Irony and the Double Normativity of Utopia.

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This contribution explores the normative dimension of utopias, broadly understood as narratives that prefigure perfect worlds, in which every trace of injustice disappears and a precise idea of good society is realised. By investigating the normativity of utopia, the fundamental role of irony will emerge. Irony is not only an essential attitude in utopian thought with respect to the reality of existing ethical-political relations, but is also a relativising attitude within the very models proposed by the different utopias. First, drawing on Rainer Forst's thematisation of the double normativity of irony, I explore the first level of the normativity of utopia. Secondly, I examine the second level of the normativity of utopia. In fact, according to Forst, irony does not only turn outwards. This aspect constitutes a first level of normativity that could be defined as 'diagnostic', which can be fully placed within a typically theoretical-critical method. The ironic posture, on the contrary, also turns inwards, that is, towards the proposed utopia itself. Third, I point out that the ironic side of utopian thought is linked to criticism towards naive conceptions of progress that delude humans into the idea of a possible perfection.

— IRONY
— NORMATIVITY
— RAINIER FORST
— JUSTICE
— DIALECTICS.

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Introductory Remarks

The aim of this contribution is to investigate the normative dimension of utopias, broadly understood as narratives that prefigure perfect worlds, in which every trace of injustice disappears, and a precise idea of good society is realised. The approach is not so much historical-philological as ethical-political and critical. The background to this contribution is the reference to the problematic relationship between critical social theory and utopian thinking, which several authors have taken up and explored in depth. By investigating the normativity of utopia, the fundamental role of irony – which can be traced back to a form of skepticism – will emerge. Irony is not only considered an essential attitude in utopian thought with respect to the reality of existing ethical-political relations, but is also, and perhaps more profoundly, a relativising attitude within the very models proposed by the different utopias. It is an attitude that acts as an antidote to the pervasive risk of the perfect society imagined by utopias being transformed into its opposite.

The author of reference for this investigation is Rainer Forst, a philosopher who can be traced back to the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School. He has identified a new horizon for critical theory in justificatory procedures (Forst 2007), starting from an original interpretation of the Kantian constructivism *à la* Rawls. Even though Forst is not a utopian thinker, his writings explicitly show a clear thematisation of the double normativity of utopia from the perspective of the critical theory of society.

Firstly, I explore the first level of normativity (and the role of irony in it) in utopian thought, by reconstructing Forst's arguments. According to him, the first level of normativity consists in the radical critique of historically given power, and of the injustice that this power produces in the form of oppressive or insufficiently emancipating economic, social, and political relations. Therefore, utopian models are normative insofar as, by outlining ideal worlds, they at least implicitly provide criteria for criticising (Shklar 1965) and possibly transforming (Athanasiou 2020) the existing, thus putting the world and its relations at an appropriate distance through irony.

Secondly, I examine the second level of the normativity of utopia. In fact, according to Forst, irony does not only turn outwards. This aspect constitutes a first level of normativity that could be defined as 'diagnostic', which can be fully placed within a typically theoretical-critical method. The ironic posture, on the contrary, also turns inwards, that is, towards the proposed utopia itself. By reconstructing some passages from some of the most famous political utopian narratives, Forst investigates this trait, recognising it as a vital function of utopia. By using irony to describe the ideal world being proposed, the authors provide a valid antidote to the relativisation of the very idea of a perfect society. Therefore, on a closer inspection, Forst argues that the authors of utopian tradition used irony precisely when describing the features of that perfect society, explicitly realising how disturbing and risky it was.

Thus, the second level of normativity of utopia consists precisely in this ironic look at themselves, remembering that perfection does not belong to humans and how dangerous it would be to attempt to realise it. Rather, irony binds utopian thought to constantly rethink itself, to

relaunch new narratives without slipping into perfectionism and, at the same time, into the cold resignation of one who watches from afar the vain attempts to perfect or transform the world. Irony in utopian thought is thus a powerful antidote to the absolutisation of any vision of the good and of a blind faith in human perfectibility.

Thirdly, by examining some of the criticisms that have been levelled at Forst's perspective, it is recognised that the ironic side of utopian thought is linked to a criticism towards naive conceptions of progress that delude humans into the idea of possible perfection. This side does not turn into resigned despair, but rather into an invitation to think otherwise, while imagining new social and political forms that are capable of reflecting justice and the good, without the latter having to turn into a reason for exclusion towards those who have ideas of the good that differ from those proposed in utopian narratives.

Finally, it will be pointed out that the implications on which Forst's analysis is based are multiple: firstly, it is a matter of recognising that utopian thinking is useful, if not necessary, only if it seriously takes into account the two levels of normativity; therefore, paradoxically, if it does not take itself too seriously. To do this, it is necessary to unveil the ethical-anthropological presuppositions of this perspective: the renunciation of an idea of perfection, whereby authentic utopia has already come to terms with the human limit, and also the distinction between justice and good, a distinction that utopian thought has sometimes attempted to annul, thus making itself an easy prey to totalitarian delusions. Utopian irony then becomes a form of dialectical thought that inhabits a middle ground between the too-narrow horizons of reality – which require critique – and the daydreams of a disturbing perfection.

Some preliminary considerations are necessary in order to situate irony as a particular form of skepticism. While modern and contemporary skepticism is primarily epistemological, ancient forms of skepticism are also a way of living, a form of detachment from any crystallisation of beliefs, forms of life, and values. Skepticism encourages us not to take for granted and problematise even the commonsensical ideas of right and good forms of life in common. Such attitude is proper to irony as well. It is a form of problematisation of what is considered "normal" and "valid", with particular attention to the forms of life and to the ethical-political ways of living together. What irony adds to the skeptic detachment is a form of playfulness, which is not opposed to a serious commitment and does not turn into nihilism, but, on the contrary, is the attitude that makes normativity possible. Even if not explicitly recognised in Forst's essay on irony and utopia, such meaning of irony can be traced back to the early Romantics, in particular, as it is well known, to Friedrich Schlegel (1958), according to whom irony is actually a form of «critical-reflective distancing» guided by the practice of «self-limitation» (Fabro, Pieretti 2006, 5839). It is not a lack of interest for the ethical and political commitment in the world, but a movement of immersion and distancing that is fundamental to identify the distortions and injustices of a certain political and social context. It is also fundamental not to take too seriously the possible solutions and the revolutionary or reformist projects of transformation. In this sense, irony becomes a valuable tool for dialectical thinking, as it seems to show an awareness of the limitedness of

every human political omni-comprehensive project, which runs the risk of turning into its contrary.

The First Level of (Ironic) Normativity in Utopian Thought

In his *Utopia and Irony. On the Normativity of a Political Philosophy of Nowhere*, Forst traces utopian politics back to radicalism and explicitly follows Ernst Bloch in distinguishing a kind of politics that defends human dignity, which can be traced back to a view that aspires to happiness. As it is known, Bloch elaborates on such distinction in his famous work *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (1986), and he reproposes it in his *The Principle of Hope*. According to Bloch,

> Social utopian thought directed its efforts toward human happiness; natural law was directed to human dignity. Social utopias depicted relations in which *toil* and *burden* ceased, natural law constructed relations in which *degradation* and *insult* ceased (1986, xxix).

It is not by chance that Forst primarily refers to Bloch and starts from such distinction, which implicitly calls into question the difference between the right and the good, and, as it will be shown in the last section, the fact that such reference comes back to and is compared with the Adornian legacy. Since the very beginning of the essay, it becomes clear that the problematic side of utopian thought is traced back by Forst to the reference to good and happiness. Indeed, according to him, irony serves precisely to solve such troubles. Forst analyses utopian political thought from the perspective of the Critical Theory of Society, having in mind the first generation of those thinkers in particular. According to both Forst and some spokespersons of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, utopian political thought points to happiness, if not completeness, which is translatable into the category of «political perfectionism» (Forst 2014, 179).

This radical trait is both the force and the weakness of utopian thought, which does not limit itself to correcting injustices, but rather aims at eliminating the conditions that produce such injustices. In order to eradicate injustices – so Forst's argument goes – the concept of justice is not enough, therefore one must have an idea of good, even perfect, society worth being realised.

> Utopias present colourful, literary depictions of political communities in which social conflicts are not primarily *canalized* or dealt with in legitimate and just ways, but in which the causes of such conflicts are *eradicated* […] Utopian thinking, I want to argue, is radical in this sense: it aims to pull out the roots of social evils (Forst 2014, 177).

Eliminating the roots of social evils has at least two implications: in terms of perfection and happiness, the ideal society must proceed from a definition of the good; and the assumption that justice is not enough. The reference to perfectionism should not be overlooked.

The first level of normativity depicted by Forst is not thinkable without irony, even if the reference to irony is not explicit in his essay. It consists of criticising the present reality through an exercise of self-distancing,

even by imagining another (or no) place from which to look at the awful reality. Therefore, utopian thinking is *prima facie* capable of normativity, since it criticises the present in light of some criteria with which to compare the present society. The normative content is, at least partly, dependent upon the capability of self-distancing, which represents one of the most important meanings of irony from the Romantics onwards. Such normative and self-distancing attitude is recognised by the author, first and foremost, in Thomas More.

More's *Utopia* first book is precisely such exercise: a critique of his contemporary English politics and religion, carried out «with extreme sharpness and no hint of ambivalence» (182). Such criticism towards the contemporary world, raised by a gesture (even imaginative or literary) of self-distancing, is recognised by the author in other utopian thinkers and works, even if not with the same grade of explicitness. In Campanella's *The City of the Sun*, the reference to the author's experience – and the implicit critique towards the religious situation – can be deduced, for example, [1] from Campanella's description of the jurisdiction adopted by the *City of the Sun*, which is similar to the methods that the author experienced in prison. He refers to «summary convictions without charge», and to the practice of «influencing someone convicted "until he himself acquiesces in the sentence of death passed upon him"» (187). Whether it is an elsewhere far away from their birthplace, or a prison, the change of place is a form – even physical – of self-distancing that makes critique possible.

[1] In other textual *loci*, for example, Campanella also criticises the avidity of his contemporaries in conquering the "new world".

Continuing with the reading of the utopian traditional spokespersons, Forst mentions Francis Bacon and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. In both cases, even though it is not explicit in Forst, the normativity of their utopian visions of a perfect society starts from self-distancing – even while remaining within the system – from the current world.

The hypothesis here is that the ironic and distant attitude, which could be defined as the facilitator, represents a way of applying immanent critique. Therefore, Bacon's *New Atlantis* is not only a critique of the contemporary way of doing science, but also a political critique of dogmas, superstitions, and ignorance. Mercier's *L'année 2440* is a critique of contemporary society, which paves the way for the dream of a future set 700 years ahead.

Forst's analysis firstly focuses on the implicit normativity of such pictures of a perfect world, tracing back such normativity to a counterfactual ideal which serves as a criterion to judge what is wrong with the present. He introduces irony only at the second level of his analysis, but perhaps it could be worth noting that such normativity is enabled by an exercise of self-distancing, which is inherently an ironic positioning.

To make utopian thought usable for politics, it is important to recognise its proximity to the idea of immanent critique, as suggested by Danani (2023) and Stahl (2023). To make utopia not only a nowhere, but also a good place to live, a reference to the functioning of immanent critique is appropriate. This latter is analogous to utopia since it does not create external principles or norms to assess the real world. Even if utopian tales could look like an escape, the real world has not disappeared, but quite the contrary. It lies precisely here, even if it is far, but it is always at least virtually possible to come back and transform it. Immanent critique, as it has been defined

by Jaeggi, is a kind of critique rooted in the immanent world, and does not aim to restore promised and disattended forms of fair and good life, but recognises that there is no fair and good life within that world, whose normative assumptions turn out to be contradictory (Mordacci 2023). Hence, the need to transform it and imagine society in a different way. Since it is impossible for humans to create *ex nihilo*, according to Jaeggi (and Marx before her), immanent critique, «insofar as it adopts an immanent approach, is not a matter of dogmatically positing a norm that stands in opposition to the existing order of things. In Marx, this antidogmatism becomes the antiutopianism of a form of social criticism» (Jaeggi 2018, 193), which does not unrealistically create values or images *ex nihilo*, but moves from a criticism of the past conditions to radically modify them.

Titus Stahl (2023) proposes an integration between immanent critique and utopian thought, but he does not sufficiently insist on the critical immanent trait of utopias. They are daydreams, tales, and imaginative exercises which, due to their reference to the good, are not equitable to external or ideal images and norms, but precisely derive from the failures of the present and the past.

The Second Level of Normativity in Utopian Thought and the Role of Irony

Forst proposes to recognise two levels of normativity in utopian thought, with the second one being explicitly linked to the ironic attitude of utopian thinkers, first of all Thomas More. The force of irony lies in its not being «all that serious» (Chrostowska 2018), in its being similar to play.

Forst's analysis keeps normativity and irony together: if utopia contains a second level of normativity, the latter lies between the necessity and the impossibility of envisioning a perfect society. If utopia has a normative content, it is due to the irony implied within it. Utopian thinkers know very well that irony can rescue utopia from becoming a totalitarian project. Doubts raised by irony concerning the goodness of what utopia proposes represent the way to constantly put into question projects aimed at realising a perfect and unchangeable society. Self-ironising is thus the practice that allows utopian thinkers for a relativisation of their proposals, not taking them too seriously and literally.

Therefore, irony is also normative, since it signals that, if we want to transform the ideal into the real, the only way to do so is to bear in mind that perfection does not exist and is not necessarily good: "optimum is the enemy of the good". Irony is not a way to disregard and ridicule political and social projects, neither it is a kind of resignation; rather, it is a way to constantly interrogate oneself about the correctness, fairness, and the applicability of the ideal to the real. According to Forst, the authentic utopian thought is precisely recognisable by its capability of self-distancing, not only from the experienced unfair reality, but from the same idea of fair and good society that it is proposing, imagining, and designing. For utopia to be good, it needs to cultivate such capability from within; otherwise, the risk of totalitarianism cannot be avoided.

Let us follow Forst in his steps towards such depiction of irony. First, he pinpoints two relevant features of utopian normativity, which are worth mentioning:

> Characteristic of this form of political normativity is (a) its *radicalism* (the roots of the social evil are eradicated completely) and (b) it goes *beyond* justice, because the good society is in a sense beyond a just one since the latter has to deal with conflicts that the utopian society has already overcome. (Forst 2014, 189).

Here, the reference to the good beyond the right is fundamental, since Forst precisely argues that the good can make utopian societies dangerously close to totalitarian experiments, thus imposing a particular vision of the good to the political community. Therefore, according to him, almost all degenerations of utopia can be traced back to such reference to the good. This means that such risk is inherent to utopia, that is, the design of a good, happy society. Such distinction between good and right is explicable in the author since he is a Kantian and ultimately a Rawlsian constructivist, anchored to the idea that formalism will rescue political societies from becoming ethical, oppressive or even authoritarian states. If Forst's analysis were to stop at this level, one could say that utopia has no chance of survival and is inevitably destined to turn into hell after promising paradise. Nonetheless, it is irony itself that saves utopia from final condemnation. In this sense, irony is normative, that is, it becomes the very norm of a good utopia: the secret of irony is not to take itself too seriously.

He goes on as follows:

> The second normative level of utopia is situated where reflection on the first level is conducted, – that is, where the imperfect shines through the perfect, where utopia threatens to revert into dystopia and the colourful picture turns grey and dark. Hyperbole and irony are the expression of this reflection. But what exactly does their normativity consist in? Not, of course, in a (post)modern Rortyan consciousness of contingency but rather in a moderate skepticism, in a challenging of the very idea of human perfectibility. (189)

The imperfect emerges through the perfect, and human imperfection guides the moderate skepticism that leads utopian thinkers to doubt the real goodness of what they are proposing. If utopia has a function, one could say, it is the dialectical one, since the awareness of the risks of taking a certain idea of the good too seriously is itself a warranty of not becoming a dystopia. To make such an argument, Forst analyses More, Campanella, Bacon, and Mercier's projects, highlighting for each of their utopias the explicit ironic position they cultivate in order not to be taken too seriously in their message. He shows and refers to some passages of their works in which this irony becomes apparent. In More's *Utopia*, for example, irony serves as a means to unmask the dangers implicit in controlling and determining all aspects of collective and private existence, through a rigid discipline and many specific rules. In Campanella's *The City of the Sun*, as previously mentioned, there are many explicit critiques concerning the summary jurisdiction applied. In Bacon, Forst argues that there is an ironic attitude concerning scientific experiments that play with human and animal life, aimed at extending *ad libitum* human life and enhancing their capabilities, or even at creating new species. Lastly, according to Forst, Mercier's work is disseminated of exaggeration and ironic descriptions of strange habits, such as the punishments assigned to bad writers, or the fact that the

religion in which to believe is explicitly declared as something invented for people.

Indeed, Forst links utopian normativity to the capability of relativising their own pictures of a good society, thus showing the risks of rigidly and universally applying the rules intended to achieve and preserve collective happiness. Therefore, if a reference to the dimension of the good is unavoidable in utopia, as Bloch clearly showed, Forst points out that it has to be accompanied by a constant exercise of self-relativisation through irony, and that this task must be carried out from within.

Forst's essay ends with a further consideration, which is worth mentioning to fully grasp the anthropological premises on which his political argument is grounded. According to him, the most radical problem in taking utopias too seriously lies in the fact that utopias tend to discard human dignity, particularly those aimed at controlling and determining in a widespread way each and any aspect of human life. As a matter of fact, they do not allow for human creativity (the core of human dignity) to manifest itself and to find solutions to the unpredictable: «here an element of individuality and non-determination – or non-identity – in Adorno's words, come in» (190), [2] that is, the impossibility of determining everything is recognised even by utopian thinkers, precisely to the extent that it applies first and foremost to their reference to happiness, which is impossible to determine once and for all. Otherwise, happiness could undermine human dignity, whose outcome is creativity, which is meant as the possibility of humans to determine themselves, without being pre-determined once and for all. On this basis, Forst can argue that the lesson of utopian thought is that «happiness appears as an aporetic political concept». Such conclusion could sound quite paradoxical, since his essay started with the recognition of an inherent tendency to imagine and pursue happiness as the main feature of utopian political thought.

[2] The reference to Adorno will be useful in the next section.

The Normativity of Irony in Utopia: Forst and his Readers

This section focuses on two influent critical voices (Ypi 2015, Chrostowska 2018) whose comments to Forst's essay can help to further examine the meaning of irony in utopia, and to highlight some implications of Forst's analysis, even comparing him with his two main interlocutors in his essay: Bloch, who is explicitly and often referred to, and Adorno, who is quoted *en passant*, but, as it will be shown, is very important to him in understanding the aporetic trait of utopia.

The first critical reading is that of Lea Ypi, who devoted an article to Forst's essay on utopia and moved an articulated critique of him, to which he responded extensively and exhaustively. Lea Ypi's criticism can be pinpointed as follows. First, she raises doubts regarding the reference he makes to the negative dialectics, which seems to be a trait of utopian thinking, a negative dialectic demonstrating the structural ambivalence of utopia, precisely through the use of irony. According to Ypi, even if Forst tries to reassure the reader by saying that this negativism will never turn into resignation, such reassurance is nothing but a verbal one, therefore it is at least ineffective. Second, according to Ypi, Forst fails to recognise that

the degeneration of utopia into its opposite does not depend upon its content, but rather upon its form. Moreover, so Ypi's argument goes, there is no reason not to believe in the possibility of realising happiness through a more concrete, not abstract, idea of justice – a radical one – which has to come to terms with a sort of idea of the good. The problem, Ypi suggests, is not that utopia points to the good, but that it does not point enough and convincedly to it, proceeding abstractly rather than exercising the famous Blochian educated hope. She writes:

> This educated hope allows us to see that the normativity of Nowhere does not come from the critical reflection on the existing world enabled by our dreaming of an imagined one, nor does it come from the ironic stance that being neither here nor there forces upon us. It comes rather from the process of discovering thoughts and aspirations implicit in the ongoing historical struggles of the world that we have (Ypi 2015, 222).

At the end of his reply to Ypi's criticism concerning his reading of utopia, and in order to address the critique of resignation that one may deduce from his essay, as Lea Ypi does, Forst goes back to his tradition and provides a reply to such criticism by tracing the irony of utopia back to negativism. This makes any picture of the ideal society not only impossible, but also dangerous, thus putting a ban on images. According to Forst,

> Obviously, we find both elements – the right and the good, generally speaking – within the Marxist tradition. And in fact both elements are at work in thinkers like Bloch. My account is closer to the tradition of Western Marxism that was developed in Frankfurt and elsewhere, in which there was a reason for a ban on images of the true and good human life like we find in Adorno. Within this tradition, it is for humans in progressive history to determine the true and good life for themselves through processes of reciprocal justification, and disagreements about the good remain legitimate as long as the imperative not to dominate others remains in place (Forst 2015, 233).

If Lea Ypi's criticism is grounded on the persuasion that the right and the good should not be kept too separated, and that in the end they speak the same language, Forst's position favours the primacy of justice over happiness. What he refers to as ironic attitude is exchanged by Ypi as resignation, and her criticism is directed precisely towards the fact that Forst does not take happiness too seriously. While Ypi could be right in her attempt to get justice and happiness closer in the political sphere, since radical justice can only take into account the issues of happiness, some perplexities could be raised in her equating irony and resignation.

Nevertheless, her comments enable Forst to delve again into this question. He demonstrates that, instead of resignation, irony could be easily traced back to the attention one must pay when defining a precise and fixed notion of the good. It is not by chance that the original point of friction internal to Critical Theory concerning utopia is precisely the distance between Adorno and Bloch. Forst reconsiders this space that separates Bloch and Adorno, as well as their famous 1964 radiophonic conversation. According to Adorno, it is not possible to determine the "open",

therefore the ban on images applies to utopian pictures of a perfect society as well [3].

Irony serves as a relativising tool, which helps create vague and indeterminate counter-images; a skeptical-utopian tolerance should be used against the risk of solidification of certain ideas of the perfect society. Perhaps, the issue at stake in Forst's arguments does not concern irony, nor the proximity between his use of irony and Adorno's ban on images of the good, but the too neat separation between the right and the good. Indeed, Adorno himself would not have shared it, preferring not to crystallise any idea of good society, nor to trace utopia back to a single category like happiness. It is worth quoting Adorno in his dialogue with Bloch in at least two passages. In the first one, he recognises that:

> What people have subjectively lost in their consciousness is the ability, quite simply, to imagine the whole as something that could be totally different. That people are oath-like bound to the world as it is. My thesis on this would be that innermostly all people, whether they admit it to themselves or not, know that it is possible that it could be different. Not only could they live without hunger and probably without fear, but they could also live as free people (Adorno 1964, 4).

It is apparent that his negativism does not lead to resignation, but quite the contrary. He denounces the resignation he sees precisely because he recognises that it could be fought through a cultivated – and negativistic, of course – utopian thinking. Forst recognises this trait very honestly. Adorno then specifies that his reference to the whole applies not only to the entirety of human coexistence, but rather to the categories that should be taken together, such as happiness and freedom, and so forth. Secondly, in another passage of the radiophonic dialogue with Bloch, Adorno clearly explains the meaning of the impossibility of making idols, images of the good and of the best utopian society, tracing it back to his negative dialectics. However, he does not fail to acknowledge the risks of not being allowed to create pictures of utopia. In particular, he highlights the risk that negative existing elements might progressively undermine the possibility of imagining alternative ways of achieving justice and happiness.

Forst shows great sensitivity towards Adorno's approach. In particular, he appreciates the caution against the production of images of the good. However, while Forst rejects any incursion of the good into the just, Adorno considers such contamination as necessary, although it requires careful attention to avoid producing misleading images of it. As a consequence, he leaves the doubt that in an unfair world it is still possible not to be contaminated and to conceive what justice could be, even if the impossibility is considered by him as a condition of possibility of resistance.

The proximity between Adorno and Forst is not secondary, and has been noted also by Chrostowska (2018) in an essay dedicated to the utopian dimension in Benhabib, Forst, Cooke, and Allen. According to Chrostowska, Forst's essay on utopia is worth considering attentively for several reasons, with a particular focus on the following elements: the normative stance and negativism as positive features of utopia, and a kind of normativity closely linked to irony, which she appreciates but proposes to

[3] Quoting Jutten to comment Adorno's perplexities on utopia, for example, Stahl refers to «imaginative negativism» (2023, 65). This point is emphasized also by Danani (2023) and Mordacci (2023), who invites to be careful in insisting too much on negativism when it comes to utopia, otherwise it could turn into resignation.

correct with the category of play. Nonetheless, she criticises the formalism of his proposal, going back to the final lines of Forst's essay, where he praises for utopian dreams not to be dismissed. Chrostowska comments as follows: «the weak utopianism—moderately skeptical [...], less-than-radical [...]—that Forst advocates seems too ironic and insufficiently hopeful, and one is justified in asking: How exactly is the utopian dream not betrayed?» (4). The idea of utopia in Forst is too loose to be effective, even for going on and dreaming, and it runs the risk of remaining too anchored to a type of formalism that corresponds to abstractness. Apparently, renouncing the idea of happiness unavoidably implies renouncing radicality. As it will be shown in a while, this is partly true.

The interest in Chrostowska's reading of Forst's essay lies in the fact that she considers his reference to irony as a valuable point. However, she proposes to enforce and enrich it by resorting to the dimension of play, in which Adorno once again is a precious reference. The idea of play owes its effectiveness to the fact that it is usually associated to the utopian thought, particularly to Thomas More's *Utopia* (Piaia 2018). Furthermore, play has many points of contact with irony, but it adds the concreteness of a practice, which is carried out and performed within and with reality. It is not merely a matter of detachment, but of trying to conceive alternative forms of coexistence illuminated by an idea of justice—an idea that, to be genuine, must be radical.

Chrostowska points out:

> Utopian play must [...] consist in playing by, but also with, the rules of social-political practices, exposing their contingency and the real contradictions between them, and showing that the existing conditions are unacceptable, not to be played along with—that, in short, the game is up. It thus entails a creative and spontaneous exercise of freedom, exceeding the given, radically reconceiving it, and it is fair only to the extent that the old rules still apply to it (6).

Chrostowska explicitly recognises similarities between Adorno's notion of play, according to whom man is a playful animal, and the role of irony in utopia. She firmly believes that playing with the rules, as well as with the normativity established by the same play, is perhaps more effective than irony. Furthermore, it can be more concrete and less desperate and resigned, just because people are compelled to play, and to undo reality, rules, and images produced and reproduced.

Conclusion

Forst has the merit of coming back to the normativity of utopia through irony, and of giving new life to the link between utopia and critical theory, in line with Benhabib (1986), among others. Ypi and Chrostowska highlight two different critiques of Forst's reconstruction of the political benefits of utopian thought. Nevertheless, two additional aspects are worth noting in his reconstruction. The first one concerns the belief in progress and perfectibility. This concept, indeed, is underlined in his reference to Mercier's uchronia, which is entirely guided by a strong plea for human historical progress. The second one involves the attempt to translate Adornian negativism – expressed through the famous ban on images

– into a type of formalism. By doing so, Forst runs the risk of overlooking the creative and transformative side of utopian thought, which should not fall in love with the images of a good society that it produces, but cannot stop producing them. There is no doubt that Forst refers to irony precisely to suggest that utopian thought should play with the images that it produces. If this interpretation is true, then Forst's merit lies in having recognised such dialectical tension, and in having discovered that within utopian thought such dialectic is the salvation of utopian thinking, and that this can only be realised through irony.

Perhaps, Forst could have further emphasised the critique of human perfectibility that appears in utopian thought, which would imply a critique of the linear and inexorable progress of history, as well as the implicit critique to the persuasion that progress exists and leads history towards the better. In other words, the ironic glance inherent to some forms of utopian thought could help disregard a naif idea of progress and better understand the concept of progress itself in a dialectical way. Forst supports this point in order to avoid simplistic, unilinear, teleological, dominative, models of social and moral progress: «If our critique of false notions of progress is situated and not merely abstract and empty, we also argue for progress, both in theory and in practice, because overcoming false progress is true progress. Being against progress because one is motivated by an account of nondomination or emancipation is also to be for it» (Forst 2019, 18). Irony could be a way of distancing oneself from the concept of progress without taking it too seriously, while also relativising it. This allows to keep an open dialogue between the demand for emancipation and the teleological optimism typical of certain progressive philosophies of history. [4]

However, the fact that some utopian authors like Mercier subscribe to the belief in historical progress imposes certain cautions against the relationship between utopia and progress, which irony can help to focus on but not completely resolve. In particular, utopian thought appears as a transformative strategy, leaving open the question of the gradualness and progressiveness of reforms. Maybe, for a utopian ironic normativity to be effective, it should further ironise the very notions of perfectibility and progress. Utopia is radical to the extent that it is capable of putting into discussion and ironically distancing ourselves also from the blind faith in progress, and from the idea that mankind will one day reach an ultimate state of perfection. In his final remarks, Forst insists on the need to trace utopia back to human dignity rather than to happiness. However, for human dignity to become real, one should cultivate a moderate skepticism not only towards the utopian dreams of a perfect society, but also towards a consolidated idea of progress which has become a dystopian nightmare for many people in the past, in the present, and in the future. The irony of utopia, then, lies precisely in the fact that it suspends the linearity of time and plays the game of "what if", thus coming to terms with the bad habit of always considering the road to justice and happiness already laid out. Irony is and shall remain a safe exercise of self-relativisation, without renouncing the ruptures provoked by thinking otherwise and presenting a completely different and distant reality.

[4] See also Forst (2017), who states that progress occurs when «a society strives for new levels of justification» (74) of moral and social orders. According to him, justification is the only practice which impedes progress to become yet another form of domination or presumed superiority.

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