



ARTICLES



Complex Democracy, Complex Utopianism

Fátima Vieira

University of Porto

ABSTRACT

Longtime utopian scholar Fátima Vieira draws from a variety of contemporary social theorists, Anglophone and European, to argue for the notion of a “complex” utopianism that departs from previous, traditional models of utopian narrative, thought and practice. To resist the seemingly dystopian spirit of our own time, Vieira argues, we need to define, and then establish, a new “utopian class” akin to (and perhaps coinciding with) Latour’s and Schultz’s proposal for an “ecological class.” Wide-ranging in its theoretical sources, the article invites scholarly conversation about “what’s next” for human sustainability—and for utopian thinking.

KEYWORDS: *democracy, “utopian class,” complexity*

In this text, which I present as an essay rather than an article, I share part of the research on the theory and the nature of contemporary utopianism that I have conducted over the past years. This research has been prompted by questions I have often been asked while promoting the idea of utopia in



the framework of outreach activities: How did Thomas More innovate when he wrote *Utopia* (1516)? How do utopian thinkers think? Why do dystopias predominate today? What sort of utopian ideas are still to be found? In which ones are we to invest? To answer these questions, I turn mainly to non-English speaking authors who have not written explicitly about utopia but whose work on different aspects of contemporary society, from education and politics to neuroscience, provided me with tools to better understand contemporary utopianism. By doing so, I hope to expand the theoretical references of utopian thinking while formulating my theory of utopia.¹

My primary references are Michel Foucault, Daniel Innerarity, Edgar Morin, Frédéric Lenoir, Miguel Abensour, and Bruno Latour, although I refer to many other authors in this text. From Michel Foucault, I take the definition of Marx and Freud as “founders of discursivity” to understand how five centuries of utopian texts still find their dynamic source in More. From Daniel Innerarity, I borrow the idea that our problem in understanding how our society works derives from the fact that we are resorting to tools defined in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. Innerarity claims that we need a theory of complex democracy to understand the very complex society we live in—and I move from this idea to suggest that in order to understand today’s utopianism, what we require is a theory of complex utopianism. From Edgar Morin, I borrow the description of how complex thinking operates, and I use the operators of complexity Morin propounds to suggest these might be utilized to unleash our utopian imagination. Then, I use Frédéric Lenoir’s scientific arguments to explain, on the one hand, why it seems so difficult for contemporary writers and thinkers to imagine new utopias; and, on the other hand, to explain my conviction that human beings can still learn to imagine regenerative utopias. From Miguel Abensour, I incorporate the idea of a “new utopian spirit.” Finally, I draw on Bruno Latour, particularly the co-authored (with Nikolaj Schultz) 2022 French edition of *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*, in order to advocate my position that we need to establish the basis for the definition of a “utopian class.”²

This essay is to be read as a call for acknowledging our period as an *age of utopia*. I argue that we will only be able to trace today’s utopian thinking if, on the one hand, we accept that such thinking has changed in nature and, on the other hand, that it is now operating on a small scale. I further contend that if we see this new utopianism in the light of the idea of complexity, we will understand that its power lies in its experimental, fragmentary and pluralistic way of responding to today’s global and so-called wicked problems,

and that it is the symptom of the polycentric democratic society we live in. I believe that our ability to imagine alternatives may be fostered by complex thinking and that the green utopia is the mobilizing idea we need to involve utopian minds in a truly transformative process. And I know, despite my usual optimistic disposition, that we cannot fail this mission: the planet is dying out, and utopia may be our ultimate resource.

Revisiting More's *Utopia*

When Thomas More published *Utopia* in 1516, he orchestrated a revolution in thought. Besides forging a neologism and establishing a new literary genre, he introduced an innovative perspective on the world framed by Humanist values and convictions; a new way of addressing social problems and constructing solutions. I believe Thomas More to be a "founder of discursivity," as Michel Foucault said of Marx and Freud in a lecture to the French Philosophical Association in 1969.³

Just like Marx and Freud, More set up the "possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts"⁴; the result was the creation of "certain concepts or theories" that may be "considered as derived, secondary, and accessory" in relation to the founding ones.⁵ This aspect, Foucault claims, is what distinguishes the revolution in thought orchestrated by Marx and Freud from the revolution generated by scientific discoveries: "Reexamination of Galileo's text may well change our knowledge of the history of mechanics, but it will never be able to change mechanics itself. On the other hand, reexamining Freud's texts modifies psychoanalysis itself, just as a reexamination of Marx's would modify Marxism."⁶ This acknowledgment that "the initiation of a discursive practice is heterogeneous to its subsequent transformations"⁷ is instrumental to the understanding of utopian discursivity. This is how I read the past five centuries of utopian thinking: a constant revisiting of the founding text, which thus expands its meanings. The concept of utopia has mutated because of this dynamic relationship between the founding text and its offspring.

Foucault suggests that to identify the founders of discursivity, we need to determine their founding acts, as well as the "propositions or statements to which, alone, one grants a founding value."⁸ In my view, More's founding act lies in the establishment of a utopian practice of thinking where the discourse on the Other is centered on oneself: the inhabitants of the island of Utopia are Europeans in their culture, contradictions, and concerns,⁹ and the

utopian journey is meant, above all, to solve their problems. This is still valid nowadays, even when utopia permeates science fiction and transports us to other planets. As to the propositions or statements that inform utopian discursivity, they are to be found in the utopian ways of solving problems, i.e., in the “utopian modes of thinking,” which I label as *prospective thinking*, *critical thinking*, *holistic thinking*, and *creative thinking*.

The reason for the absence of prospective thinking in Thomas More’s *Utopia* is apparent: Utopia’s turn to the future would only take place in the eighteenth century, following the publication of the first euchronias in France. *Utopia* gives voice to More’s conviction—and that of the intellectuals of his time—that human beings can determine their own destiny by calling upon reason. Prospective thinking is, thus, clearly a case of a “subsequent transformation” of a founding “proposition” or text, according to Foucault’s theoretical explanation of discursive practice. The relationship between More’s *Utopia* and subsequent utopian texts is still very much in evidence, as both spatial and temporal utopias presuppose breaking with existing ideas and experimenting with radically different solutions. This is, after all, how prospective thinking differs from extrapolative thinking: the latter explores present-day movements and trends, whereas the former implies disruption.

Critical thinking is deeply embedded in utopian discursivity. While on the one hand such thinking governs the rejection of the utopist’s present situation, on the other it requires the utopist to substantiate the paths they have decided to explore. As with critical thinking, the data the utopist deals with must be consistent and reliable, and the logical, sequential, and progressive outcome one of careful consideration. The utopian thinker must master the six core skills of critical thinking—interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation—as well as a capacity to consider other people’s interests in the solutions that are sought.

Holistic thinking is one of the most important innovations introduced by utopian discursivity. What we are offered in utopias is a description of society at work, which implies considering its social, economic, political, and religious organization and how all these aspects are solidary and interdependent. While in Plato’s *Republic* the discussion of life in the city is confined to speculative terms, that is, on the plane of hypothesis, in More’s *Utopia* Raphael Hythloday is quite assertive in the multidimensional analysis of what he has seen and experienced.

Finally, creative thinking is fed by our imagination. Its starting point is always “What if?”—a disruptive question prompting exploration and

experimentation. It does not, however, necessarily entail the creation of something entirely new; rather, it entails drawing into the center what used to be on the margins, and describing every possible consequence.

Contemporary utopian thinking both resembles and differs from More's utopian thinking in the same way that contemporary Marxism and Freudianism differ from the theories propounded by Marx and Freud. Just as we may say, "Hmmm, that is a Marxist argument," or "Hmmm, that is a Freudian perspective," we say, "Hmmm, that is a utopian way of addressing a problem." This is, in fact, what persists: the conviction that human beings can find solutions to the problems of the societies they live in.

There are, of course, breaks—at times, one could even say that utopia is on the brink of death. This, however, is due to a confusion of the concepts of *philosophical* utopia, informed by an ideal that persists through the ages; and *political* utopia, which conveys situated sociopolitical recipes¹⁰; it is the latter, not the former, which is likely to die. In fact, the utopian legacy we have inherited from past centuries is the culmination of centuries of utopian recipes, of all the strategies devised, of all the paths explored, and of all the dead ends met. This happens because utopian thinkers are, above all, humanists, and, as such, they are not guided by the idea of progress but rather by that of accumulation. This is, after all, what distinguishes the humanities from the sciences: while the sciences are informed by the concept of progress, insofar as they are made up of provisional truths that are constantly replaced by new truths and discoveries, the humanities, in contrast, do not progress linearly and sequentially. Leon Wieseltier explains this well: productivity in the humanities is done through a process of cumulative reception of cultural objects; humanists are constantly aware of the past, but they use the past not to dominate the present but instead to shed light on it.¹¹ This last point is crucial as it enables us to understand that contemporary utopias are meta-utopian, i.e., they subscribe to the utopian philosophical ideal while referring to past political utopias and past sociopolitical utopian idealizations.

But it is not only the contemporary utopia that carries the memory of previous utopias; Western societies' "diachronic identity" has already integrated the idea of utopia. As I see it, this memory of utopian ideas and strategies provides our diachronic identity with a solid "connective structure," thus performing an autonoetic function.¹² Five centuries after More, we are well equipped with a wealth of utopian strategies: we do have the means to create a better society but need to understand how a paradigmatic change may happen.

Complexity

In his 2019 *A Theory of Complex Democracy*,¹³ philosopher Daniel Innerarity argues that today we face a major conceptual problem: we try to understand twenty-first-century problems with conceptual tools defined and used to analyze and understand nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century issues. We apply solutions of the past to current problems because we think that they are not new, just versions of past issues, but they are not: they are different, and we thus need a novel frame of reference to devise new solutions to address them.¹⁴ According to the Spanish philosopher, what we take as a lack of interest on the part of communities when it comes to the construction of our societies mainly results from a lack of awareness of how those same societies work and how people can contribute through their actions.¹⁵ New perspectives on how to deal with the interconnected and conflicting problems that characterize our societies are thus required—complex theories that allow us to analyze, describe, and address uncertain times and contradictory ideas.¹⁶

While science has changed a good number of its paradigms—complexity is investigated today in the molecular systems of physics and chemistry, in the ecological systems of biology, in the neural networks of the brain, in economics and the social sciences—the central concepts of political theory have not, in fact, undergone an equivalent transformation. In the nineteenth century, political construction was conceptualized according to the logic of mechanical devices such as clocks and scales. How can we continue envisaging the political construction of our society with the same instruments?¹⁷ Neurology, for example, offers us perspectives and concepts against which our forms of government seem inappropriate simplifications.¹⁸ Edgar Morin was the first to call attention to the fact that because the world is changed, we need to develop the sciences of complexity. Innerarity now argues that Cartesian thought, which presides over the right–left dichotomies, cannot describe the complexity of our societies as they overly categorize and simplify our complex world.¹⁹ A complex society like ours rejects the idea of a center from which everything must be governed.²⁰ Innerarity's main point is that it is not democracy that is in crisis today but the theory that describes it; that is why we need a new theory.²¹

The theory of complex democracy that Innerarity puts forward in his book considers democracy not an end but a process that articulates the contradictory forces of our times. We need to describe the world using new categories: globalization, knowledge, and complexity. Only complex systems theory

can offer an interdisciplinary point of view for understanding and managing nonlinear processes in nature and society.²² Complexity theory, Innerarity claims, is relevant because the density of interactions characterizing a complex society has yet to be adequately understood by traditional politics. A complex democracy, he argues, tries to balance a set of values, dimensions, and procedures often seen as contradictory and even incompatible—while paying the price of instability and contradiction.²³ That is why what we need to learn, Innerarity contends (reminiscent of Habermas), is how to orchestrate and balance citizen participation, free elections, expert opinions, national sovereignty, protection of minorities, the rule of law, independent authorities, accountability, deliberation, representation, and more.²⁴ Drawing on Austrian zoologist Rupert Riedl, Innerarity claims that we emerged from the industrial age with a prehistoric brain, genetically programmed to think in a linear fashion, along isolated causal chains.²⁵ But we need to change; we need to consider complexity.

French sociologist Edgar Morin, mentioned above, spent his entire academic life fighting for the implementation, in university curricula, of complex thinking capable of counteracting hyper-specialization in subjects that, according to him, do not offer actual knowledge. In *The Path to the Future of Humanity*,²⁶ Morin argues that what we study today at university are but isolated threads of a tapestry; if we look only at the threads we will never be able to appreciate the beauty of the pattern they make up together.²⁷ That is why we need to invest in multidisciplinary responses: the problems we face today have many fronts and all are mutually dependent. Only together will we be able to devise adequate solutions.

Morin is not talking about a mere alliance of different disciplines but rather an improbable way of doing things. In this context, in *Method: Towards A Study of Humankind*, vol 1 (*The Nature of Nature* (1992 [1977])),²⁸ he details three operators of complex thinking, which I believe we can already find in utopian thinking. The first is the *dialogic operator*. As Morin contends, “dialogic signifies the symbiotic units of two logics, which simultaneously nourish each other, compete against each other, live off each other, oppose and combat each other to death.”²⁹ This principle implies that we bring together what usually is separate: reason and emotion, the humanities and the sciences, but also the real and the imaginary, as utopian thinking does. The second is the *recursive operator*. Morin argues that “in order to conceive of any active organization . . . we must couple in a central way the ideas of equilibrium and disequilibrium, stability and instability, dynamism and constancy;

but this coupling must be conceived as a *looping*, that is to say a recursive relation between these terms forming a circuit, where what is generated generates in its turn what generates it.³⁰ We are, in fact, used to thinking along the cause-and-effect rule; we now need to make the effect circulate over the cause. Utopian thinking also does that, making the future circulate over the present, thus providing the present with meaning. The third is *the hologrammatic operator*. Morin sustains that “proper to hologrammatic organization is the fact that, in a certain way, the organization of the whole is found inside the part which is in the whole.”³¹ This idea of totality implies that we cannot separate the part from the whole, which means that all discussions must be contextualized and multidimensional;³² again, it is all about the holistic approach typical of utopian thinking. Complex thinking reconnects different knowledges with one other, the parts to the whole, the global to the local, and vice-versa. It makes us understand connections, mutual interactions and implications, multidimensional phenomena, and, simultaneously, both complementary and conflicting realities. Complex thinking is, I believe, what we need to comprehend the nature of utopian thinking of our times.

If, as Innerarity argues, contemporary societies are a set of non-hierarchical systems that do neither merge nor delegate into a hyperstructure;³³ if, as he claims, the concept of polyarchy is what best represents structures that are organized in a multidimensional way, which are distinguished from hierarchies because it is not possible to manage them vertically,³⁴ not only do we need a theory of complex democracy, as Innerarity proposes, but also a theory of complex utopianism. Without it, we will be forever entangled in the idea that we can no longer imagine and write utopias.

The history of the positive ideas conveyed by literary utopianism seems to have come to an end in the 1980s and 1990s, in what Lyman Sargent and Tom Moylan each called “critical dystopianism.”³⁵ This is, however, an idea that I would like to contradict by arguing that our problem, when we say that we are no longer able to imagine utopias, is that we are using concepts that were defined to analyze and understand nineteenth-century utopias, the so-called “euchronias,” i.e., grand narratives imagined within the logic of linear and causal reasoning. We need to recognize that we no longer live in the age of time—which informed the grand narratives—but, as Foucault argued in a lecture he presented in Tunisia in 1967 (published only in 1984 under the title “Des Espaces Autres”), in the era of space. Foucault explained it well: in the nineteenth century, people were obsessed with the idea of time and progress—a legacy of the Enlightenment transformed by Marxism. However, we live

today in a time when our experience is less and less that of a long life developing and progressing on the axis of time, than a network connecting intersecting points. That is why the concept of space is the only operational tool that enables us to understand our own historical period, which is characterized by juxtaposition, by the tension between the near and the far, the side by side, the dispersed.³⁶ Because grand narratives are no longer suitable for our times we need, as Renato Janine Ribeiro, former Minister of Education of Brazil, has argued, “small utopias.”³⁷ Our social imaginary is formed by small utopias that often coexist, and frequently contradict one other. To realize how different these are from earlier utopias, we must understand how utopianism has responded to anti-utopian arguments.

Responding to Popper

One of the arguments critics of utopia most frequently advance concerns the monolithic vision it often takes. The reasoning is always the same: the utopia of some may well be the dystopia of others, and the example of Nazism is repeatedly brought up for discussion. In his 1945 *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper, one of the leading detractors of utopian thinking, accused utopian thinking of being (1) unrealistic, (2) totalitarian, and (3) holistic, and pointed the finger at socialist-communist ideals that absorbed and wasted the energy of so many generations. Popper's critique, which addressed the utopias of the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century in particular, is not, however, relevant today. Contemporary utopianism has changed its configuration and form of action, notably since the 1970s, and responds to the three criticisms expressed by Popper. Miguel Abensour describes this phenomenon: contemporary utopianism, informed by what he calls a *new utopian spirit*, seems to result from the presence, within utopian culture, of a movement of distrust regarding utopia, of self-reflection, as if utopia had integrated, along its path, arguments from the enemies of utopia without, however, having renounced its primary objective, i.e., without having accepted the announcement of the end of utopia.³⁸

In fact, contemporary utopianism is *realistic*, engaged in experimentation and in the implementation of utopian projects that, while not assumed to be perfect, do play the vital role of raising awareness of new forms of organization. Presented as counter-power strategies, they should be seen as a first step in a process that needs to be continuously reevaluated.³⁹ Sandrine Roudaut

considers this radical experimentation a way of thinking, a creative resistance, and an ambition, a positive vision of a society we want to create; it is, finally, a mode of action, a behavior that leads to transformative experiences. Radical experimentation takes us beyond our comfort zones; it obliges us to project ourselves into an order distant from where we are: it is idealistic in its dreams (radicality) but pragmatic in its actions (experimentation).⁴⁰ This perspective allows us to understand that utopists are not victims of a dream, as Popper stated; Thierry Paquot found the right word to describe them, underlining the importance of human agency in the process: utopists are *experimenters* and not mere guinea pigs.⁴¹ In this sense, contemporary utopists experience the future in the present, distancing themselves from the echronists of the nineteenth century who took utopia from another place to another time, thus highlighting a chain of causalities between events and moments of rupture. Contemporary utopianism is now committed to experimenting, in “real-time,” with the emancipatory ideas it carries. Therefore, as Paquot concludes, utopia is a future that is, in fact, a present,⁴² fulfilling, as Erik Olin Wright claims, the vital function of opening “emancipatory fissures” in reality.⁴³

Second, contemporary utopianism is not totalitarian because it is based on participatory processes, thus benefiting from “collective intelligence.” As Olivier Piazza explains, this concept refers to the cognitive abilities of a society, a community, or a group of individuals and results from a dialectical evolution between the individual and the society to which he belongs. While the individual benefits from social knowledge, society itself gains the accumulated knowledges arising from the interaction of individuals in process analysis, problem-solving, and collective decision-making.⁴⁴ As David Wechsler proved, back in 1971, individuals who work together develop better answers, having access to insights that would never form part of their thinking if they were working alone.⁴⁵

The concept of collective intelligence is useful for understanding contemporary utopianism, because this mode of intelligence incorporates different voices and opens space for reflection and discussion, never imposing opinions. Furthermore, it allows us to discern how contemporary utopianism works: on the one hand, experimentation is preceded by a phase of collective discussion, producing new visions that will be crystallized in the practical implementation of these ideas; on the other hand, evaluation of the practical results produces knowledge instrumental to defining new horizons. The challenge, therefore, lies in utopians’ capacity to inspire and to galvanize collective action. This will not be a movement in one direction only: by integrating

through its evolutionary process a critique of utopia's historical univocity, contemporary utopias are above all *polyphonic*.

Thus, Popper's critique of the holistic ambition of utopia was also integrated and resolved, transforming how new utopias present themselves. This transformation stems from a postmodern worldview wherein the linear, classical narrative model no longer serves as an instrument of perception. Recent transformations of utopia are then related to a change in the narrative paradigm, which itself accompanied the paradigm shift that Foucault announced: that we live in the age of spatiality. Edward Soja, elaborating on this notion, contends in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) that ours is a time of *simultaneity*, in which events are to be understood not diachronically but *synchronously*, in the extension of these events, and in the possibilities that continuously agitate them.⁴⁶

Thus while contemporary utopianism is characterized by juxtaposition, simultaneity, and the dispersion of proposals, its fragmented character is at once a symptom of the contemporary fragmentation of our lives as well as a form of understanding, a positive movement toward the reconstruction of these fragments. Fragmentation is thus a means of achieving a holistic view of things. This fragmentation, the vitalities of utopian disobediences, the variety of horizons are, as Nicolas Duinton argues, the new guises of a way of thinking that, while seemingly imprecise, is actually quite active.⁴⁷ What we need, in order to understand that the holistic wish (negatively perceived by Popper) was successfully resolved, is to abandon our Cartesian ways of thinking, as Edgar Morin has advocated for decades.

New utopian thinking integrates a diversity of fragmentary, antagonistic, and complementary utopias, as Morin says when he speaks of complex thinking. It is precisely in this plurality of utopias that we find the mechanism that will ensure the survival of our societies. Responding to Popper's critique of being unrealistic, totalitarian, and holistic, contemporary utopianism asserts itself as experimental, resulting from participatory processes, polyphonic (fragmented), and juxtaposed.

Imagination

Abensour argues that utopia is informed by a stubborn impulse, an irrepressible desire for freedom, and a centuries-old struggle against equality in the name of an endless sense of justice.⁴⁸ This is because, as has been

demonstrated by neuroscience, our brain is a prospective organ that is constantly altering the temporal linearity, bringing imagined events in the future to the present and linking them to the past; this explains our human capacity to plan, predict, and design. These two essential characteristics distinguish us from non-human beings: the imagination of better worlds and future-oriented psychology.⁴⁹

Our brain is constantly preparing and organizing itself in such a way as to know how it will act if something unexpected happens: it is ready to transform the future.⁵⁰ This idea has been corroborated by many studies, including those by Portuguese American neuroscientist António Damásio, who, in his famous book *The Error of Descartes*, argues that one of the most distinctive features of human beings is their ability to learn to be guided, not by immediate results, but by future prospects, something that we begin to acquire in childhood.⁵¹ But why does it seem so difficult today to imagine utopias? Why do dystopias and apocalyptic narratives prevail? There is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon, as the French philosopher Frédéric Lenoir advances in his 2012 book *La Guérison du Monde*.

Reporting on studies by neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux, Lenoir explains it has been scientifically proven that our brain is affected by the relationship it creates with our social life, giving rise to a complex neural structure that renews itself every generation. The left side of our brain has a rational, logical, and verbal nature and works mainly at the level of abstraction. The right side of the brain has an emotional, intuitive, relational nature and works based on visualizations of the imagination. Throughout history, the human brain has experienced fundamental changes. At the turn of the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, for example, when humans became sedentary, their behavioral and cultural characteristics altered their neural structure. Humans were then forced to rationalize their lives. To ensure the safety of the communities in which they lived, they created political, economic, military, religious, and administrative systems. The logical and rational dimension of the brain—the left side—has then undergone unprecedented development. In contrast, the intuitive features and emotions governed by the right side of the brain, which, at the time, were not so necessary because all efforts were focused on the construction of new societies, have not been subjected to similar development. As the history of humanity has come to be the history of the redefinition of its political, social, economic, and religious base, the right side of the brain has not been much engaged.⁵²

Utopia always depends on our ability to imagine, but our problem is that we need to get used to imagining. In *Tools for Conviviality*, Ivan Illich explains that our brain has been so deformed by our society and our habits of thought that we do not even dare to think about other possible forms of organization. The question is that we are used to thinking that there is just one way of using things, but there are always at least two ways of using, for instance, a scientific discovery, two fundamentally contradictory ways. According to Illich, we have been trained to accept instead of imagine; we have almost completely lost the power to dream of a world where all people would have the right to speak and to be heard, where there are no limits to creativity, where everyone and every single person may change his or her life.⁵³ Although he does not mention the idea of utopia, Illich is describing, in fact, a society made of individuals who have almost completely lost the abilities that enable utopian thinking. Edgar Morin would certainly subscribe to Illich's view on this issue. To Morin, the crises we are experiencing—which include a crisis of imagination—have a cognitive nature.⁵⁴ The good news, though, as Lenoir contends, turning to Changeux's studies, is that we can change our brain. If we live in the right environment and are exposed to the right stimuli, we can develop the right side of our brain and start using both sides more rationally.⁵⁵

Lenoir's and Changeux's conclusions are relevant to my discussion because utopian thinking depends on the use of the right side of our brain. On the one hand, it summons our ability to imagine, widen our angle of vision, and perceive things that the left side of our brain is not able to recognize. On the other hand, it requires a relational view of things (Morin calls it complex thinking), which is essential for us to understand the future not just as the inevitable consequence of the present but as a network of possibilities. And sometimes, it is not that hard to imagine something radically different. It is a matter of taking into consideration the three operators of complexity described by Edgar Morin. What is necessary, then, is that we learn and practice utopian thinking. I have no doubt that it is all a matter of practice.

A New Utopian Class

Having described the new utopianism and the need for a theory of complex utopianism, it is now time I go back to where I started and try to understand what sort of recipe it offers. This is naturally difficult to describe as we are talking about many small experiments, small utopias that are juxtaposed,

overlapping, and elbowing each other on our horizon. The interesting question to discuss is this: where will this moment of utopian enthusiasm take us? And what is it based on? On a belief in the efficacy of laws, as was the case in the Renaissance? On a belief in the essential goodness of individuals, as was the case in the Enlightenment? A little bit of both. We know the change we desperately need can only happen with everyone's participation. As Innerarity says, we live in a complex, polycentric society without accentuated hierarchies.

Take, for example, the environmental issue. We know that it can only be rightly addressed if human beings change their consumption patterns (Serge Latouche proposes the concept of “happy decrease”),⁵⁶ but also if, at the same time, legislation is created to support this change. Change cannot come from above, nor from below, but from both sides, indeed from many sides, resulting from many utopian strategies put in place simultaneously. But, without a concrete idea of the nature of the horizon toward which we are to walk, don't we risk living in a dispersed, chaotic society with many utopian experiments that do not really lead us to a better place? Don't we need any guidance? And how compatible would it be with the idea of dispersion of utopias? I do think we need guidance, and I believe it is not at all incompatible with the idea of the dispersion of small utopias. After all, as Innerarity argues, complex democracies always have to pay the price of instability and contradiction.⁵⁷

But what sort of guidance do we need?

On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo,⁵⁸ jointly authored by Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, provides some answers. The book was published in 2022, the same year Latour passed away, and it includes a self-explanatory subtitle: *How to Give Rise to an Ecological Class Aware and Proud of Itself*. Latour and Schultz's argument is very similar to Innerarity's in that they also argue the need to rethink basic concepts. Innerarity defended the need to revise the idea of democracy; Latour and Schultz contend we need to revise the concept of class.⁵⁹ Innerarity pointed out that dichotomies (such as left/right) are no longer helpful, as they do not provide insight into the very complex society in which we live; Latour and Schultz state that our society is no longer informed by the idea of convergence, i.e., it is no longer conceived as a set of facts that form a coherent front—the arrow of time, pointing forward—but as dispersion, pointing in all directions—an idea that complexifies what the nineteenth century tried to simplify.⁶⁰ With regard to environmental problems, Latour and Schultz argue, the situation is even more complicated, as people of the same class have different attitudes

regarding these issues. Ecology is everywhere, the authors sustain, but ecologists seem unable to mobilize people to action.⁶¹

The certainty of a catastrophe, Latour and Schultz claim, instead of inspiring people, seems to have a paralyzing effect.⁶² The solution is then to create the basis for asserting a new ecological class. We need the concept of class because it has proved effective. The idea of class struggles simplified narratives, made them understandable, and mobilized people.⁶³ In the nineteenth century, and even in the twentieth century, the concept of class was built around the organization of production, and the tension that prevailed among social classes resulted from different ways of perceiving how the results of production should be distributed. The new ecological class, though, is not to be defined in relation to the modes of production, as there is a new tension now between production systems and the habitability conditions on our planet. This is what has been added to the equation and what has changed the rules: questions related to the habitability of our planet.⁶⁴ Because of this, the ecological class has a broader, longer, and more complex view of history and geohistory.⁶⁵ And because it has this privileged perspective, it is better positioned to create meaningful narratives for our future.

The problem is that what prevails today is what Latour and Schultz call *punitive ecology*.⁶⁶ In fact, more often than not, the narratives offered are boring and promote ideas of punishment and regression. Yet, the ecological class may well already be the majority of the population: it already has in its ranks members of the labor movement, of feminist movements, of Post-colonial Movements, young generations, intellectual and academic classes, activists in general, and ordinary citizens.⁶⁷ Seen from this perspective, the ecological class is not at all marginal; this is an important point that Latour and Schultz stress throughout their book, calling for the creation of a new cartography of the allies and the enemies of the ecological class.

Referring to Bruno Latour's works to talk about contemporary utopianism may sound strange when we know that, for the French philosopher, utopia was a way to avoid. Latour was very clear regarding what he disliked about utopia. First, the fact that, as the etymology of the word suggests, utopia is simultaneously out of time and out of space; second, because he saw it as a product of modernity, with everything it implies: a society organized from "above," relying on the idea of the total separation of human and nonhuman species. Despite this, what the authors of *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo* call for—a new way of organizing society where ecology, usually on the margins of society, becomes the center—profoundly

resonates with what we now call the “green utopia,” informed not by the modern anthropocentric idea of human dominance over nature but by the postmodern perspective of humans and nature as deeply interconnected and interdependent.⁶⁸

Latour’s problem with utopias derives from his outdated idea of the concept. But the best ally of ecological action may well, in fact, *be* utopia. In their book, Latour and Schultz uphold that, to succeed, ecological action needs new aesthetics. Poetry, the literature in general, film, and architecture all had a relevant role in the invention of liberalism (44). Ecology—the authors conclude—desperately needs to be present in the art scene (67). In other words, ecology desperately needs utopian aesthetics. But how can utopian aesthetics contribute to the green cause?⁶⁹ In “Green Utopias: Imagining the Sustainable Society” (2002), Lisa Garforth argues that “it is in the exploration of what it might mean to ‘live in place’ that the green utopia makes its most important contribution to sustainability discourse”:

the green utopian fiction offers the reader experiential knowledge of the sustainable society. Through a range of narrative devices, these visions of sustainability invite our empathy and identification. Engaging stories, recognisable characters and “thick” descriptions of specific landscapes, communities and individuals allow the question of how we might live well and in a better relationship with nonhuman nature to be re-embedded in the sphere of lived experience, culture and meaning.⁷⁰

Informed by “positive psychology,” offering images of a brighter future, green utopias may well be the most successful way of inspiring action and educating people’s desire to understand sustainability as a reduction of consumption.⁷¹

Conclusion

Responding to the accusation of being unrealistic, contemporary utopias are, first and foremost, realistic. This idea, advanced by American sociologist Erik Wright and Dutch historian Bregman Rutger, is interesting because it adds to the concept of utopia the conviction that we need to invest in the practical side of transformation. Rutger argues that we cannot think of utopias if we do not see them as realizable. The history of our civilization is

full of achievements in terms of justice, education, human rights, and these achievements—universal suffrage; female emancipation; the right to education; the national health service; scientific and technological progress—are proof of the realization of utopias.⁷² One of the characteristics of contemporary utopianism is, in fact, its investment in radical experimentation. As Roudaut maintains, utopianism is now increasingly committed to implementing utopian projects that are critical in raising awareness of new forms of organization; they are modes of action, and ways of experiencing the future in the present.⁷³ And as Innerarity asserts, contemporary societies are complex, polyarchic, and multidimensional. This means they count on various agents of change with different objectives and methodologies. According to Morin, everything has already started: We can find a bit of utopia everywhere, all over the world, a multitude of local regenerative initiatives. The problem is that their promoters do not know of each other's existence! They are, nevertheless, the nursery of the future.⁷⁴ Ours is the era of "small utopias," and what is still to be done is the study of the connections, the mutual interactions, and the sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting implications of these utopian ideations. But for our society to advance (and the concept of advancement I am using encompasses the idea of "decrease"), we need these small utopias to walk toward a common horizon.

But how may this common horizon be created? And, more importantly, who is going to define it? Latour and Schultz offer a solution when they mention the new ecological class, pointing out the high number of members that this class already has. I believe that a common utopian horizon can be constructed collectively by the ecological class, which is another way of saying that a new ecological class will be the promoter of the green utopia. In practical terms, this has at least two consequences. First, it implies a revival of utopianism: by contributing to inspiring more people and strengthening the green cause, utopian aesthetics also benefit from the process, as its positive psychology methodology is thus legitimized. Second, complexity is needed more than ever to understand how contemporary utopian projects work, as they are simultaneously dispersed (I am talking about the different small utopias pointing in different directions) and united by a common goal, a common concern, i.e., a green utopia. In his most recent book, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life after Consumerism* (2022), Gregory Claeys presents a very relevant "Theory of Utopian Sociability" "both in fiction and in practice," which he successfully associates with green utopianism. As he states in his closing arguments, "Our way forward lies in sustainability. . . . We have everything

to lose, and everything to gain” (512–13). In fact, our age may well come to be called the Age of Utopia, as the green utopia is our best chance of escaping extinction.

Utopian thinking is inscribed in the Western identity. It has proved, in the past, to be a productive strategy. What we need to do is intensify the tension between the present and the future and confront skeptical minds with a simple question: Why do you think that the imagined future will not at all be possible? Utopias make us perceive possibilities we had never devised before. At a moment presided over by uncertainty, only by analyzing the different possibilities paved by a utopian imagination will we know how to productively react to the worst scenarios.

FÁTIMA VIEIRA is Vice-Rector for Culture and Full Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto, where she has been teaching since 1986. She was the Chair of the Utopian Studies Society / Europe from 2006 to 2016. In 2013, she received the Larry E. Hough Distinguished Service Award from the American and Canadian Society for Utopian Studies; in 2023, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Utopian Studies Society / Europe. She is currently the Coordinator of the University of Porto’s branch of CETAPS—Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies, where she is the leader of the research project “Mapping Utopianisms” and coordinates the ARUS Postdoc and Internationalisation Programme in Utopian Studies.

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Notes

1. Since I am relying on research I conducted over the past years, some of the arguments I am presenting in this text have been published before. I first described how utopian thinking works in “The Four Modes of Thinking Framed by Utopian Discursivity, Or Why We Need Utopia,” in *Utopias: Worlds and Frontiers of the Imaginary*, ed. Rosário Monteiro, Mário S. Ming Kong, and Maria João Pereira Neto (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2016), 27–33. I elaborated on the way contemporary thinking responds to Karl Popper’s detraction of utopia in “Utopias realistas para a construção social

européia” (Realistic utopias for the social construction of Europe), in *Utopias Europeias: O Poder da Imaginação e os Imperativos do Futuro* (European utopias: The power of imagination and the imperatives of the Future), ed. Álvaro Vasconcelos (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2021), 41–53. And I sustained the idea that utopia is one of the “connective structures” of our Western identity in “Da memória da utopia: A função autoonética dos programas comemorativos dos 500 anos da publicação de *Utopia*, de Thomas More, no Reino Unido, França e Portugal” (On the memory of Utopia: The autoonetic function of the commemorative programs of the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia* in the United Kingdom, France and Portugal), in *e-Letras com Vida: Revista de Humanidades e Artes*, no. 1 (2018): 149–63. This is the first time, however, that I have articulated these ideas in this way.

2. All translations from this edition are mine.
3. Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 25.
4. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 114.
5. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 116.
6. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 116.
7. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 115.
8. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 116.
9. Utopians are, as Andrew Hadfield has noted, “dislocated Europeans.” See *Literature, Travel and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance (1545–1625)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 7.
10. For a discussion of the concepts of the philosophical and the political utopias, see Adalberto Dias de Carvalho, “From Contemporary Utopias to Contemporaneity as a Utopia,” in *Utopia Matters: Theory, Politics, Literature and the Arts*, ed. Fátima Vieira and Marinela Freitas (Porto: U.Porto Press, 2005), 63–80.
11. Leon Wieseltier, “Crimes Against Humanities,” *The New Republic*, September 3, 2013. <https://newrepublic.com/article/114548/leon-wieseltier-responds-steven-pinkers-scientism>.
12. I am employing here the terminology defined by Jan Assmann. Although he does not refer to utopia when he elaborates on the concept of “autoonesis”—a sort of awareness that conditions the knowledge we have of ourselves during our life—I find it particularly productive to understand how utopian thinking is embedded in our identity. See J. Assmann, “Memory and Culture,” in *Memory: A History*, ed. D. Nikulin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 328–29.
13. Daniel Innerarity, *Uma Teoria da Democracia Complexa (A Theory of Complex Democracy)* (Lisboa: Ideias de Ler, 2021).
14. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 31.
15. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 14.
16. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 59.
17. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 16.
18. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 17.
19. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 20.

20. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 61.
21. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 35. Innerarity also argues that what is required is “a new synthesis that combines efficacy and the recognition of a satisfying democratic mode” (34). His interpretation of the crisis of democracy we experience today results from the fact that some democratic values are not “functioning in a balanced way” (35).
22. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 59.
23. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 25.
24. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 40.
25. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 70.
26. Edgar Morin, *La voie pour l'avenir de l'humanité* (The path for the future of humanity) (Paris: Fayard, 2011).
27. Morin, *The Path*, 253.
28. Edgar Morin, *Method: Towards a Study of Humankind. The Nature of Nature*, trans. and introduced by J. L. Roland Béranger (New York: Peter Lang, 1992). The original text, in French, was published in 1977.
29. Morin, *Method*, 77.
30. Morin, *Method*, 187.
31. Morin, *Method*, xl.
32. Edgar Morin elaborates on the operators (or principles) of complexity in several books and journal articles. For more information on the subject, see Edgar Morin, *Introdução ao Pensamento Complexo (Introduction to Complex Thought)*, trans. Eliane Lisboa (Porto Alegre: Ed. Sulina, 2005), esp. 68 and 74. See also “Le défi de la complexité” (The definition of complexity), in *Chimères: Revue des Schizoanalyses*, nos. 5–6 (1988): 13–15.
33. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 109.
34. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 116.
35. See Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 1–37; and Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Perseus, 2000), 195.
36. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 22.
37. Renato Janine Ribeiro presented this idea of the reduction of the scale of utopian projects at Forum 2050: Utopia-Prospetiva-Política (Forum 2050: Utopia-prospective-politics) held at the University of Porto on October 28, 2023.
38. Miguel Abensour, *Utopiques II: L'Homme est un animal utopique* (Utopics II: Man is a utopian animal) (Paris: Sens and Tonka, 2013), 205–6.
39. Sandrine Roudaut, *L'Utopie, Mode d'emploi. Modifier les comportements pour un monde soutenable et désirable* (Utopia, Instructions for use. Changing behaviors for a sustainable and desirable world) (Rezé: La Mer Salée, 2018), 12.
40. Roudaut, *L'Utopie*, 20–21.
41. Thierry Paquot, *Utopies et Utopistes* (Utopias and utopians) (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2007), 99.
42. Paquot, *Utopies et Utopistes*, 99.
43. Erik Olin Wright, *Utopies Réelles (Envisioning Real Utopias)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017), 9.

44. Oliver Piazza, *Découvrir l'Intelligence Collective* (Discovering collective intelligence) (Malakoff: InterEditions, 2018), ix.
45. As Wechsler explains, "when working in a group [individuals] tend to influence each other's thinking. The result is an interaction, explicable perhaps in terms of resonance phenomena analogous to those used to explain intellectual insight. . . . From this interaction, something 'new' in the creative sense emerges. Like necessity, cooperative thinking may be the mother of invention." David Wechsler, "Concept of collective intelligence," *American Psychologist*, no. 26, vol. 10 (1971), 907.
46. Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1999), 11.
47. Nicolas Dutant, *Les Secondes Vies de l'Utopie* (The second lives of utopia), *L'Humanité*, no. 22.362 (7 February 2018): 8–9.
48. Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun et al., "L'homme est un animal utopique. Entretien avec Miguel Abensour" (Man is a utopian animal), an interview with Miguel Abensour, *Mouvements* 3, nos. 45–46 (2006): 77.
49. Sandra Jovchelovitch and Hana Hawlina, "Utopias and World-Making: Time, Transformation and the Collective Imagination," in *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives From Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*, ed. Constance de Saint-Laurent, Sandra Obradović, and Kevin R. Carriere (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 131.
50. Jovchelovitch and Hawlina, "Utopias and World-Making," 132.
51. António Damásio, *O Erro de Descartes. Emoção. Razão e Cérebro Humano* (Descartes' error: Emotion, reason and the human brain) (Mem Martins: Edições Europa-América, 1995), 226.
52. Frédéric Lenoir, *La Guérison du Monde* (Healing the world) (Paris: Fayard, 2012), 292–94.
53. Ivan Illich, *La Convivialité* (Tools for Conviviality) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003 [1973]), 12, 24. The English version was also published in 1973 by Harper and Row.
54. Morin, *The Path*, 239.
55. Lenoir, *La Guérison du Monde*, 295.
56. On the concept of "happy decrease," see Maurizio Pallante, *La Décroissante Heureuse. La qualité de vie ne dépend pas du PIB* (The happy decrease: The quality of life does not depend on the GDP) (Jambes: Nature and Progrès Belgique, 2011), with a preface by Serge Latouche.
57. Innerarity, *Uma Teoria*, 113.
58. Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo) (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 2022).
59. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 13–14.
60. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 50.
61. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 11.
62. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 27.
63. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 14.
64. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 31–32.
65. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 33.
66. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 41.

67. Latour and Schultz, *Emergence*, 59–60.

68. As Gregory Claeys explains in *Utopianism for Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), “proto-ecological ideas” already appeared in utopian form in the late nineteenth century, “with Morris, in particular” (413), but we had to wait for Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) to witness “the most impressive utopian literary confrontation with environmentalism in the later twentieth century” (414). In the early 2000s, the “subgenre now known as climate fiction, or cli-fi” emerged, playing out “many possible scenarios” (416).

69. The environmental movement encompasses a wide range of issues, goals, and strategies, such as climate action, biodiversity and conservation, sustainable agriculture, pollution control, waste management, environmental justice, sustainable urban development, water conservation, renewable energies, and animal rights and welfare. Although there are several “green causes,” I am using here the concept in the singular, subscribing to Latour’s and Schultz’s idea that what we need to do is to emphasize the ecological concerns that unite the different stakeholders. As their memo *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class* argues, “for the ecological movement to gain consistency and autonomy . . . we need to acknowledge, embrace, understand and efficiently represent its project, gathering all the conflicts [that characterize it] in a unity of action that anyone may easily understand” (12).

70. Lisa Garforth, “Green Utopias: Imagining the Sustainable Society,” doctoral thesis, The University of York, Department of Sociology, 2002), 254, 273.

71. Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2022) is a good example of a hopeful yet pragmatic view of how humanity might navigate the challenges of climate change and construct a sustainable and equitable future.

72. Bregman Rutger, *Utopies Réalistes* (Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017), 13.

73. Roudaut, *L’Utopie*, 12.

74. Morin, *The Path*, 51–52.