

FROM FICTIONAL TO THEORETICAL STRATEGY OF UTOPIAN DECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract. *The paper presents the joints of the two deconstruction strategies of the utopian imaginary. On one hand, the fictional strategy, which aims to strip the structure of the perfect societies as they are conceived by the constructive utopia, and which reveals the adverse consequences generated by the utopia based practices. On the other hand, the theoretical strategy, which deals with the criteria of rationality of the actions as suggested by the utopian programs. Some anti-utopian arguments are discussed as they are presented both in literary masterpieces (e.g. A. Huxley, G. Orwell) and in significant critical studies (e.g. K.R. Popper, A. Toffler). The paper represents an updated version of my older work (Cioară, 2006).*

Keywords: utopianism, deconstruction, anti-utopia, social criticism.

Introduction

The most recent stages of modernity have implied one the most radical mutation concerning the content and structure of the social imaginary: the emergence and development of the deconstructive utopianism. The intellectual roots of the *anti-utopian utopy* proceeded from the divided nature of the rationalist thought, which was able to turn on its own basis and to examine its own prospect on the future into a critical mirror.

Like I showed (Cioară, 2006) *deconstructive utopia* – thanks to its fictional form – belongs to the utopian genre: it makes use of the same subject and even symbolical set/network, but in a different manner as long as it focuses on disassembling of the perfect societies structure as they were produced by its opposite symmetrically pole – *constructive utopia*; so, it focuses on revealing the nefarious consequences of the utopian practices/actions (dystopia, anti-utopia, critical utopia) or, simply, on

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showing up the hybrid outgrowths inside the real, present-day societies (satirical utopia).

The images and symbols in contra-utopian view were astonishingly supplied by Plato (*Critias* and *Timaios*)(1993): the earthly, wise and thriving Athens city has an opposite – the Atlantis state after its collapse (*Critias* reports on the history of a people which substituted the natural insular landscape for an artificial, strong fortified city, obsessed with external security threats).

Although Plato negatively interpreted Atlantis custom, the constructive utopia has perverted it into *utopian values*. The antiutopianism will render Plato's view of the Atlantis exemplary history interpretation and will extrapolate this prospect on the entire/complete set of utopian values.

From another standpoint, the western anti-utopianism could be looked upon as putting up-to-date the Christian idea of the original sin: after its decay, the human race is unable of perfection in this world. In L. Tower Sargent's view, the secularization of this idea is the premise of the anti-utopianism, according to which any attempt to get perfection is *unattainable*: so the obstinacy to carry out a perfect society might be extremely dangerous and harmful (Sargent, 1994, p. 22).

If constructive utopia reverses the image of the world that generated it, then such type of image upsetting by the utopian deconstructivists should lead to/head to a realistic resetting of a world which has already been ravaged by the excessive rationalist terror impact.

Fictional deconstructivism

Classical utopia/utopias tried to outline a more *attractive* image of a rational State of law (i.e. an optimistic belief that “the other world” is both different and better); during the XXth century the utopian image becomes *negative* or pessimistic (the utopian State will appear as a mechanism of domination and as an tool of individualization loss).

Anti-utopia preserves the utopia form and content as well, i.e. the imaginary description of an ideal society, but which has all ingredients of a perfect nightmare; it also makes use of utopia discourse and techniques; however “utopia and anti-utopia are each other mirror reflected images” (Kumar, 1998, p. 152).

Anti-utopism has an extremely controversial genealogy: it was conceived as a literary anti-totalitarian. Zamiatin's *We*(1991) is looked as the first modern anti-utopia; here, the author performs an exhaustive and meaningful image of the ascending totalitarianism. It describes an extremely made standardized society (a consequence of this process is the humans transformation in numbers), ruled by an absolute authority state having the main function repressing any personalization gesture. This frozen world is consciously cultivating what is the ideal and the absolute, with a high price: its citizens' freedom.

A basic feature of this kind of utopian thought is the *warning* addressed to the reader: something needs to be done (and can be done) now to avoid the future.

From now on, utopia will mean *to put us on our guard* and will not distinguish of the positive utopia than by the author's own intentions.

This kind of utopia *denounces* with great lucidity the devastations inside the totalitarian societies and ideologies and blames the state's ascendancy on the individual Evgheni Zamiatin (1991) criticizes the Marxist experiences, while G. Orwell (1991) rather focuses on the hitlerist totalitarianism).

In R. Mucchielli's (1960) view too, the critical anti-utopia is a pretext against an unwanted utopian world, contrary to the genuine aspirations of humanity. Such unwanted world is announced by the *communist utopia* which became violent attacks singled target for the anti-utopianism; in this way it has been recognized its persuasive force and remarkable influence in social and intellectual environments. As for the case of those who had the premonition of the devastating socialism danger, the most suitable manner to denounce its true nature was to place it in the center of utopias which terrify the readers. So, pioneers and masters in literary anti-utopia (Zemiatin, Wells, Orwell, Huxley) have not made saving means of narrative fiction in order to impose the distressing image of a dehumanized and oppressed world.

The anxiety of these writers/authors was emphasized when the socialist utopia attractiveness brought about the modern world to start to work it out at a large scale. Their intuition with regard to the imminent achievement of the utopias in vogue (at least, at that time) made anti-utopia to be looked upon almost as totally anti-socialist and anti-technological.

However, the anti-utopianists preserved the utopia frame: they did not turn into theorists and did not approach real state of affairs; they preferred to build up imaginary realities in order to destroy them later. Their aim was not to bring the best society closer, even if they described traditional utopia similar societies; it is easy to point out they did not build for the sake of building but to destroy. So, the negative utopia building up is used as an exemplary but negative model and points out what the anti-utopianists think it should not be.

This is the reason to name this kind of utopia as *deconstructivism*, since the anti-utopianist is "building up" in order to "de-construct" the "abstract macro-society" foundation (Popper, 1993).

One of the first satires upon Utopia was S. Butler's *Erewhon* (1968). This work denounces, with some humor, certain modern society shortcomings that would fall into a technocrat utopia to be designed to achieve. The author successfully pointed out the impressive relativism of modern reasoning. His work showed a peculiar vision on the mechanization and did not miss the opportunity to chaff the property cult, the conventionalism, the official morals and the Anglican Church environment.

Another brilliant work in this field is R. Bradbury's *451° Fahrenheit* (2013), which has presented a certain society where books were burned (this fact was unfortunately taken over from reality: the fascism and communism). There are two

spiritual worlds to confront in this utopian vision: on one hand, the next millennium world, where the tendency to make uniform/to standardize knowledge as a result of the perfected mass-media techniques, got to paroxysm; on the other hand, the uprising world which was striving to resist and to put back the cultural heritage of the planet. This utopia has an unexpected and optimistic end: the uprising people were learning books by heart (a freedom symbol/icon) they were hoping to reprint in better times: so, the Reason is saving Freedom/Liberty.

Contra-utopia ability reaches its peak in Huxley's *The Wonderful New World* (1997): the author himself considers "to represent an imaginary and a little low-cut picture of a society where the attempt to create human beings after the white ants type and likeness, is pushed up almost to the limits of the possible" (Huxley, 1997, p. 261). A completely organized society is described ("far too orderly"): God is replaced by Ford, "*Everything is perfect in the world*", everybody is happy since people had everything they had been wishing; so, nobody needed to dream or to aspire to something/anything.

In such a world anything is voluntarily abode for the sake of society. The individual predestination and *conditioning* has an essential role – since the embryo stage, by stopping the normal development of the individuals – and these are looked upon as a major tool for social order and stability. Individuals will be "programmed" to be part of hierarchical *castes* (alpha, beta, gamma...) that are determined on scientific basis. The conditioning goal was to make people to come to love their relentless social destiny which is, at the same time, the happiness and virtue secret as well: i.e. people have to like what they are bound to do. The individuals who, however, due to an error, "got rid" of conditioning, have been considered strange (our world normality they referred to, seemed strange and gave the opportunity to great fun). If you are "different", then you are obliged to remain quite alone, but solitude is forbidden.

This is an absolutely pragmatic world, every caste fulfills its tasks and functions in an unconditioned way and on time.

The "beyond world" for those who were residing in *The Wonderful New World*, was our natural, primitive "uncivilized" world.

Institutional stability is assured through cancellation of the distance between desire and satisfaction and audience becomes acceptable through regular doses of happiness which are generated by chemical means (a certain *soma* drug). So, governance – by nonviolent handling of the individuals thought and feelings – proved to be more effective than the governance by terror.

This is a particularly significant picture: a *warning work* against the *utopia* itself (not against one or another form of it) and an expression of the justified fear of human mechanization and of "the total organizing nightmare that threatens us at the turning point" (Huxley, 1997, p. 234). This latter issue – associated with the possibility to stimulate the desirable behavior and with the demographic growth – is, in Huxley's view, the premise of pushing the world towards totalitarianism (see also Servier, 2000, pp. 236-244).

Shifting the emphasis from Truth and Beauty to comfort and happiness, that made possible *The Wonderful New World*, is very characteristic for our own world as well and thus, it is opening wide the gates for... utopia and is ready to sacrifice its art, spiritual life and freedom for the sake of the stability and serenity, as in the case of Ford era.

Theoretical Deconstructivism

The *theoretical strategy* works in parallel with “*literary*” strategy: the former approaches the rationality criteria of the acts based upon utopian programs; the latter is implicitly concerned with destroying any utopian constructivist formula. The theoretical deconstructivism discourse assumes the endeavor to discover and to eliminate the errors and sophisms that made use of in justifying the traditional utopian thought. Theoretical critique firstly aims to/targets the idea that progress is a positive-sense notion, secondly (aims to) the idea of the future-progress identity, where progress is identified with organizing and planning acts; thus we can have the future in our sole discretion.

Although modern thought is pretending to be a believer in linear time and progress, the imaginary it makes use of and the social technologies it utilizes will stifle future: the future will be filled with the image of a fixed world in the frame of a frozen perfection which is engulfing its history by infinitely repeating of the same duration. This view of time – the *anhistorical/unhistorical view* – i.e. reducing time to an unreal perfection state, will be a permanent count of indictment in the anti-utopian criticism.

A French author, J.J. Wunenburger (1985) illustrates the two types of argumentation frequently used by the anti-utopian criticism: The *former* is to underline (as classical Marxism) the utopia *lack of skill* to be topical, part of the present, to settle the daily existence, to take note of the countless tactical compromises and strategies that are needed in the effective political action. Utopia is thus an imagination expression which breaks out of the real, is losing all contact with empirical history. Utopia proposes/suggests new structures for imagination that suppose a radical change of our customs and institutions; however, these changes application in real/effective/actual communities would have to face insurmountable difficulties (this is the main reason for the relentless fail of all utopias/utopian application attempts). The *latter* is more subtle and highlights, by contrast, not so the loss of sense of reality to Utopia, but an *imagination deficiency*: an image contamination and exclusion by one-dimensional and suffocating reason. Far to assume and achieve the function of “alternative sociability dream”, utopia comes up by breaking away from the stereotypical and prosaic canons/rules. In this respect, the above mentioned author concludes on the need to search if not somehow “utopian imagination is not responsible of multiple sclerosis of the social imagination and hence, of the collectivities images regarding their own future” (Wunenburger, 1985, p. 98).

Before the presentation of other arguments and aspects of the anti-utopian criticism is not without interest to sketch a pessimistic view on Plato’s contribution

to the social constructivism development. Such evaluation is already met in Aristotle's works (1996) ; later, Lucian (1983) and Erasmus (1960) expressed their delight as no real republic has been tempted by Plato's program.

Most times, critics do not want to remember that Plato did not propose a government program, but an abstract paradigm, an *absolute* Utopia prototype, a standpoint of the spirit...They have given credit to the idea that carrying out Plato's *Republic* (1986) prescriptions should mean to be located in Orwell's (1991) austere *Oceania*.

A. Koyre (1945) – in a bad way too – admires, for instance, “the extraordinary modernity” of Plato's political thought. This kind of interpretation of *Republica* by adding new valences that it/the dialogue never had, will generate as inappropriate reaction of the utopian deconstructivism to Plato's attempt to “build up by mind” an absolutely good city.

Extremely tough is Russell's (2005) view too: it is surprising that the above dialogue was admired as a political work, achieved by uninterested people and the only explanation should be the commentators' snobbism.

On the contrary – Russell claims – *Republica* is a good example of *totalitarian essay*, due to the stories and literary works censorship, theatre interdiction, (sly and liar) oligarchy leadership, large scale infanticide and eugenics programs.

Ciorănescu's approach (1996) seems to be more appropriate: beside Plato's political philosophy criticism, the Romanian author offers a justification for it: Plato's system is justifying and legalizing class differences, which is a normal aspect for Plato's historical life time. It seems one of its inspiration sources to be Lycurg's *Sparta*: there are many elements of Plato's community republic that come from (ascetic-military customs, common property, visits abroad interdiction, political element pressure on the civil one and the totalitarian leadership).

Plato's option in his all political philosophy was to consider the *whole social*, without taking into account the *individual*, so he asserted the unfortunately successful principle: “republic does not need to fold its people needs but the individual has to fold republic requirements”. Ciorănescu tried to justify this choice: “He (i.e. Plato) has worked in the name of a transcendent idea that had saved his thought and not the human material/issues he was treating on” (Ciorănescu, 1996, p.79).

Contra-utopianists will consider Plato as an inspiration source of the trend that disregarded human personality and value and reduced them to numbers (as Zamiatin argued) or to economical functions (Huxley, 1997). On the other hand, the Utopia transcendent ideas and values were repudiated, thanks to the easy with which they have made possible such barbarism.

One of the most systematic and founded criticisms of the “*utopian engineering*” belongs to K.R. Popper (1993): he made use of an implicated concept but which cannot be precisely deduced. Without explicitly recognize, he relates only to one of the Utopia paradigms – the militant one - , i.e. “the aspiration for bringing the Kingdom of heaven on Earth”. In his view, “under the name of *utopian engineering* is

lying a criticism that recommends to re-build up the society as a whole, i.e. large changes which would have difficult quantifiable consequences since our experience is limited” (Popper, 1993, p.187). Popper criticizes Utopia from the logical point of view, from the standpoint of possibility of achieving it and from the human standpoint as well, i.e. the consequences of the attempts to make possible the impossible.

Utopian approach – in his view – starts from the idea of a rational choice of the Ideal State as final political purpose/end/aim. Difficulties arise only now as:

- 1) It is infinitely difficult to declare in favor of an ideal society; hence the project is unable to assess;
- 2) The utopian trial to achieve the perfect State, using a project for a society as a whole, requires an authoritarian leadership of a social engineers group and is susceptible to head to dictatorship (in Popper and other authors view – the worst form of government);
- 3) Even the well-meaning dictator should have to face the following difficulties:
 - a) He cannot find out his decision is harmonizing with his good intentions (authoritarianism discourages criticism), so he will not find out the dissatisfactions generated by his own decisions
 - b) He can ignore even many reasonable dissatisfactions and criticisms;
- 4) The dictator’s succession problem: it is due to the vastness of such an enterprise which supposes achieving its goals in the course of several social engineers generations;
- 5) This approach would be successful or practically valuable only on the base of keeping untouched the initial project (the ideal) (Popper, 1993, pp. 184-185).

To conclude: such an engineering intends/attempts to plan carefully the whole project to transform/change the society even it does not have an adequate knowledge/know-how and a practical experience for such a type of planning.

There is another argument, worthy to be taken into account: utopian approach violates the scientific method principle (even in the case of using the “scientific” epithet – e.g. “scientific socialism”). Issues of uncertainty, due to the human factor which cannot be reduced to a “constant”, oblige the utopianist to control human factor through institutional measures/acts and to extend his program so as to include not only social change but also the human transformation.

The political problem/issue that arises is “organizing human impulses so people to direct their energy toward strategic points that are proper to straighten the development process in the desired direction” (Popper, 1996, p. 48). Utopianism has to recognize its program implies admitting failure even before the implementation of this program, since the utopianist has to add to the initial plan a

a project “to shape” individuals in order to fit their new society. Here is the anti-utopian argument involved: a human behavior science is as a science to evolve in the abstract, a necessary but completely discordant to reality one, hence Utopia cannot be based on a scientific ground. This removes with certainty any possibility to test the success or failure of the new society.

Utopian method is supposing an unrealistic attachment to a project based on many sacrifices as long as strong interests should depend on the experiment success and what will reduce even more its rational aspect and scientific value. Also, the idea of a very exact and detailed social calendar the project should be obliged to comply with is self-contradictory and that is why social, scientific, exact and detailed forecasts are impossible.

In Popper’s (1993) view, utopian approach could however become viable only by adopting Plato’s belief for an absolute and invariable *ideal* and that is reinforced by two suppositions: the existence of rational methods to determine very precisely what this ideal is; determination nor the best means for achieving this ideal. To accept such suppositions/agree with such suppositions (in fact unacceptable, since/as there is no rational method to determine the ultimate goal) means to provide value and credibility to the utopian methodology. This ultimate demonstration by *reduction ad absurdum* allows Popper to conclude that the utopian engineer opinions difference, predictable due to the above conditions, when reason is missing, is leading to violence instead of reason. Unfortunately, Popper did not want to assume utopian paradigms complexity and diversity (as structure and applicability): he operated with a single *paradigm*, i.e. he uses throughout his argumentations – as the hypothesis and conclusion – the bias that utopianism had been/has been a totalitarian planning form.

Another anti-utopian argument comes from the analogy between the actual/real society (having an inexhaustible complexity) and the utopian one (an unhistorical, fixed, static, ordered social system); this kind of argument works in the frame of emphasizing the achievable aspect of the utopian ideas and particularly recognizing the overwhelming influence of the socialist utopia. Mannheim (1979) adopted – from leftist positions – a kind of determinism for the utopian projects that aimed to the historical achievement; so he has caused a wave of hostility toward followers of utopianism.

In Toffler’s opinion (1983), utopianists were seduced by straight lines (a genuine geometrical symbol of the triumph of human goals): they conceive the future as a simple extension of the present time and forget the fact that propensities are not simply continuing and... nothing is changed. “The future flows, it is not frozen. It is built up as a result of the changing daily decisions and every phenomenon influence on all other” (Toffler, 1983, p. 181).

In an explosive diversity world, nobody can conceive (or simplify) all this complexity when one tries to find a solution, even for a particular problem of the social system, even more so in the case of an ideal society, where the general will

is to be represented. Utopias can no longer remain an attraction or a rule for the future.

Both the anti-utopianists and the theorists of utopian deconstructivism seem to be horrified in front of the modernity “pro-utopian turn”: they have converted their attitudes into a philosophical and political criticism of the utopia and produced many times unfounded statements with reference to the utopian thought. They did not have taken into account of the structure differences among various types of utopia: they have treated these as belonging to a *unique paradigm*; they have generally reduced utopia to one of its latest/ultimate expression – the communist or technocratic utopia.

Conclusions

Crossing some of the highest ideals and expectations of the humanity, constructive utopia made possible its overthrow and seizure by the *totalitarian utopia*. Utopian deconstruction has warned of such misinterpretations and has tried to oppose the devastating impact of the last century utopian experiences by a final overthrow of traditional utopian values: this is a valuable contribution to dismantling the modernity utopianism and to plotting points on the road to an unutopian society.

How important are these issues for us? I consider, like Russell Jacoby that: we can “speak to both worlds: for both the prosperous and the destitute utopian ideas are as dead as door nails. They are irrelevant for the affluent and immaterial for the hungry – and dangerous for many intellectuals, to boot. To the desperate, utopian ideas seem meaningless; to the successful, they lack urgency or import; to the thinking classes, they lead to a murderous totalitarianism. Yet something must be stated at the outset: the choice we have is not between reasonable proposal and an unreasonable utopianism. Utopian thinking does not undermine or discount real reforms. Indeed, it is almost the opposite: practical reforms depend on utopian dreaming – or at least utopian thinking drives incremental improvement” (Jacoby, 2005, p. 21).

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