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Author(s): Jüren Fohrmann

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From Literary Utopia to The Utopia of Subjectivity

JÜRGEN FOHRMANN
Universität Bonn

When examining the literary utopia of the early modern period, for example Thomas Morus' *Utopia* (1517), Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas Solis* (1623), Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (1638) or even Johann Gottfried Schnabel's *Wunderliche Fata einiger Seefahrer* (better known as *Insel Felsenburg*, 1731), one is struck by a dualism which, no matter how explicit, determines the structure of the texts.¹ This double presentation of society (old and new) is staged in a way that makes possible a number of suppositions about how before and after relate to each other. Conditioned by the acceptance of original sin, it was natural to interpret utopia as a kind of *satire*, whereby the new was not intended to be realized, but was only to be critically contrasted with the old.² Teleologic historical models, on the other hand, asserted this realization and looked for ways of accomplishing the transition from yesterday to tomorrow.³

"Old society" appeared, thereby, as something strangely obscure. "Entangled into their tales," it served narrators as a reservoir of ever newer, incalculable threats, as a diffused complexity, arising from continual arbitrary action in a lawless space.⁴ In other words, old European society is widely experienced here as *anarchy*. It turns the weak as *bellum omnium* into its "playthings," even if it does still elicit from them the providential reassurance of the "inpenetrable ways of God." Thus the course of one's life is guided neither corporately nor, in a more modern sense, by the conditions of law. The subjects are released for the chase.

In 1642 the theorist of absolute monarchy, Thomas Hobbes, had attributed these findings in his *De cive* wholly to the state of nature (*status naturalis*): "the state of nature in man . . . has been war, and indeed, not simply war, but the war of all against all."⁵ He encouraged a pact of submission (*pactum subiectionis*) to put an end to such anarchy, and called for the formation of a "civil" state in the community.

In the utopias this separation between the state of nature and the civil state—within the framework of the "old society"—is dealt with in an un-

usual way. Civilization itself is seen as that “detestable chaos, made up by power, inequality and demoralization,” from which the philosophical dreamer of Mercier’s *L’An 2440* (1770) endeavours to escape into the passage of time.⁶ But “civilization” is all this only because the *state of nature in man* itself renders the *bellum omnium contra omnes* possible. Criticism of the division of wealth or conditions of justice, or life in general, is founded not only in basic social conditions, but also in anthropological suppositions.

This anthropology differs primarily in its distinction between reason and non-reason, whereby non-reason is often portrayed as the dominion of passions, emotions or inner nature.⁷ Emotions are, as it were, the anarchistic state of nature in man. They produce a society whose external discord corresponds with its internal dissension.

The decisive factor here is that non-reason appears as being more complex than reason. Indeed, it was the passions that generated an opaque image, in which chance, even if guised as *fortuna bona* or *fortuna mala*, had the upper hand. “Chance,” therefore, meant always to be extradited to a diffused, malevolent and, at the same time, dangerous world.

Thus it seemed natural to reduce complexity, that is, not to put one’s hopes on unpredictable non-reason, but rather in a new way, on “reason.” Here, internal and external are also brought together.

Hence the “new utopian community” integrates the subjects into a comprehensive regiment: their actions are in one way or another controlled, a rigid time schedule steers the course of their day, year, and life. Their working day and limited leisure time is organized around rituals. Human relationships are transparent and predictable, institutions are clearly structured, exteriors are geometric, customs are sensible and suitable.⁸ A perfect community, indeed, an ideal republic.

One could also say that social regimentation takes the place of that *inner freedom*, which the utopias were always emphatically warning against. In the old society this “free inner space” generally originated in idleness. But “idleness” brought about an emptiness which was soon penetrated by the craving desires of emotion which then fought off boredom. Thus, it is possible that *nature differs from reason*.

Utopia’s remedy is now quite simple: a new society should be created in a separated space, in which man’s inner nature is disciplined by a reason that organizes society as a perpetual recurrence of never-changing rituals. This reason is the functional equivalent to Hobbes’ sovereign. If a man is solely inner nature, then he is *deficient* when compared with utopian reason. He is not fit for utopia; he must be educated, or he must be completely banned from the new society—this is a process which had already been dealt with by Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947) before Michel Foucault. The utopian man can therefore only be justified if his “being” can be fully mirrored in the new forms of

social behavior, that is to say, if inner nature can be created in the image of supposed reason. What I am saying here is that in the utopia of the early modern period the new subject is delineated solely *by society* (not as before, the anarchistic society by the passions of the unruly subjects). This implies that man cannot be more complex than the society which is to surround and mould him. "Subject" is understood primarily here as the sub-iectum, as the yielder. If thereby the realization of peace takes the place of civil war—for this, indeed, was the main aim of the European early modern period—then it is a peace based on the strict control of nature in man, and society can only be seen as a machine with a small degree of complexity. Despite all its exotic coloring, this kind of utopia is not concerned with the revocation of a new state of nature, but rather with the occupation of a *space*.

Step by step, throughout the course of the presentation, possession is taken of this geographical and, at the same time, social area. Once possession is completed, a moulded, only slightly modifiable cultural field remains, indeed a naturalization of history, and this regardless of whether the utopias will later occupy new areas, or will project themselves into a new future or even try to take possession of the universal space. Utopia of space, utopia of time, and "science fiction" are all variations on the same anthropological ideas, the same ethics, and thus the same social designs. Each time the desire for peace is attempted in a pre-modern way, by classifying the subjects, incorporating virtuousness, excluding passions and their carriers, and by forming stabilizing rituals. The very fact that utopias of this kind hopelessly underreflected the complexity of both the subject and the society, is precisely indicated by the utopia-parody which was introduced in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The distinction between non-reason and reason, that is, the state of nature and the status civilis, is now seen quite differently from how it had been handled by the social utopia of the early modern period. One thinks here not so much of arcadian revocation of society in the already cultivated natural space,⁹ but rather of the perpetuation of the complexity of inner nature, as well as of a non-predictable society. As far as I see it, this idea was developed for the first time by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but at a high price:

I can neither praise nor rebuke myself: henceforth I am nothing amongst people, and indeed that is all that I can be because I no longer have a true relationship or a social connection with them. As I can do no more good without it turning to evil, and as I can no longer act without hurting others or myself, I have made it my sole obligation to withdraw, and I do this, as far as it lies in my power.¹⁰

If one has detached oneself from society in this way, then it becomes possible to understand inner human nature not only as the causer of anti-social

effects but also as that inner wealth which appears only in times of solitude. Again, in the words of Rousseau:

These lonely hours of reflection are the only times of the day when I am completely myself, when I wholly belong to myself without any distraction, without hindrance, and I can honestly say that I am that which nature intended me to be.¹¹

Sociability is confined now to self-contact, which by means of works created by the author, seems to make forms of self-communication beyond momentary consciousness possible.

I undertake the same as Montaigne undertook, but for reasons quite contrary to his, for he wrote his “Essais” solely for others, and I write my dreamings only for myself. If in my old age, approaching death, I am still in the same state of mind, as I indeed would hope, reading them will revive in me the pleasure I experienced as I wrote them, and in re-creating bygone times I shall be able to double my existence, as it were. In defiance of mankind I shall still enjoy the fascination of social relations. . . .¹²

If subjective abundance and life in society are thus in contradiction with one another, then they can no longer be connected with a *single* utopian model. “Utopia” is therefore not completely discarded by Rousseau. It reappears in an “authentic self-relationship” but cannot be universalized in society. Thus, utopian society and utopian subject part company: this is then the price to be paid for revaluing the subject still within old European society. However, when this revaluation has been completed, a frame of reflection is marked out, which can no longer allow the simple social utopian models of the early modern period to continue, without moving beyond the niveau of the discussion. From now on, utopia is concerned with two questions:

- (a) How is a *complex* utopian society conceivable and
- (b) how is a *complex* human being conveyable with it, that is to say, “sustainable in it”?

The search for answers to these questions brought about suggestions around 1800 which one could perhaps refer to as a “paradigmatic change” in utopian discussion. The old image of utopia saw the subject also in the new society as tending towards deficiency, whereby the subject was formed by the ideal society. Now utopian designs are introduced whereby *society is delineated by the subject*; the state’s constitution is now seen as the *subject’s effect*. Society can therefore only be “utopian” if it conforms with the demands of a complex subject. The realm of freedom which Schiller proposed is based on the performance of an individual, refined by aesthetic education.¹³

The founding of a utopia on the resources of the subject, a task which dominated social political discussion right up to Marx, saw itself faced with a number of difficulties. These difficulties arose mainly from the aporetical construction of the new concept of subjectivity, that is, *individuality*, which, for its part, had the purpose of conquering Rousseau's basic contradiction, the impossibility of uniting subjectivity with utopian society.

The initial difficulty lay in the problem of the beginning. Let us again take as an example Schiller's construction of an "aesthetic education." The aesthetic education which endeavoured to make the subject mature for a better society, that is to say, which was to bring about a balance between emotions and reason, which in turn would bring with it a kind of "ennobled sociability," was only conceivable as a process without a beginning and with an unpredictable end. For the educators were inadequately educated, and it was unclear when the end point of the intended educational process would be reached, when the subject would be completely "ascended" to its generic destiny. It was, however, possible to avoid this problem by defining utopia itself as a "process," by distinguishing between empirical and transcendental subject if one returned to Kant's concept of the "regulative idea."¹⁴

By projecting utopia into the future one could imagine a non-starting and a non-ending process, which was nonetheless still guided by a utopian impetus. The utopian impetus was itself now only obtainable by abolishing time. Kant called this condition "the end of all things."

The second difficulty, because it was constitutively connected with the new vision of subjective abundance, was of an even more fundamental kind. In order to understand this, it is necessary to explain here the concept of *individuality*. The starting-out point in Rousseau's "Rêveries" was indeed the subjects' now affirmed plenitude, which should nonetheless lead to a unitary self-relationship. The problem facing not only the new semantics of subjectivity but also the new vision of utopia was how to gain unity from plenitude without destroying plenitude. The problem was to disperse productively the *paradoxical constellation* of a plenitude into a unity, and, in doing so, to appear to remove the paradox. This achievement was to bring about a new concept:

The final task of our existence is to give as great a meaning as possible to the concept of mankind in our person, both during our lifetime and after it, through the traces of the living effects which we leave behind; this task is fulfilled only by the association of our "I" with the world, in its most universal, active and freest interaction.¹⁵

The relationship between "I" and "world" is understood in this dictum by Humboldt as an interaction, which, if it is free, should make it possible to unfold the transcendental destiny in the subject as completely as possible.

The educational process linked with this sees the subject thereby as the “individual universal” (individuelle Allgemeine), that is, as the *embodiment of the universal in the individual subject* (Besondere), within a pars-pro-toto relationship.

The subject, which itself has become wise through the “world,” now represents the “world” and, indeed, in a way which allows this representation to be understood not as a contingent reflection, but as a manifestation of the universal in the individual subject. The concept of *individuality* serves here as mediator. Only through education can one succeed, according to Humboldt, in gaining that “something special,” that “plenitude of uniqueness” which also makes the individual a representative of the whole:

One seeks universality to escape dissipating, confusing plenitude; to avoid losing oneself in an empty and unproductive way to eternity, one forms a sphere which is in every way surveyable; in order to attach the image of the last purpose to each step that one moves forward, one seeks to transform dispersed knowledge and action into a compactness, mere learning into an erudite education, and restless searching into a wise pursuit.¹⁶

The concept of “individuality” gains significance especially through the fact—and this in support of Blanckenburg—that “the great entirety is not for us,”¹⁷ that totality is reserved for a “most perfect understanding”¹⁸ (that is God). Our access to entirety leads us out of necessity from the universal to the “Besondere,” via individuality, which in turn becomes *the* constitutive starting-out point for world understanding. “The individual,” according to Niklas Luhmann, “is the world in the representing I.”¹⁹

At this stage we are not so much interested in theoretical subject prerequisites—rather in the consequences for a utopian theory linked with these.

Firstly, if the individual, that “parasite of the difference between the universal and the Besondere”²⁰ becomes the key to the world, then only through his knowledge can “all” be gained. Self-descriptions and descriptions by others attempt only to draw conclusions from man’s “innermost parts”: one has recognized that abundance and plenitude appear only in succession, in stories of the individual, for example in “educational novels” (Bildungsromane).²¹ The utopia is shifted in this way to the paradoxes of the self-exploration process: Become what you already are!

As this process can never be concluded, the individual remains alien to himself, for there is always a remaining part still to be explained, that “ineffable” which Goethe had spoken of, and from which not “only a whole world,” but also the utopian imperative to gain a more detailed knowledge of itself, is derived. The self-reflection of the subject and his constant self-descriptions find no end: it seems that the unique, namely subjectivity, can never be completely dissolved into that individuality (as the representative

of the universal), but that indeed a rest remains that evades the universal (and that means utopian society). Subjectivity is radical and individuality a myth.

An individual, that is, a being that always remains unexplained, indeed a “secret,” cannot simply be generalized as a utopian subject—and this he must be!—unless society regards itself as a never-ending abundance (as Marx supposed). Robert Spaemann, on the other hand, referred years ago to that “limitation” whose command always leads to restrictions.²² Alleged subjective abundance cannot unfold under conditions of restrictive discipline. It is no coincidence that the literary utopias of Orwell or Huxley, which are generally referred to as “negative utopias,” ban imagery of utopian society from their suggestive utopian hopes.²³ Here, it is subjectivity alone that defiantly claims its right, and insists on a surplus of sense which thrives on rebuke, not on social definition. Hopes connected with the concept of individuality have thus led one to declare education as a utopian process, but not to that society which appeared as the projection of these individuals on the utopian horizon; the image of this ideal society inevitably led to restrictions, which interpreted the subject, transcendently renewed, as a generic being and in so doing put its hopes on indiscernibility. The “individual universal” appears therefore as not so radical a concept as supposed by the educational theorists of the late eighteenth century:²⁴ as all individual distinctions related to the whole, this vision of individuality can always be traced back to a generalizing unity—a unity which was not only reserved for that “most complete understanding,” but which was also claimed by the nation or the state.

The unique subject, on the other hand, that is radical subjectivity, in the Rousseau sense, is not sociable. His communication is soliloquy and his utopia is based on a solipsism that endeavours to realize life exclusively as self-contact.

A utopia in the sense of the early modern period or of the late eighteenth century cannot be delineated by a society that normatively proclaims the (restricted) good, and at the same time must always presuppose the limitations of that which exists, nor can it be delineated by individuality or a unique subject. Today a utopia such as this can surely no longer be praised, for the discipline of reason, the representation of the universal, and also the subjective solipsism, refer only to the change in social structures, whose problems were also reflected in the semantics of utopian change.

Translated from German by Pamela Jones

¹Lars Gustafsson referred to the principal gesture of negation, which is the underlying principle of this structure. Compare Lars Gustafsson, “Negation als Spiegel: Utopie aus epi-

stemologischer Sicht," *Utopieforschung: Interdisziplinäre Studien zur neuzeitlichen Utopie*, ed. Wilhelm Voßkamp, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1982) 1: 280-92.

²Compare Ludwig Stockinger, *Ficta Respublica: Gattungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur utopischen Erzählung in der deutschen Literatur des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1981). Peter Uwe Hohendahl, among others, deals with the problems of narration connected with this. See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Zum Erzählproblem des utopischen Romans im 18. Jahrhundert," *Gestaltungsgeschichte und Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Helmut Kreuzer and Käthe Hamburger (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1969) 79-114; and Peter Kuon, *Utopischer Entwurf und fiktionale Vermittlung: Studien zum Gattungswandel der literarischen Utopie zwischen Humanismus und Frühaufklärung* (Heidelberg: C. Winter Universitätsverlag, 1986).

³This then is the central theme of the philosophy of history. See in this connection the article by Lucian Hölscher, "Utopie," *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972 ff.) on the historical discussion of utopia, which also reflects this theme.

⁴Using the "Robinsonaden" as an example, I discuss this in my book *Abenteuer und Bürgertum: Zur Geschichte der deutschen Robinsonaden im 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1981).

⁵Compare Thomas Hobbes, *Vom Menschen. Vom Bürger*, pref. and ed. Günter Gawlick (Hamburg: Meiner, 1959) 83.

⁶Compare my article "Utopie und Untergang: L.-S. Merciers *L'An 2440* (1770)," *Literarische Utopien von Morus bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Klaus L. Berghahn and Hans Ulrich Seeber (Königstein/Ts.: Athenaum, 1983) 105-24.

⁷Compare Günter Abel, *Stoizismus und Frühe Neuzeit* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1978).

⁸Compare to this Lars Gustafsson, "Tommaso Campanellas *Der Sonnenstaat* (1623)," *Literarische Utopien*, ed. Berghahn and Seeber 44-49; compare also Michael Winter, "Don Quijote und Frankenstein: Utopie als Utopiekritik: Zur Genese der negativen Utopie," *Utopieforschung*, ed. Voßkamp 3: 86-112.

⁹Compare to this Klaus Garber, "Arkadien und Gesellschaft," *Utopieforschung*, ed. Voßkamp 2: 86-112.

¹⁰Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Träumereien eines einsamen Spaziergängers (Rêveries)," in: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Schriften*, ed. Henning Ritter, 2 vols. (München: Hanser, 1978) 2: 645. On this aspect of Rousseau's work see also Bernhard Lyppe, "Rousseaus Utopien," *Utopieforschung*, ed. Voßkamp 3: 113-24.

¹¹Rousseau 648.

¹²Rousseau 646.

¹³Compare Friedrich Schiller, "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen" (1795), Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, 2nd ed. (München: Hanser, 1960) 5: 570-669.

¹⁴On the reactivation of this category see Karl-Otto Apel, "Ist die Ethik der idealen Kommunikationsgemeinschaft eine Utopie?," *Utopieforschung*, ed. Voßkamp 1: 325-55.

¹⁵Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Theorie der Bildung des Menschen," Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960) 1: 234-40; here 235-36.

¹⁶Humboldt 238.

¹⁷Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg, *Versuch über den Roman: Facsimile print of the original edition from 1774*, epilogue by Eberhard Lämmert (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1965) 257 ff.

¹⁸Compare Karl Philipp Moritz, "Fragmente aus dem Tagebuch eines Geistesehers," Karl Philipp Moritz, *Werke*, ed. Horst Günther, 3 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1981) 3: 306.

¹⁹Niklas Luhmann, "Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus," Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989) 149-258; here 207.

²⁰Luhmann 207.

²¹On the utopian liability of the "Bildungsroman" see Wilhelm Voßkamp, "Utopie und Utopiekritik in Goethes Romanen *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* und *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*," *Utopieforschung*, ed. Voßkamp 3: 227-49.

²²See Robert Spaemann, *Zur Kritik der politischen Utopie: Zehn Kapitel politischer Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1977).

²³On the “negative utopias” see Hans Ulrich Seeber, “Anmerkungen zum Begriff ‘Gegenutopie,’ ” *Literarische Utopien*, ed. Berghahn and Seeber 163-71.

²⁴On the theoretical consequences of the “individual universal” see Manfred Frank, *Das individuelle Allgemeine: Textstrukturierung und -interpretation nach Schleiermacher* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977).