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## REFERENCES

Oxford et al: Peter Lang, 2010. pp. 264. ISBN: 3-03911-366-8

- 1 As its title suggests, Ruth Levitas's *The Concept of Utopia*—published originally in 1990 and republished this year in the “Ralahine Classics” series—is a study principally concerned with the definition of its object. Though this is rather unusual as the objective of a book-length study in more established fields of inquiry in the humanities, it is less so in utopian studies, where the desire to defend the scholarly dignity of one's preoccupations from the Scylla of mass media trivialization and the Charybdis of scholarly disrepute has made rigorous definition a priority.
- 2 The book's purpose is essentially twofold: first, it undertakes to summarize, in more or less chronological order, a variety of influential definitions—implicit and explicit—of the concept of utopia. This is not an effort to resolve the problem of definition by illustrating the existence of a hidden consensus, however; rather, Levitas is concerned to highlight zones of divergence and disagreement, showing that they follow from decisions to focus on different aspects of the concept (principally, on form, function and content). The second goal of the book, one pursued explicitly only in its last chapter, is to propose a new, and in the author's view more flexible and less problematically exclusive, definition of the concept of utopia. For Levitas, this new definition would allow us “to include the utopian aspects of a wide range of cultural forms and behaviors,” while exploring “the ways in which form, function and content interact and are conditioned by the social context of utopia” (222).
- 3 The structure of the book is accordingly both bifocal and asymmetrical: chapter one briefly examines the covert definitions of utopia in some of the early studies of the field—ones published between 1879 and 1952. Chapter two—on Marx and Engels—shifts the

focus from literary history and the history of ideas to sociology, and thus also to definitions of utopia principally concerned with function rather than with form or content. More interesting—because rarely discussed elsewhere—is chapter three which examines the pejorative conception of “utopia” in Georges Sorel (particularly in *Reflections on Violence*) in juxtaposition with its affirmative meaning in Karl Mannheim’s well-known essay on “Ideology and Utopia”. Chapter four turns to the greatly influential approach of Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, originally published in 1955-1959, but only made available in English a few years before the publication of Levitas’s book, in 1986. Levitas views Bloch as the principal advocate of the methodological rejection of form as the defining aspect of utopia and focuses on the ways in which Bloch attempts to shift focus to the rich variety of utopia’s contents (from mere daydreaming to the concrete utopia of Marxism) and functions (cognition of the present, anticipation of change, education of the desire for social transformation).

- 4 This last function—the treatment of desire as an educable, intentionally shapeable dimension of psychic life—comes unto its own as a subject in chapter 5, which is arguably the pivotal chapter in the book. The chapter focuses on the “rediscovery” of William Morris as a figure whose literary and essayistic work bridges utopianism and Marxism without sacrificing the former to *doctrinaire* orthodoxy but also without bypassing the need for engagement with real social relations and their transformation through collective action. Levitas usefully excavates the history of Morris’s reception in Marxist circles, from Robin Page Arnot’s reclamation of Morris for orthodox Marxism in the 1930s to Morris’s positive reappraisal as a properly Marxian utopist in A.L. Morton’s *The English Utopia*, to the hermeneutic “claims and counterclaims” that emerge in E.P. Thompson’s detailed study of Morris as a mediator between the otherwise disjointed traditions of Romanticism and Marxist humanism, but also in the diverging French interventions of Paul Meir and Miguel Abensour and in Perry Anderson’s reflexive appraisal of Morris’s place in the rethinking of the relationship between Marxism, Romanticism and utopia. Chapter six continues the investigation of the concept of utopian desire by revisiting Herbert Marcuse’s effort to think through the import of Freudian psychoanalysis for a theory of the function of the utopian impulse as counterweight to the combined pressures of the so-called “performance principle” and the establishment-propagated pleasures of “repressive desublimation”. Chapter seven, which closes this long genealogy of sociological conceptions of the function of utopia, visits more recent forays into definition, from J.C Davis’s typology of forms of the “ideal society” as forms of negotiating social scarcity, to Zygmunt Bauman’s insistence on the historical fatality of the modern link between utopianism and socialism, to Tom Moylan’s exploration of the category of “critical utopia” as an instance of interplay between changes in form and the transformation of ideological functions.
- 5 The book’s last chapter then undertakes both a critical summation of the approaches that have been outlined and a series of propositions that concern the re-theorization of the concept of utopia beyond the limits located in past theories. Levitas concludes a) that “narrow definitions” of utopia “in terms of content or form or function are all undesirable”; and b) that “any definition must be able to incorporate a wide range of forms, functions and contents” (207). This new definition involves the predication of utopia on a notion of desire—“the desire for a different, better way of being” (209). Levitas sees desire as a far more inclusive dimension than what it is frequently

associated with—hope—since the former does by no means necessarily entail hope in realisability and thus includes visions that are not meant to be taken as capable of materialization, from the Land of Cockayne to millennial visions of a state of things brought about by divine intervention, to utopian visions of an ideal world located in another, unlocatable space rather than in the impending future. In addition, Levitas privileges desire for a “better way of being” over that for an alternative world of social arrangements because for her “the pursuit of a better way of being does not always involve the alteration of external conditions” (221). A number of consequences follows: first, the rejection of the existence of anything like “universal utopia,” since “needs are differently perceived by different observers” and since “needs actually do vary between societies” (213); secondly, and as a consequence of this first consequence, the rejection of any definition of utopia that privileges a determinate ideational content; and finally, the rejection of the idea—central in much utopian theorizing from Bloch to Mannheim or Marcuse—that “utopia is both oppositional and transformative” (212). For Levitas, there is no deterministic link between utopian desire and social change, since “the transformation of reality and the realization of utopia depend [...] upon not only wishful thinking but will-full action” (230-31).

- 6 Principal among the strengths of Levitas’s book is its tough-mindedness regarding frequently unquestioned and unreflective assumptions about the relationship between the social dreaming involved in utopia and the possibilities of transformative social action. This seems to me particularly welcome, given the tendency of many literature-focused studies to assume a kind of transcendental efficacy in the formal qualities of a text and to overlook the multifold complexities of mediation between text and social context. Such tough-mindedness also has the virtue of allowing Levitas to argue convincingly and compellingly against the frequently unexamined assumption of the waning of utopia, showing that the neoconservative and neoliberal visions that dominated western society throughout the 1980s (and 90s) can be rigorously defined as utopian, to the extent that they fully express a desire for a different way of being—one that, in addition, its exponents did view as better and as more fulfilling for the individual than the one offered by socialism or by the Keynesian welfare state.
- 7 But the book also seems to me to exhibit a number of weaknesses: the first is largely compositional, and concerns what I described earlier as the book’s “asymmetrical” structure. It is not always clear to the reader why it is necessary to undertake a long and detailed examination of frequently well-known positions (for instance Marx and Engels’s, or Bloch’s) in order to arrive at the propositions of the last chapter. The exercise seems frequently repetitive, especially as Levitas returns to the criteriological triptych of form-function-content in almost every chapter, forcing a conceptual formalism on texts that do not always warrant it, often with rather reductive results. Given the highly interesting and challenging nature of the last chapter, one would wish for a different kind of presentation, one that would more organically interlace the author’s own concerns and methodological counterclaims with the critical reading of the tradition.
- 8 The second important weakness is one Levitas herself comments on in her new preface, and concerns the theoretical status of her key definitional term, that of (utopian) desire. Levitas argues that readers of the book have been puzzled by the term, “wrongly assuming a Lacanian reference” (xiii-xiv), but it is quite unclear what the appropriate theoretical ground for the concept actually is. Bloch’s attempt to construct a theory of

the “utopian impulse” is, as the author herself remarks, based on the assumption of a realm of consciousness—the “not yet conscious”—which has a drastically different character than that of the essentially regressive unconscious, but this supposition has had no theoretical impact within psychoanalysis and arguably lacks any experimental or clinical support. Marcuse’s own brand of Freudo-Marxism is one that has come under severe attack from orthodox psychoanalysis, which has accused it of a crude and reductive confusion of the categories of desire, demand and need, and of ignorance of Freud’s metapsychological theory of drives<sup>1</sup> (as Žižek has frequently remarked, for instance, Freud’s death drive has very little to do with Marcuse’s *Thanatos* or the so-called “nirvana principle”)<sup>2</sup>. Levitas herself seems to conflate desire and need in a number of instances, as when she speaks of a desire “for the effortless gratification of need” (220) or when she treats “educating desire” and “defining needs” (223) as interchangeable formulations of the function of utopia. The very idea of an “education of desire” is inadmissible from a psychoanalytic perspective, which would, if anything, speak of the possibility of a *manipulation* of desire through the provision of endless stand-ins or substitutions for its always lacking object (as in advertising); or, alternatively, of an education *through* desire, to the extent that the rallying cry of Lacanian ethics is not giving up on one’s desire<sup>3</sup>—which is to say, of traversing the fantasy that desire may be fulfilled, of overcoming the compensatory and regressive satisfactions of the Imaginary for the sake of confrontation with the traumatic but also liberating core of the Real.

- 9 It is impossible to bypass such objections effectively by simply remarking that “Lacanian psychoanalysis makes me lose the will to live” (xiv). One would rather need a fully developed alternative theory of desire that somehow does away with the structuring, ineradicable role of lack, including the lack in the Other who, according to Lacan, constitutes the locus of the subject’s desire. In the absence of such a theory, Levitas’s call for redefinition seems to stand on rather unsafe ground. What Fredric Jameson has termed “the desire called Utopia”<sup>4</sup> may be a useful heuristic schema, but it seems to me to refer less to an expression of desire pure and simple than to the result of a complex negotiation between desire and conscious political will, one that largely consists in an attempt to tether the former to the latter, to find ways through which the spontaneous expression of the former can be managed so as to benefit the goals defined by the latter, thus rendering the socially useful individually pleasurable and vice versa (Fourier seems to me the exemplary investigator of this mechanism). But one must also concede that this hardly seems to be exclusively the business of utopia, since the social management or “education” of the libidinal, far from being an adequate ground for the definition of the term, is no less the purview of utopia’s dialectical complement, which is to say of our old friend ideology.

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## NOTES

1. See Adrian Johnston, "A Blast from the Future: Freud, Marcuse and Snapping the Threads of the Past," *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious*, 2008, 73, 76-79; Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 27.
  2. See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2006, 62; and Joshua Delpech-Ramey, "An Interview with Slavoj Žižek," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 1.2 (2004): 33.
  3. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar VII), trans. Dennis Porter, New York: W.W. Norton, 1997; Bruce Fink, "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: A Lacanian Perspective," *The Psychoanalytic Review* 86 (1999): 529-545. Of Žižek's many forays into what a Lacanian "ethics of the real" would involve, of particular interest is his discussion of Agota Kristof's *The Notebook* in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009, 301-303.
  4. See Fredric Jameson: *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London and New York, Verso, 2005.
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