Another Place, Another Time
Phenomenological Reflections on Utopia

Introduction

The year 2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre as well as the fall of the Berlin Wall. The resulting collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was considered the final death knell for all utopian experimentations in the 20th century. The defeat of Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy in World War II had already confirmed what Karl Popper[1] and Isaiah Berlin[2] said about the totalitarian tendency in utopianism. Since 1989 utopian thinking has become symptomatic of the totalitarian mentality, which must be discarded in order to safeguard individual freedom and dignity. Popper calls forth a "piecemeal social engineering" rather than "utopian engineering." Instead of dreaming the high hope of any perfect world that promises ultimate human happiness, we should eliminate "concrete evils." Popper elaborates:

> But do not try to realize these aims indirectly by designing and working for a distant ideal of a society which is wholly good. However deeply you may feel indebted to its inspiring vision, do not think that you are obliged to work for its realization, or that it is your mission to open the eyes of others to its beauty. Do not allow your dreams of a beautiful world to lure you away from the claims of men who suffer here and now. Our fellow men have a claim to our help; no generation must be sacrificed for the sake of future generations, for the sake of an ideal of happiness that may never be realized. In brief, it is my thesis that human misery is the most urgent problem of a rational public policy and that happiness is not such a problem. The attainment of happiness should be left to our private endeavours.[3]

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[1] Karl Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*. vol. 1, London: George Routledge and Son, 1943, p. 2.

[2] Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

[3] Karl Popper, "Utopia and Violence," in *Conjectures and Refutations*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 361.

With this thesis, "utopia," an idea representing ideal and perfect society since its inception by Thomas More in 1516, has become simply a fantasy word, devoid of any positive meaning. True to its original meaning, utopia is in no place (*outopia*), though it is a good place (*eutopia*). But it has been functioning as a *telos* for humankind since Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, Thomas More's *Utopia* inaugurated a significant literary genre of ideal world and perfect society, which exerted great influence upon subsequent historical developments, from American independence to the communist revolutions of the past century. However, the atrocities of the 20th century proved the danger of such an ideal world. In fact, utopia does not exist and should not have positive relevance to our contemporary world. However, it is interesting to note that although utopia is no longer fashionable, its counterpart, dystopia, is. In one recent collection on utopian thinking, *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, the editors express a lament for utopia in the introduction:

> After more than a 100 years of what Nietzsche first diagnosed as 'European nihilism,' dystopia has now firmly established itself as the current *Weltanschauung*, a lens through which we filter historical reality. In the West, the sense that all viable alternatives for a different political organization have been exhausted led to widespread voter apathy, resignation, and nonparticipation in the political sphere. Aesthetically, this dystopian mood has given rise to countless novels and films, the most emblematic of which is perhaps George Orwell's *1984*, that project into the future, or into an alternative reality, a society based on an exacerbation of the darkest traits and tendencies prevalent in the contemporary world.[4]

To be sure, utopia is never a pure philosophical concept. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines utopia as a "place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, custom and condition." and utopian thinking as the ultimate pursuit of an "impossibly ideal scheme, especially for social improvement." As such, utopian thinking—or simply utopianism—is, far beyond its meaning in More's critical novel, a collective term embedded in mythology, religious study, politics, literature and philosophy. Hence, the golden age of Greek mythology,

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[4] Patricia Vieira and Michael Marder, eds., *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, London: Continuum, 2012, p. ix.

the Garden of Eden and heaven in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun,* the social utopias of Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and Karl Marx and the modern utopian literature of H. G. Wells, Edward Bellamy and William Morris are all in the long tradition of utopian thinking.

The purpose of this short essay is to reopen the issue of utopian thinking by looking not into the grand narrative of the ideality and perfection of social construction but into the spatiality and temporality of utopian thinking. I agree with Popper that the age of dreaming an ultimate world or society which purports to guarantee happiness and harmony for every human being may be over, but the utopian propensity in us is still there: the hope for a *better* existence is always in the mind of the human being. I would like to argue for the existential relevance of utopia in our lives, based on the insights of Michel Foucault, Ernst Bloch and Martin Heidegger.

The Unreality of Utopia

By definition, utopia does not exist, whether it is the ideal world of heaven or the perfect society of the New Atlantis. However, the idea of utopia does not come from nothing or pure fantasy. The unreality of utopia originates exactly from the reality of the life-world. All utopian thinking begins with the discontent and critique of the present human condition, out of which an ideal reconstruction of the present world is projected. Though utopia cannot be found here and now, it is supposed to be in another place and another time. The Garden of Eden existed before civilization, whereas the perfect society of heaven will follow the Resurrection, at the end of human life and history. More's Utopia existed synchronistically but was situated, apparently, in another part of the earth. So was Bacon's New Atlantis. Disregarding the content and function of utopia, one of its main characteristics is its *virtual* reality.[5]

Foucault's unpublished lecture of 1967, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," challenges the contradistinction of reality and the unreality of utopia by referring it to an example of heterotopia. We do not live in a homogeneous space that determines our everyday life. "We

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[5] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*. London: Oxford University Press, 1951, p. 8.

live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another."[6] Other than the everyday space in which we live, there are heterotopias. According to Foucault, there are two main types of heterotopia, namely utopia and other heterogeneous spaces. Beginning with a normal interpretation of utopia, without giving any specific literary or historical example, Foucault says:

> [Utopias] are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.[7]

However, Foucault further elaborates on the paradoxical nature of the "unreality" of utopian space with the metaphor of a mirror, which, I think, opens a new vista for understanding utopian thought. He says:

> The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect; it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.[8]

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6   Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Misko-wiec, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* 5 (Oct 1984), p. 3. http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf.

7   *Ibid.*

8   *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The important insight of this mirror metaphor for utopia is the ambiguity of the reality and unreality of myself as a mirror image. In a certain sense, all utopian writers must see themselves somehow present but also absent in their works: Plato would see himself as Socrates in the Dialogues, More would be Hythloday, who had visited the island of Utopia, and Bacon would be one of the crewmen who landed on New Atlantis. To Plato, the Republic described by Socrates might not exist in that time and space, but at the end of the Dialogue, Socrates says:

> It may be, however, that it is retained in heaven as a paradigm for those who desire to see it and, through seeing it, to return from exile. In fact, it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference whether it exists or will exist anywhere: it's still the only community in whose government he could play a part.[9]

As a paradigm in heaven utopia is at the same level as the *eidos*: it is ideal and hence more real than any empirical existence of human community. Plato would argue for the necessity of such community for any human community that claims justice and happiness. Indeed, the dialogue *Politeia* opens up a virtual space in which the structure of the classed society guided by the philosopher-king is delineated. By looking into the text of the *Republic* as into a mirror, Plato is convinced that such community must exist, though not yet in the empirical, contingent world. In this sense, Plato's *Republic* is a heterotopia.

So is the island, Utopia, for More. The book, *Utopia* (1516), was claimed to be a true report on a discussion in Antwerp between More, Peter Giles and Raphael Hythloday, who came back from Utopia. Not only are the geography and history of the island described in detail; also the social organization, political structure and education program are expounded. Hythloday convinces More that Utopia is the most perfect of all societies. Unlike Plato's Republic, More's Utopia was said to be a *real* place that existed in another space. In the age of discovery, beginning with Columbus, there were indeed places not yet discovered by the Westerner at the time of More. Thus the search for utopias, real or fictitious, beyond the open ocean in uncharted lands, was ubiquitous in the literature of the Renaissance. Perfect societies were there to be discovered. Utopia did not exist in heaven so much as in other space. Both More's England and Utopia exist at the same time. Following

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[9] Plato: *Republic*, 592b2-6.

Foucault's metaphor, the historical More would see the More of the novel as both real and unreal. The misery, inequality and injustice of More's England at that time are the basis of critique as well as the objects of transformation in Utopia. The abolition of private property along with money and luxury are a result of seeing all the evils of private property in a classed, feudal society. Virtues in Utopia were in sharp distinction to the vices of England. It was, of course, wishful thinking for a more just and equal society, for More; but the willful act of transformation of this fantasy into the novel *Utopia* engendered a *heterotopia* that has exerted *real* consequences in all the subsequent social and political revolutions based on this primitive communism of his. No one could deny the unreality of the island utopia, but precisely this unreality turns utopia into a reality. More's utopia is a placeless place, in Foucault's terms; hence, a heterotopia.

The mirror metaphor can be extended to dystopian novels and films. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), though set in the future, is based on his critical understanding of the scientific development of eugenics and human behavioral engineering in his day. Huxley would see himself as John the Savage, who rebels against the inhumanity of a perfect society that has eliminated unhappiness and human conflict. This is a future world of total harmony, in which everyone is created and trained in one of the castes and everyone performs his/her predestined task dutifully and without question. Thus is Platonic justice realized and ultimate happiness achieved. By creating this brave new world, Huxley invites us to look into the heterotopia of a possible future place, suggesting the results of the human development of his time. Comparing his book with another great dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, by George Orwell, Huxley said:

> In the context of 1948, *1984* seemed dreadfully convincing. But tyrants, after all, are mortal and circumstances change. Recent developments in Russia and recent advances in science and technology have robbed Orwell's book of some of its gruesome verisimilitude. A nuclear war will, of course, make nonsense of everybody's predictions. But, assuming for the moment that the Great Powers can somehow refrain from destroying us, we can say that it now looks as though the odds were more in favor of something like *Brave New World* than of something like *1984*.[10]

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[10] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1958, p. 7.

Huxley is certainly convinced of the *reality* of the unreality depicted in the novel, over and against the reality of our present world. This brave new world is a mirrored heterotopia. Hence, utopia and dystopia are nothing, devoid of the link to reality. In one of the most recent reflections on utopian thinking, Alexandre Franco de Sá says:

> It is a description of a fictional place that is to be found within this very reality: a narrative form of fiction destined to highlight reality's possibilities to be explored. These possibilities do not go against human nature; on the contrary, they originate from it.[11]

Both utopia and dystopia are possible ways of living in our societies, despite their "present absence." They could nevertheless come into being in other spaces and times in our world. De Sá cites Paul Ricœur:

> From this "no place" an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now often beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living.[12]

It is exactly by looking into the unrealities in the mirror of our reality that we understand the real potentials of utopia and dystopia.

However, utopia is not a static mirror image of reality, but a becoming toward the future. Utopia is not just a placeless place, but also a timeless time: it does not only locate itself in another place as a heterotopia, but also points to the construction of a world to be realized in the future. De Sá explains further:

> If the reference to space gives utopian thinking its essential link to reality, the dimension of time lends utopia its central meaning: the possible transformation of the future of humanity. In this way, far from being the description of a fantasy or the formulation of mere wishful thinking, utopia is defined by a decisive connection to effective reality: not to reality as a given fact, but to a reality to be constructed and reinforced factually on the basis of an anticipated future opened up by utopian thought itself.[13]

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[11] Alexandre Franco de Sá, "From Modern Utopias to Contemporary Uchronia," in *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, eds. Patricia Vieira and Michael Marder, London: Continuum, 2012, p. 25.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Here is the shift from the spatiality to the temporality of utopian thinking; from ideal but static perfection to the possibility of its future realization. According to de Sá, it is also a paradigm shift from modern utopia to contemporary uchronia:

> In this sense, in the same way in which utopia is a construction of the modern world, the emergence of contemporary uchronia, which encompasses a nostalgic celebration of its utopian past, is, in today's terms, nothing more than an intellectual construction removed from the life experiences within societies notorious for the persistence of their *status quo*.[14]

Hope and the Possibility of Utopia

Modern utopian thought originates from the tradition of Platonic rationality and the eschatology of Judeo-Christianity. It is guided by a definite idea of human perfection according to reason and morality. The ultimate vision of utopia will be realized based on the perfectibility of human beings. Human beings will be transformed to a better kind of existence if we follow the utopian blueprint. This is exactly the tragedy of many utopian experiments in the past, from Plato and More to Marx. Popper's critique of "utopian engineering" lies in the refutation of any historical determinism and uniformity of human nature, even though such ideas are claimed to be true and prophetic. Human history does not evolve in accordance with intrinsic laws or principles. And bringing any utopian engineering project into realization by hegemonic ideology will inevitably result in totalitarianism and dictatorship. Historical atrocities in past centuries and contemporary dystopian novels and films have borne witness to the death of this idea of utopia. Perfect social harmony and human happiness exist only as abstract ideas, but are not relevant to the concrete individual.

Therefore, is there any sense in talking about utopian thinking today? What Foucault offers in his paper is an invitation to look at utopia as heterotopia, to consider it in terms of the ambiguity of reality and unreality of mirror representation. This is the side of *topos* in *ou-topia*. But there is still the other side, of *eu-topia*, of a good place. The desire for betterment in the future world and improvement of the

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[14] *Ibid*., p. 34.

present is certainly fundamental to all utopian thinking. The idea of hope is therefore central to the reconsideration of utopian thinking. And it is Bloch who brings forth the close relationship between hope and utopia in his massive volume, *The Principle of Hope*.[15]

What Bloch articulates as the first principle of hope is to discard the traditional conception of utopia. He says:

> But to limit the utopian to the Thomas More variety, or simply to orientate it in that direction, would be like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first noticed. Indeed, the utopian coincides so little with the novel of an ideal state that the whole totality of *philosophy* becomes necessary (a sometimes almost forgotten totality) to do justice to the content of that designated by utopia.[16]

Hence, according to Bloch, utopian thinking begins with daydreams, and then myths, fairytales, fantasy, escape attempts, and wishes to break away from the everyday world. Simply taken, the utopian wish originates from human hope; a will and desire to have a thing actualized. Bloch elaborates:

> The genuine utopian will is definitely not endless striving, rather: it wants to see the merely immediate and thus so unpossessed nature of self-location and being-here finally mediated, illuminated and fulfilled, fulfilled happily and adequately.[17]

Utopia is thus designated as "anticipatory consciousness," as a Not-Yet (*Noch Nicht*).

> The anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken *only as emotion*, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but *more essentially* as a directing act of a cognitive kind (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory).[18]

Of course, free-floating fantasy or daydream would not constitute the actual content of utopia. Here lies the distinction between mere

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[15] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice & Paul Knight, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 15.

[17] *Ibid.,* p. 16.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

wishful thinking and willful acting. Hope will become Utopia only when the Not-Yet-Consciousness is manifested in the Not-Yet-Become. Ruth Levitas explains Bloch's idea as follows:

> Utopia, as the expression of the Not-Yet-Consciousness, is vindicated in so far as it reaches forward to the real possibility of the Not-Yet-Become, as an anticipation of the future (rather than merely a compensation in the present) and, through its effects on human purpose and action, as a catalyst of the future.[19]

All human hopes are optimistic in nature: we only hope for the best because hope is a desire for the good. Hence utopian thinking is characterized by the possibility of bringing hope into future reality. To be sure, Bloch does not stop at a description of the rudimentary level of utopian wishes of the Not-Yet-Consciousness, but aims at the reconstruction of a concrete Marxist utopia based on the analysis of hope. However, this does not concern us here and it suffices to understand hope as a universal human phenomenon, thereby opens the temporal horizon of utopian thinking.

Towards a Phenomenology of Utopian Thinking

Is phenomenology relevant to utopian thinking? It seems to me that neither Husserlian transcendental phenomenology nor Heideggerian existential phenomenology would offer any substantial utopian thinking. Indeed, the lament of Husserl at the crisis of humanity after World War I might point to a resurrection of human rationality through the reconstruction of philosophy in terms of phenomenology. Husserl says:

> [I]f history has nothing more to teach us than that all the shapes of the spiritual world, all the conditions of life, ideals, norms upon which man relies, form and dissolve themselves like fleeting waves, that it always was and ever will be so, that again and again reason must turn into nonsense, and well-being into misery. […] can we live in this world, where historical occurrence is nothing but an unending concatenation of illusory progress and bitter disappointment?[20]

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[19] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, London: Philip Allan, 1990, p. 87.

[20] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Pheno-menology*, David Carr trans., Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1970, p. 7.

However, Husserl never proposed any concrete blueprint for an ideal world or perfect society in either his famous speech in Vienna in 1935 or in his last great book, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936). The call for a return to the renaissance humanistic ideal, in which the human being is the true center of the universe, could hardly save Europe from falling into the abyss of the barbarism of war and totalitarianism. In the face of political and social crisis, phenomenology seems to be impotent. It is indeed beside the point to ask phenomenology to offer any concrete proposal for political action. Phenomenology can never become an ideology that purports to change the world as Marx did. Hence, Husserl's phenomenology has nothing to do with utopia.

Furthermore, the *Daseinsanalysis* in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* eliminates the possibility of any utopia by showing that human *essence* cannot be considered as something substantial. All utopias assume the perfectibility of human *essence*, which forms the basis of any perfect society; for example, rationality, being the essence of man in Plato's philosophy, forms the core of the *Republic*. But for Heidegger, there is no human nature as such, as "the 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence."[21] The Being of Dasein lies in its How and not in its What. Both characteristics of Dasein—i.e., Existence (*Existenz*) and In-each-case-mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*)—are unable to support the formation of a unified idea of happiness based on either a single cluster of human properties or a commonwealth devoid of individual difference. Indeed, a general will, in Rousseau's sense, may be proclaimed as the principle of utopia. But whether such a general will can operate in everyday life is determined by the inauthentic They (das Man), opening the question of the true meaning of utopia. Is this utopia authentic to human existence? Hence, Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia* or Marx's communism, which asserts happiness for all in that perfect society, represent only a hegemony of the collective over the individual. The rebellion of the heroes in Orwell's *1984* and in Huxley's *Brave New World* begins with an awareness of the inauthenticity of life: most people live their lives as they are supposed to live, according to the principles and moral precepts of the government, without questioning the truth. Winston and John the Savage refuse to accept this apparent order and harmony because they are disgusted with the inauthenticity of the They. The perfect

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[21] "Das Wesen des Dasein liegt in seiner Existenz." Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976, §42.

social order and ultimate human happiness proposed by all utopias assumes the universal acceptability of the people, without raising the question of whether such order and happiness is authentic or inauthentic to any individual member. Hence, the dilemma of utopia lies in the construction of a universal and uniform principle of moral and political order in the hope of saving human beings from misery, chaos, inequality, injustice and unhappiness, and that in doing so, individuals are deprived of difference and authenticity. There cannot be one form of happiness to fit all. Heidegger's *Daseinsanalysis*, though it never addresses the question of utopia, in fact argues implicitly against it.

But this does not mean that phenomenology cannot be either critical or positive regarding utopian thinking. What we have discussed so far is a move away from the traditional conception of utopia as a grand narrative of ideal world or perfect society, which claims to provide the ultimate solution of a harmonious and happy human life. Following Foucault, utopia can be seen as a heterotopia in which human desire can be located that is based on the possible realization of hope in Bloch's sense. Further, Heidegger's analysis of the temporality of Dasein—that Dasein is fundamentally futural—gives the condition of the possibility of hope, because the Care-structure shows that Dasein is always ahead of itself. But Heidegger nowhere indicates what a concrete authentic life should be; nor is there any definite form of happiness for everyone.

However, utopia can be expressed differently in the same vein of thought: as Michael Marder and Patricia Vieira suggest, "Another world is possible."[22] All utopian thinking that begins with the critical evaluation of the present, resulting in a deep dissatisfaction with the analysis, will call for a renewal of the world, where betterment can be found. The most fundamental hope for all such utopian thinking is the possibility of another world. This is where existential phenomenology can enter into the discourse on utopia: the components of Marder and Vieira's simple statement—"world," "possibility" and "another"/otherness—are open for existential phenomenological reflection. Marder and Vieira propose the term "existential utopia" to differentiate it from the traditional conception of utopia. Firstly, "world" as a phenomenological concept is not simply the summation of all things, but "as phenomenology shows, a plurality of worlds is intrinsic to the concept 'world', understood as a web of significations irreducible to an objectively true and, hence,

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[22] Marder and Vieira, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

unitary structure of meaning."[23] World is not objectively situated against human beings but is constitutive as Being-in-the-world. As human beings we are thrown into the cultural and historical web of meanings interwoven with those of other people. Secondly, the idea of possibility is considered not metaphysically but existentially. "Rather, possibilities form the fabric of human existence, guiding our projects and actions in the world without standing for *teloi* to be fulfilled."[24] Through possibility, the human being opens him-/herself into the future, in spite of the fact that it is a thrown-possibility that is rooted in the primordial finitude of human existence. Thirdly, the concern for otherness is of utmost importance, as no single ego can be dominant and superior to others:

> If existential utopia is to heed the call of the Other, summoning us to our responsibility, it would need to come to terms with such finitude as its own enabling condition and, instead of insisting on the immutability of the project it enunciates, accept diverse possibilities, including those that do not coincide with its own vision for the future.[25]

The idea of existential utopia opens a new horizon for reflecting on utopian thinking, different from the traditional one beginning with More. However, the above sketch of the phenomenological reflection on the possibility of another world only serves as the very beginning for any future research on the phenomenology of utopia. In an age of dystopian thought, fatalism and pessimism, a renewal of utopian thinking along the lines of phenomenology could enlighten and brighten the future of humankind. The complete abolition of utopia is surely a symptom of the sickness of our contemporary world. As Karl Mannheim states, in *Ideology and Utopia*:

> The complete disappearance of the utopian element from human thought and action would mean that human nature and human development would take on a totally new character. The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely, that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of

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[23] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of
impulses. Thus, after a long, tortuous, but heroic development,
just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to
be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man's own
creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his
will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it.[26]

Indeed, we should not give up utopian thinking. But before we can
think of any concrete utopia we have to reflect on the very structure of
utopian thinking phenomenologically, so as to avoid the metaphysical
hegemony of unitary utopian engineering. Before any plan for actual-
ization, we have to think through the meaning of possibility, which
serves as the existential basis of any human hope. Once again echoing
Heidegger: "Higher than actuality stands *possibility*." A phenomeno-
logical reflection on utopian thinking lies in the understanding of utopia
as human possibility.

A Hong Kong Heterotopia: Harcourt Village

The "Umbrella Revolution"[27] in Hong Kong was a civil disobe-
dience movement, which existed for 79 days from 28 September to 15
December 2014. It began with the boycott of classes by thousands of
high school and university students on 22 September, to protest against
the unjust declaration of the Beijing government of a false "universal
suffrage" for democratic election of the Chief Executive in 2017. On 28
September, the Hong Kong police force deployed 87 tear gas canisters
to clear tens of thousands of protesters. But this was not successful.
Following this event, the civil disobedience campaign led by the
students occupied three areas of downtown Hong Kong: namely, the
busy districts of Mongkok[28] and Causeway Bay as well as Connaught
Road in Central Hong Kong Island. My remarks here are not so much a
social and political analysis of the Revolution as a reflection on the per-
sonal experience of utopia in the occupied zone in Central Hong Kong.

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[26] Karl   Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of
Knowledge*, London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1966, p.236.

[27] The Umbrella Revolution (Chinese: 雨傘革命), sometimes used interchangeably
with Umbrella Movement (Chinese: 雨傘運動), was a series of sit-in street protests
that occurred in Hong Kong from 28 September to 15 December 2014.

[28] The Mongkok occupied zone was brutally cleared by the police on 25 November
2014, the 59th day after the inception of the occupation.

Figure 1. Map of Harcourt Village[29]

The Connaught Road occupied zone, later dubbed "Harcourt Village," extended more than two kilometers into the heart of Hong Kong's financial center. In this area, surrounding the Central Government offices, what started out as scattered barricades against police clearance action evolved into a fully-fledged small village, replete with campers and frame tents. It is estimated that there were some 1,900 tents set up in the area, spreading out into Connaught Road Central, Harcourt Road, Tim Mei Road, the area in front of the Legislative Council, and Tamar Park. This was usually an extremely busy traffic area, with thousands of vehicles running to and fro every minute of the day, virtually without any pedestrians. Though there was always an indefinite number of people coming and going in the village, several hundreds of students and protesters were staying in the occupied zone around the clock.

The purpose of this occupation was the struggle for a free and open election of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Government. It was simply a demand for true democracy and genuine universal suffrage, which had been promised by the Beijing Government in the Joint Declaration with the British 30 years previously, in 1984.

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[29] http://img.qz.com/2014/10/screen-shot-2014-10-14-at-5-02-51-pm.png?w=1024.

Figure 2. Road tunnel leading to Harcourt Village (author's photograph)

Unlike many other demonstrations in the rest of the world, there was a strange peace and harmony in this occupation. This village was created unexpectedly out of a mass protest. The tents should not have been there. The highways were blocked from their normal everyday function. It was a space out of its usual place. It was very surreal to stand still at the mouth of a road tunnel that led to the village, where heavy traffic is the rule (see figure 2). The Harcourt Village is a good example of a heterotopia, in Foucault's sense.

I would like the reader to refer to a report by Time Magazine on October 20, 2014:[1] in which the Hong Kong Protest site was described as "There are no leaders, but everything, from the supply tents to the recycling stations, runs just beautifully."[30]

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[30] Elizabeth Barber, "The Main Hong Kong Protest Site Is a Perfect Anarchist Collective," *TIME*, October 20, 2014:   [1] http://time.com/3523217/occupy-central-hong-kong-harcourt-road-admiralty-democracy-anarchism-anarchist-collective-china-protest/.

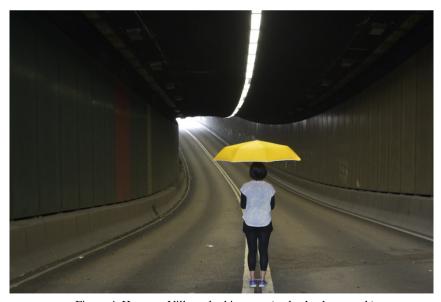Figure 3. Harcourt Village, looking west on Hong Kong Island (author's photograph)

Figure 4. Harcourt Village, looking east (author's photograph)

Observation: Harcourt Village as Utopia

My wife and I visited the village frequently. We slept one night in a tent and talked to the students around our tent till 4.00 am. We talked about every topic from the modern history of Hong Kong and China to the idea of the rule of law.

Time magazine provided a good and objective description of this strange place: The Harcourt Village is "[…] but classical political anarchism: a self-organizing community that has no leader." There was never any plan for the construction of the village. There was initially no organization. Without any call by any definite leader, people—most of them young professionals, office workers and students—have been just pouring in voluntarily, erected their tents and lived their lives in an orderly way, peacefully, politely, courteously. There was no need for currency because all supplies were free to take and welcome to contribute. People paid respect to each other; everyone was equal and bound only by a mutual understanding that the reason why they were occupying this place was to struggle for true democracy, with love and peace and without violence.[31] It was not a party but a protest. Everyone was free to express what he/she felt in words or in art forms. Most people went back to work during the daytime but came back to the village after work. There was always assembly in the evening, at which reports were updated and speeches from various people were delivered. Of course, there were sometimes heated debates, but they did not turn into violent disagreement. There was an extensive study area with Wi-Fi and desk lamps for students to study with volunteer tutors assisting them. There was a counselling booth, a small library, recycling and religious facilities, security patrols, various open lecture spots, and first-aid stations. It was a place where the French national motto, "Freedom, equality and brotherhood," was realized. Harcourt Village was not just a heterotopia, but also a utopia.

No one would believe such a utopia could exist in reality. I have never had this utopian experience in my whole life. But it happened in front of our eyes. This utopian experience was far from unreal, but indeed surreal in the sense that it came precisely out of reality. We have to bear in mind that everyday life was running as usual in all the roads

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[31] "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" was the original motto of the two academics and one priest who initiated the whole movement more than two years ago. The emphasis on non-violent civil disobedience has been the fundamental spirit of the movement.

and streets just parallel to Connaught Road, where Harcourt Village was situated. But there was a drastic change of perception of the everyday "real" world from the perspective of the "surreal" utopian village.

Harcourt Village was a result of the call to our own consciences in face of the political injustice and police brutality. The utopian longing for justice, democracy and freedom suddenly became realizable among many people who shared the same vein of thought and mentality. Harcourt Village, coming out of nowhere, became the "borrowed time, borrowed space"[32] for this utopia. To be sure, there was a deep sense of tragedy from the very beginning of the occupation. Very few of us believed that the Hong Kong Government would listen to the demands of the students and protesters. No one thought Beijing would overturn the decision made on 31 August 2014 regarding the election procedure in 2017. We were doomed to fail. Yet we had the courage to say "no" to fate and "yes" to civil disobedience.

In fact, Harcourt Village is a classical Greek tragedy. It is, however, also a romantic drama. No matter how much we like the beauty of drama, we know the final scene will come and the curtain will be closed. Utopia can perhaps only be transient and never become sustainable. On 15 December 2014, the 79th day of the occupation, the police began the clearance of Harcourt Village, following the injunction order issued by the High Court of Hong Kong on that Monday. Harcourt Village disappeared and nothing remained on site the next day. The "borrowed place" was returned back to the normal road users; the "borrowed time" was taken back by students and protesters returning to their everyday lives. Once again, utopia would retreat back to the hope of human beings and back to the possibility of being human. But without this utopian hope and possibility, there is perhaps no meaning in human life and history.

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[32] "Borrowed time, borrowed space" is a phrase used to refer to colonial Hong Kong before 1997, and is the title of a book by Richard Hughes (1976 [1968]). See Richard Hughes, *Borrowed Place, Borrowed Time: Hong Kong, and its Many Faces*, London: Deutsch, 1976 [1968].