

## Beyond Hopes and Disasters: The Rejuvenation of Utopia

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In October 1854, around 150 years ago therefore, François Cantagrel, a disciple of the well-known utopian visionary Charles Fourier, set sail for the New World. He was leader of the first group of French Fourierist settlers emigrating to North America, where they planned to emulate their American co-disciples in establishing new 'phalansteries' there and hence to lay the foundations for the 'phalanx of harmony' to come. The instigator of the expedition was Victor Considérant, a great propagandist for Fourier's doctrine, under whose mandate Cantagrel was sent out. The region chosen for the founding of the utopian colony was Texas, at that time in the midst of a great surge of settlement. Cantagrel bought a block of land in Houston, then a mere straggling frontier town on the edge of a bayou infested with alligators and mosquitoes, to serve as a staging post. Of more significance was land purchased close to Dallas, then but a village of 400 souls, for it was here in the next few years that a Fourier colony, 'La Réunion', was established. It came to number more settlers than the village of Dallas itself. But it resulted in a total disaster.

The taxing climate, fatal diseases, internal conflicts, inept farming practices and clashes with the settlers already in place all contributed to the failure of the enterprise. The dream turned to nightmare. After two years there remained almost nothing of the original project.

*Disaster in Texas* was the uncompromising title of the corrosive book Savardan, the party's doctor, wrote after the undertaking collapsed.

Today, Houston is a huge metropolis of 6 million people where no one remembers the parcel of land bought by Cantagrel in 1855. For its part, Dallas, with its 2 million inhabitants, has also almost entirely forgotten the Fourierist experiment which nevertheless contributed to its development. All that subsists of the venture are a few descendants of the original colonists still living in Dallas, the name 'La Réunion' given to a tall mushroom-shaped tower building, and a little winding, poorly sealed road in a down-at-heel neighbourhood called 'French Settlers Road'.

The dashed hopes of this abortive venture, made even worse perhaps by an

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incredibly rapid historical development which did not find its success through following this utopian path but a quite different one, seemed to me, from the moment I learned of them through my research into actualized, and not merely conceptual, utopias, to be sadly and even tragically emblematic of the fate of utopian communities in general. Begun in great hope, they typically collapsed in disaster, manifesting thereby a sort of absolute mismatch, a radical historical disjuncture, a form of schizophrenia even, in relation to the manner in which social reality is effectively mediated.

So is utopianism a mental aberration that prevents one from seeing reality for what it is? A kind of pathological impairment of reason and imagination that must be vigorously treated with powerful and repeated doses of realism, inoculations of pragmatism and the shock treatment of cynicism and machiavellianism?

There is no doubt that such scepticism has been reinforced in recent times by the critical climate of post-modernism. Viewed from this standpoint, the notion of a utopia belongs to a past age which persisted in believing in a direction for History and in a faith (perhaps theological in origin) in the potential and progressive emancipation of humanity. A ferment in anticipation of better times, the utopian dream drew its legitimacy from the great march of World History, heading ever onwards towards greater enlightenment, greater reason, greater happiness for the greatest number. But with the sudden fall into crisis of the positivist philosophies of History, which, from Condorcet to Marx by way of Hegel, Comte or Fourier, had confidently claimed the power to trace a future path for human society, the credibility of the utopian vision collapsed. In an era of post-modernity, post-history, post-humanity, the catastrophe scenarios of anti- or negative utopias are becoming more substantial, more impressive, more dangerously imaginable than the meagre hopes lodged in a city of harmony where the human inhabitants of a verdant planet would be reconciled among themselves and with nature. The accelerated globalization of this present moment in history, though it may confirm and perhaps even usher in the unicity of human history, also heralds the closure of other possibilities. The imminent realization of a closed and finite Earth, in which risks and conflicts are multiplied by the cheek-by-jowl propinquity of nations and peoples, is pregnant with anxiety. The entire Earth is becoming an Easter Island, where the tensions are mounting but from which flight is impossible and escape is without hope, a sphere of turbulent life lost in the vast ocean of the cosmos. It's a paradox of supreme irony that the image of the lost, self-entire island so long dear to utopians may become, magnified on a global scale, the depiction of the cataclysmic outcome of the human experiment. For how much longer will the ever more massive monoliths of our rivalries and our ambitions be erected before the constantly increasing risk of a general conflagration is overcome by the arrival of the age of harmony that the visionary Fourier dreamed of?

As grim as the future of humanity may appear today, is there not yet a light to guide us? For hope in the future cannot be dismissed. Not only because there is within humanity a principle of hope and a compulsion to look forward, but because within each new emergent generation the future offers itself for rebirth. There is a rejuvenation of utopia, because each new generation remakes the world and cannot but remake the world, perceiving it with a new and critical gaze.

The illusions of youth, its unrealistic expectations, its idealism, its uncompromising sense of justice and commitment, its extremism and its love of risk, all could constitute the qualities and defects of the utopian spirit. There may well be, for better or for worse, a profound affinity between youth and utopia. It is held to be a characteristic of youth to want to make the world a better place than it is; to imagine one can make it bend to the ideals of happiness, liberty and self-fulfilment by changing the course of things if necessary, which the dogmatic insensibility of those who are too well adapted to the system and who have accepted too many concessions, whether small or great, can no longer modify.

Several difficulties and uncertainties emerge from this image often attributed to youth. It is these that I wish now to elaborate.

First, it is possible that, in its starkest form, this representation belongs to a modernity that is no longer altogether ours. It presupposes an era in which the age groups are sharply distinct, where the passage from early adolescence to young adulthood and then on to fully adult maturity is not achieved without extreme and painful tensions, without denial, rejection and revolt. The gut-wrenching outpourings of Rimbaud, the anathemas cast by the dadaist and surrealist avant-gardes upon the aesthetic and political establishments, right through to the student movements of the 1960s, all exemplified this posture of utopian contestation of the status quo. André Breton (incidentally a great admirer of Fourier) asserted in one of the surrealist manifestos that his message was above all directed at youth, particularly those in schools, factories and army barracks who refused to accept society's mould.

And yet the importance and extensive space now accorded by the whole of society to the *spirit of the young* since that already bygone age has perhaps altered the pre-suppositions of this avant-gardist and utopian vocation. And therein lies the essence of a great paradox.

This function of youth, implicit in the renewal of the passing ages, operant in both the transmission of the past and in its distortion within an ill-refined amalgam of fidelity to inherited values and pursuit of tangential novelty, is assuming such a preponderant role in contemporary civilization that certain fundamental features of youth are no longer attributable to a particular age group, but have become characteristic of the ethos of a whole society. In a culture of change, of permanent innovation, of readiness to adapt, of flexibility, of life-long learning, youth is no longer simply one of the ages of life, it is the essential way of life of a whole era. What is involved is, one might say, a structural operating process of contemporary societies which have made technological and economic innovation the principal driving forces of their existence. Beyond the rowdy and justly disparaged manifestations of the *cult of the young*, which is the superficial and popular form of this phenomenon as transmitted by the media, there is to be found something deeper, an anthropological rupture at the very heart of our societies, which are being transformed through the on-going *creation* of the unforeseeable new.

Creation, creativity: watchwords of a technological civilization but equally of an artistic one which derives its vitality from the constant re-evaluation of its moral and cultural traditions in the pursuit of new mechanisms to shape its way of living. Since the advent of the industrial society, which, with its Promethean ambitions, has changed the face of the globe over the course of several technological revolutions, the

idea of *creation* has not ceased to pervade the human soul, as though a power hitherto reserved to the incomprehensible transcendence of the divine was becoming recognized as within the grasp of man: creation in the arts, in morality, in technology, mankind takes arrogant pride in an unlimited power to transform the world and itself.

Now the exaltation of this creative power (whether by Nietzsche or Bergson or by the artists of the avant-garde who set themselves free from the constraints of imitating nature) has naturally gone hand in hand with a renewed veneration of childhood and youth. Childhood, the age of boundless imagination, of the spirit of play, of unconstrained invention, was a fundamental point of reference for Nietzsche as it was for André Breton. The child is a seeker, an inventor, perpetually in search of the new. He thus becomes a model for creativity, rated a pre-eminent quality, surpassing those of obedience and disciplined endeavour. Even prior to these authors, some of whom drew their inspiration from him, Fourier had already elaborated all his principles of education around the need to stimulate, and not to repress, that which he and subsequently his disciples described as 'that restless curiosity which leads children to want to know things'. It was hence a constant theme of all utopian thinkers of the 19th century to affirm that education should be enjoyable, where natural curiosity, a spirit of competitiveness and a capacity for invention should not be stifled by the imposition of ready-made knowledge and adult learning which checks 'the young plant in its efforts to grow' as Bergson put it.

This special value put on childhood and youth which prevails through to the present day, and which in fact has become so accentuated that it is causing some to fear the excesses of the 'cult of youth' and the 'rule of the young', is rooted therefore in a profound necessity. It is the indicator of an historic turning-point or series of turning-points: the advent of a society which, across the domains of its technological and scientific productivity, its economy, its aesthetic endeavour and even its morality, has embraced creativity and innovation as a near-sacred imperative.

But it is here that a powerful paradox becomes apparent. This society, so imbued with the urge to create the new, to experiment on all fronts, could, and therefore should, be that where the desire to realize utopian visions is carried to its height. Never has the ability of man to transform his human environment been so great and so strong. Never has what Bergson reckoned to be the very essence of man, his capacity for 'material and moral creation, for manufacturing things and for manufacturing himself' been as manifest as it is today. It is worth noting that utopian ideas emerged, whether in Antiquity with Plato or at the dawn of the modern era with Thomas More, in two periods when the idea could flourish of a conscious construction of a society by itself, when confidence in the power of human initiative was so great that the notion of consciously assembling an exemplary social order instead of passively continuing inherited institutions was able to be accepted.

And yet it is quite the opposite of such a strong utopian drive that we observe today. The future looms as a crisis; our capacity to look ahead is paralysed; our avant-gardes are exhausted; the great tales of emancipation that fired our commitment are at an end. . . . The role of the utopia seems compromised and gradually fading from our outlook.

This paradox nevertheless carries within it a certain logic. The difficulty of

formulating a utopian vision today is that the idea of the utopian community implies almost immediately a social equilibrium that is both ready-achieved and maintained, a harmony and stability within society that is collectively assented to. As such, it is a stasis, not a dynamic. Its form is crystallized rather than fluid. But we human beings are convinced of the idea that, in the universe of nature and of society, what Bergson calls 'continuous creation of the unforeseeable new' is its fundamental driving force. The idea of incessant creation and innovation, revealed to us daily through technology and the arts in all their surprising diversity, forbids us from entertaining the thought of a future where such innovation has come to an end. We know that inventions as different in their nature and as circumscribed in their function as the telephone, the radio, television, the computer or, in a different field, antibiotics, psychotropic drugs, contraceptive pharmaceuticals, etc., have brought about significant changes in conditions of life, in behaviours, in the relationships experienced between individuals. Given the rate at which 'man manufactures and self-manufactures', to quote Bergson again, it would be the height of presumption to propose plans and procedures and lay out in great detail a specific socio-political organization of society such as Thomas More or Cabet had taken it upon themselves to do. Such a project would translate as an extravagant illusion rather than as a political utopia. The formulation of utopian visions ceased being possible as the rate of technological innovation accelerated. Not simply because their impact has often been judged as negative – since they have also had an extraordinary and incontestably positive impact such as in favouring the spectacular increase in life-expectancy, but because arriving at a plausible vision for the future became an impossible exercise.

The paradox lies therefore in the fact that, in an era when the extraordinary value attached to the spirit of youth (through its openness to new experience, flexibility, inventiveness, bold imagination, critique of current structures, and so on) should favour the birth of utopias, in fact a crisis of the utopian vision has opened.

And yet the urge to create a future is still there. It has even become all the more pronounced as our powers to transform the human environment and our will for the new have become heightened. In reality, what can no longer be formulated with any degree of credibility is utopia as a concrete *model*. But utopia continues to lurk within us as a principle and as a process. Utopias no longer have outward appearance or shape (be it the city of the Sun, the Icarian society, or Fourier's world of harmony), but they are still present in the form of an impulse, a hope, maybe even a drive. The utopian city is no longer concrete, it escapes precise description; but its appeal is still powerful.

All the same it is perhaps not entirely impossible to be a little more positive than that. Not by claiming the power to trace clear contours for the future, but at least by drawing attention to what might clearly distinguish the utopias of recent times, whose various failures are not difficult to pinpoint, from those that may be envisioned in the *after*-period of modernity.

A few likely attributes come to prominence when one reflects on any new utopian tendencies, contrasting strongly with the more classic characteristics of modern-age utopias. Among these attributes, two seem to me significant: the demand for *diversity* and the dream of *aestheticization*.

Let's take the demand for diversity first. A deep-seated urgency, which may come across as an insurmountable contradiction, drives the present-day expectation: on the one hand the legitimate and increasingly rigorous and imperative desire for equality, and on the other, a no less legitimate desire for the respect, and even celebration, of difference. On one side there is the defence of an abstract identity established under law. This is the right of a human being to be recognized as such, beyond considerations of race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, language, etc. But on a different level there is the demand for a right to singularity, for separate identity, the insistence that the multiple facets that make up a single concrete individuality be given recognition. In other words, the affirmation of equality as a general principle which asserts an essential human identity shared by all and to which each has an inalienable right – which is a modern principle (even though it had already been prefigured in Antiquity) – must be reconciled, without its being undermined, with a demand for difference, for individuality, for non-resemblance – a principle which could be called post-modern (though in certain cases it was effectively pre-modern). It is clear therefore that a truly contemporary utopia would have to accommodate this double demand, which requires a much more complex concept of the person than the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment had imagined.

In opposition to the social fragmentation of medieval and pre-modern times, the result of undefined particularities and multiple inequalities which generated injustices and oppression, the utopias of the modern era had proposed the radical ideal of the identical. Hence their blue-prints, which today appear monotone and inhibitory, at once idealist and totalitarian.

The situation today is very different. The principle of equality before the law is universally recognized, even though it is not always and everywhere respected as it should be. Yet the trend towards cultural, media and linguistic homogeneity brought about by the vast growth in communications and by commercial and financial globalization is conflicting with endeavours to maintain or establish individual identity (be it religious, cultural, linguistic, regional, etc.). This latter inclination thus sets up a resistance to the trend towards abstract universalization and the erasure of difference, for this is experienced as a loss of individuality and an irreversible and irreplaceable erosion of symbolic diversity.

The logic of the 'general equivalent', which is that of a *currency*, seems to be coming to dominate all situations and activities. Yet this is an abstract, and therefore pernicious, universality which negates difference and obliterates the still diverse roots by which life and consciousness are grounded.

In such a context the modern-era utopia becomes an obstacle. It reinforces what contemporary social evolution, though in a less conscious, less visionary and more coercive manner, is in the process of giving concrete form to. We want something more than that, however impossible it might seem. Just as with post-modern architecture, which has reacted against the dehumanizing geometric brutalism of the modernist aesthetic, we want to integrate the rational and functional advances of the modern era with the multitudinous richness and diversity of social evolution now stretching back several thousand years. We want the sharp clean brightness of Le Corbusier's *Cité radieuse*, but softened and modified by a more exuberant, baroque inspiration which draws together the styles of every period and nation while cease-

lessly inventing new ones. We want to be equals, yet still assert the right to difference. We want the new, but also the remembrance of things past. We want our personal space, but we also want the common space of conviviality. We want the global but also the local. We want instant interactive communication with others on a world scale, but we also want to reappropriate for ourselves the intimate idioms of our ancestors. We are trying to graft onto one stock the heritage of the most ancient past with the challenging urgency of the radically new. An identity formed from a mesh of multiple values which no longer accepts the imposition of a single and definitive role.

It would be to such a community as this, embracing these multiple and perhaps insoluble contradictions, that the word utopia might be applied today, a utopia where the heterogeneous, the unlike, the plural would constitute a vortex of beneficent and harmonious creativity rather than be a source of injustice and violence. If (with all the prudence necessary when employing a terminology that is still fragile and still subject to the swiftness of change and a slide into lexical obsolescence as voracious as that which consigns commercial products to oblivion) one can still speak of a post-modern, or ultra-modern, or hyper-modern, utopian order, it would seem that this new utopia could be even more difficult to conceive and bring about than the world-orders that the Moderns dreamed of, and for which the rule, the set-square and the pair of compasses seemed to suffice, along with simple arithmetic, for crystallizing a configuration of society.

The fact is that the modern-era utopias were at heart theological in origin; the community of the spirit, the monastery where tasks and goods were shared in common, the carefully programmed daily routines and so on were their more or less secret inspiration, to which they gave a secular form. There is no clearer example of this secularization than that of Etienne Cabet, author of *Journey to Icaria*, who was born in Dijon and died on the banks of the Mississippi: he explicitly saw in the communism of his utopia (defined and put forward before Marx's) the realization of the Christian ideal.

But the utopian spirit of today is more likely to be aesthetic. It promises to be the totally hyperbolic enactment of the aestheticization of existence, the outline and glow of which can be glimpsed in the world of the present. The dream of harmonizing sense and sensibility, logic and imagination, order and chaos, calculation and chance, unity and diversity, and for which the activity of art provides the closest paradigm (even allowing for the current tendency of art paradoxically to wilfully exhibit the ugly, the shocking and the dissonant), could indeed constitute such a utopia. It would be consonant with a world in which the artist, as exemplary creator, is placed on the highest pinnacle; where the reference to artistic activity as a creative principle would influence ethics as much as economics.

In conclusion, this briefly sketched perspective gives me the occasion to come back to Fourier, from whom I started out. Of all the utopians of the 19th century it was perhaps he who advanced furthest beyond the bounds of the modern-era utopias. He was not a visionary of the like, but of the unlike. He sought the best configuration possible for weaving into a common social fabric persons of different destinies, of differing passions, of diverse curiosities and vocations. For Fourier, what prefigured or symbolized the 'harmonious society' was the Opera, with its

voices of different tones and resonances, its numerous and variegated instruments, all of which meld together to produce beauty: 'The unity of passion-derived harmony has no more perfect emblem than the opera . . . . It is the image of God's intended operation over all our industrious and aesthetic functions', wrote Fourier in a posthumous manuscript. Granted, the Opera still has a composer and a conductor, which could well limit the scope of this emblem. But one can well see, however, from this standpoint how the survivors of the Texas experiment whom I was recalling at the beginning deviated a long way from the path to utopia.

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