Introduction

UTOPIA AND CRISIS: AN INTRODUCTION TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

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Over the past five centuries, *Homo sapiens* has increasingly become aware of its place in the bigger picture. Copernicus showed us that we are not the center of the universe, and Charles Darwin proved that we are evolutionarily connected to everything that lives on earth. We also learned that nothing is ever static or final, as we are part of an ongoing cosmic story from Big Bang to infinite extension or ultimate implosion.

Nevertheless, many people like certainty and structure, and they often display a strong penchant for transcendant ideas and solutions. When myths and religions lost some of their explanatory power, these solutions were increasingly sought and found in human constructions and projections. Since the Scientific Revolution and the era of Enlightenment, people have increasingly endeavored to understand their world empirically and to use this knowledge to improve their living conditions to create more just, rational, and efficient institutions and to predict and even steer the direction of human history. Some of them came up with definitive answers.

A recent example, representing the revival of this tradition, is the idea of the end of history.[1] The political scientist and former US policy advisor Francis Fukuyama considered world history to be a process of trial and error, an ideological contest, moving toward the best possible form of social and political organization. In his view, the twentieth century left us with three remaining ideologies. In 1945, fascism and National Socialism were defeated and discredited; in 1989, the same thing happened to communism. What remained, capitalist liberal democracy, represented the ultimate answer, the solution to several centuries of political and ideological confrontation — at least until the onset of collective boredom could start the historical process all over again. Probably not coincidentally, Fukuyama's vision coincided with the rise of neoliberalism with the ascent of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

Fukuyama inspired, or was part of, a broader movement in the late-twentieth century that projected ideas towards their logical end point. The end of art, art history, and art theory were announced in a number of learned studies,[2] and many other things were brought to

1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, 1992).

2 Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge and New York, 2004); Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London, 2001); Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago, 1996); Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel* (Stanford, 2006); Arthur C. Danto, *after the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, 1995).

their academically supported termination.[3] Envisioning a final design for human life is very much part of the utopian tradition. The book that gave this tradition its name, *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516), was arguably more of an originally conceived criticism of his own time, because his ideal society was full of contradictions and humorous touches, such as the name of Utopia's capital city, Air Castle. But in the seventeenth century, humor and irony made room for blueprints of an ideal future, such as Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602, published 1623) and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), both claiming to provide definitive answers to questions of human happiness and destiny. The nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries witnessed a number of attempts to translate such ideas into practice, such as Charles Fourier's *Phalanstère* idea of small harmonious communities, the *Arts and Crafts* movement initiated by William Morris, the *Garden City* concept as developed by Ebenezer Howard, and, more aggressively, Le Corbusier's plans for the complete make-over of the city center of Paris.[4] Marxism, perhaps the nineteenth century's most enduring intellectual and political system, angrily decried utopian thinking, rooting itself, by contrast, in empirical historical and economic observation, yet its twentieth-century legacy was intertwined with the utopian longings of artists, visionaries, and revolutionaries across the globe.

Utopian ideas have the function of presenting an alternative to the world we are living in. They energize people not to accept the world as it is but to actively shape it according to their wishes and dreams. In the course of the twentieth century, however, the dark side of utopian thinking manifested itself in the trenches of the First World War, the Holocaust and other genocides, the threat of nuclear war, and the brutal politics of Soviet- and Chinese-style state socialism, entangling utopian yearnings and cold state repression in a bitter modern dialectic. Philosopher Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (published in 1945), identified a deeply rooted tradition in Western thinking, starting with Plato's ideal society and further developed by thinkers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx, which resulted in the nightmarishly repressive regimes of the twentieth century.[5] And six years later, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt drew connections between nineteenth-century antisemitism and imperialism and the fascist and communist regimes of the twentieth century.[6] More recently, philosopher John Gray analyzed the totalitarian foundations of Christian apocalyptic thinking, Enlightenment extremism, and modern utopian projects.[7] How the organization of paradise on Earth could easily turn into its very

3 Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Growing the World's Wealth in an Age of Extremes* (New York, 2005); Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York, 2006); Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York, 1984); Russell Targ and J. J. Hurtak, *The End of Suffering: Fearless Living in Troubled Times – Or, How to Get Out of Hell for Free* (Charlottesville, 2006); Richard Heinberg, *The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality* (Gabriola Island, 2011); Moises Naim, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York, 2013); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (London, 2006); Joel Fuhrman, *The End of Dieting: How to Live for Life* (New York, 2015), to mention just a small selection.

4 Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, eds., *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (Oxford, 2001); Richard Noble, ed., *Utopia* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London, 2011); Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, eds., *The Utopian Reader* (New York, 2017).

5 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, 1945).

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951).

7 John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London, 2007).

opposite is effectively described in famous novels by Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*, 1920), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949), Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1953), and many others.[8]

The conference "Alternative Realities," on which this volume is based, took place at the Wende Museum of the Cold War in Culver City, as well as at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles on April, 16-17, 2018, and was co-organized by the Wende Museum, the Max Kade Institute for Austrian-German-Swiss Studies at the University of Southern California, and the Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam. It was directly inspired by the current state of our political- and social-media-induced confusion about reality and fiction, or about facts and alternative facts, and by the recent reemergence of authoritarian politics and xenophobic movements worldwide. Now that the boundaries between reality and imagination have become opaque, it seems useful and necessary to revisit those products of the imagination, utopian or dystopian, that inspired us to critically assess the world around us without rejecting its very substance.

The conference had a special focus on Germany, the country that witnessed five regimes over the past one-hundred-plus years and experienced both the heights of national euphoria and the depths of physical and moral defeat and destruction in the twentieth century. During moments of rupture, cultural ideas and expressions take on new relevance in envisioning a new political order. This conference addressed the role of utopian visions, both artistic and intellectual, in tranforming the world from the twentieth century to the present day. Indeed, major historical turning points were inspired by, and provoked, periods of profound cultural and political self-examination. These moments of fundamental reflection were often accompanied by fierce debates about historical lineages and legacies. Utopian movements alternately asserted a complete break from the past or claimed to represent the fulfilment of historical destinies. The recent growth and political success of populist anti-democratic forces all over the world and the apparent realignment of the political order suggest that we might be entering another period of profound political and historical rupture today.

In our call for papers, we asked the conference participants to address one or more of the following questions:

1. *Utopian concepts and political identities*: In what ways did utopian concepts influence the construction — or contestation — of

8 M. Keith Booker, ed., *Dystopia* (Ipswich, MA, 2013); Kate Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten* (Chicago, 2015); Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford, 2017).

political ideas? What alternative realities did they envision? What aspects of social, political, and cultural life were addressed by these utopian ideas? In what form or medium were they presented? Which utopian visions had the power to actually help shape political realities?

2. *Utopian ideas, traditions, and contingency*: How did artists, writers, composers, filmmakers, intellectuals, and visionary politicians create political meaning by relating to existing cultural traditions? How did they adapt, appropriate, or change these traditions? How did they embed their proposals in a broader historical narrative? What was the impact of local traditions and circumstances on the creation of visionary ideas? To what extent are grand visions a product of their place and time?
3. *The utopian century in comparative perspective*: Are there overarching tendencies in the ways artists, writers, composers, filmmakers, intellectuals, and visionary politicians envisioned alternative realities throughout the history of the twentieth century? How did twentieth-century utopias differ from utopian visions and practices of the nineteenth century and earlier? Is the twentieth century a post-utopian era?
4. *Utopia present and future*: Is utopian thinking still relevant today? How can it escape the pitfalls of state repression? Does utopian thinking after "the end of history" still offer viable political alternatives? What is the role of art and culture in creating these alternatives? What role do utopian projections play in the success of or resistance to right-wing populism in the present day?

For this volume, we selected several of the most thought-provoking contributions which, taken together, highlight the major themes and perspectives that ran through the conference presentations and discussions, divided into sections on Countercultures, Ideologies and Practices, and Alternative Visions. In the opening essay of the Countercultures section, "The Body Politic: From Meyerhold to My Barbarian," Farrah Karapetian traces broad lineages over a century of artistic and theatrical production and theorizing. She analyzes Russian theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold's ideas about the corporeal aspects of theater, and their lasting impact on artistic utopian strategies. In 1940, Meyerhold was executed as an enemy of the people. Having spent his forty-year career in intellectual pursuit of making theater one of the cultural conquests of the Russian Revolution, he refused to conform to Socialist Realism as the exclusive route

toward identification with the masses. For him, art had a specific, vital function. He conceived of theater as a means of agitation, and his use of biomechanics, which made him famous, emerged out of a study of labor published just after the Russian Revolution. Meyerhold's ideas hold lasting currency because of their impact on his teacher and peer Konstantin Stanislavski, his student Sergei Eisenstein, and his foreign contemporaries Bertolt Brecht and Lee Strasberg. The combined legacy of these artists includes their commitment to stripping the theater of its stage, their experiments in splitting narrative into episodes, and their constant return to the body as the arbiter of authenticity. Using a range of different contemporary artists, Karapetian examines the lasting influence on contemporary performance of Russian Revolutionary theatrical theory and its utopian commitment.

Erin Sullivan Maynes, in her paper "Currency and Community: Labor, Identity, and *Notgeld* in Inflation-era Thuringia," discusses the ways in which community currencies were used in Germany during the First World War and the Weimar Republic to imagine a utopian alternative to the disturbing political and economic realities of the time. Community currencies appeared in places with strong local identities. The function of these currencies was largely symbolic; they responded to vertiginous economic change and currency fluctuation, asserting local pride, supporting regional businesses, and implicitly rejecting global markets. *Notgeld*, the emergency money that had been appearing in Germany since 1914, was initially introduced as a stopgap solution to the war-induced shortage of coins and official *Reichsmarks*. But like other community currencies, it eventually took on more symbolic functions alongside its practical uses. Maynes considers the ways in which German communities used *Notgeld* as a means to re-imagine the economy at the local level and shape it in their own image at a moment of national economic crisis. In rural areas and small towns, it functioned as a decorative collector's object as much as a provisional currency and was used to project messages that were both idealized self-presentations and longed-for projections of local identity.

In "Beyond Historicism: Utopian Thought in the 'Conservative Revolution,'" Robbert-Jan Adriaansen claims that right-wing thinkers in Germany during the Weimar Republic were no less utopian in their ideas than their left-wing counterparts. The Conservative Revolutionary movement, a loose collection of historians and political theorists, has often been characterized as a reactionary movement that tried to escape the harsh realities of violence, military defeat, and economic

turbulence by turning to an imagined and glorified German past. Its embrace of modern technology has been interpreted as a paradoxical "reactionary modernism" that strove to embed technology in a Romantic irrationalism, which revolted against reason, liberalism, and Enlightenment thought. Adriaansen argues that the Conservative Revolution was neither paradoxical, nor reactionary, but rather utopian. Although it was not a coherent social or political movement, the theorists he discusses did have in common the aim to overcome the historicism of the nineteenth century. The utopian ideas that inhered in the Conservative Revolution experimented with new meanings and configurations of past, present, and future that often defied unilinear time. The past could serve as an ephemeral expression of eternal ideas, and, as such, it could testify to the attainable potential of a utopian *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community). Because these utopian ideals were more often rooted in metaphysics than based on notions of historical development, this essay challenges the thesis put forward by historian Reinhart Koselleck that modern utopias always rely on modern historical consciousness.[9]

The Ideologies and Practices section begins with Aviva Halamish's essay "Kibbutz and Utopia: Social Success and Political Failure." In it, she sketches the history of the kibbutz movement in terms of its utopian aims and practical realities. The kibbutz is probably the best-known and longest-lasting experiment in building and maintaining a utopian society in the modern period. It succeeded in establishing and maintaining a community with utopian elements, but as a socialist wing of the Zionist movement it did not manage to constitute an avant-garde for creating a new Jewish society in Palestine or fostering a new socialist personality type in accordance with its utopian ideals. Halamish elaborates on the reasons for these developments and the kibbutz's seemingly paradoxical conservatism, distinguishing between the first half of the twentieth century, when national struggle was intertwined with a call for social transformation, and the period after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Her essay foregrounds the tension between nurturing utopian ideals and adhering to revolutionary Marxism that has run through the kibbutz experience.

An East German science-based socialist utopian ideal is the subject of "Networks: On the Utopian Qualities of Technology, Cybernetics, and Participation in the GDR of the Late 1960s" by Oliver Sukrow. For their movie *Netzwerk* (Network) of 1969, director Ralf Kirsten and

9 Reinhart Koselleck, "The Temporalization of Utopia," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, ed. idem, 84-89 (Stanford, 2002).

screenwriter Eberhard Panitz sought a cinematic representation of the questions: "Where do I come from, who am I, who should I be tomorrow to meet the challenges of the future?" The movie problematizes the phenomenon of workers confronting progress in science and technology: How did different kinds of people react? What are the possibilities and limitations of automatization and modernization? What is the role of ideological concerns in an environment where science and technology seem more important than politics and class struggle? In 1969, the year *Netzwerk* was released, the German Democratic Republic opened an architectural complex on the outskirts of Berlin for the training of leading nomenklatura. At this "Academy of Marxist-Leninist Organizational Theory" (AMLO), leaders were to be prepared to face the same challenges *Netzwerk* had dramatized. To avoid the problems addressed by the movie, designers and architects developed a completely new type of exposition space in which the visitor was not just a passive viewer but actively interacted and engaged with the exhibited machines and computers. In this essay, Sukrow shows that both the movie and the exposition potentially carried the participatory elements of a short-lived utopian, scientific socialist modernity.

Anna Krylova's "A History of the 'Soviet': From Bolshevik Utopia to Soviet Modernity Soviet Modernity" traces a crucial, but frequently overlooked, discursive shift in the USSR from *Bolshevik* to *Soviet* in the later 1930s. More than merely a semantic distinction, the move from *Bolshevik* to *Soviet* heralded a larger turn away from the utopianism of the revolution's early years, its celebration of proletarian values and subsuming individualism into the collective, toward the more individualistic political culture of the later 1930s and beyond, which condoned ambition and the cultivation of individual talents. This latter cluster of values facilitated the Soviet Union's navigation of the path toward industrial modernity in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, Krylova, like Sukrow, presents a distinct vision of socialist modernity, one that in this case eclipsed the utopianism and wild experimentation of the years immediately following the October Revolution.

The final section, Alternative Visions, begins with a turn to a later revolutionary moment. Maarten Doorman in "Revolution or Repetition: Woodstock's Romanticism" discusses the Romantic roots of the revolution of 1968. The late 1960s have generally been considered the most revolutionary postwar years in Germany and the entire Western

world, and for good reason. If we take a closer look at the changes of that time, we can recognize how it revolved around several core cultural values. Doorman elucidates the provocative new ideas presented and criticized at the famous Woodstock Festival (1969), such as the primacy of youth, the idealization of free love, the so-called return to nature and the countryside, a leaning toward spirituality and mysticism, the importance of the imagination (the use of psychedelic drugs), and the prevalent role of music in this case study. Doorman's essay calls into question the revolutionary content of these changes, showing that they can be considered a reiteration of the program of the German (and English) Romantics of the early-nineteneeth century; what at first glance seems to be a revolution consists chiefly in recycled Romantic motifs. Following the approach of Robert J. Richards, Doorman aims at a deeper insight into the character and origins of popular culture today.[10] At the same time, drawing on Isaiah Berlin's interpretation of Romanticism as "the greatest shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred," the deconstruction of revolutionary values may raise questions about the historiographical concepts of revolution and continuity in culture in general.[11]

In her essay "Utopian (Tele)visions," Anikó Imre takes as her subject television programming in late Eastern Bloc socialism. Imre builds on the assumption that studying television cultures under socialism thoroughly muddles the Cold War framework of two opposing, radically different world systems. Rather, the historical experiment of socialism is rooted in the history of modernity to the extent that socialism and liberal capitalism cannot be disentangled. Imre shows a transition in socialist television programs and program types from the stodgy didacticism of the early period to a more open, often playful, and at times even critical style of entertainment with surprising similarities to Western television. Not unlike the discursive shift that Krylova chronicles, Imre points to the appearance of a new set of values in 1970s and 1980s television programming by which competitive and extraordinary individuals were presented as role models in increasingly popular game shows that flouted earlier notions of collective, proletarian identity.

The final essay, by Friend & Colleague, a platform for editions, fiction, and special projects, founded by siblings Katya and Alexei Tylevich, presents a contemporary take on utopian thinking. It poetically and humorously addresses aspects of the other conference contributions in text and image, based on the video the Tyleviches organized, directed, and produced for the conference.

10 Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago, 2002).

11 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, 1999), 1.

Taken together, these essays shed new light on the history of utopian thought and on the experience and representation of major twentieth-century turning points. They disrupt simplistic dichotomies between revolutionary and conservative movements, revealing the utopian impulses behind conservative ideas as well as the nostalgia and conservatism at the heart of some of the century's most forward-looking and progressive moments and movements. Similarly, they break down barriers between East and West, revealing the operation of similar tendencies and patterns on both sides of the Iron Curtain, as capitalist and communist regimes marched toward alternative, but ultimately parallel, visions of modernity. They chart the petering out of the twentieth century's boldest and most ambitious projects — of creating new men, new women, new people — and yet show the reemergence of utopian longings in the retreat to the familiar, the local, and the traditional. Twentieth-century Europe's darkest moments saw the stirrings of new utopian aspirations, and we suspect that this dialectic will continue to characterize the twenty-first-century world, which, by all indications, suggests that history is anything but over.

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