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## **Spatial Images in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Utopian Writings**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The following paper aims at identifying and analysing the way in which space is constructed in three utopian writings belonging to the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, by tackling the problem of spatiality from the point of view of ideological structures, prototypical social codes and the collective imaginary.

### **KEYWORDS**

Spatial Images; Utopia; Anti-Utopia; Social Codes.

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In the following research, in the case of each analysed utopia/ dystopia, I chose to firstly set the limits of the rationalist methodology, by analysing the spatial images only in terms of measurable data (factual observation). The rationalist methodology starts from Descartes and involves taking into account only the elements which can be quantified and factually measured. According to the *Dictionary of Qualitative Methods*,<sup>1</sup> the analysis which applies within the rationalist methodology is a hybrid type of analysis that can be classified as *quasi-qualitative*. Due to the fact that it targets measurable objectives, it is assigned to the group of quasi-qualitative methods. In what follows, I shall present the spatial metaphors from the perspective of what they offer at the first level of interpretation by remaining within the limits of what the texts offer explicitly and in an unmediated fashion. The factual observation constitutes an essential step when taking about content analysis. Furthermore, the metaphor allows the studying of an image in its essence, without any historical placement or analysis of the elements which generated its construction. Thus, in the first part of my paper, I will observe the constituting elements of spatial images and the relations which are established between them. I will discuss the way in which space is constructed by observing the stable and measurable structures on



which it is based. Thus, being in the close proximity of the image itself, without speculating or generating any interpretations, the data observed after applying this method will constitute the necessary material for a type of approach based on prototypical cultural codes. This will allow for a scanning of the spatial imaginary typical for the period under discussion.

Secondly, I will tackle the sphere of Marxist methodology or, in other words, the domain of anthropology and visual sociology. Cultural critique is the method which best suits this scenario. Taking into consideration that there is “a direct relation between the symbols used and their external social meaning,”<sup>2</sup> I will identify the connection between spatial elements and embedded social structures. In the case of utopian writings, one can talk about complex schemes of the cultural codes they contain. The ideological, political or social codes represent a domain worth exploring in order to see how fiction calls upon the collective psyche and what kind of stability structures they engage.

The organisation of space in *The Machine Stops* represents the reflection of the state that the human being itself lives. An analysis of space within this dystopia is fully revealing for the prototypical cultural codes of the nineteenth century. The way in which the world is constructed translates into fiction the obsessions and risks brought about by hyper-technologisation, mechanisation, uniformity and lack of transparency, this resulting not only in anxiety, estrangement from one’s self, nature and otherness, but also in alienation. In this study, I will discuss all these elements which gravitate around and form the spatial structure. The narrative begins with the very description of the setting; the readers’ attention is channelled and directed away from the geometrical shapes of the walls, towards the emptiness inside, and only afterwards does it

focus on the human being: “Imagine, if you can, a small room, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a bee. It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. There are no apertures for ventilation, yet the air is fresh. There are no musical instruments, and yet, at the moment that my meditation opens, this room is throbbing with melodious sounds. An armchair is in the centre, by its side a reading-desk – that is all the furniture. And in the armchair there sits a swaddled lump of flesh – a woman, about five feet high, with a face as white as a fungus. It is to her that the little room belong.”<sup>3</sup> The room is thus presented as a cell-like space, a space which totally lacks transparency, swallowing the human being; in other words, it is the woman who belongs to this space and not the other way around. The central stage which the human being apparently occupies shifts the focus from man as the result of divine creation and master over his Creation, towards the man placed at the centre because of a purely subversive propose of control and surveillance. In the great hive, the human being is merely a particle which, once out of control (the euthanasia of children who had a strong and vigorous built was practised),<sup>4</sup> may disturb the machine’s mechanised and exact functionality. The system imposes a reverse selection of individuals from that upheld by Darwin’s theory (and obviously mocking it) – it is no longer the strong who survive, but the weak.

At a macro-level, the space consists of two parts: the one from the surface of the earth, as towards the sky were “the ruins of cities, with diminished rivers creeping by their walls, and by the sides of these were sometimes the signs of vomitories, marking the cities of to-day” could be seen, and the one beneath the surface of the earth where there were “rooms, tier below tier, reaching far into the earth, and in each room there sat



a human being, eating, or sleeping, or producing ideas. And buried deep in the hive was her own room.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, this uniformity reproduced over and over again, both vertically and horizontally, applies even at the smallest scales: “The bed was not to her liking. It was too large, and she had a feeling for a small bed. Complaint was useless, for beds were of the same dimension all over the world, and to have had an alternative size would have involved vast alterations in the Machine.”<sup>6</sup> The characters’ rooms were identical; the armchairs, “the buttons, the knobs, the reading-desk with the Book, the temperature, the atmosphere, the illumination – all were exactly the same.”<sup>7</sup> The journey has the purpose of fulfilling this landscape of objects by focusing on alienation, redundant similarities, lack of differences and one’s impossibility to be rescued from the pattern. The main character finds the journey to her son absolutely useless “and if Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, stood close beside her at last, what profit was there in that?,”<sup>8</sup> preferring human relations to be kept at a minimum, without the discomfort of meeting people in the flesh, thus having “to submit to glances from the other passengers”<sup>9</sup> or risking being touched by others (any touching, any direct contact being frowned upon and even punished). Mechanisation has taken over humans, spaces, cultural acts (there are buttons for everything, even for the production of literature), communication and relaxation practices. The machine manifests itself like a Big Brother *avant la lettre*, playing the role of either the oppressor or, on the contrary, of the deity to whom prayers and praises are dedicated. The places have lost their original names, now being classified only in accordance with their mechanical names, while refinement, civilisation and commodities involve a total denial of nature: “When the air-ships had been built, the

desire to look direct at things still lingered in the world. Hence the extraordinary number of skylights and windows, and the proportionate discomfort to those who were civilized and refined.”<sup>10</sup> All of these lead towards anxiety – “her horror of direct experience returned”<sup>11</sup> – estrangement and alienation. Space is intrinsically human, while its recovery, its reintegration saves man from complete loss of self: “But I had got back the sense of space and a man cannot rest then.”<sup>12</sup>

In Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), space organises itself as an adventurous *journey*, fulfilling almost the same functions as a fairy tale: the brave traveller engages in fulfilling certain tasks, overcomes obstacles and receives the prize of discovering a new land, a new way of organising the world, new governing strategies. Spatiality is conceived as a large display of fields, mountain ranges and stretches of water, with cities, streets and buildings. Nature is mysterious and wild, requiring all of the protagonist’s travelling / discovering abilities: “I was now upon the route by which alone the mysteries of the great ranges could be revealed.”<sup>13</sup> The protagonist’s main goal is the discovery of a new world, thus attributing meaning to the entire journey that precedes the great discovery. The tasks and obstacles which lie ahead seem almost fairy tale-like: “Chowbok had designedly attempted to keep me from going up this valley,”<sup>14</sup> the space is Dionysian, the vegetation abundant, difficult to be penetrated by the human being. Once the “great range” is crossed and its mysteries conquered, the entrance to the new world is guarded by totemic creatures worthy of the Erinyes’ portraits in the Greek tragedies: “There were the figures, quite still and silent, seen vaguely through the thick gloom, but in human shape indisputably.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the space is hidden, mystical, filled with meanings which go beyond the realm of knowledge. The utopian world



which the protagonist will discover appears at first (and I refer here to the time spent exploring the wilderness) as a phantasm, generating fear and shivers: "I could not help feeling rather uneasy as I wondered what sort of a reception I might meet with if I were to come suddenly upon inhabitants,"<sup>16</sup> "The wildness of the wind increased, the moans grew shriller, coming from several statues, and swelling into a chorus."<sup>17</sup> Following the pattern of classical utopias, the inhabitants of the new land are included into the category of the *Other*, usually perceived as the monstrous,<sup>18</sup> the inappropriate, the uncivilised, the non-Christian. The protagonist lingers upon two main obsessions regarding the new world: 1. its Christianisation (he overlaps his own image with that of Moses, meant to bring the pagan flock towards the truth: "But what I saw! It was such an expanse as was revealed to Moses when he stood upon the summit of Mount Sinai, and beheld that promised land which it was not to be his to enter"<sup>19</sup> – his own anchoring in the spirit of the Bible justifies and strengthens his status of being the conqueror of the new world); 2. the configuration of his own identity by comparing it with the new space and the *Other*: "It is a dreadful feeling that of being cut off from all one's kind (...) but I do not believe that any man could long retain his reason in such solitude, unless he had the companionship of animals. One begins doubting one's own identity."<sup>20</sup> All human relations are constructed upon the principle of identity-otherness, the unfolding of the new world taking place by comparing it to his own self and to the world from which the character originates. The exploration which the character undergoes is not only an exterior one – according to the classical structure of utopias, there is a journey towards the assumption of one's inner self and towards the configuration of one's own identity. The spatial crossing actually marks the character's leap

from one identity to another.<sup>21</sup>

After entering the new world, architectural patterns follow the principles of the space from which the hero originates: the buildings and the layout of the space are usually similar to those in England or, in any case, in constant connection with them (for example, the "musical banks" are similar to the British Gothic cathedrals). The Erewhonian population and customs bring forth the discussion regarding the machine's supremacy over man and the risk according to which human beings will become parasitical creatures. The satirised image of the utopian world which entirely abolished science due to the fact that people were slaves to machines does nothing but enhance the fact that in this utopian piece of writing, like in others, man and machine become components of spatiality.

Another way of conceiving space within the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century utopia was to merge it with temporality. Spatiality is distorted by the metaphor of time, thus becoming space-time. Miraculous time travels (H. G. Wells *Time Machine*) or the protagonists who after sleeping for tens or thousands of years have to rediscover and reconfigure the space they inhabited according to the rules of the new time (H.G. Wells *The Sleeper Awakes*, Belamy *Looking Backward*, William Morris *News from Nowhere; Or an Epoch of Rest*, Paolo Mantegazza *The Year 3000*) become recurrent themes for the literature of the age. Strongly ideologised, time travels no longer aim at discovering countries, lands, unknown geographical displays, the action taking place in the same space, a space contaminated, as I stated earlier, by temporality. Discussing political issues (capitalism vs. socialism) in all the forms of their interpretation (either one of the two forms of governing is considered redemptive – in utopias / eutopias, or it is deconstructed by



presenting in detail the process through which it destroys and distorts the world in which it is implemented – in anti-utopias/ dystopias), utopian writings which set time travel as their main narrative project spatiality in a double dimension. We are first familiarised with the initial space from which the character departs (or in which he falls into cataleptic sleep) and then, the same geographical display undergoes morphological changes; the two of them are placed within a recurrent parallelism at the level of discourse. These types of utopias and anti-utopias are seen as a response and creative reaction to one another, often kept within the lines of an ideatic and narrative dialogue. For example, while Bellamy conceives a utopia in which socialism is fulfilled through authority, by industrialising and mechanising the world, Morris portrays an idyllic space where the sense of equality and unity generated by socialism is harmoniously achieved through the small pleasures of life and the return to nature. The sceneries are (in the utopian world, the one in which the hero awakens) thus worthy of the terrestrial paradise: the vegetation grows faster and more abundant, the trees are taller and more beautiful, chestnut and oak trees stronger, while the forest gives off romance and freshness.

Everything is configured on the basis of comparison: while in the initial world, the river Thames is “muddy,”<sup>22</sup> in the newly discovered world, the residue from over-industrialisation which covered all of London’s buildings is replaced by the “picturesque” and an architectural style characterised by fantasy. The buildings which still remained from T1 (T1 represents the initial time, that from which the narrator originates, and T2 is the future time, the one in which he finds himself after waking up) are considered ridiculous and are kept only to further emphasise the beauty “of the ones

which we now build”<sup>23</sup>; they appear in opposition with the small, picturesque “very well executed, and designed with a force and directness which I had never noticed in modern work before,”<sup>24</sup> where one could feel “that exhilarating sense of space and freedom which satisfactory architecture always gives.”<sup>25</sup> The obsession with cleanliness and space sanitising is reflected within the descriptions from T2: Westminster Abbey was “cleared” of monuments, the houses were simple and impeccable, while the House of Parliament was turned into a “dung-market.”<sup>26</sup> This string of oppositions dirty-clean, muddy-clear, hard/rusty works as a metaphor for the ideological structures. Words such as *workers*, *changes*, *rebels* or *soldiers* saturate the narrative structure.

Summing up, in *The Machine Stops*, published in 1909, Forster brings about the mechanised spatiality. The space-car shape, the human being closed and limited inside it, brings forth an entire theory that will mark the twentieth century. The human, captive within the system, suffering from the annihilation and alienation of its own humanity, is kept under surveillance and transformed into an obedient being that does not stir up any problems. Practically the author predicts one of the biggest crises of the twentieth century, portraying in literature the main prototypical social images of his time: human estrangement and life’s lack of meaning inside the system; the human being is reduced to a simple piece of the puzzle. Each piece of the system is thoroughly monitored, any form of rebellion or individualism being punished; the contact between beings, or between beings and nature, is annulled and uniformity creeps in everywhere, bringing about anxiety. In other words, in this dystopia, we can identify a good deal of the traits that will later characterise existentialism. By overlapping the image of Forster’s story with the symptoms of existentialism, we can observe the fact that



we are dealing with a dystopia evincing identical cultural codes which, once stratified in the human conscience, bring forth existentialism: a) the contingency of the human being (who has ceased to be conceived as a necessary being); b) alienation (humans are estranged from themselves and do not take hold of their freedom or selves); c) absolute loneliness (people are cut off from each other and the distance between them is due to a sort of impenetrability); d) an exposed life (people living under the constant gaze of the others or, as in F's case, under "the eyes" of the Machine/system); e) personal becoming (the necessity of the human being to accede to a personal and fully sentient life).<sup>27</sup> Thus, in *The Machine Stops*, we have Kuno as an exponent of such a conception, because he has the possibility to choose, the possibility of opposing the system and breaking its barriers even if this could lead to a tragic end for him. The imminence of death (another existential motif) restores the character's experience of life, which he assumes, thus reclaiming his own self. Assuming the freedom of sentient choice, as well as the feeling of death's imminence, detaches the main character from the uniformity and mechanisation of the world Foster imagined. The male character seems to be a foreshadowing of the existentialist motif of "the man who was thrown into the world," his journey towards the surface of the earth being – *avant la lettre* – just a metaphor for the *sense being in the world*. Also, choosing a personal destiny and the imminence of death turn K into a pre-existentialist character, a character that heralds one of the dominant lines of thought of the twentieth century.

Samuel Butler's anti-utopia, *Erewhon*, offers a satirical perspective upon the world: the symbolical images which refer to England are ironical; the space loses its sacred attributes, even though it seems to be mythically charged (grand, with abundant

vegetation, with Cerberus guarding the entrance to the new world); the institutions and buildings no longer fulfil their specific roles: the British gothic cathedrals are portrayed in the new world discovered by the narrator as "musical banks," the institutions of education become schools of "irrationality" and the industrial buildings were abolished, the Erewhonians giving up all together the use of the machines. The image of *the man who is slave to the machine* appears constantly in this anti-utopia, as an invariant. In other words, the author highlights the constant game of the institutional forms of power.

To paraphrase Wunenburger, mythical thinking and the recurrent structures of the political imaginary "play an irreducible, and often positive, role in the construction of political principles and institutional implementation."<sup>28</sup> I thus wonder: to what extent do satire and the anti-utopian deconstruction of this mythical imaginary inspire "one type of socio-political patterns of development or organisation or another"<sup>29</sup> or, on the contrary, do they exhaust the trend and all of the cultural codes belonging to the age? I believe that the answer is obvious. The entire spatial perception, filled with irony and playfulness, strips away the legitimacy and meaning of all the images which correspond to England, within real history. Thus, this imaginary projection succeeds in bringing forth, at the level of the social imaginary, the political phantasms of the age, the fears and blockages which mark the collective unconscious. What is the purpose of an ironical representation, reflected in a deformed mirror and charged with a high degree of playfulness? By bringing into discussion the phantasms of the age, the collective imaginary is slowly released from under the ideological structures obsessively inserted within most cultural manifestations. Anti-utopia thus acts as a cleansing





mechanism of the collective psyche, deconstructing the ideological recurrent images.

In *News from Nowhere*, we can address the idea of mirror spatiality. The space which the author leaves behind has the same geographical coordinates, even though it actually functions in an antithetical way to the initial space (just like an inverted mirror). Thus, in William Morris' novel, we are actually dealing with prototypical spatial images that outline the limits and the ideological program of socialism, the way in which Morris conceived it. Returning to an Elysian type of nature, an egalitarian spatial arrangement, harmony between peers, the lack of property, the general cleansing of old buildings, monuments and life conceptions are just some of the ideas that the image of this new space brings about. Just like in the other works discussed above, the spatial image functions by way of the machine's image; either it estranges and dehumanises the human being (in the narrator's original world), or it is abolished; in a renunciation that recasts humankind on the trajectory of an Elysian life, the machine is one of the prototypical elements of the contemporary socialism *versus* capitalism dispute.

Another prototypical spatial image is that of a terrestrial paradise brought upon by a restored Golden Age: harmonious alliances between humans, animals and vegetation, longevity and the absence of any labor requirements. Thus, what Mircea Eliade presents in *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour*<sup>30</sup> as a departure of societies from the original time and ideal perfection, is echoed, in *News from Nowhere*, as a time detached from temporality, from its natural unwinding. The heavenly space, harmony and complete equality, investing labor requirements with attributes of pleasure and canceling any obligation of fulfilling unwanted tasks,

trace the limits of a mythical, archetypal, legitimating space.

The spatial imaginary of this utopia draws the parameters of the socialist ideology just as it is perceived by William Morris. Reflecting into fiction a microscopical perspective of the social order, the intrinsic ideology of Morris's projection features equality and productivity, offering readers a mythical compound consisting of the values and attitudes of a desired, imagined society, whose fulfilment within reality must be prepared and cemented into the collective imaginary by means of symbols, myths and prototypical images. Subsequently, the real historical occurrences will be assimilated to all of these structures (delivered to the reader by fictional means). Thus, the socio-political imaginary gets to be constructed (apart from other factors) by these images referring to fundamental characteristics and the organisation of the ideal society, images which are highly used in the utopian writings of the time. In other words, utopias not only reveal systems representing the ideologies of the period, but also influence and determine them. Thus, I believe that the relation between fiction and the historical reality, ideology being their common constant, is based on interdependence. An approach to ideology by means of the spatial or visual images that constitute it is fully justified. General cleansing, small-scale architecture, filled with "fantasy," buildings constructed with sincerity, passion and power, purified of the remnants of capitalism characteristic of the age or the sense of space – reflect the trends and limits of a new ideology.

Also, by paraphrasing Oliver Rebol, according to whom ideology operates rationally by consensus and necessity,<sup>31</sup> it can be argued that fiction becomes a suitable domain where this very need can insert itself within the socio-political imaginary. The main character's time travel allows the construction of a fictional history, similar to



the one desired in the real dimension, connected to a harmonious imaginary with a strong mythical charge: the myth of the Golden Age, the myth of the merging community.

Thus, if according to Wunenburger, “within utopia, history is faultless, progress representing nothing more than the permanent repetition of the same state, and not the waiting of an actual change,”<sup>32</sup> we can argue that beyond utopia, within the real history, these utopian projections (the state which perpetually repeats itself) have the power to determine and influence. In other words, ideological utopia smoothens and prepares the collective unconscious, modifying the degree of acceptance towards a new form of government.

I will summarise the endeavour that underlines the present demonstration by reviewing its main stakes and gains. I chose to discuss three utopian writings belonging to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries from a rationalist, respectively Marxist, methodology. Concerning the methods employed, I first used factual observation with the help of which I identified the prototypical spatial images, so that later on, by placing my discourse in the sphere of cultural critique, I could analyse the effects these images have on the collective imaginary, or, at a smaller scale, on the possible reader.

To begin with, I noticed that the spatial disposition in all of the three utopian writings is similar to the imaginary projections of the hopes, anxieties and fears of the collective unconscious. Space is built as a space-machine (in the anti-utopian view of E.M. Forster) or as a space that *releases* or *frees* itself from technology and mechanisation (in the case of Samuel Butler, respectively William Morris). We can consider the growing hyper-technologisation (the machine takes over the role of the human being, being simultaneously an overseer, an oppressor and a de-spiritualized divinity), estrangement or alienation

as symptoms of the late nineteenth century. While the utopia (William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*) discussed in the present research brings forth, by way of fiction, clear ideological structures meant to influence and prepare the collective unconscious for a new social and political order, the two anti-utopias (*The Machine Stops* by E.M. Forster and *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler) deconstruct the prototypical ideological structures of the time, aiding to the cleansing of the collective psyche, safeguarding it from manipulation and propaganda.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dicționar al metodelor calitative în științele umane și sociale*, ed. Alex Mucchielli, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2002, trans. Veronica Suci, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Doru Pop, "Istoria culturală a vizualității într-o schiță analitică", *Caietele Echinox*, ed. Corin Braga and Vasile Voia, ed. Dacia, vol 6/2004.

<sup>3</sup> E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops*, Las Vegas, Create Space, 2009, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> "By these days it was a demerit to be muscular. Each infant was examined at birth,

and all who promised undue strength were destroyed. Humanitarians may protest, but it would have been no true kindness to let an athlete live; he would never have been happy in that state of life to which the Machine had called him; he would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body. Man must be adapted to his surroundings, must he not? In the dawn of the world our weakly must be exposed on Mount Taygetus, in its twilight our strong will suffer euthanasia, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress eternally," p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 21 and 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Butler, *Erewhon: Or, Over the Range*, G. Richards, 1872, p. 22

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 22

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 39

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 38

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 40

<sup>18</sup> Corin Braga, *De la arhetip la anarhetip (From archetype to anarchetype)*, Iași, Polirom, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Thesis proposed and discussed by Corin Braga, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest*, ReadHowYouWant.com, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> In tracing the characteristics of existentialism I resorted to E. Mounier, *Introduction*



*aux existentialismes*, Gallimard, 1962.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Jeaques Wunenburger, *Omul politic între mit și rațiune*, Cluj, Alfa Press, 2000, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Gallimard, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Reboul, *Langage et ideologie*, Paris, P.U.F., 1980, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Imaginarile politicului*, București, Paideia, 2005, p. 109.