



ARTICLE

## The End of Utopias?

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### ABSTRACT

The present article discusses the legitimacy of the question: Are we really living in the era of “the end of utopias”? It is argued that a positive response to this question is possible only if, when considering utopias, their predominantly “left” content, left phraseology and the declaration of left anti-capitalist goals are placed at the forefront. However, if we approach utopias from the point of view of their objectively executable functions, their primary content is no longer utopian in the usual sense. A utopia is always a “function of the real” (Labica, 2004, p. 291). Contemporary utopian consciousness should be considered taking into account that: (a) utopias are inextricably linked with capitalism; (b) they serves its transformation (defining its “spirit” by its criticism) in transition from one stage to another; (c) they are an expression of the worldviews and aspirations of social groups (classes) rising at different stages of capitalism. Therefore, in order to find the place in the social structure in which modern utopias are born, it is necessary to locate the “rising class”. The article defines the rising class as one that has, at least potentially, the greatest productivity. Its role in social production is increasing; around it are formed production, cultural and other relations, which become decisive according to the foreseeable historical perspective. The “creative class” is considered in terms of a contemporary rising class. Dazzled by its bright prospects, it is inclined to impose its utopia of the “creative economy” on the majority. The consequence of the rise of the “creative class” is a concomitant growth in the precarious social group of service workers and other social strata for whom the prospects of gaining entry into the ranks of the cognitariat are becoming increasingly unstable. Now that these strata are more likely to struggle for their existence, they find themselves trying to defend what has been lost without raising questions about the need to radically transform the social system. Variants of modern utopian consciousness are considered, proceeding from the outlined view of the socio-structural transformation of contemporary societies.

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**Introduction**

Today, it is difficult to resist the fact that “the end of utopias” did not transpire as predicted by G. Marcuse (Marcuse, 2004). No less often is it said that utopias have changed, e.g. become “concrete” or “private”, that their only function was “civil repair” (Alexander, 2002) or that their object was the reform of democracy. According to F. Ainsa, the creation of “partial” or “fragmentary” utopias is, apparently, the task of developed democratic societies, which should be solved by social collectives not loner-dreamers. At the present time, the traditional contradiction between the struggle for a complete renewal of society and maintenance of the status quo is being gradually replaced by a multiplicity of such mutually agreed “partial” utopias appearing in the spheres of education and labour or seen in the development of certain “segments” of contemporary urbanity. This becomes possible thanks to the recognition of two fundamental truths: the increasing complexity of the manifestations of a multipolar, interdependent world, and the need to search for a “consensus” (Ainsa, 1997).

However, reasoning of this kind differs little from the statement concerning the “end of utopias” if by the latter we refer to revolutionary utopias whose stated goal is to go beyond the limits of capitalism. In this case, if, when considering utopias, the predominantly “leftist” content, left-wing phraseology, declarations of anti-capitalist goals, etc., are at the forefront, we certainly live in the era of the end of utopias.

Nevertheless, if utopias are approached from the point of view of their objectively executable functions, their main content is no longer utopian in the traditional sense; perhaps those who proclaim the “end of utopias” are simply looking for and failing to find them in their usual place “under the sun”. However, a utopia is always a “function of the real” (Labica, 2004, p. 291). It is from this point of view that contemporary utopian consciousness should be considered, irrespective of the form it takes.

Such an approach implies that utopianism:

- a) is inextricably linked with capitalism;
- b) serves its transformation (defining its “spirit” by its criticism) in the transition from one stage to another;
- c) is an expression of the worldview and aspirations of social groups (classes) rising at different stages of capitalism.

**Utopianism and the spirit of capitalism**

The inextricable connection between utopia and capitalism is best viewed in the light of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s concept of the changing “spirits of capitalism”. In the light of this concept, a utopia consists primarily in a criticism of capitalism.

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Utopian consciousness is closely connected with the image of capitalism, which serves as the object of its criticism. To a large extent, this determines both rising and descending consciousness and, as such, consists in the suspended state of relevant social groups. From this point of view, liberal utopianism is a critique of real capitalism in the sense of the pragmatic and not ideologically overburdened continuation of the domination of capitalist class – not to mention socialist criticism, which in this sense is the direct heir of the liberal (Rosanvallon, 2007, p. 219).

Thus, utopian-critical consciousness is, so to speak, negatively shaped by the existing image of capitalism and the legitimising strategies transformed under its influence (i.e., the “spirit of capitalism”). Even in a critical reaction to the discomfort of social existence, utopian consciousness cannot raise itself far above this existence. Thus, utopian consciousness and imagination objectively perform the function of transforming (but not overcoming!) capitalism by influencing its “spirit”. The “spirit of capitalism” depends on utopias to the extent that it responds to the aspirations of the rising classes, placing upon their aspirations the means of their legitimisation. In legitimising itself, capitalism must connect its existence with the satisfaction of the aspirations and needs of the representatives of these classes, in such a way that these become possible (or even uniquely possible) precisely within the framework of capitalism (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2011, pp. 56–61).

In other words, if we were actually living in the period of the end of utopias, this would imply the end of capitalism. Capitalism certainly – and unambiguously – exists, although its continued existence is hardly problem-free. And this also means that utopias (or at least utopian consciousness and imagination) exist; their existence is a logical necessity. Those who talk about the “end of utopias” are referring in historical terms to the specific socialist, communist, anarchic and other left-wing critiques of capitalism that are characteristic of its industrial stage. The present “end of utopias”, however, is just the end of the utopias of the era of industrial capitalism, traces of which are still evident in the vague dreams of some leftists concerning an “educational dictatorship” in the Jacobin style (Johnson, 2012).

These utopias ceased to be relevant because they had already done their critical work on the transformation of early capitalism, with its “Protestant work ethic”, into the “labour society” (Castel, 2009) with – to use the terminology of Boltanski and Chiapello – the “second spirit of capitalism”. In so doing, they already managed to make way for those critiques that, to a large extent, determined the “third spirit of capitalism.” However, these critiques are not generally considered to be “utopian” since “utopias” are necessarily communist-socialist in their orientation.

### **Political discourses of the rising minority**

Adhering to the position of K. Mannheim, we proceed from the assumption that utopianism, at least in the epoch of capitalism, creates rising classes (Mannheim, 1991, p. 122). Therefore, in order to locate the place in the social structure in which modern utopias are born, it is necessary to identify the “rising class”. In what does it consist? Which classes can today be considered to be “rising”?

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Taking as samples the leading classes of the Modern era (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat), we can say that the rising class is that which disposes, if only potentially, the greatest productivity. Due to its increasing role in social production, the members of such a class occupy key positions, are able to defend themselves, can sabotage production and communications, etc. Around it are formed production, cultural and other relations, which become decisive according to the foreseeable historical perspective.

When it comes to a contemporary rising class, the source of technical and cultural innovations allegedly playing a decisive role in the economy is usually considered in terms of “creative class” or “cognitariat”.

In the past, utopias that transformed the spirit of capitalism were associated with rising classes, which constituted, if not a majority of the population, then a very significant (quantitatively and qualitatively) part thereof: hence the “Third Estate”, the working class and, finally, the “middle class”.

However, the specific character of the present time consists in the fact that, if there are now rising classes, then they are quantitatively rather insignificant. Even if we delineate the boundaries of the creative class as widely as possible, as R. Florida is inclined to do, it still represents a clear minority of the working population of even the most advanced countries. A critical examination of the concept of the creative class reveals that the majority of the social groups attributed to it are in fact representative of the service sector, which was, so to speak, renamed in advance into “also creative class”.

Moreover, due to ongoing economic and technological changes, these individual groups are constantly shrinking. No sooner does one imagine oneself to be the main beneficiary from the achievements of progress, to which a bright future is almost guaranteed, than the next stage of development demonstrates this is not so. The periodic flaring up and fading of the utopias of the middle class, the creative class, and the bohemian bourgeoisie are cyclically accompanied with outbursts of jubilation and the loss of hopes. The utopia of “self-realisation” and the involvement of the majority of the population in a certain “creative economy” look very problematic in the outlined perspective. This understanding is reflected, in particular, in the following passage of R. Florida, the creator of “creative class theory”. In his view, the creative class has enough power, talent and strength to play a significant role in the transformation of the world. Its representatives (in fact, the entire society) have the opportunity to turn their inclination towards introspection and the revaluation of values into practical action aimed at a more ambitious renewal and transformation of society...” In practice, things are never quite so simple. In order to achieve genuine social cohesion, the creative class must offer representatives of other classes a realistic vision of ways for improving life, if not by participating in the creative economy, then at least by accessing some of its benefits. If it does not take these actions, the already constantly deepening social and economic contradictions will become even more significant. I am afraid this will lead to the result that our life at the top of an unhappy society will be far from serene. It is time for the creative class to grow up and take responsibility (Florida, 2016).

Whatever may be said in the sense of creativity not being “the prerogative of a select few geniuses”, the most recent utopia that engenders capitalism cannot

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be a utopia for the majority. As V. S. Martianov notes, “the utopias of the creative class, e.g. hipster urbanism, gentrification and the creative industries, are oriented towards privileged urban minorities” (Martianov, 2016, p. 49). In reality, fully-fledged membership of the “creative class” consists in only a very few leaders, e.g. engineers, scientists, top-managers, etc. The peculiarity of their social position generates a utopian consciousness typical of the self-defeating branch of the Enlightenment, which is not oriented to the progress of mankind as a whole, but rather to the progress of Reason (Fishman, 2016) and, of course, its most “advanced” adepts. These latter, as winners, will receive everything, while all the others are taken into account at best as a problem to be solved, an annoying hindrance. It is possible to consider the specific utopia of the top of the “creative class” to be transhumanism. A worldview that pins its hopes on technological progress is not surprising for a social group that considers itself to be the main productive force, whose role will only grow, while other people will gradually become superfluous. However, in its fantastical variant, it is also attractive – both to superfluous and potentially superfluous people – to the extent that it promises a future in which artificial intelligence, robots and some kind of universal machine are engaged in production and service and the human being is fully supported by them. However, objectively speaking, this is precisely the utopia of a shrinking minority, which actually addresses itself not to “humanity” and “society”, but to that chimerical state of singularity when both humanity and society become superfluous. It only has a chance to transform capitalism if its adherents become more socially conscious than they are now.

It would certainly be a mistake to reduce the political discourses of this rising minority to transhumanism, with its attendant deviation from social issues. Representatives of the same minority, who understand the limitations of the “utopia of the creative class”, reflect on the rather gloomy prospects that the continuing progress of science and technology implies for everyone else today. For example, Martin Ford devoted a whole book to these perspectives, whose title speaks for itself: *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*. In this book, Ford already comes very close to raising the question of the need for another transformation of capitalism: “We will have to get rid of the idea that workers are a source of funds for supporting pensioners and financing social programmes and instead admit that this source comprises our entire economy as a whole” (Ford, 2016, pp. 368–369). However, it is just this kind of criticism on the part of the (so far) rising minority, which in the future can also be assimilated by the majority that, in its mass form, expresses itself politically in other ways.

### **Political discourses of the non-rising majority**

What about the majority that does not belong to the “creative class”? This consists, for the most part, in the service sector workers for whom to join the ranks of the creative minority is an almost impossible dream. This class, if not yet comprising “superfluous people”, consists of people involved in “useless work”, the demand for which is conditioned by the existence of other people engaged in similarly useless

work (Greber, 2014, p. 151). Moreover, the scope of this useless labour is reduced in proportion to the development of processes of technological substitution.

In the classical Mannheimian scheme, the specificity of ideologies and utopias is explained by the class position and the distorted point of view dictated by it, from which only a part of the real state of things is visible, and the other part is not visible or not completely visible. This “over-rational” scheme can be corrected in the spirit of D. Greber by replacing the point of view with the “point of imagination”, with the illusory consciousness being explained by a “skew of the imagination” (Greber, 2014a, p. 139). It is possible that this new interpretation is itself the product of the consciousness of certain social groups (service workers), whose representatives are guided primarily “by imagination”, and therefore that the position of the other groups is also assessed from the point of view of their “imbalances”.

Since there is no sustainable role in social production for social groups that are clearly not “rising” (“useless work” cannot be assigned to such), they also cannot offer projects for the reorganisation of society as a whole, i.e. analogues of classical utopias. The opportunity here, consisting not even in improving one’s position, but simply in not losing what one has, is illusory for these groups; therefore, they cannot see a “bright future”. However, they are still capable of expressing outrage at their position, clothed in rhetoric whose ideological zeal is neither right nor left (Žižek, 2012, pp. 150–152). Unlike the utopias of the industrial period, which were expressions of the aspirations of classes possessing the real possibility of empowered communication (because they really controlled important spheres of the economy), these sentiments are engendered by social groups whose ability to communicate with power centres is very limited. W. Beck noted that nowadays the voice of a person as a citizen and a producer does not mean much; however, the voice of a consumer, a “global client”, which grabs more and more power, means a lot. Like capital, it disposes a global “no”, a no-buying power. Like capital, a political consumer can use the “no” policy as a calculated side effect of economic actions; that is, uncontrolled and with insignificant own costs” (Beck, 2007, p. 317). But, apparently, this point of view no longer fully reflects reality. If, for the majority, salaries, in terms of purchasing power parity, do not increase (which is already a fact repeatedly confirmed by statistics), arguments concerning the alleged “power of non-buying” acquire a distinct shade of bullying. In addition, since the consumer does not constitute a class, consumers can neither sabotage communication nor production. At the same time, in the workplace, this consumer is usually a service worker, in which context he is obliged to understand a client who does not need to understand him, because he is “always right”. The skewing of imagination is thus caused by the fact that the service sector worker is doomed to constantly enter into a relationship of one-sided, “impotent” communication. In this process, he must constantly show benevolence and cordiality, affability, politeness, affability and graciousness, restraint, finesse, solicitude, skill and erudition, as well as the ability to use a smile (Basova, 2008).

The position of the service worker – the proletarian of contemporaneity – is characterised by the fact that he or she produces someone else’s “quality of life” at the

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expense of his or her own. A large part of the service worker's life, therefore, consists of pretending to be something that one is not. It's not even about selling one's labour, time or skills, but rather about disposing one's spiritual qualities, one's personality. In a literal sense, the service worker is involved in "selling oneself". His or her natural desire therefore consists in life on the rent, which implies the cessation of such a trade. Today it leads, for example, to downshifting, in which attitude many find an attractive alternative to the "rat race". It also includes many alternative ways of life - in squats, anarchic communities, eco-villages, etc.

Be that as it may, if the rethinking of the connection between a social position and a political discourse with an emphasis on "imagination" is adequate to the current state of things, it is obvious that a "skewed imagination" creates very specific forms of political thinking. Utopias (as well as ideologies) in the former sense imply the primacy of rational goal setting, which goes beyond the framework of self-consciousness entirely as a consequence of "skewing of the imagination". Suspension within the framework of this distortion, as presently seems to be the case, gives rise to the absolutisation (if not ontologisation) of the communication method inherent to the social group (in this case, based on a quick reaction tailored to the customer's desires). This leads to the justification of the "concrete utopia" that is embodied "here and now" in forms of social organisation that reveal a clear "similarity with capitalism itself" (Manche, 2015).

Today's majority political discourses are almost diametrically opposed to the utopias of the left in the traditional sense. This is an expression of the political aspirations of the "non-rising-class" and concerns the need to change the world to incorporate the virtues of a "concrete utopia". Since the skewed imagination of these social groups simply cannot imagine a "place that is not there", it rather focuses on a "place that (and only that!) is located in "civil society" and "democracy". This kind of political imagination is easily assimilated by populist identity politicians and (thus) unlikely to transcend the emerging rental society. These modern "utopias" reflect the worldview of those social groups that cannot seriously count on this or that form of income as compensation for their lost former social subjectivity. Therefore, they fluctuate between the desire for income compensation for the loss of subjectivity (which they often do not have and do not expect in a stable form) (Fishman, 2016a, pp. 116–129) and gaining some "autonomy", which for them becomes the only realistic strategy in relation to the formation of the rental society.

Ideologically, the requirements of income compensation can be disguised in the clothes of the former utopias; however, then we should refer to "reactionary utopias", whose adherents want to return to a place that is no longer there. It has been repeatedly observed that members of movements like "Occupy Wall Street" do not demand anything concrete; rather, they protest to signal their indignant outrage. But why? With full and frank awareness of their situation, they cannot demand anything but their share of rent; however, that entails admitting that they are superfluous people. Nevertheless, recognising oneself as such either implies being reconciled to one's position or posing the question more radically than these superfluous people are

capable of doing. They are not yet able to coldly face the facts because they believe that they still have something to lose.

### **Is a revolutionary utopianism possible today? (From the “function of the real” beyond the limits of capitalism)**

The foreseeable future will bring (and is already bringing) a steady decline in jobs due to technological substitution, including for those who are still engaged in the service sector. Here we refer not to a skewed imagination, but about the fact that the social position that generates such an imagination itself ceases to be economically in demand. If an increasing number of people turns out to be banally superfluous, then it becomes more than simply another kind of utopia of self-actualisation; to that will be added another clear inflection of the utopia of demand, contrasted with the utopia of the total superfluity of a person in the context of transhumanism.

The present situation is quite reminiscent of early capitalism, in which the bourgeoisie was an unquestionably rising class, while the proletariat was the non-rising - moreover, “suffering” – class. Now it is the “creative class” that is rising. Like the bourgeoisie before it, it is just as dazzled by its bright prospects and just as inclined to impose its utopia of the “creative economy” on the majority; in this way, it closely resembles the classic utopia of the self-made man, according to which every hired worker can join the bourgeois. The consequence of the rise of the “creative class” is a concomitant growth in the precarious social group of service workers and other social strata for whom the prospects of gaining entry into the ranks of the cognitariat are becoming increasingly untenable. Now that these strata are more likely to struggle for their existence, they find themselves trying to defend what has been lost without raising questions about the need to radically transform the social system. But must it always be thus? And is today’s analogue of the proletariat also only temporarily a non-rising class, which will proclaim its revolutionary utopias at some point in the future?

The hope for the realisation of this assumption is that the proletariat of the industrial phase of capitalism’s development was not originally a rising class in many respects. It was a class whose political rights, access to culture and education were highly circumscribed; they did not even have enough free time for such things. And it created revolutionary utopias, because in the socio-political sense the prospects for its rise under capitalism seemed precarious and untenable. For the workers, the prospect of recovery through overcoming capitalism looked more realistic and convincing than the utopia of the bourgeoisie, which claimed that everyone could become a bourgeois. Nevertheless, the industrial proletariat was an objectively rising class, since its economic role was growing by leaps and bounds. This seemed so obvious that even a look directed towards a fantastic future revealed [as in H. G. Well’s novel *The Time Machine* (1895)], along with the privileged “Eloi”, the oppressed “Morlocks” on which, in fact, everything depended. Ultimately, for several decades, a socio-political model was victorious in which the economic role of the working class (and then the “middle class” of wage workers) had become a condition for ensuring its political, cultural and

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educational rise. Thus, it was that the revolutionary utopias of going beyond capitalism turned into a critique that was functional for capitalism.

With the social layer of service workers replenishing the ranks of the precariat, the situation is different. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that workers in the service sector have long represented a major part of the working population of most developed countries. On the other hand, the development of new technologies is buffeting them with increasing force; they are the primary candidates for victimhood of technological replacement processes. A single development of a particular kind of software is all that is necessary to force many workers out of the labour market, beginning with accountants and ending with taxi drivers or workers in the spheres of trade and fast food. Many have already been superseded; others will be in the foreseeable future. Today, technological progress destroys more jobs than it creates; in addition, the majority of newly created jobs are worse paid and require fewer qualifications (Ford, 2016, pp. 93–177).

Of course, the growth of the creative class, accompanied by the process of its gentrification, creates vacancies for all sorts of domestic servants, which partly takes care of matters that were formerly a strictly familial sphere. A portion of this new servant echelon, according to R. Florida, even has sufficient social capital to qualify for entry into the ranks of the creative class (Florida, 2007, p. 94). Nevertheless, it is obvious that the new gentry cannot provide employment for all those in need of it. In addition, there is no guarantee that the process of technological replacement will not in the foreseeable future lead to a reduction in the ranks of the creative class itself.

Thus, by contrast with the industrial proletariat and even with the “middle class”, the majority of workers in the service sector have no prospect of social recovery. The prospect of such a rise (“involvement in the creative economy”) can only ever apply to the minority of this class, consisting of the servants of the new gentry. Others gradually turn out to be the “suffering class” or “underclass”, whose condition can be maintained by the payment of “basic income” or some other kind of benefit. According to Z. Bauman, “in a society where consumers, and not producers, are the driving force of economic prosperity (it is precisely in a revival caused by the growth of consumption that we place our hopes as a means of solving economic problems), the poor do not represent value as consumers: they are not spurred to make purchases by flattering advertisements, they do not have credit cards, they cannot count on current bank account loans and the goods they need typically bring tiny profits to traders or even do not bring any profits at all. Not surprisingly, these people have been relegated to the “underclass”: they are no longer a temporary anomaly awaiting correction, but a class outside classes, a group outside the “social system”, an estate without whose existence it would be more convenient and everyone else would feel better.” (Bauman, 2005, pp. 93–94) Therefore, a stipend will be provided not so much for humane reasons as for the sake of maintaining the purchasing power of the majority of consumers, which is necessary in order to continue the mass production of goods and services and to make a profit.

In fact, given the development of technological substitution processes within the framework of capitalism, the most favourable future variant for the majority of service

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workers and other members of the precariat is the construction of a kind of neo-feudalism. This means that, in general, members of the creative class, who do not need many servants, will nevertheless keep them for humanitarian reasons, for preserving social stability and in order to ensure a relatively comfortable social environment. But even this comparatively favourable scenario does not give rise to real opportunities for the social uplift of the majority, since, according to the logic of capitalism, such opportunities can only appear in social groups whose economic role is growing, not decreasing.

The logic of capitalism, which, from the economic point of view, leaves open the possibility of cultural, educational, etc. rises for the majority – a possibility still representing economic value – is also the logic of utopia as a “function of the real”. If there is no room for such a possibility (the neo-feudal perspective looks more like an anti-utopia), this implies that the path of utopia as a “function of the real” is closed to the majority. It also means that the prospect of recovery for the majority is now associated only with a society in which the production of “goods” and “services” in itself will lose its meaning, both as a leading way for human self-identification and as a source of profit; however, it does not imply the cancellation of a person’s need for creative activity and participation in public life. Therefore, it is quite possible that it is only now that the time of real, revolutionary utopias – irreconcilable and reducible solely to the “function of the real” – is truly upon us.

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