

LOUIS MARIN

THESES ON IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA

THESIS I.

1.0. Utopia is an ideological critique of ideology.

1.1. Utopia is a critique of the dominant ideology to the degree to which it reconstructs present or contemporary society by displacing and projecting the latter's structures into a fictive discourse. It differs thereby from the philosophical discourse of ideology which is the totalizing expression of existing reality as well as the latter's ideal justification. Utopia, however, displaces and projects this reality into the form of a non-conceptual fictive totality, a figure produced in and by discourse, but functioning at a different level and according to different mechanisms from political, historical, or philosophical discourse. The critical power of utopia derives, on the one hand, from the (metaphorical) projection of existing reality into an "elsewhere" that cannot be situated in historical time or in geographical space; and, on the other, from (metonymic) displacement, that is to say, from an accentual variation within the reality it expresses, from the rearticulation it confers upon the analogical model whose production the utopian metaphor enabled.

This is the way in which, by that figurative representation which constitutes it, utopia subverts the picture of reality given by ideological discourse; for the latter expresses reality by way of a closed conceptual system whose aim is to provide a legitimizing or justificatory representation of the world. Utopia, as a figure inscribed within narrative discourse, threatens ideological discourse and its system of representations by bringing them doubly into play: through an implicit critical interrogation and through a distanciation or internal reflexion which reveals the presupposition of certain of the features ideology had presented as self-evident. For the immobilizing effect of the system of ideological representation, utopia substitutes the mobility of a figure upon that dialogical scene constructed by the complex discourse of narrative.

1.2. The utopian critique is ideological to the degree to which the two operations which produce the utopian figure—the metaphorical projection into a non-place and a non-time, and the metonymic displacement rearticulating the analogical continuum of reality—are not reflected in a metadiscourse about the discourse in which they are being produced. The utopian

critique is ideological insofar as utopia, as discourse, does not contain the method which allows it to take place, nor the methodology which would legitimate it: does not, in other words, contain the theory of its own production. In other terms, the utopian critique is ideological because it is not itself the object of a critique, because the discursive position necessarily implied by it, the operations it sets in motion to produce itself, and the presuppositions both historical and theoretical which govern the latter, are not introduced into the critique. If utopia is the *other* of real society, if the utopian transgression is the inverse of institutions existing in the present, its negativity—albeit critical—remains fictive: its figurability, while permitting it to be produced, at the same time prevents utopian discourse from being reflected in a theory of social negation which would necessarily require a critical awareness of its own place of production. This non-reflected place or locus stands within the existent society, within contemporary history, within an ideology whose function is precisely to conceal that society's contradictions, whereas utopia as a figure remains *fantastically* exterior to that society, history, and ideology.

THESIS II.

2.0. Only the distinction between utopian and utopian *practice* permits a theory of utopia which would at the same time be a critical preface to a theory of praxis.

2.1. Utopia is a fictive construction, a figure in a discourse which produces it through determinate (rhetorico-poetic) discursive operations and plays across the narrative as a relatively free and independent representation (the notion of the utopian scene), in which, *figuratively*, the *other* or negative of contemporary social reality appears. The latter is thus the absent term—absent in its own form—of a figure nonetheless referentially organized around it. The utopian figure is not therefore a discursive object which lacks a referent, but rather one which has an absent referent, as its very name suggests: it is not a place located outside of space, or imaginary, or unreal, but rather the not-place, the place without determination, the very figure of the neuter. It therefore implies a reality which is not expressed *in* the figure, nor assumed in the discourse as the latter's signified (or if so, then only marginally, in the form of a term of comparison rather than that of a referent).

In other words, utopia as a figure within discourse refers to that which is not *of* that discourse: it opens onto the very end of discourse itself. It does not *signify* reality, but rather *indicates* it discursively. This referential indication of a real term which is absent *qua* signification from discourse marks that utopian practice of which the utopian figure is the product: a practice which is the force of production repressed by the product as a closed and completed figure and reabsorbed by the ideology of representation as a social ideal, as an imaginary *reverie* or a political process, in short,

as a model whose criterion will now simply be the possibility or the impossibility of its own realization. Utopian practice emerges from the distance between reality and its other; it bridges the very gap of transgression itself by producing, not that term which reduces or abolishes it as does the social ideal or the political project, but rather one which conceals and reveals it all at once: the utopian figure. In the latter, pure contradiction, the transgression of the norms of reality as they are structured in institutions, is not resolved, but rather maintained as such: the figure thus becoming the "other" of that reality and the product of a practice which does not negate reality by transforming it, but rather indicates it merely, by producing the figure of its negative: and this is a practice which would find no possibility of investment in the textual product did the latter not retain traces of such production in the nominal or discursive signifier itself.

2.2. The critical theory of utopia aims at producing the concept of utopian practice, by way of the preliminary construction of a schema which corresponds to the traces of utopian production in the figure. Such a schema includes: a *model* relating the differences between the various types of space signified by the figure or constitutive of the latter's signifiers (the space within the text or the spaces *of* the text); a *superposition* of the various incompatibilities between those spaces; and a *topological mapping* of the internal tensions and breaks in the figure (as, e.g., in the non-homologation of the levels of political organization, authority relations, and economic exchange in More's *Utopia*). In this way a thematization of the unformulable distance between the absent term merely indicated and the signifying figure itself may be realized by way of a structure of divergencies within the figurative product, and of a topological mapping of the play of the various signifying and signified spaces in the figure. Utopian practice is the concept which corresponds to this model, superposition, and topology on the theoretical level, the latter constituting the loci of the operations of the theoretical system and its space of construction and revolution. In the figure it produces, utopian practice is the ensemble of divergent operations that create a space in which social theory may be constructed and a place in which the concept of political economy may be formed. It is therefore not itself the construction of the theoretical concept, but rather the formation of the latter's historical conditions of possibility, and this is a formation which is produced within and enveloped by the utopian figure.

Genuine theory, whose figure bears marks of its own constitution and symptoms of its own formation, whose utopia is figurability itself as a textual mode through which historical possibility expresses itself, would be both system and strategy: system insofar as it is the reconstruction of reality in the concept, the rearticulation of the given as an object of knowledge, insofar as it is a critique of the knowledge of that given; and strategy insofar as it forms an ensemble of operations designed to transform reality, insofar, in other words, as it is a revolutionary project. System and strategy are thus theory as the practice of theory and the theory of practice all at once. The

product of utopian practice, however, is a figure which blinds us to this twin structure: for the reality of existent institutions is not reconstructed, transformed, in its very concept, but rather merely *represented* under the form of its obverse and its negation; and the figure is a blind spot to the degree to which the practice which produces it fails to attain, in the very product itself, a self-consciousness of its own productive operations. Utopia is a systematic representation of a strategy which consists of nothing but the play of signifying and signified spaces in the text.

THESIS III.

3.0. Utopian discourse appears only in the historic moment of the constitution of the capitalist mode of production.

3.1. Utopian discourse accompanies ideological discourse as its obverse and designates the as yet empty place of a scientific theory of society (Marxism). Thus in the strict sense it can only appear at that moment in history when the capitalist mode of production is constituted, since it is only at that particular moment that the real conditions of possibility of theoretical or scientific universality are obtained for social life: theory being constructable only in the determinate historical area in which the conditions for its construction are present. "Humanity always takes up only such problems as it can solve, since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. . . . The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production. . . at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation constitutes, therefore, the closing chapter of the pre-history of human society" (Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). On the theoretical level of the development of a science of society and of history, the epistemological break can take place only when the material possibilities of existence of bourgeois conditions of production have matured within the womb of the older feudal society, and that insofar precisely as those new conditions of production "create the material conditions for the solution of the antagonism" between relations of production and forces of production, or in other words precisely insofar as a real and material universality of the forces of production within bourgeois economy. But if it is possible to describe, "with the precision of natural science, the material transformation of the economic conditions of production," it is not quite so easy to do so in the case of superstructural forms, of those "ideological forms in which people become conscious of this conflict and fight it out." It is only at the moment when the conflict itself produces the economic conditions for its own solution, in other words, at the moment of the bourgeois mode of production itself, that the ideological forms of historical consciousness can be transcend-

ed and transformed into a scientific theory of political economy and a scientific theory of the history (or pre-history) of human society.

3.2. Utopian discourse appears consequently as an ideological form of this consciousness of the conflict between bourgeois productive forces and feudal productive relations, a form symptomatic of the new material conditions of production within the decaying feudal system. But it is a *critical* mode of ideological consciousness to the degree to which, within that ideological discourse of which it is but a fragment, utopian discourse designates not only the contradictions between property relations (or feudal relations of production) and bourgeois productive forces, but also—albeit in a fictive and unself-critical fashion—those conceptual instruments of theory which permit such contradictions to be analyzed scientifically: conceptual instruments, in other words, which correspond superstructurally to the final stage of the antagonisms within the social process of production.

To put it differently, utopian discourse is the one form of ideological discourse that has anticipatory value of a theoretical kind: but it is a value which can only appear as such when theory has itself been elaborated, that is to say, subsequent to the emergence of the material conditions for the new productive forces. Utopian discourse thus has critical validity within the very ideology of which it was a part: it possesses this validity *historically* during that period which extends from the emergence of the new forces to the point at which theory is itself elaborated, which is to say, roughly, from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. There are no doubt discursive formations *analogous* to utopian discourse which are to be found in the other transitional moments of social history, in particular at the moments of emergence and disappearance of the Asiatic or classical modes of production, or at that of the emergence of the feudal mode itself: such discursive formations may well present a number of similarities to the Utopian texts of the Renaissance, Baroque, or Enlightenment periods in Europe; yet they must be distinguished from the latter insofar as they are unable to manifest—even figuratively, and according to the immanent operations described above—the topical schemata of a scientific or Marxist theory of society. It is obviously possible, by some explicit terminological agreement, to use a more extended definition of utopias, provided we continue to distinguish precisely between the differential species within the genre. Moreover, utopian discourse, with its characteristic narrative structure, and with its distinctive figure, represented in alternately positive and negative fashion, may well continue to be produced long *after* the codification of a scientific theory of society. But in that case such discourse ceases to have the anticipatory critical value we have detected in a More, for instance, and retains, within ideological discourse in general, nothing but a heightened symptomatic significance which can be used by social theory to criticize and denounce the ideology of which utopia has become the mere by-product.