

The Space Between What Is and What Wants to Be

The Abandoned Practice of Utopian Thinking

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“The essential function of Utopia is a critique of what is present.”
— Ernst Bloch to Theodor Adorno¹

I. ABANDONED PRACTICES

Why are practices abandoned? “Abandoned” connotes something that has been left behind and whose use is over. But “abandon” has another meaning, that of indulging in some uninhibited action, giving oneself over completely to something, perhaps only to find later that one has lost interest or that the practice is no longer respected or understood. However enamored we may be with an action, at some point, in response to fashion or utility, we move on. To what degree this shift occurs consciously or deliberately is a matter for discussion, one that concerns the dubious term “progress” and the extent to which we are in control of the evolution of our own species—or even want to be.

In the arena of science, often one “discovery” supersedes an earlier one, which causes a way of seeing or understanding to be abandoned. Hard science attempts to “prove” the correctness of one theorem over another. “Mistaken” ideas are replaced, and then everyone’s understanding should also be transformed. But even in science the acceptance of so-called objective proof can take a while to shift consciousness. Copernicus, as we know, advanced a heliocentric cosmology that the earth revolves around the sun, which transformed the entire understanding of the world and our position in it. But it took one hundred years for this thinking to take hold. The earth either revolves around the sun, or the sun revolves around the earth. Both concepts cannot coexist and be understood as “truth” for very long. Observation, aided by prosthetics, eventually proves one theorem over another, and the matter is settled, at least for rational thinkers.

In the cultural arena, the evolution of ideas and practices is much less decisive. Hand-drawn animation continues even though computer-generated animation is now ubiquitous. There is even computer-generated animation that simulates hand-drawn animation—an electronic facsimile of the “real thing.” Sometimes, when new practices come into use, nostalgia for the past arises. Embroidery, needlepoint, and knitting, perceived as less-than-serious endeavors for some time, have returned as “extreme craft” and have gained a niche in the visual art world. Forms may be absent from us individually, but they may not be absent from the species altogether. For example, landscape painting, portraiture, and traditional theatre have not been replaced by computer-generated imagery and performance art. The more classical forms are now merely accompanied by the contemporary remixes and re-imaginings of the older practices.

II. UTOPIAN THINKING

When Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign with the concept of “Hope” some years ago, it seemed a strangely old-fashioned word and an even more outdated idea, yet it caught on. Hope, like faith and charity (words and even female names from another time), had been long lost to the coolness of contemporary angst and cynicism. The unexpected title of Obama’s book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, recognized the attitude of thinking that such a revival implied. But the word did not seep into the collective consciousness until his national campaign began. Soon many people were wearing campaign buttons with an image of Obama and the word “Hope” printed large underneath.

Hope is both a positive expectation and a propelling anxiety that attempts to move people into the future. It is also an emotion that can cause ambivalence and is somewhat daring, because built into its aspiration is the very clear sense that the hoped-for something may or may not materialize. To *not* hope, however, is to close down possibility. For many, hope is a religious concept—hope that there is a God that will help you. The opposite of hope—despair, or the “complete absence of hope,” as defined by the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*—is often called a sin because it implies that one does not believe in God or that one doubts God’s ability to save us from death or from ourselves.

Hope is also a spatial concept connected to the future. To hope for what does not yet exist—or, as Ernst Bloch calls it, the “not-yet-conscious”—one must use one’s imagination.² To hope for “change,” another key concept that Obama evoked, one must imagine a transformation of the present that can affect the projection of the future. In his lecture “Can Hope Be Disappointed?,” Bloch noted that Hercules said, “Whoever does not hope for the unhoped-for will not find it.”³ An

enormous retro-chic clothing billboard at the New York intersection of Houston and Broadway once cleverly announced, “The Future is Back.” In response we need to ask, where did it go before it returned?

III. THE UNFASHIONABLE PROJECT OF IMAGINING THE FUTURE

For some time in the West, it has been generally understood that all hopes for a Marxist, socialist, or other alternative economic and political future have been obliterated. Even intellectuals no longer try to envision new organizations of society that are anything other than variations on known forms of capitalism. Societies that once imagined a more egalitarian state are now enamored with advanced capitalism and accept its inherent inequities, including its proffered illusion of infinite choice available to all through commodities. And those countries, like China, that had once professed commitment to such egalitarian values have long since shown their tolerance for inequity and the abuse of civil liberties. But because China is an enormous economy, everyone is anxious to gain access to its markets, despite its prevailing political ideology. In addition, since the events of September 11, 2001, and the results of the Bush Administration’s alarming policies to strengthen “national security,” many people around the world no longer project onto the United States an image of a welcoming democratic society. To them, the country has become distrustful of foreigners and exclusionary. For many, hope—and its companion concept, utopia—have lost a geopolitical location.

These conditions have made it very unfashionable even to try to imagine a different future. And so the practice of what we might call “utopian thinking”—what Ernst Bloch calls “anticipatory illumination”—seems to have been abandoned.⁴

The word “utopia” is derived from two Greek words: *utopos*, which means “good place,” and *outopos*, which means “no place”—a nonexistent space that is imaged into consciousness by an expectation of what the future could be. Utopian thinking can be nostalgic, a looking back in order to move forward; a sense that in order to hypothesize the idealized future, one has to imagine an ideal past, the lost Eden or Atlantis, an imaginary conflation of time and place when the species cohabitated in an idyllic condition. That Golden Age, projected by Hesiod and others, was based on a bucolic representation of enough for all and a subsequent absence of greed, vying for power, and corruption.

Many of the great thinkers and leaders of the twentieth century also believed in the potential for humans to coexist in an ideal state. Marx was convinced that there would be progress toward equality as the inequitable system of capitalism, and the state that supported it, would inevitably collapse. Gandhi believed that

within consciousness humans could achieve a personal balance, an equilibrium that would positively affect the social sphere. For his part, Oscar Wilde wrote, "Progress is the realization of utopias."⁵

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a great deal of utopian writing—positive speculation that, in the twentieth century, became dystopian writing, like that of H. G. Wells, George Orwell, and others. Many would agree that it is much easier, and perhaps even more fun, to write about evil than to write about good; more dramatic to write about darkness than light; more compelling to read Milton's *Paradise Lost* than *Paradise Regained*, or Dante's *Inferno* rather than his *Paradiso*; to create images of hell rather than of heaven; or, for that matter, to relish the imagined evil of Satan rather than the goodness of Christ. In a similar way, perhaps it is much more engaging to talk about and represent war and its tragedies than peace and its equilibrium. So maybe it is not too surprising that one truly compelling historic dialogue focused on the subject of peace, a conversation between Einstein and Freud called *Warum Krieg?* (*Why War?*), has been all but forgotten.

Einstein's participation in the League of Nations and in its International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation offered him the possibility of inviting a person of his choice to a frank exchange of views on any problem of his choice. Given world events in the years 1931–1932 and the rise of Hitler, Einstein's topic of choice should come as no surprise. Einstein posited this problem: "Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?"⁶ Because he felt his understanding of the world through physics was limited, and because he knew the motivations for war were complex, Einstein invited Freud, the recognized master of the "dark places of human will and feeling," to respond. He asked Freud this question: "Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness?" In his letter to Freud, Einstein explained, "Here I am thinking by no means only of the so-called uncultured masses. Experience proves that it is rather the so-called 'Intelligentzia' [sic] that is more apt to yield to these disastrous collective suggestions."⁷

The result was a profound exchange that received little attention. By the time the German edition was published in 1933, Hitler, who was to drive both men into exile, was in power, and the inevitability of war and the imminent need for these Jewish intellectuals to flee their homelands were already on the horizon. Only two thousand copies of *Warum Krieg?* were printed in German and English. So an exchange that might have received a grand reception and generated further dialogue was lost to the precipitous historical moment.

Freud ended his contribution by encouraging more discussions in the future, expressing both his fear of war's inevitability and his certainty that all that "fosters the growth of civilization" works against war. It is an interesting statement, given the extraordinary level of cultural development of Germany in the 1930s and the shocking fascination with the Third Reich of many exceedingly well-educated Europeans, such as Heidegger. But Freud believed in the potential evolution of the species, recognizing that the desire for war results from a primitive, i.e., developmentally early, and collectively shared destructive impulse that can only be sublimated by civilization.

Recognizing, however, that war persists and is often perceived as the only solution to national conflict, Freud added:

The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life, to the dictatorship of reason . . . But in all probability that is a Utopian expectation.⁸

If one were even to broach the subject of peace at this time, it would *still* be considered naïve, idealistic, foolish, or, dare we say, a hopelessly "utopian expectation"—a topic for dreamers who insist on believing that the species *is* capable of consciously determining its own future.

IV. WILHELM REICH

Wilhelm Reich, a former student of Freud's, was a utopian thinker of an entirely different order. While Freud and others attempted to appease the Nazis by choosing a non-Jew to head the Psychoanalytic Association (fearful they would be dissolved if they did not), Reich spoke out against Hitler and was thrown out of Freud's inner circle as a result. In books such as *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and *The Murder of Christ*, Reich made a direct connection between individual repression, group repression, group responses to repression, war, and fascism. Here he attempted the psychoanalysis of civilization itself—a practice that Freud began in *Civilization and its Discontents*—as if group psychology mirrored individual psychology and understanding society's collective motivations might allow us to hope for a happier future. Reich believed that humanity could be transformed through the use of orgone energy (universal life force). But "orgonomy," the study of such energy, got him into trouble.

Through the creation of Orgone Accumulators—best represented by the famous orgone box—Reich hoped to harness the energy that he believed existed in the universe and use it to liberate energy blocked in the body. He perfected his understanding of the relationship of this energy to the orgasm. But by locating

his theories in the body and imagining sexual energy as a key to such liberation, Reich was an easy target for his colleagues and ultimately for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

For Reich, as for Freud, repression was the source of individual and collective unhappiness. But Reich took the notion of the energy of repression and its obverse, the instinct of the libido, quite literally, believing that blockages in the body thwarted the free flow of energy and thereby caused illness or at least inhibited the ability to heal. Libidinal energy and orgone energy could remove these obstructions, he believed. Although engaged in extensive and durational cancer research, Reich never claimed that his devices could cure serious illnesses. But he did work with very ill patients in unorthodox ways, which led to his being hounded by the authorities and ultimately imprisoned.

Reich went farther and wider than his contemporaries, even inventing a machine that appeared to cause rain—a wild device called a Cloudbuster that seemed able to do for the inhibited skies what the orgone box could do for the individual body. It is reported that rain did fall on drought-ridden Arizona after Reich hooked up his machine. Inspired by this elaborate contraption, British singer Kate Bush wrote a song called “Cloudbusting.” The MTV video shows the Cloudbuster inexplicably being pushed up a hill by Kate Bush and Donald Sutherland, not unlike the steamship in the film *Fitzcarraldo*.

So confident was Reich in his understanding of orgone energy that he even enlisted Einstein to test the ability of the orgone box to generate heat. Einstein could find no measurable results. Reich’s harassment and martyrdom in prison was also related to the prudish 1950s cultural environment and the fear of sexuality that accompanied the Austrian-Jewish exile, who mistakenly believed that the experimentation of new ideas would be welcomed in the United States. His assumption, of course, proved naïve and even utopian. Tons of his own books were incinerated in New York in 1956, an occurrence not unlike the raiding and burning of Freud’s books in Vienna in 1933. Reich died in prison in 1957.

V. THE PRACTICE OF THINKING PEACE AND THE PRACTICE OF MAKING ART

The use of the Orgone Accumulator became both a banned and an abandoned practice. Not one of Reich’s intellectual peers stood behind him when his work was condemned and he was imprisoned. Yet now it is clear how much of what we call “New Age”—any attempt to understand the relationship between mind and body energies—is constructed on similar notions. Many medical practitioners, especially those who incorporate Eastern philosophy into Western medical

practice, would agree that there is a relationship between holding emotions in the body—i.e., repression and sublimation—and what Reich called blockages and the illnesses that can result from them.

Perhaps the practice of imagining the evolution of the species—not only in its biological sense but in its emotional, psychological, and spiritual sense—is the key to creating a world without war. As impossibly idealistic as it seems, the truth about utopian thinking is that it only exists if one is capable of aligning “one’s beliefs about what is desirable with their [*sic*] perceptions of what is possible.”⁹ If one thinks that what exists is inevitable, then there *is* no space to create the imaginary, no place for utopian thought. And, it must be said, no place for art.

Art creates utopian space—an “interpretation of that-which-is in terms of that-which-is-not,” as Herbert Marcuse might say.¹⁰ Every act of creation is a purposeful negation, an engagement in an organization of the world as the artist or artists would want it to be. Even if the content is somehow horrific, the fact that it could be imagined and given coordinates—a latitude and longitude externalized by the imagination—means that the particularity of this seeing has been brought into being by an individual or collective vision and given form to communicate that vision to a public. This simple act of making, or even believing that a unique interpretation of the world can occur through the act of externalizing an interior vision, is utopian. And this desire to give form to what Ernst Bloch might call “the not-yet-conscious” reveals a key imperative of utopian thought, to always “anticipate” and “illuminate” what might become possible within a societal situation.

Utopia always implies a change in the communal way of organizing and understanding the world. It is never just a re-presentation of a personal desire. Art allows for an individual vision to become communal by giving it narrative, shape, color, texture, complexity, sound, movement, or whatever elements are needed to translate its intention to others. Such a belief assumes the utility of art-making to demonstrate that the material world begins in the incorporeal, in ideas. We must generate new organizations of ideas, so the world will continue to progress and there will be a future.

This notion of dreaming the world into being is an ontogenic, archaic, wish-fulfilling practice, and it’s also a revolutionary one. The desire to present an individual transformation of the material world that also posits a collective vision of reality, while standing in juxtaposition to the dominant collective will, is an undisputedly naïve, utopian practice. But it is one that we must refuse to abandon if the species is to survive.

NOTES

1. Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 12.
2. Ernst Bloch, "The Conscious and Known Activity within the Not-Yet-Conscious, the Utopian Function," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, 103.
3. Qtd. in Jack Zipes, "Introduction: Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination," in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, xxv. I am indebted to Zipes's ingenious interpretation of Bloch's theories.
4. *Ibid.*, xx.
5. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, Linda Dowling, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 141.
6. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII*, James Strachey, trans. and ed. (London: Vintage Books, 1932), 199.
7. *Ibid.*, 201.
8. *Ibid.*, 213
9. Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), 285.
10. Alain Martineau, *Herbert Marcuse's Utopia* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1986), 35.

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