*The Imagination of Detail: Barthes and the Politics of Utopia*

SAM MCAULIFFE (30.06.17)

Whenever Roland Barthes sets out to codify the relation of utopia to politics – an effort that is undertaken time and again across his work, that encompasses a wide variety of case studies and thematic contexts, yet without ever acquiring a systematic form, not through any neglect on the author’s part, but because the question seems to pertain to something that is inherently unstable, that must each time be taken up anew – whenever this relation is codified by Barthes it remains subject to a fundamental tension. A utopian projection, together with the impulse that animates it, are taken to be irreducibly discontinuous with the sphere of politics, they are something that in principle and in practice cannot take on a readily identifiable form there. The subject of action that emerges as a function of the political field can do nothing to facilitate this projection; whenever this subject understands itself to be exercising its agency, whether individually or collectively, it tacitly accepts that it cannot do so in the service of these particular ends. Utopia cannot constitute an end for political action, it is one way in which a programmatic association or correspondence between politics and action appears to be found wanting. Said otherwise, there where there is politics, utopia is always elsewhere, or rather, *nowhere*. It is, as its name indicates, the place which, without determinate ground, cannot be situated with respect to all other places; it is absent from there where it would accede to itself *as* place. This is at once its weakness and its strength.

The incommensurability between politics and utopia is stated most emphatically in Barthes’ engagement with Fourier, where the utopian impulse is referred to under its other heading, *desire*:

“The area of Need is *Politics*, the area of Desire is what Fourier calls *Domestics.* Fourier has chosen Domestics over Politics, he has constructed a domestic utopia (but can a utopia be otherwise? can a utopia ever be political? isn't politics: *every language less one*, that of Desire? In May 1968, there was a proposal to one of the groups that were spontaneously formed at the Sorbonne to study *Domestic Utopia* - they were obviously thinking of Fourier; to which the reply was made that the expression was too 'studied,' ergo 'bourgeois'; politics is what forecloses desire, save to achieve it in the form of neurosis: political neurosis or, more exactly: the neurosis of politicizing).”

(*Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 84-85)

The series of alignments and antitheses drawn up here is at once classical and heretical. Politics is “every language…”, that is to say, it is the coming together of discourses, all possible discourses, discourse in its plurality and totality; it is the provision of a meeting place for their circulation and exchange; it is also, then, what secures the availability of discourse, the forum in which one avails oneself of language and thus the framework that conditions its use; there is no more classical definition of the *polis* than this. And yet Barthes only recalls this definition so as to immediately lay bare its limits. Politics understood as a discursive totality is constitutively incomplete; something has always already been subtracted from it that confounds it as a totality, leaving it compromised, making it an order that falls short of itself, not accidentally but essentially. Politics is, to repeat, “every language *less one*,” and this privation is such that it cannot even be appear in its absence; the many languages of which the political is said to consist here cannot themselves mark this lack – this is what it means to be foreclosed. Or else, to turn to the second register favored by Barthes here, if politics consists in the evaluation, cultivation, and utilization of a system of relations with a view to the satisfaction of needs, needs that are themselves derivative of and sanctioned by this system, then seen from this perspective desire is indeed anomalous, an expenditure that is superfluous, purposeless, that can be neither accounted for nor justified. “Desire and Need pass through [each other], as though the two nets were alternatively superimposed, playing at topping hands. However, the relationship of Desire and Need is not complementary (were they fitted one into the other, everything would be perfect), but supplementary: each is the excess of the other. The excess: what does not pass through” (*ibid.*,87-88). There is no way of bringing the two spheres into relation without inadvertently producing this irreducible remainder that is the signature of their non-coincidence.

And yet, and this is the other pole of the tension we began with, for Barthes it is precisely this remainder that evinces a possibility of sorts, if not an imperative. This supplementary possibility can be brought to bear on the order from which it is excluded as nothing else can, and this is what constitutes its singularity. In a short article written around the same time as the Fourier study, and having just re-stated the discontinuity between politics and utopia, Need and Desire, “two discourses… [that] complement but do not comprehend each other,” Barthes writes: “Sometimes the Wall is penetrated and Desire manages to explode into Politics. This produces something like May ’68, a rare historic moment, the moment of an *immediate utopia* – the occupied Sorbonne lived for a month in a utopian state (it was, in effect, ‘nowhere’). Desire should constantly be brought back into politics. By this I mean not only that utopias are justified but also that they are necessary” (‘Utopia,’ 106). In its very irreducibility to politics, a utopian projection holds out the possibility of re-determining the structure and substance of the order with which it is incommensurable, in a way that could never be achieved through the application of the terms of this order alone. As if the political sphere could only be re-configured from a margin that it does not and will not recognize.

Something of this is already evident in the entirely idiomatic chain of associations that follow on from the distribution of categories drawn up by Barthes here when, with Fourier’s phalanstery in mind, he speaks of a “domestic utopia.” The provocation of this idea and the conjunction it rests on should not be passed over: it conscientiously disrupts the longstanding, if not unbroken, association between utopia and the *res publica*. As he himself notes elsewhere: “all written utopias have been social: an attempt to fix upon the ideal organisation of power” (*How to Live Together,* 130). For the classical understanding of utopia, this qualification would therefore be a contradiction in terms. But a domestic utopia is neither a retreat from nor an abdication of politics, or need not be. Elsewhere Barthes expressly denounces utopias that turn in on themselves and forfeit their relation to reality as little more than forms of “tourism” founded on the forgetting of politics (*Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 80). A domestic utopia is instead a little pocket of space, on the basis of which a circuit is drawn up that would allow desire to circulate in such a way that it would propagate a series of disruptions there where it has otherwise been excluded from, dispatching something across the divide that separates place and non-place, centre and margin, politics and utopia.

But what then is specific to utopia as a discursive mode, holding as it does this fundamentally equivocal position with respect to the political? What does its subtraction from politics, “every language less one,” deprive the political *of*? No doubt there are several possible lines of enquiry that could be opened up here, but the one that testifies to the singularity of Barthes understanding of utopia concerns the notion of *detail*. This is ultimately what distinguishes utopian discourse from all other forms. Detail is utopia’s viewpoint, as it were, and it inscribes itself in the immanence of this viewpoint without reserve. What does this mean?

“Truth to tell, it isn’t that we are afraid to produce a general blueprint for a future society – such things are to be found, and to be found in the political sphere. It is the *details* of that society we will not give, and this is where utopian thinking and desire is lacking, for utopias – this is their particular nature – are *minutely detailed*. Utopian thinking imagines timetables, places, practices; it is *romanesque* – novelistic – like the fantasy, of which it is ultimately simply the political form.”

(‘Utopia,’ 106-07)

“The Sadian utopia - like that of Fourier, for that matter - is measured far less against theoretical statements than against the organization of daily life, for the mark of utopia is the everyday; or even: everything everyday is utopian: timetables, dietary programs, plans for clothing, the installation of furnishings, precepts of conversation or communication, all that is in Sade.”

(*Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 17)

Utopia is an apparatus for the simultaneous proliferation and accumulation of detail. This is its primary function, the function that all other of its functions are subordinate to; it is bound to this detail as to its essence, essence here lying, strange as it may seem, on the side of the quotidian, the ontic. Utopias produce not schemata but minutiae, and these details are always plural; no doubt a detail is singular, irreplaceable and unrepeatable, but there is no detail that appears *in* the singular, in and of itself, alone and in isolation; a detail is serial, one implies another, where there is one, there are many, it is always already part of a sequence, that is in turn inscribed within a network, and so on.[[1]](#footnote-1) These details derive their lucidity from the fact that they are borne without a preconceived sense of the totality that they will, taken together, give rise to; the discrete parts of the assemblage they form are not derived from or mediated by their overarching aggregation, which means the resultant whole does not provide a frame of reference for what it contains; its outer limits only ever take shape arbitrarily, and will continue to be redrawn as detail proliferates. And detail is such that it never stops proliferating, it is always being added to, this is the manner in which it is produced.

Once conceived as such utopia is responsible for a series of surprising categorical inversions: for instance, within its horizon what is accidental and incidental, superfluous and inconsequential, is less the individual particularity, as it would be anywhere else, but the totality itself. Note too, however counter-intuitive it appears, that if detail is the preserve of utopia and utopia alone, and if as a discursive form it is always responsible for a sharpening of focus – “detail magnifies… like joy” (*ibid.,* 104) Barthes writes – this means that the reality over and against which a utopia rests is always left appearing abstract in comparison, colorless and without substance, shorn of any determinate qualities, a *terrain vague*.

Now if a capacity for detail is what the order of politics is deprived of, this is one reason why desire is unable to accede to itself at any point within this order. This brings us to the fundamental determination of utopia in the specific line of thought we have been following.

“Perhaps the *imagination of detail* is what specifically defines Utopia (opposed to political science); this would be logical, since detail is fantastic and thereby achieves the very pleasure of Desire.”

(*ibid.*, 105)

The details of which a utopia is comprised would therefore be something like the notational points on which desire alights and through which it finds itself channeled. Desire is not fixed by these points but sustained by them in the state of pulsion that makes it what it is (and here again is evidence of a difference in kind between the two economies in question: a need is sated, and negated in being sated, whereas a desire is sustained). Details provide desire with its circuit, and inasmuch as they are the work of fantasy, the constellation they form is not subject to reality’s strictures. That is to say, the array of detail that a utopia indexes need not demonstrate any internal cohesion or consistency; in fact its aggregation can even be drawn into a state of overt contradiction with itself, and, far from diminishing its potency, this is the very sign that desire has been sent coursing through it. As Barthes suggests at the outset of *How To Live Together*, another key point of reference for the model of utopia and politics in question here, fantasy is such that it can encompass details that are not simply disparate but incompossible, that could not otherwise be made present to one another.

“The fantasy isn’t a counternegation, it’s not the site of a frustration experienced as its opposite: eudemonic visions coexist without contradicting each other. Fantasy: an absolutely positive scenario that stages the positives of desire, that knows only positives. In other words, fantasy isn’t dialectical (clearly!)… The fantasy = an unruly projector that picks out fragments of the world, of science, of history – of experiences – in an abrupt, discontinuous fashion.”

(*How to Live Together*, 4; 19)

On any other ground this aggregation would not hold, it would find itself broken apart into the incommensurable pieces of which it is composed. Utopia remains the single site capable of sustaining the “positives of desire,” of recognizing desire in its positivity, even and especially when it desires what cannot be granted.

A final question: how does this imagination of detail that is the preserve of utopia exercise itself in Barthes’ own text? What form does the utopian impulse take on there, under the guise of what fantasy? The lecture course just mentioned, *How to Live Together*, offers a wealth of material here: it consists of an exhaustive compendium of eclectic details, or “traits” as Barthes calls them there, that are compiled with a view to determining the optimum arrangement of *lived* relations between oneself and others, a codification of the spaces, situations and behaviors that would lend themselves to the realization of this ideal. The development of this fantasy, Barthes explicitly refers to the work as such, is at each stage pursued not in relation to the extended social sphere but in the latter’s margins and interstices, confirming that the *topos* of this experience is, strictly speaking, utopian. In any case, from this vast repository replete with detail, here is the cluster that interests us, for the model of utopia it facilitates. It is founded on the premise that, ordinarily speaking, social space is a space in which I may enter only inasmuch as I appear there as recognizable, identifiable, and thus tied to a proper name; the name is the condition of my participation in the *polis*, but because this name, the token of my presence, can always be invoked in my absence, it leaves me, in a certain sense, defenseless before its misuse. For this reason, Barthes suggests, in social space *I suffer my name*, it hangs over me like a verdict.

“Communities tend to want to be spaces of manipulation, so only proper names are retained: first names, surnames. But – in the communal space – the proper name presents a danger: that of gossip… In an ideal (utopian) community, there would be no names, making it impossible for people to gossip about one another: there would be only direct addresses, presences, not images, absences. There would be no manipulations effected by the name, whether good or bad.”

(*ibid.*, 101)

Utopia as a space in which the subject of politics would appear before its counterpart namelessly, its appearance at no point mediated by the name: however idiosyncratic this fantasy appears at first sight, we know that such a space existed, in reality, or rather, in the margins produced at the side of reality during the events of May ’68. Recall that for Barthes the occupation of the Sorbonne produced an “immediate utopia.” Now whenever one reads an account of the organization and composition of the committees that sprung up in this singular context, what stands out is precisely this detail. Maurice Blanchot, for example, who also refers to the event in question as an “immediately realized utopia”, says as much when he speaks of a coming together of an “anonymous and impersonal” body of presences, within which each and every individual appears as “the unknown-familiar” (*The Unavowable Community*, 30-32). Or else Marguerite Duras, who in her account of the Students-Writers Action Committee, which both Barthes and Blanchot also participated in to varying degrees, speaks of an “enhancement of depersonalization… the enhancement of the person separated from his persona.” “Here,” she writes,

“we don’t *classify* anyone from the beginning. Here, we have disorder. Lacking suitable references, let’s continue by analogy: the Committee has the inconsistency of dreams. Like the dream, it is striking. And it is an everyday affair.”

(‘20 May 1968,’ 62; 59)

Here fantasy has been brought to bear on reality itself. For desire to flare up suddenly on the side of politics, for nowhere to manifest here, nothing more and nothing less is required than a detail of this kind.

*Works Cited:*

*-* Barthes, Roland. *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

- Barthes, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989.

- Barthes, Roland. ‘Utopia,’ in ‘*The “Scandal of Marxism’: and Other Writings on Politics, Essays and Interviews, Volume 2*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015.

- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Unavowable Community*, Barrytown, N.Y: Station Hill Press, 1988.

- Duras, Marguerite. ‘20 May 1968: Description of the Birth of the Students-Writers Action Committee,’ in *Green Eyes*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

1. This is why, as Barthes suggests, again thinking of Fourier’s work, anacolthuon is a privileged figure of speech within utopian discourse: disparate clauses abruptly conjoined without syntactical rule (92). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)