

CONTEMPORARY UTOPIANISM: THEORY AND PRACTICE.

IMPRINTS OF BLUEPRINTS

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ABSTRACT: Herein I argue that due to the proliferation of poststructuralist critique and the pernicious and ever-present threat of totalitarianism, the classic utopian design novels of the past have all but disappeared, or have become more twisted and inclined towards dystopian outcomes. Ironically, they have partly survived and thrived in non-fiction, based on the human instinct and positivist love of tools, plans, and schemes. I will primarily be using the example of Jeremy Rifkin's book, "The Zero Marginal Cost Society" to build and clarify my argument, with additional reference to Ray Kurzweil's, "The Singularity is Near." These "utopias of cornucopia coming" bear striking resemblances to chiliastic and messianic traditions of spirit and thought, and use extrapolated predictions of growth and progress to herald an age of change and a change of ages, all without the need for bloodshed, redistribution of property, grief, tears, or revolution. Finally, I conclude that with greater scrutiny of malformed utopian blueprints, there may be great potential for academic progress in such an endeavor. While their predictive power is arguably dubious, their general commentary on society, as well as the modern zeitgeist for societal improvement through technology, may well prove to be invaluable. This benefit is likely to reinvigorate not only utopian studies as a pursuit in itself but other neighboring academic fields, lending its method and conclusions eclectically and freely, and likely resulting in its ascension to the higher tiers of contemporary academic notoriety.

Introduction

The demise of the blueprinting utopia has been long ongoing; the poststructuralist deconstruction lead to an (over-) emphasis on its potential, or some might even say tendency, to encourage a totalitarian outcome. The "real-existierender Sozialismus" and the excesses of fascism seem to completely justify those assumptions. Some see blueprinting, or even worse, utopia as a whole, as completely discredited. Others at

least try to save the Utopian approach by reducing it to its pure impulse and most atavistic trajectory. This could well be Abelour's famous notion of the education of desire or Levitas' Utopia as a Method. Without wanting to criticize these titans of Utopian Studies, reading these works can leave a great deal still literally to be desired. Particularly, I'd add, the desire inherent to man and arguably one of his most noble traits: his creativity, ingenuity, his desire to shape the world around him, to create and use tools. That is, man the maker, not just man the aspirer.

One has to remember, being in the 500th year of the original publishing of More's Utopia, that he used the island narrative and the obvious contradictions inherent in it, humorous jests and jibes and sprinkles of self-conscious writing and satire on contemporary travel literature not only to entertain, but also to obfuscate his intentions and dampen the full impact of his social critique in an age of censorship, of cruel and random punishment, and a very select clerical readership to be engaged with care. He later paid the ultimate price, being beheaded for his convictions, refusing to bow to what he saw as a usurping of the religious domain through worldly powers. Luckily, in the modern western world, these times are over. Yet in the nascent digital age, we currently find ourselves in, thumbs-ups and unanimous positive reviews are paramount to economic success and general exposure alike. No author in his right mind outside the obscure realm of electronic self-publishing would still dare write a full-scale classic blueprint utopia. Yet the initial desire - the urge to create order in randomness, to solve all ailments of the crooked timber that humanity is made of, the strife to create a worldly paradise - can't seemingly be quenched.

Imprints of blueprints – Jeremy Rifkin

Barred from gaining traction and ultimately blossoming in contemporary fiction, it retreated to online forums, parts of the science-fiction community and (this being the main result of my early research on my thesis) to non-fiction literature. Referring to Jeremy Rifkin's work, this short position paper however does not allow me to summarize a 300 page, densely written, book which mainly consists of, in my opinion, a well-rounded and apt attempt at summarizing the history of (western) industrialization, its underlying matrixes of power, consumption, production and transportation. Arguably the most interesting part is the structure of the book, first

amassing over 200 pages of fact-based economic history, loaded with citations and references, then jumping to fantastical conclusions and vastly unrealistic assumptions about the near future. It would not be hyperbole to interpret the overwhelmingly dense first section as a method of building trust and gaining authority, to then jump over presenting and offering a possible future of our society's structure to instead flat out declaring how, exactly, the current development will pan out, intermingle and spark a whole new order.¹ Present day trends are optimistically and randomly prolonged into the future, ignoring bell-curve effects, digressive patterns, or any standard means of statistic caution. Technology and its progress is burdened with exceptionally unrealistic expectations, not only bordering on but clearly crossing into the realm of science fiction.² Basic laws are bent almost until breaking point; all of this in order to present a concise picture of how our future will be. In an extremely abridged version, a little unfair to Rifkin's vast approach, a combination of a resurgence of the commons, almost-free renewable energy, a confluence of total connectedness, transparency and free and exhaustive online education plus distributed additive manufacturing at home and a total mechanization and automation of farming, mining and, industry will create a society almost devoid of what we see as work or classic for-profit capitalism today. Would it be such a vast stretch to interpret this is a blueprint utopia in disguise, just lacking the narrative features or the island myth?

The most notable part of the work is the seemingly boundless optimism and positivism displayed by Rifkin, which was already dissected by Raphael Sassower in his excellent short book review published in *Utopian Studies* Vol. 26. Almost any critique leveled

¹ One could of course argue that this is either totalitarianism in a new guise and at its worst, perpetrating the vision of the future as irrevocable and unavoidable or a twist of a Hegelian "Weltgeist" at work.

² Rifkin treats additive manufacturing as a de-facto version of the "replicator" famous from the series *Star Trek*, a technology which manipulates matter on a molecular level to produce any good needed. He ignores all the intricacies in the productive process of modern technological advances, the myriad of materials and refined machinery involved. Without being overly pessimistic I dare to predict that it is unlikely that we see a machine in every home even at the end of this century which is able to print so much as a sandwich-toaster lest a microchip. To further illustrate these intricacies refer to Thwaites, Thomas: *The Toaster Project. Or A Heroic Attempt to Build a Simple Electric Appliance from Scratch*, Princeton Architectural Publishing, New York, 2011 or use this video resource https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_thwaites_how_i_built_a_toaster_from_scratch?language=en.

here can be traced back to Sassower having to make do with less than four pages to summarize and comment on Rifkin's work of epic proportions.

Rifkin, as with many others, identifies a "hybrid" or "post-capitalist" economy, "...where strands of capitalist and socialist theories coexist without rancor or where the best of both come to fruition."³ He draws from the free software movement, free culture movement, sharing economy, the maker movement, open-source, the traditional commons, the creative commons, big data, the internet-of-things, collaborative learning culture, communalism and the environmental movement. Sassower concedes to Rifkin that "...after a quarter of a century his voice should be heard, regardless of any disagreement about the details of his analysis."⁴ Rifkin thinks that "as more and more of the goods and services that make up the economic life of society edge toward near zero marginal cost and become almost free, the capitalist market will continue to shrink into more narrow niches where profit-making enterprises survive only at the edges of the economy. This will, apparently, ultimately lead to reliance on a diminishing consumer base for very specialized products and services"⁵ Throughout his work a disregard for all the ailments and vices plaguing our current world is eminent; his optimism and praise for perceived human nature is astonishing. The mindset of the upcoming generation is collaborative, infused with "empathic consciousness"⁶. The new generation forms benefit corporations, mutually shares resources, prefers access over ownership, is environmentally concerned, creative, and in general kind and caring. No crooked timber of humanity to be found here, apparently. Sassower too sees that Rifkin paints "a certain inevitability to its eventual success." He expects a shift of consciousness and identification away from a mythological, theological, ideological, and psychological notion towards one based on mutual empathy culminating in the

³ Sassower, Raphael: *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* by Jeremy Rifkin (review). *Utopian Studies*, Volume 26, Number 1, 2015, pp. 256-259

⁴ Sassower of course is right with this basic matter of academic politeness, he does kindly omit though that the author also purveyed books with telling titles proclaiming "The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era end of work" already in 1995 or "The hydrogen economy" in 2002. Neither the former nor the latter ever materialized, the tendency of jumping on the bandwagon and on current trends becomes apparent though.

⁵ Rifkin, Jeremy. "The zero marginal cost society." J. Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* (2014) p. 5

⁶ Rifkin, p. 298.

notion of the “*homo empathicus*”.⁷ Quoting Gandhi multiple times, he calls for a moderation of technological use, citing the Appropriate Technology movement. Nevertheless, the fifth and last chapter of his book is rather tellingly titled “The economy of abundance” and starts out with the topic: “the sustainable cornucopia”. Yet, as any modern author or inventor of a utopian community, he refuses the utopian label: “There is no need of empathy in heaven and no place for it in utopia because in these otherworldly realms there is no pain and suffering, no frailties and flaws, but only perfection and immortality.”⁸ His distancing from utopianism yet actually rather reinforces the categorization of his vision as *clearly* utopian.

He continues: “Often people mistake empathic consciousness with utopianism when in fact, it is the very opposite. When you and I feel empathy towards another being – be it another human being or one of our fellow creatures – it’s tinged with the whiff of their eventual death and the celebration of their existing life.”⁹ Here he conflates utopianism with humanism or just a generally positive outlook on the *conditio humana*. His philosophical background seems to be inspired by Levinas’ writings about the Other and his philosophy of the primacy of ethics. Sassower too seems to disagree with the findings: “Here at last we have his view of utopia, one that may not resonate with all of us. Utopian thinking is indeed inspirational and at times in “no place.” Yet this does not mean that it necessarily ignores the realities—frailties and flaws—built into our forms of organization and governance.”¹⁰

Sassower thus is rightfully asking: “Will collaboration necessarily benefit us all or just those among us who are experts? Will income and wealth inequality vanish in the digital age or remain a thorn in our collective thigh? What about the delicate balance between accessibility and privacy (which Rifkin mentions briefly [75–77])? As empathic as we may all become over time, can we imagine excising jealousy and rivalry if not

⁷ Rifkin, pp. 298–302, the term “*homo empathicus*” is a subchapter headline borrowed from chapter five: biosphere lifestyle.

⁸ Rifkin, p. 301.

⁹ Rifkin, p. 301.

¹⁰ Sassower, p. 258 having an economic academic background Sassower quotes Benkler and tries to mount a small critique in the last chapter of his review whereas I have the luxury of elaborating my point with more space.

outright competition among humans? Can sadness and suffering be fully eradicated?" Without resort to the Prozac or Soma of the future, one might add.

All of these questions are perfectly valid though yet more come to mind: What about the dominance of property over access? Is it not inevitable that transparent access will lead to a rising marginal income of the property-owners? This inevitably leads back to Sassower's question of wealth and income-inequality. Current economic research from Piketty¹¹, amongst others, clearly points in that direction. If there is this perceived increase in information exchange, manageability, transparency combined with the ecological outlook of the *homo emphaticus*, why not change the whole corporate model to benefit corporations? Which niche sectors exactly will remain core-capitalist, while the mainstream capitalism will be overcome by its own success? Do the young people he dubs the "collaborative generation" really prefer access over ownership or are they just economically and morally downtrodden enough to settle for the scraps left over by debt-burdened governments, struggling to provide for the retirement plans of previous baby-booming generations? Concerning the ideological premises: Will the developing nations just skip the 2nd industrial revolution we underwent and enjoyed to our benefit and head straight for the collaborative commons? To state that a lot of questions are unanswered and doubts are prevalent is something of an understatement.

"As market capitalism becomes less dominant, we should all welcome ideas and books by the likes of Rifkin that promote alternative models of organization. But accepting too rosy a picture of these models without proper critical engagement will be at our peril."¹²

It should be telling when a scholar of utopian studies chastises the economist for painting a too rosy picture.

The other book highly reminiscent of this kind of thinking is Ray Kurzweil's notable "The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology" from 2006. Despite focusing on a completely different topic¹³, it shares many of the same characteristics as

¹¹ Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Harvard University Press, 2014.

¹² Sassower p. 259.

¹³ Kurzweil predicts that through the combination of the progress of genetics, robotics, nanotechnology and A.I. human life will be irreversibly transformed and will transcend the limitations of our biological bodies and brain. This point of time, the singularity, continues the strife for "greater complexity, greater elegance, greater knowledge, greater intelligence, greater beauty, greater creativity, and greater levels

Rifkin's utopia: An upcoming rapture and societal structural change only for the better, all guided by processes already set in motion and deemed unstoppable (in this case scientific progress and not capitalistic logic) which result in overall human worldly eudemonia.

One notably unique factor of Kurzweil's utopia is that it will be populated not with the liberated proletariat, nor any humans at all, in fact. Instead, Kurzweil advocates a modification of human nature itself through genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and merging human consciousness with AI. This presents something of a problem for anyone considering his ideas, as it becomes almost impossible to relate emotionally or intellectually with these sated cyborgs of tomorrow. Kurzweil places almost all of his faith in the transformative power of technology, and makes almost no allowances for inevitable abuses of said technology. One point to keep in mind with the thesis, also, is the fact that Kurzweil's ideas are unique in that he has constructed one of the few utopian blueprints that is not subject to the usual downfalls of human nature left unchecked over time. Whereas other models attempt to better the world through solidarity and efficient political rearrangement, Kurzweil argues that just the mere act of changing our most basic, primal nature through the use of technology will already deliver us the keys to our own salvation.

Just like More 500 years ago, the blueprint is sprinkled with a number of contradictions and "what-ifs", but more, apparently, just to reinforce the overall argument. Being "non-fiction", Kurzweil seems to lack the humor and narrative frame of the original utopia but in all other ways the two are a full genetic match. Kurzweil even commits the fatal mistake of all utopians, futurologists, and doomsday-cult-proponents by providing a specific date: In 2045 the Singularity (or, the rapture) will come to pass. Rifkin wisely dodged the fallacy of chronological specificity.

The Philosophical Origins

of subtle attributes such as love" According to Kurzweil these attributes in their apex are generally used to describe God. Hence according to him evolution is moving towards a "conception of God" and altering or even the full transition from our biological roots is in fact a spiritual undertaking. The analogies to chiliasm and messianic Marxism are evident and paramount.

But this piece is not about writing another, lengthier, review about Rifkin's book and its shortcomings; for he did write an impressive piece of economic history and provided an insightful analysis and approach. The same goes for Kurzweil's most well-known work. Both works definitely depict utopian blueprinting processes though, clearly visible throughout the entire work. The analogies to Marx are striking. He too saw himself less as a philosopher than as an economist. Marx analyzed past trends and the development of capitalism out of the feudal periods up to his time and predicted what in his mind was inductively bound to come next. Rifkin does exactly the same, only in a far gentler fashion. His blueprinting does not include a rapture or, a call for revolution, or for arms. Empathy and capitalism will apparently pave the way for a future of abundance automatically. We will be guided to the sustainable cornucopia of the future by the invisible hand of the market. We only need embrace its gentle grip and allow ourselves to be led to techno-lubberland. XX scarcity / light-green Ecotopia Kurzweil on top of that does away with humanity, as we know it.

It is not just classic run-of-the-mill Marxism which is visible here, but there are unmistakable remnants and reverberations of century-old sentiments. Roughly half a century after Marx' death, concurring with the Russian communist revolution and its aftermath, a deeper utopian undercurrent surfaced. Mainly brought to light by the likes of George Lukacs, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin it is known as "messianic Marxism". Michael Gardiner aptly summarized it as a "heady synthesis of millennialist and Judeo-Christian theological influences, irrationalist philosophies of the sort that were redolent in fin-de-siècle Europe [*italics his*], and a very idiosyncratic, almost Gnostic interpretation of Marxism."¹⁴ Lukacs dubbed it "romantic anti-capitalism" which had an impulse of restoration, following sorelian thought, and at the same time a forward thrust of the utopian kind. The Jewish collectivist redemptive influence is clearly visible, defying ameliorism or piece-meal reform in favor of leaping out of the historical continuum of modernist progress. Thus, an amalgam was forged between libertarian-utopian socialism and the promise of the radical transformation of the present through apocalyptic messianism. There is one major difference, though, to the modern echo of

¹⁴ Gardiner, Michael. A Postmodern Utopia? Heller and Fehér's Critique of Messianic Marxism. *Utopian Studies* Vol. 8, No.1 1997 P. 89-123.

this messianic thought: as mentioned already, it evolves automatically, without any bloodshed or combined effort. No class consciousness needs to be invoked, we are all in this together, resting, yet joyfully waiting. Back in the 20th century there was almost a sense of longing for a departure from this perceived corrupt world, devoid of genuine community or society, as a short-cut to escape the dreadful, grinding, seemingly aimless workings of the Hegelian or Marxist dialectic spiral. The same utopian longing is still present, but our generation merely tries to let a positivist Hegelian Weltgeist and its autonomous capitalist agency do our bidding instead. Unlike in Rifkin, Kurzweil presents us with his version of the rapture, the so-called Singularity. But again, unlike in metaphysical or religious terms it comes about with no bloodshed or even conscious effort. In Rifkin's work an amalgam of techno-capitalism and free enterprise gradually leads us away from scarcity and frees the *homo empathicus* trapped inside of us, while in Kurzweil's book technological progress boosts us forward to a point of no return where actual humanity changes its own nature down to the DNA.

Conclusion

Without poking unjust fun at some overly optimistic projections, a number of questions remain about blueprinting and its future. As one can see, it certainly breaks through many defending walls erected by postmodern poststructuralist deconstruction. So does it make sense to cry wolf (or rather "Hitler" or "Stalin") at anyone being caught trying to deliver a blueprint for a future improved society and forgetting to include a disclaimer, regardless of how well-meant and cautious its formulation? Is a cautious dream even be possible if the act of dreaming itself is fundamentally about getting lost in an ocean of possibility? Is it possible to build a future world inside confines set up in the present due to hazards past?

Maybe one should rather view utopian modes of thought like a dual-use technology; in general beneficial but with a hazardous potential. In the 500th year of the publication of the original Utopia, just how utopian might More's narration have seemed to the readers of yore?

Ultimately, to conclude, the question seems to rest in determining whether these works are examples of utopia-lite, utopia refined, or the seeds of potential dystopias waiting patiently for their day. The task at hand is to devise a litmus test against which to

determine and separate a possible utopia from mere science-fiction. Or is the gradient so fluent that just the mere act of making precise predictions in time allows us to distinguish between those models we revere, and those we take with a heavy pinch of skepticism?