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How to cite:

Cojocaru, Mara-Daria. "Realizing Utopia? Reconstructing its Normative Potential."
In: "Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Academic Approaches,"
edited by Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner, *RCC Perspectives* 2012, no. 8,
45–56.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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Realizing Utopia? Reconstructing Its Normative Potential

Hope without a utopian dimension is liable to be too unambitious for our own good.¹

Invoking the concept of utopia today requires taking into account a whole series of difficulties. One is subject to exhaustive battles on the matter of definitions, for, as Richard Saage observes,² there is no consensus in the academic literature about the meaning of the term. Because of its arbitrary usage and association in everyday speech with unworldliness both in thought and action, particularly with regards to the organization of human society, the term also easily arouses suspicions of political and intellectual irresponsibility. If one is prepared to take on this challenge and, rather than becoming bogged down with defending one's position on the discursive front line, instead focuses on recognizing the utopian potential as something that can be *expressed*—that is, *realized*—most impressively in the lived practice of human beings, one is confronted with the challenge of implementing “the utopian project” to its fullest extent, at least theoretically. What this means, in which philosophical and political tradition the corresponding sketches of a better society are to be understood, and to what degree utopia asks to be implemented in reality, will be outlined in the following essay.

A Necessarily Brief Digression on the History of the Term

It would not necessarily be doing the utopian project a favor to refer to the origins of the name in a text referred to by its author as “a truly golden little book, equally beneficial and entertaining, about the best kind of a republic and the new island Utopia,”³ and, above all, to place too much emphasis on the scholarly wordplay that calls it a *non-existent* place

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Brenda Black. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of non-English sources are also the translator's.

- 1 Malcolm Schofield, *Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 200.
- 2 “Whoever discusses political utopias today needs to know that there is no consensus regarding what this concept means.” Richard Saage, “Wie zukunfts-fähig ist der klassische Utopiebegriff?” in *Utopisches Denken im historischen Prozess: Materialien zur Utopieforschung*, ed. Richard Saage (Berlin: Lit, 2006), 79.
- 3 This is one possible translation of the full Latin title, *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque nova insula Utopia Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus*, of the work which is best known as *Utopia*, first published in 1516 in Leuven by Thomas More.

(ou-topia). For in order to make the concept of utopia productive as a normative interpretation of human life and its future—that is, to use the utopian method to consider how we should live—it makes sense to assume that what is meant in utopias more generally speaking is obviously the *good* place (eu-topia).⁴ Less obvious, however, is the question of what role the minutely detailed descriptions of a humanly possible way of life often found in such utopian sketches might play—whether they are actual plans for action, or whether they serve primarily to illustrate criticism of current circumstances, regardless of their inherent desirability and philosophical import.

Detailed utopian outlines for alternative ways of life are problematic insofar as they must always be seen in the context of the tradition of philosophical reflection about human ways of existing, a tradition within which Thomas More situates himself: namely, the dialectical observation of the possibilities and limits of a society, which is permeated with the attempt to realize the virtues of an essentially rational human nature. This form of philosophical reflection usually gains momentum during periods seen as urgently in need of criticism. It is possible to equate the beginning of this normative reflection upon human existence with the beginning of political philosophy per se and mark its starting place with Plato's *Republic*. This modification of our understanding of the term's history is not meant to throw the intellectual ball back onto the field on which philosophers have been competing for the most successful footnote for centuries; rather, we hope to avoid a discussion of a philosophically unprofitable political novel (namely, More's *Utopia*), which, in the end, is mainly interesting for the history of ideas. By doing so, we also hope to make clear that the full scope of the utopian project is expressed in precisely this philosophical attempt to combine ethics and politics with epistemology and metaphysics into an individually and politically relevant conception of "the good life," a term explained later. It is precisely because the utopian project, as a contribution to the societal process of self-definition, cannot be adequately reduced to the utopian tradition as a literary genre that some of the aspects of a philological analysis will be omitted. In addition, the details of specific alternative ways of life will not be considered. Rather, we will try to map the philosophical and normative dimensions of the utopian project to embed humankind into nature as a whole.

4 More's famous wordplay works by exploiting the homophonic character of the Greek prefixes *eu*, meaning "good," and *ou*, meaning "not"; "topia" is derived from the Greek *topos*, meaning "place." Hence, *Utopia* can be interpreted as either the "good place," or "no place"—i.e., nowhere and, thus implying the inexistence (and impossibility) of said best republic.

Reconstructing the Normative Potential of Utopia

The utopian project, Ionel Cioară suggests, continues to be important today: “Announcing the imminence of an ideal world and the appearance of the plenary man, utopia throws into discussion the ontological status of the human way of existing, raising questions related to human destiny and human condition, questions always sent by philosophy on an intellectual debate-ground, so that we can be sure that it is not dead yet.”⁵ If it is true that utopia is not dead, one must ask where precisely efforts to realize it are most alive. Is it in the alternative communities of people seeking alternative lives? Is it in the dreams of each and every person before they succumb to the normalcy of everyday life? Is it in the bold visions of scientists and politicians, or is it in the realm of some socially and culturally grown set of wishes, desires, and ideals of how to live? Here, it shall be argued that the utopian project is manifested in its most essential form wherever people are more or less systematically pursuing the question of human existence in such a way that it points to the possibilities of humans reaching their full potential in a world that is ideally arranged, rather than negating these possibilities on the basis of supposedly “realist” insights into human nature as crooked and wicked. On the contrary, *perfection* and *harmony* are normatively derived from the human self-understanding as a being endowed with the faculty of reason. Here is not the place (nor is it actually necessary for our purpose) to define what counts as reasonable and/or rational; suffice it to say that any utopia will ideally include its own conception of reason that is basic to its anthropological and philosophical findings. It goes without saying that, based on this assumption, the location of a utopian project is at the same time always a place where philosophical clarification should occur. Even so, at present, the required quasi-utopian efforts are lacking within mainstream philosophy, and so is the integration of those disciplines that would be able to evaluate individual aspects of the practical implementation of alternative, utopian approaches to life.

In spite of the present disenchantment with utopia, “utopian” should for the time being be understood as simply endorsing the goal of extensively improving the individual ethically in accordance with his or her both recognizable and malleable *human nature* and the pursuit of *political ideals*, such as freedom, justice, and the absence of social conflict. At the same time, said improvement or perfection should be accomplished

5 Ionel Cioară, “The Critique of Utopian Reason: An Abstract,” *Annales Philosophici* 1 (2010): 10.

within, rather than outside of, one human society or another; it is thus an inherent characteristic of utopian thinking that reflection upon fundamental political questions leads the theorist to conceive social and cultural requirements and institutions, both material and immaterial, which are thought to be conducive to the normative ideal that is being pursued politically.⁶ Insofar as utopias reflect upon the entirety of human practices—everything from questions of nutrition, education, and leisure activities to work, politics, and worldview—and insofar as the ethical dimension is inextricably intertwined with the political, utopias belong more to the ancient or premodern tradition of political philosophy than to the modern. Utopian projects refer to an alliance between ethics and politics, which defines the question of the normativity of human existence in terms of the good or well-lived or correct life.⁷ By this is meant a focus on living life consciously and giving meaning to life as a whole, both through participation in the affairs of society and through one’s individual lifestyle—that is, identifying meaningful relations between, for example, the private and the public, the individual and society, and humans and nature. The assumption *that* we strive for the “good life” functions as a quasi-anthropological premise, which precedes and informs the theory.

The good life is thus considered in connection with the entire scope of human practices: family, education, work, social life, economy, culture. It is important to keep in mind that the goal of attaining happiness in life by exercising one’s virtuous character is a goal that does not have a functional relationship with something else in the way that, for example, making money functions in relation to the intent of pursuing further goals in a market society. In the attempt to define the good life outside of such relations, psycho-

- 6 George Kateb, “Utopias and Utopianism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 213.
- 7 Central to such an idea is the concept of *eudaimonia*, which has achieved prominence in the history of philosophy in part because of the notorious difficulty of translating it. “Happiness” is inadequate to convey the meaning of this term, which contains the components *eu* (good, well) and *daimōn* (deity, divine or supernatural being, fate). Cf. the entry “Eudaimonia” in Christoph Horn and Christof Rapp, eds., *Wörterbuch der antiken Philosophie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2002), 158. It is inadequate if it is not qualified as a substantial and ultimate end of human action and life as a whole, contrary to momentary feelings of satisfaction or the occurrence of luck, which is independent of an agent’s actions. In order to capture the aim of eudaimonist ethical approaches today, it is commonly said that they focus on “the good life,” which, again, is not referring to a comfortable, “happy-go-lucky” life or to a life of luxury. This presupposes that there is actually an answer to the question of what sort of life can be said to be a good or well-lived life and that we should organize the whole of our practices in such a way that they will lead us toward it. Of course, different eudaimonist ethics differ in their accounts of what the good life *actually* is. Nevertheless, utopia is eudaimonist in the sense that utopian projects, too, agree that the question of the good life for human beings should be examined, can be answered, and should have consequences for the way in which we organize life, individually and socially or, rather, politically. It is in this sense that I refer to “the good life” here, too.

logical—that is, character-related—goods and virtues become normatively relevant and significant. At the same time, it is not the purpose to allow the unqualified, subjective well-being to become the highest good. Typically such theories are concerned from an objectivist perspective with questions that are important for our life. For this reason, and because of their expansive nature in which ethical assumptions are part of a greater philosophical system, theories of the good life cannot be integrated without difficulty into, for example, liberal theory, which largely fails to explicitly consider problems of (private) questions of the good (life). Utopian projects, as they are understood for this discussion, are characterized politically by their attempt to bring the authorship of one's own life into a harmonious relationship with a collective identity. The question of who exerts more influence upon the other—the individual upon society or society upon the individual—may be answered differently, but in all cases utopias share the idea that the individual, as an active person, is connected to society holistically, and her task is to comprehend these connections and, thusly informed, to translate her actions into the practice of the good life. Normative concepts such as *virtue* and *responsibility* offer practical orientation here.

Utopias are further characterized by the *perception of a crisis*, from which an alternative system must arise. Famous examples are the crisis of the Greek city-state in the time of Plato, the crisis caused by the rise of the bourgeoisie in the time of More, and the crisis-filled period of industrial upheaval in the time of the early socialists.⁸ One might mention further the crisis of optimism about modernization in the so-called postmodern period and the crisis of the environment and the nation-state today. The outline of a better society is thus a diagnosis that each of the respective contemporary practices are proceeding in a manner that is blatantly *false*; it is therefore to be assumed that the alternative is held to be *correct*, based on a series of assumptions that must be explained for each case. A sense of crisis or a widespread feeling of discontent with the social situation is, thus, a necessary precondition for utopian thought.⁹ It defines its critical impulse, once again in respect to politics.

8 Cf. Burghart Schmidt, *Kritik der reinen Utopie: Eine sozialphilosophische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998), 62.

9 Regarding a sense of crisis as “estrangement” cf. Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3, 9 and chapters 1 and 3.

Even though utopian criticism—which normally takes place externally¹⁰—unfolds and is executed by exploring human practices and nature as they seem to be given at a particular point in time, it is notable that it does not propose to change the situation in the same way changes affecting society as a whole are usually negotiated, namely politically. Eventually utopia, as a rule, dispenses with political and societal confrontations, since the declared goal is harmony—that is, the absence of precisely these threatening conflicts. Thus, utopian projects frequently fail to suggest any good political strategy for realizing a collective identity, even when they may seem to offer convincing alternatives with respect to one’s private life. This type of anti-politics—which one may, with Saage, reduce to the formula “administrating instead of ruling”¹¹—is presumably the primary reason why utopian thinking is often accused of having a tendency to develop totalitarian structures. However, this accusation is not necessarily justified. The utopian project does indeed occupy a special position insofar as it concentrates more on (re)constructing new modes of societal interaction than on investigating concrete ways of accomplishing its goals within the given political system; in so doing, it is necessary to leave room for new, yet-to-be-devised political orders. According to Burghart Schmidt, one could argue that a utopian sketch of a better society must differentiate itself fundamentally from the type of planning that instrumentally serves clearly defined goals that are proclaimed to be without alternative and often disguised as inherent necessities.¹² Utopias should thus be best understood as contributions, often creative, to the normative self-defining of a society; one must accept that in this process there is not a constant reflection upon the political middle.

The resulting open-endedness should not, however, lead to the assumption that the concrete, nameable normative intentions and goals of the agents involved are irrelevant. On

10 Criticism of a system can always take place either externally or internally. Internal criticism focuses on the contradictions or the double standards of societal practices, which, however, are felt to be basically correctable. External criticism, by contrast, compares the criticized practice with a radically different one. This radical change does not necessarily have to consist of presenting a way of life that is of a completely different nature. The comparison can, as for example in the *Theory of Justice* of the early John Rawls, be accomplished by simply using a completely different way of deriving the rules that determine the basic structure of the existing society. Alternatively, one may suggest realizing a not-yet-existing, but definite and extensive set of positive and negative freedoms, or returning society to a state of affairs from the past under the banner of conservatism. Utopias typically compare the society they criticize to something that has not yet ever been realized in reality; that is, they practice external criticism. Cf. Samuel Clark, *Living Without Domination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 16. For the opinion that John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* can, in some ways, indeed be considered utopian, see Schofield, *Plato*, 203.

11 Richard Saage, *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit* (Bochum: Winkler, 2000), 263 and 275.

12 Cf. Schmidt, *Kritik der reinen Utopie*, 59. Regarding this distinction between plan and utopia, Schmidt argues further that plans can be equated to social engineering, whereas utopia serves the process of tentatively communicating goals and exploring possibilities of realizing them (65).

the contrary, as Lucy Sargisson points out, “Let us assume for a moment that it is possible to prove that a good society once existed without intent. . . . Such a place would not be a utopia. It would be a happy accident.”¹³ This note about the connection between *action* and *meaning* as intention in contrast to mere behavior is valuable for examining those elements of utopian thought that are rooted in philosophical or philosophically reconstructable conceptions of human self-understanding as agents. Sargisson concludes: “The challenge for utopian studies, then, is not to abandon intent but to explore, interrogate and better understand its limitations, implications and consequences.”¹⁴

Utopian intent, however, will almost certainly run into limitations, insofar as the scope of social imagination is not endless. As a matter of fact, utopia must ultimately draw on shared knowledge: about human nature and the good life, about the expectations concerning the future and the ecological dependencies of humankind, and about the explication and practice of normative political principles. Shared knowledge is relevant to the plausibility of the reasons for action that follow from any utopian project. Epistemically speaking, the fact that utopian outlines draw on a store of pre-theoretical knowledge (both descriptive and normative in nature) is decisive. Insofar as they operate representatively in the mode of possible human experience, they are to be understood as fundamentally realistic (i.e., consonant with our everyday experiences). Insofar as they go beyond that into the realm of the scarcely possible, exaggeration makes up a constitutive component of every utopia, for by doing so, their emotional importance, among other things, may be conveyed. As George Kateb writes, “Almost all utopian works contain curiosities or excess, which may often be explained as compensatory responses to especially terrible features of the real world.”¹⁵ It is not characteristic of utopias, however, that they completely “withdraw themselves from the sphere of the prevailing societal norms and institutions” (contrary to Saage’s suggestion).¹⁶ *Rather, they use this as their starting point and attempt to overcome them creatively, as well as to expand the area of our normative knowledge by creating additional options for action.*

13 Lucy Sargisson, “Reflections: Can Utopianism Exist Without Intent?” *Journal for Cultural Research* 13 (2009): 94.

14 Ibid.

15 Kateb, “Utopias and Utopianism,” 214.

16 Saage, “Wie zukunftsfähig ist der klassische Utopiebegriff?” 79.

Whether the narrative that underlies the utopian project is commensurate with the store of shared knowledge of a society is determined in part by the concept of knowledge it is based on and what pressure to act is to be generated by it. Utopian projects, as already mentioned, are always based on an understanding of reason, rationality, or planning that is appropriate from the perspective of the author. When the corresponding theoretical elaborations are lacking, one helpful clue as to the kind of concept of knowledge that is being used is how much importance is placed on intellectual reflection and understanding on behalf of the recipient and how much on shaping her environment. This decision is generally dependent on the conception of history used; this, in turn, is a determining factor as to whether one is dealing with a spatial or temporal utopia in any given case.

Spatial utopias are those that, although they anchor their normative plot of the good life to the world of lived experience by means of critique, do not precisely name the location and, in particular, the time of their realization. They draw their value through understanding themselves “as a detached reference, as an informing power, as rather more of an heuristic device than any form of directly applicable instrument.”¹⁷ *Temporal utopias*, by contrast, are to be understood as a connecting link between theory and praxis that consists of at least three components—social criticism, a plan for a better world, and a fixed, nameable anchoring in place and time—and as a reference to locations that merely do not yet exist. The contemplative spatial utopia was superseded by the activist temporal utopia as a normative paradigm in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century against the backdrop of the increased possibilities for action (due to technological innovation) and the likewise increased need to take action (due to the social upheaval). The latter—that is, the temporal utopia—draws its strength from the conditions of feasibility and a modern *idea of progress*.¹⁸

There are various theories concerning the origins of this concept, which differs from the mere awareness of progress¹⁹ that might be seen to be present in antiquity in rudimentary form as a consciousness of human ability.²⁰ One can argue with Hans Blumenberg

17 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), 14.

18 *Ibid.*, 14–17.

19 Evelyn Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung: Die kulturellen Voraussetzungen des Politischen in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1994), 273.

that the idea of progress arises from the recognition that we cannot expect to be provided with any divinely preordained fortunate course of events—even if the fact that concepts such as “hope of salvation, hope in the hereafter, transcendence, divine judgment, worldly abstinence and worldly corruption” are still comprehensible suggests that the process of secularization connected with this idea is not yet completed.²¹ Accordingly, humans must plan and take responsibility for their future themselves. They manage this by means of “theoretical penetration and mastery of nature.”²² The function of this idea is particularly important, not least because the philosophy of history that is connected with it has become unfamiliar to us. The idea of progress, at any rate

provides a narrative portrayal of the entire course of history, it tells how the human race worked its way up to the current state of civilization, based on the assumption that reason plays a fundamental role and that humans naturally possess this capacity, which allows them to control and change the world in the sense of an ever improving future. The idea of progress is a creation of the philosophy of history from the Enlightenment.²³

With this idea of progress—one which has fundamentally shaped modernity and which at the same time represents a “constant self-justification of the present by means of the future which it turns into”²⁴—an ethical design for the world is created through the

20 But: “No concept of progress evolved in the fifth century. Perceptions of improvement related to numerous advances that affected several areas of life. The improvements were either experienced directly or—in the case of primitive times—reconstructed on the basis of experience. We are dealing here with the progress of certain things in certain respects. . . . Only a few manifestations of ability went beyond what could be empirically observed. We are dealing essentially with an increase in technical ability, in the Greek sense of *techné*—the expert performance of tasks in such fields as art, craftsmanship, and shipbuilding, as well as in military, political, constitutional, and educational affairs. . . . And the consciousness of such improvements was concentrated in the ‘technicians’ (not in a bourgeois public). The repercussions were of course felt farther afield—in the widening scope for constitutional and legal improvement; in political planning, warfare, and shipping; and in the rapid growth of material resources. However, this did not lead anyone to suppose that some universal process of improvement, involving the whole of humanity, was in train. Above all, certain important areas were excluded. No improvement was expected, either in the present or in the future, in general morality, general knowledge, or social and economic conditions; if such a notion was entertained at all, it related to improvements in individual *poleis*, arising, perhaps, from good constitutional organization or legislation—in other words, from institutional expertise—or from war and conquest. These were thus for the most part precarious and reversible benefits, not the outcome of regular, objective tendencies.” Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 204–05.

21 Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 11.

22 Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 273.

23 Cf. Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 274.

fusion of cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and political motivations, which are based on the fundamental human need for a meaningfully structured cosmos.²⁵ At the same time, the intensity of the promise (of salvation)—that perfection is possible in the here and now—itself becomes a problem. For one thing, the distance to, and thus the intellectual implementation of, this idealized conception as a regulative idea is lost. The expectation becomes more and more real in correspondence with the degree to which the utopian elements of the philosophy of history are given up. “The scientific conception of the world in modernity no longer takes its interpretation from an outmoded philosophy that carries on the structure of eschatology in its design for history, but rather from the progress made by science and technology.”²⁶

Thus, due to the infiltration of the utopian spirit into the everyday reality of lived experience, the normative, critical purpose of a utopia is stripped of its reflective moment and becomes, in a sense, a natural outgrowth of the structures that have been created—society changes independently of its members for the better, the meaning of which, however, is no longer recognizable. Accordingly, in the light of such an indisputable but hard to understand idea of progress, the question of whether this is how we want to live is asked whenever we have difficulties in developing stable patterns of action within and in endorsement of our social and political arrangements. This is especially so when socio-political developments are accompanied by damage to sensitive areas, such as social justice and/or the environment, which cannot be simply interpreted as collateral damage.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, a great number of contemporary utopian projects are motivated by topics of *sustainable* or *ecologically responsible* ways of living, which provide meaning and significance to collective forms of life. It goes without saying that these normative terms are and must themselves be objects of intellectual reflection, so that, for example, clarifying the relationship between humans and the environment and the corresponding political principles must be an integral part of our actual practices.

In summary, whenever utopian projects consider questions of negotiating individual and collective identities; of individual happiness and societal harmony; and of reasonable

24 Hans Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 43.

Cited in Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 275.

25 Cf. Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 276.

26 *Ibid.*, 280.

27 *Ibid.*, 281.

rules, virtue, and their origins, they count as serious (if creative) contributions to the problem of how we as human beings should live in the future. This is true regardless of where exactly such a society is located, for every utopia is characterized by elements that offer answers to precisely the above questions. Of particular social and philosophical interest is a mention of what served as the basis for the proposal, what understanding of human nature, what concept of knowledge and rationality, what model of history is being adopted, and how the corresponding theoretical and practical knowledge should be communicated and realized in the structures of everyday life. Finally it should be pointed out that a utopian project is not to be disqualified merely because it does not seem to be advocating one's own already established political positions.²⁸ Utopian projects desire in principle to restructure the temporary conditions of human existence and take part in the struggle for the right to authoritatively interpret the relationship between humans and their environment; their value is not based on whether they reflect or visualize one's own political preferences. "The expected response to a utopia is not just to say 'that sounds wonderful,' but to change one's beliefs about what is really possible for us: that is, to expand one's political imagination."²⁹

Where Do We Go From Here?

Up to this point, it has been made clear that historically the utopian-normative potential was not primarily concerned with articulating design goals for the human environment. This dimension came only late in its development, as Cioară suggests: "From the beginning of modernity until late in our epoch, utopia will estrange itself more and more from the sphere of pure ideas, aiming to turn into a world accessible to man."³⁰ Hence the history of utopia is scarcely to be considered a collection of preliminary studies on city planning or the organization of ecovillages.³¹ However, it is also clear that utopian projects, by reflecting upon all relevant and conceivable forms of human practices, are always reaching towards the actual lived practice that is implicit in their theory.

28 Murray Bookchin succumbs to this mistake when he classifies Plato's *Republic* as not a utopia, because, according to his interpretation, it portrays neither a communist society nor "in any sense of the term a democracy." Cf. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), 182.

29 Clark, *Living Without Domination*, 18.

30 Cioară, "Critique of Utopian Reason," 15.

31 Similarly, Schmidt suggests that, since its beginning, utopia, especially in the sense of an urban utopia, has always been a loaded term. Its immediate feasibility is subordinate to its effectiveness as a form of political confrontation. Cf. Burghart Schmidt, *Kritik der reinen Utopie*, 65.

Indeed, the external environment has therefore always had one of two narrative functions. First, it *illustrates*, however metaphorically, the thought experiment. But because of its partly inconclusive or aporetic character—that is, one which ends in an irresolvable, but not to be relinquished uncertainty—a utopian narrative must be understood not so much as a concrete plan or set of policy recommendations, but as a call to decide for oneself about the plausibility and the desirability of the postulated ideals. Second, it serves a top-down instrument for enlightening society, using the resources of social technologies. The task of realizing a utopian project of contemporary relevance that doesn't peter out into either aporia or a frenzy of social-technological activity remains unfinished, arguably both practically and theoretically. In particular, efforts of societal self-organization from recent decades, in rural as well as in urban areas, present valuable reflections and areas of experimentation regarding the human hope for a better future or, rather, for the good life. The multiplicity of worldviews that, as is to be expected, results from this may be precisely the part of the experiment that is important for society as a whole—given that bridges connecting these particular utopian locations to the general public sphere remain, enabling the public to also realize utopia in the sense of noticing and reflecting upon it. The columns supporting these bridges could be an interest in informed and critical exchange between those who have sought out the location of a concrete project and those who wish to examine such projects conceptually.