

Crafting Utopia: Notes on the tensions within Marxist-related conceptualizations

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Abstract

In an era marked by the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism and the far right's increasing popularity, the language of utopia has returned to scholarly and political debate, sometimes in conversation with Marxist positions. Still, the discussion hinges on whether such language propels us beyond capitalist social relations or confines itself to limited liberal ambitions. To clarify this tension, the article first revisits Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's ambivalent stance on utopianism, underscoring both their principled skepticism toward speculative blueprints and their conviction that utopia, as a communist horizon, is indispensable to revolutionary praxis. It then interrogates three authors, influenced by Marxist frameworks, who have recently renewed the debate on utopia: Erik Olin Wright's 'real utopias', formulated within analytic Marxism; Michael Albert's 'practical utopias', grounded in libertarian-socialist currents; and Ana Cecilia Dinerstein's 'concrete utopias', who borrows Ernst Bloch's anticipatory consciousness with autonomist Marxism. Its final aim is to ascertain not only the differences among these three perspectives but, above all, the extent to which their respective frameworks converge with a Marxist conception of utopia as articulated in classical Marxism. We undertake this examination to argue that, despite their attempts to revalidate Marxist utopianism in the present, these perspectives may nonetheless fall short of articulating a horizon that truly

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transcends the proclaimed *end-of-history*, one commensurate with the Marxian aspiration to abolish class society and build communism.

Keywords

concrete utopia, Engels, Marx, Marxism, practicable utopia, real utopia

Introduction

The resurgence of the far right, the intensifying articulation of ecological and economic crises, the normalization of quotidian terror, and the eruption of popular anger compel us to revisit Gramsci's oft-cited aphorism that the 'old world' has not yet died, even as the 'new' appears ever more remote (Gramsci 2002; Žižek 2011). How might we revive a utopian imagination adequate to a reality that often appears irretrievably dystopian? In the shadow of this turmoil, the post-Cold War ideology of the end of ideologies – euphemistically branded the *end-of-history* (Fukuyama, 2019) – has generated a widespread sense of disillusion (Moyn 2010; Traverso 2019). By treating utopia as a purely formal exercise detached from collective struggle, the defeats suffered by labor and socialist movements at the close of the 20th century drastically narrowed the horizon of social transformation (De Sousa Santos 2009; Eagleton 1997).

Yet the human impulse to envision an alternative future has not withered. Without utopia, humankind would risk, as Garforth (2009) remembers, the very disappearance of the future. Marxism, with its long-standing commitment to exposing and abolishing the contradictions of capitalist society, provides a conceptual arsenal for renewing this impulse (cf. Chrostowska and Ingram 2017; Gardiner 2006; Wallerstein 1986). Utopian thinking, understood not as an escapist blueprint but as a critical epistemology, can help to puzzle the contradictions of the real and may highlight how they can be stopped and removed from the logic of exploitation and domination (cf. Eagleton 2000). Nevertheless, the contemporary revival of utopia is riven by paradox. Alongside emancipatory aspirations, we encounter its domestication into minimal liberal reform (cf. Habermas 1986) or annihilation by ecological cataclysm (cf. Berardi 2011) or even by the grotesque revanchist dystopia of the far right (cf. Fitting 1991).

The task, therefore, is not merely to acknowledge utopia's return but to interrogate whether it fosters an emancipatory political subjectivity capable of displacing the so-called *end-of-history* paradigm. Guided by Marx's emphasis on immanent critique, class struggle, and the communist horizon, this article undertakes such interrogation. We begin by reexamining the classical Marxism's ambivalent engagement of Marx's and Engels's with utopianism, arguing that the commonplace portrayal of their position as wholly hostile is reductive and essentialist of what utopia means. Indeed, the task is far from straightforward, since the Marxian and Marxist canons abound in incisive critiques of utopianism (cf. Davis 2010; Geoghegan 1987; Leopold 2007, 2016; Lovell 1992, 2004; Paden 2002).

Even so, there is a profound connection between Marxism and utopianism, but it is not an undefined one: Marxism shapes a specific conception of utopia (cf. Engels 2014).

This article begins to revise the connection and determinacy of Marxian conceptual apparatuses in relation to utopian thought. The utopia of classical Marxism is best understood as a movement toward a *horizon* (cf. Dean 2013). Marx and Engels reject speculative architectural designs for the future¹ precisely because their critique of capitalism is oriented to an immanent communist possibility: communism as a practical, historically mediated project that emerges from determination and is irreducible either to Icarian projects or to liberal ideals of juridical equality and moral harmony.

We then scrutinize three contemporary frameworks: Erik Olin Wright's 'real utopias', Michael Albert's 'practicable utopias', and Ana Cecilia Dinerstein's 'concrete utopias'. Emerging amid the neoliberal dystopia of recent decades, these approaches offer contrasting answers that aim at renewing the junction of contemporary Marxist analysis and utopian thought. However, our core claim is that, notwithstanding the important revalidation of Marxist utopianism, contemporary invocations of utopia often undermine or fetishize the very nucleus of Marxism (e.g. the centrality of class, antagonism, and the dynamics of struggle). As we argue throughout, returning to classical formulations can help to disentangle why this occurs and to clarify what it means to struggle for utopia today.

Utopia in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: critiques and examinations

If the concept of 'utopia' is, therefore, multiple and diverse, and if the various approaches that have been taken to it are sometimes mutually contradictory, this is not because it is a useless notion nor because it has been analytically mis-categorized, but because it harbors within itself the potential to transform the world (cf. Marx 1994a). Even if this idea at certain moments assumes a moralizing character (cf. Sánchez Vázquez 2007), it cannot be assumed that such a feature is essential to the term. After all, the long trajectory taken by the different utopian projects – even before the label we now assign to them existed (Tapia Argüello 2019: 172–174) – attests to their broad variability.

The first explicitly Marxist engagement with the concept of utopia appears in Friedrich Engels's *Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie* – Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy – (cf. Schmidt 1962: 150). In this text, one of the immediate antecedents to Marx's later turn toward the political economy of labor (cf. Marx 1994a: 89), Engels mounts a critique of Malthusian theories of human reproduction while simultaneously interrogating the scientific validity of their foundational postulates. In doing so, he not only challenges what would later be designated the 'traditional' views of political economy (Horkheimer 2008) but also the underlying assumptions that these perspectives found as the limits of their analysis. By presenting future scientific and technological developments as genuine possibilities, Engels problematizes the purported constraints imposed by the economic conditions of his time. This method does not posit an unreservedly optimistic vision of tomorrow via ostensibly ready-made solutions. Rather, it precisely uncovers those unexamined, yet fundamentally problematic dimensions embedded within reality itself (Engels 1970).

The problematization of what has been termed the philosophical critique of reality (e.g. Marx 1994b: 229–232) brought about a radical transformation in Marx's and

Engels's thought, leading them, among other things, to question both the theoretical development and the practical implementation of socialism in their own time. It was in this spirit that they advanced their critique of utopian socialism, a model they themselves had already outgrown. This is not to adopt a purely presentist stance (i.e. the notion that people in the past should have known what we know today) but rather to offer a historically situated critique:

As we have seen, the utopians were utopians because they could not have been otherwise in an age when capitalist production was still so underdeveloped. They were compelled to idealize the elements of a new society, since those elements had not yet manifested in any general or visible form within the old society. The utopians were therefore limited to an appeal to reason to establish the basic characteristics of their construction, for they could not yet appeal to contemporary history. (Engels 2014: 359)²

If the utopian socialists' analyses were inadequate, this was not due to personal failings, inferiority, or lack of intelligence but to the specific historical moment of social relations and the way those relations presented their own objective conditions. Their rejection of the proletariat's living conditions unfolded in a mirror-image, incomplete – and perhaps even erroneous – form, since it rudimentarily reproduced the very principles against which it was directed (Marx 1994a).

In retrospect, as they themselves insisted, the utopian socialists' achievements were 'profoundly admirable', yet they 'lacked a clear consciousness of the possibilities for their own transcendence', that is, of the historical conditions under which their aspirations could be realized through determinate social forces rather than benevolent designs (Marx & Engels 1994: 279–282). This ambivalence is inseparable from the political–juridical milieu that shaped modern claims about freedom and equality. In the long, often atomized struggle of the bourgeoisie against feudal restriction and privilege, the very grammar of political common sense (i.e. rights, citizenship, legality) was forged to solve the bourgeoisie's problems and to stabilize its power (cf. Tigar and Levy 1986). Put differently, the processes through which political-legal common sense was constructed responded specifically to principles developed by and for the bourgeoisie (Tapia Argüello 2011). It is hardly surprising, then, that Marx's and Engels's critique of formal equality (e.g. Engels 2014: 157–170), of the vaunted 'freedom' of the laborer (i.e. free in a double sense), and of the institutional architecture that shields bourgeois society, including the modern doctrine of human rights (Marx 1994c: 43–52), arises precisely from this context. They read those forms not as neutral universals but as historically determinate expressions of a social relation that posits equality juridically while reproducing inequality materially. Yet such a critique was unavailable to the utopian socialists. They mistook the bourgeois universal for the universal as such and fought, in good faith, for what they took to be the 'true' realization of principles whose social content they could not yet decode (Engels 2014: 64). Seen from this angle, the utopian socialists' limits are legible as historical limits, not as personal failings. The utopian socialists, standing at the threshold rather than amid capitalist development, could not observe those determined processes.

Thus, by adopting as their own the key components of a rising bourgeoisie's 'utopia' (Mannheim 1993: 179), the utopian socialists displaced the antagonism that would have

been constitutive of any genuinely socialist horizon (Marx & Engels 1994). Their universalism was a naïve universalism, organized around bourgeois 'unequal equality' and its rule forms (Marx & Engels 1971), rather than a determinate negation that would have transcended the very limits those rule forms impose. Likewise, the freedom they endorsed was the 'double-sense' freedom that presupposes the separation of producers from the means of production and is perpetually renewed through processes of expropriation and market compulsion (Harvey 2004). In this light, Marx's and Engels's critique of utopian socialism echoes their critique of the liberal project itself: a project ultimately unrealizable on its own terms because its normative claims rest on an incoherent reconciliation of fundamentally antagonistic social relations (cf. Hinkelammert 1984: 11–14).

Marx's and Engels's critique of utopian socialism converges, in part, with their critique of liberalism, yet they are not symmetrical. Utopian socialism, for Marx and Engels, registers a genuine impulse toward emancipation. It is a direct antecedent, a historically limited but necessary articulation of struggles at a given moment, misguided as to method and standpoint, yet propelled by an adequate aspiration (e.g. Engels 2014; Marx & Engels 1994). The liberal project, by contrast, must be grasped as openly ideological (e.g. Marx & Engels 1974), hypocritical in (Marx & Engels 1971), and, despite its paradoxical efficacy in realizing its own aims, deeply injurious to human flourishing (Marx & Engels 1994). Only under the pressure of material life do the contradictions of both projects become visible, and only through a determinate critique of those contradictions can they be overcome.

This distinction helps clarify a persistent misunderstanding. The strictness of Marx's and Engels's polemic against utopian socialism – even, one might say, the elements of self-criticism (cf. Schmidt 1962) discernible in works such as *The German Ideology*, the famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, and perhaps most importantly in *The Communist Manifesto* – does not entail the abandonment of utopia tout court. It indicates, rather, a twofold movement that aimed to uproot a type of utopian thinking that is literally incorrect and the effort to discover and name a different kind of utopian project, that is, one that arises immanently from social practice and appears 'not to exist' only because it has yet to be realized (Sanchez Vázquez 2007: 250). This distinction, between utopia as something unrealizable and as a project that appears not to exist only because it has yet to be realized (Tapia Argüello 2011: 224), allows for a far more nuanced understanding of the relationship between utopia and Marxism. If the first utopia takes the form of a prescriptive schema superimposed on reality, the second appears as a horizon embedded in the tendencies, antagonisms, and capacities that structure the present. In this sense, Marx's call for a 'ruthless criticism of everything existing' (Marx 1843) is not an injunction to extinguish hope, but a method for locating the real possibilities that hope anticipates and for specifying the practices through which those possibilities may become actual (Marx 1994d: 69).

Read in this light, the 'utopian' moments presented in Marx and Engels – as can be seen in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* or in *The Holy Family* (cf. Sánchez Vázquez 1975: 51–58; Schmidt 1962: 150–151) – are not residues of an immature phase (cf. Althusser 1969: 35). Rather, they are integrated into a particular mode of analyzing reality and intervening in it. Later texts reorganize the utopian impulse around a more exacting analysis of social forms. At one pole, the *Communist Manifesto* condenses it into

minimal but strategic demands that target the reproduction of capitalist social relations (e.g. Marx & Engels 1994: 270). At the other pole, the *Critique of the Gotha Program* interrogates the very grammar of distributive justice, distinguishing between phases of communist society and refusing to smuggle bourgeois norms into the new order (Marx 1971). The utopian function does not disappear. It changes philosophically from a 'elsewhere' to a practical–critical mapping of determinate steps, constraints, and transitional forms rooted in class antagonism.

Hence the paradox that is not truly a paradox: Marx and Engels are at once critics of utopia and utopian in the strongest sense. *Communism*, their utopia, is not a perfected scheme but 'the real movement' that abolishes the existing order: an orientation that converts utopia from an abstract ideal into a determinate negation rooted in existing struggles (Marx & Engels 1974). Nonetheless, within Marxism, divergences have indeed outweighed convergences on the question of utopia. The issue is not merely a conceptual definition but the articulation of utopian struggles and practices (cf. Lovell 2004). Overall, what distinguishes Marxist critiques from conservative or liberal dismissals is not a blanket suspicion of aspiration but a vigilance toward the pitfalls of liberal idealism and political naïveté. Sustaining that critical posture matters because the opposite error (i.e. an uncritical celebration of 'utopianism' as such) easily lapses into a naïve empiricism that abstracts aspiration from the historical terrains, class antagonisms, and organizational forms that condition its possibility (Gardiner 2006). Against liberal commonplaces that treat most social subjects as disinclined to radical transformation, Marxism needs to take up utopia precisely to contest the *end-of-history* thesis and to reopen the horizon of collective becoming (cf. Goodwin 1980).

This line of argument sits squarely within the terrain prepared by Marx's and Engels's own reconfiguration of utopia. For them, *good utopianism* is historically mediated. It begins with the concrete conditions and limits of its time rather than demanding that history conform to an abstraction. It is critical rather than idealist, as *ruthless criticism* is not an injunction to extinguish hope but a method for identifying real possibilities and specifying the practices through which they might be realized. More importantly, their decisive contribution, distinguishing them not only from the utopian-socialist tradition but also from other socialisms, was to embed utopian imagination within class analysis. Utopia is rooted in struggle and class antagonism, insofar as the possibility of transformation derives from determinate social forces, rather than benevolent designs or appeals to pure reason. It is hopeful without being naïve: the future is possible, yet contingent, difficult, and unpredictable, not a project to be preserved but a *horizon* to be fought for. Accordingly, the point was neither to abandon projection nor to legislate an abstract future, but to specify the agents, antagonisms, and transitional forms through which a society beyond class rule might be pursued.

Yet many of these elements may pose difficulties today. Even among scholars inspired by Marxism and anticapitalistic critiques (cf. Albert 2017; Dinerstein 2015; Wright 2010), explicit elaboration of the classical canon remains partial (cf. Marx 2008), because it may argue that contemporary capitalism is widely held to have undergone transformations that communicate inherited conceptions of the 'political' or 'revolutionary' subject. Just as Marx and Engels were able to read the changing material conditions of their time, revealing the limits of utopian socialism, the passage of time has supplied Marxist theory

with new means of analyzing social reality and specifying the concrete practices it demands (Bloch 2000). It is in this spirit that the following sections turn to three recent, Marxist-inspired conceptualizations of utopia, each retaining core Marxist commitments while, at points, problematizing aspects of that inheritance. The question is whether these problematizations can unsettle the *end-of-history* imaginary and substantively reopen a communist horizon of emancipation.

Marxist-related utopian notions

The real utopia

Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) proposes 'real utopias' as institutional designs that are simultaneously normatively ambitious and empirically workable. Aligned with the previous, he frames the project as a corrective to two recurrent weaknesses in utopian discourse: overly abstract, indeterminate ideals that ignore contextual constraints, and hyper-concrete blueprints that amount to 'pointless exercises in fantasy' (Wright 2010: ii). Real utopias aim to align socialist values with feasible arrangements supported by social-scientific knowledge, conceived as accessible 'waystations' capable of cumulatively reorienting institutions away from capitalist logics.

For building a real utopia, Wright prioritizes organized, institution-centered strategies over spontaneous action, associated with autonomist initiatives. Within an 'economic ecosystem' where capitalist, statist, and socialist power relations coexist (Wright 2019), albeit under capitalist dominance, he defines capitalism as a specific mode of organizing economic activity structured by class relations and mechanisms of economic coordination. His diagnosis emphasizes capitalism's reproduction of avoidable suffering through exploitation, inequality, job insecurity, and technology-induced dislocation, alongside spatial strategies of profit maximization.

The author believes in the cumulative potential of organized transformations on institutional designs to transcend capitalism. Building a real utopia encompasses three fundamental stages: diagnosis and critique, construction of viable alternatives, and transformation (Wright 2010). Specifically, the second phase of this model shifts analysis from a 'theory of trajectory' to a 'theory of possibility', focusing on the range of institutional changes that can be enacted under varying social conditions. Because the heart of any socialist alternative lies in economic institutions, Wright (2010) proposes that real utopian designs be assessed by three criteria: desirability (their guiding principles), viability (their sustainability in practice), and achievability (their strategic realizability given power relations).

Transformation (Wright 2010), the third phase, entails four analytic components: a theory of social reproduction; a theory of cracks and contradictions within reproduction; a theory of unintended dynamics and historical trajectories; and a theory of collective actors, strategies, and struggles. Wright distinguishes three logics of change. Rupture transformation mobilizes organized class actors to confront the state and capital directly; interstitial transformation builds alternatives in civil society at a distance from the state; symbiotic transformation leverages alliances and state capacities to expand social power. Extending this matrix, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* (2019)

elaborates five strategic ‘roots’ – smashing, dismantling, taming, resisting, and escaping capitalism – mapped, respectively, onto rupture (smashing), symbiotic (taming, dismantling), and interstitial (resisting, escaping) logics. Taken together, Wright’s framework consolidates a rigorous, criteria-driven approach to designing and sequencing institutional change, situating socialist ideals within feasible pathways that recombine rupture, interstitial, and symbiotic logics.

The practicable utopia

Michael Albert’s *Practical Utopia* (2017) develops a libertarian-socialist framework that, like Wright’s, foregrounds institutions as both constraints on and vehicles for social transformation. He believes institutions are important for a social theory of social change for two main motives. First, institutions dictate possibilities for action. Second, they are the main form of organization that organizes the commons and social functions. Albert (2017) posits four interdependent spheres of social life – economy, kinship, culture, and polity – each capable of reproducing its own and the others’ core relations. Misalignments among spheres generate tension and resistance. When such contradictions crystallize, they can precipitate social revolution, understood simply as systemic change of sufficient depth, not necessarily as violence or chaos.

The author hypothesizes that modifications in the spheres of activity may encompass the creation of new institutions. Institutional change may originate in any sphere but reverberates across the whole, prompting new forms of co-reproduction. Strategically, Albert (2017) advocates ‘seizing power in everyday life’, beginning with a functional analysis of existing institutions and the interests of competing groups. Class analysis is central to economic transformation. Beyond workers and capitalists, he identifies a distinct ‘coordinator class’ (i.e. professionals who perform empowering tasks) and insists that effective theory and strategy address all three positions.

Albert (2017) articulates a set of guiding values – solidarity, diversity, justice, self-management, environmental stewardship, internationalism, and participation – which he operationalizes in his model of participatory economics, the Parecon (Albert 2003). Parecon has the potential, says Albert, to extinguish a division between the so-called exploitative class and the working class. It replaces both markets and central planning with workers’ and consumers’ councils; balanced job complexes; remuneration according to duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor; and cooperative participatory planning. Internationally, it envisions equitable aid and cooperative development rather than exploitative integration (Albert 2008), while acknowledging the United States as a likely early locus of experimentation.

Politically, Albert aligns Parecon with Shalom’s Parpolity (Shalom 2008): face-to-face processes of deliberation at the base with recallable delegates for larger-scale issues. In the same line as Wright, transformation may follow different nonexclusive paths: an electoral route of winning office to alter policy, an insurrectionary route during moments of acute disruption, and a constructivist route that builds alternative institutions in society’s interstices. Whatever the path, strategy should remain flexible (i.e. ‘minimalist maximalism’) (Albert 2017) and eschew sectarianism, continually refining goals and methods. Albert rejects both market socialism and centrally planned socialism, favoring

decentralized, bottom-up structures that contest and, where possible, improve existing capitalist institutions while prefiguring participatory alternatives.

The concrete utopia

Drawing on Ernst Bloch (1996, 2000), Ana Cecilia Dinerstein (2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016) revives the notion of concrete utopia to interpret contemporary autonomist movements, above all in Latin America. For her, autonomy is simultaneously a mobilizing horizon and a practical form. Since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, indigenous communities, landless peasants, unemployed workers, and the ‘new poor’ have anticipated alternative realities amid structural deprivation by building cooperative, often extra-institutional, forms of social reproduction. Accordingly, since the 1980s, ‘autonomy became both a mobilising utopia and the organisational form of a multifaceted process of prefiguration of alternative realities within contexts of urban and rural vulnerability, hunger, social deprivation and political adversity’ (Dinerstein 2015: 1).

Institutions, while not dismissed, are approached warily because they tend to translate insurgent demands into hegemonic state logic, thereby damping radical potential (Dinerstein 2013c). Autonomist actors therefore maintain a strategic distance from parties, unions, and state agencies, even as they sometimes engage them tactically (Dinerstein 2013a, 2013b). This ambivalence is sharpened by what Dinerstein terms *subsumption by exclusion*. Marginalized groups are simultaneously incorporated into capital’s valorization process and barred from its formal protections, rendering them vulnerable yet indispensable (Dinerstein 2015).

Indigenous autonomies often defend ancestral cosmologies against colonial-capitalist encroachment, whereas non-Indigenous autonomies foreground experimental practices that anticipate a postcapitalist future (Dinerstein 2013a). Rural variants concentrate on land access and agriculture, while urban ones concentrate on housing, employment, and social security. The *Piqueteros* (Organized Unemployed Workers) (cf. Dinerstein 2013c) exemplify this dual dynamic. Their demand for *dignified work* ranges from calls for formal employment backed by redistributive policy to cooperative production that subverts wage labor altogether.

Concrete utopia resides in the ‘*not-yet*’ – the embryonic presence of alternative social relations that are denied recognition but incubated within autonomist struggles (Böhm et al., 2010; Dinerstein 2016). Unlike the previous notions, the institutionalization of utopias is more controversial. Central to Dinerstein’s framework is the *untranslatable novum* – aspirations, practices, and meanings that cannot be fully absorbed into the metrics of state or market institutions and subjectivities. However, because concrete utopia is always at risk of institutional cooptation, its condition is one of persistent tension, namely an (im)possible practice that simultaneously gestures toward a world beyond capital and confronts the danger of being instrumentalized for neoliberal decentralization (Dinerstein 2013c). Autonomist strategy thus entails two intertwined capacities, namely, an enduring suspicion of the state and an ability either to sidestep confrontation or to repurpose the state’s mediations in service of alternative production (Dinerstein 2013c, 2015).

Beyond class society and striving for communism? The end-of-history pervades

Read together, Wright's 'real utopias', Albert's 'practical utopias', and Dinerstein's 'concrete utopias' aim to rearm Marxist utopian thought against neoliberal fatalism by clarifying mechanisms of capitalist reproduction, equipping movements to democratize work and coordination, and cultivating the capacities for collective self-management, thereby renewing practical pedagogy for denaturalizing capitalism.

However, this has been accomplished while simultaneously soft-pedaling the Marxian notion that the abolition of class conditions is the very possibility of emancipation. Still, we do not claim that Wright, Albert, or Dinerstein dispose of Marxism. They inherit from Marx and Engels indispensable presuppositions (e.g. analysis of capitalism's dynamics, a disciplined suspicion of utopian blueprints) yet tend to reassemble them within a horizon that treats class antagonism as one axis among many rather than the strategic organizer of the totality. Because the horizon of class abolition is either presumed to have been achieved *de facto* or reencoded as a question of 'recompositing', these perspectives risk converting the Marxian utopia into a contemporary aporia of utopia. The result is a form of utopianism that illuminates core features of capitalist functioning and nourishes desires for better lives but often sidelines the theoretical and practical apparatus for constructing communism.

For Marx and Engels, class is not a variable in a multivariate model of domination. Besides being the motor of capitalist society, it is the fulcrum of its overcoming. Capital and labor are not merely positions in a social taxonomy but antagonistic poles whose struggle produces both the historical subject and its utopian horizon. It is in the violence of this antagonism that it is possible to locate the constitutive process of capitalist domination (Holloway 2010: 143). This is why such antagonism must be placed at the center of analysis if domination is to be overcome. Marxism, in this concrete sense, is not a 'theory of Society' nor a merely descriptive theory *of* capitalist domination. Rather, in its radicality, it is the most adequate framework through which to understand how to move beyond such domination: it becomes a *theory against* that dissolves society's totality of forms, something that other approaches are unable to do (Holloway 2005: 11).

It is precisely here that contemporary re-elaborations encounter decisive tensions. When the link between antagonism and horizon is severed or when 'class' is dissolved into a sociological gradient or displaced by a more ecumenical catalog of subjectivities (cf. Holloway 2004), the very mechanism by which Marxism thinks social transformation is dulled. They replace the totalizing horizon of class analysis with other, ostensibly more viable and less ambitious totalities (Eagleton 1997). In doing so, the singular subject oriented toward overcoming the capital-labor conflict is displaced by a proliferation of subjectivities.

Wright's trajectory is exemplary of the promise and the gridlock. His theory of 'contradictory class locations' (Wright 2019) and the associated program of 'real utopias' seek to supposedly refine Marxist analysis by capturing occupational fragmentation, contractual flexibility, and the diffusion of small-scale property. Yet the conceptual move that dissolves the proletariat into a mosaic of positions also weakens the explanatory and strategic centrality of the labor-capital antagonism. In his own words,

just as feminists need to take seriously, rather than dismiss out of hand as absurd, the claim that gender oppression is withering away, so class analysts of both Marxist and Weberian inspiration need to take seriously the arguments that we are moving rapidly towards a classless society, or at least a society within which class has 'dissolved' as a salient explanatory category. (Wright 2015: 140)

The proposed remedy (i.e. an accumulation of experimentally designed institutions meant to induce egalitarian outcomes) recasts antagonism as a design variable and the transitional problem as an optimization of rules. What is gained in institutional imagination is compensated by a drift toward incrementalism. Utopia becomes a portfolio of scalable reforms whose feasibility is indexed primarily to their compatibility with existing circuits of power. The utopian label is retained, but the utopian *motor* (i.e. a collective subject organized around the abolition of wage labor and the expropriation of capital) is canceled. Class is recast as a spectrum of resources and strategies distributed across social organizations rather than as the collective subject capable of contesting the totality of relations of production (cf. Wright 2000, 2015). This conflation of Marxian and sociological conceptions of class (cf. Holloway 2004) signals the end of utopia in Marxist terms. Antagonism is declared dead, and reformist utopianism is unleashed. From a Marxist point of view, a utopia in which class is diffused is conceptually illogical.

Albert's 'practical utopias' in *Parecon* follow a parallel trajectory, likewise undermining a theory of conflict and class power. Despite its importance, the main proposal is the 'negotiation of priorities' among diverse identities. Class struggle is reencoded as the engineering of incentive-compatible deliberative mechanisms. The very strength of the proposal (i.e. its institutional specificity) threatens to become its limit when the question is not how to allocate within an already transformed social order but how to bring about the rupture that would make such allocation possible. In this sense, Parecon also risks reconciling itself to liberal incrementalism. One of the most striking features of Wright's and Albert's proposals is their attempt to harness the language of utopia while simultaneously renouncing utopian reasoning in its radicality (cf. Ingram 2017; Thaler 2018). The very difference is that Wright searches for a utopian label in scalable projects, whereas Albert is much more concerned with low-scale projects.

Also concerned with more low-scale projects is Dinerstein's proposal. For Bloch, the transformative potential of utopia does not lie in blueprinting new institutions – as Albert does through Parecon and Parpolity – but in revealing how future possibilities are already embedded in current struggles, aspirations, and acts of resistance. Dinerstein (2015) also holds to the point that the subject of *concrete utopia* is also much more diverse than the labor class, as it encompasses much more diverse subjects (e.g. indigenous movements) subsumed by exclusion. However, the author remains quite silent on how the constitution of such subjectivities relates to labor-capital conflict, or in other words, with the construction of a classless society. The wager that a multiplicity of subjects and dispersed practices can cumulatively substitute for a unified antagonistic subject sits uneasily with the Marxian insistence on totality. In displacing labor as the strategic locus of universalization, 'concrete utopia' risks mistaking pluralism with transcendence. The horizon of class abolition is not denied, but it is tacitly outsourced to the spontaneity of heterogeneous struggles, with the expectation that recomposition will occur without a theory of how capital's unity imposes itself over social difference.

Across these variations, we find common slippage. If antagonism is reimagined as a matter of institutional parameters, stakeholder balancing, or the aggregation of dispersed refusals, then the *end-of-history* is not overturned; it is just managed. Utopia is left without any utopian subject. Hence, the language of utopia, though central, is not founded in Marx's diagnosis of class as the foundational social relation. Any horizon that aspires to transcend capitalist sociability must reinscribe the conflict between labor and capital at the strategic center, not as dogma but as the material condition of emancipation. After all, as the multiple cases described by Marx and Engels (1994: 279–282) show – both in the *Manifesto* and in other texts, including *Capital* (cf. Marx 2010) – material conditions are not volitional elements from which one can escape voluntarily (cf. Holloway 2010: 208).

Second, as previously discussed, if Marx and Engels were suspicious of 'utopian socialism', it was not because they rejected the future as such, but because they refused both idealism and the replacement of abstractions for struggle. As an alternative, a communist horizon must be immanent to existing contradictions and, at the same time, refuse reduction to them (cf. Hudis 2012). Utopia, at least in a Marxian way, must be a determinate negation of the present: grounded in material antagonisms yet irreducible to any immediately available practice or norm. When the utopian element collapses into either a managerial design or, conversely, evaporates into an immaterial element of the 'not-yet', the result is not a Marxist utopia but its deformation.

This can also be seen in other approaches which, while articulating a Marxist discourse (indeed, one might even say a political ethos oriented by Marxism), also advance the view that, today, it is no longer possible to develop genuine alternatives capable of confronting capital, against and beyond it. Thus, for example, Paolo Virno's (2003) theory of *exodus* may be said to reproduce, to some extent, elements reminiscent of Icarian utopianism. In its opposition to norms and law, it even reiterates the error that Lukács (1970) identified, in certain left currents, as the specular conception of the relation between centralized social regulation and revolution. This argument, later taken up by David Graeber (2013: 83–84), nevertheless overlooks the fact that this is hardly the first moment in which social transformation has appeared impossible and that, historically, both emancipatory struggle and Marxism itself have been reconfigured in and through the tensions between possibility and impossibility (e.g. Gramsci 1984: 156–157). As a well-known dictum has it, 'all revolutions are impossible until they happen; then they become inevitable' (Sachs 1990: 1). It is here that the path of utopia is to be found. From this point, the recent Marxist-inspired frameworks examined in this article move in instructively different but ultimately insufficient directions.

In the case of Wright's (2019) 'real utopias', correct economistic fatalism by insisting on different managerial forms. That insistence has genuine strategic value as it contests passivity and broadens the repertoire of struggle. Yet the same insistence invites a drift toward pragmatism, in which the language of utopia functions less as a communist commitment than as a legitimating device for projects already tailored to liberal common sense. Too often, 'utopian' here simply names what is ambioned to be seen as more 'future-like' liberal options than others, licensing some reforms on innovative, pluralist, tolerant, or moderate grounds. When a utopia does not privilege these features, it is typically judged unattractive and dismissed as totalitarian (cf. Brossard 2019).

Albert's (2017) blueprint delineates impressively detailed procedures for participatory planning, but the passage from existing social relations to that new coordination regime remains largely schematic. In practice, the model's procedural completeness invites a technocratic gradualism (i.e. incremental redesign within the horizon of feasibility). In turn, Dinerstein's (2016) notion of 'concrete utopias', inspired by Ernst Bloch's 'not-yet', locates the utopian in forms of autonomy in which concrete action is oriented toward an indeterminate surplus.³ The difficulty lies less in defending the 'misfit' that utopian practices must generate within capitalism than in the tendency to treat the utopian – the purported strength of these utopias – as ethereal, pure, untouched, and ultimately impenetrable. By circumscribing utopian practice in these terms, this account effectively immunizes utopia against risk. It erects a *cordon sanitaire* against the possibility of failure and, with it, against the very conditions of possible success.

The result is often a kind of concrete idealism. A fetish of proximity and immediacy whereby communal gardens, time-banking schemes, or platform cooperatives are proclaimed revolutionary because they are tangible, local, and ethically resonant, as though presence sufficed to negate capital's structural power. While utopias can and should be framed as tangible, comprehensible, and attractive political projects (Morrow & Brault 2015; Ollman 2005), they must not be conflated with certain conditions (i.e. 'the immediate', 'the local') as if those conditions guaranteed transformative impetus (cf. Gardiner 2006; Ingram 2017). Every day, achievable actions, like communal meals, ecological initiatives, and neighborhood coops, may well be useful, but they are not inherently transformative simply because they occur under the sign of autonomy or the common.

Across these otherwise distinct proposals runs a common thread, namely, that the conviction that concrete institutions, practices, and struggles already materialize the future – an assumption that has usually been popularized in the widespread notion of prefiguration (cf. Swain 2017, for a discussion). What disappears is the jagged contradiction between what is and what could be, as the own epicenter of utopia itself (Stillman 2000). Once that distance is flattened, two distortions follow. First, conflict is quietly evacuated. The ruling class appears to have neither the means nor the will to retaliate, and organizational energy is siphoned from trade-union and party forms that still possess capacities for generalization and defense.

Second, a paradoxical presentist conception of utopia is constructed. Yet presentism is analytically costly as it confuses the 'not-yet' with an 'already-here', which becomes legible within a paradigm of *future-likeness* common to the different proposals. Indeed, Wright tends to anchor utopia in feasibility and institutionally scalable reforms; Albert locates it in the procedural design of participatory institutions; and Dinerstein increasingly safeguards it within concrete struggles, in an affective register of refusal and lived resistance. Across these variations, however, utopia comes to function as a compensatory subjectivity. Impulses that ought to *catalyze* struggle (the 'not-yet') are retheorized as if they already *were* the future. Under such a framework, historical time is routinely conflated with local practice, and incremental amelioration is mistaken for systemic negation.

None of this is to deny the utility of progressive politics, institutional designs, or autonomist practices within each proposal, nor the political necessity of linking present work to a horizon of emancipation as part of the process of struggle (cf. Lukács 1970).

The problem is that, when the future is repeatedly *conflated* with an already-given space, misfit, or institutional form, the strongest Marxian insight for thinking utopia is obscured. Utopia is not a property of *forms* but a horizon produced through an imminent movement of struggle. It must be assessed by directionality. This is the decisive criterion bequeathed by classical Marxism. Utopia is not validated by local success, inspirational rhetoric, or institutional polish but by its relation to a real movement toward the abolition of the value form itself.

Conclusion

The renewed attention to the language of utopia is unquestionably desired. It testifies to the exhaustion of the neoliberal imaginary and to a persistent craving for horizons beyond far-right expansion. Yet popularity brings the risk of liberal taming as 'utopia' can be rendered compatible with the present so long as it is trimmed to managerial scale or dispersed into aesthetic aspirations. Marx and Engels never repudiated utopian thought outright. Yet they opposed the fetish of ready-made social blueprints detached from the concrete antagonisms of capitalism.

Read together, the previous three frameworks mobilize recognizably Marxist concerns such as exploitation, democratization of production, and negation of domination, while partially displacing Marxism's foundational stake: the collective action of the exploited, organized through and against capital's contradictions, is the motor of social transformation. In different ways, each approach can reproduce the atmospherics of the *end-of-history*. In all cases, the utopian subject is conflated with the practice and failure is minimized, either because the envisioned future is calibrated to what already appears feasible or because its indeterminacy immunizes it from conflict. Where there is no possibility of failure, however, there is no determinate possibility of success.

Taken together, these three frameworks deploy isolated questions of a Marxist lexicon while forsaking Marxism's foundational wager, that the collective action of the exploited class, organized through and against the contradictions of capital, alone can found a radically different mode of production and sociality. The danger, then, is that utopia becomes a methodological supplement to capitalism rather than its gravedigger. Accessible is not a word to define utopia and the struggle to construct communism, nor has it been more than ever.

A Marxist concept of utopia cannot be secured by feasibility alone or by the poetry of openness. It requires subjective determination that embodies movement. Utopia is not something to be preserved in the present as if it were a fragile habitat. It is something to be fought, collectively, against the grain of capitalist temporalities. Its content is not given in advance, but its direction is not indeterminate. It points toward the end of class society and the creation of a mode of production and sociality incompatible with capitalism.

In short, this does not mean abandoning institutional reforms, social models, or autonomies. It means binding them back to a theory of agency and movement. If the language of utopia is to be more than a consoling supplement to capitalism, it must be recentered on this strategic horizon. Only then will utopia cease to live 'peacefully among us' as a curatorial object and become the name of a historical process, that is, the organized interruption of capitalist time and the opening of a world beyond class.

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Notes

1. In this sense, it is possible to remember the rejection of making ‘*receipts (Comtist ones?) for the cook-shops of the future*’ (Marx 1965: 26).
2. Translated from the text: ‘Los utopistas, como hemos visto, fueron utopistas porque no podían ser otra cosa en una época en la que la producción capitalista estaba aún tan poco desarrollada. Necesitaban construir idealmente los elementos de una nueva sociedad, porque dichos elementos no se manifestaban de un modo general y visible en la vieja sociedad. Los utopistas estaban limitados a apelar a la razón para establecer los rasgos básicos de su nueva construcción, porque no podían aún apelar a la historia contemporánea’.
3. The notion of ‘surplus’ as deployed here requires clarification, since it is not synonymous, for instance, with surplus value. In Dinerstein’s argument, surplus designates a dimension of concrete utopias. The excess of social practice, meaning, and capacity that cannot be fully translated into the standardized grammars through which capital and the state recognize – and thereby dominate – social activity. It is therefore a category oriented toward nonidentity and untranslatability, the remainder produced when lived struggle exceeds the forms available for its representation, measurement, or institutional capture. Even when certain aspects of struggle are appropriated, there remains a dimension that discloses the radicality of collective autonomous forms – ‘an unnamable, invisible dimension, without image, non-empirical and, therefore, unassimilable to the logic of power’ (Dinerstein 2016: 360).

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