

UTOPIANISM REVISITED WITH WILLIAM JAMES'S PLURALISM.
FROM A CRITIQUE OF THE REALIZED UTOPIA
TO AN EXPERIMENTAL UTOPIA
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Abstract

A paradox can be identified in contemporary Western societies. They represent themselves as grounded in strong realism and guided by reason, believing they inhabit what might be called a “realized utopia”. But what appears to be a disenchanted world is just a simulacrum. This kind of enchantment is immanent and devoid of any transcendence, thereby reducing utopia to the domain of the existing rather than projecting it into the horizon of the possible. This paper argues for a re-enchantment of the world through a renewal of utopianism, grounded in William James's epistemology. Connecting utopian thought with James's pragmatism can implement the indeterminacy and ambiguity inherent in utopianism in order to elaborate a way of thinking based on openness and pluralism.

Keywords: Realized utopia; Hyperreality; Pragmatism; Re-enchantment; Pluralism.

1. Introduction

Dominant imaginaries conceive contemporary Western societies as deprived of any reference to a world other than the actual state of affairs, presenting themselves as fully oriented toward empirical reality and governed by the authority of Science. Yet rather than inhabiting a purely disenchanted world, these societies live within a collective hallucination: the belief that the utopia of an unlimited world placed entirely at human disposal has been realized. This supposed fulfillment of utopia functions as a simulacrum that replaces both genuine utopian imagination and the world in its irreducible openness.

The disappearance of transcendence thus does not mark the end of utopian thinking; rather, it signals its transformation into an unreflective form. What presents itself as scientifically informed realism conceals the assumption that the horizon of possibility has already been exhausted within the existing order. Against this closure of imagination, the need for a different kind of utopianism arises – the need for a re-enchantment of what is believed to be disenchanted, through the development of a utopian vision grounded in a pragmatist epistemology.

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Only a utopia conceived in terms of openness, fallibility, and ongoing experimentation can reorient the world toward the concrete construction of a more just society. In this sense, Jamesian pragmatism provides the conceptual resources to reopen the horizon of possibilities that the hyperreal closes. By conceiving truth and reality as outcomes of ongoing inquiry and collective experimentation, William James's philosophy provides a conceptual framework to change the epistemic posture of both the realized utopia and some forms of utopianism, thereby offering the chance of discovering and experimenting with possibilities, grabbing latent options, and proposing alternatives to the *status quo*.

2. Immanent Utopia

A critical sociological perspective seems the most effective in understanding the functioning mechanism that characterizes Western societies. Given its focus on the social organization and expression of phenomena, it can better penetrate the reasons behind the display of the paradoxical belief in the fulfillment of utopia and the absence of any transcendence.

Jean Baudrillard seems especially relevant, given his description of the image of itself that the society of consumption presents and believes in as that of a "realized Utopia" [*Utopie réalisée*]¹, explaining the apparent disenchantment of the world, which truly corresponds to a kind of disenchanted enchantment that exhausts reality and all the alternative possibilities into the signs of reality.

2.1. Simulacra

Jean Baudrillard explains the contemporary world through the concepts of simulacra and simulation².

Disneyland is the perfect example of a simulacrum, an image that conceals the fact that the United States of America *is* Disneyland, meaning that the real is no longer real³. This calls into question the distinction between true and false, real and unreal: there is nothing real against which the unreal Disneyland stands, Disneyland *is* the real. Indeed, it is the "hyperreal", in the

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation*, Gallimard, Paris 1970, pp. 95, 318.

² Cfr. Id., *La société de consommation*, Gallimard, Paris 1970; Id., *Le système des objets*, Gallimard, Paris 1968; Id., *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, Paris 1976; Id., *Le miroir de la production ou l'illusion critique du matérialisme historique*, Galilée, Paris 1975/1973; Id., *Simulacres et simulation*, Galilée, Paris 1981.

³ Id., *Simulacres et simulation*, Galilée, Paris 1981.

sense of a third-order simulation that constructs a wholly representative world detached from any reference to actual reality, connected to all the other simulacra in an infinite chain of equivalent symbols.

Hyperreality creates a system of self-referential connections between images, without any reference to reality, so that the hyperreality thus produced corresponds to a “simultaneity of all functions, without past, without future, with totalizing operationality” (my translation from French)⁴. Bernard Stiegler’s work further explains this mechanism, enhanced by the digital nature of capitalism in contemporaneity, where all interactions and knowledge are reduced to algorithmic combinations and calculations, thereby deepening the consumption of reality through its immaterial interchangeable symbols⁵.

The conceptual grid created by representations synthesized in simulacra is therefore a hyperreal grid that simultaneously absorbs, produces, sustains, and represents reality, similarly to Guy Debord’s “society of spectacle”⁶. In the hyperreal, the relations among all elements that compose both reality and the hyperreal are consumed within the grid of images, which at once divide and unify reality within themselves.

Simulacra, then, create a world where there is no distinction between reality and images of that reality, because, *de facto*, reality is no longer considered. This is relevant for the account of utopianism that will be outlined through this paper, since it explains how a disenchanted enchantment is actually possible: the hyperreality created by simulacra is believed to be the actual reality, and all the possibilities are absorbed into the chain of symbols of reality, leaving no space for further experimentations.

2.2. *The Simulacrum of the Realized Utopia*

The world is understood, represented, and created as an infinite chain of images, where the final purpose of action is the domination and control of every aspect of (hyper)reality.

In this context, the simulacrum of an infinite world at the disposal of the human species emerges. What is believed is that the best of all possible worlds is here, and that to improve it all that is needed is already here, just waiting to be properly utilized.

⁴ Ivi, p. 118.

⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique. T1. L’époque hyperindustrielle*, Galilée, Paris 2004; Id., *De la misère symbolique. T2. La catastrophe du sensible*, Galilée, Paris 2005.

⁶ Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Buchet-Chastel, Paris 1967.

This feature is well exemplified by contemporary ecomodernist ideas. The essential claim of the ecomodernist project – that Mathias Thaler does not hesitate to qualify as utopian⁷ – is that humanity already possesses the cultural (including social, moral, political, and economic practices) and, more importantly, the scientific and technological knowledge to turn the ecological crisis into a flourishing future. In the *Ecomodernist Manifesto* it is clearly stated:

Modernization has liberated ever more people from lives of poverty and hard agricultural labor, women from chattel status, children and ethnic minorities from oppression, and societies from capricious and arbitrary governance. [...]. Modernizing processes are far from complete, even in advanced developed economies. Material consumption has only just begun to peak in the wealthiest societies.⁸

We can see the work of the realized – and yet hyperreal – utopia. The fundamental assumption is that there is no need to look for something else, because what is realized is already good; it just needs to be brought to fulfillment.

Reality is conceived as being exhausted in what is existing and considered, and the attitude associated with this kind of conception is that of technical dominion over the world aimed at ensuring humanity's prosperity. The most reasonable behavior in a perfectly realized Utopia is that of maximizing the enjoyment of the infinite resources at humans' disposal, with the aim of bringing to completion all the possibilities already present in this perfect reality⁹.

Underlying this kind of behavior is the assumption that humans are capable of controlling the existing through their scientific and objective understanding of the world. Augusto Del Noce, appropriately, sees precisely

⁷ Mathias Thaler, *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022, pp. 146-221.

⁸ Ted Nordhaus et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, "Breakthrough Journal", (online) 2015, <https://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english> (vd. 10 February 2026).

⁹ The idea that in a perfect reality humans would only have to maximize their scientific competences to exploit for their prosperity what the world offers already informs early modern utopias. Cfr. Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*, Floating Press, Auckland 2009/1627; Tommaso Campanella (edited by Massimo Baldini), *La città del sole*, Newton & Compton, Roma 1995/1602; Thomas More (edited by William Dallam Armes), *The Utopia*, The MacMillan Company, New York 1912/1516.

in scientism the core characteristic of modernity, that is paired with atheism¹⁰. This connection between scientism and the absence of transcendence can be identified in the pretense of scientism to exhaust reality in its objective and statistical inquiries. As Hartmut Rosa interestingly suggests when reflecting on how to translate the German term *Unverfügbarkeit*¹¹, “This is exactly what this book is about: modernity’s incessant desire to make the world engineerable, predictable, available, accessible, disposable (i.e. *verfügbar*) in all its aspects”¹².

The crucial problem is therefore the connection between faith in the reality and objectivity of the scientific representation of reality, and the exhaustion of everything into this perfect, closed, understandable and controllable reality.

2.3. *Disenchanted Enchantment*

The existing order is believed to be the best of all possible worlds, the realization of the Utopia of infinite resources, that humans can control and utilize.

To better understand this confusion between utopia and reality, consider a famous utopian image, spread across Europe from the Middle Ages: the “Land of Cockaigne”, “the profane corporal imaginary of a land of shared plenty, pleasure, and leisure”¹³, that Sylwia Dominika Chrostowska identifies as the origin of utopianism¹⁴. The “Land of Cockaigne” used to represent the *bouleversement* of peasants’ everyday life in the late Middle Ages: in the “Land of Cockaigne”, peasants can sleep and enjoy themselves, food is abundant and ready to be eaten, without requiring any labor. This image is a profoundly bodily utopia, focused on the connection between social justice and abundance and on the free enjoyment of pleasure.

In advanced capitalist societies, the “Land of Cockaigne” acquires a very different meaning. Gianluca Cuzzo employs this image to expose the paradox of consumerist societies, that is the belief in the reality of the myth of abundance:

¹⁰ Augusto Del Noce, *Il problema dell’ateismo*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1964.

¹¹ Hartmut Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit*, Residenz Verlag, Salzburg 2018 (*The Uncontrollability of the World*, translated by James C. Wagner, Polity Press, Cambridge 2020), pp. vii-ix.

¹² *Ivi*, p. viii.

¹³ Sylwia Dominika Chrostowska, *Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2021, p. 18.

¹⁴ *Id.*, *The Flesh Is Not Sad: Returns of the Body in the Utopian Tradition*, “Diacritics”, 2018, No. 46/3, pp. 4-30.

First and foremost, it [melancholia] means *anchoring to the world*, in order to overcome the spurious fabulations that cloak it, conferring upon reality the semblance of the Land of Cockaigne, in its postmodern and consumerist variant: an immense supermarket stretching in every corner of the globe, where all that exists – as if it were an image without referent – can be bought and consumed on credit, becoming always available to our ontophagic delirium (my translation from Italian).¹⁵

The transformation of the utopian image of the “Land of Cockaigne” is quite transparent. If utopia should normally represent the Other, the beyond-yet-to-come, in contemporaneity utopia is instead an immanent vision without projection, since “paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that is no longer of the order of the possible, one that we can now only dream of as a lost object” (my translation from French)¹⁶. Abundance and consumption are the utopia onto which the common imaginary of contemporary is projected.

The contemporary understanding of the world is therefore paradoxical, being at the same time a utopia and the set of all the actualized possibilities, a fictional representation and reality itself, an infinite chain of symbols and the only possible horizon.

On the one hand, the conviction of understanding the world as it is in the name of Science is based on crude realism, practice-oriented policies, and solutionism. According to Evgeny Morozov, what he calls “technological solutionism” is indeed the most common posture assumed to face crisis: instead of reasoning on the causes of the problems, usually action is guided by the belief in the capacity of science and technology to tackle every problem and better any situation through control and engineering¹⁷. On the other hand, this belief is actually the expression of the hallucinatory Utopia of a materialized Eden, believing that the perfect conditions of living are always and everywhere within reach.

Contemporary societies, then, are not disenchanted, but rather they are trapped in a hallucinatory version of enchantment. What is believed to be reality is in fact a utopia, leaving no space for actual utopias to flourish.

¹⁵ Gianluca Cuzzo, *Utopie e realtà: Tra desiderio dell'altrove, ecosofia e critica del presente*, Moretti & Vitali, Bergamo 2015, p. 65.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Galilée, Paris 1981, p. 179.

¹⁷ Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything Click Here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, Public Affairs, New York 2013.

3. William James's philosophy: Re-opening the horizon of possibilities

Even if the realized utopia tends to exhaust all possibilities in hyperreality, every system produces its opposing forces and critiques¹⁸, and William James is a strong candidate to galvanize these resistance efforts, due to his eclectic interests and pivotal concepts of openness and pluralism¹⁹. The value of James's philosophy for a re-discussion and re-configuration of politics has been long recognized. However, these debates usually operate in the liberal democracy paradigm – hence somehow reducing the plurality of possibilities opened by pragmatism – or focus on the concept of *meliorism* – which could lead to a conception of progress, thereby being too close to some of the fundamental characteristics of the realized utopia²⁰.

Instead, here the suggestion of Martin Savransky is followed and expanded²¹. The value of William James's pluralistic attitude resides in the explosion that this conception entails, namely an ontological fragmentation of the world into a plurality of worlds where tensions and struggles are always in place, outside of any determined paradigm and instead oriented through constant experimentation. Taking this suggestion seriously from an epistemological point of view, here is argued that William James's epistemic reflections are the starting point for the elaboration of a conceptual apparatus apt to re-open the horizon of utopian possibilities closed by the simulacrum of the realized utopia.

¹⁸ On the interplay between power and resistance practices, see Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard, Paris 2011/1999; Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, Nelson Phillips, *Power and Organizations*, Sage Publications, London 2006; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1. La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1976; Id., *Il faut défendre la société. Cours au Collège de France (1975–1976)*, Gallimard, Paris 1997; Id., *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France (1978–1979)*, Gallimard, Paris 2004; Id., *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)*, Gallimard, Paris 2004; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2008/1990.

¹⁹ Cfr. Sarin Marchetti (ed.), *The Jamesian Mind*, Routledge Philosophical Minds, New York 2022.

²⁰ Cfr. Joe Hoover, *The dangers of utopia: World building and the careful practice of hope*, "Journal of International Political Theory." 2025, Vol. 21 Issue 3, pp. 346-365; Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*, Columbia University Press, New York 2009; Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999/1998; Id., *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989; Id., *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, London 1999.

²¹ Martin Savransky, *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds: Politics of the Pluriverse*, Duke University Press, Durham 2021.

3.1. *Pluralism and Non-finitude*

The core feature of a pragmatist utopia relates to the idea that reality is not concluded but always in creation.

According to James, the world is not the product of one unified and teleologically oriented story, but a jagged collection:

The world is full of partial stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we can not unify them completely in our minds. In following your life-history, I must temporarily turn my attention from my own. Even a biographer of twins would have to press them alternately upon his reader's attention.²²

The world is to be conceived as a range of possibilities²³, which result in a range of choices and possible actions for humans.

Reality is not a fixed, fully knowable entity waiting to be discovered; it is always experienced and interpreted through human activity:

Now however fixed these elements of reality may be, we still have a certain freedom in our dealings with them. [...]. We read the same facts differently. "Waterloo", with the same fixed details, spells a "victory" for an Englishman; for a Frenchman it spells a "defeat". So, for an optimist philosopher the universe spells victory, for a pessimist, defeat. What we say about reality thus depends on the perspective into which we throw it.²⁴

This does not mean that there is not such a thing as a reality, but rather that humans cannot discover and understand reality as something objective, pure, and eternal, because reality itself is always changing and expanding, since it is full of activity and humans continuously reorganize it through their experiences, ideas, and perspectives.

²² William James, *Writings: 1902–1910*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York 1996/1987, p. 548.

²³ Following his pragmatic maxim, James advocates in favor of an option over another in virtue of the greatest advantages in the long run that the first option rather than the latter provides. For preferring pluralism to monism in particular, cfr. *Pragmatism and A pluralistic universe* in William James, op. cit., pp. 479-624, 625-820; *The will to believe* in Id., *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, Green, and Co., New York 1912/1897.

²⁴ Id., *Writings: 1902–1910*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York 1996/1987, p. 594.

This focus on perspective suggests that understanding reality involves adapting our beliefs to reality, through the integration of new experiences into our set of beliefs.

We can extend this insight from the individual mind to social contexts, exploring how collective activity shapes shared realities and arguing in favor of a different way to interpret reality and live in an active and ever-unfinished world. Martin Savransky precisely explores a plurality of stories and ways of inhabiting the world to illustrate all the different worlds that are constantly brought to life by different actors²⁵. At the opposite end of the spectrum from simulacra relations to reality, there is the pragmatist account of the interconnections between human creativity, reality, and relations between all elements of reality. The world and, accordingly, our understanding of it is thus conceived as never-ending and open.

James maintains that our beliefs display their practical value if and only if we recognize that the horizon of human beings is the future – that is, possibility. In the absence of a future, everything would appear settled and resolved. The theme of the possible within the given is central to James's thought, and it is from this that his pluralism emerges: it is because we live within the realm of the possible that we can affirm one belief rather than another by considering their practical consequences. Our theories are not grounded in an original foundation; rather, they must be evaluated in terms of what they mean for life, that is, according to their practical consequences in the future. The pragmatist's point of view looks to possible consequences – to what may unfold in the long run: the pragmatist's outlook is grounded in possibility, future, and pluralism.

Hence, a vision of the world as a realized utopia, which understands reality as fixed and exhausted, is far removed from actual reality, since it suppresses activity and contingency:

The world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy-professor introduces you is simple, clean and noble. The contradictions of real life are absent from it. Its architecture is classic. Principles of reason trace its outlines, logical necessities cement its parts. Purity and dignity are what it most expresses. It is a kind of marble temple shining on a hill.²⁶

²⁵ Martin Savransky, op. cit.

²⁶ William James, *Writings: 1902–1910*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York 1996/1987, p. 495.

A pluralistic conception of the world as fragmented, incomplete, relational, experienced, and full of incompatible possibilities clearly opposes the hyperreal conception of reality, seen as exhausting all the existing and being fully intelligible and controllable.

3.2. *Necessity and Possibility*

The world is still in the making and open, and human creativity plays a fundamental role in shaping reality. However, the importance given to human activity is not to be mistaken for the belief in the capacity of humans to achieve everything and always succeed in their plans.

Indeed, contrary to scientism and, more broadly, the idea characterizing the realized utopia that everything is controllable and within reach, James teaches that contingency is the universe's most fundamental feature:

James was a passionate advocate for pragmatism because it supports a pluralistic metaphysics that he felt best meets these needs: balancing melioristic hope that our actions *may* steer events to better outcomes with awareness of the possibility of tragic failure that makes our actions necessary and meaningful.²⁷

Human activity is simultaneously orienting reality and adjusting itself to it. The power of humans' capability – that in the view of the realized utopia is ready to bring to fulfillment the perfection of the world – is embedded in the contingency of the universe.

James suggests a conduct of cautious fallibilism. Even if human actions play a decisive role, reality constitutes a resisting force to humans' freedom. James's pluralism does not entail an independence of human action regarding reality; rather, humans can organize and orient reality, always knowing that necessity still exists, but humans can bend it by choosing what best accords with it. Agreement is not simply a matter of getting along with reality or not; to "agree" means being able to frame something, to come into contact with it²⁸. Reality is not a scattering of unrelated and independent atoms; rather, it is a world in ferment in which we are immersed, and therefore the agreement we establish with the world is an unstable one.

²⁷ Sarin Marchetti (ed.), op. cit., p. 541.

²⁸ Cfr. *The Meaning of Truth* in William James, *Writings: 1902–1910*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York 1996/1987, pp. 821–978.

Nothing is determined and necessitated in the strong sense of a monistic and deterministic vision. And yet, necessity is still at play, but in a universe governed by contingency. This means that humans need to be aware of the provisionality of knowledge and to remember the constant effort required to update our set of true beliefs about the world. In this sense, scientific knowledge as well is just an adequate set of tools to orient ourselves through reality. Contrary to scientism, pragmatism offers a conception of science that does not lead to control and perfectionism, but rather to a collective and never-ending process of inquiry and testing.

The interplay between necessity and possibility is a fundamental issue. A pragmatist approach claims to operate freely outside of any necessitating framework with our intellectual tools, keeping them open to experience and willing to call acquired instruments into question. The underlying idea that the universe we inhabit is open and never closed entails that we are never completely determined, but neither are we entirely dissolved into a chaos devoid of order. In fact, human life is bound up with the category of possibility: things are not simply given with certainty, yet for something to come about, the conditions must allow it. Possibility means glimpsing and believing that what is given to us is not given once and for all.

In the social dimension, this understanding of reality as tangled and ambiguous entails a commitment to accept the non-finitude of the world, thereby taking the chance to actively participate in the creation of social realities and their exceeding what is already given.

4. Re-enchantment: Pragmatist Utopia

A different utopia is required, one capable of bringing a new enchantment, being aware of itself and transcending the realm of actualized reality by being projected into the realm of possibility. Silvia Federici explicitly longs for a re-enchantment of the world in connection with utopianism: “It is to the discovery of reasons and logics other than those of capitalist development that I refer when I speak of “re-enchanting the world”, a practice that I believe is central to most anti-systemic movements and a precondition for resistance to exploitation”²⁹.

The necessity of this kind of practice can be satisfied through a discussion of utopianism intended as a potentiality. Through a jagged collection of authors, a utopian epistemology based on ambiguity, the

²⁹ Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, Oakland 2018, p. 188.

interplay of different temporalities, the recollection of all differences, and the constant and never-ending effort to construct society can be elaborated. Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch show how to rupture the linear progressive temporality of the realized utopia by highlighting the unfinished character of the past and the latency of the future. Miguel Abensour proposes a definition of the meaning of utopias strongly connected to their potentiality for desiring alternatives, by anchoring his definition on ambiguity and tension, without connecting it to any institutional paradigm nor limiting his exploration of utopia's potential to a historical and linguistic excursus. Finally, Silvia Federici advocates for the necessity of the re-introduction of enchantment in the world, but through collective and communitarian practice, rather than technological dominion or pure transcendence.

4.1. Different Temporalities

When thinking about utopia, it is usually the future that is addressed. And James equally focuses on the future as the horizon that allows for possibilism and pluralism in the first place. Whereas in hyperreality there is no past and no future, since everything is consumed in the equivalency of all functions, a core feature of utopianism is its anchorage in an intertwined and complex conception of time.

Walter Benjamin³⁰ and Ernst Bloch³¹ offer a strong argument for a different relation between past, present, and future in the emergence of utopian thought³². As Benjamin argues, time is not an inert and inactive *continuum*; rather, it is a *discontinuum* in which past and future must be constantly re-actualized in the present to seize opportunities to change the course of events.

Benjamin's notion of "cultural heritage" [*Kulturgüter*]³³ is particularly interesting, since it corresponds to the flat and diachronic reconstruction of the past carried out by historicism, which, with its continuous vision of history, perpetuates the tradition of only the victorious. By contrast, the past should be the object of remembrance, which reactivates the past by breaking the *continuum* of historicism. In this way, the past becomes the engine of

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2010/1942.

³¹ Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, Duncker & Humblot, München and Leipzig 1918.

³² Their proposals diverge in countless non-secondary respects, yet both put forward a revolutionary project that is not deferred to an indefinite future, but instead begins from a new vision of history which, by intertwining past and future, aims to serve as a tool for action in the present.

³³ Walter Benjamin, op. cit., Thesis VII.

political action, carrying the revolutionary chance as an opportunity to redeem what has not received justice, snatching it from its encapsulation in the past to make it a new response in favor of the oppressed of the present.

Bloch's vision of the future interprets the present as a moment that is neither concluded nor yet arrived, containing within itself a latency that comes from the past and can materialize in a future whose first signs are already actualizable. Bloch indicates it is appropriate to imagine an alternative horizon already in the now, without waiting passively for a future capable of redemption. Redemption is in the hands of the present, which can move in the imagined direction precisely thanks to fragments of what is configured in utopia that are already latent in the present.

Their visions become more understandable within the Jamesian conception of the universe as pluralistic and ever-finished, which allows for a connection between past, present, and future actions that highlights the non-definitive and ever-evolving nature of truths and facts, thereby fostering an attitude of continual openness to discovering difference. Within a deterministic perspective, humans are fixed, and this gives rise to pessimism, because there is nothing to be done. By contrast, the indeterminist believes that human beings have the possibility of interrupting and redirecting the causal chain of events, which leads to optimism, because there is something that can be done. This leads us to see history not as closed, but as open, and to conceive of the universe as a bundle of possibilities – a tolerant universe in which there is not a single story entitled to be *the* narrative.

A pragmatist utopia operates by reactivating unrealized possibilities of the past in view of future consequences, within the openness of the present.

4.2. Ambiguity

As Miguel Abensour recalls, utopia is *ab origine* an ambiguous concept³⁴, since the word “utopia”,

³⁴ The ambiguous nature of utopias and the connected anti-dogmatic conception of utopianism is discussed at length in recent debates (cfr. Gregory Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet. Life after Consumerism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2022; Fredric Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, New York 2005; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, Peter Lang, Witney 2011/1990). However, Abensour's account is the one that better and more clearly highlights the connection between this ambiguity and a radical and actual political practice infused by the power of a different way of desiring, disconnected to any determined pre-existing political paradigm and more effectively shifting the attention to the education of utopian desire for the envisioning of something radically different.

coined by Erasmus's friend More from the Greek to designate the island on which the best form of political community is found, is a play on words and from the beginning stands under the sign of ambiguity. [...]. It [the game between the place of bliss and that of nowhere] calls our attention to More's writing, an oblique writing that, thanks to indirection and ambiguity, plays with the prohibitions of the existing order, carefully avoiding attacking it head-on. By the same stroke, it prevents dogmatic readings [...].³⁵

Playfulness and ambiguity are not something superficial or trivial: what is at stake is the posture one must adopt in the face of tensions, contradictions, and irreducible differences.

In the realized utopia, tensions and differences are absorbed in the grid of the hyperreal and thereby resolved with no mediation or dialectics, being canceled in the name of the chain of symbols or transposed into the novelty of commodified products. On the contrary, in a re-enchanted and open utopian thought the tensions are maintained and addressed as an indelible part of reality. Contradictions express the plurality of experiences and perspectives that emerge within an open universe, while also revealing the inequalities that shape different ways of inhabiting the same world, depending on one's position among the dominant or the oppressed.

According to James there is not one unified narration about the universe. This differentiation of stories does not only come from the fact that different individuals operate differently, but also from the fundamental opposition between victors and vanquished³⁶. Walter Benjamin explains how history is written by victors, thereby excluding from the dominant narrative the lived experiences of the oppressed throughout history³⁷.

Hence, not trying to resolve the contradictions and tensions that characterize the world and our understanding of it is not only a more accurate representation of reality – as argued by James – but it is also the way to avoid the elimination of the stories and experiences that have so far been excluded. This entails a more comprehensive shared image of the world, oriented at including as many different forms of knowledge and experiences as possible, instead of an image that only plays with the elements already given inside it.

³⁵ Miguel Abensour, *Persistent Utopia*, "Constellations", 2008, No. 3, pp. 406-421, p. 406.

³⁶ Even if James does not address this issue, it is worth noting that he chose the example of Waterloo to illustrate the difference of perspectives (cfr. section 3.1).

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, op. cit.

In the realized utopia the main goal is to comprehensively understand reality in order to control it and maximize its resources for human flourishing. On the contrary, in the case of a pragmatist utopia the aim is to create a vision capable of always embracing difference, thereby reducing exclusions based on the non-coherence with the rest. Indeed, the problem with a vision such as the one of the realized utopia is that it cannot include what does not go in accordance with what is already understood, since it is believed that what is here is all that there is and should just be completed. Consequently, what has not been included already is doomed to be always excluded, even if it is clearly a portion of reality. This entails both the misconception of reality and, perhaps more importantly, the perpetuation of the same errors.

Contradictions should then not be resolved but further investigated and evaluated through practice and experimentation.

4.3. No blueprints

Going back to Miguel Abensour's quote that opened section 4.2, I would like to bring attention to the importance of avoiding "dogmatic readings" of utopia(s)³⁸.

The intrinsic ambiguity of utopia can be reinforced by James's fallibilistic conduct, in order to strongly stand against the reduction of utopias to strict and definitive blueprints for the construction of a fixed reality.

A parallelism can be established between James's account of attaining truth and the definition of utopia as a tool to orient actions in the present. According to James, truth is not a simple correspondence to a fact of reality, but it is what works in experience over time. Ideas that are verified as true are not then set aside; rather, they serve to further explore experience, since truths are not considered true only because they have been verified, but also because we make use of them. There is a dynamic within the horizon of ideas and truths. Thus, the process of knowledge proceeds through these partial truths, which we connect to others we take to be true because they have been verified. This process is not necessitated but open. In this sense, truths function as tools for the expansion of knowledge.

Similarly, utopia should not be a model for a perfect society, but rather a regulative and experimental orientation that can guide collective action. As in the case of truths and beliefs, so in the discussion of utopia the focus is not the creation of a fixed and final answer, but a hypothesis that needs to be experienced, tested, and always updated.

³⁸ Miguel Abensour, op. cit.

Not only is the universe plural and open, but our lives and the tools we use to navigate them, precisely because of the openness of the world, need to be open as well. Human beings live in a state of precariousness: their relationship with the environment and with others is always provisional, a continual passage from one situation to another. Indeed, the world is one, yet it is composed of parts that are not unrelated but interconnected; these relations, however, are mobile and not closed.

5. *Final Thoughts*

Utopia is then to be understood “as an indeterminate speculation about a qualitatively better future for human society and as a hypothesis, by assuming it to be possible”³⁹. Utopia thus becomes a pragmatic hypothesis in a plural and open universe, and not a model, but rather a field of tensions and contradictions, where experimentation with all possibilities is encouraged. In this context, re-enchantment signifies the reintroduction of transcendence, meaning the reintroduction of possibility and pluralism, of something that goes beyond what is given. Transcendence refers then to the excess of reality and possibilities compared to what is given and realized, it is what exceeds reality in its current comprehension. Hence, utopianism expresses its potentiality at best if it is understood in its ontological and epistemological characterization, rather than in its potential connections with consolidated practices and ideologies. Utopia thus becomes a radical means of critique and experimentation, that opposes all forms of determination and rigid instantiations, in favor of a conception of a provisional hypothesis that is always modifiable and that emerges from continuous experimentations.

³⁹ Sylwia Dominika Chrostowska, *Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2021, p. 14.