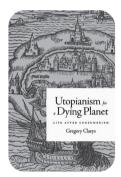Gregory Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet. Life after Consumerism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022

Georgiana Tudor
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
georgianatudor.art@yahoo.com

UTOPIAN SUSTAINABILITY FOR CLIMATE CATASTROPHE DEPRESSION

The book is divided into four parts with numerous subchapters and subtitles, organized thematically and historically. Subchapter 2 of Part I "The Mythical Background: Remembering Original Equality", Part II and Part III, as well as subchapter 9 of Part IV "Twentieth Century Consumerism and The Utopian Response" offer a long history of the ideas of Equality, Sociability, Luxury and Consumerism in literary or practical utopias from Antiquity and the Middle Ages to their flourished development in the past three centuries. The historical approach to these concepts is meant to be the basis for persuading the reader to embrace a practical utopia that reconciliates aspects of Marxism, Socialism, Buddhism[1] and Environmental Policies. For instance,

> The new paradigm owes to capitalism an emphasis on maximising technical efficiency, and an element of technological utopianism. In its dedication to equality and antipathy to exploitation it is indebted to socialism. But in the centrality it gives to sustainability it (…) is uniquely utopian.[2]

As its subtitle suggests, the study is written within the paradigm of Marxism. "Life after consumerism" is presented as life after capitalism, even though the program does not intend to make *tabula rasa* of the old systems, but urges for radical changes that should come out of every individual, as if the ecological purpose had a spiritual component.

However, the research is valuable as such beyond the theoretical motivations of the entire book. From a historical point of view, the ideas discussed are addressed in their change and evolution from the very beginning of European Culture: the Golden Age, Sparta, Christian Paradise, Utopia and Millenarianism, Thomas Morus (who coined the genre of utopia), Festivals, Pilgrimage, Intentional Communities, Mandeville, Rousseau, the French Revolution, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Edward Bellamy, William Morris, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Ernst Callenbach.

In addition, the book's four parts explore nearly six hundred primary sources and over one thousand five hundred secondary sources, most of them from the British-American cultural space. In engaging such a remarkable wealth of material, the usual divisions between disciplines are placed aside. Literature, Economics, Politics, Social and Cultural Studies works are used to persuade the reader of the need to engage into the development of the program of utopian sustainability.

Addressing the contemporary concern regarding an environmental apocalypse, the book motivates its initiative as a therapeutical solution for the excess of today's "doomerism", especially the effects of "depression, a sense of hopelessness, and a paralysing activity"[3]. Moreover, it attempts to reshape reality on a sustainable basis. The author does not question the validity of eco-narratives[4] and identifies their sources especially in works like those of Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (Bloomsbury, 2014), of Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change* (Picador, 2017) or of Jonathan Margolis,

A Brief History of Tomorrow (Bloomsbury, 2000).[5]

In a word, the book tries to propose and motivate "the need to imagine utopias in order to take action regarding climate crisis"[6]. The requested utopia would have to perform two functions: the futurological one, and the alterity function. The first one will satisfy the need for hope and push people into taking climate-motivated actions, while the other will deal with social needs and community-driven aspects that have to be continuously perfected. Gregory Claeys argues this need by presenting the history of such utopian projections and analysing their practicability.[7] According to his point of view, a practical utopia would be the answer to Climate Catastrophe[8]. The attempt assumed is to "rethink the very principles of our existence as a species from the ground up"[9] using the tradition of utopianism.

The point would be that "utopianism has functioned through the ages to hold up a critical mirror to deepening social inequality and oppression by the rich, as well as the folly of obsessively pursuing wealth and luxury."[10] Equally important, the main focus of the demonstration would be to propose the great utopian history for the use of creating concrete utopian events in concrete spaces. For instance, the author argues "the possibility of viable alternative ways of living in which equality, solidarity, communal identity, and belongness are prioritised as a kind of halfway house to utopia, or even approximating it."[11]

The idea of utopia as a concrete manifestation in a specific place in everyday life is supported by three theories, those of heterotopia, liminality and concrete utopia. First, Michel Foucault's heterotopia

would serve to conceive utopia no longer as an imaginary island, but as a specific public space; second, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's concept of liminality refers to the fact that utopia should no longer be approached as a perfect society, but as one that has to be continually improved; third, Ernst Bloch's concrete utopia mediates between the common points of utopia and society within the world envisioned by Karl Marx, yet this concept would bring the necessity not only to dream, or to imagine utopias, but to build them; and finally, the concrete utopia should be what propels communities to hope and what gives them the power to change public and political life. Here, it is not clear if the author's own program should be one way among the others of changing the actual society, or the only one available as the program addresses the entire world, not groups or communities.

The author assumes Bloch's reconciliation of Marxism and utopianism, referring to the elimination of the following utopian connotations: ideals and the *finale utopica*,[12] the relinquishment of final, abstract general scopes being often reiterated. Actually, the goal of the work is to present the inheritance of utopian genre as a viable tool for social engineering, without overtly stating this. The reason for that would be the intent to influence specific behaviours and attitudes on a large scale in order to produce desired ecological and social characteristics by knowledge control, resources control, economy control. For this reason, Gregory Claeys's book would stand near contemporary studies that analyse or propose utopia as a methodology for social engineering such as Michael Harvey's *Utopia in the Anthropocene: A Change*

Plan for a Sustainable and Equitable World (Routledge, 2019) or Teppo Eskelinen's edited anthology *Revival of Political Imagination: Utopia as Methodology* (Bloomsbury, 2022). Moreover, for Claeys, utopias of twenty-first century must include three qualities, as follows: equality, sociability and sustainability.[13]

To begin with, the first two ideas are specifical to historical utopias as they imagine different kinds of communities. This study narrows the meaning of community to the need for belongness. Equality is a controversial problem that is discussed as a material concern, even though "Utopia remained the ghostly nostalgic memory of the imagined original equality of a lost paradise or Golden Age"[14]. Notably, the examples discussed underline the sense of happiness, fullness, beauty, more exactly, feelings and states of being that are believed to accompany the so-called original equality. For Gregory Claeys, equality plays the role of facilitating sociability, which is enhanced as belongness to both a community, and a place. Equally important, sociability is a compensatory factor for the humans engaged in constructing a practical utopia, because the sense of belongness would bring happiness and fulfilment reducing the suffering out of voluntary material restraints.

Adjacent to the main demonstration, the author tries to identify specific sources of the contemporary western ethos, namely, Immanuel Kant's famous concept of "unsocial sociability," meaning "a propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society"[15]. In that case, the specific modern tension of being in and out of society as the society has the

family as a basis is discredited by Gregory Claeys by implying that the balance should lean towards society. Here the institution of the family is criticised because of the presupposed gathering of goods and property for the members of the family alone, there he claims that all emotional needs of the individual should be fulfilled by the society alone. In a word, being in society should exceed the importance of being in the family.[16] In reality, he tries to suggest entering into a new social contract whose commitments should include the new values, especially, equality, sociability and sustainability.

By the same token, Luxury and Consumerism are presented as the great evils criticised by utopias from different periods and as values that caused the soon-to-come climate catastrophe. Essentially, both luxury and consumerism are forms of excess and, to some extent, forms of waste. Irrational waste is an issue, but a certain amount of excess supply is preferred in spite of the lack of it in case that the unpredictability of life demand the use of more supply. By controlling one's supply or consumption, the result is controlling one's capacity. However, Claeys's demonstration implies the self-control into consuming less goods.

And yet again, the history of monachism in every form that includes practices of self-constraints presents cases of failure, not to mention that only a small part of the believers (of the community or society) ever tried to dedicate themselves to such practices or way of life. In a word, luxury and consumerism should be replaced by sustainability-driven self-constraints. Thus, the new ethos would imply austerity, ascetism, simplicity, and "a quest for *being* rather than *having* more – that is, a qualitative rather than quantitative enrichment"[17] which is, in essence, also, what almost every spiritual doctrine claims. As a result, the ecological utopian sustainability should be a form of salvation for the planet based on a voluntary ascetism that should be compensated by the joy of being with others.

In conclusion, the task assumed "is to sketch out a new paradigm which is neither capitalist nor Marxist but defined by utopian sustainability."[18] However, there is a bit of contradiction with parts of the book where specific Marxist and capitalist elements are kept in the new program in an eclectic way. Above all, the book is a sincere attempt to construct a form of optimism to oppose the climate catastrophe depression can be distinguished.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Claeys, Gregory, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet. Life after consumerism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022.

Hudson, Wayne, *Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, London, Macmillan, 1982.

Kant, Immanuel, *On history*, Indianapolis, Bobs-Merrill, 1963.

Nash, James A. , "On the Subversive of Virtue: Frugality", in David A. Crocker and Toby Linden (eds.), *Ethics of consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship (Philosophy and the Global Context)*, London, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997.

Kolbert, Elizabeth, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, London, New York, Sydney and Delhi, Bloomsbury, 2014.

Rich, Nathaniel, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change*, London, Picador, 2020.

Margolis, Jonathan, *A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London, New York, Sydney and Delhi, Bloomsbury, 2000.

Notes

1. Self-constraints and voluntary simplicity towards a spiritual fulfilment implied in utopian sustainability or schematic ecotopia.

2. Gregory Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet. Life after consumerism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2022, p. 462.

3. Gregory Claeys, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

4. One of the few remarks on the pros and cons of this debate is the issue of Green parties and industries' funding of the theoretical attempts, academia, grants, media and private groups to support their green policies which would carry no bias as long as the whole economy and consumerism as such is financially supported by the contemporary biggest economic actors.

5. It has to be mentioned that the book does not take into discussion the narratives of *Anthropocene* that already tried to name and explain the phenomenon of Global Environmental Crises and gathered them under the idea that for the first time in history man is capable of geologically influencing the fate of the Planet, or other alternative narratives to Global Warming. From the great range of eco-narratives, only a couple are taken into account.

6. Gregory Claeys, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

7. Thus, the work would inscribe itself in a category that could be called a plea for imagination, even though it is politically engaged.

8. Utopia as an answer to climate catastrophe takes into account only the humans' perspective, the agency of the planet being ignored. Thus, the continuous scientific measurement of the points that are to be changed is not discussed, even though the premises to such changes would be the actual activity of the climate that is constantly changing out or not of our control. As the author proposed the term of voluntary simplicity, the same term gives way to the increased ignorance of the complexity of the world we live in, including the planet, the climate or the environment.

9. Gregory Claeys, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

10. *Ibidem.*, p. 441.

11. *Ibidem.*, p. 129.

12. Wayne Hudson, *Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, Macmillan, 1982, p. 54.

13. Gregory Claeys, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 441.

15. Immanuel Kant, *On history*, Bobs- Merrill, 1963, p. 15.

16. As a matter of fact, when Marxist Leninism tried to eliminate religion, despite the fact that religion was one of the traditional powers in state, people rendered the party and the doctrine as the old religion with catastrophic consequences. Thus, a society whose base would be eliminated would be a society that would end up being rendered as a family and the consequences of such a scenario do not include only positive effects.

17. James A. Nash, "On the Subversive of Virtue: Frugality" in Croker and Linden, *Ethics of consumption*, 427.

18. Gregory Claeys, *op. cit.*, p. 453.