Better Worlds and Mark Twain's Submarines: Utopian Literature as a Stimulus for Social Engagement[1]

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1. Literary Utopias and Social Change

There is an amusing, though most likely untrue story about Mark Twain and submarines told by Bertell Ollman, a professor of politics at the New York University in his 2005 article *The Utopian Vision of the Future (Then and Now)*. Apparently, Mark Twain was once asked what could be done about the invention of a new, and seemingly very dangerous, weapon – submarines. After a short deliberation, Twain answered: the only way to deal with enemy submarines is to heat the oceans to the boiling point, thus incapacitating the submarines. When questioner persisted on a further elaboration of his proposal, demanding details regarding the boiling of the oceans, Twain allegedly said – *You asked me what we should do; do not expect me to tell you how to do it.*[2]

Ollman uses Mark Twain's submarine analogy with the intention of presenting a Marxist critique of utopias and utopian thinking as producing impossible ideals without giving any explanation about the process that leads to them.[3] This is the way all utopias

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1 In this paper, as a starting point I have used some insights already published in my book *Budućnost žene: Filozofska rasprava o utopiji i feminizmu* [*Woman's Future: A Philosophical Treatise on Utopia and Feminism*]. Zagreb: Plejada; Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, 2015.

2 Ollman, 2005.

3 The rich Marxist tradition of utopian criticism begins with Marx's and Engels' views on the attitudes of socialist utopians outlined in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Anti-Dühring* (1878). There they reproach utopians' ideas on the lack of practical value that manifests itself in their reluctance to carry out

work, claims Ollman. They are distinguished by "a desirable goal drawn from hopes and daydreams, unrealistic means, and ignorance of existing conditions".[4] And this is how we usually understand the word *utopia*, as a naïve little story, popular with naïve people – daydreamers and wishful thinkers, living in some distant naïve times. Today, utopias are considered old-fashioned and outdated, deprived of the power they were once believed to have – that of making people become socially engaged, of making people change the world.

In this paper, I tell a slightly different story of utopia, a story that, although critical towards many aspects of utopianism, points out positive traits of utopias that are constantly and persistently forgotten. In doing so I primarily concentrate on so-called literary utopias. This is not to devalue other utopian forms and manifestations. However, my choice of literary utopias as stimuli of social engagement is intentional, since I argue that they are the original keepers of the true utopian spirit, a spirit that is, unfortunately, today often under attack, and occasionally lost completely.

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serious (revolutionary) social changes, as well as in applying the wrong methods and mechanisms of change. See for example *The Communist Manifesto*: "The significance of Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism bears an inverse relation to historical development. In proportion as the modern class struggle develops and takes definite shape, this fantastic standing apart from the contest, these fantastic attacks on it, lose all practical value and all theoretical justification. Therefore, although the originators of these systems were, in many respects, revolutionary, their disciples have, in every case, formed mere reactionary sects. They hold fast by the original views of their masters, in opposition to the progressive historical development of the proletariat. They, therefore, endeavour, and that consistently, to deaden the class struggle and to reconcile the class antagonisms. They still dream of experimental realisation of their social Utopias, of founding isolated "phalansteres," of establishing "Home Colonies," of setting up a "Little Icaria" -- duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem -- and to realise all these castles in the air, they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois. By degrees they sink into the category of the reactionary conservative Socialists depicted above, differing from these only by more systematic pedantry, and by their fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effects of their social science". (Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf (retrieved on June 23)).

4   Ollman, 2005.

The first literary utopia, *De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia,* was written in 1516 by Sir Thomas More, an English Renaissance philosopher, Catholic saint, scholar and great chancellor in the service of King Henry VIII. More used a very simple storyline that many writers of literary utopias later inherited. There was usually the main utopian hero, a traveller who discovers a remote and isolated place, an island or a country. There he meets its citizens and is acquainted with their social, political, economic and religious institutions, their private and public lives and their relationships. Literary utopias usually end with the hero returning home, conveying a message about the existence of an alternative and better society.

Although utopia is of Renaissance origin, many of its attributes were not novel for that period. Utopia was born under ancient and Judaeo-Christian influence, borrowing from the first a polis-like vision of a perfect society, prospering on some remote island, usually surrounded by tall walls. Judaeo-Christian tradition gave further value to the original remoteness of the imagined place by adding a temporal dimension – utopias were often not only spatially but temporally distant as well.[5] Like a Christian paradise, utopias were to be expected at some point in the future, with one crucial difference: unlike in paradise, man had an active, even primary role in the creation of the future with utopia in it. That being said, it should be noted that I do not understand the creation of utopia as some coincidental event happening to one of the most brilliant Renaissance men. Although Thomas More wrote his utopia with the intention of subtly criticizing British society and royal government, leaving his utopian work to be a mixture of satire and fantasy without taking it, or himself, too seriously, he did resonate the spirit of the time marked by the awakening of human confidence in his intellectual and moral abilities to change the world and its future. In other words, utopia became such an immensely popular form because it downright tackled something that was already present in the European societies of the time and that can be described

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5 Manuel and Manuel, 1979; Kumar, 2003.

as a utopian spirit or a utopian thought. It is unlikely that literary utopia would have brought so much joy in some earlier times, or inspired generation of writers, readers and lawmakers, had they not themselves already nurtured the utopian spirit.

Literary utopias during and after More became immensely popular, affecting the development of other utopian forms, such as utopian intentional communities and utopian social theory.[6] Ernst Bloch was among the first to see utopianism in many myths and fairy tales, art, music and architecture, in social and in revolutionary thought. Bloch is also a philosopher who went the farthest in understanding utopian thought and its influence on the modern world, contributing to the development of utopian philosophy and utopian studies as well.[7]

But what is it that makes utopias, especially literary utopias, socially engaging in the first place? In what follows, I try to explain what I mean by socially engaging and what factors made literary utopias function in such a way. I understand social engagement in a slightly different way from how the notion is employed in the usual sociological and psychological definitions concerned with our degree of involvement in community life. For the purposes of this paper I will narrow this definition, concentrating on those aspects of social engagement that are oriented toward transcending the existent and creating a better life, a better society and a better world. In other words, I am talking about social engagement as a means leading to a social change. I argue that utopias had and potentially still have a capacity for encouraging people to change themselves, the community they live in and the future that awaits them. I also argue, and I am aware that I am not alone in that argument, that the undesirability of utopias in the eyes of many does not stem from their alleged naivety or outdatedness, but arises because they are considered dangerous due to their promise and incitement of social change.

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6 Sargent, 1994.
7 See for example: *Geist der Utopie*, 1918; *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1938-1947; *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 1963.

So, what is it that literary utopias have that incites (or at least, that used to incite) social engagement? In my work on literary utopias I have detected at least four factors explaining their social capacities. These are f*easibility*, *criticality*, *democracy of authorship* and *seductiveness*. I will briefly explain each one starting with the last.

2. Seductiveness

The seductiveness of literary utopias can be traced to their capacity, so eloquently described by Bertrand de Jouvenel, to paint beautiful pictures of everyday life.[8] De Jouvenel refers to the utopian *likeability* and *honesty* that give utopia an advantage over other forms of textual persuasion on social engagement. Immersing in the utopian story – and it is the story part where the persuasion holds its strongest position – is compared to dreaming by de Jouvenel. Dreams, although not real, give us a sense of reality that no political or philosophical elaboration of the best possible worlds can give.

> A dream, while less than reality, is much more than a blueprint. A blueprint does not give you the "feel" of things, as if they existed in fact: a dream does so. If you can endow your "philosophical city" with the semblance of reality, and cause your reader to see it, as if it were actually in operation, this is quite a different achievement from a mere explanation of the principles on which it should rest. This "causing to see" by means of a feigned description is obviously, what More aimed at: it is also the essential feature of the utopian genre[9].

For de Jouvenel utopian description of a daily life is not just an ornament, a literary device to entertain idle readers. Rather, it is a necessary element of incitement since it does not only give its readers the conceptual contours of the imagined system, but the ways in which the system affects the everyday lives of ordinary citizens under it. For some utopian writers, utopia meant a world without private property led by communist ideals. For others, it designated

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8   de Jouvenel, 1965.
9   de Jouvenel, 1965, p. 437-438.

some scientific community where people lived for knowledge and truth, or a little village where life was in harmony with nature, or a land of carnal pleasures and sexual liberties. Precisely this utopian insistence on "what" and not so much on "how" is what Ollman resents in utopian writers. What can be said in defence of those writers is that the *wishing* part usually precedes the *knowing* part. Thus, before giving answers on *how* to achieve utopia, utopian writers – if they are to be held responsible for giving those answers – should have the right to first and foremost imagine their utopias. In my opinion, the final judgment not only on the quality of the utopian picture but also on the means and ways of achieving it, should not be forced on the writer. The readers are those who decide if a utopian world is worth living and worth fighting for, and the most talented among them can maybe even have ideas of how to build them.

3. Feasibility

My next argument regarding the power of literary utopia to incite social engagement concerns its feasibility. Feasibility should not be in any way mistaken for a criterion used in many discussions on the (im)possibility of utopian realisation. Much of utopian criticism is often exhausted on arguments about the utopian impossibility, where such alleged impossibility is regularly considered a justification for their worthlessness. Utopias, it is said, are impossible because usually, there are no existing scientific, technological or engineering means of their realization. The problem with this kind of argument lies in the fact that by using it, we impose on utopia the benchmarks of reality which, by definition, it seeks to transcend. Utopias, especially literary utopias, work with non-existent worlds, sometimes using non-existent preconditions of their own existence. By putting the *impossible* label on the utopias, we are reducing human existence to the immediate, negating the horizons to which human creativity and imagination can lead us. A long time ago, when flying was considered humanly impossible, to dream of flying was a utopian dream. There were also times when

the same could have been said about diving to the bottom of the ocean or walking on the moon. In the meantime, man took off, reached the bottom of the ocean and walked on the moon, proving that the ancient impossibility of utopia imagining such things was nothing more than an empty word that, if one believed in it, one would probably not have flown, reached the bottom of the ocean or walked on the moon. It is precisely the belief in the utopian picture, or, even better, the feeling such a picture produces, that makes people engage, which is why many philosophers and some poets believe in the close relationship between utopia and human progress. In the words of Oscar Wilde:

> A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.[10]

There is however one criterion that utopia should meet, not only to be considered practical, relevant and socially engaging but to be considered utopia at all. I call it the feasibility criterion. When I say that feasibility is an attribute of literary utopias, what I am in fact suggesting is that, unlike many descriptions of beautiful worlds that have been present in human civilisation and culture from their very beginning, Thomas More's utopia, and many others that followed, didn't leave the responsibility for a good life, a good society and a good future to gods, monsters, forces of nature, or aliens. Utopias give the responsibility over human destiny only to humans themselves. And that is why utopias are feasible. Their feasibility is grounded in the fact that they are man-made i.e. they are dependent on human's engagement with his own and with social life. That is why, in my opinion, Plato's *Republic* is not a utopia and this is why stories of paradise are not utopias. In the first case, the creator of the perfect world possesses capabilities that Plato is convinced ordinary man does not; in the second, the creator is God himself.

As has already been said, literary utopias depend on the his-

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10 Wilde, 1891.

torical emergence of the necessary spiritual, intellectual and social prerequisites for a different understanding of human history. In that understanding, the past, the present and the future are possible only because of the human agency – both positive and negative. Utopias' feasibility makes them socially engaging because they appoint the main actor of all events – man. In such a constellation, it is impossible for him to look at the world's and the society's inadequacies externally and disinterestedly, blaming gods or destiny for them. As a sole creator of his circumstances, he is the only one responsible for shaping them, making his engagement with the world and the future desirable or even obligatory. And though this responsibility seems like a divine gift, it is also a great burden, since, we see that today more than ever before, human engagement is not always wise or just and the consequences of such engagement can be terrifying.

4. Criticality

Closely related to the above-mentioned topic is utopia's criticality. Utopia is never only about imaginary worlds or imaginary futures. An integral part of every utopia is its relationship to the present, which is always found inadequate. It can even be said that ever so often, a careful analysis of the existing world's shortcomings has a primacy over the construction of the imaginary utopian world. Even in More's case, one of the most interesting parts of his book refers to his insightful analysis of the social crisis in the country, which finally led him to conclude on the necessity of abolishing private property. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, probably the main reason for writing his book was the ability it gave him, to criticise his government without suffering the sanctions for it.

There is no description of a non-existent world without some form of a critical review of the existent one. This critical review in literary dystopias (descriptions of non-existent worst possible worlds) usually occurs directly, since the main effort of dystopian writers is to make the closest possible connection between the imagined world and the world in which they live, making their

dystopian world a direct consequence of the events in the existing world. In literary utopias, the relationship between the imagined and the existent is usually indirect, since the imagined is considered not to be necessarily a direct consequence of current events in the existing world. This is why I do not agree completely with Marxist accusations of utopian writers for their ignorance of existing conditions. It is true that many of them did not understand or did not want to understand the complexity of injustices, inequalities and unhappiness of the world in which they lived. They even sometimes closed their eyes to the causes of suffering, especially when they themselves were contributing to it. It is also true that many of them did not know, or did not care to suggest, practical ways of dealing with injustices, inequalities and unhappiness. What they did know was that something was fundamentally wrong, even if they could not pinpoint it. Utopias are born out of understanding such existing conditions, no matter how insufficient this understanding occasionally is. To put it even more bluntly, there is no utopia without some form of critique.

Criticality grows out of injustice and dissatisfaction with it. Utopian criticality makes it a tool for social engagement and social change, which is why many proclaim its utility in the modern world obsolete. They usually remind us either of needlessness of change or of human incapability to change anything for the better. The modern crisis of utopian critique is, I suggest, followed by a crisis of political, social and other kinds of critique in contemporary society. In the absence of critique, there is a lack of engagement and consequently, a lack of social change. Without such social change, the world remains the same and man remains the same. Without social change, there can be no progress, no elimination of injustice, no breakthroughs of human ingenuity and no hopes for a different kind of living for those who are suffering. This is why Francis Fukuyama calls the end of history, understood as the end of progress and fundamental change, sad.[11]

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11 Fukuyama, 1992.

5. Democracy of Authorship

It is interesting to notice that the main carriers of the utopian spirit today are social movements which, being occasionally the only critics of reality, carry the power to change it. Social movements are continuing something that utopias started earlier – giving voices to those who were usually unable to speak; hence, utopian democracy of authorship. The utopian ability to pinpoint many of the life's complexities by telling powerful and sad stories of injustice and disempowerment encouraged different voices to use precisely the utopian literature to express their own attitudes, hopes and perseverance. Experimenting with different kinds of living, black, feminist, queer or postcolonial utopias gave insights into the, for the most part, hidden lives and adversities of the oppressed, thus giving hope to the ones living unbearable lives.

In claiming the utopian democracy of authorship, a certain *naiveté* should be avoided at all costs, by keeping in mind two things. The first one pertains to the fact that, throughout history, utopian writers were educated and financially secured white men, who spoke about the injustice from their mostly privileged positions. Like all forms of writing, writing utopias required time, money and, in the words of Virginia Woolf, *a room of one's own* – circumstances, in other words, associated with a privileged life. To claim that anyone could write a utopia sounds very cynical if we know that for the biggest part of the history, the majority could not write or did not have sufficient resources to write anything, let alone a utopia. Even if a woman, a black man or a proletarian did write, what odds did they have of reaching a wider audience, an audience composed mostly of rich white men? Of course, one can argue that the privileged utopian writer could have had an understanding, sympathy or even compassion for the oppressed ones – after all, utopian socialists definitely had such an understanding, making an effort to write a utopia addressing issues of existent social injustices. That being said though, I nevertheless have to agree with Fredric Jameson's claim that, historically, the "view of those who

are oppressed is ontologically more fundamental"[12], believing that the true understanding of oppression comes only from the experience of oppression.

The second thing that should be kept in mind is that historically, for many writers, literary utopias were not so much a medium for combating injustice, but a means of expressing oppressive views. Quite often, utopian writers built their utopias precisely on the sacrifice of the weak and on the exploitation and suffering of those who were different. Not even Thomas More himself could have imagined a society without slaves. In addition, although throughout history, their inadequate social position remained unchanged, most utopian writers did not only fail to notice the oppression of their female contemporaries, but many of them believed that women were already living in utopia.[13] By making oppression utopian, many utopian writers silenced the voices and hopes of the oppressed.

By the contemporary democratization of utopian voices, women writers (and the other 'Others') entered the world of literary utopias showing all the shortcomings of the existing and imaginary worlds. They did so by giving alternatives to political and other public institutions on one side, and by critically considering everyday private life with all its little intricacies on the other. By doing that they made the utopian worlds, previously often reduced to descriptions of public space and life, even more complex and, in my opinion, valuable.

Paradoxically, modern authors, by paying attention to the elaborate layers of contemporary lives, have shown all the difficulties not only of realizing utopian dreams but of engaging in that realization as well. Defining *others* as goals and never as tools, they questioned many of the historical assumptions of utopian life – one of them being that it necessarily depends on some form of exploitation of others – people, animals, and other living or inanimate creatures. They have also significantly influenced what it means to

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12 Jameson, 1971.
13 Sargent, 1981.

have a good life and under what circumstances that life is possible. By showing us the world that is becoming increasingly irreparable, they have made utopia ambivalent and sometimes hard to swallow. Their utopias are often sober and dark; they rest on the delay of pleasure and on sacrifice; they describe hardships and struggles; they are global and universal. Proclaiming their work naïve is nothing more than cynical.

The history of utopia so far is based on the dialectic of the utopian and the dystopian. This dialecticism is nullified in contemporary utopias, as the boundary between a worse and a better world has dissolved. Modern utopias are even less of a blueprint than they have ever been, since they are no longer perfect places. It is up to us to decide what kind of places they are and whether we want to live in them. Democracy of authorship does not only rely on the freedom of writing utopias but on the freedom of choosing what utopia is and whether it is worth dreaming. Some would even say that utopia from the start was just that – a nonexistent place that could be better or worse than the existent one and that the audience should have been the only arbitrator of its (im)perfection. By giving everybody that choice, utopias are once again becoming grim reminders of their responsibilities towards the world and the future, again turning attention to the possibility and to the necessity of engaging with them.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper I have pointed out the link between literary utopias and social engagement. I did so by singling out a few traits of literary utopias that I consider crucial to the ability of a utopian text to incite its readers towards social engagement and social change. The seductiveness of literary utopias lies in their ability to immerse readers, by painting beautiful pictures of everyday life, into their imaginary worlds, describing life as it could and should be. Even though many utopian critics claim that literary utopias represent an escape from the woes of the existing, I only partially agree with them. Utopia can represent an escapist

fantasy only during the act of reading. When the reading is over, a necessary return to the real world occurs, followed by the painful realization of a differences between the two worlds. Utopian feasibility reminds utopian readers of their responsibility for creating a better (or worse) world and future. The feasibility criterion refers to the emancipatory move against any kind of authority, celebrating human ingenuity, independence and bravery. Utopian criticality represents an articulation of awareness and an attitude towards the real world. It challenges the logic of order, allowing the critics to move out of their daily lives and re-evaluate them. Utopian democracy of authorship refers to the opening up of a space for different voices, different experiences and different visions. It also points to the complexity of the lives and coexistence of different people that traditional literary utopias often sought to ignore.

The contemporary attack on utopia is, in my opinion, an attack not so much on the usual understanding of utopia as an insignificant backlog from some naive times, but on utopia as a stimulus for social engagement. Such utopia encourages all social groups to criticize the existing world and to offer an alternative one, while reminding them of their responsibility for their own destiny. Repudiation of utopia also means giving up criticism of existing injustices, building alternatives to them, and giving everyone a voice to actively contribute to social change. Recognition of these aspects of the modern attack on utopia opens up a whole range of social and political issues that have long outgrown the boundaries of literary utopia, issues regarding the possibility and necessity of social change in general. I hope that this analysis will contribute to dealing with, and solving, these issues.

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