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The Half-Life of Utopia: On Memory and Temporality

From early on we are searching. All we do is crave, cry out. Do not have what we want (Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 21).

It's the hour of the dead, of our dead. And you should know that the Zapatista dead are very restless and talkative. They still speak, despite being dead, and they're shouting history. They're shouting it so it can't go to sleep, so that memory won't die, so that our dead will live, shouting – (Subcommandante Marcos, *Our Word is Our Weapon*, 201).

I.

In the long, and varied, trajectory of anti-utopian thought (from Aristophanes or Augustine, Burke or Popper, Ratzinger or Fukuyama), the project of utopian aspiration has been rejected as, at its most benign, an undertaking that is boring and stifling or, at its most demoniac, one that is authoritarian and destructive. While utopian practitioners and scholars have consistently opposed these negative judgements, they nevertheless recognize the dangers of closure and concentration of power that can develop in the moves from initial utopian impulses to an organized movement toward a better society or indeed the building of such a society. The tendency of disciplined political practice or the systematic ordering of a new society to repress the transformative energy that started it all has been soberly recognized in the utopian tradition – most especially in the self-reflexive critical utopian work of the 1960s-1970s.¹

¹ I want to thank Susan McManus for her responses to earlier drafts of this paper, and essay.

And yet, no utopian worthy of the name would embrace a transformative impulse alone. The risk of closure and control is thus unavoidable if utopian *change*, rather than gestural politics, is to be seriously pursued. The threat of a diminution or compromise of utopian energy (as the movement is organized, as subversive energy is tamed in favor of a post-revolutionary equilibrium, or as the power of leading the movement or administering the new society settles into habitual hands) cannot be denied, but rather must be addressed at each step in the transformative trajectory. The sheer threat of closure and control cannot justify the step backward that is called for in the anti-utopian stance. Utopian transformation *is* a dangerous act, but it no less worthy, or necessary, for being so.

In this essay, I explore the *temporal* quality of the utopian process. I argue that the productive utopian moment is of limited time duration, and needs to be recognized and worked with as such. For if and when a utopian movement is carried forward or a social order is successfully established, the subversive energy of the process at every moment must be protected within the very problematic and practices that drive it. To prevent closure and privilege – or at least to enable successful challenges to any such that develop – the conditions for a *renewable* utopian impulse must be made available. While the maintenance of an open logic and system that discourages privileged power (be it in the form of overt force, wealth, information, or hierarchy) is essential to the work of preserving the utopian opportunity, a vital tool in this strategy of keeping utopian potential alive is *memory*. For, as the closure of a movement or system threatens to take hold, historical knowledge, active memory, can enable dis-possessed, dis-empowered utopian activists or citizens to look back, recognize, and learn, not only from their own project but also from the historical struggles of others. In what follows, I elaborate my points by way of readings of three utopian texts: the film *The Village* and two sf/utopian novels, *The Dispossessed* and *The Years of Rice and Salt*.

II.

In *The Village* (2004), M. Night Shyamalan offers a pedagogical opportunity to meditate on the nature of the relationships between utopian impulse, movement, and system. Clearly, the desire of the village's founding

group to reject mainstream America and establish an alternative community is a good example of the sort of paradigm shift that a viable utopian energy can produce; and yet, the repression of that initial impulse and its transposition into a legitimation-disciplinary regime speaks to the ways in which utopian energy can fade away or be short-circuited in the face of either the elaboration of the new utopian paradigm (as here) or in the re-establishment of the system that the utopian impulse challenged (as we see in science fictional and dystopian narratives). And yet, some utopian value persists in the restored consensus at the end of the narrative: since the community continues to survive as a refuge to the modern American society beyond its forest walls. By film's end, the tension between process and system is still foregrounded, and viewers – in a Brechtian moment – are invited to dwell on the nature, and consequences, of this dynamic.

Of course, one of the classic studies of the tensions unfolding across impulse, movement, and system is Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 critical utopia, *The Dispossessed*. This time, however, we have a text that moves from the pedagogical *meditation* of *The Village* to a more activist pedagogical *intervention*. Here, Le Guin not only explores the relationship between process and system, for she goes on to refuse their apparent binary opposition (a strategy that informs all aspects of the novel). By the end of *The Dispossessed*, it is clear that she is calling for the persistence of utopian energy throughout the trajectory of political movement and societal planning. Thus, the utopian impulse of the revolutionary leader, Odo, and her comrades challenges the planetary status quo and produces a utopian society. However, when that new society falls into the strictures of its own plan, the limits of the initial impulse are reached. Yet, in another historical turn, a new impulse arises within the next generation, and a revolution in the revolution transforms the utopian society. Of course, this impulse and its own paradigm shift will likely be exhausted and a new equilibrium will settle into place; but, unlike the village, the new social order will be one in which process is both theoretically and practically, scientifically and existentially, incorporated within the Anarresti social reality.

III.

As we see in these examples, and so many others, this tension between process and system is almost always found in a given utopian example.

In this light, the utopian impulse might helpfully be understood if the terminology of nuclear physics were applied to it: namely, that any given instance of utopian aspiration has a certain *half-life*. In physics, half-life is the time required for the quantity of a radioactive material to be reduced to one-half its original value.² As a metaphor for the dynamics of the utopian impulse, *half-life* captures the explosive energy of utopian desire even as it recognizes that that energy will eventually run down. By understanding the tendency of the utopian impulse to crack open the present, provincial moment but then to recede after its catalyzing work is diminished (by being deflected, defeated, or exhausted), we are perhaps better able to understand the utopian dynamic and thus to work more knowingly with its recurring spiral of openness and ordering.

Many utopian commentators have reflected on the nature of the utopian impulse, and each in their own right has addressed the realities of its diminution or compromise. Fredric Jameson's observation that utopia's "deepest subject" is precisely humanity's "inability to conceive it, our incapacity to produce it as a vision" leads us to value utopia as a provocation that always exceeds its articulations or achievements ("Of Islands and Trenches" 21). Consequently, he invites us to regard utopia not as determined or determining content but rather as a "problematic," or a "set of ["essentially contested"] categories in terms of which reality is analyzed and interrogated" (Jameson, quoted in Wegner, "Horizons" 58).

Lyman Tower Sargent has written about the ways in which the catalyzing power of "utopian energy" can be "displaced ... into activities other than the creation of utopias" ("Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action" xx). Here, utopian energy is lost not in an entropic absorption into a given plan or system but rather in a diluting spillover into a reformist, or

² "The radioactive half-life for a given radioisotope is the time for half the radioactive nuclei in any sample to undergo radioactive decay. After two half-lives, there will be one fourth the original sample, after three half-lives one eighth the original sample, and so forth." See <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/nuclear/halfli.html>

even ameliorative, project. And yet, Sargent insists that even these compromised projects can, as they fail to meet human needs and desires, again “give rise to a new cycle of utopian thinking” (“Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action” xx).

Further, Susan McManus argues that a utopian project needs to be based in its most disruptive impulses even as it goes on to inform the building of movements, institutions, or societies. Thus: utopia “should be resolutely disruptive ... of thought which accepts the given realities as the only realities; disruptive of attempts at recuperation of the radical; and transgressive to any given order of things.” And, while both the disruptive and the institutional “are epistemologically and politically necessary, and dialectically related [, the] second moment, of institutionalisation must ... always be subject to the disruptive and imaginative moment” (“Fabricating the Future” 3).

And, of course, Ernst Bloch identified the utopian impulse as central to the historical movement of hope and change. As with the others, Bloch is at pains to make clear that a “mere” impulse in the present is not enough, for this forward drive must embody an elaborated – or, as Ruth Levitas puts it, “educated” – move toward a future achievement, even as that very achievement will itself change in the realities of historical accomplishment (see Levitas xx). Important, here, is Bloch’s recognition of the temporal movement generated by the utopian impulse. To be sure, the near achievement of a utopian victory may well slow down the impulse, as the “magnetic needle of intention then begins to sink, because the pole is near”; and yet, the impulse persists, based as it always is in an “intention that is never demolished” (I, 315). Bloch clearly does not oppose impulse and system as incompatible binaries. To the contrary, while recognizing the primacy of impulse he asserts the connective relationship between the two.

The utopian impulse, then, is the primary utopian category of interpretation. While I agree with Ruth Levitas that this is not an essential quality of human nature, not an anthropological truth, I do argue that it is a central category of analysis within the utopian hermeneutic (see *Concept* 7-8). Given this distinction, our understanding of how we might more effectively grasp the nature of such a utopian impulse can be further refined by our study of theories, texts, and experiences. Here, then, I argue that we can read utopian activity by way of identifying its motive force as an impulse toward a better world, a better society. Having posited this category of an *impulse*, however,

I think it is useful to recognize additionally that it is almost always temporally limited by the ways in which it is taken up and (variously) displaced into reformist movements, congealed into revolutionary discipline, or trapped within social blueprints – when it is not simply defeated or suppressed. The force of the impulse is powerful, but it needs to be reignited over and over as its initial bursts of energy fade. A major tool in this process is memory – in particular, that form of memory that is productive rather than consoling or disempowering. Working from Bloch, Vincent Geoghegan identifies two types of memory: *anamnesis* (recollection) and *anagnorisis* (recognition). *Recollection*, he reminds us, is seen by Bloch as “epistemologically conservative, precluding new knowledge since all knowledge lies in the past” and is therefore closed to the new, settling instead for a recurring reassurance within the status quo (“Remembering the Future” 21). With *recognition*, on the other hand, “memory traces are reactivated in the present, but there is never simple correspondence between past and present, because of all the intervening novelty (“Remembering the Future” 22).” The creative force of recognition, then, lies in the way it can register the similarity and dissimilarity between past and present and thus produce new knowledge that is informed by the past yet not reducible to it. As Geoghegan puts it, Bloch values “memory as a repository of experience and value in an inauthentic ... world”; however, for that deployment of memory to be productive it must guide but not control present transformative work (“Remembering the Future” 23). In regard to the utopian impulse, the recognition of, and creative reflection on, past struggles can inform the initial drive so that it becomes imbued with an educated grasp of previous efforts as it proceeds with the work of negation, re-vision, transformation in an act of what Bloch has called “temporal solidarity.”

Thus, in the case of *The Village*, the utopian alternative is compromised as the true story of its original utopian impulse is suppressed in favor of the myth that keeps the community locked in a static enclave. Without recognizing its history and building on it, the village is doomed to remaining, at best, a *residual* refuge rather than an *emergent* community that meets the needs of its members as well as challenging contemporary American society.

Whereas in the ongoing project of Anarres, the structural openness of the utopian culture enables its citizens to break through accumulated stasis and privilege. Working not only from their needs and desires but also from

memories of the teachings of Odo and the actions of the entire movement from their first campaigns to the building of the new society, the young members of the Syndicate of Initiative (itself an example of McManus's linkage of the disruptive and the institutional) learn from their own past as well as from other struggles on their home planet and on the distant Terra; but they then take the next utopian step in ways that innovatively go beyond the earlier, concrete utopian, moment.

This subversive power of a forward-looking memory in the service of utopian change is especially foregrounded in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002). In Robinson's counter-epic, the Black Death destroys such a large part of the population of Europe that the rise of "Western civilization" never happens. Instead, history takes a different path, with centers of power emerging in Chinese and Islamic societies, while Christian Europe and the indigenous cultures of the unconquered Americas survive on the peripheries. Into this story – with its considered reexamination of the processes of history and revolution, science and society – Robinson introduces three characters who recur in a series of historical episodes that move from the post plague years of the 8th century up to the revolutionary Chinese society of the second millennium (marked by the "Christian year" of 2002). As they live through each period and then die and are resurrected (by way of Robinson's version of Buddhist reincarnation), the characters ("always reincarnated with names that begin with the same letters") eventually seize control of history so that humanity can intervene with an empowering memory of previous lifetimes (649).

Thus, Robinson follows his threesome as they die and enter the *bardo*, the holding room in the afterlife, wherein they are prepared for their next life by being purged of their previous memories, judged as to their behaviors, and returned to a new life in a form that is in keeping with their accrued karma. Somewhere around the time of what would have been the onset of Western Enlightenment, these increasingly subversive subjects begin to retain glimpses of their past life while still alive. Eventually, while waiting yet again in the *bardo*, they devise a way to hold on to their active memory, so that upon rebirth they no longer "awake to emptiness" but rather remember, recognize, what happened in the previous periods.

The critical breakthrough comes during their fifth reincarnation, when (then) Khalid, Bahram, and Iwang reflect on what is becoming a painful

cycle. This time, the three ask why such a cycle has to happen, why there is not a developing meaning to life, why there is no choice in its direction (297-298). “I liked that life! I had plans for that life,” Bahram declares; but Khalid reminds him that they are but toys for the gods, who kill them for sport. Finally, Iwang steps in and says, heretically, “Forget them. We’re going to have to do this on our own”; and Khalid say he wants not just love and happiness but truth, and more so justice and closes the conversation by announcing that “we can make our own world” (298-300). When they enter new lives in their next reincarnation, now in the utopian Hodensaunee culture in North America, the three manage to recall fragments from their previous lives, primarily in their dreams but also at moments of unexcepted recognition (315). Thus, in a politicization of the psychoanalytic process, the three forge a new perspective on their existence, working against the regime of forgetting as they enter into a collective talking cure of recognition.³ Their growing access to memory leads them to realize that events do not necessarily have to happen over and over again; and this shift from blindness to insight enables them to devise pro-active strategies to protect their utopian North American culture from imperialist invasion (316-327). In an evening when they are helped by an altered state of consciousness brought on by “shamanic tobacco,” Iagogeh, Fromwest, and Keeper reach a politically therapeutic moment of recovered memory: “Listen – we live many lives. We die and then come back in another life,” Fromwest asserts (326). Now realizing that it is the history of ordinary people rather than that of “emperors and generals” that has revolutionary potential, Iagogeh declares that, “We grow together, as the Buddha told us would happen. Only now can we understand and take on our burden” (328). If their political and cultural gains are to be taken forward to later generations, then their accumulating memory must be tapped and directed by these once powerless subjects of the gods.

After another death, the three again enter the bardo. Only this time their informed consciousness has prepared them for overt action. Keeper is ready for revolution as he “looked at the long line of souls waiting their turn to be judged, and saw them staring at him amazed, and he shouted at them, Riot! Revolt! Rebel! Revolution!” (333); and Iagogeh draws on a journal she had written in an earlier life in her efforts to retain a political memory. Reading

³ This is a move suggested, as I see it, by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*.

from her “Jade Record,” she outlines their revolutionary strategy: “Frontal assaults are ineffective, as I recall.... We have to go at the system itself. We need a technical solution,” and then she spells out the key tactic of refusing to drink the “vial of forgetting” (333). As she elaborates: “We go into each life ignorant of our pasts, and so we struggle on each time without learning anything from the times before. We have to avoid that if we can. So listen, and remember: when you are in the hundred and eight rooms of [Meng, the Goddess of Forgetting], don’t drink anything!” Reading on, she plots the final moves of her plan: “If they force you to [drink], then only pretend to drink it, and spit it out when you are released.” Thus, the three enter the chamber of Meng, ready to act against the gods’ logic that declares that “souls were not to return to life too burdened or advantaged by their pasts” (334). Following the plan, they spit out the liquid of forgetting and reach the far shore of the river of blood. The now clear-headed Keeper cries out “Justice”; and Iagogeh reminds them that in their next life they can remember, and “make something new” (335).

Thus, Robinson spins his political fable, one that turns on the collective grasp of historical memory and its deployment in the process of producing a utopian world. Indeed, what we read in this novel is an extended meditation on engaged, and theorized, historical change, wherein “habit is no longer enough, and choices have to be made” (644). Consequently, not simply the content of history but now its form comes to the fore (see 648). Refusing the cyclic pattern, Robinson argues for a critical narrative of historical unfolding that is increasingly self-aware and open to the imaginative work of utopian vision; for as Kirana, in yet another reincarnation, notes, there has developed in human consciousness the phenomenon of “people imagining that things were better in another land, which then gave them the courage to try to enact some progress in their own country as in the stories of the good place discovered and then lost, what the Chinese called ‘Source of the Peach Blossom’ stories” (601). Thus, utopian vision joins with the work of *dharma history*, “in which humanity struggles to ... to better itself, and so generation by generation to make progress, fighting for justice, and an end to want, with the strong implication that we will eventually work our way up to the sources of the [Chinese utopian] peach blossom stream, and the age of great peace will come into being” (646).

What follows in the last half of the book is still a difficult process. As an earlier version of the I character, Ibrahim, writes to his wife, Kang, the full transformation of the world will require a long and hard struggle: “until the number of whole lives is greater than the number of shattered lives, we remain stuck in some kind of prehistory, unworthy of humanity’s great spirit. History as a story worth telling will only begin when the whole lives outnumber the wasted ones” (408). Yet, as we see, the I, K, and B characters do finally seize control of the means of reincarnation and tap the power of forward memory in order to act on Ibrahim’s utopian anticipation. By retaining active memories, they and others can recognize what went socially and politically wrong and intervene accordingly. Now self-aware from one lifetime to the next, humanity can gradually improve the world.

Memory, then, intensifies the quality of the utopian impulse. Like an enriched plutonium with its increased power, the forward looking memories that inform the renewed impulse afford a higher valence of effectiveness to the utopian process of not only anticipation but actual transformation.

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