

Dwelling in the Reality of Utopian Thought

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Throughout the history of modern Western thought, the concept of “utopia” has come to denote a detachment from, or lack of connection to, reality. To speak of utopias is to speak of ontologically nonexistent spaces, nonrealities. Indeed, the more seriously utopian one is the more in need of a “reality check” one is considered to be. The main ontological assumption lying behind this conception of utopia is what I will refer to as mono-realism: the idea that there is one, and only one, reality that our thought is or can be connected to. A relatively recent school of thought, building on a long anthropological tradition that questions the core ontological assumptions of modernity, has shown mono-realism to be one among those core assumptions. From it emerges the possibility that what we call “reality” is merely a dominant reality, and that there are always minor realities in which we are equally enmeshed. A further consequence of this is that thought, utopian thought included, even when not speaking to the dominant reality, is still emanating from and speaking to a reality; that utopia, rather than being a space inspired by an idealized past that has disappeared or a future-oriented imagining of a space that has no existence, is metonymic of minor and repressed spaces in which we already dwell in the present.

For a long time now — throughout the history of modern Western thought, and particularly the history of radical political thought where it has had a prominent presence — the concept of “utopia” has been clustered with an ensemble of terms that include “romantic,” “vague,” “dreamy,” “idealistic” and “sentimental.” What all those terms have in common is that they denote a detachment from, or lack of connection to, reality. Indeed, the term “unrealistic” easily belongs to the cluster. To speak of utopias is to speak of ontologically nonexistent spaces, nonrealities. Utopias can be inspired from an idealized past and a fantasized future. They can also attempt to negate at the level of fantasy negative features of the present. But they are not articulated to a present reality. Indeed, the more seriously utopian a utopia is, the more in need of a “reality check” it is considered to be.

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The main ontological assumption lying behind this conception of utopia is what I will refer to as mono-realism: the idea that there is one, and only one, reality that our thought is, or can be, connected to. The Marxist-inspired political division between materialism and idealism that dominated radical politics for so long is a good example of this mono-realism. The division presupposes the existence of one reality: either your thought speaks to “reality” and to the forces that emanate from it, and you are a materialist; or it doesn’t, and you are an idealist. It is within this construct that utopian thought is seen as a variety of idealism.

A relatively recent school of thought, building on a long anthropological tradition that questions the core ontological assumptions of modernity, has shown mono-realism to be one among those core assumptions. Developed particularly around the works of Bruno Latour and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro on multi-naturalism, this approach invites us to think of ourselves as always inhabiting a multiplicity of intersecting spatialities and realities.¹ From this emerges the possibility that what we call “reality” is merely a dominant reality, and that there are always minor realities in which we are equally enmeshed. A further consequence of this is that thought, utopian thought included, even when not speaking to the dominant reality, is still emanating from and speaking to a reality; that utopia, rather than being a space inspired by an idealized past that has disappeared, or a future-oriented imagining of that which has no existence, is metonymic of minor and repressed spaces in which we already dwell in the present.

CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: FROM THE REALITIES OF THE OTHER TO OTHER REALITIES

Of all the social sciences, anthropology has undoubtedly been the most important in providing utopian thought with its raw materials. In the conclusion to a lecture given in Japan around the topic of “Anthropology in the face of the problems of the modern world,” which succinctly summarized the ethos behind all his work, and perhaps the whole discipline, Claude Levi-Strauss argued the following:

Anthropologists are here to witness that the manner in which we live, the values that we believe in, are not the only possible ones; that other modes of life, other value systems have permitted, and continue to permit other human communities of finding happiness. Anthropology, thus invites us to temper our beliefs in our own importance, to respect other ways of living, and to put ourselves in question through the knowledge of other customs that astonish us, shock us or even make us repulsed [author’s translation].²

It is in such a project that we can see the foundational moment of critical anthropological thought. It is a thought

that tells us that, regardless of what and who we are, we, as individuals and as a society, can dwell in the world in a completely different way from the way we dwell in it at any given moment. This is because the anthropological other is both our other and ourselves. The other has, and we can have, different (and perhaps “better”) ways of conceiving sexual relations, kinship, our relation to plants, animals and the landscape, causality, sickness, etc. The affinity of critical anthropology with utopian thought becomes here quite pronounced, highlighting at the same time what is perhaps most far-reaching in what this critical anthropology is proposing.

This idea that anthropology shows us to be other to ourselves (that it provides, as Patrice Magnilier proposed, “a mirror image of ourselves in which we do not recognise ourselves”³) is more challenging than it might first appear. It was already demanding for the local imagination to cope with the accounts of world travelers who, well before anthropology came to existence, began to note the existence of cultures and customs of people who lived differently than we did. But anthropology began by saying much more than this. It told us that these radically different modes of being were relevant to us. They speak to us. And it is here that lies the complexity of the proposition. Anthropology not only notes the existence of other cultures, but it makes a proposition about us, our own modern culture and the spaces we inhabit: if the otherness of these cultures speaks to us, then there is something about us that is in a relation of affinity to what is being said, something about us that is already other. This can be summarized by the very simple but also paradoxically powerful formulation: we can be radically other than what we are. It is paradoxical because in the very idea of “we can be” other than what we are lies the idea that “we already have it in us” to be (or, more simply, “we already are”) other than ourselves. Our otherness is always dwelling within us, and we are always dwelling in it: there is always more to us than we think, so to speak. Thus, anthropology always aims to connect the existence of other cultures elsewhere to the existence of otherness among us.

What does it mean to speak of the “existence of otherness” — of other cultural forms, of other modes of being — within and among us? This is perhaps one of the most productive problematics that anthropology has generated. Does this otherness exist in a virtual or potential state within social reality? And do anthropologists, like the shamans they study, bring that virtuality into being, allowing it to disrupt and haunt our dominant modes of dwelling in the world? Or does this otherness exist in the form of a psychological disposition or a mental structure that can be linked to the presumed “unity of human kind”? The multi-naturalism and radical perspectivism of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour opens up a way of thinking differently about this otherness. It allows us to think of it as articulated not to virtual but to actual realities — albeit minor ones — that are continuously present, even if they are overshadowed by more dominant ones.

From such a perspective the possibilities of another way of being in the world are no longer seen as necessarily belonging to some pure act of the imagination disconnected from the real. Instead, they can be seen as fully enmeshed in minor, “eclipsed,” but nonetheless existing, realities that a critical anthropology helps bring to the fore. This can also be true of those “idealized forms of being” that constitute the affective and imaginary building blocks of many utopian projects (and that are of particular interest to us here): intense loving relations, organic forms of social solidarity, “romantic” relations of communion with nature, etc.

I will examine more fully the example of a particular socio-affective thought that is constitutive of many utopias: the idea of a noninstrumental relation to nature. I will show how we can see this utopian thought as speaking to a reality in which we are already enmeshed, rather than as an “idealist” or “romantic” vision fantasizing a reality that does not exist. Before I do so, however, I will delve further into what the notion of “reality” (and particularly what I have referred to as “minor reality”) means from the perspective of “multiple realities” or “multi-naturalism.”

FROM THE SUBJECTIVE POINT OF VIEW TO ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVISM

The notion of multi-naturalism emerges in Viveiros de Castro’s work as a logical complement to his ethnographically derived conception of Amerindian perspectivism. The latter, he has argued, challenges not only the varieties of perspectives that we have “on reality” but the very idea we have of perspective as being a subjective/cultural perspective on a natural reality. Consequently, before seeking, as a clichéd anthropological formula would have it, to understand reality “from the natives’ point of view,” we need to work out first what the natives think a “point of view” is: their point of view on the point of view, as it were.⁴ The alternative is to uncritically allow a Western conception of what a “point of view” is to prevail. However, Viveiros de Castro’s target is really a dominant Western conception of the point of view. As I will briefly show, there are some versions of perspectivism within Western cultures that are, at least in some regard, closer to, and can act as a bridge to better understand, the Amerindian version.

Undoubtedly, the most popular way of understanding the notion of “point of view” in Western cultures is a subjectivist one. That is, a “point of view” is most often taken to mean a subjective take on what is either explicitly or implicitly posited as a single objective reality. This is the implicit assumption in statements such as “you have your point of view, and I have mine.” And it is less implicit when people speak of having “different points of view” or a “different understanding” of “the situation.” This idea is closely linked to an equally subjectivist notion of “interest” that is particularly dominant in

the political sciences: people see “things” or “a conflict” (both implying a single “reality”) according to their interests.

The most common opposition to this mono-realist objectivist view is a relativist “social constructionist” conception of multiple subjectivities. Here, there is no objective reality at all that matters; what matters are the multiple subjectivities that are themselves the only realities that matter. However, there are variations within this polarity. For example, not all “social constructionism” is a form of relativism and idealism. There are conceptions of subjective interest and perspective that end up with an objectivist conception of social construction. Here the idea of interest is seen as leading to selective interaction with particular elements of reality.

Recently, my wife was serving as host for an ecologist from Italy, and I took our guest to see the famous Sydney Opera House. Dropping her at the Botanic Garden, where one has a breathtaking view of it, I went for a swim. When I came back, my guest was very excited. She told me how many incredible species of birds she has managed to see while walking there. She did not once mention the Opera House; it was as if it had no presence for her. Clearly, she did not see what I was seeing there (and hoping she would see also). Her subjective interest made her perceive reality in a very different way. But her reality was not subjective: the birds and a world made out of birds were objective enough for both of us. Her subjective interest made her see reality and construct reality in a specific way; but in no way was this construction subjective.

In much the same way, we can say that an artist and a road engineer looking at a valley — one to paint it and the other to build a road through it — have different points of view and different perspectives on what they are looking at. They thus will see different things and have different takes on the present reality; but each of their social constructions of reality is objective enough. Here, to say reality is a social construction is no different from saying that a chair is a social construction as opposed to a tree. In no way is one saying that the chair is more or less objective than the tree by claiming it to be a social construction. We can see, therefore, that here the subjective interest, in interacting with reality, does not produce a subjective point of view. Rather, it positions one in a particular objective construction of reality.

This conception of perspectivism is closer, but still very far, from the multi-naturalist view. It is closer because it conceives of each person’s reality as the product of a *relation* between oneself and one’s surroundings, not something that is given. As we shall see, reality as a relation is crucial for multi-naturalism. However, for the latter, the relation is perceived to be between *the objective modes of existing, inhabiting, and relating to our surroundings with our body* rather than, as is the case above, the interaction between our subjective interest (as a painter or an engineer) and our surroundings.

The above perspectivism also differs from multi-naturalism because it still posits the existence of one and only one

reality that exists outside our interaction with it. Thus, in the example above, we who are not painters or road engineers and gazing on both have no trouble seeing that each are positioned in one dimension of reality that is nonetheless part of the one reality which we, the outsiders, are able to capture as *the* reality. For multi-naturalism there are only the multiplicity of realities produced by the multiple ways our body inhabits its surroundings.

This is, briefly, how multi-naturalism is conceived in the work of Viveiros de Castro. Building on a long tradition of Amerindian ethnographies and anthropologies where Levi-Strauss has pride of place, he presented a world where the animals and humans share the same soul: a kind of Kantian pre-social and pre-perspectival subjectivity. Consequently, in such a world, while humans and animals have different perspectives, this difference is not primarily between the soul/mind of the animals and the humans, since this is what they share. Rather, the different points of view emerge from the ways in which different bodies constitute different modes of relating to, inhabiting, and being enmeshed in their environments. If, generally speaking, Shamanism involves the capacity to move between the perspectives of humans, animals and things, Amerindian shamanism highlights the fact that such a move is not a move between different subjective interests, but is “defined as the ability shown by certain individuals to cross the corporeal barriers between the species.”⁷⁵ Consequently, in Amerindian perspectivism, “a perspective is not a representation, for representations are properties of the spirit, while the point of view is in the body.”⁷⁶ As such, perspectivism should not be confused with relativism: “far from the subjectivist essentialism of relativism, perspectivism is a corporeal mannerism.”⁷⁷

Here, the body is not just flesh or socialized body but, Viveiros de Castro stressed, a “body with its affection.” Affection here is used in Spinoza’s sense: the body’s “capacities to affect and be affected by other bodies.”⁷⁸ As Katherine Swancutt has explained: “Bodily affects, in Viveiros de Castro’s sense of the term, are not just physical characteristics, such as comportment, mannerisms or tastes consistently ascribed to a given subject, they are also ‘forces,’ ‘energies’ or ‘talents’ which are taught, acquired and refined over time.”⁷⁹

In being the site of a multiplicity of forces and energies, each body, whether human or animal, constitutes a multiplicity of bodily modes of engagement with its surroundings. It is this multiplicity of bodily engagements which in turn produces a multiplicity of realities or “natures” that the notion of multi-naturalism alludes to. What lies beyond those realities created out of the interaction between our bodily *habitus* and its surrounding is a nonaccessible, non-symbolically “capturable,” all-encompassing element akin to what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called “the Real.” Realities are our interaction with this Real, an interaction based on objective modes of bodily insertion in, and relation with, this Real — or what I will refer to as a plurality of modes of enmeshment in the Real.

THE CRITICAL AND POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF MULTIPLE REALITIES

Clearly, the multi-natural argument is a critical anthropological argument. That is, it is more than a “the Amazonians have their reality and we have our reality” argument. It does mean the latter, but it also means that their reality speaks to ours. It haunts us with the possibility that we, as well, live in multiple realities. Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism highlights the Amazonian’s sense of multiplicity of natures structured around the multiplicity of bodies: the body of the human, the body of the jaguar, etc. In speaking to us, however, it *also* — and it is crucial not to think in either/or terms here — highlights the multiplicities that are within each and every body. If a reality is an encounter between the affective, postural, libidinal and physical potentiality of the body and the potentiality of the Real, to think of ourselves as inhabiting a multiplicity of realities is to recognize the multiplicity of the potentialities of the human body. That is, it is also to recognize the multiplicity of modes in which the body is enmeshed in its environment.

Let me give a quick personal example. I am hearing-impaired. I began losing my hearing in my twenties. Before losing my hearing, I had developed a “bad habit”: I used to eavesdrop. I developed the habit following years of being taken, as a kid, by my parents to work and to lunches with people I had no capacity or interest to understand. I developed the *habitus* of an eavesdropper in that well after I stopped being subjected to the situation that led me to become an eavesdropper, I continued to have a strong disposition to eavesdrop on conversations around me, regardless of where I was.

From the multiple-realities angle I want to invite thinking with, eavesdropping was a mode of being enmeshed in my surroundings. Indeed, eavesdropping produces a very specific reality with very specific properties. Take, for instance, the fact that “in reality” the closer a sound is to you the more you hear it. This is not true of the reality in which one finds oneself as an eavesdropper, where the opposite is true. Sounds that are further from you start to become clearer than ones near you. There is no better proof that my disposition to eavesdrop created its own reality than the fact that the capacity was the very first thing I started losing when I started going deaf. And with the loss of my capacity to eavesdrop I lost the whole reality that came with it. I didn’t lose a subjective point of view on reality; I lost a whole reality. If I had gone totally deaf I could probably also argue that I lost the whole reality, the whole world of sound, produced by the capacity to hearing. This is so, since one’s hearing is a particular mode of bodily enmeshment in one’s surroundings. Indeed, this goes for all of our senses. Each enmeshes us in our surroundings in a specific way, producing at the same time a reality specific to this mode of enmeshment. What we call our sensorial reality is really a fusion of separate realities produced by the body’s sensory enmeshment in its surround-

ing. If we lose one of our senses we lose one reality — not a particular take on reality, or a particular dimension of reality.

It seems to me that the notion of humans as living continuously and concurrently in a multiplicity of realities provides an important consolidation of the critical anthropological ethos of “we can be other than what we are.” This is how it goes: if we all live in a multiplicity of realities, and if the socio-historical path of our society and culture has made us dwell more in one reality than in others, this does not mean that we have simply stopped dwelling in those other realities. As such, we are continuously shadowed by realities in which we are dwelling, of which we are not fully aware, but which often induce in us a vague feeling, or a sense of their presence. It is here that critical anthropology transforms into a critical politics. “Being other than what we are” is not just conceptually possible; it is materially possible, since one is already dwelling in it.

Such a conception of multiple realities opens up the possibility to perceive domination not only as the product of a struggle within a reality but also the struggle between realities. This idea that dominant groups do not just dominate an already given reality but impose their reality is already present in social theory, most explicitly in the work of Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁰ It is not surprising that Bourdieu, of all the social scientists working on modernity, gets very close to a multi-realist conception of the world. The reason is Bourdieu’s thinking derives from Spinoza but also from an adaptation of Husserl’s notion of *Umwelt*, a conception of the bodily *habitus* as always being part and parcel of the very social reality it helps give rise to. Behind Viveiros de Castro’s multi-naturalism lies a similar conception of the body. Indeed, at one point, in explaining his conception of the body, Viveiros de Castro wrote:

What we are calling her “body,” therefore, is not a distinctive physiology or a characteristic anatomy; it is an ensemble of manners and modes of being that constitute a habitus, an ethos, an ethogram (author’s translation).¹¹

Bourdieu’s different worlds are produced by different competing interests and orientations within an always modern conception of reality. As such, they are far from encompassing the possibility of radical alterity in the way it is present in Viveiros de Castro’s work, and closer to the objectivist form of “social constructionism” mentioned above. Nonetheless, through his conception of *habitus*, Bourdieu sees interest as a bodily mode of existing in reality rather than as a “subjective” dimension of the self. Furthermore, by offering a conception of politics as a struggle between different realities, Bourdieu opens up a path for us to understand that what he calls symbolic violence is also a form of ontological violence: certain realities come to dominate others so much that they simply become “reality,” foreclosing their history as a process

of domination and equally foreclosing the very possibility of thinking reality as multiple. To use Gramscian language, there are processes in which certain forces become hegemonic within a reality, but there are also processes whereby a reality becomes hegemonic over other realities.

As suggested above, I want now to exemplify some of the dimensions of the utopian ecological imaginary and its relation to reality when seen through a multi-realist lens.

THE REALITY OF ECO-UTOPIAN THOUGHT

The ecological crisis, whether in the form of global warming, environmental degradation, or the overexploitation of both the human and the nonhuman elements constitutive of our planet, has generated a continuous stream of ecological utopian thought. In this thought, human relation to nature is imagined in a variety of ways other than the instrumental and exploitative mode of interaction that has come to dominate our lives. More often than not such utopian conceptions of human-nature relations are perceived as pure fantasy. If they are related to reality at all, it is a negative relation, in that utopia here is an attempt to negate the harsh ecological reality by transcending it in thought. One can be inclined to see it as embodying the very Marxist definition of ideology and “false consciousness”: an attempt to transcend at the level of thought that which cannot be transcended at the level of practice.

Nonetheless, it should be equally clear that these ecological utopian ideas are also connected to another reality: the reality of the alternative primitivist tribal modes of inhabiting and relating to nature as they have been depicted by the accounts of travelers and anthropologists throughout Western history. The recent work of Phillipe Descola, *Par delà la Nature et la Culture*, yet to be translated to English, is perhaps the most important compilation and analysis of the multiple ways in which humans have conceived of their relationship to nature to date.¹² One can easily see how many of these alternative modes of inhabiting and conceiving the natural world, which began their lives in the West by being recorded by anthropologists and others, have now made their way to the ecological/utopian imaginary, whether in holistic intellectualized utopian constructs in the Tomas Moore tradition, or in partial utopian imaginaries in a variety of cultural forms: literature, dance, sculpture, etc. — and, perhaps most importantly today, science fiction films. The science fiction blockbuster *Avatar* abounds in such alternative imagining in its depiction of Na’vi culture. I will reflect on one particular imagined relation in the film: the ability of Na’vi riders to “plug” themselves into and bond with animals like the “Direhorse” and the “Mountain Banshee,” such that they become together a type of fused integrated assemblage.

Far from being the product of “pure fantasy,” the idea of a deep connectivity and oneness with certain parts of the natural world was the subject of seminal work by Lucien Lévy-

Bruhl through his description of the mode of being he called “participation.” This mode entails a less marked delineation between self and other and a radically different conception of the boundaries of being. One of the achievements of Lévy-Bruhl, in what perhaps constitutes a defining moment for anthropology, was his interpretation of the famous statement captured by the ethnographer Karl Von Steinen, in which the Amazonian Bororo tribespeople told Von Steinen “The Bororos are Araras” (referring to a local species of bird). Lévy-Bruhl confronted this “we are birds” statement by moving away from explanations that could easily be encompassed by Western thought, keeping it within its comfort zone — such as “what the Bororos really mean when they say they are birds is that they are so metaphorically.” Lévy-Bruhl’s attitude was more akin to “they say they are birds; if you are an anthropologist, either bring yourself to understand how one can exist in the world in such a way that they can credibly think they are birds or forget it.”

In developing his conception of participation, Lévy-Bruhl was trying to describe (and show there were) *other* ways of existing in the world than the instrumental mode of being that dominates our lives. He thus differentiated between the “logical mentality,” which depends on and creates a separation between self and other and is part of the instrumental/rational mode of inhabiting the world, and the “mystical mentality,” which is part and parcel of the process of participation, where self and other exist in relative states of fusion. Crucially, however, in continuation with the arguments about the anthropological conception of otherness developed earlier, Frederic Keck recently explained that for Lévy-Bruhl: “The difference between ‘primitive mentality’ and ‘civilized mentality’ does not separate two historically and geographically separated modes of thinking as an evolutionist philosophy of history would have it — one whose presuppositions Lévy-Bruhl has always criticized — but two logical principles that direct the human mind in every society and in every individual (author’s translation).”¹³ From the reality of the other we always end up with the otherness of ourselves. As Lévy-Bruhl himself pointed out, “there is a mystical mentality that is more easily demarcated and therefore more easily observable among the ‘primitives’ than in our societies, but it is present in every human mind.”¹⁴ Lévy-Bruhl, therefore, was hardly arguing that the primitives are *inherently* more mysti-

cal than us, as some crude interpreters still like to read him. Nor was he saying that the primitives lived in a mystical world of which we know nothing. Rather — and especially as his later writings became less about “mentalities” and more about experience — the difference becomes precisely about which experiential reality, in the sense of which modality of enmeshment in the Real, comes to dominate over others.

That is, if we are to make him speak in the language of multiple realities, both we and the primitives are bodily enmeshed in our environment such that we produce and live in a multiplicity of realities. Among these are the realities associated with both the logical and the mystical mentalities that interested him. Crucially, being enmeshed and dwelling in the reality associated with the logical mentality that has become the dominant feature of our modernity has never stopped us from being enmeshed and dwelling in a multiplicity of other realities, including the reality of participation and the mystical mentality associated with it. Consequently — to go back to our original concern with utopia — the utopian idea of state of fusion, far from being “pure” fantasy, speaks to a reality where we actually do exist in a state of fusion with nature, and which we continue to inhabit, but which has been obscured by our capitalist modernity.

But there is more to Lévy-Bruhl’s argument than the idea that we always already exist in spaces where our relation to nature is *other* than what it appears to be. Perhaps more important is the fact that Lévy-Bruhl helps us undermine any political and ethical polarity that we are tempted to create between a modernity associated with instrumental reason and a primitiveness associated with a state of participation and a mystical mentality. Indeed, he does not see instrumental reason as specific to modernity. Rather, he helps us think that what perhaps characterizes modernity most is the way we have increasingly come to see instrumental reason and the reality associated with it as the *only* possible mode of being and the only possible mode of reasoning. In this sense, rather than instrumental reason as such, Western modernity’s greatest “achievement” has been to make us mono-realists, minimizing our awareness of the multiplicity of realities in which we exist, always grounding our utopian thought in the past or the future, rather than in the present, where it has always been grounded.

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