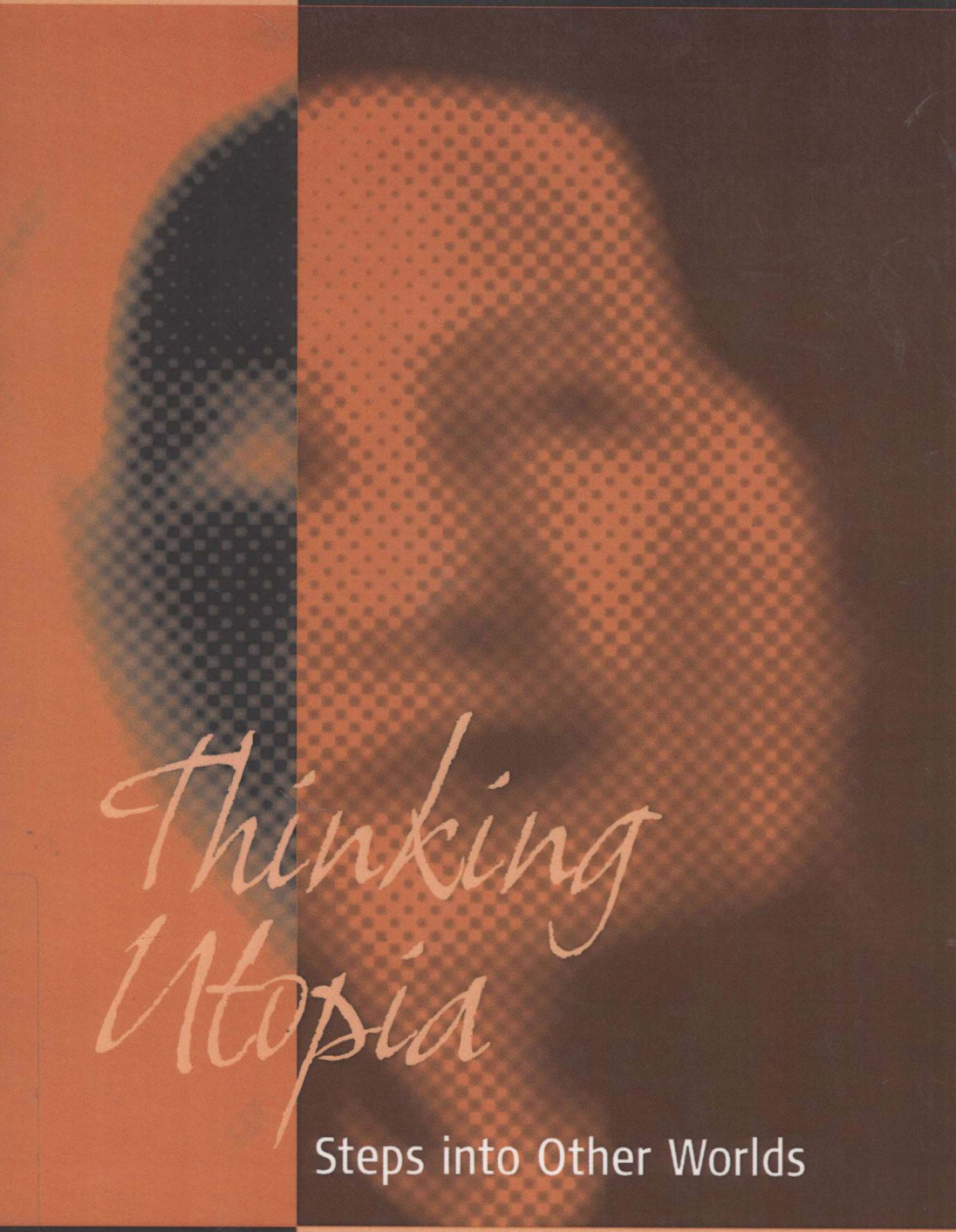
Making sense of History



Thinking Utopia

Steps into Other Worlds

Edited by Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas W. Rieger

Thinking Utopia

Steps into Other Worlds

Edited by
Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas W. Rieger

Berghahn Books
New York • Oxford

Frist published in 2005 by

Berghahn Books
www.berghahnbooks.com

First paperback edition published in 2007

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Thinking utopia : steps into other worlds / edited by Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr, Thomas W. Rieger.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-10: 1-57181-440-X (hbk.) -- ISBN-13: 978-1-57181-440-1 (hbk.)
ISBN-10: 1-84545-304-2 (pbk.) -- ISBN-13: 978-1-84545-304-6 (pbk.)
1. Utopias--Congresses. I. Rüsen, Jörn. II. Fehr, Michael. III. Rieger, Thomas W.

HX806.T45 2004
335'.02--dc22 2004045085

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper.

ISBN-10: 1-57181-440-X	ISBN-13: 978-1-57181-440-1	hardback
ISBN-10: 1-84545-304-2	ISBN-13: 978-1-84545-304-6	paperback

Thinking Utopia

MAKING SENSE OF HISTORY
Studies in Historical Cultures
General Editors: Jörn Rüsen, Alon Confino, Allan Megill

Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate
Edited by Jörn Rüsen

Identities: Time, Difference, and Boundaries
Edited by Heidrun Friese

Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness
Edited by Jürgen Straub

The Meaning of History
Edited by Jörn Rüsen and Klaus E. Müller

Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds
Edited by Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas W. Rieger

History: Narration – Interpretation – Orientation
Jörn Rüsen

Preface and Acknowledgements

In recent years there have been exciting developments in both the field of utopian studies and critical discours on utopian thinking. At the very center of this debate is the question of relevance of utopian thought today. In our volume we therefore primarily explore the question of significance of utopian potentials after the 'end of the utopias', in particular after the collapse of the socialist/communist systems, and problematise the current notion of the 'end of utopian thought'.

We believe that, contrary to its perceptions and connotations in hegemonic contemporary ideologies and thought models of the political, a rehabilitation of utopian thought is necessary. This reduced and narrowly defined concept of the utopian represents but one segment of the many perspectives that transcend the human world. It requires in this context not only a critical analysis and evaluation in terms of its social effects and consequences, but also in terms of its future potential. In so doing, a more extensive and complex concept of the utopian was to be developped. Questions about utopian elements that transcend space and time and the necessity of this form of thought in humankind's confrontation with the environment were thus central issues in our volume.

When Karl Ernst Osthaus opened the Museum Folkwang (today the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum) in 1902, he not only founded a new type of museum, already seen as revolutionary by his contemporaries. Osthaus's cultural and art-political initiatives provided the Utopian thought of modernity for the first time with a significant social site: a building in which the most modern design and paintings were presented in mutually reinforcing ways, the Museum Folkwang was conceived as an aesthetic-artistic counter-model to the social utopias of the nineteenth century and was intended to serve as the foundation for the Folkwang idea – the redesign of social life through art. To this extent, the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum and the cultural institutions of the Hagener Impulse –

a network of significant institutions and collections initiated by the collector and art patron Karl Ernst Osthaus – as well as the unique cultural treasures of the Ruhr Region, a landscape with the highest density of museums in Germany, provide an ideal backdrop for celebrating 100 years of the Folkwang idea with symposia, events and an exhibition – Museutopia.

In his introductory essay, Lyman Tower Sargent emphasises the necessity as well as the inherent problematic of reality-based utopian thinking, moving beyond the eutopia-dystopia patterns and looking at the question in a cross-national perspective. Sargent's critical analysis of current concepts of utopia – including the complex and multidimensional but also more diffuse concepts, not yet reified in design – pleads for a concept of the 'relative utopia' of a better world instead of the 'absolute utopia' of a perfect world.

The contributions in part I, 'Politics, Construction and Functions of Utopian Thinking', deal from various perspectives with the problems of the forms of emergence, the potentials of association and the functioning of a complex concept of utopia. They represent current research paradigms and strategies on utopian thinking. Krishan Kumar explores the question of the formation of a utopian tradition in the context of Western thought, which has no true, independent equivalent in Eastern thinking – with the exception of a few classical Chinese texts. From the perspective of the anthropologist and system theorist, Michael Thompson studies notions of value in terms of future scenarios, linked to a plea for a non-reductionist theory of thinking about the future. In his contribution, 'Utopia, Contractualism, Human Rights', Richard Saage explores the extent to which current concepts of individual and human rights can be traced back to the Enlightenment. The philosopher and historian of science Wolfgang Pircher treats the problem of world construction before the backdrop of the economic and technological thinking of the engineer and the planning strategist.

The section 'Artificial Worlds and the New Man' combines contributions from the areas of the natural sciences (computer sciences), social sciences (sociology and theory of science) and philosophy dealing with virtual projections of the future and a new formulation of the relationships among humans, nature and technology. In her contribution on 'utopian bodies', Dorothy Ko deconstructs the image of the human in classical Chinese utopian texts and speaks at the same time in favour of alternative concepts of utopia that allow for more extensive concepts of the body (desire, aesthetics, fantasy). Klaus Mainzer describes from the perspective of the computer scientist and philosopher the inspiring potentials of the utopian for the evolution of human intelligence. In his contribution about the virtual as a site of the Utopian, Claus Pias describes the transition of

utopia from a text-bound medium to models of a 'synthetic history'. These models are based on results of calculation processes and are exemplified by way of the strategies of war games during the cold war. The sociologist Ulrich Oevermann dedicates his contribution to utopian thought in everyday life and notes a trend towards de-professionalisation, a shift of utopian discourse from the domain of intellectuals (intellectuals as stockholders of the utopian discourse) towards a broader and more plural discourse of visions of the future.

A further part of this volume is dedicated to the museum as utopian laboratory. The essays in this section focus on the museum as a field of experimentation for ideal visions of a society and the shaping of the museum as a 'site of permanent conference' (Beuys), but also the Utopian character of art works and artistic work as a model of utopia. Donald Preziosi explores basically the relationship between subject and object constructions in the museum and its influence on our notions of time, history, memory and identity. In his contribution on the relationships among the museum, art and utopia, Michael Fehr develops the idea of the museum as an 'epistemological construction site'. Based on an analysis of the concepts of art and wonder chamber, the literary scholar Wolfgang Braungart pleads for the creation of spaces of discourse and critical reflection that could serve as an answer to the current fragmentation of science and scholarship and their philosophical and ethical components. Rachel Weiss concentrates on the influence of conceptual ideas on art and their utopian character.

In the final section, scholars focus on utopias as a medium of cultural communication. The literary scholar Zhang Longxi studied the utopian tendencies in Confucianism and Chinese literature. Using the concept of trauma, Michael S. Roth explores a new area of utopian thinking, that of a dystopia of the spirit. With this, he addresses a fundamental problem of utopia: the limits of representation. Slavoj Zizek subjects the utopian potential of revolutionary cinema and the catastrophe film to a critical analysis. Wilhelm Voßkamp explores the poetics and narrative and representative techniques of classical utopian texts. In a concluding critical postscript, Jörn Rüsen pleads for utopian thought as a culture of inspiration and analyses utopian thinking as an anthropological constant.

Taking Jörn Rüsen's suggestion to use these contributions, originally given on a symposium at Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in 2001, as an 'agenda finder' for a comprehensive treatment of the issue of utopian thought, in October 2002 the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (KWI) and the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum organised the annual conference of the Wissenschaftszentrum Nordrhein-Westfalen (Science Centre of Northrhine-Westfalia) titled 'Restless Culture: Potentials of Utopian Thought' in Hagen. A separate volume in German will

appear on this conference with contributions by Hayden White, Jan Philipp Reemtsma, Micha Brumlik, David Kettler, Nico Stehr and numerous other authors.

Our volume consciously integrates different methodological approaches and discourses towards utopian thinking, thus reflecting contemporary and innovative positions within this field of research. Our search for the essence of utopian thought, its nature and its concept may therefore be regarded as a tentative achievement, a future 'epistemological construction site' (Fehr).

Our thanks go first of all to the authors of this volume for graciously providing their essays for publication in this volume. Special thanks are due to Marion Berghahn and Berghahn Books; the publication of this volume is thanks to her initiative.

Jörn Rüsen
Michael Fehr
Thomas W. Rieger

Contents

List of Illustrations

The illustrations are taken from the collections of the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, Hagen, Germany (former Museum Folkwang) where the first *Thinking Utopia* symposium took place in 2001, celebrating the centenary of the birth of the Folkwang Idea in 1902 and serving as an agenda finder both for the museum exhibition *Museutopia* and the *Thinking Utopia/ Restless Culture* congress in 2002 (cf. Preface). The installations and artworks are referring to the utopian potentials of the museum as a laboratory, a space for creating and constructing artificial universes and alternative worlds. Reality and fictionality form a microcosmic net in the open archive of Sigrid Sigurdsson, the weird laboratory of Michael Badura and the utopian continents of the Martynchiks. The works of Allan Wexler and John van Geluwe's Museum of Museums – to name just two examples out of the large collections of the Osthaus Museum – introduce a different and ironic view of the construction of reality not only inside the institutional framework of the museum space but as well in our everyday world.

For further information on the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum the reader is kindly invited to visit the museum webpage: www.keom.de

Chapter 1

The Necessity of Utopian Thinking: A Cross-National Perspective

LYMAN TOWER SARGENT

After the fall of the Wall in 1989, there developed a small 'end of utopia' industry. This occurred mostly in Germany but was found elsewhere as well. The arguments for the 'end of utopia' were wrong on almost all counts. First, these arguments continued the erroneous equation of utopia and communism. Secondly, it assumed that communism itself had somehow actually ended, ignoring at the time China, Cuba and Vietnam, among others.

It also missed, probably because it did not fit the ideology, the utopian role being played by capitalism and the free market in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The failure of this utopia, while bringing about a resurgence of communist parties under new names, has not brought about renewed exultation over the 'end of utopia'.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, a glance back at the twentieth century should give us pause regarding utopia. The twentieth century witnessed a continual movement between utopian aspirations and the creation of dystopias out of those aspirations. The hopes of communism became the dystopia of Stalinism. The positive images projected by fascism became the dystopia of the camps. The utopian dreams of Pol Pot became the dystopia of Kampuchea. The utopian dreams of African nationalist movement turned into a series of military dictatorships. The dream of a Boer utopia became the dystopia of South Africa throughout most of the century. The dreams of a post communist capitalist utopia in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have often become dystopias of corruption and poverty. The dream of a Shiite utopia

in Iran has become yet another authoritarian dystopia. One could go on, but it is clear that the twentieth century has been one in which utopian aspirations have been continually renewed and continually defeated. But, in this essay, I argue that while utopians can be dangerous, utopian thinking is essential.

My argument, which I have made before but which I try to set out more thoroughly here, (Sargent 1982, 1994) is based in part on the fact ignored in the 'end of utopia' argument that one utopia was simply being replaced by another. Also, I ground my argument in material that many of the 'end of utopia' advocates ignored – utopias. There are rich and complex histories of utopian literature in many countries (see Pordzik 2001; Sargent 2001a). The single most important fact is that each country, and within the United Kingdom each constituent nation, has its own utopian tradition that differs from the others. This is true even when, as in my examples, these traditions are rooted in the English language and have classical and medieval utopianism and sixteenth to eighteenth-century English utopian literature as common inheritances (see my preliminary analysis in Sargent 2000). What we should have learned from the aftermath of 1989 was not that utopia was ending but that nations matter, with the subtext that utopias are one of the ways that nations create themselves (see Aramă 1993; Đergović-Joksimović 2000; Sargent 2001b and Tokarczyk 1993 for studies of Romania, Serbia, New Zealand and Poland, respectively).

Recent Changes in What is being Written[1]

Authors keep writing utopias, and they began to change what they wrote so that even the better definitions began to look simplistic and we poor bibliographers had to scramble to figure out where those boundaries, now more porous, belonged. And the authors have continue to write utopias and continue to change not only the content but also the formal structure of what they write without thought for the poor scholars whose confident declarations they are busily undermining.

First it was what Tom Moylan has called the 'critical utopia' (Moylan 1981, 1986), signalled by the subtitle *An Ambiguous Utopia* that Ursula K. Le Guin appended to her *The Dispossessed* (1974). More recently, Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini have characterised some recent works as 'critical dystopias' (Baccolini 2000; Moylan 2000; Baccolini and Moylan 2003). And, while there is serious disagreement over this most recent move, it signals that works are being written that are in significant ways (not yet fully defined) different from previous dystopias.

One characteristic of most dystopias well worth remembering is that they have a positive message. Robert O. Evans's (1973: 33) discussion of

dystopia insists that a defining characteristic of the dystopian genre must be a warning to the reader that something must and, by implication, can be done in the present to avoid the future. The traditional dystopia was an extrapolation from the present that involved a warning. The eutopia says that, if you behave thus and so, you will be rewarded with this. The dystopia, in the tradition of the jeremiad, says, if you behave thus and so, this is how you will be punished.

The central change to the positive utopia is that these utopias are, as Le Guin's subtitle suggests, troubled. They are inhabited by real people who lust after each other and, probably more significant, after status and power. Utopias have been accused of needing to 'change human nature'. While I have argued that this is an overly simple view of both human nature and utopias (Sargent 1975, 1977), there have been utopias where the inhabitants appear or, in a fair number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century examples, are dead (for example, see Phelps 1883; Petersilia 1889; Benson 1912).

But the tradition was never like that. J.C. Davis's statement in his *Utopia and the Ideal Society* (1981: 36) that utopia reflects '(...) the collective problem: the reconciliation of limited satisfactions and unlimited human desires within a social context' makes that point, as would any reading of More's *Utopia* (1516) that was not entirely blinkered. More's society works in its authoritarian and patriarchal way because its far from perfect people are severely punished for infractions of its many rules. And this is the norm in the early utopia; for example, Thomas Lupton's *Siuqila* (1580) stresses quick and sure punishment as the means of social control. Later things get more complex, but remember that those who refuse to work in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) are imprisoned on bread and water until they change their mind. And even the relatively simple nineteenth-century utopia only rarely presents a perfect society or perfect people.

In *A Modern Utopia* (1905), H.G. Wells argued that utopias needed to be inhabited by real people, but it can be argued that in *Men Like Gods* (1923) he had come to doubt that it was possible. Other authors, such as Muriel Jaeger in *The Question Mark* (1926), have made similar points, but because times have changed, the inhabitants of most past utopias seem unreal to us. We can relate better to the people in recent works because they respond roughly as I expect we would to the situations imagined. So why is this important?

It is important because in the twentieth-century utopian visions, from Lenin to the Taliban, that purported to have the potential of producing an enhanced life have been hijacked and turned into dystopias. This was done by people who either were willing to force others into a mould of their devising but which they rarely applied to themselves or simply

ignored the utopian implications of the vision in order to further their personal agenda, which was usually money and power. Some had never believed in the vision; others found power so corrupting that they traded all their beliefs for it. And, in what is the central argument here, the 'only' way to overcome a utopia that has become a dystopia is with another utopia. But, of course, this opens up the possibility of the new utopia being hijacked in turn and turned into a new dystopia.

That is why we need to reflect on what contemporary authors of utopias are doing. They are opening up at least the possibility of new modes of utopian thinking, ones intended for the real people of our world, utopias that hold out serious promise of betterment but do not promise anything like perfection. They offer utopias that are aware of the dangers inherent in utopian thinking and guard against them, utopias that might even suggest that it is possible to live in utopia even in the dystopia that we have created of our world. But they also give us utopias that loudly insist that no one should be required to live in dystopia to feed the power hunger of presidents and prophets, despots and dictators.

Utopian thinking is essential for our social, political, and psychological health, but, like everything else, utopian thinking is time- and place-bound. One model does not fit all. Oscar Wilde's insight that 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias' (Wilde 1910: 27) is both profoundly right and fundamentally wrong. Wilde is right in that it is what we as human beings do since we are at best only temporarily satisfied and hunger after new satisfactions. Wilde is wrong in that he appears to suggest only one trajectory for the human race.

For example, I find life in More's *Utopia* dystopian on many dimensions, but I expect that if I were a poor peasant in 1516 I would find it extremely appealing. Closer to home I also find many aspects of Bellamy's utopia, even as improved in *Equality* (1897), dystopian, although less so than More's. But, if I had been an industrial worker in the late nineteenth century, I would have signed up immediately. Of course, if I had been a rich capitalist of the time, I probably would have hated it as much as most of them did. And, today, try to imagine conveying a contemporary feminist utopia to the Taliban or the Taliban utopia to a modern feminist. To each the other's vision is one of hell, but to each their own makes perfect sense.

F.L. Polak argued in his 1961 book *The Image of the Future* that at any one point in time we need a single dominant image of the future or utopia. He also allows for the continuing need to develop new utopias, saying: