

Democracy in East Central European utopianism

The context of the research

Given that great variations exist in the geographical or cultural definition of Central Europe, we will analyse it not only as physical space but also a virtual/imaginary (quasi-utopian) area marked by an awareness of and a longing for “democracy” (among a clearly defined segment of the intellectual elite), combined with a parallel awareness of permanent democratic deprivation due to several reasons (backwardness, belatedness, foreign domination etc.). Péter Hanák (1989) talks about a diffuse region, arguing that utopia and reality continuously blend and complement the other in this region. Hanák also refers to Kundera, claiming that the region belongs culturally to the West, but politically to the East. It is also a significant feature of the region that in the 19th and 20th centuries East Central Europe was comprised mostly (though not exclusively) of small nations with distinct national cultures living adjacent to large empires (cf. Bibó 1946). In essence, the boundaries of the region have often depended on the political structures of the neighbouring areas. Under such circumstances and for most of the 19th century, nationalism served as an important modernising force. Still, the small nations living on the verge of extinction have easily turned against the other. Most often such conflicts are fuelled by mutual non-understanding: while from a distance the region may seem relatively uniform, great differences in language result in difficulties in cultural transfers (primarily beyond the Slavic majority). This feature of the region constitutes one of the challenges of this investigation: the research group needs to be equipped with the required language competences.

Utopia and utopianism

Based on Sargent (1994) the project considers utopias as ideas of a better society, not necessarily perfect, but intended to be ideal, at least significantly better than the current society of the author. Although the investigation focuses on texts and their relationship to historical and political movements and conflicts, all three faces of utopianism will be reflected, that is, literary texts, the utopian elements of political ideologies and to some extent intentional communities as well. Claeys (2013) considers utopias and dystopias as a kinship rather than being in an opposing relationship, emphasising their structural similarities (expressing a mainstream view in utopian studies). His concept of *enhanced sociability* is a feature present both in dystopias and utopias, as signified by dystopias motivated by fear and utopias by friendship. We shall

investigate how this concept of utopian friendship may be related to the concept of fraternity, a concept originating in the Enlightenment and one that received less attention than liberty and equality.

It is equally important to investigate the negative images of fictive societies, negative utopias or **dystopias**, particularly narratives of fictive dictatorships or totalitarian states. They often express the need for civil liberties and democratic patterns in a negative fashion through depictions of fictive societies lacking democratic values. Dystopias usually operate by contrasting the society the author lives in with an even less agreeable social structure of non-freedom, that inhibit the possibilities of human flourishing. Dystopias present a threat, and in this way attain a social function of warning or cautioning against dictatorial efforts. In a paradoxical manner, through the depiction of an abominable situation, dystopia acts to highlight the value and importance of democratic patterns.

Methods of the investigation

Research must be tailored to the text or phenomena of investigation with an emphasis on multiperspectivity to gain a full picture of the relationship of democracy and utopianism. We cannot neglect the ambiguities present in the concept of utopia as ‘good place’ and ‘no place’ at the same time (see also Abensour 2008). When interpreting literary texts, the polysemic and polyphonic nature of literary utopias require consideration; they are not direct proposals or blueprints, but rather opportunities for new ideas or thought experiments to provoke new political thought (see also Blaim 1982). We look at utopias as showing a direction or horizon for human society, rather than a destination in and of themselves. As Vieira (2017) suggests, a utopia is often an antithesis that confronts the thesis of the political reality in which it is read, and it is the reader who is supposed to reach a synthesis. In our project, the thesis of the undemocratic or quasi-democratic patterns of East Central European historical realities will be confronted by the antitheses of utopias. From there we shall reach a synthesis which discloses the role of democratic values. It is also hypothesised that Western and East Central European utopian text treat the role of democratic values differently, hence there is innovative potential in contrasting the different attitudes and their historical contexts. Finally, this investigation is also expected to shed light on the historical experiences of the authors and societies that have produced the texts.

Numerous literary approaches are available to guide the analysis of dystopian texts and phenomena. The concepts of critical utopia exposed by Moylan (2014), the contrast of utopia

and the present, where the text is critical of the utopian model itself, will be taken into consideration. However, our approach is closest to Claeys (2017) who investigates dystopias primarily not as a literary concept, but as a historical and cultural phenomenon related to monstrosity culturally and totalitarianism historically.

The problem of the *fictive* nature of many utopian texts also must be addressed. The very nature of fictionality makes some historians and social scientist ignore such texts when they look at fact and fiction in binary opposition. Literary studies, relying on the results of the Leibnizian philosophy of possible worlds (cf. Ronen 1994, and Dolezel 2000), emphasize the interrelatedness of fiction and factual reality, thereby viewing fictionality as a matter of spectrum rather than an alternative to empirical reality. Our research takes advantage of this approach in exploring the potentials of fictive or imaginary worlds in interpreting historical reality and demonstrating the impact of fictive text in the factual world. In this manner, fictive texts (and also other cultural artefacts) become a source to better understand historical phenomena.

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