Utopia as Replication

Fredric Jameson

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Hypertext Distro is a zine press distributing literature to help inform and inspire a practical utopian future.

Series I: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Unthinkable is a three-part release that examines our contemporary social and political reality—with all its crushing control mechanisms, mind-numbing distractions, and violent coercion—and asks the unthinkable: what here, of all places, can serve as the unexpected seeds of the utopian future to come? If there is a such thing as clear-eyed optimism, these essays channel it: every seemingly iron-clad political narrative is up for radical revision, and even the most "noxious phenomena" become fertile grounds for revolutionary utopian dreaming.

Contents

Introduction

Two weeks ago, my friends and I went to Wal-Mart. We were shopping for a party, and the store, the largest one of its kind in the town where I live, seemed to stretch endlessly before us, promising—well, everything. "We should walk down every aisle!" a friend exclaimed.

Half an hour later, after traversing the length of the store twice ("Oh shit, we didn't get solo cups…"), I encountered the same friend. She was sitting on a pile of giant bags of discount dog food in the middle of a major shopping-cart thoroughfare, face down in her phone, the whole scene palely illuminated by that ubiquitous fluorescent light. "Let me know when you find the others," she said, her voice sounding as exhausted as I felt. "I'm ready to get out of here."

"Is Wal-Mart utopia?" Fredric Jameson asks in *Utopia as Replication*, and—even ignoring for a moment the union busting, wage theft, near total transformation of small town America, environmental devastation, and demand of low prices so pathological that it must singlehandedly prop up some of the worst working conditions on the planet—I feel my reflexive answer must be: No, of course not. But then, I find myself returning again and again to the provocative (or in Jameson's words, even "perverse") premise of this essay, which challenges its reader to look anew at the worst excesses of 21st century capitalism, attempting to find an angle from which they can be interpreted radically differently.

In order to accomplish this, Jameson encourages us to practice utopian thinking as a *method*, a distinction I didn't appreciate my first time through *Utopia as Replication*. It's a subtle operation, and not a predictive one—that is, utopia as method does not seek to "read the outlines of the future within the present"—but instead imaginative, allowing us to vastly broaden our sense of the different possible positive futures. Following this line of thinking, it may not be accurate to say that Jameson's question is whether Wal-Mart is utopia, but instead something more like, "If we look *even* to Wal-Mart for features of a utopia to come, what do we find?" Taken together with Jameson's claim that works of utopian fiction tend not to make proposals or give blueprints so much as to demonstrate the limits of what we can imagine, I think we can begin to get a sense of what this formulation of utopia as a method is offering us. By trying to find utopia in the particularly thorny and unlikely places that he goes looking in this essay, Jameson is pushing against the limits of our collective utopian imagination, and, what's more, he's pushing in just those places that the most dire problems of our existing world demand.

> [I]t is apparently difficult for us to think of an impending future of size, quantity, overpopulation, and the like, except in dystopian terms. Indeed, the difficulties in *thinking quantity positively* must be added to our list of obstacles facing Utopian thought in our own time. (emphasis added)

Paired with Jameson's reevaluation of Wal-Mart is an attempt also to turn the utopian gaze onto population growth, or "the multitude." Our tendency to frame countless social ills as the inescapable outcome of overpopulation might just, Jameson contends, be a rehashed fear of the Other, now multiplied without end. To what degree have we inherited the bourgeois interpretation of any large undifferentiated group of people as "the mob"—unruly, indecent, dangerous? What would it mean to embrace the Earth's growing population as a "post-individualistic mass" in which to be (in Jameson's memorable language) "resubmerged"? One pictures, suddenly, a rich and diverse population teeming with life—and an invitation to join—instead of an undifferentiated hoard.

Taken together, Jameson's treatments of predatory monopolies and crowded cities ask us to reconsider which qualities it might be possible for a utopian society to contain, especially as these qualities relate to *scale*. Jameson, like so many of us, sympathizes with the idea that a preferred future would be characterized by degrowth, small-scale collectives, intentional communities, and so forth. But then he cuts this sympathy with warnings against backward-looking pastoralism that ignores the challenges of our present and instead "attempt[s] to return to a past that no longer exists." Jameson is demanding we use the world that we live in, complete with its billions of people and complicated supply chains, as our starting point for imagining a better future. Sure, small is beautiful, but we live in a world of extraordinary size and complexity. If our visions of utopia can't accommodate that, we may have nothing more to offer than "regressive nostalgia." These words of caution, sharp though they are, don't come from a place of cynicism. Rather, he seems to be daring us to be ever more expansive in our political thinking. And, as counterintuitive as it feels to say about an essay with such an (again) "perverse" premise, I feel I must say he is also daring us to be grounded: if your utopia requires that the population of Earth be 10% of what it is now, there's very little by way of effective political action that will bring it into being—or very little that is conscionable anyway. If, on the other hand, our utopian dreaming can somehow integrate the towering scale of the present, there may yet be many different unexplored avenues to a liberatory future.

I'll admit, I don't know that I understood his insistence on utopia as method my first time through because Fredric Jameson as a writer can be opaque, difficult, at times, even frustrating. Within the span of just a few lines at some point in this text there are references to Walter Benjamin, St. Augustine, Proust, Hegel, Heidegger, and Paolo Virno (who is himself referencing Hardt and Negri!). Add to this his occasional—though thankfully not really on display in this essay—obstinate and even grating Marxism, and I fear that all of a sudden I'm making a case against bothering to read Jameson after all. Instead, I ask that you take the fact that this zine has been produced at all as a testament to the strange and beautiful strength of the ideas on display in *Utopia as Replication* and as an encouragement that it is

worth grappling with even at its most dense. I once read Mark Fisher compare Jameson's writing to a drug-induced psychedelic experience, and, at the time, thinking of Jameson primarily as a stodgy academic, felt it must be hyperbole. Now I'm not so sure. This essay, acid-like, brings on moments of confusion and discomfort; hovers, tantalizingly, just above the line where abstraction can be brought down to earth; at last, surprises (and even delights?), with sudden turns of piercing lucidity, allowing for heretofore unexplored connections.

Finally, it needs to be said: Wal-Mart is not utopia. Jameson knew that as well as anyone else. But the exercise in perspective that is required to allow us to see it that way, even in fleeting moments, is a skill that we will need should we ever want to arrive at utopia, or even grasp in its direction.

Utopia as Replication

Editor's Note

The following essay was originally published in 2009 as Chapter 16 of *Valences of the Dialectic*, available from Verso Press.

After it had already been decided that *Utopia as Replication* should be the first essay of this new distro, but before much was done by way of design or layout, Fredric Jameson died on September 22, 2024, at the age of 90. He leaves us an immense amount of writing on everything from postmodernism to linguistics, architecture to science fiction.

Utopia as Replication

We ordinarily think of Utopia as a place, or if you like a non-place that looks like a place. How can a place be a method? Such is the conundrum with which I wanted to confront you, and maybe it has an easy answer. If we think of historically new forms of space—historically new forms of the city, for example—they might well offer new models for urbanists and in that sense constitute a kind of method. The first freeways in Los Angeles, for example, project a new system of elevated express highways superimposed on an older system of surface streets: that new structural difference might be thought to be a philosophical concept in its own right, a new one, in terms of which you might want to rethink this or that older urban center, or better still, this or that as yet undeveloped sunbelt agglomeration. For a time then, the Los Angeles concept is modern; whether it is Utopian is another matter altogether, although Los Angeles has also been a Utopia for many different kinds of people over the years. Here is Brecht on Hollywood:

> The village of Hollywood was planned according to the notion
> People in these parts have of heaven. In these parts
> They have come to the conclusion that God
> Requiring a heaven and a hell, didn't need to
> Plan two establishments but
> Just the one: heaven. It
> Serves the unprosperous, unsuccessful
> As hell.[1]

A true dialectic; a true unity of opposites! Will it be possible to untangle the negative from the positive in this particular Utopia, which has perhaps also, like all the other Utopias, never existed in the first place? Something like this will be our problem here; but we need to work through some further preliminaries before we get that far.

1

For the hypothetical example of a new kind of city that sets an example for the building or reorganization of other new kinds of cities to come is based on a conviction we may no longer be able to rely on, namely, the belief that progress is possible and that cities, for example, can be improved. What is Utopian is then identified with this now traditional and much criticized bourgeois idea of progress, and thus implicitly with teleology as such, with the grand narrative and the master plan, with the idea of a better future, a future not only dependent on our own will to bring it into being but also somehow inscribed in the very nature of things, waiting to be set free, lying in the deeper possibilities and potentialities of being, from which at length and with luck it may emerge. But does anyone believe in progress any longer? Even keeping to the realm of the spatial we have taken as an example, are the architects and urbanists still passionately at work on Utopian cities? The Utopian city was surely a staple of modernism: one thinks of everybody from Le Corbusier to Constant, from Rockefeller Center to the great Nazi or Soviet projects.[2] At a lower level, one thinks of urban renewal and of Robert Moses.[3] But modernism is over, and it is my impression that the postmodern city, west or east, north or south, does not encourage thoughts of progress or even improvement, let alone Utopian visions of the older kind; and this for the very good reason that the postmodern city seems to be in permanent crisis, and to be thought of, if at all, as a catastrophe rather than an opportunity. As far as space is concerned, the rich are withdrawing ever more urgently into their gated communities and their fortified enclosures; the middle classes are tirelessly engaged in covering the last vestiges of nature with acres of identical development homes; while the poor, pouring in from the former countryside, swell the makeshift outskirts with a population explosion so irrepressible

that in a few years none of the ten largest cities on the globe will include the familiar First-World metropolises any longer. Some of the great dystopias of the past—I think of John Brunner's novels from the early 1970s[4]—centered on what was then the alleged nightmare of overpopulation; but that was a modernist nightmare, and what we confront today is perhaps not a dystopia either, but rather a certainty lived in a rather different way and with a properly postmodern ambivalence; which at any rate distinctly forecloses the possibility of progress or of solutions.

Indeed, it suffices to think of the four fundamental threats to the survival of the human race today—ecological catastrophe, worldwide poverty and famine, structural unemployment on a global scale, and the seemingly uncontrollable traffic in armaments of all kinds, including smart bombs and unmanned drones (in armaments, along with pharmaceuticals, good and bad, progress does apparently still exist!)—it suffices to think of these four trends alone (leaving pandemics, police states, race wars, and drugs out of the picture) for us to realize that in each of these areas no serious counterforce exists anywhere in the world, and certainly not in the United States, which is itself the cause of most of them.

Under these circumstances, the last gasp of a properly Utopian vision, the last attempt at a Utopian forecast of the future transfigured, was a rather perverse one, I mean so-called free market fundamentalism as it seized the moment of globalization to predict the rising of all boats and the wonder-working miraculous powers of worldwide unregulated global markets. But this was a Utopia which, drawing on the unconscious operations of Adam Smith's invisible hand, and in sharp contrast to the hyperconsciousness of the Utopian "intentional community," gambled everything on the unintentionality of its universal panacea, for which any number of populations around the globe proved unwilling to wait. Nor did this waning Utopian effort recover much strength by shifting to a different code, from economics to politics, and rebaptizing the freedom of the market as the freedom of democracy. To that degree, as a political slogan, the banner of Utopia has been passed to the critics and the enemies of free-market globalization and has become the unifying rallying cry or "empty signifier"[5] of all those varied new political forces who are

trying to imagine how another world might be possible.

Yet an empty signifier seems far enough away from the Utopian visions with which we are familiar from More and Plato on down, and this is probably the right moment to say a word about the long book on Utopias I have just published and of which this essay is something of a reconsideration, if not a supplement. What has tended to perplex readers of this book, *Archaeologies of the Future*,[6] if not to annoy them, is not only the repeated insistence on the form rather than the content of Utopias, something that would on the face of it scarcely be unusual in literary criticism, no matter how deplorable, but also another thesis more likely to catch the unwary reader up short, namely the repeated insistence that what is important in a Utopia is not what can be positively imagined and proposed, but rather what is not imaginable and not conceivable. Utopia, I argue, is not a representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe). Is this then a failure of imagination, or is it rather simply a fundamental skepticism about the possibilities of change as such, no matter how attractive our visions of what it would be desirable to change into? Do we not here touch on what has come to be called cynical reason, rather than the impoverishment of our own sense of the future, or the waning of the Utopian impulse itself? Cynical reason, as the concept has evolved far beyond what Peter Sloterdijk named so many years ago,[7] can be characterized as something like the inversion of political apathy. It knows everything about our own society, everything that is wrong with late capitalism, all the structural toxicities of the system, and yet it declines indignation, in a kind of impotent lucidity which may not even be bad faith. It cannot be shocked or scandalized, as the privileged were able to be at earlier moments of the market system; nor is the deconcealment of this system, its analysis and functional demonstration in the light of day, any longer effective in compelling critical reactions or motivations. We may say all this in terms of ideology as well: if that word has fallen on hard times, it is perhaps because in a sense there is no longer any false consciousness, no longer any need to disguise the workings of the system and its various

programs in terms of idealistic or altruistic rationalizations; so that the unmasking of those rationalizations, the primordial gesture of debunking and of exposure, no longer seems necessary.

The waning of Utopias is thus a conjuncture between all these developments: a weakening of historicity or of the sense of the future; a conviction that no fundamental change is any longer possible, however desirable; and cynical reason as such. To which we might add that it is the sheer power of excess money accumulated since the last great world war, which keeps the system in place everywhere, reinforcing its institutions and its armed forces. Or maybe we should also adduce yet a different kind of factor, one of psychological conditioning—namely that omnipresent consumerism which, having become an end in itself, is transforming the daily life of the advanced countries in such a way as to suggest that the Utopianism of multiple desires and consumption is here already and needs no further supplement.

So much for the limits on our capacity to imagine Utopia as such, and for what it tells us about a present in which we cannot any longer envision that future. But it would clearly be wrong to say that the representational Utopia has everywhere today disappeared; and another significant critique of my book suggested that I failed to do my duty as a Utopian insomuch as I omitted any mention of these surviving Utopian visions, which mostly center on the anti- or post-communist conviction that small is beautiful, or even that growth is undesirable, that the self-organization of communities is the fundamental condition of Utopian life, and that even with large-scale industry the first priority is self-management and cooperation: in other words, that what is essential in Utopianism is not the ingenious economic scheme (such as the abolition of money, for example) so much as it is collectivity as such, the primacy of the social bond over the individualistic and the competitive impulses.

The great Utopias of the 1960s (and 1970s) tended to stage such visions in terms of race and gender: thus we have the unforgettable image of male breast-feeding in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and the ideal (in Le Guin as well) of the villages of the First Americans. Later on, at a different historical moment, in France, at the moment of the socialist electoral victory of 1981, we

have Jacques Attali's image of free collective tool shops, where anyone in the neighborhood can find the materials to repair, to rebuild, to transform space; along with the periodic festivals that, as in Rousseau, reaffirm the collective project itself.[8] In our own time, meanwhile, with the resurgence of anarchism, a variety of vivid representations of workers' self-management restore the sense of class to these concerns, as in Naomi Klein's admirable film *The Take*, about the seizure of a factory in Argentina by workers who have been abandoned by their bankrupt owner. Such intermittent visions of the structural transformation of the shopfloor itself have energized and revitalized political action from Marx's lectures on the Commune all the way to the program of Yugoslavian autogestion and to *soixante-huitard* films like *Coup pour coup* (Marin Karmitz, 1972); and they clearly persist in America yesterday and today.

It is not appropriate to raise practical political objections to these enclave Utopias, always threatened by the hegemony of private business and monopoly all around them, and at the mercy of distribution as well, not to speak of the dominant legal system. I would rather speak of the genre of the revolutionary idyll: and indeed, in his *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1960), William Empson went a long way towards assimilating socialist realism in general to such a form, which, with its shepherds and shepherdesses and its rural peacefulness and fulfillment, seems to have died out everywhere in the literature of the bourgeois age as such. William Morris famously subtitled his great Utopia "an epoch of rest": and this is indeed what, on an aesthetic level, the idyll or the pastoral promises as a genre: relief from the frenzied anxieties of the actual social world, a glimpse into a place of stillness and of transfigured human nature, of the transformations of the social relations we know today into what Brecht memorably called "friendliness." To that degree, what I've been calling representational Utopias today do seem to take the form of the idyll or the pastoral; and assuredly we do need to recover the significance of these ancient genres and their value and usefulness in an age in which the very psyche and the unconscious have been so thoroughly colonized by addictive frenzy and commotion, compulsiveness and frustration.

So I do see a place for the representational Utopia, and even a political function for it: as I tried to argue in *Archaeologies*, these

seemingly peaceful images are also, in and of themselves, violent ruptures with what is, breaks that destabilize our stereotypes of a future that is the same as our own present, interventions that interrupt the reproduction of the system in habit and in ideological consent and institute that fissure, however minimal and initially little more than a hairline fracture, through which another picture of the future and another system of temporality altogether might emerge.

Yet today I also want to project a different way of invoking that future and to propose a different function for the Utopian; and in a sense it is premised on the distinction I proposed at the very beginning of my book between the Utopian program and the Utopian impulse, between Utopian planners and Utopian interpreters, so to speak, or if you like, between More and Fourier or Ernst Bloch. The Utopian program, which aims at the realization of a Utopia, can be as modest or as ambitious as one wants: it can range from a whole social revolution, on the national or even the world scale, all the way down to the designing of the uniquely Utopian space of a single building or garden: what all have in common, however, besides the Utopian transformation of reality itself, is that closure or enclave structure which all Utopias must seemingly confront one way or another. These Utopian spaces are thus on whatever scale totalities; they are symbolic of a world transformed; as such they must posit limits, boundaries between the Utopian and the non-Utopian; and it is of course with such limits and with such enclave structure that any serious critique of Utopia will begin.

The interpretation of the Utopian impulse, however, necessarily deals with fragments: it is not symbolic but allegorical: it does not correspond to a plan or to Utopian praxis, it expresses Utopian desire and invests it in a variety of unexpected and disguised, concealed, distorted ways. The Utopian impulse therefore calls for a hermeneutic: for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of Utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real; a theorization and interpretation of unconscious Utopian investments in realities large or small, which may in themselves be far from Utopian in their actuality. The premise here is then that the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish-fulfillments and Utopian gratifications; indeed,

I have often used the example of the humble aspirin as the unwitting bearer of the most extravagant longings for immortality and for the transfiguration of the body.

2

This kind of Utopian analysis, however, may seem to foreground the subject and subjectivity and to risk transforming the Utopian impulse itself into inconsequential projections which carry no historical weight and imply no practical consequences for the social world as such. This objection seems to me to be overstated to the degree to which human desire is itself constitutive of the collective project and of the historical construction of social formations, within the limits imposed by objective conditions of possibility. Still, it may be best to lay in place a view of those objective conditions before continuing; and to outline a model of the objective possibilities of Utopian social transformation against which the interpretations in terms of some putative Utopian impulse might be measured.

Indeed we might well want to argue that the Marxian view of historical change combines both these forms of Utopian thinking: for it can be seen as a practical project as well as a space of the investment of unconscious forces. The old tension in Marxism between voluntarism and fatalism finds its origins here, in this twin or superimposed Utopian perspective. A Marxist politics is a Utopian project or program for transforming the world, and replacing a capitalist mode of production with a radically different one. But it is also a conception of historical dynamics in which it is posited that the whole new world is also objectively in emergence all around us, without our necessarily at once perceiving it; so that alongside our conscious praxis and our strategies for producing change, we may also take a more receptive and interpretive stance in which, with the proper instruments and registering apparatus, we may detect the allegorical stirrings of a different state of things, the imperceptible and even immemorial ripenings of the seeds of time, the subliminal and subcutaneous eruptions of whole new forms of life and social relations.

At first this second model of temporality is expressed by Marx

through the most banal of essential mysteries, which no longer carries much figural power for us. "No social order ever disappears," he tells us in 1859, "before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed"—so far, so good—and it is an observation which was not sufficiently meditated upon in the 80s and 90s of the last century. And then he goes on: "and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society."[9] Yet this is so far nothing but a metaphor; and childbirth does not necessarily seem to be the best figure for dynamics of the Utopian impulse as Bloch described it, or for the allegories of Utopian investment and the Utopian libido, the hidden traces and signs of Utopianism that lie in wait in the world about us, like Rimbaud's flowers that begin to observe us as we pass by.

Meanwhile, we need to add that both Marx and Lenin wrote specifically Utopian works, both of them based on the Paris Commune. Marx's lectures on the commune ("The Civil War in France") are indeed something like a blueprint for a Utopian democracy beyond the structures of bourgeois parliamentarianism. Lenin's *State and Revolution* then expands on this model of direct democracy, famously breaking off in August 1917 with the apologetic remark that it is more entertaining to make a revolution than to write about one. Both of these texts however, deal with political rather than economic Utopias, and it is clearly the latter that poses the greatest conceptual difficulties for us today.

To be sure, the anarchist strain in Marx is not to be underestimated. When, early in *Capital*, he asks us "to imagine, for a change, an association [*Verein*] of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labor-power in full self-awareness as one single social labor force,"[10] it is still not clear whether this is not merely some expanded collective "Robinsonade" or Robinson Crusoe fantasy, nor indeed whether we are not still at the stage of petty commodity production, as in yeoman farming or the Germanic mode of production.

The decisive statement will come later on, and will, as Marx himself puts it, "flirt with the Hegelian dialectic":

> The capitalist mode of appropriation, which springs from the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of its proprietor [a reference to the yeoman system I just mentioned]. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not reestablish private property, but it does indeed establish individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: namely cooperation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labour itself. (*Cap*, 929)

Note that childbirth still persists somewhere in these figures, which mean to describe "the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor"—in other words, what the Frankfurt School significantly called "*Vergesellschaftung*" ("societalization") in a variety of contexts (and what Italian thinkers today, following the Marx of the *Grundrisse*, call "General Intellect"[11]). Still, not only does the metaphor of pregnancy not go away, the child is actually born in this paragraph! The centralization and socialization just mentioned are now a few lines later in a famous peroration declared "incompatible with their capitalist integument" (in other terms, the new infrastructure becoming incompatible with the older superstructures): "This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated." This is very much a figural climax, or the realization of several different kinds of figures all at once (although not the ones we will shortly be concerned with). What is at stake in the account generally is, of course, the growth of monopoly; and it will actually be a monopoly which I perversely wish to identify as a Utopian phenomenon. But before I do so, it seems to me appropriate to quote a little more of Marx's description of the approach of what Lenin will then theorize as capitalism's second (or "highest") stage, as it seems to me extraordinarily contemporary and powerfully relevant for our own third stage of capitalism, what we generally call globalization:

> This expropriation is accomplished through the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, through the

> centralization of capitals. One capitalist always strikes down many others. Hand in hand with this centralization, or this expropriation of many capitalists by a few, other developments take place on an ever-increasing scale, such as the growth of the cooperative form of the labour process, the conscious technical application of science, the planned exploitation of the soil, the transformation of the means of labour into forms in which they can only be used in common, the economizing of all means of production by their use as the means of production of combined, socialized labour, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market, and, with this, the growth of the international character of the capitalist regime. Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows. (*Cap*, 929)

It is then appropriate to prolong this standard Marxian picture of the transition from capitalism to socialism with Lenin's analyses, which omit the image of childbirth but insist even more vehemently on the ways in which the future society is "maturing within" the present one—in the form, not only of the socialization of labor (combination, unionization, etc.) but above all monopoly. Indeed, we are here at a certain watershed in radical or socialist thinking: where a progressive bourgeoisie seeks to deal with monopoly by breaking up the great corporations into smaller ones again, in order to permit the return of a healthier competition; and where anarchism denounces concentration as a figure for the state itself, which is to be destroyed at all costs and wherever its power appears—for Lenin the "withering away of the state" consists very specifically in the seizure of the monopolies and in their management by the producers themselves, which at one stroke does away not only with the managerial class but also with the political state and bureaucracy that runs its affairs. Take, for example, the following passage on finance capital:

> Capitalism has created an accounting *apparatus* in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers' societies, and office employees unions. *Without big banks socialism would be impossible* … The big banks are "state apparatus" which we *need* to bring about socialism, and which we *take ready-made* from capitalism; our task

> here is merely to *lop off* what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it *even bigger*, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality … We can "lay hold of " and "set in motion" this "state apparatus" (which is not fully a state apparatus under capitalism, but which will be so with us, under socialism) at one stroke, by a single decree.[12]

Now I have quoted these very representative passages at some length because their very defense of size and monopoly is shocking today, both on the right and on the left, for admirers of free markets as well as for those who believe that "small is beautiful" and that self-organization is the key to economic democracy. I often share these sympathies, and do not particularly mean to take a position here; but I would observe that in both cases—regulation and the breaking up of monopolies in the name of business competition on the one hand, and the return to smaller communities and collectivities on the other—we have to do with historical regression and the attempt to return to a past that no longer exists. But it is apparently difficult for us to think of an impending future of size, quantity, overpopulation, and the like, except in dystopian terms. Indeed, the difficulties in thinking quantity positively must be added to our list of obstacles facing Utopian thought in our own time.

3

This is the point at which I wish to propose a model for Utopian analysis that might be taken as a kind of synthesis of these two subjective and objective approaches. I want to develop two examples of this kind of interpretation, which will be what I want to identify, not as the Utopian method as such, but at least as one possible method among others: and these examples will draw on history and theory respectively. My theoretical example will be drawn from the now burgeoning field of manifestos for a politics of the "multitude"; my historical example will however propose a new institutional candidate for the function of Utopian allegory and that is the phenomenon called Wal-Mart. I trust that this proposal will be even more scandalous than Lenin's celebration of monopoly, all the more so since information research tells us that an enormous percentage of

Wal-Mart shoppers are themselves sharply critical and even negative about this corporation (and that the critics also shop there[13]). The negative criticisms I think everyone knows: a new Wal-Mart drives local businesses under and reduces available jobs; Wal-Mart's own jobs scarcely pay a living wage, offer no benefits or health insurance; the company is anti-union (except in China); it hires illegal immigrants and increasingly emphasizes part-time work; it drives American business abroad and also itself promotes sweat shops and child labor outside the country; it is ruthless in its practices (mostly secret), exercises a reign of terror over its own suppliers, destroys whole ecologies abroad and whole communities here in the US, it locks its own employees in at night, etc., etc. The picture is unappetizing, and the prospects for the future—Wal-Mart is already the largest company, not only in the US but in the world!—are positively frightening and even, particularly if you have a bent for conspiracy theory, dystopian in the extreme. Here, rather than in the trusts and monopolies of Theodore Roosevelt's time, is the true embodiment of the Marxist-Leninist prophecy of concentration and the monopoly tendency of late capitalism; yet as its commentators observe, the emergence of this entity—like a new virus, or a new species—was not only unexpected but also theoretically unparalleled and resistant to current categories of economic, political and social thinking:

> Wal-Mart is something utterly new … carefully disguised as something ordinary, familiar, even prosaic … Yes, Wal-Mart plays by the rules, but perhaps the most important part of the Wal-Mart effect is that the rules are antiquated … At the moment, we are incapable as a society of understanding Wal-Mart because we haven't equipped ourselves to manage it. (*WME*, 221–222)

What we must add to this, however, is the reminder that there is a type of thinking which can deal with this strange new phenomenon lucidly, at the same time that it explains why traditional thought is unable to do so: and that is the thinking called the dialectic. Consider the following analysis:

> That kind of dominance at both ends of the spectrum—dominance across a huge range of merchandise and dominance of geographical

> consumer markets—means that market capitalism is being strangled with the kind of slow inexorability of a boa constrictor. (*WME*, 234)

And if this sounds like mere journalistic rhetoric, we have the observation of a nameless CEO who flatly affirms of Wal-Mart—"they have killed free-market capitalism in America" (*WME*, 233). But what is this peculiar contradiction but the contemporary version of what Marx called the negation of the negation? Wal-Mart is then not an aberration or an exception, but rather the purest expression of that dynamic of capitalism which devours itself, which abolishes the market by means of the market itself.

This dialectical character of the new reality Wal-Mart represents is also very much the source of the ambivalence universally felt about this business operation, whose capacity to reduce inflation and to hold down or even lower prices and to make life affordable for the poorest Americans is also the very source of their poverty and the prime mover in the dissolution of American industrial productivity and the irrevocable destruction of the American small town. But this is the historically unique and dialectical dynamic of capitalism itself as a system, as Marx and Engels describe it in the *Manifesto* in pages which some have taken as a delirious celebration of the powers of the new mode of production and others as the ultimate moral judgment on it. But the dialectic is not moral in that sense: and what Marx and Engels identify is the simultaneity of "more and more colossal productive forces than all preceding generations together" along with the most destructive negativity ever unleashed ("all that is solid melts into air"). The dialectic is an injunction to think the negative and the positive together at one and the same time, in the unity of a single thought, there where moralizing wants to have the luxury of condemning this evil without particularly imagining anything else in its place.

So it is that Wal-Mart is celebrated as the ultimate in democracy as well as in efficiency: streamlined organization that ruthlessly strips away all unnecessary frills and waste and that disciplines its bureaucracy into a class as admirable as the Prussian state or the great movement of *instituteurs* in the late nineteenth-century French lay education, or even the dreams of a streamlined Soviet system. New

desires are encouraged and satisfied as richly as the theoreticians of the 1960s (and also Marx himself) predicted, and the problems of distribution are triumphantly addressed in all kinds of new technological innovations.

I enumerate a few of the latter: on the one (informational) hand, there is the evolution of the UPC or the so-called bar code, one of what Hosoya and Schaeffer call "bit structures," and which in general they define as "a new infrastructure in the city, providing unprecedented synchronization and organization in seeming formlessness. Bit structures reorganize the pattern of the city and allow its destabilization."[14] The bar code, meanwhile "reverses the balance of power between retailer and distributor or manufacturer," via the introduction, in the early 1970s, of "a whole new generation of electronic cash registers," which were now able to process the mass of information registered on the bar code from inventory to customer preferences: technological innovation pioneered, according to the oldest logic of capitalism, "as a remedy to a time of stagnation that forced competing manufacturers to cooperate."[15] The Utopian features of the bar code project it as something like the equivalent, in the world of commodities, of the internet among human subjects; and the reversal of dominance from production to distribution somewhat parallels the emergence of the ideologies of democracy in the social realm.

Yet on the side of the material object, there is another relevant development, as fundamental as this one but quite different from it, and that is the invention and emergence of containerization as a revolution in transport, whose multiple effects we cannot explore further here.[16] This spatial innovation would be something like the response to demography and overpopulation in the social realm, and also leads us on into a dialectic of quantity and quality. Indeed, both these ends of the so-called "supply chain" demand philosophical conceptualization and stand as the mediation between production and distribution and the virtual abolition of an opposition between distribution and consumption.

Meanwhile the anarchy of capitalism and the market has been overcome and the necessities of life have been provided for an increasingly desperate and impoverished public, exploited by

its government and its big businesses over whom it is scarcely able to exercise any political control any longer. Anyone who does not appreciate this historic originality of Wal-Mart and its strengths and accomplishments is really not up to the discussion; meanwhile—and I say this for the Left as well—there is an aesthetic appreciation to be demanded for this achievement, an appreciation of the type Brecht reserved for one of his favorite books, Gustavus Myers's *History of the Great American Fortunes*, or which we might today be willing to grant the manipulations and strategies of those arch-criminals the Russian oligarchs. But such admiration and positive judgment must be accompanied by the absolute condemnation that completes the dialectical ambivalence we bring to this historical phenomenon. Nor is Wal-Mart itself wholly oblivious to its own ambivalence: after avoiding journalists altogether for fear of letting slip damaging facts, its publicity people now come to expect mixed feelings in which the harshest criticism will inevitably be accompanied by celebratory concessions (*WME*, 145–146).

I am tempted to add something about the ambivalence of the dialectic itself, particularly with respect to technological innovation. It is enough to recall the admiration of Lenin and Gramsci for Taylorism and Fordism to be perplexed at this weakness of revolutionaries for what is most exploitative and dehumanizing in the working life of capitalism: but this is precisely what is meant by the Utopian here, namely that what is currently negative can also be imagined as positive in that immense changing of the valences which is the Utopian future. And this is the way I want us to consider Wal-Mart, however briefly: namely, as a thought experiment—not, after Lenin's crude but practical fashion as an institution faced with which (after the revolution) we can "lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus," but rather as what Raymond Williams called the emergent, as opposed to the residual—the shape of a Utopian future looming through the mist, which we must seize as an opportunity to exercise the Utopian imagination more fully, rather than an occasion for moralizing judgments or regressive nostalgia.

I now need briefly to address two further but extremely pertinent objections to this paradoxical affirmation, before moving on to a Utopian exercise of a rather different kind. First, it will be said

that Wal-Mart may be a model of distribution but it can scarcely be said to be a model of production in the strict sense, however much we might talk of the production of distribution, etc. This cuts to the very heart of our socioeconomic contradictions: one face of which is structural unemployment, the other the definitive outstripping (dated in the US from 2003) of "productive" employment by retail employment. (Computerization and information would also have to be included in these new contradictory structures, and I think it is evident that Wal-Mart's special kind of success is dependent on computers and would have been impossible before them.) I want to look at this from the perspective of the dictatorship this retail company exercises over its productive suppliers (or "partners," as Wal-Mart likes to call them); it is a devastating power, in which the giant firm is able to force its suppliers into outsourcing, into a reduction in quality of materials and product, or even to drive them out of business altogether. It is worth noting that this power could be exercised in exactly the opposite way: "using its enormous purchasing power," Fishman suggests, "not just to raise the standard of living for its customers, but also for its suppliers"(*WME*, 181). (The example is the proposal that Wal-Mart impose ecological standards on the Chilean salmon fisheries it has itself virtually created; one might imagine a similar positive dictatorship over working conditions and labor relations.) It is a Utopian suggestion, to the degree to which the valences of this power—from retail monopoly to the various producers—could be reversed without structural change.

But I also want to suggest that—as at the end of Eisenstein's *Old and New* (1929, a.k.a. *The General Line*), where the aviator and the peasant swap roles, the worker becoming an agriculturist and vice versa—it seems possible that the new system offers a chance to suppress this opposition altogether— this binary tension between production and distribution, which we do not seem to be able to think our way out of—and to imagine a wholly new set of categories: not to abandon production and the categories of class in favor of consumption or information, but rather to lift it into a new and more complex concept, about which we can no longer speculate here.

The other objection has to do with the profit motive itself: after all, the very driving force of Wal-Mart is that it is a capitalist

industry, and the failures of socialism all seemed to lie in the slackness encouraged by the command economy, in which corruption, favoritism, nepotism, or sheer research ignorance led to the scandals in which, famously, the basements of the GUM were filled with illimitable quantities of identical lampshades that no one wanted to buy. All socialism seemed to be able to offer as a counterforce to the profit motive were the famous "moral incentives" Che invoked in Cuba, which require repeated mobilizations and exhausting campaigns, in order to reinvigorate failing supplies of socialist enthusiasm.

What has to be observed here is that Wal-Mart is also driven by moral incentives: the secret of its success is not profit but pricing, the shaving off of the final pennies, so fatal to any number of its suppliers. "Sam valued every penny," observes one of the founder's colleagues (*WME*, 30), and it is a fateful sentence: for this imperative—"always low prices"—is in fact driven by the most fundamental motive of all, the one Max Weber described as the "protestant ethic," a return to that thrift and obsessive frugality which characterized the first great moment of the system and which is recaptured (with or without its religious component) in the hagiography of Sam Walton and the heroic saga of his company. Perhaps, then, even the explanatory appeal to the profit motive is essentialist and part of an ideology of human nature itself projected from out of the necessities of the initial construction of capitalism. It should be added that Marxism is not psychologically reductive in an essentialist way, and asserts, not determinism by greed or acquisitiveness, but rather the determination by the system or mode of production, each of which produces and constructs its own historical version of what it would be like to call human nature.

4

Now I need to describe with more precision the theory and practice of this new type of Utopia my account of Wal-Mart seems to presuppose. Indeed, the discussion will assert that theoretical approaches to it are sometimes to be found in positions explicitly characterized as "anti-Utopian." This is the case with our next

example, which will turn on the now well-known concept of the multitude, as developed (borrowing a term of Spinoza) by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books *Empire* and *Multitude*. It is worth noting that their own specific denunciations of Utopianism, while consistent with a good deal of poststructuralist doctrine, have the immediate political and historical reference of Stalinism and of the historic Communist Parties coming out of the Leninist tradition (despite the latter's own internal critique of Utopianism from Lenin on). Here Utopia is identified with slogans of historical inevitability and of "tomorrows that sing," the sacrifice of present generations for some future Utopian state, and particularly with the party structure.

As for the concept of multitude itself, it seems to me, however flawed, to constitute an attempt to substitute a new and more serviceable substitute for older theorizations of collectivity and collective agents, such as those of "the people" (in populism) and of social class (in workerisms that excluded gender and race, and even sometimes the peasantry, from their narrow political definitions). Every new approach to collectivity is on my view worth welcoming in an atomized and individualistic society (but I will come back to individualism in a moment). The older collective concepts were also clearly flawed in their own very different ways; at the same time that they expressed the social reality of the emergence of new forms of collective agents or subjects. But I will not here enter the debate on "multitude," since I am rather trying to identify a methodological innovation. In order to do so, however, I will not draw on the massive and complex books of Hardt and Negri, but rather on a briefer intervention in this discussion, a luminous exposition of some of the consequences of this new theoretical position (which is by now a new tradition) by one of the most remarkable philosophical minds of the era, the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, still too little known over here.

His book, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, may be read as a series of notes on the changes the concept of multitude should be expected to bring to the phenomenology of everyday life in postmodernity (not his word) and indeed to our attitudes towards and evaluations of those changes. I will not touch on all of his themes and intentions here, but essentially on the book's revision of certain standard

Heideggerian positions which are still very much with us today, in liberal as well as in conservative culture, and indeed in Western bourgeois daily life in general.

You will recall that Heidegger called for a purgation of the decadent habits of bourgeois comfort by way of anxiety and the fear of death; and that he saw modern life as dominated by inauthenticity and urban collectivity. You may also remember the four forms of degradation into which *Dasein*'s daily life is alienated in the daily life of modernity, namely, "das Gerede, die Neugier, die Zweideutigkeit das Verfallen,"[17] or, as the translations of *Sein und Zeit* have it, "idle talk, curiosity, ambiguity, and falling" (or "falling prey"). It is essentially these categories, and the very concept of inauthenticity, that Virno has it in mind to revise (leaving Nazism and the later theories of technology out of it, as we will also do).

What is important to grasp, however, is that these diagnoses of "modernity" are not specific to Heidegger; they are part and parcel of a whole conservative and antimodernist ideology embraced by non-leftist intellectuals across the board in the 1920s, from T. S. Eliot to José Ortega y Gassett, by traditionalists from China to America. This ideology expresses a horror of the new industrial city with its new working and white collar classes, its mass culture and its public sphere, its standardization and its parliamentary systems; and it often implies a nostalgia for the older agriculturalist ways of life, as in the American "Fugitives," in the idealization of English yeoman farmers or in the Heideggerian "*Feldweg*." It is unnecessary to add that this ideology is informed by an abiding fear of socialism or communism, and that the corporatisms that dominate the political life of the 1930s, from Roosevelt's New Deal to Stalin's Five Year Plans, from Nazism and Italian fascism to Fabian social democracy, are from this perspective to be seen as so many compromises with such traditionalism as it resists the so-called modernities of the age of so-called "mass man."

Those compromises have, to be sure, now for the most part entered history (leaving contemporary social democracy in some disarray, it may be added, in a situation in which free market fundamentalism is so far really the only serviceable new practical-political ideology); but I want to argue that the general social

attitudes of the older conservative ideology I have just outlined (and of which Heidegger is only the most extraordinary philosophical theorist) are still largely with us and still intellectually and ideologically operative.

I will do so by returning to the issue of representational Utopias I raised earlier. Indeed, the standard way of dealing with the social anxieties that inform the old anti-modernist ideology has been to accept it while assuring us that in whatever future "more perfect society" all of the negative features it enumerates will have been corrected. Thus, in these pastorals, there will be no social insecurity to generate anxiety (and even death will be postponed), idle gossip will presumably be replaced by a purified language and by genuine human relationships, morbid curiosity by a certain healthy distance from others as well as an enlightened awareness of our position in the social totality, "ambiguity" (by which Heidegger means the lies and propaganda of mass culture and the public sphere) will be cured by our more authentic relationships to the project and to work and action in general; and *Verfallenheit* (our loss of self in the public dimension of the *man*, or the inauthenticity of "mass man") will be replaced by some more genuine individualism and a more authentic isolation of the self in its own existential concerns and commitments. Now these are all no doubt excellent and desirable developments; but it is not hard to see that they are also essentially reactive: that is to say, they constitute so many obedient replacements of the reigning negative terms by their positive opposites. But this very reactivity of the Heideggerian response tends to confirm the priority of the negative diagnosis in the first place.

It may also be confirmed by current dystopian visions in which the multidimensional fear of all those unknown others who constitute "society" beyond my immediate circle of acquaintances is once again, under postmodern or globalized conditions, concentrated into the fear of multiplicity and overpopulation. Clearly an ancient tradition of satire from the Hebrew prophets onward rehearsed this horror of the collective other in the form of the denunciation of a sinful or fallen society; just as philosophical speculations such as Descartes' assimilation of the other to the automaton expressed the scandal in a different way from its theological version (the stream

of soulless employees going to work across London Bridge in *The Waste Land*) or from journalistic "culture critiques" of alienation. The Science Fiction of the 1960s, particularly with John Brunner's classic tetralogy, gave non-ideological expression to various figures of social crisis, dissolution, or degradation; while the image of soulless clones or brainwashed zombies expressed some more overt denunciation of the unreformable stupidity of the modern democratic masses. Yet even in these expressions of crisis the symptoms (pollution, atomic war, urban crime, the "degradation" of mass culture, standardization, impoverishment, unemployment, predominance of the service sector, etc., etc.) remained differentiated and gave rise each to a different kind of monitory representation. It is only in postmodernity and globalization, with the world population explosion, the desertion of the countryside and the growth of the mega-city, global warming and ecological catastrophe, the proliferation of urban guerrilla warfare, the financial collapse of the welfare state, the universal emergence of small group politics of all kinds, that these phenomena have seemed to fold back into each other around the primary cause (if that is the right category to use) of the scandal of multiplicity and of what is generally referred to as overpopulation, or in other words, the definitive appearance of the Other in multiple forms and as sheer quantity or number. Predictably, the representational response to this crystallization has taken the twin positive and negative forms of a vision of the "sprawl," as a seemingly dystopian urbanization of enormous sectors of the older global landscape, or of a retreat into precisely those pastoral visions of smaller collectivities evoked above. Few have been those who, like Rem Koolhaas, with his embrace of a "culture of congestion"[18] and his projection of new and positive spaces within which overpopulation can joyously flourish, have seized on a strategy of changing the valences and of converting the gloomy indices of the pessimistic diagnosis into vital promises of some newly emergent historical reality to be welcomed rather than lamented.

It is indeed just such a strategy that I will want to find at work in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, whose themes may now be briefly (and incompletely) passed in review. For the insecurities of both fear and anxiety (sharply differentiated in Heidegger), Virno substitutes a wholesale attack on bourgeois security as such, to which

we will return, only observing that security is also a spatial concept (related to Heideggerian "dwelling") and posits some initial physical separation from my neighbor which is also ideologically interrelated with concepts of property (in that sense, only the rich are truly secure, in their gated communities and their carefully policed and patrolled estates, whose function lies in occulting and repressing the existential fact of collectivity itself). The operator of the transvaluation recommended here, from anxiety to affirmation, is the Kantian notion of the sublime, which incorporates fear within its very *jouissance*; yet the practical consequences of such a transformation will also transform the pathos of Heideggerian homelessness into the animation of Deleuzian nomadism, as we shall see.

Nomadism, however, would also seem to characterize contemporary labor, in a situation in which, the economists solemnly warn us, no one should any longer expect to hold down a single lifelong job (they do not generally add the increasingly obvious supplement, namely that many should not expect to hold down any job at all). Virno's discussion of contemporary labor, which undertakes to challenge and to dismantle the traditional Aristotelian distinction (revived by Hannah Arendt) between labor, politics and philosophy, would also seem to aim at a Utopian restructuration of the whole notion of alienation, as it has been degraded from Marx's early analysis of industrial labor into some all-purpose cultural characterization. The Hegelian notion of externalization, of which Marx's concept was both a critique and a restructuration, itself constituted a kind of Utopian celebration of handicraft activity and production, no longer relevant in the industrial era.[19] Virno now proposes a notion of production as virtuosity, a concept which redeems the old 1960s ideal of an aesthetization of life, as well as resituating in a more positive way the even more contemporary denunciations of contemporary society in terms of the spectacle (Debord) and the simulacrum (Baudrillard).

We must first note the specificities of labor today, as Virno outlines them, drawing the ultimate conclusion from the movement of all modern philosophy from categories of substance to categories of process. Modern (or perhaps I should say, postmodern) work is a matter of process, an activity for which the end has become secondary

and the production of an object a mere pretext, the process having become an end in itself. This is comparable to virtuosity in the aesthetic realm, and indeed we here meet an unexpected avatar of the old left dream of an aesthetic disalienation of the world, from Schiller to Marcuse and the 60s. Yet this one will have none of the saving graces of the older aestheticism, it will be a culture of minding the machines, a post-work culture, an activity of language-sharing and linguistic cooperation. This move then also entails the resituating of labor—hitherto ambiguously differentiated from both private and public spheres (it is not private life, but its framework is still owned by the capitalist and not open to the public)—within some new space from which the opposition between private and public have disappeared, without the reduction of one to the other.

This last is now a "publicness without a public sphere,"[20] a transformation which in its turn entails a series of other Utopian consequences. For one thing, so-called mass culture is itself transformed, becoming "an industry of the means of production" (*GM*, 61). Its clichés and commonplaces are now an enactment of collective sharing and participation, and come to have the redemptive innocence of childhood repetition: indeed, at this point, Virno sketches out what might be a theory of the cultural equivalent of that theory of General Intellect, which, drawing on Marx's *Grundrisse*, has been so crucial in the way in which Italian philosophy today has sought to disclose the profound socialization and collectivization of late capitalist social life and work. In this context, then, where science and language have soaked into the everyday and permeated all the pores of our daily life, making everyone an intellectual (as Gramsci famously put it), a henceforth globalized mass culture and omnipresent communication themselves have a very different significance. The multitude has its own new kind of linguistic and cultural literacy, everywhere on the globe: there are no prehistoric peoples, no premodern survivals: tribals listen to their portables and nomads watch their DVDs; in mountain villages without electricity as well as in the most dismal refugee camps the dispossessed follow world current events and listen to the vacuous speeches of our president. Yet in that dedifferentiation of culture and politics which characterizes postmodernity, it must also be understood that such

"publicness without a public sphere" also grounds and prepares what Virno calls "the feasibility of a non-representational democracy" (GM, 79).

It is evident that within this extraordinary reversal of the traditional judgments on mass society and its "degradations," Heidegger's existential inauthenticities will also be transformed. To the existential philosopher's enumeration (idle talk or gossip, curiosity, ambiguity, and *Verfallenheit*) Virno adds two more—opportunism and cynicism—which have perhaps attracted more explicit and fulsome condemnation in recent times. Perhaps it is increasingly obvious that gossip, as in Proust, is preeminently the mark of a human age and of the preponderance of the human other over the former relations between man and nature. But curiosity—particularly in the classic form of voyeuristic envy analyzed so long ago by St. Augustine— is also to be accorded its Utopian transfiguration. Benjamin's paradoxical defense of "distraction" may now be reread as the designation of a new type of perception within a world of habit and numb routine:

> The media trains the senses to consider the known as if it were unknown, to distinguish "an enormous and sudden margin of freedom" even in the most trite and repetitive aspects of daily life. At the same time, however, the media trains the senses also for the opposite task: to consider the unknown as if it were known, to become familiar with the unexpected and the surprising, to become accustomed to the lack of established habits. (*GM*, 93)

As for opportunism, very much in the spirit of Hegel's defense of utilitarianism, it marks the indispensable emergence of the tactical and strategic *coup d'oeil*, the capacity to size up and evaluate the situation itself, the makings of a new and intensified sense of orientation in this new world of the Utopian masses: "opportunism gains in value as an indispensable resource whenever the concrete labor process is permeated by a diffuse 'communicative action' and thus no longer identifies itself solely with mute 'instrumental action'" (*GM*, 86). As for cynicism itself, today at the very center of liberal political reflection, it clearly also develops a new and original stance with respect to the knowledge of the way in which our system

functions, renouncing "any claim to a standard of judgment which shares the nature of a moral evaluation" (*GM*, 88) and thereby, according to Virno, repudiating the very principle of equivalency on which moral judgments themselves are founded. Cynicism thereby abandons the universalism of equivalency (read: exchange value) for that new kind of multiplicity that traditionalists call relativism, but which is a new effect of the multitude rather than some inherited philosophical position. With these few remarks, Virno opens up the whole urgent problem of cynical reason today for some original retheorization.

If "ambiguity" designates Heidegger's anxiety about the degradation of language in the modern world of mass culture and universal literacy, *Verfallenheit* characterizes the more general way in which, according to him, the inauthentic *Dasein* is abandoned to the collective order and "falls prey" to the "world" of others, in which it forgets itself and loses its individuality—that is to say, for Heidegger, its existential solitude and that isolation in which it can alone know its freedom, its "being-unto-death." This loss of self in the crowd, the submersion of individuality in the multitude, has been the central indictment proposed by counterrevolutionary ideology since its invention, knowing its highpoints in the grisliest mob scenes of the French Revolution (and in their analysis by Le Bon and Freud as the overcoming of the rational ego by collective irrationality), as well as in deplorable outrages to private property in practically any large-scale revolt you can instance.

And this is also the way our bourgeois tradition has from time relatively immemorial observed the crowd or the mob—that is to say, from a safe distance, and deploring the excesses and the way in which its subjects run to and fro aimlessly, shouting and gesticulating, released from the constraints of law and decency, and as it were under the spell of a kind of shamanistic possession. What Virno has to tell us about this is extremely timely: these inherited pictures and prejudices, he argues, suggest that our traditional view of what we like to call modernity (first-world bourgeois capitalism) presupposes our emergence as individuals from some inchoate pre-individualistic mass, and our fear of being resubmerged back into a post-individualistic "multitude" in which we will again lose everything

we have painfully achieved as individual subjects. The multitude is on the contrary the very condition for individuation, it is alone in the multitude and the collective that we arrive at our true singularity as individuals. We must abandon the habit of thinking of a host of things—language, culture, literacy, the State, the nation—as goals to be achieved in some arduous yet beneficent process of modernization. On the contrary, they are long since all achieved, everyone is modern, modernization has been over for some time. "Unity," Virno tells us, "is no longer something (the State, the sovereign), towards which things converge, as in the case of the people; rather it is taken for granted, as a background or a necessary precondition. The many must be thought of as the individualization of the universal, of the generic, of the shared experience" (*GM*, 25).

The premise of unity articulated here is, to be sure, based on that understanding of General Intellect alluded to above: the recognition of an immense expansion of the cultural sphere in late capitalism or postmodernity, the generalization of knowledge (very much including science) in that end of nature and the natural, that tendential humanization of the world implicit in Marx's "universalization of wage labor" and the approach of a genuine world market. It also casts a different light on the politics of difference, which has a meaning after the totalizations of capitalism that it could not possibly have had in early capitalist (or pre-capitalist) thought and experience. Even the unification of groups in some great collective project must necessarily work differently after the consolidation of a system of nation-states than it did when the very construction of the nation, incomplete, was a heroic and a progressive process.

So much, then, for some of the constitutive features of this new world of the multitude, which we are to train ourselves to welcome as the first fresh stirrings of the very storm of Utopia itself. The last-mentioned aspect of the multitude's curiosity, however—"the lack of established habits"—will bring us back to the second theme I wanted to explore in Virno's book and that is the very opening remarks about security and shelter. For established habits are also a security and a shelter, and perhaps the most fundamental feature of the new situation from which that new thing, the multitude, emerges, can be addressed in that way, as some new and utter absence of security

and shelter, as some new homelessness no longer to be reminded with nostalgia or bourgeois comfort, with Heideggerian "dwelling" or the protection of the State—a new and permanent crisis situation in which we are all refugees whether we know it or not. What we are calling the multitude is then the population of those refugee camps as they supplant the promise of suburbs and the mobility of freeways which have become permanent traffic jams.

Virno associates two kinds of actions with this new multitude, Utopian or not. The first is civil disobedience, the refusal of the State, to which can already be opposed the self-organization of the camps and *bidonvilles* themselves, which have fallen below the state's radar. The second is his version of Deleuzian nomadism, namely emigration, as the latter hovers above modern Italian history (in Gianni Amelio's great film *Lamerica*, [1994], for example) but also reappears in the very last chapter of *Capital*, where the European laborers are seen to desert the old country for the American east coast, only in a few years to "desert the factory, moving West, towards free lands. Wage labor is seen as a transitory phase, rather than as a life sentence" (*GM*, 45). The camps, the frontier: such is the deeper unseen reality of the world of the multitude which Virno asks us to embrace in Nietzschean fashion, not as some forever recurring of the present, but as the eternal return of the future and of Utopian possibilities to be celebrated as though we had chosen them in the first place.

5

Now I need to clarify the Utopian "method" presupposed here and to give a theoretical account of the rather peculiar and even perverse readings I have offered of my two illustrations. Just as I hasten to assure the reader that I do not mean to celebrate Wal-Mart, let alone to forecast the emergence of anything good and progressive from this astonishing new post-monopoly institution, so also my discussion of Paolo Virno was not to be taken as an endorsement of some putative new politics of "multitude" nor even as a practical-political discussion—something he is perfectly capable of conducting in his own voice and indeed which the final chapter of his *Grammar* (on which I have not touched) begins to lay out. Or to put it in a

different and more accurate way: it does not matter what I think personally about the future of the Wal-Mart-type business operation or about the "politics of multitude"; I have been using both topics and both occasions to illustrate a method, about which it is now important to say that it is meant to be distinct from any of those outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

The hermeneutic I have wanted to demonstrate is therefore not predictive, nor is it symptomological: it is not meant to read the outlines of the future within the present, nor is it meant to identify the operations of collective wish-fulfillment within the rather unpleasant phenomena (monopoly, overpopulation) which are its objects of examination. The latter approach —generally identified with Ernst Bloch's work—would have to take the opinions and ideologies, the ways of life and situations, of actually existing social groups far more seriously and empirically into consideration than this exercise has done. The former line of inquiry, that of practical politics and programs, and identified here with Marx and with Lenin, would have had to assess the concrete world situation in its economic and political objectivity, as well as in the balance of ideological forces, from a strategic perspective rather than from isolated data.

I consider the Utopian "method" outlined here as neither hermeneutic nor political program, but rather something like the structural inversion of what Foucault, following Nietzsche, called the genealogy. He meant by that to distinguish his own (or perhaps even some more generalized post-structural or postmodern) "method" in sharp contrast from either empirical history or from the evolutionary narratives reconstructed by idealist historians. The genealogy was in effect to be understood as neither chronological nor narrative but rather a logical operation (taking "logic" in a Hegelian sense without being Hegelian about it). Genealogy in other words was meant to lay in place the various logical preconditions for the appearance of a given phenomenon, without in any way implying that they constituted the latter's causes, let alone the latter's antecedents or early stages. To be sure, inasmuch as those genealogical preconditions almost always took the form of earlier historical events, misunderstanding—and the assimilation of the new construction to the older historical approaches (chronology, causality, narrative,

idealist continuity)—was always inevitable, and could not be warded off by Raymond Roussel's immortal anecdote of the tourist who claimed to have discovered, under glass in a provincial museum, "the skull of Voltaire as a child."

There is so far no term as useful for the construction of the future as that of genealogy for such a construction of the past; it is certainly not to be called futurology, while utopology will never mean much, I fear. The operation itself, however, consists in a prodigious effort to change the valences on phenomena which so far exist only in our own present; and experimentally to declare positive things which are clearly negative in our own world, to affirm that dystopia is in reality utopia if examined more closely, to isolate specific features in our empirical present so as to read them as components of a different system. This is in fact what we have seen Virno doing when he borrows an enumeration of what in Heidegger are clearly enough meant to be negative and highly critical features of modern society or modern actuality, staging each of these alleged symptoms of degradation as an occasion for celebration and as a promise of what he does not—but what we may—call an alternate Utopian future.

This kind of prospective hermeneutic is a political act only in one specific sense: as a contribution to the reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our system— offering itself as the very end of history—necessarily represses and paralyzes. This is the sense in which utopology revives long dormant parts of the mind, unused organs of political and historical and social imagination which have virtually atrophied for lack of use, muscles of praxis we have long since ceased exercising, revolutionary gestures we have lost the habit of performing, even subliminally. Such a revival of futurity and of the positing of alternate futures is not itself a political program nor even a political practice: but it is hard to see how any durable or effective political action could come into being without it.

Endnotes

1 Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, London: Eyre Methuen, 1976, 380.

2 See, for the canonical account, Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

3 Robert Caro's biography of Moses, *The Power Broker*, New York: Knopf, 1974, is an indispensable resource.

4 *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), *The Shockwave Rider* (1975).

5 See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 1985.

6 London: Verso, 2005

7 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

8 Jacques Attali, *Les trois mondes: pour une théorie de l'après-crise*, Paris: Fayard, 1983.

9 Karl Marx, Preface, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, in Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer, New York: Doubleday, 1959, 44.

10 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, London: Penguin, 1976, 171. Future references to this work are denoted *Cap*.

11 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin, 1973, 706; and see also Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 20–24.

12 V.I. Lenin, quoted in Neil Harding, *Leninism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996, 145–146.

13 Charles Fishman, *The Wal-Mart Effect*, New York: Penguin, 2006, 220. Future references to this work are denoted WME.

14 *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, eds. Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, and Sze Tsung Leong, Köln: Taschen, 2001, 157. This book is volume 2 of Koolhaas's monumental *Project on the City*. And see also on technological innovations "The Physical Internet," *The Economist*, June 17th, 2006; and Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, New York:
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, especially 128–141

15 Chuihua Judy Chung, et al., *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, 158.

16 But see Marc Levinson, *The Box*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

17 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, paragraphs 35–38.

18 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 7; and see also, on city size, his *S, M, L, XL*, New York; Monacelli Press, 1995, 961–971.

19 Hegel's discussion of "die Sache selbst" ("the matter at hand") is to be found in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 237–252

20 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson, New York: Semiotext[e], 2004, 40. Future references to this work are denoted *GM*.