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MARTIN DOLL

The Topoi of Utopia
A Topology of Political Tensions

ABSTRACT: Writing a positive account of utopias has always been a difficult and risky task. Utopias have always already been out of fashion and outside of time. Since 1989 at the latest, visions of utopia appear to have come to an end. Twenty years after Fukayama's 'end of history', this article re-assesses the potentially fruitful roles for utopia's out-of-timeness. Focusing on the critical potential of utopias through the concept of tension, it argues that utopian thought must be conceptualized through its tensile connections both to the status quo of a given society and to its possible futures.

THE TOPOI OF UTOPIA

A Topology of Political Tensions

Martin Doll

Writing a positive account of utopias is a difficult and risky task.[1] From the very inception of the term, 'utopia' constitutes a sort of insult, implying that its proponents adhere to visions of non-existent and unrealizable lands of milk and honey. Hence, utopias have always already been out of fashion and outside of time.[2] Since 1989 at the latest, visions of utopia appear to have come to an end. But twenty years after Fukayama's 'end of history', perhaps we can re-assess potentially fruitful roles for utopia's out-of-timeness. Through the concept of tension, I want to focus on the critical potential of utopias. Utopian thought, I will argue, must be conceptualized through its tensile connections both to the status quo of a given society and to its possible futures.[3]

Etymologically speaking, if one subtracts the prefix, *u-*, the root, *topia*, emphasizes the importance of a certain spatiality. This raises several questions: Where does utopia take place? Or, rather, what is the relation of the space of utopia to the already-existing social sphere? I would like to approach these questions through a typology of different topologies: *eutopos*, *outopos*, *heterotopos* and *atopos*. Topology can be understood in the double sense of the word, as standing both for 'the scientific study of a particular locality' and for 'the way in which constituent parts are interrelated or arranged'.[4] In addition, since *topos*

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2 Ulrich Dierse, 'Utopie', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, 13 vols (Basel: Schwabe, 1971-2007), XI (2001), cols. 510-24.

3 Ruth Levitas analytically differentiates among three approaches towards utopia: a) that which concerns the content, b) the form, and c) the function. My discussion here will follow the final focal point, concentrating on the functional aspect of utopias (cf. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (New York: Philip Allan, 1990), pp. 4-5).

4 'topology, n.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford University

means not only 'space' but also 'theme' or 'motif',[5] topology here relates both to a geographical and to a more abstract conceptual dimension. These topological accounts lead to three crucial perspectives. First, we can take a bird's eye view on the relationship between a utopia and the socio-political status quo. Second, by focussing on the social and political *topoi* of different utopias, we can observe the intersections and collisions between utopias and existing political orders. This will show the potential for political change present in different models of utopia. This implies, third, that the central spatial terms surrounding the concept of utopia must also be interpreted temporally.

1. *EUTOPOS*: TENSIONS BETWEEN PRESENT AND IDEAL

> The ancients called me Utopia [or Nowhere] because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato's *Republic*, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly I ought to be called by the name of Eutopia [or Happy Land].[6]

In these opening lines of his 1516 *Utopia*, Thomas More, the originator of the modern term utopia, has his island speak for itself. This self-characterization informs us from the very beginning of the double character of utopias. In Greek, ούτόπος (*outopos*) means no-place or nowhere and εύτόπος (*eutopos*) means good place. In this respect, the utopian places described are always implicitly directed against or even explicitly contrasted to something – or, rather, somewhere – else. This is the other side of utopia: an existing supposedly bad or unhappy place. More writes accordingly: '[T]here are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments'.[7] This shows the strong critical relation of utopias to actual socio-political conditions. To explain this relationship, Ruth Levitas argues in *The*

Press, 1989) <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50254559> [accessed 14 June 2009].

5 'topos, n.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50254566> [accessed 14 June 2009].

6 *The Yale Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. by E. Surtz and J. H. Hexter, 15 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963-97), IV: *Utopia* (1965), pp. 20-21.

7 Ibid., p. 68.

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Concept of Utopia that utopias exhibit the 'desires which those conditions generate and leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies'.[8]

By examining the tradition inaugurated by More, one can identify two major literary genres of utopia, a spatial and a temporal one. As already indicated, both have a certain temporal function because they attempt to mobilize political actions. Spatial utopias stage a situation that is ahead of its time by constructing ideal communities in inaccessible places, such as More's island, whereas temporal utopias describe an ideal future state of the same place. At the end of the eighteenth century, temporal utopias became increasingly prevalent.[9] Concerning the latter, the strained relation between utopias and the time of their reception is thus not only induced by a difference in characteristics (since the utopian mirror image is, at times, the total negation of the status quo) but also by a temporal difference concerning the same situation. The description of the qualities of a certain utopia is therefore not only an indirect attack on a given government, but also the articulation of a 'not-yet' (in Ernst Bloch's phrase), of something to be achieved in the future, e.g. an ideal commonwealth. This 'not-yet' should be read in light of the dual senses of the German phrase *noch nicht*, which not only stresses a 'future present', but also signals a 'lack in the present' – a 'still not'.[10] To give an example: there would be no need for More to call for contemporary governments to imitate the Commonwealth of Utopia if he already lived in the best of all possible worlds.

To go a step further, if one connects the concept of utopia to the idea of a social imaginary, one can understand the notion of utopias as non-places that nevertheless have a place. Given that a social imaginary – that is, how a society conceives of itself – guides the particular actions of the citizens, utopias situate themselves as a kind of counter-imaginary that may interfere with already existing regulative principles. Furthermore, if one locates utopias at the edges of the social imaginary, can they not then have the function of exposing the fact that the perceptible

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8 Levitas, p. 8. For a detailed account of the satirical aspects of More's *Utopia*, see: Irma Ned Stevens, 'Aesthetic Distance in the *Utopia*', *Moreana*, 43-44 (1974), pp. 13-24.

9 Cf. Richard Saage, *Utopieforschung: Eine Bilanz* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1997), p. 73.

10 Levitas, p. 87-88.

divisions of human life – its seemingly natural order – is contingent, and that it could also be governed or ruled differently? Utopias in the collective imaginary would then be two things at once: they are places where a possible better future is staged, and they are non-places because they offer a radical alternative to current socio-political conditions, an alternative that does not yet take place. Serving as a counterfactual sketch of social principles that are in radical opposition to the present rules – whether they concern the coexistence of individuals or certain structural power relations – utopias provide the insight that the social status quo does not necessarily have to be maintained but could also be changed.

As a consequence, even if utopias are a kind of nowhere, they are imaginary better futures that may lead the way. To use a term within the framework of tension, they exhibit still unrealized socio-political conditions and therefore create a certain suspense (*Spannung*) via the creation of a desire not yet fulfilled. In this respect, utopias bring into play a certain striving for change, an attempt to create a different society – a society, for example, that is built upon equality rather than on domination.

The tension between this present and the proposed utopian alternatives, this desire for change, this striving for a 'not-yet', might be understood as motivating historical action. It also leads to the crucial question of how to resolve these tensions, that is, how to arrive at the 'good place', in other words how and when to bridge the gap, the time-lag. But precisely the premise that socio-political change can be driven by utopian conceptions has become the target of a critique alleging that such a bridging is unrealizable, for it is primarily the transition or the qualitative distance between the *here and now* and the utopia that is called into question.

2. *OUTOPOS*: TENSIONS SURROUNDING THE NO-PLACE

Objections concerning the realizability of utopias may be divided into two groups: the first condemns utopias as mere reveries leading to escapism, and the second rejects them as dogmatic ideals totally divorced from actuality.

The first 'tradition', beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century, devalues utopias as fanciful depictions of the land of Cockaigne, leading to fantastic and unrealistic wishes or dreams that are imprac-

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ticable to fulfil and infeasible to sustain.[11] In this case, the relation between idea and actuality is stretched to the breaking point so that utopias lose any critical connection to the present.[12] Furthermore, they might even sustain the status quo. Indeed, if one takes the metaphor of the dream seriously, one could argue that a dream – an already fulfilled wish, according to Freud[13] – forecloses any drive or attempt to act, because it stands for something that is already true in the imagination. Utopias as dreams would then lead to escapism, therefore sustaining the current socio-political conditions by providing delightful but transient imaginary journeys to worlds of no-place, journeys which merely lead us to forget mundane woes.[14]

The second major objection to utopias is strongly connected to Marx's and Engels' writings (and to later Marxism) and consists of the accusation of dogmatism. This leads us in a slightly different direction because especially socialist utopias are criticized for their failure to account for the real forces and contradictions at work in the societies they attack. Marx writes in his famous letter to Ruge: '[W]e do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one'.[15] For Marx, utopias are completely detached from the actual socio-political conditions, whereas the abolishment of a current political system can only be accomplished starting from the very system itself. Utopias, in this respect, are condemned as *outopoi*, not only in a geographical but also in a conceptual, topical sense, that is, they are dismissed as abstract, idealistic 'no-wheres', totally disconnected from the present, therefore inciting no action and leading nowhere. Unlike the inventors of socialist utopias, Marx does

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11 Cf. Dierse, cols. 510-13.

12 John Crowne, for example, devalues imagination of any kind as 'a dream fit for nothing but Utopia' (John Crowne, *Sir Courtly Nice* [1685], in *The Dramatic Works* (Edinburgh and London: W. Patterson and H. Sotheran & Co, 1873–74), III, pp. 243-357 (p. 270)).

13 Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), pp. 147-57.

14 Against the assumption that one tends to dismiss the impact of dreams immediately, one should also recall that in the history of the twentieth-century civil rights movement 'I have a dream' by Martin Luther King was one of the most influential rhetorical manoeuvres.

15 Karl Marx, 'Letter to Ruge', in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress, 1975-2004), III (1975), pp. 133-45 (p. 142).

not want to confront the current system with some ready-made system. In other words, he rejects an idealistic approach in favour of a materialistic approach: '[W]e do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles'.[16] In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels writes accordingly about the utopists by emphasizing that their abstract ideals neglect the actual historical conditions and contradictions, which, according to Engels, can only be addressed scientifically:

> To all these [utopists], Socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and has only to be discovered to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power. And as an absolute truth is independent of time, space, and of the historical development of man, it is a mere accident when and where it is discovered.[17]

Whereas the socialist utopians are accused of imposing a dogmatic out-of-sync-normativity by promoting an *abstract* negation of the current socio-political order, Marx and Engels aim at making people aware of what is already latent.[18] They want to proceed from the material contradictions of the present that lead the way to concrete political actions. As Engels writes:

> [T]he final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in men's better insights into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of each particular epoch.[19]

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16 Ibid., p. 144.

17 Frederick Engels, 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', in *Marx/Engels*, XXIV (1989), pp. 281-334 (p. 297).

18 Engels writes: 'The Socialism of earlier days certainly criticized the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. But it could not explain them, and, therefore, could not get the mastery of them. It could only simply reject them as bad' (Engels, 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', p. 305). Another prominent allegation can be found in the *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels criticize the socialist Utopians for misconceiving the proletariat as a 'class without any historical initiative [*Selbsttätigkeit*]' and for putting 'the organisation of society especially contrived by these inventors' in place of 'the gradual, spontaneous class organisation of the proletariat' (*Marx/Engels*, VI (1976), pp. 476-519 (p. 515)).

19 Engels, 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', p. 306.

This leads to – as Marx calls it – 'ruthless criticism' of all that exists, 'ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be'.[20]

A certain normativity nevertheless remains in Marx's proposal to develop new principles out of those already contained in the existing world. Though his 'this-worldly' critique is primarily focused on current socio-political conditions, his perspective on the contradictions inherent in capitalist society is to a certain extent guided by the abstract, autonomous normative principle of freedom that is similarly a-historical, i.e. disconnected from the singularity of historical conditions and set up independently from the concrete materiality of the socio-political situation.[21]

In this context, it is remarkable that even Marx's own writings contain rare quasi-utopian depictions of a future without contradictions. In *The German Ideology*, for instance, he uses the epic or general present tense to describe a quasi-bucolic, classless society in which the division of labour will be abolished:

> [I]n communist society […] nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.[22]

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20 Marx, 'Letter to Ruge', p. 142.

21 See, for example, the *Communist Manifesto*: 'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the *free* development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (p. 506) and *The German Ideology*, where the communist society is decribed as 'the only society in which the genuine and *free* development of individuals ceases to be a mere phrase' (Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *Marx/Engels*, V (1975), pp. 19-539 (p. 439)), and finally the *Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood*, where Marx talks about 'the equality of the genus' and states that 'human law is the mode of existence of *freedom*' as opposed to animal law that 'is the mode of existence of unfreedom' (*Marx/Engels*, I, (1975), pp. 224-63 (p. 230)) (my emphases). The notion of 'this-worldliness' can be found in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *Marx/Engels*, V (1975), p. 3.

22 Marx, *German Ideology*, p. 47. Another utopian vision can be found in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: 'In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith

Although the early Marx himself returns to ideal constructions to illustrate his theses, his critique of utopian ideals remains a potent charge, one that may also be formulated in terms of the relationship between realized utopian projects and their societal contexts. I will turn to this concern in the context of an early nineteenth-century attempt to actualize utopia.

3. *HETEROTOPOS*: EX-TENSIONS OF EUTOPIAS

In order to investigate the relationship between actual utopian experiments and their anticipated expansions into an all-encompassing future condition, I will examine a particularly instructive utopian project, Robert Owen's 'New Harmony' settlement. In 1799, Owen bought shares of the 'New Lanark Twist Company', a cotton mill in New Lanark, Scotland, and remodelled it in the course of around twenty years into a kind of industrial community, following principles of co-operation and aiming at the amelioration of education and welfare.[23] Owen believed that a person's character is formed by the circumstances which surround him. As a result, he thought that if one created the right social and edu-

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also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; [...] after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly' (*Marx/Engels*, XXIV (1989), pp. 75-99 (p. 87; my emphasis)). In *What is to be done?* – a title tellingly borrowed from a utopian novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Lenin concedes the power of dreams by quoting a novel by Pisarev: '"The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well." Of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement. And the people most responsible for this are those who boast of their sober views, their "closeness" to the "concrete"' (Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960-70), V (1961), pp. 347-530 (pp. 509-10)).

23 The historical information about Owen's enterprises is taken from Richard Saage, *Utopische Profile*, 4 vols (Münster: Lit, 2001-06), III: *Industrielle Revolution und Technischer Staat im 19. Jahrhundert* (2002), pp. 35-58 and 348-56; Hermann Schempp, *Gemeinschaftssiedlungen auf religiöser und weltanschaulicher Grundlage* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969), pp. 80-91.

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Fig. 1. The School at 'New Lanark'.

cational circumstances, one could 'produce' right-minded and benevo-
lent people.[24] Over the years 'New Lanark' – promoted by Owen in his
theoretical essays as a solution to the problems of industrialization[25]
– developed into a much-admired model plant, which was visited by
many social reformers and even statesmen. Interestingly, it also became
a great commercial success. But while his enterprise was still based on
the relation 'employer – worker', the former being generous to the lat-
ter, Owen's attitude changed step-by-step from that of a liberal reform-
ist to one that was increasingly socialist.

Eventually, in 1825, Owen bought the Rappites' settlement,[26] 'Har-
mony', in the United States and invested 80% of his fortune, a hun-
dred and fifteen thousand dollars for the purchase and another million
to build up the community 'New Harmony'.[27] Whereas the previous

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24 Cf. Robert Owen, *The Book of the New Moral World* (Glasgow: H. Robinson
  & Co, 1837), pp. 1-52.

25 Cf. *A New View on Society* (1813) and *Report to the Committee of the Associa-
  tion for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor* (1817), *The Revo-
  lution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race* (1849).

26 The 'Rappites' are a sectarian group surrounding its founder George [Johann
  Georg] Rapp.

27 'New Harmony' was not the only case. Between 1825 and 1850, fifteen Owenite
  settlements were founded, between 1841 and 1858, forty Phalanges (Fourier)

Fig. 2. 'New Harmony'.

social mission in New Lanark was meant to be accomplished with the help of the government[28] or of political parties, his new experiment was insulary located within the society and maintained without the idea of governmental support. Moreover, whereas 'New Lanark' conformed to the interests of the government, 'New Harmony' was designed to break with the existing society. He intended it to constitute the perfect microstructure of the future society, that is, his experiment was meant to be only the beginning of a large-scale extension of his concepts from the insular realm of 'New Harmony' to the whole society.[29] A closer look at the constitution and development of this newly founded community might show how the tension within nineteenth-century society was conceptualized and how it might be understood or even criticized from today's perspective.

‘New Harmony’ began with the founding of a preliminary society, which attempted to shift 'from an ignorant, selfish system to an enlightened social system which shall gradually unite all interests into one, and

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and between 1843 and 1853, six Icarian communities (following the ideas of Cabet) (cf. Schempp, pp. 302-03).

28 Owen had several hearings at Parliament Committees, most famously the 1817 meeting with the Committee of the House of Commons on the Poor Law, cf. fn. 25.
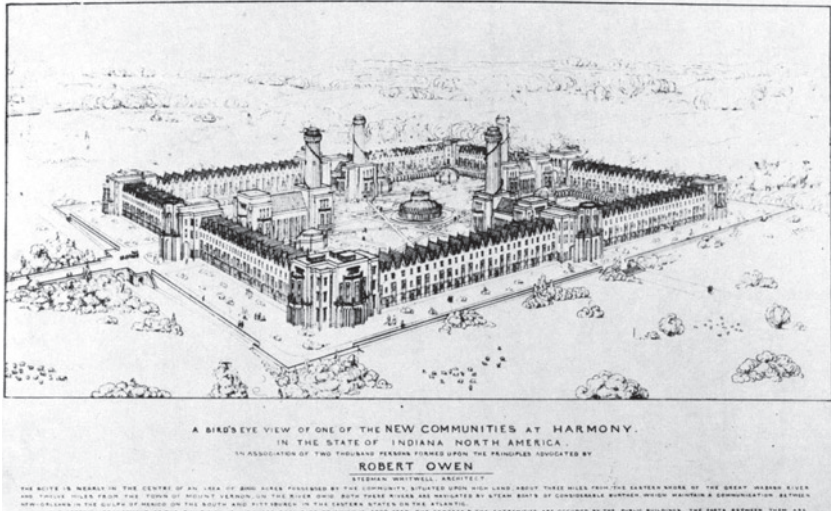
29 Cf. Saage, *Utopische Profile*, III, p. 38.

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A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF ONE OF THE NEW COMMUNITIES AT HARMONY,
IN THE STATE OF INDIANA NORTH AMERICA.
IN ASSOCIATION OF TWO THOUSAND PERSONS FORMED UPON THE PRINCIPLES ADVOCATED BY
ROBERT OWEN
STEDMANN WHITWELL ARCHITECT

Fig. 3. Stedmann Whitwell's Design for an Owenite Community.

remove all contest between individuals'.[30] Therefore, in the beginning, 'New Harmony' was declared the 'halfway house' between the old and the new, temporarily confronting its members with a certain degree of 'unavoidable pecuniary' but not 'personal inequality'.[31] Nevertheless, the preamble of the constitution, ratified on 1 May 1825, proclaims the high aims of the social enterprise: 'The society is instituted generally to promote the happiness of the world'.[32] To make this endeavour more feasible it was necessary to establish it on a smaller scale and split the ideal world into branches: 'The Preliminary Society is particularly formed to improve the character and conditions of its own members, and to prepare them to become associates in independent communities, having common property.'[33] By educating the members for their duty in multiple communities, 'New Harmony' was meant to be the nucleus

30 Robert Owen, 'Community Address (April 27, 1825)', *The New Harmony Gazette*, 1.1 (1 Oct 1825), pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

31 Ibid., p. 2. Even in this community of equality, some were 'more equal than others' or at least some were not allowed to join the society of equality. An article of the constitution reads: 'Persons of all ages and description, *exclusive of persons of color*, may become members of the Preliminary Society' (ibid., my emphasis).

32 'The Constitution of the Preliminary Society of New Harmony (May 1, 1825)', *The New Harmony Gazette*, 1.1 (1 Oct 1825), pp. 2-3 (p. 2).

33 Ibid.

of an ideal society on a larger scale. The aim was to disseminate the communitarian idea not by growth of individual communities but by replication of small and autonomous egalitarian settlements leading to a powerful global network. In 1826, Owen declared:

> [O]ur principles will, I trust, spread from Community to Community, from State to State, and from Continent to Continent, until this System and these *Truths* shall overshadow the whole earth, – shedding fragrance and abundance, intelligence and happiness, upon all the sons of men.[34]

On 5 February 1826, following the initial plan to turn the preliminary society into a full-fledged communist society, 'The New Harmony Community of Equality' was founded. The updated constitution included a list of principles. Significantly, the preamble offered a more modest conception of the original declaration's ambitious aim of transforming the entire world simply by overtly postponing 'New Harmony's' global influence to a later time:

> When a number of the human family associate on principles which *do not yet influence* the rest of the world, a due regard to the opinions of others requires a public declaration of the object of their association, of their principles, and of their intentions.[35]

Although the scope of 'New Harmony's' ambition was thus reduced, its objectives within the self-contained, equal society were even grander. Article 2 proclaims the complete abolishment of differences in social status: 'All the members of the Community shall be considered as one family, and no one shall be held in higher or lower estimation on account of occupation.'[36]

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34 Robert Owen, 'Oration, Containing a Declaration of Mental Independence (July 4, 1826)', *The New Harmony Gazette*, 1.42 (12 July 1826), pp. 329-32 (p. 332).

35 'Constitution of the New Harmony Community of Equality (Feb. 5, 1826)', *The New Harmony Gazette*, 1.21 (15 February 1826), pp. 161-63 (p. 161), my emphasis.

36 Ibid, p. 162. It might be added that the experiment was a social and economic failure and ended after two years of growing difficulties in March 1827. Many members left the community and the others partitioned the land to cultivate the fields on their own or to loan it to somebody else. In an address to the citizens of 'New Harmony', delivered on 6 May 1827, Owen analysed the breakdown and traced it back to the fact that 'there were too many opposing habits and feelings to permit such a mass [of members …] to act at once cordially together' (Rob-

The relation between Owen's micro-utopia and the status quo of the whole society may be characterized as a special and unique form of *heterotopos* in Foucault's terminology. *Heterotopos* literally means 'other place'. In medicine, it means the 'displacement of an organ or part of the body, such as a bone, from its normal position'.[37] In other words, it stands for something that emerges at the wrong place. It is not a pathological tissue (like cancer) but something that is dislocated, something that differs, something that is strange, but nevertheless has a place.[38] Foucault himself starts his elaboration on *heterotopias* by comparing them to utopias on the basis of their relation 'of direct or inverted analogy' to an existing society. In this respect, both 'places' 'have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect'.[39] Whereas utopias – understood as unreal spaces – 'present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down', *heterotopias* featuring the same set of relations are kinds of 'effectively enacted utopias' that 'can be located in reality'.[40] In this regard, Owen's 'New Harmony' might be described as an *heterotopos par excellence*.

If one takes a closer look at the sixth principle in Foucault's text in which he sheds light on the function of *heterotopias* in relation to 'spaces beyond', one finds a way of simultaneously appreciating and excoriating the tensions between insularly realized utopias and the status quo of the society to which they are correlated. On the one hand, and in accordance with my argument in section one, Foucault speaks of the function of creating 'a space of illusion that exposes every real

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ert Owen, 'Address (May 6, 1827)', *The New Harmony Gazette*, 2.32 (9 May 1827), pp. 254-55 (p. 254)). Later, between 1836 and 1844, Owen published a revised and updated version of his utopian ideas, based on his experiences with the 'New Harmony' project in *The Book of the New Moral World* (cf. Saage, *Utopische Profile*, III, p. 355; Schempp, pp. 40 and 91).

37 'heterotopia', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine* (Oxford University Press, 2007) <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t161.e3165> [accessed: 14 June 2009].

38 Cf. María do Mar Castro Varela, *Unzeitgemäße Utopien: Migrantinnen zwischen Selbsterfindung und gelehrter Hoffnung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), p. 58.

39 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' [1967], *diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 22-27 (p. 24).

40 Ibid.

space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory', thereby rendering the given social situation contingent, subject to change.[41] On the other hand, he speaks about a contrary function of *heterotopia*, its role as 'another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled'.[42] This latter type functions as a compensation, according to Foucault. This compensatory effect, however, implies a neutralization of the critical potential of utopias. For, if the *heterotopos* simply neutralizes opposing forces, it loses its characteristic relation of tension with regard to the status quo and becomes a merely insular realization of human perfection. Thus, the *heterotopos*, counterbalancing the contradictions, desires, and deficiencies of a given social situation, would itself annihilate any productive tension, eventually leading to a stable equilibrium. Against this background, one might doubt that Owen's colony of equality – even if the actual community had not fallen apart for internal reasons – would have had a global emancipatory effect, overshadowing the whole earth, shedding happiness upon the whole of mankind. It seems likely that it would rather have served only as an 'off place', as a space set off or beside the world, preventing people from acting, from changing the rules of the whole society. Even though Owen's 'New Harmony' actually existed, all political force was removed from it. With this, we see perhaps an indirect confirmation of Marx's claim that because utopias lack all critical connection to the world, they can never change it: rather than societal contradictions serving as the engine of change, they are instead given their own spaces and can thus continue unchanged.

Keeping this objection in mind, one could ask how utopias should be conceptualized in order to strengthen their positive effects and to avoid the pitfalls of 'utopian' thinking: the charge that they simply construct a perfect but insular compensatory space, be it an Owenite heterotopic settlement or an escapist dream. Brecht effectively provides a counter-model to the problem we have identified with using *heterotopoi* and *outopoi* to initiate political action. Instead of functioning as *heterotopoi* or mere *outopoi*, utopias can be regarded as *atopoi* containing contradictions which wait, full of suspense, for their unfolding.

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41 Ibid., p. 27.
42 Ibid.

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Atopos – ατόπος, in Greek – means 'out-of-place', something that has a place but is inappropriate, uncommon, unbefitting, injurious, amiss, or wicked. In medicine, *atopy* stands for a 'form of allergy', a certain 'hypersensitivity to allergens', which may lead to an overreaction.[43]

In order to show the political potential of utopias – understood here as impracticable, improper, as *non-topical* – I would like to refer to a concept of utopia that develops out of a reflection upon the specific potential of one technical medium, namely out of Bertolt Brecht's 'Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat' ('The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication') from 1932. As is well-known, Brecht argues that radio must be changed from a medium of entertainment and top-down distribution of information into a medium of communication, a medium that makes exchange possible. In particular radio must become a medium to which everybody can contribute, a medium that should let the listener receive as well as transmit, 'speak as well as hear', and bring the participant 'into a relationship instead of isolating him'.[44] This argument has been influential for all types of techno-optimists – from certain Marxist revolutionaries to cheerleaders for neoliberalism – up to the present day. But what often remains unacknowledged is that Brecht argues on the basis of a utopistic model:

> [Radio] alone can organize the important talks between branches and consumers on the standardization of objects of use [*Gebrauchsgegenstände*], debates on the increases in the price of bread, the disputes of local authorities. Should you consider that as utopian, then you should reflect upon why it is utopian.[45]

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43 'atopy', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine* <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t161.e648> [accessed: 14 June 2009].

44 Bertolt Brecht, 'The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and transl. by John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), pp. 51-53 (p. 51).

45 Remarkably, this passage is missing in the published English translation. I have translated it directly from Bertolt Brecht, 'Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat', in *Werke: Große kommentierte Frankfurter und Berliner Ausgabe*, 30 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988-98), XXI: *Schriften, I. Schriften 1914-1933*, ed. by Werner Hecht and others (1992), pp. 552-57 (p. 554).

The widely-spread pejorative use of 'utopian' in the sense of impossible is strategically deployed here to devalue the current state of society. Radio – a discovery that had 'not been called for' – is described as a technology that was more advanced than society, which was thus not capable of accepting it. Hence, the ready-for-use apparatus of communication only appears utopistic against the background of the current socio-political order. Brecht argues that the proper application of radio has utopian potential:

> This is an innovation, a suggestion that seems utopian and that I myself admit to be utopian. When I say that the radio or the theatre 'could' do so-and-so I am aware that these vast institutions cannot do all they 'could', and not even all they want. But it is not at all our job to renovate ideological institutions on the basis of the existing social order by means of innovations. Instead our innovations must force them to surrender that basis. So: For innovations, against renovation! […] Impracticable in the current social order, practicable in another one, these suggestions – which, after all, only form the natural consequence of technical development – serve for the propagation and formation of this *other* order.[46]

Brecht rejects reforms that would immanently derive a future from the present and instead embraces the 'natural consequence of technological development'. Though this proposal is informed by a certain media determinism and therefore highly questionable, one can appreciate – even without subscribing to his necessitarianism – Brecht's manoeuvre by which he attributes to radio the capability to change reality.[47] Brecht's collaborative radio practice only seems to be utopian – in the sense of being an *atopos*, impractible, inappropriate or unbefitting – when seen from within the current socio-political order. In other and more abstract terms, one has two possibilities to think utopias. On the one hand, one can keep one's own framework of understanding and dis-

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46 Ibid., pp. 52-53. The last part is once again omitted in the English version of the text. See: Brecht, 'Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat', p. 557.

47 If one looks at early radio history in Germany, one is led to the suspicion that the state authorities actually feared the very consequence Brecht embraced. At an early stage, radio was an amateur technology practiced by a circle of enthusiasts. This movement, though aiming at self-determination, was soon absorbed by the state authorities and eventually any independent use of radio was strictly forbidden by law. This institutionalization finally prepared the perfect substructure for the Nazi propaganda machine (cf. Winfried B. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland* (Frankfurt a.M.: Josef Knecht, 1965), pp. 45-72).

miss them as out-of-place, impossible or improper. On the other hand, if one focuses on precisely this atopic status of utopias, one sees that they disturb the background itself, call it into question, render it inappropriate by showing that the immanent contradictions of the logic of the social order cannot be resolved *within* the current system. Thus, we can reverse the perspective, starting from the atopia and regarding the social status quo as the discordant part: what was formerly dismissed within the system created by present conditions – the supposedly unthinkable and improbable – instead sets up an arena of conflict. It renders visible the reasons for a given society to foreclose certain alternatives. This therefore serves as an impetus to go beyond the current limits of what is feasible. The very impracticability of utopia provides a negative foil for radical change, allowing the formerly impracticable to become practicable.

5. A *TOPOS* ALWAYS TO COME

One final hitherto unmentioned and important objection has to be considered here: as designs for an all-encompassing, single, closed, and perfect society, utopias run the risk of establishing a complete, final unchanging, and total structure. Adhering to this demand would automatically lead to totalitarian claims. To counter this objection, I would like to draw on Castro Varela's argumentation and introduce the idea of the utopian fragment.[48] By neglecting utopias' character as self-contained perfect worlds and focusing instead on their discordant aspects, one might save their critical impact, rather than wiping them away entirely with the mere accusation of totalitarianism.[49] This would lead

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48 Castro Varela, p. 24.

49 In *Utopics: Spatial Play*, Louis Marin develops a highly interesting perspective for looking at utopias. He stresses that utopian microworlds do not have to be analysed in terms of perfect totality but, rather, in terms of the contradictions they set forth. In this respect, Marin states that utopian practice, understood as a figurative mode of discourse, is able to show the social contradictions at a certain historical moment that were not yet conceptually formulizable by social theory (Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 10); on Marin, see also: Fredric Jameson, 'Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse', *Diacritics*, 7.2 (1977), pp. 2-21 (esp. pp. 15- 21).

to a more flexible approach that is far from sticking to any stable ideal, thus focussing on partial aspects and their critical effects while keeping the danger of totalitarianism in check.

Tineke M. Willemson, a contemporary theorist of gender and politics, in fact sees a certain historical change in concepts of utopias, claiming that even the utopians themselves have already taken this problem into account:

> [U]topian thinking has adapted to modern times in that indeed the more recent utopias are often not grand narratives; they do not describe societies pretending to be *the* universal ideal society for *everyone*. Instead most modern utopias describe more limited, local ideals, or they describe societies in which just one aspect is changed and then study the consequences.[50]

It follows from this that utopias exist in interrelation with their particular 'heres' and 'nows'. It is out of the negation of an imperfect 'here and now' that a good or happy place may be conceived.

But to do so, there must be some criteria for judgment. Hence, ideal commonwealths are measured according to how freedom, justice and equality are realized in a specific situation. In this respect, utopian fragments can be understood as imaginings that stage particular counter-discourses by – as More puts it – exhibiting 'laws of surpassing excellence' opposed to those of the existing government. But one has to bear in mind that the solution cannot consist in establishing universal laws once and for all. Therefore the legitimacy of particular societal principles has to be permanently called into question or put up for discussion. In this regard, utopias – including their critical impact – are bound to an index of time, because they are legitimate only for a certain singular historical condition.

In order to make this conception of utopias politically effective, I shall turn to the Derridaean idea of the 'democracy to come', a democracy that is always to come, that 'will never exist, in the sense of a present existence'.[51] Even if Derrida overtly rejects the idea of utopia

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50 Tineke M. Willemsen, 'Feminism and Utopias: An Introduction', in *Feminist Utopias in a Postmodern Era*, ed. by Alkeline van Leening, Marie Bekkerl, and Ine Vanwesenbeeck (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1997), pp. 1-10 (p. 7).

51 Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. by P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 86.

as a demobilizing 'dream' leading to passivity and resignation,[52] one might bring his concept of an ever-perfectible democracy into fruitful connection with a broader understanding of utopia. To accomplish this, the fragmentary status of utopias must be emphatically retained, for the democracy to come is a democracy that is always out-of-itself and does not allow one to follow a perfect sketch or even a predictable, predetermined future. In this respect, utopian fragments – 'no places' in perpetuity – play with a certain urgency of particular actions: Within the conceptual framework of democracy-to-come, these fragments, in their respective (historical) singularity, would then generate resistance against the pseudo-evidence of the current situation by denying that the future is just a prolongation of the present, by liberating political practice from a so-called realism that prevents action and decision. But utopias might only function like that if they are not understood as immutable blueprints of the future. They would not establish a fixed set of eternal laws and rules or even regulative principles functioning as an universalist programme and operating in an a-historical, uniform, or quasi-mechanical manner. Instead, utopias would have to retain a certain fragmentary openness towards the future, abandoning the possibility of any pregiven, static, ideal future. As a result, they would provide an agenda of futurity by inventing *singular* rules, toying and experimenting with the applicability of the norms of freedom, justice and equality in imaginary field tests. They may thereby establish realms in which ideals are provisionally put into practice and in which rules are in permanent tension with existing reality. Hence, constant negotiations between utopian conceptions and the surrounding society bring to light the perfectibility of concrete historical situations. Thus, the impossibility of utopia bears a certain infinitesimal possibility within itself by providing a kind of *tout autre*, something always improper. John D. Caputo concisely describes Derrida's concept of the *tout autre*:

> But beyond […] settling in and acculturating […], the *tout autre* for Derrida is always […] structurally outside, out of place, out of power, im-possible, to-come. If the *tout autre* ever won the revolution, if the Messiah ever actually showed up, if you ever thought that justice has come – that would ruin everything.[53]

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52 Jacques Derrida, 'Ich mißtraue der Utopie', *Die ZEIT*, 11 (5 March 1998), p. 47-49.
53 John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 74.

This concept of a *tout autre* can be interpreted as a specific form of the powerful atopic status of utopia already mentioned. Utopias must escape the three dangers of, first, leading to a far too 'eutopian' escapism, second, constituting 'outopoi' totally divorced from the present, and, finally, functioning as 'heterotopic' compensation. All three risks would render utopias incapable of inspiring any effective action. Thus, utopias must always be incomplete, remain critically connected to the present situation and stand in relations of tension. To do so, they have to be permanently re-invented, re-actualized and re-interpreted, and can never be declared completely accomplished. The best utopia in this respect would be one in which utopianism itself has a place.

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