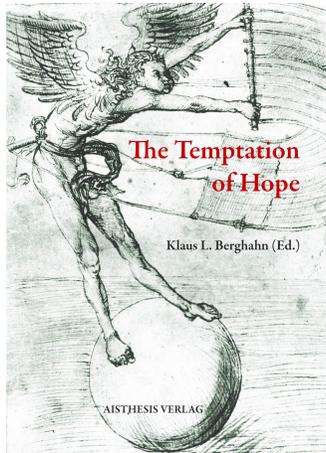


Leseprobe

Klaus L. Berghahn (Ed.)

The Temptation of Hope

Utopian Thinking and Imagination
from Thomas More to Ernst Bloch – and Beyond



AISTHESIS VERLAG

Bielefeld 2011

Cover image:

Peter Vischer der Jüngere (1487-1528): *Geflügelter Knabe, der auf einer Kugel übers Meer fährt* (Winged boy going across the sea on a sphere), University Library Erlangen-Nürnberg.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© Aisthesis Verlag Bielefeld 2011
Postfach 10 04 27, D-33504 Bielefeld
Layout: Germano Wallmann, www.geisterwort.de
Printed by: docupoint GmbH, Magdeburg
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ISBN 978-3-89528-804-3
www.aisthesis.de

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Klaus L. Berghahn | |
| Preface | 9 |
| Wilhelm Voßkamp | |
| Rational Ordering and Human Existence. | |
| Narrative Staging of Image and Counter-Image by Thomas More ... | 13 |
| Jürgen Fohrmann | |
| On Kant’s “as if”. | |
| Utopia and How to Tell a (Hi)story to Its End | 31 |
| Russell Jacoby | |
| Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and the Anti-Utopian Refugees | 49 |
| Klaus L. Berghahn | |
| “Concrete Utopia” and “Exact Fantasy”. | |
| Utopian Thinking and Imagination | |
| in Ernst Bloch’s <i>Principle of Hope</i> | 65 |
| Angelika Bammer | |
| Feminism, the Dream of Utopia, and the Rage of Lisbeth Salander | 79 |
| Peter Morris-Keitel | |
| Imagining a ‘Green’ Future. | |
| Principles of Ecological Sustainability in Works | |
| by William Morris, Robert Havemann, Gioconda Belli, | |
| and Tschingis Aitmatow | 103 |
| Robert C. Holub | |
| Academia as Heterotopia | 125 |
| Jost Hermand | |
| The Necessity of Utopian Thinking | 139 |
| Robert C. Holub | |
| <i>Laudatio</i> for Jost Hermand | 155 |
| List of Contributors | 165 |

Preface

The Temptation of Hope may seem to be too modest a title for a workshop that dealt with utopian thinking and imagination. The audacity of hope would have expressed more strongly the necessity of utopian thinking in our time. But two particular circumstances have to be considered when we talk about utopian thinking today.

First, utopian thinking and imagination have fallen on hard times. It has become almost commonplace that utopian visions are obsolete. The present state of world affairs seems to paralyze utopian thinking. In an age of worldwide exploitation of natural resources and destruction of natural environments, global warming, turbo capitalism, and the “war on terror,” the future of mankind appears bleak. Especially the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, if that was supposed to be a utopia at all, has shattered any dreams of century-old social utopias. Utopia is draped in a mourning veil, and Post-modernism, we are told, is ringing in the end of utopia.

Second, when we speak of hope, there is no certainty – only possibilities, latencies, and tendencies which have to be discovered and explored. The reality of our world and our lives is open, unfinished, and changeable. Utopian thinking is nothing more, but also nothing less than a thought experiment: How could our society be different? What could be changed? How can we improve our living conditions? Utopian thinking and imagination are never satisfied with the world as it is, rather criticize the existing order to improve it. And we know how much in the world and our society is still in need of change.

“Can hope be disappointed?” Ernst Bloch asked in his inaugural lecture at the University of Tübingen in 1961 after leaving the GDR. Yes, of course, he answered. Naïve optimism, wishful thinking, and daydreaming can easily be disappointed, and even well-founded hope can be frustrated by the contingencies of history. Hope is never discouraged by setbacks; it only becomes wiser and corrects its course.

Hope seems to be a human propensity. If it could be repressed or even forgotten, it would not have been a constant part of the human experience or an historical factor. “Our children and grandchildren will put up a better fight,” was the militant slogan of the defeated peasants and Thomas Müntzer in sixteenth-century Germany, and the torch of hope is still handed down from generation to generation. Against all cultural pessimism it is Bloch’s

“encyclopedia of hope,” that permeates all aspects of life and gives utopian thinking a diversity and latitude it has never before known. “If we stop hoping,” Christa Wolf, a former student of Bloch, reminds us, “that which we fear most will certainly happen.”

But why has utopian thinking always provoked so much criticism, if not outright hatred? Do not literary utopias, with all their humane and idealistic intentions, belong to the best inventions human imagination has produced? What are the numerous enemies of utopian thinking and imagination so afraid of? Looking at their arguments, it becomes clear that they are not so much opposed to the ancient seafarers’ tales and their fictitious images of a new society, but rather to the utopian intention itself, i.e. the implicit or explicit criticism of the existing order of the state or society. Conservative critics of utopian thinking who conjure up the dangers of utopian intentions warn either against the danger of utopian totalitarianism or ridicule those irresponsible dreamers and their “false hopes,” as today’s political rhetoric goes.

It is against this backdrop of past and recent criticism of utopian thinking that this workshop sought to rescue the concept of utopian thinking and to restore the power of utopian imagination. Such is the Temptation of Hope.

The 43rd Wisconsin Workshop explored important aspects of utopian thinking from Thomas More through Ernst Bloch and up to our contemporary culture. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) is not only the prototype of the utopian genre, as Wilhelm Voßkamp’s close reading of the text demonstrates, but in its criticism of sixteenth-century England’s social miseries the counter image of the fictitious *Utopia* became also the discursive model of utopian thinking. Jürgen Fohrmann complicates More’s model of utopian thinking by demonstrating how, in Immanuel Kant’s essay “Das Ende aller Dinge” (“The End of All Things,” 1794), utopian and apocalyptic thinking are intertwined insofar as the apocalypse is the inverted mirror of the utopian community. Russell Jacoby looks critically at two masterminds of anti-utopian thinking in the second half of the twentieth century (Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin), who conflated fascism and communism as totalitarian ideologies with utopian thinking. Klaus L. Berghahn sketches a short history of the criticism of utopian thought on the right and the left, and he demonstrates how Ernst Bloch struggled to preserve utopian thinking and sublimate it into Marxism. For Bloch, utopian thought experiments follow the logic of modalities – exploring the latencies and tendencies of reality and making them visible in art through his aesthetics of “Vor-schein” (pre-appearance). Of the numerous influences of utopian thinking in our time, two tendencies

were singled out: Angelika Bammer looks at modern feminism as utopian thinking from a different perspective by linking justice, violence, and utopian thinking as they apply to the struggle of women in our time and she exemplifies her provocative thesis with the fierce female protagonist Lisbeth Salander of Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy. Peter Morris-Keitel, inspired by Jost Hermand's numerous books and articles on environmental concerns, first sketches a short history of the development of an ecological consciousness from the eighteenth century to the present and then provides a critical review of works which deal with ecological sustainability. Robert C. Holub interprets academia as one of the vestiges of heterotopia, "another place" (Foucault), free from authoritarianism and repression. He uses, however, Jürgen Habermas's utopian concept of the "public sphere" and historicizes it in order to demonstrate the promise and limits of academic discourse in the United States: the promise of academic freedom – the "sifting and winnowing of ideas," as suggested by the motto of the University of Wisconsin – and its limits in financially stressed times. Whereas the hands-on schools of engineering, medicine, and business flourish, the discursive human and social sciences suffer due to financial restrictions. As chancellor of a major state university he knows what he is talking about. The final essay, by Jost Hermand, is a fundamental expression of the necessity of utopian thinking in our time. It combines a dystopic analysis of the political, economic, and environmental conditions of the world with radical criticism of the prevailing order and tentative attempts to propose solutions for this predicament. Such is the audacity of hope.

The 43rd Wisconsin Workshop in honor of Jost Hermand's eightieth birthday took place at the University of Wisconsin–Madison from September 9th to 11th, 2010. The symposium was framed by two social events. The Chancellor of the UW–Madison, Carolyn "Biddy" Martin, a student of Jost Hermand (Ph.D. 1985), invited his former students, alumni, and workshop participants to her residence for a grand reception with a memorable potpourri of speeches and musical presentations. A festive banquet at the Faculty Club ended the conference with a *laudatio* for Jost Hermand by Robert C. Holub, another of his former students (Ph.D. 1979) and now Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. To the delight of the audience, he first reflected in a professional manner on the ancient genre *laudatio*, and then went down memory lane with many anecdotes, never forgetting how influential Jost Hermand has been as a scholar, teacher, and friend for his many students.

Special thanks to Jost Hermand's former students Carol Poore (Ph.D. 1979), Stephen Brockmann (Ph.D. 1989), and Matthew Lange (Ph.D. 2005) for organizing the alumni event, and to the German Department's administrator, Joan Leffler, for handling all logistics with efficiency and grace.

A generous gift by the Dean of Letters and Science, Gary Sandefur, and support by the Center for German and European Studies and the Department of German made this conference possible.

This volume is dedicated to our Vilas Emeritus Professor Jost Hermand with deep gratitude for his services to the Department and the University for over 50 years.

Madison, February 2011

Klaus L. Berghahn