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Psychology of utopias

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THE CONCEPT OF UTOPIA

Utopias have primarily been studied within the fields of philosophy, literary history and history, up till now. These fields investigate questions concerning content and genre. Studying the psychology of the authors of utopias, however, falls within the competency of psychology. As far as I know, psychologists have not dealt with this problem.

The concept of utopias derives from the Greek "ou" (a prefix meaning "no"), and "topos" ("place") expressions meaning "nowhere", or a "place that does not exist". To this non-existent place the author dreams the world where the naïve traveler (who gets there by some chance) finds a pluperfect society instead of the incomplete one he knows so well from reality. The term *utopia* comes from the title of Thomas More's work, though we have been acquainted with earlier utopias as well, such as Plato's *Republic*. Concerning content, we distinguish between positive and negative utopias. The former depicts a society that seems ideal for its author, while the latter (often called "dystopia") handles the term "ideal" ironically and provides a misshapen and grotesque caricature of the society. We also make a distinction between the utopias of order and the utopias of liberty, and there are combined forms as well.

As a genre the utopian literature is fairly multifarious, and that is why literary history does not consider utopia a distinct genre. It can appear as a state novel or a fantastic travelogue, or it can be science fiction or a piece of fantasy literature. The correct classification is irrelevant to the present paper so I will not make such distinctions. I will speak about utopias in general – not as a literary but as a "psychological genre".

Concerning the psychological approach to the problem of utopia, I do not have an easy task due to the unprecedented nature of this exploration. Invoking psychohistory[1] the question should be asked in the following way: "why do people write utopias"? That is, what psychological situation motivates people to quit reality and speculate on alternative and ideal realities? The question implies that this time I concentrate on positive utopias.

UTOPIAS AND PSYCHOSIS

The most conspicuous feature of utopias is that they secede from reality, so we can say that they have something in common with psychosis on the level of the phenomenon. It is true that this is a controlled secession (by the authors), and it does not mean the complete loss of contact with reality.

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[1] Psychohistory suggests a strong relationship between an author's personality and the work of art he creates.

If we look for the analogy of utopias with psychosis, we can easily acknowledge that utopias are based on delusion-like ideas. These ideas, however, construct a coherent system. "Delusions" keep the theoretic systems of utopias together, and they serve as an ideological and moral basis to them. As delusions are necessarily false, the content of the reality generated by them is at least dubious.

Delusions tie down and, at the same time, are capable to mobilize exceeding amounts of energy. This energy provides utopias for ideological and moral élan. The élan enchants and fills the travelers (not mentioning the authors themselves) up with enthusiasm. Readers also can fall victim to its charms. This élan mobilizes not only the readers' minds but also their emotions, and they can hardly stay indifferent to the world of the utopia. The delusions of the utopias operate in the same way as the psychotic persons'. They serve accomplished responses to all the questions inside their systems. The questions that query the systems themselves are labeled irrelevant.

The analogy, however, is incomplete. There are some differences between insane persons and the authors of utopias. Delusions encompass the psychotic persons' everyday life, but for the authors of the utopias (except for the case they are also insane) they serve as intellectual adventures (concerning leastwise the conscious level)[2]. The boundaries, however, are permeable. For the insane persons it is natural that they subordinate their thoughts and acts to delusions. If the author started to construct the world of the utopia he no longer could be regarded sane.

As the boundaries between psychosis and utopia are permeable, it seems logical to conclude that the authors of utopias are very close to get into a psychotic state. Their contact with reality is unbalanced and their personalities are at the threshold of disintegration. Writing utopias, thus, (just like any other creative activities) is a self-healing attempt, aimed at the prevention of mental insanity. All these issues need a more elaborative exposition that I will try to perform in the following sections.

UTOPIAS AND FAIRY TALES

Utopias resemble the world of the fairy tales in many ways. They both depict coherent (though fictive) worlds that enable the heroes to find their happiness. In both genres wish-fulfillment predominates. In fairy tales happiness comes true at the end while in utopias it should not be reached since it has been given. The worlds of utopias are the worlds of happiness. Utopias usually start where most fairy tales end: "And they lived happily ever after." Utopias save conflicts: in their worlds the aims, values and ideals that guarantee the happiness of their civilians have already been achieved.

The Bettelheimian "good-enough tale" term (that refers mainly to folk tales) reflects the infantile world-view, which operates with sharpened contrasts, rather than with sophisticated distinctions. Thus the heroes of fairy tales are one-dimensional: they are either very good or bad, beautiful or ugly, and so on[3]. As Bettelheim says, children draw ideas from the tales to rearrange their inner chaos[4]. The clear contrasting pairs of fairy tales motivate the children to find their way in their own chaotic worlds. Thus children can observe the operation of these simplified emotions, features and desires, both separately and together. By means of identification and projections to heroes of fairy tales, these things become comprehensible and easy to elaborate for children[5].

The worlds of utopias seem to share common features with the infantile world view. The civilians of the utopias are just as one-dimensional as the heroes in fairy tales, with the exception that all represent the "right" side, since there is no "wrong" in these ideal societies. So in utopias only the morally "right" halves of the contrary pairs are projected to the heroes. Morally "right" things, of course, imply many different features (e.g.

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2 Utopia, as a genre falls into the field of speculative fiction. One of the most characteristic features of speculative fiction is that the authors play an intellectual game. They try to answer a "What if…?" type question in a speculative way. See Balint (2009).

3 See Bettelheim, p. 9.

4 See Bettelheim, p. 75.

5 See Bettelheim, p. 90-96.

diligence, truthfulness, love, loyalty, etc.), which can be represented by different persons or groups. The nature of the values of the contrasting pairs characterizing the societies of utopias depends on the authors' personalities, actual desires and conflicts.

The analogy of the two genres is also affirmed by the often similar beginning as well. In fairy tales the heroes must leave their homes (either they are expelled or lose their way) and start wandering to pass through adventures that contribute to a new integration of their personalities. Utopias, as I have already mentioned, begin also with the turn that the heroes find themselves in a totally unknown world. The analogy ends at this very point, because the traveler is not the real hero of the story, at least not in the same sense as the hero of a tale. It is not his integration of self that is important: his adventures in the strange world do not mean the symbolic levels of self-integration. The traveler mainly concentrates on the intellectual comprehension of the ideology of the strange world. Of course, just like the hero of a fairy tale, the traveler also faces a series of difficult tasks, because the familiar, common logic does not predominate in this world.

As for the space and time relations, there are also some parallel features. Neither fairy tales, nor utopias are linked to space and time – things happen somewhere and some time. Both fairy tales and utopias seemingly concrete the locality, saying "over the hills and far away", or "in the middle of the round forest", or "on the island", or "on the Moon", or "under the sea", but all these are, of course, only the symbolic labeling of the fact that the heroes are wandering beyond their real localities, deeply inside their soul. The time of fairy tales (if we can speak about time dimension at all) is rather the past – the linguistic past tense of the story refers to this, and the almost obligatory beginning sentence, saying "Once upon a time". This past, of course, should not be meant in a historical sense; it rather symbolizes the psychologically ancient and infantile part of the soul.

The time of utopias can also be the past, the withered golden age – this is true mainly for the utopias written in the ancient times. The longing for the golden age relates to the archaic-mythic world-view and to ancient people's relationship to transcendence. In psychological sense the past golden age is the same as the past time of fairy tales. From the 16th century the time of utopias switched mainly to the future, which can easily be explained with the appearance of the trust in progress, and the hope in the future results of progress. Future, in psychological sense, is the time of wish-fulfillment. Thus, utopias are, in modern sense, tensed moments of future; the seemingly eternal moments of fulfilled wishes.

The two genres urge the comparison from another aspect as well. This is the aspect of sexuality. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales provide the ideal sexual education – proper to the child's age and level of personality development[6]. Without any contents referring to sexuality, the story promotes the emotional maturation. With the help of fairy tales the child finds the role of sexuality both in his inner and the outside world.

In the worlds of utopias there are no emotions, at least not in their complex, conflictuous and ambivalent forms. There is no sexuality either – these worlds cannot handle the questions of love affairs and families. The authors are too busy with the depiction of social relationships, institutions and economy, and they have no time to deal with "minor details" like these[7]. They show up an "ideal" form of life that resembles monasticism. If family as such appears at all, it has no elaborated function and role, unless in economical sense. The phenomenon that utopias ignore and deny sexuality can refer to problems with intimacy and can also be interpreted as a regressive feature.

Due to psychoanalytic studies, the relationship between fairy tales and the unconscious is obvious, and the interpretations of some symbols are well-known. All the main heroes in the story (three brothers, seven sisters, etc.) refer to the same person. The split of the person into different heroes promotes the observation of how the unconscious operates, what happens if desires take over the control, and how maturing it could be to act according to the principle of reality. The elder brothers motivated by the pleasure principle never succeed, while the youngest, who is able to reconcile his desires with nature (for example he gives food to the hungry mouse), comes to know his unconscious wishes (he can speak the language of the animals), is able to delay his needs (he does not drink from the well despite of his thirst), is capable of solving critical situations. All these give the child

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6 See Bettelheim, p. 279.

7 Thomas More's Utopia seems to be an exception to this rule. He deals with the question of love in exact terms and takes romances between men and women into account.

the hope that he himself will become capable of solving difficulties by "domesticating" the unconscious and undertaking the demands of the principle of reality[8].

The relationship between utopias and unconscious is not so obvious. It is certain, that the world depicted ideal can be regarded the fulfillment of unconscious wishes. The role of the pleasure principle and the principle of reality played in wish-fulfillment need some further explanation.

UTOPIAS AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

In utopias pleasure principle predominates. Since the worlds of utopias serve as happiness and fulfilled wish, there is no need for either the delay or the abdication of wish-fulfillment. The balance prevails in a way that there is no need for compromises with reality. Despite of this utopias are not the small children's worlds, though it would be plausible concerning the things mentioned above. In contrast to children, utopias know reality; they just deny it.

Utopias try to make us believe that the principle of reality predominates in their world. But this dominance is only pretended – the small child is unable for pretending in that way. What do I mean by pretence? The authors of utopias depict the pleasure principle as if it was the principle of reality. The worlds of utopias seem to be very rational, they suggest a high level of morality, and they are subjected to strict rules. It seems as if they were impregnated by reality control. In fact, the worlds of utopias have no contact with reality, they are completely isolated. This isolation gives free course to the pleasure principle and suggests the operation of the principle of reality unreasoning. These utopian worlds have their own inner balance, thus there is no need for the balancing function of reality. They do not generate problems inside their own systems, and that is why they do not need any compromises in the course of problem solving. The phenomena that seem to be the representations of the principle of reality, such as rationality, rules, order, balance, or, in some sense, morality, all come from the inner structure of the system. Thus the principle of reality is only seemingly present, in a delusive way, in order to make the worlds of utopias valid and acceptable for adults. As for attractiveness, it is rather due to the unlimited predominance of the pleasure principle.

The worlds of utopias are in close relations with their authors' personality. If the principle of reality does not work in utopias, we may suppose that the authors have some problems with keeping in touch with reality. They try to maintain the balance, the morality and the inner cohesion of their personalities by isolating themselves from reality, and transmit the unlimited control to the pleasure principle. Here we can seize the regressive feature of utopias as well as their self-defending function.

UTOPIAS AND DREAMS

Utopias are often compared with dreams in the sense that they create ideal and dream-like worlds. Utopias are really the close relatives of dreams in their Freudian sense as well. We know that dream is ego-regression, through which the ego suspends the contact with reality. There is an analogy to be presented right here: utopias also suspend the contact with reality. The regressive feature of dreams will be detailed later. Utopias often apply the dream metaphor – the traveler gets to the new world by falling asleep, or he thinks that he is dreaming.

In the course of dreaming the unconscious desires and the repressed drives, after significant distortion (that we call dream-work), get close to the conscious. In the course of dream interpretation all these contents can be unfolded. Freud himself dealt so intimately with dreams because he thought that they lead us to the exploration of the unconscious. Dream is wish-fulfillment, suggests Freud. Utopias are analogues of dreams also from this respect: utopias seem to be completed dreams. Utopias depict the completed happiness, the Eden itself – at least the authors think so. The reason why utopias cannot vindicate a great number of followers and executers may be that the desires fulfilled in them are the authors' own. Everybody dreams his own dream.

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8 See Bettelheim, pp. 41-53.

The world of utopias often seems chaotic, illogical and distorted for the traveler (and the reader), just like dreams. The traveler is as puzzled and helpless as a dreamer is. In utopias, however, a leader usually occurs, who interprets the issues. This leader is the author himself, or, more exactly, his mouthpiece. (He is often the leader of the society of the utopia, or even the founder, or in other cases, he is just a well-informed person.) He does the same than the psychotherapist in therapy who interprets the patient's dreams. The traveler, on the other hand, finds himself in the regressed, infantile position of a patient.

What I suggest here, is that both the travelers and the leaders represent the authors' personality. The authors of utopias are projected into their dreamed worlds as two distinct persons: one can ask good questions, the other knows the right answers. There is a "division of labor" between them, just as in the case of the brother heroes of the fairy tale, but the function of their "split" is different. They are not the divided representatives of pleasure principle and the principle of reality, but the two poles of a conflict.

The traveler, though he has left reality, remembers it. He calls the world of utopia to account for the rules and operation of reality. He keeps comparing. His reminiscences tie him not only to reality but also to the principle of reality. The leader also seems to know reality but he is somehow "above" it. He regards his own utopian world superior, more reasonable and more ideal. He represents the fulfilled wish, opposite to reality. As we have already seen above, this fulfillment comes true by ignoring the principle of reality, and by the unlimited predomination of pleasure principle. It happens in the same way in dreams.

The traveler represents doubts. These doubts are, whether there could be balance without the operation of the principle of reality, or not. The leader put an end to the traveler's doubts. "Yes", he suggests, "in special circumstances this can work. Moreover, this is the most appropriate way of all." The two figures can be considered as the ones who personalize the author's inner conflict. This unconscious conflict resembles to the conflicts of dreams – and the attempt to solve it, the wish-fulfillment, resembles to dream-work. Dreams, with the help of the unconscious, argues Freud, always demand something from the ego: whether a satisfaction of a drive or a notion, or to put an end to the doubts. The sleeping ego tries to go on sleeping, so it works on the elimination of the factors (like wishes, conflicts and doubts) that disturb dreaming. This happens in a way that the ego "pretending to be unresistant" prevents these demands by wish-fulfillment and in this way it abolishes them. In utopias the answer to the traveler's doubts is wish-fulfillment; the same what happens in dreams. The function of wish-fulfillment is the same in both cases: to prevent the dreamer of awakening.

UTOPIAS AND DAYDREAMING

Utopias, as we have seen, share some common features with dreams, but there are limits with this similarity. Daydreaming, which means a kind of "wakeful dreaming", seems to be a more proper analogy. As a matter of fact, the daydreamer usually creates utopias – it is not certain, however, that he puts it into a written form. He lets his imagination free, which means, that with some conscious control he mobilizes his unconscious world of images and instincts to solve a current problem – at least in his imagination, on the level of wish-fulfillment.

Utopias, though wish-fulfillment predominates in them, with the exclusion of the principle of reality, are the favorite genre of adolescents, not of children. Utopias enforce abstractions, so one must be intellectually mature enough to do such cognitive reasoning. Adolescents not only understand abstractions but they like them as well. They willingly submerge in an imaginary world and they even create worlds like that in the course of their daydreams. Adolescents are "professional" daydreamers, and as long as their contact with reality is kept, this activity can be considered normal.

What happens in the course of daydreams? Daydreamers create imaginary images about their possible identities with the help of possible worlds. The imaginary work mobilizes their complete personalities: beyond the conscious progresses even the unconscious tends to play a significant role. Daydreamers look for the most proper identities for themselves: profession, aims, values, community. Daydreaming, at least in the case of adolescents, is in close relation with identity construction, and as such, it is a factor that makes the personality develop[9].

[9] See also Balint (2010).

In the case of an adult, daydreaming is not an unambiguously positive phenomenon. Adults start daydreaming when they get in crises, that is, they face problems concerning their identities. Unlike adolescents, adults do not have either "unlimited" possibilities, or "unlimited" life-time. That is why daydreaming is not the proper way for the reintegration of their identities in crisis. For adults, daydreaming is rather regression, or even escape, than real problem solving. Though, it is true, that it is a fairly creative form or escape, and as such, by some lucky chance, it can lead to the resolution of the crisis. Utopias, nonetheless, mean a special form of daydreaming. The authors of utopias are none other than talented daydreamers who are in identity crisis.

UTOPIAS AND IDENTITY CRISIS

Identity crisis, as Erikson argues, is one of the life tasks and a necessary part of adolescents' psychosocial development. By resolving it, only the foundations of identity become solid – there is good chance for either further construction or destruction, rearrangement or, of course, collapse. Constructing identity is a life-long progress, and that is why adulthood is not free from identity crises either. There are several factors that threaten the different aspects of adults' identities. According to Breakwell[10], the three aspects of identity are continuity, distinctiveness and self-esteem. Any of these can be threatened by internal or external factors. In this sense marriage, divorce, loss (job, home, etc.), mourning, illness and psychosis are all possible threats. When the person detects a threat he can mobilize intra-psychic or/and interpersonal coping strategies in order to save his integrity[11]. Breakwell reviews these strategies and shows how they work. Her plausible system enables us to carry on with thinking and suggest that daydreams, or the special form of daydreaming, i.e. generating utopias can be considered an intra-psychic coping strategy, even if Breakwell does not mention these in her own system.

Thus utopias are, in a Breakwellian sense, attempts to save identity in a crisis situation. Is it possible to identify the threat from the features of utopias? I will make an attempt for it.

UTOPIAS AND COMMUNITY

What have we already found out about the authors of utopias so far? When examining the analogy between utopias and psychosis I came to the conclusion that the authors are near to psychosis. At the apropos of daydreams I pointed out that they are facing identity crisis. In their personality we can observe the regressive and infantile tendencies, as well as the creative and self-healing energies. But what is their personality threatened by? I think the authors answer this question themselves by creating utopias (nor diaries, neither poems, etc.).

Utopias always depict the welfare of a community. They portray ideal communities that consist of ideal people. There is neither rivalry nor conflict among them. There is no sexuality either, because it is a rather complex phenomenon, full of conflicts. Why do the dreamers of utopias need ideal communities like these? What are they escaping from? Daydreaming about ideal fellows implies problems with intimacy. Instead of their old friends they dream about new ones and create a society controlled by themselves. This ideal society replaces the one that "excluded" or "misunderstood" them. In the authors' imaginations the people surrounding them do not need to be convinced, they follow the authors' ideas without doubts so that they can feel at home among them.

The social aspect of identity is a crucial factor of mental health. The more complex the network of one's social relations is, the more he feels at home in society. Feeling at home in society means being loved. This confirms the self-esteem aspect of identity. The losses of social contacts on the one hand lead to isolation and the loss of self-esteem on the other. Beyond self-esteem the isolated person's continuity of identity gets hurt as well. From the viewpoint of the Breakwellian system, two aspects of identity are threatened by society. This is what daydreamers try to prevent by creating an ideal social milieu in their imagination.

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[10] Breakwell (1986) p. 40.

[11] See Breakwell (1986) and Erõs (2001).

The ideal societies of utopias look ideal not because they consist of one by one "good" people but because this world is impregnated by an ideology, an order of values and morals, that determine everything. These factors make the society ideal, not the people's diligence for "good". The authors of utopias do not twiddle with the improvement of mankind, as Christianity attempts, but they practice control above them by an ideology. They "solve" the problem of the world at one sweep – and form people to their own images. The authors of utopias have obviously serious problems with control and power – in reality they had become incompetent and that is why they need overcompensation in imagination.

It is important to know also the content of the controlling ideology because it refers to the nature of the conflict between the person and the society – and this conflict obviously differs in each utopia. Without knowing the content we can only say, that this ideology (which is a close relative of delusion) is the author's resolution for the current problem. With the help of this ideology the author hopes to regain the lost control and reinstate both his self-esteem and the continuity of his identity.

THE AUTHORS OF UTOPIAS

Utopias, like any other genres, tell many things about the authors' personalities. The authors, by creating utopias, demonstrate their resentful exodus from the world. In the real world they do not obtain the appreciation, respect and love that they long for. Whilst they are creative, they start to create in order to save the integrity of their personalities. They create utopias because this genre is the most appropriate for them to admit quick and limitless narcissistic filling up. They depend on the external feedbacks too much, so escaping from critique, they create a new reality where they obtain positive feedbacks. They let in their imaginary world only those with whom they can live in a conflict-safe harmony, and who keep appreciating and acknowledging them. In order to do this they multiply themselves – the societies of utopias are so one-dimensional because each person represents the same aspects of the authors' identities. These are features that the authors can integrate into their own personalities. Their non-accepted aspects are excluded from the world of utopias and are addressed back to reality, and then realized as persecutors and doubters. Only by this circuit can the authors free themselves from low self-esteem that threats their integrity and acquire a pathologically high one. By multiplying themselves they can contemplate on the "complexity" of their personality with pleasure. They create a superior world, society and personality in this way. In virtue of all these it is probable that the authors of utopias have narcissistic personalities.

Narcissistic personality in itself would not be enough for creating utopias. One needs a current crisis as well, that threatens the balance of his personality. As we saw above the authors of utopias struggle with identity crises that threaten the continuity and the self-esteem factors of identity so much that they almost balance at the boundaries of psychosis. The above mentioned regressive tendencies (the unlimited operation of pleasure principle, infantile features and asexuality) and leaving reality all refer to that. Even an ideology that is similar to a delusion appears.

Creating utopias, however, is a creative activity as well, and as such, it can have a self-healing effect, too. How effective this self-healing can be? It depends on whether the externalization of the crisis (that is to create a coherent text) was successful – whether it reorganized chaos, orientated the authors in their emotional confusions, gave hope for change and matured their personalities. So long as they contribute to the reintegration of self, they can be considered as successful self-healing attempts. With their help the authors can cope with the current crisis, and narcissistically filled up, they can return to reality.

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