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Nebulous Utopias. From “Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer” to “China Dream” The Use of Catchwords and Slogans in Constructing Imaginary Utopian/Dystopian Communities

Abstract: The paper offers a preliminary study of a phenomenon that could be termed nebulous utopia, an attempt to project an image of the ideal state based on the use of catchwords and slogans. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their extensive use, originally limited mainly to totalitarian states and war propaganda, has become the dominant rhetorical device employed by a wide range of both left-wing and right-wing populist movements aimed at winning popular support by appealing to a set of vaguely defined general values and objectives.

Keywords: Utopia; Dystopia; Totalitarian States; Political Slogans and Catchwords; The Third Reich; China Dream; Brexit.

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Modern discourse of the ideal world here and now begins with a name coined by Thomas More suggesting an entity both ideal and non-existent, or not yet existent. At the basis of every utopia, described in detail in a longer or shorter narrative, or an exhaustive list of laws and rules, lies a set of general values/principles of which the utopian state constitutes the best possible embodiment. In the classic utopian discourse these general principles are intended to be realized very precisely in the best and only way possible, so that any deviation from their precisely defined realization undermines the very foundations of the utopian state.¹

Concurrently, if not before, there emerged a phenomenon that might be termed nebulous utopia,² referring to vague, indefinite, and open-ended conceptions of radically better “imaginary reconstructions of society”³ evoked by catchwords or slogans which proliferated in periods of major social upheavals, such as the French Republic, the Bolshevik Revolution, the rise of Fascist Italy, the Third Reich, or

numerous other undertakings aimed at organizing mass support for macro- and micro utopian projects. Unlike classic utopias, their slogan-based nebulous counterparts – at least in the initial stages of their social distribution – are intentionally used as convenient labels covering a wide range of vague ideas lacking clear definition or blueprint and, as such, open to a variety of often conflicting interpretations in order to attract the largest possible acceptance. As Ian Johnson has suggested, a slogan-based visionary project does not constitute a precise blueprint “envisioned and planned thoroughly” but rather poses as “declaration of intent”, or cognitive frame to be filled with content only later, if at all.⁴ Four such nebulous utopias will be discussed in the present paper, in a preliminary attempt to suggest the possible field of further studies.

Usually originating in a book or even an article written by an intellectual giving vent to some deep dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs and proposing a more or less concrete programme of radical changes, nebulous utopia simply ignores most of the detailed solutions contained in it. What is left from the programme is usually a catchy name for the future ideal state which gains popularity because the general public tends to ignore the exact ways and means, leaving the task of instituting the ideal state to a more or less charismatic leader and the party.

The Third Reich⁵

The first example of a nebulous utopia to be discussed is the Third Reich, or, the Third Empire, the name first introduced by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck in

his book of the same title, in which he proposed a radical change of all institutions of the state, bringing Germany back to its imaginary former glory or realizing its thus far dormant potential.⁶ Soon after its publication, *The Third Reich*, that is, the label, though not van de Bruck’s detailed project, became a part of Nazi discourse, denoting the future ideal state. In mid-1939, it was officially replaced by the Thousand-Year Reich to emphasize the novelty of the project.

The fundamental principle of the Third Reich utopia is expressed in the omnipresent slogan “*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*”, identifying its basis as the absolute unity of the people, the state, and its leader. The Führer himself supplemented this slogan with another one: “*Kinder und Küche*”, which applied to every German woman whose whole world should be “her husband, her family, her children, and her home.”⁷ Both originated in the nineteenth century, the former being an updated political slogan calling for the unification of German lands and the establishment of the German Empire (“*Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Gott*”) and the latter derived from “*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*”, promoted by Kaiser Wilhelm II and his wife as the desirable model of family and social life.

The general image of the ideal German state was gradually being filled with more and more details, following the classic utopian model in which the new affirmative formula is accompanied by a negative one: a society with *no* unemployment, *no* poverty, *no* crime, *no* disease, *no* threat from internal or external enemies will only come into existence when there are *no* Jews, *no* Gypsies, *no* homosexuals, *no* communists, *no* national minorities identified with the

dystopian other, the exact opposite of the Nazi utopia. The implementation of the Nazi utopia followed the structure of the utopian text almost to the letter, as each of its constitutive elements – itself assumed to embody perfection – contributed to the alleged perfection of the whole in a manner appropriate to its character. As Nicholas O’Shaughnessy observes, on the semiotic level, The Third Reich was “formula-driven, facilitating the creation of consistent symbol structures, a unity of symbolism and message” the use of which was strictly prescribed so as not to undermine the paradigmatic nature of the whole.⁸

Hans Domizlaff, an expert in advertising and branding, and one of Goebbels’ favourite authors, argued in 1930 that “a people can never maintain long-term enthusiasm about an abstract idea such as a state commonwealth if the idea is not objectified by symbols perceptible to the senses”.⁹ And so, the omnipresent swastika sign communicated the unity of most diverse phenomena: from being the supreme signifier of the state and the party, the sign of extreme courage (the Nazi version of the iron cross) or exemplary motherhood honoured with the *Mutterkreuz* for bearing at least four children, an armband identifying party members, to such absurd manifestations as putting a swastika into the front paw of the lion from the coat of arms of Thuringia.

The establishment of the strictly prescribed semiotic order was followed by the actualization of the general underlying principles in the form of laws and decrees followed by their practical implementation. Whereas at first, their realization consisted in such “mild” and “moderate” measures as propaganda campaigns aimed

against the selected enemies of the state, prohibitions imposed on the employment of undesirable groups and individuals, destroying or depriving them of their property, the progress of “perfecting” the state led to the creation of dystopian hetero-spaces such as concentration and death-camps intended for the enemies of the ideal order.¹⁰ Apart from their primary role as a means of eliminating the “undesirable elements”, these heterotopias functioned also as synecdochic representations of the dystopian past overcome by the implementation of the Nazi utopia.

The Fourth Republic of Poland

Like in the case of the Third Reich, the name was coined by right-wing Polish scholars and publicists and then popularized by the media before being adopted by the quasi-national-socialist party calling itself Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) which used it in its election campaign.¹¹ The initial attempt to establish the Fourth Republic occurred in 2005, when the party first came to power. At this stage, the Fourth Republic project comprised a set of general postulates leading to the formation of an ideal state and society. The new system was to ensure a moral renewal of public life by establishing a superstate free from corruption and from the countless former members of the secret police, their equally secret agents, and even a larger group of sheer fiends labelled “communists and thieves” by the party propaganda. Ten years later, after the first attempt to establish the Fourth Republic ignominiously failed, which was made obvious by the results of the 2007 parliamentary elections, another attempt was made, this time on a

much larger scale. The largely compromised label of the Fourth Republic was substituted by a more modest slogan of “The Good Change”, later to be replaced by the grander sounding “The Polish Order” and finally “The Decalogue of Polish Issues”. This time secret agents, communists, and thieves as carriers of dystopia were being replaced by all kinds of traitors plotting with foreign powers, mainly with Germany, Russia and the European Union) to prevent the good change, which, like a true utopia, is both here, and not yet here.

What the great majority of the party’s xenophobic supporters did not realize was the fact that the projected ideal state was based on the political thought of Carl Schmitt, a German philosopher of law and an unrepentant member of the Nazi party, especially on his definition of the state, its power and its interests echoing the utopian principle of isolation and open or implicit hostility to the outside world.¹² References to Schmitt, unrecognizable to average party members and supporters, appeared only in theoretical papers produced by the party intellectuals and their fellow travellers, who disregarded the intrinsic irony of the ideological framework.

In practice, this pseudo-utopian nationalistic isolationism was achieved by the imposition of a psychological and ideological act of separation from the past and the outside world by creating a multitude of hostile “Others”, e.g., the European Union, Russia, Germany, LGBT+, immigrants, etc.; the rewriting of history and replacing the actual founders and heroes of the Solidarity Movement with those who played only a minor role, if at all; the radically increased control of public discourse by subordinating the state-owned media

and attempting to eliminate or take over the private ones, verbal rather than actual emphasis on law and order combined with the massive use of surveillance, investing the secret police with new powers, and the introduction of a new kind of highly aggressive official language exhibiting many characteristics of totalitarian discourse. The latter was combined with turning the state television and radio channels into instruments of projecting the party vision of the world in accordance with the principle “Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth”.

The same tendency can be observed in the party rallies organised by the ruling Law and Justice party which, although intended to be replicas of American political conventions, bear an uncanny resemblance to Nazi *parteitage* or Stalinist meetings, combining the feverish Nazi-like excitement on the stage with the visible apathy of the audience, resembling the participants in communist gatherings. This might be seen as the material manifestation of the highly dialectical relationship between the Fourth Republic/the Good Change project with the previous communist formation involving a rhetorical rejection of its superstructure as part of an attempt to retain as much of its base and institutions as possible.

China Dream

The idea of “China Dream” introduced by Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012 to refer to the country’s desirable future, was intentionally vague. Even more than in the case of other nebulous utopias, China Dream gave rise to many

contradictory visions of that future, ranging from the implementation of the liberal ideals of the rule of law, freedom, and civil rights to the restitution of a hard-core communist system. Then in May 2013, the official, though still rather vague interpretation of the slogan was published, defining it as “a collective dream of the Chinese people—a dream of China’s national rejuvenation”, providing the framework within which its more detailed interpretations would be allowed, meaning from now on all the details would be announced by Xi Jinping himself.¹³ And so, an additional important function of the utopian slogan was to encourage the population to enthusiastically express their support for the concept in order to demonstrate their political loyalty to the leader.¹⁴

Another Chinese nebulous utopia based on the catchphrase “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” exhibits the more global ambitions of China’s leadership, even more far-reaching than those of the pre-World War II Japanese “Co-Prosperty Sphere”.¹⁵

Brexit

The more recent catch-word Brexit depicts a somewhat more complex phenomenon, as it does not directly refer to the glorious future, but rather names the foundational act of the future ideal state. The catchy “Brexit” was used instead of the long and boring descriptive phrase “Britain leaving the European Union”. Even though they are synonymous on the level of linguistic semantics, in their actual social functioning they are characterized by radical ontological difference as only the former, that is “Brexit”, projects an ideal

community that does not yet exist, whereas dystopia is here and now. For Brexit supporters, Britain appeared as a dystopia realised, afflicted with poverty and unemployment, flooded by legal and illegal immigrants, and all other kinds of plagues imaginable and unimaginable, its health service in the death throes, disempowered by the European Union, governed by half-wit bureaucrats from Brussels imposing various harmful or simply silly laws and regulations such as measuring the admissible shape and length of bananas, etc.

The Oxford English Dictionary awarded the honour of coining the term to Peter Wilding, ironically a staunch supporter of Britain’s remaining in the European Union, rather than to Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, or Theresa May, the author of one of the most asinine tautologies of the 21st century “Brexit is Brexit”.

Like all nebulous utopias, the discourse of Brexit appealed to the standard values of freedom, sovereignty, dignity, prosperity, and longevity expressed in simple and vague but emotionally appealing slogans:

- Take Back Control
- We Want Our Country Back
- Believe in Britain
- The Will of the People
- Get Brexit Done. Unleash Britain’s Potential. Britain Deserves Better

For those who would have found such ideas either indifferent or incomprehensible, there were all kinds of variants of the down-to-earth and indisputable message: “Englishman good, foreigner bad”. The idea of Brexit opening the way to utopia was also introduced and motivated by

deceptively very precise and realistic slogans such as “We send the EU £350 million a week – let’s fund our NHS instead”, which combined a statement of facts with a noble appeal employing an updated variety of the longevity motif of classic utopias.

Despite all the opponents, cynics and unbelievers, in terms of its own self-description the Brexit utopia seems to be “working”, as proved by a declaration by the British prime minister made in May 2023: “We cut VAT on sanitary products; we reformed the alcohol duties that mean this summer you will be able to get cheaper beer in pubs. These are all very tangible benefits of Brexit that I’ve already delivered. [...] That’s a very important measure of people’s living standards – hugely outperforming what people thought.”¹⁶

The four examples of nebulous utopias discussed above share the same set of general characteristics with many other supposedly ideal states such as Moscow the Third Rome, the American Dream, America Made Great Again, Hungarian Hungary, the New Order, Estado Novo, the Polish Order, or those implicitly projected by the slogan-like representations of various cultural, social or political movements,

processes or ideals, e.g., *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the Cultural Revolution, the Springtime of Nations, the Great Leap Forward, Real Socialism, Socialism with a Human Face, Eurocommunism, Arab Spring, *glasnost*, *perestroika*, Cancel Culture, Woke, the Islamic State, etc., etc., etc. The powerful and cumulative effect of their extensive use depends mainly on reducing a complex set of phenomena to a simple, easily remembered concept or phrase, often, as in the case of slogans, assuming the proverb-like structure that suggests its links with unquestionable traditional wisdom, co-defining the identity of a particular group or community (e.g., “Better Red than Dead”) or making an appeal to establish an ideal community in the near future (e.g., “Make America Great Again”). Alternatively, they may be employed to construct a utopian or at least neutral self-description concealing a dystopian reality behind it (e.g., “Arbeit macht frei” or “re-education camps”)¹⁷. The increasing role played by nebulous utopias in the current political discourse, especially in its populist variety, as well as clear and present dangers posed by them, necessitate further comparative studies for both cognitive and pragmatic reasons.

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NOTES

1. For a detailed account of the main characteristics of the classic utopian discourse, see Artur Blaim, *Gazing in Useless Wonder. English Utopian Fictions 1516-1800*. Oxford, Peter Lang, 2013.
2. Nebulous utopia may sound like an oxymoron and/or another redundant addition to the self-propelling typologies and counter typologies so popular in recent times. These typologies range from reactionary and progressive utopias, through utopias of quiet felicity and flawed utopias, to nasty utopias, negative utopias, non-utopias, or critical utopias, with the same, or even greater diversity in the case of dystopias and anti-utopias where we encounter critical dystopias, satirical dystopias, cacotopias, feminist dystopias, anti-feminist dystopias, dystopias of tragic failure, state dystopias, dystopias of contingency, nihilistic dystopias, satirical anti-utopias, fundamentalist or dogmatic fictional anti-utopias, fundamentalist or dogmatic non-fictional anti-utopias, pre-emptive anti-utopias, or critical anti-utopias. The term was first used in an entirely different context and with a distinct meaning by Selina Busby, who characterized 'nebulous utopia' as an alternative future occupying “a middle space between abstract and concrete utopias, that is, somewhere between fantasy and actual change” (Selina Busby, *Applied theatre: A pedagogy of utopia*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, p. 86).
3. The redefinition of utopia as an “imaginary reconstitution of society” was proposed by Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
4. Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2017, p. 79.
5. From an objective/intersubjective perspective the Third Reich constitutes the best example of the ultimate dystopia posing as an ideal state and regarded as such by its rulers and many of its inhabitants.
6. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich*, Berlin, Ring-Verlag, 1923.
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinder,_K%C3%BCche,_Kirche.
8. Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Marketing the Third Reich Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2017, p.14.
9. Quoted after Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 221.
10. Similar developments occurred in other totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union, Communist China, Chile, or Cambodia.
11. The term was even used in what was at the time the semi-official party anthem.
12. For a more detailed discussion of the Fourth Republic project, see Artur Blaim, *Utopian Visions and Revisions, Or the Uses of Ideal Worlds*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang 2017, p.
13. Jinghan Zeng, *Slogan Politics. Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 31.
14. The China Dream is discussed in numerous book publications tracing its rooting in Chinese history and listing in detail its main objectives and the ways to achieve them in accordance with the official party line, e.g. James C. Hsiung (ed.), *The Xi Jinping Era: His Comprehensive Strategy Toward the*

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15. Linggui Wang (ed.), *China's Development and the Construction of the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind*, Singapore, Springer, 2023.
16. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/may/17/rishi-sunak-cites-cheap-beer-and-sanitary-products-as-benefits-of-brexite>
17. In this respect at least the slogan displayed at the gates in many Soviet forced labour camps (Gulag) was more honest as it made no empty promises to the inmates: "Labor in the USSR is a matter of honor, glory, courage and heroism".