

## On Pedagogy, Countercultures, and the Theory of Utopia

— **Sam Gould:** In the fall of 2010 we had asked if you would like to compose an essay for the YouTube School for Social Politics. Your essay, “Utopia is No Place,” proposed a very hopeful and pragmatic deconstruction of Thomas More’s usage of the word Utopia. As you stated, utopia, in the Greek, means “Nowhere” or “No Place.” This could, of course, be taken as rather farcical in our present day conception of what a utopia is supposed to be. It’s funny, and probably bleak too. I don’t think most people consider the root origins of the word, and possibly that’s why most people always seem so skeptical of utopic ideals, in that in our generalized conception utopias always seem to fall short of their proposed goals. Century over century, that disappointment is contagious.

But you didn’t see it that way. Your essay proposes that the use of this “No Place” that More conjured can really be quite useful, even utilitarian and pragmatic. It can be a vehicle to achieve our loftiest goals, because, whereas we’ll always be striving to run to the horizon (a place which we can never reach), in our attempt at getting there we will have passed over places we need to encounter if we wish to proceed anywhere at all. And, in the passing of those places, I’ll venture, our visions of a utopic future are somehow bolstered, changed, and therefore, of course, continuously unattainable. In this sense, utopia is a tool, not a place.

I’d be interested in hearing you talk a little bit more about this take on Utopian Theory, if you will. Not only is it optimistic; it is, as I mentioned earlier, pragmatic. And in relation to **Dream**, your last book, I see a fairly strong correlation between acting out a fantastical present to arrive at the lovingly mundane, progressive future. I’ve been discussing this last notion—the fantastical present or, at least, utopian pragmatic action—a fair amount of late as a counterpoint to Direct Action. I suppose one could call it Indirect Action: a means of engaging the politics of the long-now.

— **Stephen Duncombe:** A favorite quote of mine, oft repeated by the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, is that to be a revolutionary you need a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will. I like this idea for two reasons. The first is that it rings true to any activist’s experience: In order to change the world you have to get up in the morning thinking that what you do will really matter, and have the critical eye that allows you to reflect upon your actions and assess their efficacy. You also need to temper the enthusiasm which motivates you with a realism that keeps you from getting distraught at the end of the day (or the month, or the year, or the lifetime) when the world seems not to have transformed. But I also like Gramsci’s advice for another reason: It assumes that we can hold two seemingly contradictory positions at one and the same time. The goal of so much of our philosophy, be it academic, religious, or merely common sense, is the drive for consistency: to get all the bits and pieces of our ideologies in line so that it forms a uniform, one-sided argument. This leads to rationalist dogmatism of the worst kind. What Gramsci understands (and being a dialectical Marxist certainly helps), is that this sort of logical unity is not necessary: that we can, do, and probably should more often hold opposing viewpoints. This way of thinking accepts as a given that the Truth or the Answer or the Direction cannot be contained in any singular answer. It suggests that neither side is entirely sufficient, and it is in the tension—the space—between two sides wherein another type of answer resonates. I like the

word “resonate” here—because it gets at the dynamism and inherent motion of this position.

So what does this have to do with Utopia? Let’s go back to the source. Thomas More’s **Utopia** is a curious book. Yes, it’s an idealization of everything that More’s 16th-century Europe was not: no money, no private property, democratically elected government and priesthood, freedom of speech and religion, and, best of all, no lawyers. But it’s also much less straightforward than one might think. The book is full of such seeming contradictions, riddles, and paradoxes. The grandest one being the title itself. Utopia (composed of the Greek *ou* and *topos*) is a place which, as you mention above, is no place. In addition, the storyteller of this magic land is called Raphael Hythloday (or Hythlodaeus), from the Greek *huthlos*, meaning nonsense. So here we are being told a story of a place which is named out of existence, by a narrator who is named as unreliable. And so begins the debate: Is the entirety of More’s **Utopia** a satire, an exercise demonstrating the absurdity of such acts of imagination? Or is it an earnest effort to suggest and promote such imagination?

Here’s the evidence for the satirical interpretation: In addition to the names given the place and the narrator, More, in his description of the island of Utopia, makes some very attractive possibilities that he (as a prominent lawyer, landowner, Kings Councilor and Lord Chancellor, and man) would have been expected to be dead set against. For example: lack of private property, no lawyers, the possibility of women priests, etc. He then places these political imaginaries within a society that also uses gold and jewel-encrusted chamber pots. As such, one might argue he effectively ridicules all these possibilities: “No private property? Well that is about as absurd as taking a shit in a gold chamber pot.” On the other hand, More could be serious about his ideals: Raphael, the narrator, is named after the Archangel Raphael who gives sight to the blind and guides the lost. Perhaps More is merely using the absurd to sincerely suggest—yet at the same time politically distance himself from—political, economic and religious imaginings that he condones but would be considered in his time a type of political and religious heresy: “Democratic election of princes and priests? Can’t you see I was kidding?”

But I think this orthodox debate about whether More was serious or satirical actually misses the political point—and power—of **Utopia** entirely. The genius of More’s book is that it is both absurd and earnest, simultaneously. And it is through the combination of these seemingly opposite ways of presenting imaginaries that a more fruitful way of thinking about imagination can start to take shape. It is the presentation of Utopia as no place, and its narrator as nonsense, that opens up a space for the reader’s imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace might be and what a radically different sensibility might be like. And by positing his imaginary someplace as no place, More escapes the problems which typically haunt political imaginaries.

Most political imaginaries insist upon their realizability, their perceived efficacy: imagining a future or an alternative and positing it THE future or THE alternative. What More does is something entirely different: He imagines an alternative to his 16th-century Europe that is openly proclaimed to be a work of imagination. It cannot be realized, because it is unrealistic. It is, after all, no place. But the reader has been infected; another option has been shown. They can’t safely return to the assurances of their

own present as the naturalness of their world has been disrupted. Once an alternative has been imagined, to stay where one is or to try something else becomes a question that demands attention and a choice. Yet, there is not the short-circuiting of this imaginative moment into a fixed imaginary: a simple swapping of one stable and logically consistent solution for another. Again, Utopia is no place. And as no place it denies us the easy option of such a simple choice. Instead, the question of alternatives is left open, and space is opened—for the reader of **Utopia**—to imagine. Why not? How come? What if?

— **Gould:** How do we extrapolate from this notion of the role of utopia? How does it become expressed off the page, away from theory, and in-between the considerations, actions, and choices of others?

For starters, these ideas regarding contradiction are really appealing to me. Not because, as I think it is to be assumed, that contradiction allows one to not take a stance, but because of that space in between ideas, people, and possibilities that contradiction allows and which you allude to. This is an interesting consideration as well, in regard to Harry Hay's notion of Subject-Subject Consciousness. Hay's early argument within his proposal for a Subject-Subject worldview is that absolutist Cartesian logic is—and this goes for dialectical Marxism in his point of view as well—inherently binary in nature. It pits two points against one another which, by its essence, energizes a state of conflict over consideration. He suggests that towards the end of the 19th century you find a system of thought that begins to negate this binary approach to questioning. Mainly, he argues, this triangulated logic can be found in the realm of physics; Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle being the catalyst for the thought processes of physicists like the Curies, A.H. Becquerel, and of course Einstein. He goes on to state that, while physics played a gigantic role within this shift in consciousness in our day-to-day lives (I mean, just the very idea of the general populous contemplating the Space/Time Continuum, come on!) other areas of academic concentration—political science for instance—stubbornly held firm in their binary approaches within their fields and their concerns. Hay saw, as do I, these spaces in-between, these contradictions (sometimes I refer to them as failures), as generative, not to be disregarded as dangerous, inconsequential, or weak-minded.

Again, this is interesting to me when we look towards utopic proposals, or viewed from another angle, so-called countercultures. They are spaces that propose another existence, another way of living or considering our place outside the perceived norm. Nominally they are viewed, from both within and without, as oppositional. They enlist the same binary considerations that Hay argues against. Dissolution tends to set in when we discover that we can't escape one another, just as much as we can't escape our own self! There is, in reality, no other at all. But what if we step back a moment and reconsider the space in question and triangulate the proposal? What if we consider these spaces of otherness, these Utopian proposals—no matter their politics—not a node at all, but that space in-between, that contradiction? In this sense they are the space of consideration and questioning, no longer oppositional at all, but educational. In this, the act of the creation of these spaces suggests a pedagogy. The space is un-fixed, floating, and open to change and deconstruction. I suppose, where that leaves us within this triangulated educational non-space, is considering the three points which surround it: Are they fixed? Are they changing? What is their relation to the loosely defined center? Is a contradiction inherently binary? Can there be three sides to an argument? If so, is it an argument at all? Regardless, my starting point lies in this notion that by triangulating strategies that might be perceived as oppositional you create an open field. This open-

ing up negates the need for oppositional space—one side or the other—and places the concerns in question within a space of pure *consideration*.

— **Duncombe:** I'm intrigued by Hay's/your idea of moving beyond—or rather between—the binary. Moving things into opposition seems to be almost hard-wired into our imagination, even our resistant imaginations. Like Hay, I'd like to lay the blame on Cartesian logic: that philosophical moment of the mind/body, self/other split. But then the question becomes, did Descartes understand something essential about human existence or did he bring a certain moment in the development of Western consciousness into clarity? There's plenty of very smart thinkers who insist on the cross-cultural, trans-historical essentiality of the binary: anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas to name just two, and you are absolutely correct in arguing that the Hegelian or Marxist dialectic, while setting the binary into motion and flux, also reifies it (that is, until the End of History!). Given that this is the way we "naturally" think about the world, we have our work cut out for us in conceptualizing this forever inchoate, resonating space in between.

The first problem with a space in between is that it counts on the two poles on either side. That is: if we completely do away with binary thinking, the magical space in between has to go as well. So at first glance this is a liability, but maybe it's also a way to address the sticky problem of novel imagination. The problem with imagination is that it's hard to think of something that you don't already, in some way, know. As Descartes himself pointed out, I can think of a mythical beast like the half-man/half-goat Satyr, but only because I already know of humans and goats. It's just a mash-up. So instead of imagining a jump out of the binary thinking that we've inherited, this in-between space uses the limitations of that thinking to create a space for a certain act of imagination: the mash-up Satyrs of a new world.

Bringing this discussion back to earth, maybe we should look at your idea of taking the counter out of counterculture and instead think of it as an educational space for experiencing and experimenting with models of living and thinking. That is: not as a space counter to the dominant culture (and thus susceptible to co-optation, defensive purity, and the like) but existing in some other place. But what place? The good thing about the binary is that you knew where you stood: not that! We're not the (dominant) culture, we're the counterculture! As such we can build counter-art forms, counter-institutions, counter-economic models, and so on. But what can you do in a place in-between? The no-place we've been discussing is the triangulation between the real and unreal, the possible and the impossible. As such it is only an imaginary space—that is, a space of imagination ... and education.

But then what to do with this no-place space of imagination? How do you 1) translate it into something useful, something educational, something political and 2) do so without immediately solidifying it onto a Truth, which will then generate a Counter-Truth and so on, until we are back where we started?

— **Gould:** You're right, binary thinking is, for the majority, intrinsic, very human indeed. I feel a constant struggle within myself to view things apart from that "one or the other" mindset, especially when it comes to power relations. It's really hard not to, and maybe you are right about this idea of it being hard-wired into us as humans. But we humans have never been daunted in the past by the idea of changing the very essence of who we are, right? And if we can argue for a pluralistic worldview, then there cannot be any true binary relations, as everyone's reality is divergent from one to the next. I think the reason most people fall back on the binary is because, simply put, the opposite, the infinite, is scary as fuck! It throws everything up in the air



and asks you to really engage yourself in the world. In this area of thought you can no longer rely on one or the other, black and white, here and there, consciousness. The possibilities are endless, and we are forced to consider not what is right, but what is what. That takes a lot of time, and most people just aren't interested in putting in the effort when there is, often, a proposition out there that seems acceptable enough.

What I enjoy about Hay's thinking, and where I feel it is useful to have it coexist with your take on utopian space and action, is how it resides in an untenable space. Similar to how most of us view what a Utopia is supposed to be, maybe absolute non-binary, or subject/subject thought, cannot exist? If so, therein lies its power. In our constant striving for a subject-subject/non-binary set of relations, we create an educational space through its (un)attainability. In this regard the process is similar to one's attempt to reach a state of spiritual enlightenment. By setting up a construct that is, to a degree, an impossibility, you create a space for what is possible here and now, but seemingly exhausting to achieve. It is a space of mindfulness, near-constant consideration. Nominally one might view this as a meditative space, though I find education and meditation to be oftentimes quite similar. So then, in this line of thinking what you have is a tool that allows you to consider your day-to-day in a different light, in the center of these two poles (which we'll soon get rid of!). By removing yourself from either opposing side, by constructing the triangulated space, a space for consideration, you become present. This isn't to say we're asked to abandon political belief, just that we allow our beliefs to wander when moved to do so.

I think it's really important to discuss this notion of removal. The removal I posited above I find very different from the more normative idea of removal we're used to when considering counter-cultural strategies. In the space of generative contradiction that you brought up earlier with the Gramsci quote, it's important that we keep in mind this normative idea of negation, or removal.

It often seems the case that the idea of utopia, or the notion of the counterculture, is that it offers an escape from the world at large. Countercultures strive for a sense of otherness, or negation. Yet we can't, despite our most ardent desires, remove ourselves from humanity. Even at our most extreme, in death (Heaven's Gate, Jonestown, suicide/murder, etcetera), our choices, our negations, continue to be generative. Despite that, the striving toward some sort of reprieve or removal from what one considers culturally or politically dominant is an important and powerful action that shouldn't be ignored. On an arch level, what I would argue is that our constant striving for the other, for removal, in relation to our inability to untether ourselves from one another, from the world at large, further expands the possibility for a triangulated space, an interstitial zone for consideration. By viewing our relationship to one another and our ideas as elastic, our movements away from one another create more space in-between to ask, what if? The generative power resides in allowing or creating this space of removal, in tandem with the understanding that we are in constant contact with the world outside, as there is no outside at all.

— **Duncombe**: I want to pick up on your mention of "the idea of removal." It strikes me that at the heart of most radical projects is this idea, or ideal, that we can remove ourselves from the present. That is, find a space outside the coordinates of the known, and thereby be done with all this messiness of the world we live in today. God, for millenia, served this function. In our more recent history of secular radicalism it was some "other" that was the stand-in: the proletariat, the peasant, the ethnic or sexual minority, youth, even the criminal (Jean Genet) or our sub-

conscious self (as the Surrealists believed) that would offer a model of living and thinking and being outside of the main currents of society. Aligned with this subject position, the rebel could look back and judge history, understand the present from an objective distance, and then look forward clearly to a bright new future. The line of the march was clear. The problem with this position was obvious: Many of those "others" refused to conform to ideal anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, anti-social ways of thinking and being and, when they could, often fought for a seat in the very space they were supposed to remain outside of. A suburban tract home with a Weber grill out back turned out to be what a lot of "others" were fighting for. Conversely, when the "other" did create an "outside"—consider Year Zero of the Khmer Rouge, an Islamic Caliphate, or the Michigan Womyns Music Festival—it was horrific.

So let's reject the model of resistance that depends upon removal and go back to your idea that the counterculture is really part of the overall culture yet opens up an educational space. And I want to return to **Utopia**. At first read, **Utopia** is a clear example of an idea of removal: It is, again, no place. But then again, as critics have long pointed out, it's not. Each *utopia* conjured up bears a direct relationship to the world of its dreamer. More's *utopia*, as I pointed out before, was a camera obscura vision of his 16th-century Europe. Hardly novel, it was merely everything his world was not. And it was also a positive expression of his times: a vision of the ideal Christian community, a sort of Garden of Eden before the fall (itself a negation of the material reality of the present). So in terms both positive and negative, More's utopia was firmly enmeshed within his present.

I don't think we should give More a hard time about this: It really is impossible to imagine outside of the images we already have. Likewise, all countercultures will be forever linked with the more general cultures of which they are a part. And really it could be no other way: If these cultures and locations were truly "other," then we would not be able to recognize them as locations or cultures. Just as we are bewildered when first confronted with words that use letters from an alphabet with which we are not familiar, truly novel creations are unreadable (although with foreign words we at least know we are looking at words). Such places and creations would be, as Jacques Rancière might put it, insensible.

So what's the use of utopias and other cultures if they really are not removed from the unity which is the binary? They are, in your words, "tools" for imagination. I think it could also be said that they are an illusion—a conscious and creative illusion. A place which you simultaneously know is a no-place. This is separate from the delusion that you can find, or already have found, a place of removal, the delusion of believing that you have created someplace outside. Instead, utopia and utopian cultural creations offer illusions that lend direction and give motivation—they set us on a path that might just get us somewhere else.

This conversation was originally published in **The Journal of Radical Shimming** #10. Courtesy of the authors

