. The architect has a striking capacity to reduce the initial project for an ideal city to particular circumstances, to translate theory into a set of modules feasible for disassembling and assembling readily. The utopian scheme becomes therefore more of a model for various solutions, rather than a poetic image showing the land of eternal happiness.

The model, other than the utopia, which is non-empirical and literary in character, is a blueprint, serving the purpose of experimental verification, in search of a certain practical principle for project implementation. The model is linked with experience, with gradual adjustment to pre-existing conditions, with developing and projecting a theory of all possible practical constraints.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 145.

In my opinion, in describing modernist architecture the 'model' is a more practical tool, compared to the 'utopia' – a term burdened with judgement, with a certain ideological standing, broad and imprecise. The model may be utopian in character, especially if it offers a vision of flying saucers over the city (Wright) or synthetic-rubber highways passing through the rooftops of skyscrapers (Le Corbusier), yet it is always prepared to enter into a dialogue with reality; modular in principle, it is open to modifications and adjustments according to the expectations of decision makers. In the hands of mad despotic rulers, it will turn into a majestic totalitarian landscape; when offered to the owners of industrial plants, it will become an economic housing project with cheap flats; developers will rework modernist avant-garde into mortgaged, fortified, luxury mansions. Architecture does not exist without political legitimisation, but typically it seeks allies in the authorities. It is always eager to play a game with ideology, and invariably, it loses.

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