

Happy Birthday, Utopia!

(You Deserve a Present)

John Clark

2016

This year marks five-hundred years since the appearance of English social philosopher, author, statesman, and Renaissance humanist Thomas More's famous *Utopia*. We might also consider that it is just over five-hundred years since the definitive anti-utopia, Machiavelli's *The Prince* was published.

We might say that the entire modern age has been a struggle between utopia and anti-utopia. Even more, it is a struggle between utopia and the dystopia that is at the heart of the dominant utopia.

Remember also that about fifty years ago, American visionary architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller posed the alternative of "Utopia or Oblivion." Today, more than ever, we are capable of understanding the full meaning of this dilemma. Only utopia can prevent oblivion. But utopia is also the cause of oblivion.

Unfortunately, the utopia of oblivion is the dominant one. Mussolini said that the Twentieth Century was the Century of the State. In fact, it turned out to be the Century of the Corporate State and the Corporate State Utopia. Its Corporate Moment spawned the post-WWII Suburban Utopia that mutated into the end of the century Gated Community. Its Statist side had already come to rotten fruition in the Worker's Paradise of the Stalinist Collective Farm that persists now only in certain vodka-fueled bouts of Cold War nostalgia.

Today, we're faced with the dominance of Late Capitalist pseudotopias and pseudo-eutopias, spaces that fake place, that fake being and goodness. They are the spaces of economistic, bureaucratic, and technocratic domination. They are the spaces in which the work of leisure takes place, the imitation of life replaces life, and a simulacrum of society devours community. They are the spaces in which nihilism (the loss of faith in life and community) is internalized so completely that those who rebel against the ruling version can only do so through a reactive, dissident nihilism.

One must wonder where the liberatory utopian communitarian impulse is today. Where is the creative spirit of community? Our problem is that the spirit of Nowhere seems to be nowhere. Even worse, the spirit of Where seems to be nowhere. The right has an almost absolute monopoly on materialist utopia, actually-existing utopia, while the left, at least since the dissolution of the Stalinist Workers' Paradise, specializes in idealist utopia. One side constructs actually-existing pseudo-utopias and inundates the masses with hyper-utopian propaganda, the other propagates the edifying thought that "another topos is possible." To paraphrase Alice, "I am (utopian) tomorrow, I am (utopian) yesterday, but never I am (utopian) today." Utopia deserves a present.

But why should the dominance of pseudo-utopia be a surprise? Whoever controls the imagination controls utopia. And the vast majority of the imaginers and the bulk of imaginary power are on the side of domination. Amazon's headquarters in Seattle has been labeled "the ultimate tech utopia."

Google's headquarters has been called a "glass utopia." Zappo's CEO, Tony Hsieh, says that he has been a "student of utopian communities" since his first rave. So, not surprisingly, "The Downtown Project" which he developed around the Zappo's Las Vegas corporate headquarters has been called "a start-up utopia." We all know where utopia lies today. Sadly, few of us know how it lies today. We suffer the consequences.

Marx posed a great question: “Who will educate the educators?” But he never found a good answer. He’s not alone. Communitarian anarchists haven’t found convincing answers to questions like “Who will anarchize the anarchists,” and “Who will communize the communists?” (Answers mean “doing it”).

Charisma (what makes us love what we love) is still with capitalism. How can we co-opt charisma? How can we create the charismatic community, that is, the free community as the object of collective utopian desire, the community that lies at the heart of each person’s fundamental fantasy?

We might reflect on the fact that after a century and a half of anarchist communalism, there is not a single anarchist intentional community of ten thousand people, or five thousand, or even a thousand, in which mutual aid and voluntary federation are everyday life. We claim that people can organize themselves into free and cooperative communities, yet we do not have functioning examples.

It would be a lie to claim that the state or capitalism forbid us to establish them, whatever obstacles they may create. We forbid ourselves. Maybe we should declare ourselves the utopian Zappotistas. We’ve been Zapped. It’s no accident that “Just do it!” is a corporate slogan (symbolizing corporate Victory). For the most part, we “just do it” for them, and we just think about doing it for ourselves.

What we urgently need are realized communities of liberation and solidarity that are also communities of awakening and communities of care. Such utopian communities are “impossible communities” because they are outside the bounds of the dominant institutional structures, the dominant social ideology, the dominant social imaginary, and the dominant social ethos. They become possible when they become actual. They become possible through the process of creating, here and now, a new social institutional structure, a new counter- ideology or world view, a new social imaginary, and a new social ethos. We realize utopia by becoming citizens of utopia.

The citizens of utopia are awakened beings. (“Where y’at?” is the most revolutionary question in history). They are awakened to their own experience, to the living reality of all beings around them, to the life of the human community, to the life of community of nature. They are toplan utopians. They renounce the abstract, alienated and totally insane world we call normal everyday life, and dwell instead in the rich, dense, exquisite and astounding lifeworld, the world of Where We Are.

This is a world that is, as surrealists have always proclaimed, a world of wonder, infused with the marvelous. The toplan utopian is, as Gary Snyder has said, the “truly experienced person,” who “delights in the ordinary.” They know that the extraordinary (the eutopian) is at the very heart of the ordinary (the toplan).

This is why a thinker like Gustav Landauer, the greatest libertarian communitarian philosopher, is so important to the anarchist tradition. Landauer proclaimed the need for the creation of both liberated base communities and a larger community of communities, a rich and thriving communitarian culture.

Landauer pointed out that we will never have a free communal society unless what we aspire to in the larger society is present within the person and small group. Everything depends on the (material and spiritual) base, where we find the greatest intensity of experience, of life, and of relationship to other beings, to the world, and to the chaosmos of nature.

Landauer realized that the communitarian impulse can only spread throughout society (we might say “like an epidemic of healing”) through the powerful force of example offered by the existence of realized practice. He understood that social revolution is not possible if the system of domination has an iron grip on the social ethos. We need to go beyond prefiguration to figuration and transfiguration. We must actually see the new Face of the Real.

There must be living examples of the new way of life embodied in thriving communities of liberation—preferably within walking distance from our own town, village or urban neighborhood. Masses of people will then abandon a corrupt and moribund society, and motivated by a kind of “positive envy” or inspiration, they will flock to the new communities in which human and natural potentialities freely flourish.

It’s only when utopian aspirations are embodied in the actual practice of communities in all fundamental spheres of social determination that utopia can finally become more than a noble fantasy or a noble lie. Only then can it become a toplan and eutopian reality.

Utopia will finally receive its well-deserved present.

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His most recent book is *The Tragedy of Common Sense*, available for pre-order at ChangingSunsPress.com. He works on ecological restoration, permaculture, and eco-communitarianism on an 87-acre Land project on Bayou La Terre in the forests of coastal Mississippi.

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