What is Utopia?

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There are many ways of Utopism. And it’s used differently in different contexts. At first we shall define the word in its modern sense and common use. A utopia is an idea how to change the society and make it better, but the goal of this thought itself is so extreme or difficult to reach that its realization seems to be more like a future vision. We have to add the fact that it also depends on society and culture. Something that might be a utopia in one country can already be reached and realized in another where it is no more a utopia but already reality. We also have to differ between a utopia and a reform. A reform is something current that can be changed by a group or an individual. It might be a social problem that has to be handled and different groups or individuals can help to realize the change, while a utopia is a vision of something better which seems to be far away and impossible to reach. Therefore a utopia only can be defined to be an utopia in a certain society in case that the society is not willing to accept this ideal or doesn’t have the possibility to realize it.

Let’s make some examples. One example might be Pacifism. Adherents of Pacifism want to have a world without weapons, wars and violence. The pacifistic ideology might be extreme, because a world without any war and without a weapon seems to be unreachable. Almost every country has its military and its weapons and arms which are ready to be used. The danger of such an idealistic thought could be that a minority having an idea how to change the world might supress the majority, as they want to silence the people who are against it. In case of our example concerning Pacifism, the ideal would only be possible to fulfill if everyone who bears an arm or weapon would be sentenced away and any country owning a weapon would be attacked. This means to reach this extreme idea of non-violence, a lot of violence and force has to be used.

Let’s take other examples. Some people say that the idea of class struggle could be classified as a utopia. Well, this example shows that it’s not always easy to fully categorize something. An argument against classifying class struggle as utopia could be the fact that many countries have had such a struggle and Socialism was realised in those countries. Let’s take two extremes: The USA and Cuba. While class struggle might be a utopia for an American, for a Cuban it is not. Someone in Cuba might say that socialism is realised and the goal is reached,
because his country had undergone such a struggle. An American could say that class struggle is a utopia as his country didn’t experience it and as it seems far away that the USA will experience it soon. This means that for an American it’s hard to reach and the society is not ready for it, while the Cuban society was ready for a revolution and a change and therefore the utopia became reality. We can also find other kinds of utopias in other societies that are not regarded as a utopia in another part of the world. For a teenager in South Korea, it is a utopia to have fun and go to a party, as he has to study for school half of the night. So while having fun as a teenager can be regarded a utopia in South Korea, in Russia it would be none!

But during I explained those examples, I also showed its use that I want to point out more detailed.

A utopia normally is a wish to change the society for better. The utopia itself is an ideal and it’s often regarded as extreme or it can at least be discussed highly controversial in the society where it appears. Therefore, we can say that a Utopia criticizes the society and shows perfect or elaborated ways how to solve a problem.

Now let’s talk about criticism.

The British-Austrian philosoph Karl Popper stated that Utopias are too inconcrete. Instead, he wishes that people change concrete problems in society. People should not try to change the society by planing a far-away ideal, but instead do something concrete to change it.

Popper says furthermore that it’s not our role to open other people’s eyes in favor for our beautiful dreams and visions and therefore it’s not our duty to convince them of their realization.

But that’s not all! Popper goes a step further and explains that we should not use our dreams to flee in a wonderful world. They just deviate from the real problems! Instead, we shall realize real problems and do our best to help solving them.

I have to fully disagree Popper’s views. First, our dreams can’t be regarded as a way to flee the truth. Our dreams are wonderful possibilities to create visions to change the world. Without a dream or a vision, there is no motivation to change anything. Just our dreams can convince us that we are able to change the society. Second, convincing people of our ideas and searching for supporters is important. Of course, we shall not force others to accept our ideas, but when somebody has a dream to change something it is his duty to share the vision, in case that he really wants to change something. Maybe you have a good vision or dream but can’t realize it on your own as you need people helping you, sponsoring you or supporting you mentally! It’s your job to convince others that your idea helps the society to move forward, reducing grievance and pain in the world and giving progress. Only if you have a
dream or a vision, you can start to do something concrete. If you only do something concrete, then there is no goal or no impulse to go further.

Having an extreme or idealistic view is not bad at all, in case you add give-and-take. If you have an extreme idea, it can cause controversies, yes... but it also pays attention. People start to care about your ideas if they are provoking. But now, you shouldn’t insist on your standpoint. Use your utopia to lead a discussion. The result will be a compromise that is good for everyone and that is a kind of progress in your society. If you just have a “normal”, un-idealistic view (and therefore a low give-and-take) and so does the partner of your discussion, there will be no good result, because your idea is already so weak that you are not willing to compromise, and so does the other side. The result is a bad compromise – and a maximum compromise!

Fred Polak even talked about the dangers in case that utopias disappear! He says that the disappearance of Utopias creates Contra-Utopias (also called Anti-Utopias or Negative Utopias). While an Utopia is a motivation to do good in the world and change things (and therefore works active), the Anti-Utopia is passive raising the Pessimism of Being and cultural Fatalism. This means that people think that they can’t do anything to change the world and accept injustice. Furthermore, they see problems as given by fate which can’t be changed or which have to be accepted as they are. The engagement of people in the society might stagnate while social problems, misery and injustice are accepted as given and regarded unchangeable. Progress and benefit for the society is not really possible under such a circumstance due to the missing motivation and the growing pessimism towards the society itself.

A very cruelful example for such an Anti-Utopia are the fighters of ISIS. The Islamic terrorists say that the world is so bad now that only Islam (the way they see and construe it) could save the world. They say there is so much trouble in the world that only violent actions could save the Muslims (as they define them). Therefore they use a scene from the Sunnah stating: “The world will not come to its end until the Romans invade Al-Amaq or Dabiq”. The city of Amaq is situated in nowadays Syrian-Turkish border region. The terrorists say that the Romans are a symbol representing the West. And as Turkey is part of the NATO and befriended with the West, they regard Al-Amaq as invaded and therefore predict the apocalypse. They say that the Islamic eschatology becomes truth now. For this reason, the ISIS-propaganda magazine advertising for new recruitments is called “Dabiq”.

There are people who have lost their hope in the world or who are thinking that the world is too bad nowadays and instead of doing a change they are so depressed that they join terrorist
groups as their promises seem to be the last hope in the eyes of those people. Because some people don’t have own dreams or visions to do something better and because they are disappointed from nowadays society they believe in such Anti-Utopias which the terrorists are spreading.

But I also have to add that in a world without positive utopias, there is not only Fatalism, i.e. accepting everything by calling it “god-given” or fate, but also the growth of Nihilism. The nihilistic ideals say that life on earth is not worthy. Instead, Nihilists are longing for their death as they see a world after death as perfect, while the immanent world only consists of chaos. The world after death consists of Nothing which means freedom, for Nihilists. It is said the Nihilists negate all the positive ideas in the immanent world.

If Nihilism is growing and Utopias are decreasing then it means that the world becomes depressive instead of creative. We can see that Positive Utopias – no matter if they are General Utopias (like Pacifism) which seem to be unreachable; Society-depending Utopias (like Socialism) which are realised in some parts of the world while it seems to be unreachable in others; or Local Utopias (like teenage parties in South Korea) which can be only found in specific areas of the world, and seem unreachable only for the people of a specific nation, region or culture – are always potentials to change the world positively, giving ideas for discussions and changing the world actively in case that people fight for their dreams.

If Utopias are criticised to be senseless future dreams that are regarded too inconcrete, too extreme or too controversial, then it creates an empty space in the society which is often filled with Negative Utopias, expressing hopelessness and fears of an unhealthy society. Negative Utopias can be very dangerous as they destabilize societies and are able to cause trouble, instead of peace and progress. However, Utopias are always judging and criticising the present situation. They are not only dreams about the future life, but an expression of how they feel about the current situation.

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