

# Utopia Dispersed

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Among the reasons for what might be called the 'utopian crisis' in post-modern culture, where the very idea of a utopia is the subject of suspicion and where its claim to perfection is held to blame for every fanatical ideology,<sup>1</sup> may well be found the close, perhaps excessively close link that the utopian idea has always maintained with metaphysics. I am referring here to the notion of metaphysics as elaborated by Heidegger. Many defenders of metaphysics still refuse Heidegger's critique, but it remains nevertheless the case that the definition of metaphysics as disregarding being-itself (*das Sein*) in favour of process-of-being (*das Seiende*), or of an objective ground of being that reason could grasp and to which it should adhere when interacting with knowledge and praxis, constitutes at least a generally accepted point of departure for discussion.

The utopias of our cultural tradition are linked back to metaphysics defined in such a way that the historian can with difficulty deny. Quite simply because it is from the metaphysical Beginning [Arché], which they take to be the formative principle of the world, that utopias have always more or less explicitly drawn their model of a perfect, ideal and final order. The legitimacy of the utopian project, even the most avowedly 'historicist' ones such as the revolutionary utopia of Marx, are never exclusively founded on the shared desire of a society, social class or party. This legitimacy is always traced back to an ideal state which, if not imagined as having genuinely existed during a mythic time of origin, at least is perceived as representing the fundamental essence of humanity, of society, of the world.

But it is not this claim to metaphysical legitimacy on the part of the utopian idea that it behoves me to discuss here in detail. The question is to know whether, just like metaphysics itself, the idea of utopia may not have undergone a dissolution – a '*Verwindung*' in the Heideggerian sense – which effectively will enable it to be re-expressed in a new form, with characteristics more in conformity with our post-metaphysical era.

Of the characteristics attributed to being by metaphysics, it seems to me that one of the most decisive, in particular for its utopian implications, is that of oneness.

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Granted, Popper's polemic against political Platonism does not directly target this aspect of utopia. What he condemns is the philosophers' claim of the right to govern the State simply on the basis of their knowledge of ideas and of truth. But if one takes Theodor Adorno, for example, specifically where, in opposition to Hegel (of whom he was nevertheless an admirer and in several senses a disciple), he propounds the thesis, not that 'the whole is truth' but precisely that 'the whole is falsehood', one can quite easily grasp the relationship between the philosophical authoritarianism criticized by Popper and the idea of totality refused by Adorno. This relationship, grasped almost by chance in Adorno and Popper, but which is one of the first to come to mind when we think of utopia, seems to me of the greatest significance. It puts us on our guard against the perverse effects – falsity for Adorno, risk of totalitarianism for Popper – of this utopian oneness.

Let us for the moment follow one of the great modern critics of metaphysics, Nietzsche. In one of his unpublished writings from the 1880s (I think it is even one of his last), Nietzsche speaks of the imperative which attributes a value to actions and which enjoins that there be no yielding to the search for pleasure. The one by whom this imperative is imposed must be an absolute authority, such as God. '*Man bedurfte Gottes, als einer unbedingten Sanktion, als eines kategorischen "Imperators" – oder, sofern man an die Autorität der Vernunft glaubt, man brauchte eine Einheits-Metaphysik*'<sup>2</sup> [One needs God as an absolute sanction, as a categorical 'Imperator' – or else, so far as one believes in the authority of reason, one needs a metaphysics of oneness]. The 'error' of European metaphysics, according to Heidegger, who was the first to have defined and critiqued it, derives from a particular tendency peculiar to western man whose source or origin he does not further define. To better understand it, one may have recourse either to the description of inauthentic existence set out in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), which is more or less identified with the inclination of the *Dasein* to yield itself up to the world of the impersonal *one* (the French *on*, the German *man*) of everyday anonymity – or, at a deeper level, one may connect with the Christian idea of original sin (which Heidegger does not admit in these terms). It would not, however, be arbitrary to establish a parallel between this inclination, identified by Heidegger, to yield to the anonymity of the everyday and the propositions of Adorno, Popper and Nietzsche. At least in the sense that the Heideggerian polemic against metaphysics cannot be based on reasons of 'objectivity'. For to do so it would be necessary to revise as not 'true' the notion that Being (*Sein*) is identified with the process-of-being (*das Seiende*), an idea inherited from metaphysics, and assert further that this notion is incapable of enunciating objectively what Being is. And this polemic therefore takes one back to the ethico-political impossibility of a reduction of human existence to objectivity, which would have been the direct consequence of metaphysics in its 'mature' phase (positivism, complete mastery (*totale Verwaltung*) of work along socially fragmented lines, class division). I would even go so far as to say that the future of Heidegger's thought lies precisely in this implicit but undeniable inspiration. Already in *Sein und Zeit* and more and more frequently in his later works, the critique and disavowal of metaphysics is not for any theoretical reasons or reasons of descriptive fidelity, but for the violence it occasions insofar as it claims to apprehend an ultimate foundation of existence, in the face of which the slightest questioning would no longer be admissible. (This suppressive power over any ques-

tioning is also the only possible philosophical definition of violence, without reduction to the Aristotelian myth of 'natural places'.)

I will skip over a more detailed analysis of all the linkages implicit in the idea that metaphysics, for Heidegger as well as for those of us who would draw inspiration from him, is rooted in violence and in the spirit of domination. For otherwise, why privilege unicity over multiplicity? I realize that we are touching here on one of the oldest and most deep-rooted 'dogmas' of European (metaphysical) tradition. One could immediately point to Plato's *Parmenides*, in which, it might be said in passing, no justification in my opinion can be found for the necessitude of the One – other than the idea that oneness is indispensable for the identity of each discrete thing-in-being. But identity itself has no 'reason'. Or, as Nietzsche wrote, it is the 'reason' itself which one can wonder if it is necessary to believe in.

The thesis that I would like with all possible prudence to put forward here is that the utopian idea has always shared with metaphysics an unchallenged preference for the idea of oneness. I further postulate that this link with metaphysics enables us today to be able to conceive of a post-metaphysical utopia, somewhat in the sense of what Heidegger calls the *Verwindung*. But why should we still keep talking of utopia? Perhaps because the term is evocative, to one degree or another, of the 'emancipation project' in the technical sense attributed to the word 'utopia' by Karl Mannheim, author of the famous book *Ideology and Utopia*, when distinguishing it from an ideology: the latter is primarily a justification based on an existing order, whereas the former is an ideal potentially able to become real through action.<sup>3</sup> Thus, whether it be in the more implicit sense given by Mannheim, or in the sense applied by authors such as Ernst Bloch, utopia understood as project carries within it a constituent relationship to a primary oneness of being.

Let us return once more to Heidegger and his notion of *Verwindung*: in his work, this word stands in contra-distinction to the use of the word *Überwindung*, which refers to the process of surmounting or transcending metaphysics. According to Heidegger, there can be no true surmounting, but only something of the order of a resigned and 'distorting' acceptance, that is to say a sort of reappropriation which I don't hesitate to call 'secularizing', which extends metaphysics while at the same time profoundly alters its meanings. And as the effort of framing this *Verwindung* process had led Heidegger to ceaselessly traverse the whole past history of metaphysics, we ought to do as much if we are to imagine a *Verwindung* of the utopian concept. I want to put forward just two questions here which seem to me the most crucial for rethinking utopia in these post-metaphysical terms: first, why the insistence on oneness, and second, why can't we just abandon the utopian idea altogether? These two questions are closely linked, at least insofar as the relation between oneness and *Autorität* put forward in Nietzsche's text appears to be valid, something of which I am convinced (and which was also Heidegger's point of view). It would seem therefore that if the pre-eminence of the notion of oneness has always been taken as self-evident, this is because it fostered the establishment and underpinning of a certain concept of dominance, not in the first instance that exercised by man over his fellows, but more particularly the dominance of man over the external 'reality'. The necessity for oneness appears first as an exigency of logic, of language even, and of the grammar associated with it (again Nietzsche argued that as long as

we have not been freed from grammar, we will not be able to free ourselves from God). But as the thinkers of the critical school of Hegelianism – Marcuse, Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School – have demonstrated very clearly, these two forms of authority, that of man over nature and man over man, have always been closely associated in the history of our civilization. Authority also means, first and foremost, the capacity to resist the threats of nature, hence logic as techno-logy. In the very first sections of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, at least according to the standard order established by the various editors, it is clearly indicated that the fact of appropriating first principles is tantamount to having the power to determine consequences – and to attain omniscience. That is more or less what Nietzsche means when he declares in a note that 'metaphysics is the attempt forcibly to take control of the most fertile regions'. This thread of thinking ends up not far from the conclusions of Heidegger, or at least of those inspired by him, in relation to the link between metaphysics and the violence of a society of the *totale Verwaltung* (total mastery).

It is of course highly troubling to retrace the 'logical' implications of the principle of oneness, so to speak, to matters of power and dominance. Knowledge of the arché or of the archai (first principles) would appear to be an indispensable first step for any revolt of 'reason' (natural law, democracy, etc.) against authorities of whatever sort that may wish to impose themselves on it. But how can we reduce to this rather rigid and simplistic schema the unity of Kant's apperception, for example, or the importance taken on, for any definition of experience, by the unificatory capacity of categories in relation to the multiplicity of sensations? It is not by chance that I allude to the thoroughly staggering nature of this calling into question of the principle of oneness and the privileged place it holds in our tradition. The difficulty inherent in this proceeding is fundamentally the same – *si licet parva* – as that met by Heidegger when he realized that to complete *Sein und Zeit* he would have needed access to a form of language that he did not possess. But even in the case of Kant – despite the popularity which he enjoyed with Schopenhauer and in the readings from Schopenhauer that were for so long dedicated to him – it would not be difficult to show how the apperception functions as a device in the struggle for survival, and that it therefore has a vital function which is not far removed from the need to be situated within a framework of relations of dominance . . .

From this 'answer', presented here in its barest outline, to the first question relating to the privilege of oneness flows also the answer to the second question: why can't we simply set aside the concept of utopia altogether? There is no real thought that is not emancipatory. The world itself, in the Kantian sense of the word, is given to us only to the extent that we are *geworfene Entwürfe*, projects brought into being despite ourselves. It is also the reason for which the 'logical' oneness of knowledge, the imperative for oneness which seems inseparable from any act of consciousness, manifests itself as an action, the adoption of a 'practical' position when confronted with a situation which affects us or which we wish to modify. Which also means that we should not necessarily reject all 'logic', even if, from this point of view, it is eminently possible to imagine that, in a post-metaphysical situation, we must try to refer to systems of logic formed of multiple values, and not just to the classical logic that is articulated around the binary true–false opposition. What I would like to limit myself to proposing here is simply the ideal (utopian it is too, I admit) of a post-

metaphysical utopia which takes as its starting-point the realization that unicity is no longer an inescapable characteristic of the utopian concept. Or rather, given that the very notion of oneness appears to be the ultimate grounding principle of metaphysics, bathed as it is in an ambience of violence and will to dominance, the issue becomes one of conceiving a post-metaphysical utopia precisely under the sign of multiplicity asserted as a fundamental value and not just as a phase of 'confusion' to be overcome through a process of synthesis, etc.

Such a proposition would have no meaning if we did not find ourselves at present in what Lyotard has called the post-modern condition, in the world that Heidegger would have described as that of the end of metaphysics. It involves correspondence with a practico-existential condition of culture in which, from the practical, political, social and even ecological points of view, the ideal of oneness (and the harmony of the human race which can be seen in shared principles, authorities, values and *Weltanschauungen*) is shown to be no longer a desirable end-point, but the most dangerous of challenges. In other words, we are coming to the realization that world unity, henceforth made attainable because of new technologies but also because of weapons of mass destruction which both permit and seem to demand the unification of all under a single world authority (both tendencies being guarantors of the world-state that Kant dreamed of) is something not at all desirable. On the one hand, the dissolution of the East–West polarity caused a breakdown in world discipline which is expressed through terrorism, a war 'from within' raging not between two states but arising as criminal infractions against a single imperial 'order'. On the other hand, the universal sharing of the same desires and life-aspirations incited by the promotional drive of the globalized economy threatens to lead to the exhaustion (in very short order, if we credit a recent report by the Pentagon!) of the planet's resources. If it is not already too late – something, alas, which seems more and more likely – the exercise of a utopian imagination needs to be in the direction of a retrieval of the multiplicity of cultures, forms of living and the different ways of survival invented by humanity in the course of its history. A science fiction story invites this reflection: in a future war of the worlds all the computers crash and the war is won by the only world which has retained the capacity to do its calculations by hand. Something for us all to think about!

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

## Notes

1. I am thinking here of Karl Popper and his 1945 book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in translation in 1962 (Popper, 1962).
2. Friedrich Nietzsche (1954), Band III, p. 906; (1967), Band VIII, 7/6, p. 266.
3. See pp. 176 ff. of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, published in translation in 1991 (Mannheim, 1991).

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