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Jean-Jacques Wunenburger: Theory of Utopia or the Utopia of Total Theory?

ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the conceptual relationship between three key terms in Jean Jacques Wunenburger's philosophical approach: the imaginary ("imaginaire"), utopia, and political reason. Each of the three concepts is closely intertwined in Wunenburger's theoretical view and bears a double relation with the other in such a way that not only do they reveal a new side of utopia, reason and imagination, but they also form the very core of Wunenburger's theory. The paper places special emphasis on how Wunenburger accomplished a new theory of utopia and its crucial role in Western thought, in the history of ideas, and in shaping the contemporary crisis of imagination.

KEYWORDS

Imaginary; Utopia; Political Reason; Crisis of the Imagination; the Myth of "the Golden Age".

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The first feature one notices about Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's work is that it forms a perfect organized system, where each book, chapter or article has its well-determined place. Each book or fragment reveals a precise, unified, almost geometrical theoretical approach that eludes any "impurities" (the historical context in which the book was written), any approximations (the transformation of his own views), almost any change in its outlook. It seems that his theoretical conception was already formed in every detail before his first book appeared. Each new title discloses from a different angle a unified philosophical system on the history of mentalities. Of course, a certain amount of fixity resides in Wunenburger's philosophical outlook. His conceptual system already contains its matrix, its answers and thus every line of its blueprint becomes very clear from his second book, *L'utopie ou la crise de l'imaginaire* (1979). Each new book starts with a series of questions, but their complex responses become very clear from the first chapters, leaving no room for uncertainty and hesitation. His philosophy of the imaginary, utopia or images surpasses the inaccuracies and the vagueness of a regular critical discourse.

It seems that Wunenburger aspires to produce an all-encompassing theory that would provide not only the precise



definition for every key concept such as “imaginaire”, “imagination”, “sacré”, “imaginaires du politique”, myth, symbol, utopia, but also their function, their relationships towards one another. At a closer look, all these terms can be placed on a general map, around a triangle in the following way: on the top of the triangle is the concept of the “imaginaire”, which also encompasses the inner part of the triangle; on the bottom side, on the left edge the concept of utopia and on the right edge the reason (Western Reason, political reason/ “la raison politique”). The bottom side of the triangle stands for the crisis of the imaginary and imagination, caused by the limitation imposed on the Western thought by utopia (since Renaissance) and reason (since the Enlightenment). In the centre of the triangle, at the very core of the imaginary are placed “le sacré”, the myth, the symbol, and the ritual. The immutability of those archetypes and concepts seem to contaminate the whole outlook of his theory, which underscores a single, clear idea: the imaginary is not a peripheral domain in contrast with the rational, but it is the other way around: human reason is a very recent surface and with limited possibilities to explain phenomena. Behind this surface resides the whole yet not explored territory of the “imaginaire” (a term which has no counterpart in English studies) with archaic roots that go even beyond myth, a conception akin to that of Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard or Gilbert Durand, disseminated throughout many studies in post-war comparative literature and history of mentalities. Wunenburger eludes the historical factor, isolating the timeless essence of the phenomena, but he finally completes a history and a conceptual map of the imaginary.

When does the crisis of the imagination begin and what are its main causes? Wunenburger’s second book (*L’utopie ou la*

crise de l’imaginaire, Editions Universitaires, 1979) offers a response through a theory of utopia. The problem which utopia poses for the imaginary is a constant concern for Wunenburger and can be found in various books, up to his most recent ones: *La vie des images* (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1995), *Philosophie des images*, (Presses Universitaires de France, Thémis, 1997), *Une utopie de la raison* and also in *L’imaginaire*, 2003. The first and the most recent book on utopia is complementary, but the second is even more convincing in blaming utopia for starting the crisis of the Western imagination.

From the very start of his *L’utopie ou la crise de l’imaginaire*, Wunenburger remarks the general trend which is significant for the second half of the 20th century: to regard utopia with suspicion. His study will also reinforce this tendency, but from a different and rather refreshing point of view (which to this day remains a unique view). Mainly, Wunenburger’s main idea is that utopian thinking is responsible for blocking the imagination, for its transformation into a frozen rhetoric, for generating an obsessive concern for systems and for disintegration of symbols: “la crise de l’imagination contemporaine reside essentiellement dans le nivellement de l’image par le monopole de l’utopie.”; “l’utopie voulant absorber tout le champ de production des rêves, elle participe d’une continue deculturation de l’imaginaire”.¹

Although he mentions in the ‘Introduction’ some interesting effects that totalitarian utopia has on the contemporary human mind, Wunenburger avoids the well-known path of denouncing utopia through its influence upon the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (the historical approach). He also insists that to denounce the imposture of the totalitarian utopia is a false debate. Wunenburger places utopia on an abstract, general level, as an archetype and a



construct in contrast with the imaginary. His point is that utopia, from its origins, has turned out to be a limitation of the human imagination in various ways and in an insidious manner.

How does Wunenburger define utopia? At first, his theory attempts towards a generalization of the term, towards transcending its visible and particular manifestations, either historical, political or literary ones (the list of the *œuvres* that fit into this genre). Utopia is defined as an archetypal figure of the imaginary, placed in a trans-historical mental configuration: "l'utopie prend d'abord place dans une configuration psychique transhistorique, s'inscrit dans des structures universelles de l'imagination, s'enracine dans une symbolique archétypale de l'espace-temps."² For a correct understanding of the essence of utopia, Wunenburger suggests a regressive turn towards utopia's roots, before its first appearance in the history of culture, beyond its literary avatars. Wunenburger's concept of utopia is very comprehensive without being vague: the literary form of utopia is included, and so are other two important forms, 'utopie d'alternance' and 'utopie d'altercation' (both practicing the break with the past, with the present order). To deal with utopia as a literary genre is a restrictive approach, since utopia is a form of action and writing that materializes in history.³ His conception is radically different from that implemented by Alexandru Cioranescu (another Romanian thinker quoted by Wunenburger) and that of Raymond Trousson: both of them strived to overcome the vagueness of the term by circumscribing the literary genre and the poetics defining it. The distinction between the extended sense of utopia (as an expression of the social imagination) and the specific one, referring to the utopian journey of the literary utopia⁴ functions also as a way to differentiate the analysts of utopia. Wunenburger's approach falls into the first category (with Karl Mannheim, Emil Cioran,

Bronislaw Backo, Jean Servier, Susan Buck-Morss, Richard Stites, etc.), while the second category of scholars is better represented (Raymond Trousson, Alexandru Cioranescu, Peter Kuon, Vita Fortunati, and many others). By including both 'utopie d'alternance' and 'utopie d'altercation' in the concept of utopia, he opens it towards its historical manifestation, namely Millennialism. In this respect, Wunenburger's view opposes the conceptions of such scholars as Jean Servier or Henri Desroche who define utopia in contrast with Millennialism, as being both irreducible forms and very different in the aspect of social rebellion (utopia lacks such a direct implication in history, being outside time and space).⁵

Wunenburger and Cioran: two kindred conceptions of utopia

At this point we can trace some similarities between Wunenburger's critical and philosophical approach and Emil Cioran's *Histoire et utopie* (often cited in Wunenburger's book): they both have an abstract and philosophical understanding of utopia and they both direct their critique towards the very roots of utopian thinking. Cioran underscores the mutation of man into a creature obsessed with history, which is due to the utopian displacement of happiness in the far future, depriving man of living in the present. Wunenburger notices the essential pressure the future exerts on imagination, projections in utopian thinking. This process is further explained in Wunenburger's *Philosophie des images*, where he classifies three types of images: utopia belongs to the predictive image, engaged in a particular relation with the future. Utopia outruns the future, simulating events in advance, being a rational prediction,⁶ and thus becomes a main force of historical movement. This imaginative constraint



imposed on the way the future is conceived is also pointed out by Cioran, who considers utopia to be a version of a controlled paradise, a substitute and a hybrid materialization of the Kingdom of God in order to fill the absence of the Christian myth. This will lead to an erroneous and excessive worship of the sense of history. Another point of accusation for utopia is that it levels all its citizens, being a constant plea for conformity, resulting in a society of marionettes, of automata. Both Cioran and Wunenburger draw a comparison between utopia and the myth of the 'Golden Age', the former being an irreversible Promethean disturbance of the primordial innocence.⁷ Ultimately, both their theories point to an essential contradiction at the core of the utopian thought: the utopian quest for a different time that would appease the contradictions between the eternal present and history, between the Golden Age and Promethean ambitions.⁸

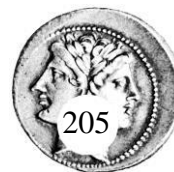
Its hybrid nature and its dream of "revising the Creation" become a staple for the whole 20th century, with a paradigmatic example in the post-human utopia and its dream of radically revising the human nature (with the help of genetics), another rational but absurd attempt of Man to become the Maker of his own destruction. In the last decade we have witnessed a resurgence of a new type of utopia, based on a post-human ideology, which contains a double-directed critique: on the one hand it is a critique of human irresponsibility in the face of new technologies for replicating life and human being (cloning), on the other hand it is also a gloomy depiction of the post-human world, a dystopian future. Novels such as *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island* by Michel Houellebecq, *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood all start from the unsettling question: is it desirable for the human race to go extinct? This question derives from a phenomenon observed by

Wunenburger: the dissemination of utopia and utopian thinking in our contemporary culture and civilization, and this can be noticed not only in the totalitarian state, but also in Western democracies. Here utopia has an unobtrusive presence, through the obsessive implementation of equality, the dissolution of hierarchy, massification, cultural uniformization, the search for happiness and security, and the fact that social inequalities do not generate open altercations.⁹

What are the possible solutions for surpassing the hindrance of utopia? – this is an essential question posed by Wunenburger and Cioran. The latter's response points either towards anti-utopia or towards apocalyptic anarchism and a longing for the end of the world, which could stand for many things: a quest for the lost freedom, a restoration of the principle of hope, a radical break with the stagnation of the present.

Utopia, a crucial concept

Utopie ou la crise de l'imaginaire, Une utopie de la raison, and Imaginaires du politique are Wunenburger's most important works in constructing not only an original theory of utopia, but also a genealogy of the three essential concepts for the history of mentality and ideas ("l'imaginaire", utopia, and the political reason). The background and their transformation is gradually analysed from Plato up to the present, but without any historicist limitations, according to three main issues: the relationship between imagination and reason, the breakdown between the political and the sacred, the dissemination of utopia in the twentieth century political systems. Utopia is placed at the crossroads between reason and imagination, a direct result from the contamination between imagination and political action. Wunenburger aspires to formulate a total theory on the genealogy of Western



ideas and mentality, and their decline towards the contemporary crisis of imagination, towards the dissolution of hope, and towards the general spread of utopian thinking and systems. Wunenburger attempts to offer the complete, irrefutable explanation for these phenomena.

His theoretical description of utopia is not only a new and profound understanding of it as a complex archetype of human imagination, but also a means to reveal the hidden meanings of the other two concepts as well (the political reason and the imaginary). In his *Une utopie de la raison* this method is best fulfilled. He compares and contrasts three strains of evolution in Western history of ideas: the process in which the political gains autonomy from the sacred (a process that started in Ancient Greece) and how it mirrors the quest for the perfect society and political system, which could replace the authority of the religious tradition. Utopia is closely connected to the political rationalisation of modernity.¹⁰ By specifying the origins of political history, he manages to demonstrate that modern rationality is a recent construct, which gives grounds for assuming a series of pre-modern political ideas. The modern form of political organization appears as a consequence of the politicization of the utopian imaginary.¹¹ The transformations brought about in the history of mentalities by utopia are compared and related to those occurred in painting (the poetics of mimesis), with the progress in the manufacture of glass and the advent of a new paradigm in the perception of reality in general. Utopia is very much responsible for this radical change in perspective and in how the real is constructed: the utopian thinker does not invent something new, but he clarifies, he excludes the irregularities and the opacity, being very close to the omniscient point of view.¹²

The radical optical shift raises a few essential questions regarding the origins of

utopia, such as: utopia – a product of an ecstatic vision or an effect of the tamed view? utopia – a result from a rejection of a previous spiritual imagination?¹³ Wunenburger's answers not only help defining utopia, but the imaginary as well: utopia relies on a reversed mystical figure, a residual version of the religious myths, of a spiritual topography.¹⁴

Another fruitful yet troubling hypothesis is that totalitarian premises can already be found in the initial configuration of utopia, and this also explains the subsequent evolution of the political. This is a different understanding of the classical utopia and how its initial symbols were augmented in the Western history of political systems: the utter refuse of any opposition (the initial autonomy of reason); the self-referential reason as being proto-totalitarian. The transformation of the omniscient view into an authoritative one is an excellent start for an examination of anti-utopias, where the characters become gradually aware of the coercive surveillance and its significance.

With the help of utopia, Wunenburger can outline the diagram of the great changes the European imagination suffered since the ancient Greeks, can trace the main sources of exhaustion in contemporary Western imagination, can explain the political development and the emerging "new political rationality", can advocate for finding full forces of imagination (the criticism of utopia) and for rethinking the current concept of the political.

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Notes

¹ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'utopie ou la crise de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Éditions Universitaires, 1979, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴ Raymond Trousson, *D'Utopie et d'Utopistes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Sironneau, *Sécularisation et religions politiques (Milénarisme și religii moderne)*, traducere din franceză de Ioan Lascu, Ediție îngrijită și prefață de Ionel Bușe, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 2006, p. 16.

⁶ Jean Jacques Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images, (Filosofia imaginilor)*, traducere de Muguraș Constantinescu, Ediție îngrijită și postfață de Sorin Alexandrescu, Iași, Polirom, 2004, p. 283.

⁷ E.M. Cioran, *Histoire et utopie, (Istorie și utopie)*, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 122

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁹ Wunenburger, *L'utopie ou la crise...*, p. 211.

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Une utopie de la raison. Essai sur la politique moderne*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2002, p. 118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.