
Although volumes four and five are already in print, *The Concept of Utopia* by renowned utopian scholar and sociologist Ruth Levitas is volume three in what will be at least a seven-book series produced by the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick. Like the fourth and fifth volumes, *Utopianism and Marxism* and *The Politics of Utopia*, this publication is a reissue, the book originally having debuted in 1990 from Philip Alan, a division of Simon and Schuster International. Of the three Ralahine republications, *The Concept of Utopia* has the most recent genesis, appearing the same year as Mrs. Thatcher bowed out and a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the preface to the Ralahine release, Professor Levitas describes the original publication date as “inauspicious”; she goes on to write that, “Politically, both utopianism and Marxism were ‘over’” (ix). Tom Moylan and his colleagues at Ralahine have once again enriched utopian scholarship by bringing this “last hurrah” volume out in the open.

In an introduction and eight chapters, Levitas rehearses the history of the critical study of and attempts to define utopia from the nineteenth century to this present volume. Hence, the book is on the whole chronological. However, with razor-sharp precision, she enriches the overall sense of chronology by weaving throughout her chapters a systematic treatment of the major utopian lineages—liberal-humanistic and socialist—and of the various approaches to defining the utopian project. Arguing that utopian studies is burdened not only by the common association of utopianism with the impossible but also by a failure of scholars to precisely define “utopian,” the author tells us that most definitions have included “content, form and function” (4), with function the principal concern of Marx and his interpreters.

Chapter 1 surveys a series of critical studies of utopia from Moritz Kaufman’s *Utopias* (1873) to A. L. Morton’s *The English Utopia* and Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick’s *The Quest for Utopia*, both published in 1952. From chapter 2 on, the book makes a sharp left as Levitas focuses on the socialist tradition in which function, or use value, trumps form. She demonstrates succinctly her preference for the primacy of the socialist efforts with the last sentence of the first chapter: “If hitherto utopists have largely sought to understand the world, the point, for Marxists, is to change it” (40).

Chapters 2 through 5 focus on utopia as seen by diverse socialist thinkers for whom the relationship between utopia and socialism is often problematic. Chapter 3, “Castles in the Air: Marx, Engels and Utopian Socialism,” is a methodical and illuminating study of Marx’s and Engels’s love-hate relationship with utopian socialism. The crux of her argument is that Marx’s and
Engels’s seeming anti-utopianism “is not an objection to speculation about the future, but a difference of view about the process of transformation” (64). For the scientific socialists, only revolution and not evolution is the path to a utopian future. Although one can piece together—as Levitas does—a sketchy view of the post-revolutionary socialist utopia-in-progress à la Marx and Engels, there is no systematic description in their writings, the revolution being dependent on a new paradigm for proletarian consciousness that cannot be fully grasped until capitalism is dead. This lack of specificity has haunted Marxist thinkers and doers ever since, primarily because the lack of specific guidelines allows anti-socialists to cite the USSR and Stalinism as the inevitable result of socialist revolution.

Having defined the Marxist conundrum, Levitas goes on to study how utopists adapted to Marxism’s vagueness about the future. Chapter 3 discusses the work of Georges Sorel and Karl Mannheim. After relating some details of Sorel’s idiosyncratic political history, Levitas introduces his preference for transformative social mythology, especially the powerful myth of the general strike, over utopian specificity. Sorel, who later took a shine to fascism, emphasized the emotionally driven or cathartic transformation of society. She goes on to discuss in detail the salient characteristics of Mannheim’s work, concluding that he favors reason over emotion but that his reasoning is not all that clear to begin with.

Ernst Bloch, William Morris, and Herbert Marcuse each get their own chapter. Bloch seems to gain importance each year as reserves of hope wane in the hearts and minds of more and more people. Levitas discusses his key concept, the Not Yet, his identification of the hoped-for future as the Kingdom of God, as well as his utopian typology. Bloch is one of the rare breed who voluntarily escaped to East Germany. After six years or so, however, he was fired from his university job and later decided not to return to the DDR while on holiday as the Berlin Wall was being constructed. Levitas fully appreciates the extent to which Bloch tried to restore humanity to the Marxist project. (Ask Alexander Dubček how that worked out for him.)

Levitas’s recuperation of Morris rests on examining his complete oeuvre and not just News from Nowhere. Like Bloch, Morris humanizes utopia. News from Nowhere critiques the mechanistic orientation of Butler’s Looking Backward. A century before The Concept of Utopia was written, Morris was responding to Marxism’s mistrust of utopia by attempting to synthesize the key differences between scientific socialism and utopia. We are told that “The problem of Marxism versus utopia manifests as a problem of Utilitarianism versus Romanticism, knowledge versus desire, thought versus feeling” (150). Bloch, Morris, and Marcuse are on the right side of each “versus.” The chapter featuring Marcuse, a major American New Left icon of decades past, emphasizes his humanity and his belief that the transformation to a new society
requires that people reassess and realign their needs, determining which are real and which are false. Without this kind of reflection and reevaluation, we are ever-dissatisfied consumers salivating at the sound of the commercial bell. This chapter reminds us that whether a capitalist economyWithholds basic needs, as it did in the time of Marx, or whether it provides a never-ending succession of addictive products, the workers who labor to meet their needs—real or unreal—are fighting a losing battle with alienation. The consumer-driven economy offers constant commercial distractions that can cause people to lose sight of the human connections and interactions that make life worth living as well as of the environmental and geopolitical consequences that the heedless hunt for material resources engenders.

The closing chapters focus on the state of utopia at the time this book was written. Chapter 7 is entitled “A Hundred Flowers: Contemporary Utopian Studies,” an obvious echo of Mao’s brief experiment in freer speech in the late 1950s. It seems to me that the title suggests that just because Mao and other Communists got it wrong, that is no reason to give up on socialism or the utopian project. Levitas is capable of a kind of understated eloquence now and then that makes important points memorable. Here is an example from chapter 7: “utopias are generally not convincing as political programmes nor are they necessarily intended to be; the transition to the good society is frequently not addressed, because utopia is the expression of desire, and desire may outstrip hope while not necessarily outstripping possibility” (188). This is in some ways a surprising idea since one major criticism of utopia has been that it is unattainable, meaning that hope soars beyond the possible. The idea expressed here appears to be that utopias must go beyond hope, that they must address society’s intractable problems because what is impossible today might well be possible tomorrow. This is not an endorsement of the Western myth of progress (in fact, she systematically rejects this myth throughout the text), for real progress comes from utopian exploration. Levitas has raised the use value of utopia to a high level.

In the last chapter, “Future Perfect: Retheorising Utopia,” she reasserts the case for desire rather than hope being the essential utopian stimulus. Furthermore, she addresses many of the problems that utopians did not have to consider prior to WWII, including nuclear holocaust and planetary climate change. In fact, I am impressed that a book written over twenty years ago seems so up to date on dystopian realities that some people still choose to deny. To top it off, she has little faith in governments, especially as their intrusive behaviors multiply. Her observation that one huge barrier to utopian evolution is “that those in control are out of control” (226) is probably shared by a much greater portion of the general public now than it was in 1989. The global financial meltdown that began in 2008 has demonstrated the foolishness and powerlessness of national governments as well as the immense dysto-
pian impact of capitalists run wild. When the highest utopian goal is limitless personal wealth and control not only of the means of production but also of the governmental structures that are intended to regulate corporate behavior, then the primary issue for utopians is agency, another topic explored in the final chapter. Professor Levitas may not be clairvoyant, but her meticulous scholarship and obvious concern for the powerless lead her to conclusions that seem almost prescient.

I am not qualified to judge Levitas’s scholarship since she knows her field better than I; however, I have found no errors or inconsistencies. I am able to discern and appreciate the intricacy and rhetorical effectiveness of her arguments. She raises high expectations in her introduction by setting herself tasks that are not easily melded. Her thesis requires clarity and precision of language that are beyond many writers. By augmenting chronology with carefully parsed definitions of utopia, she has succeeded in constructing a complex and internally consistent story of how an idea attracted so many good minds and how important it is that good minds continue to conceive and comment on utopia. The series to which this book belongs is called Ralahine Classics, and this volume deserves that appellation. All five titles in the series are must reading for scholars of utopia. Whether future utopists will see the fall of Soviet Communism as the border between eras in human history and the utopian saga only time will tell. From my vantage point two decades later, it appears that somewhere in that twenty-year period there has been a paradigm shift. The question of global survival has gained new urgency, and the grip of global economic hegemony has tightened. While the Western winners continue to pursue self-perpetuating, neo-colonial wars; while Russia raises the banner of nationalism, eclipsing even the pretence of the social safety net; and while China and India rush to industrialize at any cost that they might one day be better able to contest for diminishing resources (not just oil, but clean water, too), utopists are still at work on a project that might well provide new paths for humanity in an already troubled century. Utopia is still evolving, offering solace to those who might fear the future but who nonetheless desire and hope for the Not Yet.

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