Preliminary Review of the Literature of Utopian Thought
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December 20, 2005

Introduction

This paper will review a number of themes in utopianism related to design and the environmental social sciences. I'll start with a brief overview and history of utopian literature to familiarize the reader. I will then discuss a number of themes in utopianism including: ties to the milieu, questions of ideology, expanding consciousness, and utopianism in practice. Before I begin, let me place[1] myself in relation to the fields of utopianism and environmental social science (ESS). My initial interest is the result of having traced a number of divergent threads to the inevitable tangle that is utopianism. I was educated in architecture and became keen to discover the ways in which individual and social values inform the built environment as well as the ways in which the built environment reflects and molds its inhabitants.[2] I am interested in cultural change and concerned with social welfare, and found these issues explored in utopianism. Lastly, I agree with the author who said 'Utopians help to make a soul for the world.'[3]

Overview of Utopianism

Any review of utopianism must begin with an apology, as it is difficult to account for any significant portion of the vast and diverse population of utopian literature. Frank and Fritzie Manuel, in their comprehensive review *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, estimated the number of works dealing with utopia and utopianism to be near 5,000 in 1979[4]; and this oft-cited work primarily addresses utopias and critiques of the literary variety. Two recent surveys, *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (2000) by Schaer et al, and Ruth Eaton's *Ideal Cities* (2001), include both literary and pictorial utopias.

The word 'Utopia' was coined by Sir Thomas More as the name of the land described in his book of the same title first published in 1516. It is the combination of the Greek *topos* ('place') with the prefix *u,* which can be read as the contraction of *eu* ('no') or *ou* ('good'), invoking the paradox of 'no place' and 'good place.' This double meaning has led to its use through history as a term of hope and of derision.

My use of the word utopianism can be understood to address utopian projects (both speculative and actual) as well as the critical review of these projects. Efforts to devise utopian societies are generally considered to have been initiated by More; however, most studies of utopianism trace the roots back to Biblical texts or Plato's *Republic* and the Hellenic myths it was based upon. According to Manuel and Manuel, 'Utopia is a hybrid plant, born of the crossing of a paradisiacal, other-worldly belief of Judeo-Christian religion with the Hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth.' (15)

Speculative utopian projects have taken literary or architectural forms, but have never faced the test of actualization. On the other hand, a large number of communities have been realized which are considered 'utopian' by themselves or others. Some of these

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[1] Saegert (1993) and Chapin & Cooper-Marcus (1993) suggest the importance of 'placing' the author.
[2] In environmental psychology this reciprocal relationship is referred to as 'transactional.' For more information regarding this concept see Saegert and Winkel (1990) or Stokols (1995).
[3] Hertzler (1923). p. 277
[4] Manuel & Manuel (1979). p. 12

communities are engineered through utopian writing and design, while others have developed less intentionally. Both realized and unrealized utopias are the subject of critical review and analysis[5]. In addition, a number of writers have dealt with utopia as a concept, discussing its strengths and weaknesses as well as the implications of its application[6]. Many authors combine one or more of these approaches in their work and each of these types of utopian literature can be discussed within the general field of utopianism.

Pertinent Themes in Utopianism

Utopianism Tied to the Milieu

An important concept in the environmental social sciences is that any person, project or idea is tied to a particular place in time and space. In writing about vernacular and rural landscapes, J.B. Jackson uses historical examples to show how concepts like 'wilderness' have changed over time and from place to place.[7] Dolores Hayden discusses how social history is embedded in urban landscapes and frames social memory. Paraphrasing Lefebvre, she writes 'every society in history has shaped a distinctive space that meets its intertwined requirements for economic production and social reproduction.'[8] The ties to a particular time or place are also recognized by writers in utopianism.

As previously mentioned, Frank and Fritzie Manuel are, to date, the pre-eminent scholars on the development of utopian thought. Prior to their work, most attempts to review utopian literature were basically bibliographies or markedly personal attempts to categorize or venerate utopia. The Manuels' approach was to identify 'historical constellations of utopias' and then to look at the 'utopian propensity' within these constellations, focusing on 'psychological knowledge of persons and historical analysis of circumstances.' These constellations have 'well marked time-space perimeters and common elements that are striking enough to permit framing generalizations.' (13) One point they elaborate upon is that utopian production has always been tied to the environment and events surrounding the producers: the 16th and 17th century utopias were framed in terms of agrarian society; later utopias related to the acquisition of territory in the New World and beyond; and the theories of Marx, Freud and Darwin each impacted utopian thought. 'Every utopia, rooted as it is in time and place, is bound to reproduce the stage scenery of its particular world…' (23)

In addition to marking utopia speculation, historical events have also influenced utopian criticism. While most recent writers caution against the totalitarian prospect of homogeneous standardization and uniformity, one of the harshest critics by far is E.M. Cioran. He argues in his book *History and Utopia* (1960, reprinted 1987) that when utopianism has been realized it is only to our detriment. In view of mass production, he asks the reader to judge a scene envisioned by Cabet in *Voyage en Icarie*: "Two-

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[5] Hayden (1976) and Holloway (1951) look at attempted utopian communities. Eaton (2001), Coates and Stetter, eds. (2000) and Schaer et al, eds. (2000) have surveyed speculative utopias.

[6] Kamenka (1987), Kateb (1971), and Parker (2002) have each edited volumes on the conceptual development of 'utopia'.

[7] Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984) and *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (1994).

[8] Hayden, *The Power of Place* (1995) paraphrasing Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1991).

thousand, five hundred young women (dressmakers) work in a factory…The rule that each worker produces the same object doubles the rapidity of the manufacture and brings it to perfection." (84)

In his chapter on the 'Mechanism of Utopia', Cioran clearly implies that humans, by nature, are vile and states that coexistence is only possible because of the 'impotence of mediocrity.' He is opposed to communist principles, suggesting 'communism depends on the rate at which it expends its utopian reserves. So long at is possesses them, it will inevitably tempt all societies…everywhere offering an absolute worthy of its nothingness.' (96) Cioran, like other writers, relates utopian and apocalyptic literature, but unlike most, favors the apocalyptic as being 'closer to our deepest instincts.' These criticisms can be understood in the historical context of the cold war, facing possible nuclear holocaust.

Utopianism and Ideology

A key insight in the discussion of utopianism is from Karl Mannheim in his book *Ideology and Utopia* which 'drew a distinction between ideology—signifying those political ideas which are sustained by the system in power—and utopia—those which are in opposition to it. He thus introduced the notion that the former is static and reactionary while the latter is dynamic and progressive.'[9] Writing in Germany in 1930, Mannheim suggested that ideology is used to disguise the true nature of a situation in an effort to deceive oneself and others. He also saw the utopian mind as incongruous with reality, but distinct from ideology in that it 'transcends reality and…breaks the bonds of the social order.' (192)

In the U.S. at almost the same time, Joyce Hertzler used the word 'ideal' synonymously with 'utopian' in his book *The History of Utopian Thought.* Hertzler does not define the term, but optimistically suggests that 'ideals' can be thought of as 'goals constantly receding…leading and wooing society on the way toward the goal of perfection.' (269) He goes on to elaborate, saying that 'the acceptance of ideals is the ending of a long process,' (271) which dovetails into Mannheim's analysis of ideology.

Recent writers have modified this concept. Eaton uses the word 'ideal' to cover 'those city plans that accept the political status quo, while 'utopian' is employed for those that are designed to induce a radically new political situation.' (12) In his analysis of Mannheim's text, Stephen Ackroyd suggests that 'Mannheim apparently sets aside the habitual, modern view of utopia—that it is, by definition, completely unachievable.' (50) However neither Mannheim nor Ackroyd are willing to support this statement, instead both reverse direction saying that while utopianism is a necessary counterpoint to ideology, in actuality utopia is impractical and only an historical novelty.

Ideology is also subject to criticism in ESS. Susan Saegert believes that part of the progress of postmodern thinking has been to recognize difference and deconstruct false senses of homogeneity. She suggests that methods that reveal difference and contribute to mutual understanding should be a priority for research. 'This commitment avoids idealism because the physical, social, and psychological world are seen as continuous rather than discreet.'[10] Her distinction between continuous and discreet approaches to the environment is also applicable when looking at utopian projects.

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[9] Eaton (2001). p. 12
[10] Architecture and Behavior (1993) 9, 69-84.

Utopianism Expands Social Consciousness

One of the concerns of ESS is to understand environmental perception and expand the consciousness of people for their physical and social surroundings. Along with a number of other writers, Proshansky et al discuss cognition in relation to 'place-identity.'[11] Burton and Kates explore the awareness of natural hazards, elaborating how the perception of resources varies between users and leads to divergent social values.[12] This goal of increased sensitivity is paralleled in utopianism, though most writers do not elaborate on the processes of social consciousness.

Hertzler suggests that 'utopian projects stir the imagination of men, and we know that the imagination is prerequisite to social reform.' (269) Yet, Hertzler is fairly deterministic in his view of how this process works and the way utopian ideas inform the populace. He writes, '[Man] is simply the depository in an individual unit of the various thoughts, memories, and feelings that make up the mental substance of his time,' and states that 'choice plays a minor role' in the eventual acceptance of utopian ideas. (272)

Excluding many contributions, Manuel and Manuel state that it is the rare utopian genius who has the ability to reveal 'the inner depths, the essence, of that moment…He many have something ahistorical to say about love, aggression, the nature of work, the fulfillment of personality.' (24) Furthermore, they argue that the great utopians have also been great realists with 'extraordinary comprehension of the time and place in which they are writing, [who] deliver themselves of penetrating reflections…'(28)

Eaton explicitly 'explores the ability of ideal cities to stimulate reflection and change, and suggests under what conditions they might continue to exercise their vital function in relation to the urban environment of the future.'(1) Her conclusion falls a bit shy of this lofty intention, merely arguing that in learning from previous utopias, contemporary planners should not assume a *tabula rasa* and must take more account of environmentalist concerns.

Viable Utopian Ideas (2003), edited by Arthur Shostak is exceptional in its concrete approach. In the introduction, Shostak writes, 'Viable utopian ideas are an energizing resource for helping meet the never-ending challenge to "complete the work," an artful combination of dream, detail, and determination. Our dreams help us focus beyond the present, and they require us to labor at defining just what we are *really* seeking.' (3) (italics his) Subsequent writers in this volume go on to elaborate how and why utopian ideas serve to broaden consciousness. In one example, Tsvi Bisk connects utopianism to futurism, 'Human beings are the only species that can conceive of the future, the only species truly cognizant of its own mortality. The resultant angst leads us into the future-conceiving business.' (36) Michael Marien links utopianism to the broader concept of social betterment. 'Beyond pure utopia, a wide range of thinking on human betterment can be seen, from the highly idealistic to the reasonably pragmatic… Such processes…evoke conscious actions to shape preferred futures.' (24-25)

Utopianism in Practice

Most writers on utopianism since the 1960's have included warnings of varying degrees against the practical realization of utopia. Eaton highlights the 'painful, eternal

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[11] Journal of Environmental Psychology (1983) 3, 57-83.
[12] Natural Resources Journal (1964) 3, 412-441.

conflict between the collective and the individual, between equality and fraternity on one hand, liberty on the other.' (17) She suggests that prominent among the characteristics of utopian worlds are the ideas that the means are irrelevant, and that it offers absolute solutions, indifferent to localized factors. According to her, the typical ambition of utopia is collective happiness and harmony thus diversity, pluralism, democracy, and deviance are discouraged in the interest of the collective. Similar to Eaton, most contemporary critics underscore the difficult contradictions and paradoxes embedded in utopianism. With these cautions in mind, some contemporary authors are seeking to redefine utopianism in favor of a balanced and perhaps more local and individualized approach.

David Harvey, in his book *Spaces of Hope* (2000), makes a case for what he terms 'dialectical utopianism.' Dialectical utopianism can be understood as a way of thinking that engages apparently opposing or dissimilar forces (such as imaginary/materialized, global/body, freedom/confinement, etc.) so that they can nurture and respond to each other. In advancing this notion, Harvey seeks to encourage the formulation of process-based alternatives that begin in the realm of the imagination but take material form.

Harvey goes on to explore the figure of the architect and the process of 'doing architecture', proposing that we 'construe ourselves as 'architects of our own fates and fortunes' [by] adopting the figure of the architect as a metaphor for our own agency as we go about our daily practices and through them effectively preserve, construct, and reconstruct our life-world.' (200) In proposing this type of active engagement, Harvey suggests that utopia may not be a far-off place or a figment of imagination, but can be part of our everyday existence.

Herbert Muschamp makes a similar suggestion in his article 'Service Not Included' in the book *Visions of Utopia* (2003). This neat little essay ranges from Adolf Loos to Eastern religion as Muschamp envisions utopia as a representation of wholeness incorporating the disparate pieces of everyday life. In his analysis of a simple tailors shop, Muschamp discusses the ways in which the architecture of Loos integrated a number of binary oppositions such as theory and practice, interior and exterior, simplicity and luxury, and aesthetic and social concerns. Muschamp suggests that for himself utopianism 'has come to represent the concept of taking local, idealistic actions in an imperfect universe.' (29) This notion is further explored through the metaphor of the lotus flower in Mahayana Buddhism. Among other properties, the lotus flowers and seeds at the same time. 'In Buddhist theory, this symbolizes the simultaneity of cause and effect.' (42) This is part of his argument that even the smallest, simplest actions are utopian when they are understood as part of the connective tissue of wholeness.

In his article 'Private Dreams and Collective Ideals' in *Viable Utopian Ideas*, Douglas Porpora offers a slightly contrasting opinion. 'To be idealistic is to be committed to certain values even at the expense of our own advantage or benefit. To be idealistic is to put principles ahead of ourselves…Here perhaps lies the rub, one way our cultural norms seem to have shifted. Ideals are other-regarding…If idealism is considered unrealistic today, perhaps it is because it is considered impractical or unrealistic to be concerned with anything other than ourselves.' (10) As he examines the pursuit of private, subjective 'dreams' in comparison to the pursuit of collectively held principles, he develops a critique of both the disdain for idealism and the individualized ambitions encouraged by contemporary consumer culture.

Summary of Themes in Utopianism

Critical distance allows us to see that both utopian speculation and utopian critiques are tied to their milieu. These ties suggest that utopianism may be considered as part of the transaction between people and their environment. With critical distance, we can also distinguish between 'ideology' and 'utopia.' The implication of this distinction should be further explored as it raises important questions especially when considering architectural utopias and the spaces they produce. The belief that utopianism creates or awakens consciousness is held by most authors and is explicitly stated by Manuel, Hertzler, Eaton and Shostak. Exactly how this process occurs is debatable, though many writers suggest that utopias serve both critical and creative functions. Lastly, the writers above question whether utopia must be seen as an absolute and universal solution or if it can be localized and piecemeal. Part of this question concerns whether utopianism can be individualized or if it requires collective effort.

Prominent Concerns for Further Examination

Environmental social science is primarily concerned with making places better for people. In addition, ESS encourages people to be more engaged in their surrounding conditions. As suggested above, these are also among the aims of utopianism. Both fields encompass the physical, social, and psychological environment as well as political and economic factors. In addition, both fields criticize the existing environment and propose alternatives, often developed from an a-hegemonic perspective.

Out of the above themes in utopianism, I have distilled a few questions to guide research into the field of utopianism from an ESS perspective.

Why is the utopian impulse so prevalent in Western culture? Is it as prevalent in other cultures? What does utopianism connect with in the human condition that gives it perpetual traction? What factors in our current milieu give thrust to utopianism?

Is 'idealism' entrenched in conservative ideology, or is it a necessary component of progressive utopian thinking. How does one distinguish between 'ideological' and 'utopian' projects? Do utopian projects assume ideological aspects once they are built and inhabited?

Is the expansion of consciousness a necessary pre-condition for social change, or is it an indication that change has occurred? Are there ways of gauging the relative success of a utopian idea by measuring changes in social consciousness?

How are utopian ideas translated into reality? Is there a traceable progression from speculation to actuality? How is utopianism modified by the concept that it can be carried out as part of everyday experience? Is utopianism strengthened if it becomes individualized and local?

Conclusion

Embedded in the social consciousness of each milieu and offering creative alternatives to hegemonic ideologies, the power utopian dreams have to frame and transform reality should not be overlooked. Hopefully the themes and questions above will generate further interest in utopianism from an environmental social science perspective.

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