Conclusion: “Oh, Don’t Ask Why!”

When I get up in the morning, my daily prayer is, grant me today my illusion, my daily illusion. Due to the fact that illusions are necessary, have become necessary for life in a world completely devoid of a utopian conscience and utopian presentiment.

Ernst Bloch in “Something’s Missing”¹

This is a book about intelligibility – about what can and cannot be comprehended and understood. During the Cold War, the future was open. Whether or not it was actually the case, the future felt uncertain, with the potential of moving in not just one of two directions (communism, capitalism), but several: the continuation of a protracted stalemate, the sorting out of differences through some social democratic compromise (the world becomes Sweden), the rise of other countries to convert the power dyad into a triad, or multiple constituencies, and so on. This uncertainty was at times a dangerous one, not just because of the real threat of mutually assured destruction, but also because knowledge about the present was as uncertain as the future: the present we were living would come to look different from the perspective of what came next.

After the end of the Cold War, globalization was a discourse that offered to make the present (time) and the planet (space) intelligible.

Intelligible does not mean clear or simple. Globalization as both discourse and reality were certainly confusing enough. The resolution of the protracted political, economic, and military struggles that followed World War II occurred at the same time as the birth of new technologies and a vibrant technophilia, the emergence of pronounced anxieties about environmental limits, demographic worries (population decline in most Western countries mirrored by their near-logarithmic explosion elsewhere), and the full-blown emergence of global mass culture – an intensified and extensified society of the spectacle, redoubled in force and social significance since first described by Guy Debord in the 1960s. Globalization was imagined and conceptualized by vectors of force and sites of impact running across the range of flora and fauna into which we continue to map our social existence: economics, politics, culture, and society. Still, despite its complexity, globalization was intelligible – a process (or set of processes), or period, or even an ideological narrative, that could be understood and graphed in detail. There was a vast academic apparatus devoted to doing just this, bolstered by new technological tools that allowed for quicker communication of results and new modes of analysis.

Globalization was a name for the moment; it was also, as we have insisted, an ideological project, one whose function was to make a claim on the character of the present. Globalization marked, at long last, the conclusion of the project of human social development, the arrival of the world’s various constituencies into an accord over the governing principles of political economy. There were some malcontents and disappointed parties (no system can be perfect). But there was also broad agreement over the paths to pursue for social (read: economic) improvement and success, now and forever more.

In the process of naming and claiming the present, globalization has had an effect perhaps no one might have imagined when the “new world order” was being evoked into existence. Globalization has become a perpetual present, a project and a period without an end. The oft-referred-to crisis of the left can be summarized as an inability to mount any resistance against this restructuring of time – a redefinition of time that evacuates the future in favor of the present, translating the
ontic into the ontological. The 2008 economic crisis confirms this time shift. Where once one might have expected a global reaction on the scale of the European revolutions of 1848, or the worldwide struggles between police and protestors in 1968, today we have outrage without much action. The recently announced decision by US billionaires to donate half of their wealth to good causes has been greeted in the press not with the analysis proper to it – the criticism mounted, for instance, by Slavoj Žižek of figures like financier George Soros, who plunders the public during the day only to give half back in the evening – but with praise and comradely backslapping. The heroes of the digital age have done good – again! Today, capitalism is plainly understood as an unjust system, but instead of hopes of bringing it to an end, there is a meek accommodation, and a hope (given that there are no alternatives), that it can be made to work well for most – which is to admit that it of necessity can’t work for everyone.

What is it that makes this state of affairs intelligible? In his blog “The Conscience of a Liberal,” Paul Krugman writes: “Open immigration can’t coexist with a strong social safety net; if you’re going to assure health care and a decent income to everyone, you can’t make the offer global.” A strong safety net can help to offset the problems generated by our social and economic systems. Immediately, however, it is admitted that only a few can be so lucky as to enjoy this safety: it is impossible on a global scale. Here is a paradigmatic case of the limits of liberalism: the necessity, as Nicholas Brown puts it, to “believe two contradictory things at once: an imperative to protect the unlucky, and an imperative not to protect the unlucky.” Krugman expresses unhappiness at this state of affairs – his liberal conscience at work again, allowing him to square the circle of the contradictions of the system by recourse to the arbitrariness of nationalism and a moralism marked by its immorality. This combination of moralism and nationalism which permits an evasion of the problems and limits of global capitalism is a logic we have seen at work in the other figures whose ideas about globalization we have looked at: it is an insight produced through blindness, though advocated as if the world was viewed through an X-ray rendering of hidden forces made clear only to the author’s eye.

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The books we examine in Part Two always invoke a US audience even as they speak about the globe. This is not just a formal or rhetorical gesture – something required for the purposes of market share and to garner reviews in the appropriate news organs of the liberal center. Rather, it constitutes an admission of the divide between the United States and everyone: an awareness of the fiction of the political rhetoric that globalization benefits everyone, and the need to maximize opportunities and limited resources for one’s own nation. It is in this sense that Zakaria’s post-American world is American through and through, that Florida’s fascination with a capitalist utopia of creativity is framed as a competition between nations (and indeed between cities within them), and that Friedman scours the world for anecdotes that might help him to grasp the secret of the new world confronted by America so that America might benefit from it. Even the Canadian globalist Klein is ready to allow for a world of nationalist competition, not to mention one in which capitalism itself persists, if in the form of mixed markets. This is a view that doesn’t resolve the problem of social and economic injustice, but repeats Krugman’s contradictory logic even if it seems that her politics are to the left of his own.

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Technique, expertise, competency – the fantasy of epistemic control we see on display in Michael Clayton is a component part of the practice of rendering the complexities of the globe intelligible for the purposes of nationalism. It is essential for the coherence of this fantasy, however, that this technical expertise be conjoined with a morality that governs the correct use of knowledge about the globe and smoothes over contradictions that might arise from the application of technical insight to get ahead at the expense of others. As significant as this persistence of the nation is, the retreat from structural or systemic accounts back to an appeal to the logic of the bad man is equally significant. At one extreme, this takes the form of global conspiracy theories, from the idea that the planet is managed by the Bilderberg Group or The Family, to the beliefs that plans are exchanged amongst elites at Davos. Moralism need not take such extremes, however; the measurement of good and bad corporations, good and bad products, owners, politicians, athletes, and so on, has become ubiquitous. It is symptomatic that one of the largest companies on the planet – the corporation that embodies the tendencies
of the global moment more than any other – bears a slogan that invokes the ethical. As with Krugman’s conscience, Google’s “Do no evil” does not in fact prevent the company from making questionable decisions about privacy or the undemocratic control and management of information, so much as it helps it to continue to imagine itself as not truly a corporation (its motives are different!) even as its market value grows ($185 billion in January 2010).  

In the present moment, politics has become less about policies or changes to systems than the individual behavior and beliefs of those in charge. At a moment when one cannot help but attend to interconnected global systems – from the economic to the ecological – the Great Man theory of history returns, with a focus on the moral disposition of the leader. The growing disappointment over the first years of the Obama administration stems less from its policy outcomes than from shock at the fact that the world hasn’t changed as a result of a “good” leader taking over from a “bad” one.

This is a book about intelligibility. What we find ourselves concluding is that what passes for intelligibility today does not in fact produce insight into our present or future, but actively works to undo our sense of the limits we face and the possibilities available to us. It’s no mystery that capitalism is the operating system of the planet. But this knowledge of capitalism is not the same as an understanding of it and of its influence on our habits, understanding, expectations, views of past and present, and what might yet be. What we are calling intelligibility here – a bureaucratic-sounding word, one lacking the gravitas of many concepts or figures – has in other contexts been called utopia. Utopianism has come to mean a certain kind of fantastical or wishful thinking about impossibilities. But this is to misunderstand the significance of utopia for both politics and the generation of concepts. If utopia is about an engagement with impossibility, then this project is ultimately driven by the desire to shift the realm of possibility. Utopia, therefore, is ultimately about possibility. In particular, it is about the possibility that things might be other than they are – for instance, that we might develop a world in which everyone has access to adequate amounts of food, clean water, or even simply the opportunity to work.  

It is the desire for this possibility, uncompromised and genuine, that we feel is missing. The students whom we interview in Part Three
understand the absence of this future possibility from their present, but are unwilling or unable to address it. As for the liberals? They expend energy on the development of an exit strategy situated squarely inside and within existing relations, and then express satisfaction and even surprise at having found what they always already knew was there. As Nietzsche reminds us, “If someone hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable.”

Something’s missing when instead of the possibility of radical difference, we find always and everywhere the same ideas of how we might proceed. Of course, something’s been missing for a long time, even if globalization offers a different context (and thus, distinct challenges for critique) in which this is the case. This phrase comes from a discussion about political possibility which took place almost a half-century ago. “Something’s Missing” (1964) is the title of a discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno about utopia and its fate. Both thinkers find utopia to have become banalized in the modern world through the coming into being of all kinds of technological inventions that are utopian in their character (television, air travel) and made ubiquitous by having become associated with even the act of purchasing an object (a fantasy that can come to fruition, a wish that can be fulfilled, even though Adorno suggests that in so doing “one sees oneself almost always deceived”). The substance of Adorno and Bloch’s discussion focuses on the importance of seeing utopia negatively – not as this or that kind of society, as mapped out by figures like Thomas More or Tommaso Campanella, but as the “capability to imagine the totality as something that could be completely different.”

Treating utopia negatively acts as a defense against “the cheap utopia, the false utopia, the utopia that can be bought.” As a negation of what merely is, utopia acts as a critique of the present, pointing to what should be. The content of utopias is less important than the expression of a will for the present to be different. When it is said that some utopian goal or aim “cannot be realized,” what is really being said is “we do not want it to be realized.” Bloch suggests that this utopian impulse is captured in the sentence “Something’s missing” (Etwas fehlt) – “one of the most profound sentences that Brecht ever wrote” – which Bloch takes from Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil’s 1930 opera The Rise and Fall of the
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City of Mahagonny. The diminishment or complete absence of this impulse by the 1960s is not an accident. Bloch suggests that “There is a very clear interest that has prevented the world from being changed into the possible.”

It is worth tracing this sentence back to its origins. At once an opera that criticizes the bourgeois opera in form and content, and a savage allegory of life under capitalism, Brecht’s libretto for *Mahagonny* has been viewed as deliberately crude and didactic. Set in the American Wild West, a space of unfettered capitalism where money rules and rules are few and far between, *Mahagonny* shows what the world looks like underneath the veneer of European bourgeois culture. Jimmy and his crew of lumberjacks arrive in Mahagonny ready to spend the cash they’ve accumulated after seven years of working in the wilderness. After their long labor, they expect to translate this money into the fulfillment of all their desires – the happiness and freedom of consumption that one imagines is the reward for engaging in production. But things go wrong almost immediately. Grown bored of cheap gin and whiskey, fishing and smoking, and tired of the rules that Lokadja Begbick starts to institute in the once anarchic town, Jimmy decides to leave Mahagonny and runs to the pier to catch a boat out of town. His friends try to keep him from leaving, describing all that he can still do in the city: sleeping, swimming, enjoying himself in myriad ways. To all their entreaties, he repeats: “Something’s missing.” Jimmy is in existential despair: “And why does nothing make sense at all?/You tell me, please, why nothing makes sense at all . . . You tell me! What is it a man was born for?”

What follows confirms the play’s reputation as a blunt critique of the injustices of capitalism. After a series of misfortunes – starting with the typhoon which narrowly avoids the city and which allows Jimmy to take control away from Begbick – the play ends with Jimmy being brought in front of a tribunal to account for the city’s problems. He famously receives the death sentence not for his crimes of gluttony, drunkenness, fighting, or prostitution, but for not having money to pay his debts (two rounds of whiskey and a broken bar rail). At one level, the lesson is a straightforward one. As Adorno writes in his review of *Mahagonny*, “the present system, with its order,
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rights, and more, is exposed as anarchy; we ourselves live in Mahagonny, where everything is permitted save one thing: having no money."

But the opera is more complex than this. If it were only a critique of capitalism and its inability to produce human happiness, it would fail to explore the full significance of Jimmy’s feeling that “something’s missing.” Mahagonny is, first, an exploration of the limits of bad utopianism – that is, of a utopia that imagines that it can be actualized in the form of a set of rules and procedures, or even in the supposed freedom that comes when they are suspended. Jimmy’s response to his feeling that something’s missing (after threatening to eat his hat – “Jimmy! Hat-eating/’S not what mankind was born for”\textsuperscript{20}) is, in the confusion of the typhoon scare, to take control of Mahagonny, eliminating Begbick’s edicts and prohibitions and reintroducing the anarchy that once ruled. The crisis allows the city to swing from recession to boom times, but it doesn’t manage to fill up the absence that Jimmy experiences. Instead, the result is the tragic opposite of the pure freedom for which he hoped. Though it might have appeared that Jimmy’s version of Mahagonny undid the limits of Begbick’s, the larger system within which both were configured remained in place. It is a point Brecht cannot resist driving home in the opera’s conclusion, in the inscriptions placed on the signs of the demonstrators:

First group. Begbick, Fatty the Bookie, Trinity Moses and supporters. The inscriptions on the first group’s signs read:

"FOR THE INFLATION"
"FOR THE BATTLE OF ALL AGAINST ALL"
"FOR THE CHAOTIC STATE OF OUR CITIES"
"FOR THE PROLONGATION OF THE GOLDEN AGE"

First group:
For this splendid Mahagonny
Has it all, if you have the money.
Then all is available
Because all is for sale
And there is nothing that one cannot buy.
The inscriptions on the second group’s signs read:

“FOR PROPERTY”
“FOR THE EXPLOITATION OF OTHERS”
“FOR THE JUST DIVISION OF SPIRITUAL GOODS”
“FOR THE UNJUST DIVISION OF TEMPORAL GOODS”
“FOR LOVE”
“FOR THE BUYING AND SELLING OF LOVE”
“FOR THE NATURAL DISORDER OF THINGS”
“FOR THE PROLONGATION OF THE GOLDEN AGE.”

It is not surprising that Jimmy would imagine utopia to be found in the simple and direct negation of prohibition and the unleashing of individual desires – desires which are of necessity the product of those selfsame limits and still thus bound to them. As Lydia Goehr reminds us, “Mahagonny projects a closed world in which there is no ‘noncapitalist space.’” Despite all the injustices, exploitation, and chaos listed on the signs of the protestors, each ends with a hope “for the prolongation of the golden age.” What is on display in Mahagonny is “the closed world of bourgeois consciousness which considers bourgeois social reality to be immutable.” What’s missing is not simply an outside that would make it possible to see the laws of human happiness shaping life in Mahagonny as socially produced and not in any sense natural, but a sense of mutability or change that would open up the possibility of seeing that the golden age is anything but. The opera offers a direct critique of capitalism, but does so in a way that draws our attention to the political or conceptual blockages that need to be addressed if one is to do more than affirm it even by denying it, as Jimmy has the misfortune to do.

But how to do so without reaching for or appealing to an outside that doesn’t exist in the world of Mahagonny? This is our problem more than it was Brecht’s; there was for him not just the proximate lesson of the Soviet revolution, but also all kinds of political agitation within Germany – and even within the United States – that preceded and followed that first great system failure: the Great Depression of 1929. In the wake of our crash, we have few examples of counter-systems ready to hand to which we can reach for ideas, and certainly no non-capitalist
space to map and explore: globalization has made this a certainty, even if there might be some small zones in which experiments with other modes of life are taking place. In the intervening years, Brecht’s theatrical projection of Mahagonny into the non-space of the American West has been rendered actual. The Los Angeles Opera’s 2007 staging of Mahagonny perceptively renders the city as Las Vegas – a place to which one goes after a stretch of work for pure leisure and secret indulgence in one’s fantasies (‘What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas’). In an era of deregulation and faux freedoms as a result of the retreat of the state, Mahagonny is no longer allegory of a possibility still on the horizon as much as it is the reality with which we have to contend.

Brecht provides us with an insight into how we might render visible the character of our own Gilded Age – that is, render it intelligible, which is to say, into a system with a history, which is mutable and does not confine us like fate. In his review of the opera, Adorno draws attention to a key inversion which it can be possible to miss or to mistake. In the first scene, Begbick’s associates, Fatty and Moses, say that “this entire city of Mahagonny exists only because everything is so bad, because there is no peace and no harmony, and because there is nothing anyone can believe in.”24 Jimmy’s response comes as a negation of this “fun of peace and concord”25: “Ah, no one will ever be happy throughout your Mahagonny because there is too much peace and too much harmony, and because there is too much in which one can believe.”26 It is this surplus of belief that critical thinking has to address, a surplus of the actual and pragmatic, of the prescriptions of common sense, that stands in the way of the possible. What Jimmy misunderstands is that his negation of Begbick’s system has to be more radical, an order of thought satisfied not just with raising questions about the practices of the Golden Age, but of its very existence. And the only way to do this is to set thinking free at the same time that we break ourselves from a commitment to the reigning rule of the social, such that we can get past the limit placed on possibility.

Our seven theses on globalization are written in the negative not to shut down possibilities, but to ensure that they are enabled in the most powerful sense possible. Otherwise, as we have argued and shown, any affirmation of “solutions” to our present problems and impasses is to
think within a framework that accepts as impractical the idea that everyone could – or even should – be included as fully as possible in the social. Negation produces an awareness of system, and of its limits, in a manner in which little else is liable to do. In his discussion with Bloch, Adorno says at one point:

Yesterday you quoted Spinoza in our discussion with the passage, “Verum index sui et falsi” [The true is the sign of itself and the false]. I have varied this a little in the sense of the dialectical principle of the determined negation and have said, Falsum – the false thing – index sui et veri [The false is the sign of itself and the correct]. That means that the true thing determines the false thing, or via that which makes itself falsely known. And insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia, insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is.27

The fact that we seem to have given up on radical possibilities and are afraid to imagine utopian futures speaks not to the failure of utopia, but to the falsity of the ways in which we live our lives and think of our planet at the present time. The truth of the way that the world should be shows us the falseness of the way it is. Something’s missing – not this or that thing, easily located and thus introduced in a manner that resolves the quest for it once and for all. Something’s missing: our ability to separate truth and falsity, and to catch a glimpse of a horizon that isn’t merely the present we already know and find so troubled and wanting.

Notes

Conclusion


8. Fredric Jameson has suggested that “the most radical demand to make on our own system . . . [is] the demand for full employment, universal full employment around the globe” (37). What such a demand reveals starkly is the shape and character of political and economic structures that render any such demand unrealizable. The possibility for all individuals to engage in productive social labor simply cannot happen because of the structural need for a reserve army of labor, which takes distinct forms in different parts of the world. Jameson’s point here, as in much of his writing on utopia, is that because so basic a right cannot be realized, a political opening is possible: a demand for a “society structurally distinct from this one in every conceivable way, from the psychological to the sociological, from the cultural to the political” (37). Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 35–54.


11. Ibid., 1.


13. Adorno in ibid., 11.

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15. Ibid., 15.
21. Ibid., 63–64.