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WITH BRONISŁAW BACZKO: FROM UTOPIA
TO THE *DICTIONNAIRE CRITIQUE DE L'UTOPIE*
AU TEMPS DES LUMIÈRES

When we suggested that he should use the funds generously provided by the Balzan Foundation so that he could prepare the *Dictionnaire critique de l'utopie au temps des Lumières*, Bronisław Baczko received the idea with great enthusiasm. The task was similar to the memorable enterprise of the *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988) edited by François Furet and Mona Ozouf, with significant contributions from Bronisław (the articles «Lumières», «Thermidoriens», and «Vandalisme»). After three and a half years of constant, intense work, we had the good fortune of being able to present the *Dictionnaire* hot off the presses of the GEORG publishing house in Geneva on 13 June 2016, Bronisław's ninety-third birthday. 1,400 pages, fifty-four articles (as many as the cities on Thomas More's island of Utopia), 143 illustrations, forty-six contributors from eight different countries, a tightly knit team (Bronisław said he had never worked more in tune with other colleagues), and an effective one as well, thanks in particular to the impeccable work of Mirjana Farkas, a modern history specialist by training, who stepped in as editorial assistant and art director and who, on completion of the dictionary, also benefited from the precious assistance of her colleague, modern historian Robin Majeur.

We dare say that the result has met all our expectations. It is a wide-ranging, rich work, showing a variety of approaches, methods and subjects, leading to a nuanced, complex understanding of that time when utopia became ingrained as a structure of thought and discourse. But the scope

* Balzan Research Project Bronisław Baczko, Université de Genève. First published in BRUNEL, P. – VAUCHEZ, A. – ZINK, M. *Penser l'Utopie*, Actes de la rencontre organisée le 20 janvier 2017 sous les auspices de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres et de l'Académie des Sciences morales et politiques, avec le concours de la Fondation Internationale Balzan. Paris: AIBL, 2018.

is wide; it aspires neither to exhaustiveness nor to completeness: utopia is first of all a way of thinking, and thinking can never exhaust itself.

UTOPIA ACCORDING TO BRONISŁAW BACZKO

In *La Responsabilité morale de l'historien* (1969; second edition 2016),¹ Bronisław Baczko puts historical idealism, positivism and materialism to the test. He remarks that «the historian is implicated in the very subject of his research; [that] it is he who creates it in part». Through his cognitive functions, he creates historical knowledge according to an arbitrary questionnaire, but participates *via* «his social, familial and professional milieu» in the historical conscience of his time.² No neutrality of the historical subject, but the ethical device of its epistemological enunciation established according to a specific questionnaire and the sources chosen.

Baczko envisages the question of «ideas-images», of *representations of the world* and of the *social imaginary* linked to the Enlightenment, the Revolution and the democratic future. In the Nineteen Seventies, this approach was called «the history of mentalities», and Baczko held Europe's only university chair focusing on this epistemological area from 1974 to 1989, at the University of Geneva. After his Marxist inquiry into Rousseau between «solitude and community», he turns his philosopher's and humanist historian's gaze to the culture of utopia as it unfurled, exhausted itself and re-emerged as uchronical alternative-history narrative during the Enlightenment.

His magnum opus of 1978, *Lumières de l'utopie*,³ articulates the normative relationships between «History and Utopia» at a critical moment of political reflection on the communist régime. Such connections favour the «study of social imagination» in texts and images – social imagination which, by way of a literary game or radical reformism, works on reality in the sense of institutional, political, juridical and social «perfectibility». In Thomas More's and Veirasse's humanist and materialist legacy, in contrast to Swift's transformation of the utopian optimism of reason and compulsory happiness into the scathing dystopia of evil's eternal starting again except in the land of the human-enslaving Houyhnhnms (*Gulliver's Travels*, 1726, 1735), the «utopian dreams» of the Enlightenment become part – in

¹ BACZKO, B. *La responsabilité morale de l'historien*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016.

² *Ivi*, pp. 21-22.

³ Éditions Payot, Paris, currently out of print, unfortunately.

Baczko's opinion – of a «field of expectations and hopes, both collective and individual». They redraw the social landscape of the eighteenth century and the aspirations to the «New City» established by the Revolution (that of the rights of Man, the Terror and the Thermidor) by reactivating the ideology of the radical Enlightenment in order to liquidate the *Ancien régime*.

Whereas until the appearance Louis Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1770) narrative utopia had assigned Man outside of history to the insular presentism of compulsory happiness and equality through the state-sponsored education of children, in Baczko's opinion utopias establish an in-the-future relationship in their social conception as well as their hermeneutical force, as is done today, after its fashion, by our *Dictionnaire*. A collective effort in the generous way of his *oeuvre*, this work would like to restore the «multiplicity and diversity» of utopia at the time of the Enlightenment – that is to say, a «discursive model» and a «way of thinking» about the scope and the limits of social happiness inside the righteous city.

CONCERNING THE *ROMAN D'ÉTAT* OR STATE NOVEL

Utopian narrative establishes the epistemology of elucidation, enunciation and lexicology of its project and of its device in its normative, ludic or ideal relationships with the real world. It is at the same time, we repeat, a *discursive model* and a *way of thinking*. «It is true that one may imagine possible worlds, without sin and without misery, and one could make Novels of Utopias, or of Sévarambes, as it were; but these very same worlds would, after all, be rather inferior to our own» warned Leibniz in 1710⁴ while deploring the best of all possible worlds without God. At the time of the Enlightenment, whereas the desecration of Paradise emancipated Man from a history marked by the Fall by depriving him of the hope for salvation in the face of the fatality of evil,⁵ narrative utopia became the «State Novel» (*roman d'état*) of the «imaginary republic».

An insular, celestial or unfathomable society of collective happiness under compulsory equality before the tables of the law, a new Athens of science and voluntary servitude for the common good, a solar state of community transparency, a neoclassical city of passionate inertia, of existential

⁴ *Essais de Théodicée sur la Bonté de Dieu, la Liberté de l'Homme et l'Origine du mal* [1710], nouvelle édition, augmentée, de *L'Histoire de la Vie et des Ouvrages de l'auteur*, par M. le Chevalier de Jaucourt, tome I, Lausanne, 1760, p. 490.

⁵ BACZKO, B. *Job mon ami. Promesses du bonheur et fatalité du mal*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 113.

ennui and of social uniformity where crime sometimes offers a superior moral attraction, the utopian world is a political laboratory of institutional perfection visited, in its wide-ranging variations, by the traveller-narrator. Shipwrecked in a nowhere world, he becomes less a conquering Robinson than an anthropologist-participant in the ideal city whose mores he scrutinizes. From Thomas More to the Enlightenment, such a humanist paradigm of a totalizing harmony irrigates the conceptual idea as well as the intertextuality of the utopian tale in its promise of naturalistic happiness under the leadership of the perfect Legislator.⁶

Starting from Thomas More's prototype in 1516, which is contemporary with the discovery of the Americas, the chimerical novel harks back less to a lost paradise than to the *city of happiness* as well as to the *city of nowhere* – establishing that the former relies on the latter. In 1539, François Rabelais created the French neologism «utopia» (*Pantagruel*): «a great country of Utopia». Whereas the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* does not register the word «utopia» until 1762, quoting Plato's ideal Republic and More's non-existent island, after the shock of the Revolution, the 1798 edition takes utopia back to the individual chimera:

Utopia is generally said to be a plan by an imaginary Government, where everything is perfectly regulated for the common good, as in the fabulous country of Utopia described in Thomas More's book with this title. *Every dreamer imagines his Utopia*.

In Baczko's opinion, the period of the Enlightenment remains the «hot season in the history of utopias as much as the Renaissance was», as was the nineteenth century of industrialist and socialist utopianism thrashed by Marx. Nearly one hundred and fifty new utopian titles published in the eighteenth century in French enrich the corpus of utopias published after Thomas More. This movement culminates with the thirty-six volumes of *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions et romans cabalistiques*, a hotchpotch of novels published in 1787-1789 by Parisian compiler Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier.⁷

At the dawn of the century, More once again regained publishing currency. Nicolas Gueudeville (1652-1721), a libertine, former Benedictine

⁶ TROUSSON, R. *Voyages aux pays de nulle part. Histoire littéraire de la pensée utopique*. Bruxelles: EUL, 1999, p. 19 («totalitarian», Trousson dixit).

⁷ *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions et romans cabalistiques*, à Amsterdam et se trouve à Paris, rue et Hôtel Serpente [actually: Paris, chez Gaspard Louis Cuchet], 1787-1789. Thirty-six volumes augmented by three volumes of supplements collected under the title *Histoire des naufrages*.

friar, translator of Erasmus, pamphleteer, anti-absolutist, and a friend of Pierre Bayle's, put out a freely-rendered translation of *Utopia* in Leyden, dedicated to a republican magistrate from the same city, with publisher Pierre Vander in 1715. Appearing in the same year as the death of Louis XIV, this edition became the standard version in the eighteenth century. In Gueudeville's opinion, *Utopia* should be translated into all languages so as to benefit «Mankind». And yet, the translator uses a neologism in the spirit of the twentieth-century *Dictionnaire des verbes qui manquent*, to deplore the fact that the world «will never utopia itself». This «state novel» might well be able to make the world «better»:

[...] our Morus [...] has not suggested anything in his idea of a perfect and happy Republic, which may not, honestly, be easily done. The Laws, Practices, Customs and Mores that are here attributed to those peoples who are imagined to be happy are in no way beyond human reason. But the bad uses that [...] Men make of their reason are an obstacle to the establishment and the reality of a *utopian* Government.⁸

Rousseau got wind of this moral warning. In a letter of 26 July 1767 to the economist Mirabeau senior, the author of *Social Contract* ridiculed physiocracy by opposing utopianism to political radicalism: «Your system is very good for *Utopia's people*, it is worth nothing for *Adam's people*».⁹ Rousseau, who at that time was often denigrated by the Apologists as the dreamer of a useless social contract, set down the epistemological boundary between utopia as a speculative chimera and political philosophy as an instrument for state-led or social reformism.

On the cusp of literary game and philosophical speculation, the «State Novel» often became, at the time of the Enlightenment, the theoretical instrument for socio-political inquiry and the catalyst of social imagination. Again, one still had to find the words to enunciate the actuality of the utopian project. In 1770, after writing *L'An 2440*, a uchronical alternative-history narrative which relocates the utopian paradigm in the future in order to show, following Condorcet, that history achieves the liberating promises of the Enlightenment, Louis Sébastien Mercier gave a universal definition of the utopian approach.

In year XI [1801], the revolutionary writer published his *Néologie Vocabulaire des mots nouveaux, à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles*.

⁸ Dedicatory letter, n. p. (emphasis by the author).

⁹ Quoted by Bronisław Baczko, «Lumières et utopie. Problèmes de recherches», *Annales, ESC*, 26/2, 1971, p. 358-359.

Among the three hundred entries in this dictionary linked to the social imaginary of that time, he evokes utopia via the neologism «to fiction», which harks back to social imagination. «To fiction» does not mean «to narrate, to tell a tale, to tell a story; it means to imagine moral or political characters in order to convey truths that are essential to the social order. Fictioning a government plan on a far-away island and with an imaginary people, so as to develop a variety of political ideas is what was done by several authors who wrote in favor of the science which embraced the general economy of States and the happiness of peoples»¹⁰ (II, p. 266).

The contribution of the Enlightenment to utopian culture may be due to the fact that it made a moral branch of political science into a useful tool for the rationalisation and transformation of the social world. This idea inspired lawyer and royal censor Jean-Nicolas Démeunier, liberal compiler of two thousand articles in the four volumes of the *Encyclopédie politique et diplomatique* (1784-1788), a subseries of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* (1782-1832): «The most chimerical projects on legislation and governments usually offer useful views [to the enlightened legislator] [...] The several political novels published so far will each have their article in this Dictionary [...]».¹¹

Since Thomas More, «discursive model», and «way of thinking», utopia has plotted out narrative routes by opening up paths for the epistemological reflection of those Enlightenment philosophers who wanted to «paint the picture of a happy state where one will never find oneself», as Jean-Nicolas Démeunier concluded, even though he chose to place utopia within the field of a budding political science as a repository of social imagination.

A POLISH KING'S UTOPIA

The *Entretien d'un Européen avec un insulaire du royaume de Dumocala* is certainly not the most admirable text produced by the eighteenth century on the matter of utopia.¹² But it is certainly not the least interesting. First of all, it should be noted that it was written in 1752 by a Pole, which is not to detract from the homage we are here paying to Bronisław Baczko here. This author, however, is not a newcomer among the Sarmatians: he was a king, someone who was not once, but twice elected to the throne

¹⁰ MERCIER, L.S. *Néologie*, ed. Berchet, J.-C., Paris: Belin, 2009, p. 204.

¹¹ Quoted by Bronisław Baczko, *Lumières de l'utopie*, cit., n. 1, p. 45.

¹² LESZCZYŃSKI, S. *Entretien d'un Européen avec un insulaire du royaume de Dumocala*, ed. Laurent Versini, Nancy: Publications de l'Université de Nancy, 1981.

of his country without in the end being able to occupy it. He was received by France as a first-class refugee before giving his daughter in marriage to King Louis XV. Stanislas Leszczyński, who was made Duke of Lorraine and of Bar in 1737 by a decision of his son-in-law, reigned over his small province with the discernment of a wise man. A sovereign without any real power but a sensible observer of European politics, he wrote a good number of memoirs and treaties on morals, philosophy and politics.

It is difficult to match this king who was so very proud of all his titles (even though they were only titles), this stalwart servant of the Catholic faith and Church, this debonair conservative, a typical portrait of utopian authors, inheritors of the libertine tradition of the Grand Siècle often held responsible for the great turning point of the Revolution. It is impossible, however, to deny good King Stanislas his contribution to the literary tradition of utopia. For everything is there, to be honest, if one is to characterize utopia during the Enlightenment. Utopia became established as a model of narrative and discourse, no longer necessarily as an organ of opinion. But, from the slightest to the most virulent forms of its realizations, they were all the expression of this very particular energy which inspired reforming views and even more in all sectors of the time: the conviction that humankind is able to make at least a certain number of them come true, within a certain perimeter. Opinions differ as to that number as well as to the extension of the perimeter: such are the views of the authors of some one hundred and fifty utopian texts produced in the eighteenth century in French or translated into this language.

Never were utopias so numerous and never so varied, so rich and so surprising in their differences. To limit utopia to the texts which may look like harbingers or even inspirers of the Revolution is a serious misunderstanding: a mortal sin of teleology, of course, but above all, a crime of ignorance. Such a wide and diverse corpus of texts must be made known in order to evaluate everything that it reveals: the powerful longing for a better life, the extent of human inventiveness, the fertility of human imagination. All of them seem to be telling the same story on a canvas that was not very conducive to variations; but each of them makes it possible to see, to dream, to postulate the existence of other men, other customs, other principles, other solutions and to interpret other figures, other scenes, other sequences. And they all do so because they perceive the social reality in which they live as unsatisfactory or downright intolerable.

Dumocala, like Utopia, is a talking noun. In Polish the verb *dumać* means to think, to dream. It is an openly conjectured country whose perfections are described by an wise old man to a European traveller who has lost his way. This country obviously possesses all the qualities one expects;

it is therefore exactly the opposite of Europe, whose vices are known to the wise old man by virtue of his having had the opportunity to read a French treatise on universal history (Bossuet's?). The two interlocutors thus represent the opposition frequently established within utopia between the historian who, in the words of Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier, the publisher of the abovementioned collection of *Voyages imaginaires*, «paints men as they have been or as they are» and the philosopher who, again according to Garnier, «transports himself to new worlds, where he collects observations which are neither less interesting, nor less precious».¹³ Utopia, the philosopher's domain par excellence proves to be quite extensive at a time when every critical reflection in every area of thought and knowledge is precisely qualified as philosophical. From this to arguing that utopia and the Enlightenment have the tendency to merge in a mutually emblematising relationship is just a short step away from the line that Leszczynski and many of his associates in *utopography* would invite us to cross.

Criticizing the world in order to conjecture, to postulate another world – in other words, to philosophize – is a posture that may lead as much to action as to prudent restraint. One will not be astonished to know that it is this second attitude that is incarnated by King Stanislas. His little novel is framed by two sentences in the same spirit. «How sad is the human happiness that is only found in unknown countries that are inaccessible to us», we read in the Foreword. As for the last sentence in the text, it echoes this idea: «my reader [...] will be able to see that the real happiness of peoples can only be found in unknown lands».¹⁴ A position of resignation which, from a political perspective, may be perceived as fleeing in the face of desires and plans for change in the imperfect world of men, but which, from a literary viewpoint, reaffirms something crucial: the force of fiction, which is not only, as this virtually perfunctory king would like it to be, a possible and sufficient refuge for men looking for happiness, but a field for the incubation and experimentation of ideas or even – more specifically – the place where Man has erected the theatre of his inner life. And who could dispute the reality of this? The vehement reality, for example, of longing for happiness? The Revolution was not the culmination of utopia, nor the consequence of this longing, but it offered proof of the reality of such longing, proof that those unknown worlds are an integral part of the world that one presumes to know. This is why quite a number of utopias

¹³ *Voyages imaginaires*, cit., n. 7, t. I. p. 1.

¹⁴ *Entretien d'un Européen*, cit., n. 12, p. 1 and 45.

may be read as fables intended for the explanation, the justification and the illustration of fiction itself.

That is why the present *Dictionnaire critique de l'utopie au temps des Lumières* not only offers original, erudite insights into these better worlds devised by men at a certain moment in history. To a much greater extent, one will also find a multifarious picture of the socio-political and literary culture of the time of the *Philosophes*. The title of the dictionary might just as easily have been *Dictionnaire critique des Lumières au temps de l'utopie*.

ABSTRACT – On the occasion of the publication of *Dictionnaire critique de l'utopie au temps des Lumières*, culmination of Bronisław Baczko's research project funded by the second half of his 2011 Balzan Prize for Enlightenment Studies, Porret and Rosset reflect upon their work with Baczko on the *Dictionnaire*, bringing out the wide-ranging variety of approaches, methods and subjects that went into the production of this complex, rich work that presents a finely nuanced understanding of the historical period time when utopia became ingrained as a discursive model and a way of thinking about the scope and the limits of social happiness inside the righteous city. The embodiment of Baczko's conception of utopia, the *Dictionnaire* offers original, erudite insights into better imaginary worlds devised by men at a certain moment in history as well as a multifarious picture of the socio-political and literary culture of the era of the *Philosophes*.