

Utopia as social psychotherapy

Michail Ingerlab*, Taisiya Paniotova

Southern Federal University, 344006, Rostov-on-Don, Russia

Abstract. The article considers the approach to modern utopian works as a means of social psychotherapy. This context is currently poorly developed, although for the first time “psychological utopia”, as a society of perfect mental health, was mentioned by A. Maslow.

Utopia, remaining the object of multidisciplinary research, in the era of digitalization and information technology acquires the ability to quicker than before be reflected in the mass consciousness, to acquire the significance of a cultural phenomenon, to determine the values and meanings of the activities of its adherents.

The authors analyze the significance of utopian ideas of rational individualism, techno-utopianism, trans-humanism as ideologies of social movements. The emerging phenomenon of socio-medial psychotherapy is presented for discussion.

The authors conclude that the psychotherapeutic meaning of utopias consists in their openness to the future, the denial of the negative present and the ability to construct socially significant ideals reflected in the individual psychology of contemporaries.

*“Progress is the implementation of Utopias”
O. Wilde*

Wording of the problem

The objective of our article is to consider utopia as a type of social psychotherapy.

Utopia as a literary and philosophical genre today is in the focus of attention of multidisciplinary research (philosophical, cultural, anthropological, psychological), since it represents an attempt to create alternative models of the future and artistic understanding of the human inner life in the context of such social models. It is a creative product of a specific type of thinking - utopian thinking - characterized by the ability to create an ideal model of the world order without reliance on the real laws of its development.

* Corresponding author: ingerleyb@gmail.com

In Russia, this field of research now has an original refraction in its traditional support for the dialectical approach and is actively comprehended by the scientific community. Recent publications by D.E. Martynov [4], T. S. Paniotova [5], E. V. Sannikova [6] and others, explore new roles and meanings of utopia in modern culture and society, refute the thesis of “completion the era of utopia and utopianism”, predict in which directions the development of utopian thinking is possible. However, according to some authors [9], this research activity is “catching up” in relation to the West. In modern conditions, the position of E.Y. Batalov remains relevant: “In the world of utopias they live by their own laws and principles. But these laws and principles have a tangible impact on our lives. Capturing the imagination of large statesmen and ordinary citizens, penetrating the program documents of political parties and organizations, into the mass and theoretical consciousness, pouring into the slogans of popular movements, utopian ideas become an integral part of the cultural and political life of society” [1]. And, therefore, they determine the mentality of society, the content of the value-semantic and emotional sphere of people, their existential choices, and, ultimately, their future and present well-being.

Utopia and dystopia in the USSR as a form of psychotherapy

The most important of constructive fantasies of mankind - utopia - has always been a way to give comfort and hope, that is, in fact, to carry out psychotherapeutic work, bringing relief to people suffering from the hardships of the current life. This psychotherapeutic function of utopia is closely associated with its construction of a social ideal, which is conceived as capable of embodiment [3]. The ideal itself underwent changes as society became more complex and culture developed, but each time “consolation to the future” was at the same time “motivation for the future” both for the masses and for politicians, ideologists, and organizers of social life [8]. It is noteworthy that anti-utopian works can also give a kind of “therapeutic effect”. This is due to their critical fuse and the ability to “get rid of illusions.”

In the Soviet Union, “utopian therapy” was based on Marxist doctrine, which in its essence was directed toward the future, building a grandiose project of transforming the world. An example of such psychotherapy can be the works of I. Efremov. As the main work in which I. Efremov speaks from the standpoint of globalist utopianism, we recall the *Andromeda Nebula*. The author describes a hypothetical society based on the principles of justice and social well-being, developed on a planetary scale, where the methodology of universal education has been tested and applied. This idealized image of the future undoubtedly had a positive psychological effect on readers.

In terms of meaning, it adjoins the works of the Strugatskys brothers, whose worldview can hardly be called openly communist. They describe individual elements of an ideal society - “Midday World”, most often associated with the education system (“It's hard to be a god”, “Attempt to escape”, “Far Rainbow”, “Baby”, “Beetle in anthill”, “Waves quench the wind” and others). Their “worlds of the future” are not trouble-free, but inspiring and in this sense they had a stimulating and motivating effect on the consciousness of contemporaries.

These works are directly opposed ideologically by the anti-utopia of A. Zinoviev. In “*Yawning Heights*” A. Zinoviev criticizes the idea of “developed socialism”, in “*Global Humane Hill*” he criticizes the flip side of Western “developed democracy”. In both works he sees active total state control over all spheres of human life. In both works, the person is deprived of the right to decide his fate, endowed with the illusion of freedom in its actual absence, and is in conditions of constant manipulation of consciousness by the state. In fact, this society does not need a personality; it needs a “person-function” which leads to the triumph of mediocrity and stagnation. A. Zinoviev creates worlds in which everything is

ground: both ideas and people. The dystopian pathos of such works and their critical orientation enabled readers to react to those negative emotions that accumulated as a result of dissatisfaction with what was happening in society. The very manuscript, clandestine, forbiddenness of a anti-utopia detailed kind intensified the effect of psychological detente for the reader, for reading the “forbidden literature” made it possible to feel like individuals and heroes, and not cogs of a social mechanism.

Western "Utopian Psychotherapy"

However, the utopian works of socialist authors could not and cannot be compared in their influence on mass consciousness to the utopias created in the West. For example, take a look at the work of Ayn Rand, whose "Atlas Shrugs" is now becoming the "handbook" of young Russian entrepreneurs. Its circulation is many times higher than publications, for example, A. Zinoviev. What makes it so attractive? How does it attract the human soul?

It is thought that “Atlant ...” is an attractive narrative based on the American consumer model of consciousness, and praising individualism as one of the three main moral “models” characteristic of human society. The other two are egoism and altruism. Living on the principle of “neither you to me nor I to you” “the individualist does not consider himself as a means for another Self (altruism), but also does not allow others to consider themselves as a means for themselves (egoism)” [10]. The Utopian Society of A. Rand is guided by the principle of self-esteem, which assumes that no self can impose its will on others, because for others, self is also a value. Ayn Rand replaces generally accepted human values - mercy, human unity, faith, poverty, self-denial, duty - with a new list: justice, independence, reason, wealth, self-esteem, happiness. In this way, she actually rejects and refutes the Christian system of moral values. The psychotherapeutic effect of liberal utopia is in the resolution that it gives a person, the permission to follow their own goals and motives, ignoring the historically established moralistic laws of the “world”.

R. Heinlein also calls into question the Christian system of values in his cult philosophical novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which in its layout and essence is an anti-utopia. According to English-speaking authors, this is “one of the books that shaped America” [11]. According to others, this is the “hippie Bible” during the very youth protests of the 60-70s, when Utopian studies were born, which created the worldview of a whole generation. Anti-utopia and utopia are closely interconnected and often flow into each other, creating a single complex of “detente-stimulation”, “criticism-hope”, “rejection of the present - aspiration for the future.”

In the modern West, the dominant concept that continues the utopian tradition is “techno-utopia”. Techno utopia sets an indispensable condition for an “ideal society” advanced science and technology [2], on the basis of which the law and social system are developed exclusively for the benefit and well-being of its citizens. A variety of techno-utopia is “digitopia”, which sees the social ideal as an information technology society, where there is no state control and “superiority of the free market” is realized. On the symbiosis of techno-utopia and techno-progressivism, trans-humanism emerged - an international movement professing to use new knowledge and technologies to improve the human body (including ridding it of disease and aging) and cognitive abilities. The main postulate is that a person should become a superhuman being with new abilities, transforming into a post-person. This utopian project has a significant psychotherapeutic effect, as it gives hope for immortality. Moreover, immortality obtained scientifically and technically, and not “once”, but in the near future. According to some researchers, trans-humanism represents the best idealistic aspirations of mankind, and, according to others, the most dangerous ideas in the world. You need to understand that today this movement is

not just ideological adherents, but the multimillion-dollar “biohacking” movement, offering its followers not only ideology and literature, but also the industry of dietary supplements, literature, websites, video courses, textbooks with billions in turnover. Here a direct transformation of the utopian idea into an entrepreneurial project took place, but its psychotherapeutic effect is undeniable.

Social psychotherapy: a utopian component

So far we have talked about the psychotherapeutic role of utopia as a literary genre, but there is another side to the coin - the moment of utopia in professional psychotherapy. Social psychotherapy as a desire to harmonize the inner world of many people, although it does not build images of an ideal society, always includes a utopian component. In this context, social psychotherapy, firstly, directs people to change their consciousness and behavior in view of a better future, and secondly, where it comes to psychological self-help, it suggests that, with the support of professionals, a person will achieve his own mental well-being.

At the same time, there are no perfect guarantees that the hopes of "gaining psychological balance" will come true. And in this sense, large socio-psychological projects, for example, media psychotherapy always carry a share of the risk of being a kind of utopia, leading to disappointment. A paradox is formed: in order for the psychotherapeutic effect to take place, the value-oriented “utopian projects” themselves offered by psychotherapists to their wards should be minimally utopian. For utopia has two faces: the face of an optimistic future and the face of unrealizability. Helping the client to form valuable images and life goals, the therapist always risks not leading him to the desired spiritual harmony, but the methods used should be maximally verified and not carry frankly fantastic components within themselves [7].

Nevertheless, in modern Russia, a cycle of television programs with the participation of Dr. Kurpatov can be considered a successful example of psychotherapy based on media - media psychotherapy. There are many other worthy examples that continued his baton, for example, psychotherapeutic broadcasts on the radio of A. Danilin. For example, within the large area of Internet psychotherapy that has formed, the most relevant today is social media psychotherapy. This is a type of psychotherapy on the Internet that uses social media: social networks, blogs and the like online platforms for communication between people. It is on them that the most effective and can be the interaction of psychologists and psychotherapists with those who need help. These technologies have given rise to a new paradigm in social psychotherapy - an active approach of a person to solving the psychological problems that he faces. And this actively-active approach is implemented in such areas of psychotherapy as psychological self-help in the conditions of network communities and specialized forums.

But this is not only psychological self-help, but also psychological mutual help, which is especially important in the conditions of our country and society. The collective form of psychological assistance, which can be called mutual assistance, is very effective, it is dominated by the moment of experiencing the present, rather than “hope for improvement in the future,” and in this sense it is the least utopian. Modern networked communities turn out to be a socio-psychotherapeutic environment, forming a semantic sphere, existential attitudes, social priorities among their adherents. Positive, fertile, constructive ideas born of individual authors or creative communities are instantly reflected in individual and mass consciousnesses.

Conclusion

Concluding our brief analysis, we would like to emphasize that the paradoxical nature of the utopia phenomenon is manifested in the implementation of its psychotherapeutic function. Utopia inspires by criticizing the present and painting optimistic images of the desired future. Anti-utopia criticizes both the present and even more frightening future, revealing the dangerous and destructive tendencies of the present, serving as a warning. In both cases, the problems of the existence time, goal-setting and the pursuit of individual values are actively conceptualized.

The psychotherapeutic function of the utopian consists in freeing people from their isolation in the negative present, in their openness to the desired future and in encouraging it to form actively while avoiding the "negative options" inherent in dystopia. At the same time, the utopian promise for a better future does not give any guarantees, therefore there is always a risk of disappointment and despondency. However, philosophy and literature constantly spontaneously create utopias, despite the noted risk. Modern psychotherapy, which cannot avoid the utopian component as an element of "projecting the future," finds new forms of human consciousness harmonization that emphasize the present, and these forms are associated with the information development of society.

References

1. E. Y. Batalov, *In the world of utopia: Five dialogues about utopia, utopian consciousness and utopian experiments* (Moscow, 1989).
2. I.T. Kasavin, *Megaprojects and global projects: the science between utopia and technocracy*, *Problems of Philosophy*, **9**, 40-56 (2015).
3. N.I. Lapin, *Fundamental values of civilizational choice in the XXIst century. Part I. Human civilization before choosing the configuration of fundamental values*, *Questions of philosophy*, **4**, 3-15 (2015).
4. D. E. Martynov, *To the consideration of the semantic evolution of the concept of "utopia" (XX century)*, *Questions of Philosophy*, **10**, 152-158 (2009).
5. T.S. Paniotova, *Utopia: Life After Death (A Review of a Scientific Conference)*, *Philosophy Issues*, **11**, 213-215 (2017).
6. E.V. Sannikova, *The specifics of the Latin American utopia*, *Humanitarian and socio-economic sciences*, **1 (16)**, 200 (2005).
7. P. I. Sidorov, *Ecology of mental epidemics*, *Human Ecology*, **6**, 33-49 (2015).
8. Y. D. Smirnova, *Utopia as a form of realization of human reality*, *Scientific notes of Kazan University. Series Humanities*, **154 (1)**, 166-172 (2012).
9. M. D. Suslov, *Utopia as a subject of modern research in the West and in Russia*, *Bulletin of the Russian State Humanitarian University. Series "History. Philology. Culturology. Oriental Studies"*, **7 (108)**, 34-41 (2013).
10. L. I. Yaduta, *About mercy and justice: A. Rand's answer*, *Ideas and ideals*, **1 (2) (28)**, 110-116 (2016).
11. Patterson, Jr H. William, *The Martian Named Smith: Critical Perspectives on Robert A. Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land* (Nitrosyncretic Press, Sacramento, 2001).