



Retrotopia

Zygmunt Bauman

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To Aleksandra, companion of my thought and life

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Zygmunt Bauman

polity

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Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia

This (in case you have forgotten) is what Walter Benjamin had to say in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ written in the early 1940s about the message conveyed by the Angelus Novus (renamed the ‘Angel of History’) – drawn by Paul Klee in 1920:

The face of the angel of history is turned toward the past. Where we perceived a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistably propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.

Were one to look closely at Klee’s drawing almost a century after Benjamin put on record his unfathomably profound and indeed incomparable insight, one would catch the Angel of History once more in full flight. What

might, however, strike the viewer most, is the Angel changing direction – the Angel of History caught in the midst of a U-turn: his face turning from the past to the future, his wings being pushed backwards by the storm blowing this time from the imagined, anticipated and feared in advance Hell of the future towards the Paradise of the past (as, probably, it is retrospectively imagined after it has been lost and fallen into ruins) – though the wings are pressed now, as they were pressed then, with such mighty violence ‘that the angel can no longer close them’.

Past and future, one may conclude, are in that drawing captured in the course of exchanging their respective virtues and vices, listed – as suggested by Benjamin – 100 years ago by Klee. It is now the future, whose time to be pillorized seems to have arrived after being first decried for its untrustworthiness and unmanageability, that is booked on the debit side. And it is now the past’s turn to be booked on the side of credit – a credit deserved (whether genuinely or putatively) by a site of still-free choice and investment of still-undiscredited hope.

*

Nostalgia – as Svetlana Boym, Harvard Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature, suggests¹ – ‘is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy’ (p. xiii). While in the seventeenth century nostalgia was treated as an eminently curable disease, which Swiss doctors, for instance, recommended could be cured with opium, leeches and a trip to the mountains, ‘by the twenty-first century the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic

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utopia and ended with nostalgia' (p. xiv). Boym concludes by diagnosing the present-day 'global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' – and proposes to view that epidemic as 'a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals' (ibid.). That 'defensive mechanism' consists essentially in 'the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding'. And she warns: 'The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one' (p. xvi). Finally, she offers a hint where to seek, and most likely find, such dangers: in the 'restorative' variety of nostalgia – one characteristic of 'national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories' (p. 41).

Let me observe that nostalgia is but one member of the rather extended family of affectionate relationship with an 'elsewhere'. This sort of affection (and so, by proxy, all the temptations and traps Boym spotted in the current 'global epidemic of nostalgia') have been endemic and un-detachable ingredients of the human condition since at least the – difficult to pinpoint exactly – moment of discovery of the *optionality* of human choices; or – more precisely – they are such since the discovery that human conduct is, and cannot but be, a matter of choice, and (by the all-but-natural contrivance of projection) that the world here and now is but one of the un-definable number of possible worlds – past,

present and future. The ‘global epidemic of nostalgia’ took over the baton from the (gradually yet unstoppably globalizing) ‘epidemic of progress frenzy’ in the relay race of history.

The chase, however, goes on, uninterrupted. It might change direction, even the racecourse – but it won’t stop. Kafka attempted to captivate in words that inner, inextinguishable and insatiable imperative that commands us – and probably will continue to do so till Hell freezes over:

I heard the sound of a trumpet, and I asked my servant what it meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me and asked: ‘Where is the master going?’ ‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it’s the only way I can reach my goal.’ ‘So you know your goal?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘I’ve just told you. Out of here – that is my goal.’²

*

Five hundred years after Thomas More put the name of ‘Utopia’ on the millennia-long human dream of return to Paradise or establishing Heaven on Earth, one more Hegelian triad formed by a double negation is presently nearing the completion of its full circle. After the prospects of human happiness – tied since More to a *topos* (a fixed place, a polis, a city, a sovereign state – each under a wise and benevolent ruler) – have been unfixed, untied from any particular *topos* and individualized, privatized and personalized (‘subsidiarized’ to human individuals after the pattern of snails’ homes), it is their turn now to be negated by what they valiantly and all but successfully attempted to negate. From that double

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negation of More-style utopia – its rejection succeeded by resurrection – ‘retrotopias’ are currently emerging: visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future, as was their twice-removed forebear:

According to the Irish poet Oscar Wilde, upon reaching the Land of Plenty, we should once more fix our gaze on the farthest horizon and re-hoist the sails. ‘Progress is the realization of Utopias’, he wrote. But the far horizon’s a blank. The Land of Plenty is banked in fog. Precisely when we should be shouldering the historic task of investing this rich, safe, and healthy existence with meaning, we’ve buried utopia instead. There’s no new dream to replace it because we can’t imagine a better world than the one we’ve got. In fact, most parents in wealthy countries believe their children will actually be *worse* off – from 53 percent of parents in Australia to 90 percent in France. Parents in wealthy countries expect their children will be worse off than they (as a percentage).

So notes Rutger Bregman in his most recent, 2016 book *Utopia for Realists* (subtitled *The Case for a Universal Basic Income, Open Borders, and a 15-hour Workweek*).

Privatization/individualization of the idea of ‘progress’ and of the pursuit of life’s improvements were sold by the powers that be and embraced by most of their subjects as liberation: breaking free from the stern demands of subordination and discipline – at the cost of social services and state protection. For a great and growing number of subjects, such liberation proved, slowly yet consistently, to be a mixed blessing – or even a blessing adulterated by a considerable and still swelling admixture of curse.

Annoyances of constraints were replaced with no less demeaning, frightening and aggravating risks that can't but saturate the condition of self-reliance by decree. The fear of non-contribution/corrections supplied by the conformity of yore, its immediate predecessor, was replaced by a no less agonizing horror of inadequacy. As the old fears drifted gradually into oblivion and the new ones gained in volume and intensity, promotion and degradation, progress and retrogression changed places – at least for a growing number of unwilling pawns in the game, they were – or felt themselves to be – doomed to defeat. This prompted the pendulums of the public mindset and mentality to perform a U-turn: from investing public hopes of improvement in the uncertain and ever-too-obviously un-trustworthy future, to re-investing them in the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness. With such a U-turn happening, the future is transformed from the natural habitat of hopes and rightful expectations into the site of nightmares: horrors of losing your job together with its attached social standing, of having your home together with the rest of life's goods and chattels 'repossessed', of helplessly watching your children sliding down the well-being-cum-prestige slope and your own laboriously learned and memorized skills stripped of whatever has been left of their market value. The road to future turns looks uncannily as a trail of corruption and degeneration. Perhaps the road back, to the past, won't miss the chance of turning into a trail of cleansing from the damages committed by futures, whenever they turned into a present?

The impact of such a shift, as I'll argue in this book, is visible and palpably felt *at every level* of social

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cohabitation – in its emergent worldview and the life-strategies that this worldview insinuates and gesticates. Javier Solana's latest diagnosis of the form that impact assumes³ at the level of the European Union – (an avant-garde experiment in raising national integration to a supra-national level) – may, with but relatively minor adjustment, serve as an X-ray image of the back-to-the-past turn observable at all other levels. Different levels deploy different languages, but use them to convey strikingly similar stories.

As Solana puts it, 'The European Union has a dangerous case of nostalgia. Not only is a yearning for the 'good old days' – before the EU supposedly impinged on national sovereignty – fuelling the rise of nationalist political parties; European leaders continue to try to apply yesterday's solutions to today's problems.' And he explains why it has happened, drawing his argument from the most recent, most drastic and most attention-drawing departures –

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the EU's weaker economies faced skyrocketing unemployment, especially among young people, while its stronger economies felt pressure to 'show solidarity' by bailing out countries in distress. When the stronger economies provided those bailouts, they included demands for austerity that impeded the recipients' economic recovery. Few were satisfied, and many blamed European integration.

– only to warn, that taking such charge at its face-value is a fatal mistake threatening to draw us away from the only way to sanitize the present plight that may be justifiably sought and hopefully found:

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While the economic pain that many Europeans feel is certainly real, the nationalists' diagnosis of its source is false. The reality is that the EU can be criticized for *the way it handled the crisis*; but it cannot be blamed for the global economic imbalances that have fuelled economic strife since 2008. Those imbalances reflect a much broader phenomenon: globalization. Some have used disenchanting experiences with globalization as an excuse for a return to protectionism and the supposedly halcyon days of strong national borders. Others, wistfully recalling a nation-state that never really existed, cling to national sovereignty as a reason to refuse further European integration. Both groups question the foundations of the European project. But their memory fails them, and their yearnings mislead them.

*

What I call 'retrotopia', is a derivative of the aforementioned second degree of negation – negation of utopia's negation, one that shares with Thomas More's legacy its fixity on a territorially sovereign *topos*: a firm ground thought to provide, and hopefully guarantee, an acceptable modicum of stability and therefore a satisfactory degree of self-assurance. It differs, however, from that legacy in approving, absorbing and incorporating the contributions/corrections supplied by its immediate predecessor: namely, the replacement of the 'ultimate perfection' idea with the assumption of the non-finality and endemic dynamism of the order it promotes, allowing thereby for the possibility (as well as desirability) of an indefinite succession of further changes that such an idea *a priori* de-legitimizes and precludes. True to the utopian spirit, retrotopia derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, *security* with *freedom*:

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the feat that both the original vision and its first negation didn't try – or, having attempted, failed – to attain.

I intend to follow this brief sketch of the most notable meanders of the post-More, 500-years-long history of modern utopia, with an exercise in unravelling, portraying and putting on record some of the most remarkable 'back to the future' tendencies inside the emergent 'retrotopian' phase in utopia's history – in particular, rehabilitation of the tribal model of community, return to the concept of a primordial/pristine self predetermined by non-cultural and culture-immune factors, and all in all retreat from the presently held (prevalent in both social science and popular opinions) view of the essential, presumably non-negotiable and *sine qua non* features of the 'civilized order'.

These three departures do not of course signal a straightforward return to a previously practised mode of life – since this would be, as Ernest Gellner convincingly argued, a sheer impossibility. They are rather (to deploy Derrida's conceptual distinction) conscious attempts at *iteration*, rather than *reiteration*, of the *status quo ante*, existing or imagined to have been existing before the second negation – its image having been by now significantly recycled and modified anyway, in the process of selective memorizing, intertwined with selective forgetting. All the same, it is the genuine or putative aspects of the past, believed to be successfully tested and unduly abandoned or recklessly allowed to erode, that serve as main orientation/reference points in drawing the road-map to Retrotopia.

To put the retrotopian romance with the past into the right perspective, one more caveat is – from the very start – in order. Boym suggests that a nostalgia epidemic

‘often follows revolutions’ – adding wisely that in the case of the 1789 French Revolution it was ‘not only the *ancien régime* that produced revolution, but in some respect the revolution produced the *ancien régime*, giving it a shape, a sense of closure and a gilded aura’, whereas it was the fall of Communism that gave birth to an image of the last Soviet decades as a ‘golden age of stability, strength and “normalcy”, the view prevalent in Russia today’.⁴ In other words: what we as a rule ‘return to’ when dreaming our nostalgic dreams is not the past ‘as such’ – not the past ‘wie es ist eigentlich gewesen’ (‘as it genuinely was’), which Leopold von Ranke advised historians to recover and represent (and many a historian, though with well short of unanimous acclaim, earnestly tried). We can read in E. H. Carr’s highly influential *What is History?*:⁵

the historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate . . . It used to be said that the facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order of context.⁶

Carr addressed his argument to his fellow professional historians, to whom he granted the earnest desire to find and convey truth, the whole truth, and only the truth. In 1961, when the first copies of *What is History?* appeared on bookshelves, the widespread use, indeed the commonality of the ‘politics of memory’ – a code-name for the practice of an arbitrary selection and/or discarding of facts for political (in fact partisan) purposes – was

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not, however, as yet a public secret as it has become now, thanks in large part to George Orwell's alarming, blood-curdling vivisection of the 'Ministry of Truth' continuously 'updating' (rewriting) historical records to catch up with the fast-changing state policies. Whatever road the professional seekers of historical truth have chosen to pursue, and however hard they might have tried to hold to the choice they made, their findings and their voices are not the only ones accessible on the public forum. Neither are they necessarily the most audible among competing voices, nor guaranteed to reach the widest audience – whereas their most resourceful competitors and most unscrupulous inspectors and managers tend to put pragmatic utility above the truth of the matter as the prime criterion in setting their right narrations apart from the wrong.

There are good reasons to surmise that the advent of the world-wide web and the Internet signals the decline of Ministries of Truth (though by no means the twilight of the 'politics of historical memory'; if anything, it expanded the opportunities for this to be conducted, while making its instruments accessible more widely than ever before and its impacts potentially more intense and consequential – even if not more durable). The demise of the Ministries of Truth (that is, of an unchallenged monopoly by the powers-that-be on passing verdicts on truthfulness) hasn't, however, smoothed the path for the messages sent by the professional seekers and articulators of the 'truth of the matter' to public consciousness; if anything, this made that road yet more cluttered, twisted, treacherous and wobbly.

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