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Imagining a future civilization: a new utopianism founded in the here and now

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ABSTRACT

Are we able to imagine and create a new civilization, a better world, in a collective act of imagination and will? Active imagination is in essence a process of reflection on possible futures that already lie dormant within the present, and a decision to pursue the most desirable option. Active imagination thus may be expected to increase the probability that a positive, chosen future will actually become manifest reality. Evidently, however, the extent of our 'futuring' ability is limited. We therefore need to ask, what causes these constraints and how can they be overcome? Drawing on some recent literature in the tradition of Perennial Philosophy, this paper argues that more conscious 'futuring' is indeed possible under certain conditions. It examines the obstacles to be overcome and the preconditions that would need to be met in order to enable us consciously to imagine and create a just and sustainable future civilization.

KEYWORDS

Futuring; sustainability; utopianism

Introduction

Natural science has sounded a stark warning about prevailing trends in the physical conditions that threaten the life support system of Planet Earth, but natural science not know tell us how to overcome the unconscious influences of the past that constrain our imagination and perpetuate the dysfunctional behaviour that drives these unsustainable trends. And the social sciences, while they can certainly measure, describe and analyze such behaviour, tend to shy away from intervention, sobered perhaps by the spectacular failures of such social engineering experiments as political Marxism or neoliberalism. The humanities finally, while they afford the widest space to flights of the utopian imagination, tend to skip too lightly over the question of process, that is, the question of how human imagination and behaviour may be freed from the shackles of the past, and thus how a genuinely new and enlightened civilization may be rendered imaginable and realizable.

Focusing on this gap between our aspiration for freedom and the reality of past conditioning, this paper draws attention to a different intellectual tradition that is not normally considered utopian or even part of the humanities, but addresses precisely this shortcoming: Perennial Philosophy. Recent expressions of this ancient philosophy, such as the work of Erich Fromm and Eckhardt Tolle, very much focus on the question of process in utopian projects by exploring the psychology of change and change resistance. Furthermore, they propose technologies of inward development to enhance the potential for human freedom. The central argument of perennial philosophy is that the rise of a truly new civilization absolutely requires a liberation and flowering of

human consciousness, freed of the shackles of unconscious conditioning and anchored in a vibrant and open present that is not captive to the past or doomed to serve its reproduction. The key to a better future, in other words, is to be found in the Now.

This proposal may seem fanciful to some, and inner transformation is certainly no easy feat to accomplish. I argue, however, that the historical conditions today may be more favourable for a shift to a greater 'presence' than they have ever been, though there is a negative potential for civilizational collapse triggered by capitulation to fear and sliding back into fragmented identities. This is the dystopian shadow of the positive, utopian potential of our times. Perennial philosophy endeavours to ensure a utopian outcome by promoting conscious presence in the Now, which includes awareness of our ecological embeddedness. It thus also resonates very much with the spiritual position of contemporary 'deep ecology' social movements.¹

Realizing the utopian hope for a new civilization

Utopian as well as dystopian literature invites us to reflect on what the present holds in store for the future – positive and negative trends set to unfurl with the flow of time. It raises important questions, but cannot answer them. Where is the present dynamic more likely to take us, a utopia or dystopia? If it points to a dark future, can we change the trajectory? And if we can envisage a bright future, how can we make sure we arrive there? Are we like leaves on the river of history, or are we able to choose what to avoid and what to embrace by changing our way of thinking and being in the world?

History suggests we are painfully inept at choosing and creating the future we want. It is bitter to reflect on the many cases of avoidable disaster; avoidable, that is, from the perspective of an uninvolved observer. Why is that so?

Psychoanalytic theory can provide part of the answer. It demonstrates how humans are often driven toward personal as well as collective disasters, led not by the free exercise of reason and imagination but by the inertia of their personal psycho-social histories and the histories of the enveloping society. These histories are embodied inwardly within the personal and collective unconscious of individuals and of societies. Sociologists similarly refer to the 'social imaginary' of a culture, society and historical period, which is to be understood as specific and not easily malleable. While the personal past is subject to therapeutic intervention in psychoanalysis, for the collective unconscious or social imaginary it produces the only therapy would seem to be the evolutionary impulses of history itself.

History needs to be understood in conjunction with utopianism. While history teaches us how our current psycho-cultural conditioning came to be, good utopian and dystopian literature explores the future directions in which this momentum may take us. Indeed, some Indian Puranic texts as well as the culturally related prophetic writings I have had opportunity to study in Indonesia, combine historical and futurist modes of analysis within the same text, which is what alerted me to the important complementary relationship between them and, ultimately, between the cognitive functions of memory and imagination.² The literature also reflects on what connects these two, and from where both can be changed: The present. Indeed, the therapeutic Here and Now is the only time and place where individual consciousness can be raised in order to break the spell of the past and unlock the future, and there is no reason why collective consciousness should be any different. Historico-futurological analysis would thus seem the equivalent tools to psychology on a collective level.

Natural science has taken certainly taken to this task in a big way of late, combining the study of long-term past trends with future projections, predicting environmental change over many decades and painting the image of a future climatic and ecological dystopia. Natural scientist are conditioned to rely on rational analysis, and tend to assume that civilizations too will harken to reason, in keeping perhaps with the motto of Platonic ethics: To know the good is to chose it. But things are not that simple, as every historians can tell us, or humanity would long have heeded the advice of climate science, for example. Simple appeals to reason are not enough to overcome the inertia of civilizational trajectories.

How then do we jump over our own shadow, the long shadow of our personal and collective unconscious? Should we rely on some exceptional, visionary individuals, and authorize them to serve as the bearers of our hope? Perhaps there is a case to be made for positive leadership, but it is a dangerous course to adopt. Saviours are many but few are genuinely enlightened. Nevertheless, the current need to be saved from impeding calamity is greater than ever, and so it should not surprise us to see today's newspapers filled with reports on the dangerous exploits of populist leaders styling themselves as saviours, appealing to people's fears and hatred and fomenting fragmentation. The next question therefore, and one the classic prophetic texts also address, is this: What qualities make for an enlightened individual, or better still, an enlightened civilization, free to imagine and pursue the good of all? What quality is it that we ought to cultivate as a matter of personal practice, and perhaps also through general education, in order to raise our consciousness from the swamp of past conditioning, thus freeing the future in the present?

In what follows I would like to draw attention to what is not normally considered, but what I very much do consider to be, a special branch of utopianism, and one that directly addresses the problem of conditioning and psycho-social inertia. This utopianism is sometimes disparagingly referred to as New Age literature, sometimes as perennial philosophy. Not all of this literature is worth considering. At the more reputable end of the spectrum, however, we find this literature engaged in a serious struggle with the ultimate question of human freedom.

Adopting a cultural-historical perspective, I argue that the popularity of this literature is no accident but reflects our unique historical and cultural condition in today's globalized world. These conditions happen to be favourable for achieving the aims of perennial philosophy, I argue, which is why this alternative approach deserves the attention of anyone looking to create a new civilization. Fromm and Tolle outline the conditions under which our 'futuring' may become empowered to break through the compulsion of past habits.

Perennial philosophy and the spirit of our times: a chance for unprecedented change?

Tectonic societal shifts have radically transformed everyone's life experience. The popular rise of the variant of utopian imagination I describe herein is a direct response to these new experiences. Drawing on age-old mystical utopianism, which Aldous Huxley aptly described as 'the perennial philosophy', this new popular form of spiritual-utopian literature explicitly picks up on the idea of achieving freedom from past conditioning, and explores various means to this end. Positively expressed, the aim is to attain a state of heightened presence and self-awareness, deeply conscious of and accepting of the past, and thereby freed of unconscious confining influences from past experience. In short, this utopianism lies not in the future but in the Now. It is a vision of tomorrow based on liberating our potential to act more freely in the present, namely through a practice of rigorous self-reflection and detachment from fragmentary identities.³ In this sense, this movement

is the progressive antithesis of reactionary populism, which is always quick to find fault in ‘others’ and glorifies exclusive and illusionary self-identities as a remedy for fear of the future.

Given that the proponents of this, in some ways, post-utopian approach tend to reject mental speculation about and emotional preoccupation with the future, their work has not been widely recognized or classified as utopian until now, not even by the authors themselves. The present contribution seeks to remedy this situation, for here we have a utopianism for once that comes with a theory and technology of change.

The rising popularity of spiritual utopian texts, from 1930 until today, is interesting as a social phenomenon in its own right. It reflects and takes advantage of tectonic historical shifts in what Castoriadis referred to as the ‘social imaginary’, or what anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (following the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur) more modestly refer to as ‘cultural narratives’,⁴ or what I have referred to above in more psychological terms as ‘imagination struggling to escape past conditioning’.⁵ I will discuss this wider historical context first.

‘The’ social imaginary, as such, does not exist, as many Western social theorists quietly seem to assume, any more than a single history exists. There is of course some common cultural ground, a shared human biology and psychology, a shared planet, but there always have been and still are many thousands of different cultures on Planet Earth, each one of them fostering a distinct way of imagining society, the world, its history and future. We should be very thankful for this diversity. Indeed, the essence of the tectonic shift in contemporary social imaginaries (plural ‘s’) that I have alluded to is precisely a result of the fact that this cross-cultural diversity is now evident to almost everyone on the planet, though not everyone may be grateful for it.

As a consequence of a condition of worldwide information networking and increased mobility, commonly referred to as ‘globalization’, the relativity of our own cultural conditioning is something all thinking persons are confronted with perpetually and intensely. We live in a jungle of irreconcilable social imaginaries, and many of us are personally invested in several of them. We are assailed from all sides by competing conditioning influences and narratives, a cacophony of ‘imaginaries’ or ‘cultural identities’ competing for our attention and commitment, a process now hyper-charged by social media. It is ironic that the particular cultural condition of our times runs contrary to the creation of any kind of rigid cultural conditioning per se. We are experiencing a remarkable moment of openness. Cut off from the past of our traditional cultural roots, doubtful of the viability of our modern techno-civilization, and uncertain of the future, we are left wondering whether we ought to be afraid or ought to claim this indeterminacy as freedom.

Mass exposure to diversity is new on this scale, and it is also unexpected. The modern world has generally thought of itself to be lacking in any particular culture, and the spread of modernity was to bring about a decline in cultural diversity. But modernity in fact had a distinct kind of culture of its own, a culture based on science and technological innovations that issued from Western civilization and supported a Western project to unify the world under its presumably superior leadership (and for its benefit). Colonialism laid the foundation for globalization.

More fundamentally, modernity conditioned people to think of themselves in terms of a Cartesian dualism wherein the ‘individual’ subject – conceived as a separate, thinking entity, an ego cogito – is placed at the centre of a cosmos that is the object of the separated subject’s panoptic cognition and strategic control, based on rational scientific knowledge. The modern subject or Ego was encouraged to be independent, free and unbound by tradition, and was defined by the very act of independent rational thinking. Modernity thus proudly viewed itself as cultureless and as historically superseding all forms of culture.⁶

This project failed even as it succeeded. Even in the West, the realization has now dawned that countless traditional cultures were modernized away, only to be replaced by a multitude of cultural modernities instead. We have arrived in a global world filled with renewed diversity, and western claims to cultural hegemony within this world would now seem rather thin, as 'our' modern scientific technologies increasingly are wielded more aptly by others than by ourselves.

Maintaining a modernist outlook has become almost as difficult as it was to maintain a traditionalist approach to life after the rise of modernity. We are at a new turning point. Thanks to globalization we are constantly confronted with other individuals and groups of people who have a cultural conditioning that is different from our own. While we may still wish to deny that we have a culture too, it is very difficult to defend a culture that purportedly does not exist. The most reactionary impulse thus is to revive pre-modern cultural identities, and such nativist reactions are now observable in many parts of the world. Diversity was not eradicated, it can be denied no longer, nor neutralized with a hierarchical distinction between 'modern us' and 'primitive them'.

Constant exposure to cultural diversity on a level playing field impacts on the social imaginaries of people around the globe in a very specific way. New forms of utopianism, building on the perennial philosophy of non-denominational spirituality, are a direct response to this shift. Its proponents look at the loss of firmly delineated identities in contemporary experience, and celebrate it. Detachment from cultural identities creates space for a more immediate sense of connection with the whole of humanity and also with nature. Both socially and in relation to nature, the new outlook recognizes and celebrates the interdependence and ontological unity of all life, based on a monistic philosophy and a detachment from particularistic mental notions of selfhood, without denying diversity. It thus finds a new universalism in diversity.

As a first example of this literature, I will look at the work of Erich Fromm (1900–1980), a member of the Frankfurt School of Social Theory as well as a post-Freudian psychoanalyst. Fromm's work is an ideal point of connection between Western social and psychoanalytic theory and the more explicitly mystical expressions of the new utopianism. Like many others in his generation, Fromm gained access to the ancient mystical traditions of the East thanks to the pioneering work of early philologists and translators, but then popularized key insights from this literature among academic as well as popular Western audiences. He did so without crediting these Eastern expressions of the perennial philosophy as the main source of his inspiration, perhaps to avoid exposing himself to prejudice and thus endangering his credibility as a social scientist with a background in Marxist materialism.

While the influx of Eastern thinking into psychology, philosophy and other fields of knowledge in the 1930s and 1940s was itself a mark of early globalization, Fromm's success in reframing the message relies on the fact that, while it may be of Eastern origin, it is, in its essence, not culture-specific but universal. It was nonetheless important that Fromm, following Carl Jung, Heinrich Zimmer and many others before him, recognized and articulated the broader relevance of this rather different, inner utopia – based on the concept of 'Self-Realization' or 'Enlightenment' – for a Western and later a global audience. These ideas greatly influenced the post-war generation that followed.⁷

In said generation, these new impulses were reframed within the New Age movement, an important proponent of which was Eckhardt Tolle (1948–). I will discuss some of his work to illustrate how the idea of a different inner state as a foundation for a new civilization was developed over time. Note that this comparison is aimed at identifying the common ground between the two thinkers. The substantial differences between their work is not relevant for the purpose of the present discussion. What is important is that both encouraged an inner utopia based on a sense of presence

and being in the now; so as to fully apprehend the truth of our condition become empowered to change that condition.

The self of having and the self of being: Erich Fromm's roadmap from human destructiveness to freedom

Erich Fromm argued that the root cause of the crisis of modernity is a consciousness dominated by alienation, paranoia, greed, insatiable consumption and an underlying fear and rejection of life. The societal shift re-quired to meet contemporary global challenges, in his view, would require us to dispel the delusion of a Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, and our associated false identification with a separate Egoic mind. Rather than transcending the body, this Egoic self is a mirage based on an ill – founded dualism of mind and matter.

Let me begin with a quote from two of Fromm's colleagues in the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno. Fromm cites them to illustrate the demonic aspect of modernity, a way of being in the world that has landed us on the edge of human and natural disaster:

As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive - social progress, the intensification of his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself, are nullified. [T]he enthronement of the means as an end, which under late capitalism is tantamount to open insanity, is already perceptible in the prehistory of subjectivity. Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken, for the substance which is dominated, suppressed and dissolved by virtue of self-preservation is none other than the life as functions of which the achievements of self-preservation find their sole definition and purpose. (Fromm, 1976)

Erich Fromm recognized this problem but took a more positive approach, which was heavily influenced by some of the major themes of the 60s and 70s counter-culture movement. This youth movement popularized many key ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism which, hitherto, had been confined to a relatively small intellectual elite. One prominent representative of the movement was the American popular philosopher Alan Watts (1915–1973), who was one of the most important popularizers of Zen Buddhism and who, like Fromm, had collaborated with D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), the main conduit of Zen philosophy to the West at that time. In his last and most provocative book, published in 1966, Watts put forward the following thesis:

the prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate Ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination which accords neither with Western science nor with the experimental philosophy-religions of the East. This hallucination underlies the misuse of technology for the violent subjugation of man's natural environment and, consequently, its eventual destruction. We are therefore in urgent need of a sense of our own existence which is in accord with the physical facts, and which overcomes our feeling of alienation from the universe. (Watts, 1971)

Ten years later, in his 1976 masterwork, *To Have or to Be*, Fromm takes up similar Eastern cosmological ideas. His reflections are reminiscent also of Martin Heidegger's notion of the 'ontological mode' and of the work of the existentialist philosophers inspired thereby.

Fromm approaches the notion of being from a psychological perspective. He argues that individuals may realize the potential for freedom that lies dormant in their consciousness and that, collectively, we may realize the potential for a more sane society by shifting our focus. Rather than cling to mental identification, Fromm advocates we should experience the living awareness of being. Fromm bases his analysis on a fundamental distinction between two modes of

consciousness, one based on ‘being’ and the other based on ‘having’. His definition of these two modes closely matches and builds on Martin Buber’s (1878–1965) distinction between the ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’ modes of encountering others (Buber, 1970).

I will briefly explain Fromm’s distinction, though it is quite difficult to do so in a fully satisfactory manner in the limited space available. After all, Fromm’s project is to dismantle the entire edifice of Western modernity, which he regards as an attachment to an all-pervasive delusion.

The ‘having’ mode of existence is characteristic of the modern consumerist way of life but, according to Fromm, its conceptual foundations were laid in the Renaissance, when the rediscovery and development of Greek rationalist philosophy triggered a scientific revolution and the advent of modern technologies and social orders. The dualistic metaphysics of Enlightenment thinkers like Renee Descartes postulates the existence of an independent mental self which, based on its powers as the transcendental subject of thought, is able to survey, analyze, compare, possess and control the world and the body from a vantage point of separateness. The aim of this attitude toward nature, including our own bodies, is to achieve a maximum of pleasure and control through the continual satisfaction of subjectively felt wants (wants are by no means to be confused with genuine needs, nor pleasure with happiness, argues Fromm). This attitude has reached its ultimate expression in the consumer culture of late capitalist modernity.

The project of the Enlightenment is thus failing. It has not delivered happiness as it had intended, despite all the material comforts and powers we may enjoy, and has unwittingly helped to legitimize a philosophy of greed that is now pushing us toward a major environmental disaster. In Fromm’s own words:

The need for profound human change emerges not only as an ethical or religious demand, not only as a psychological demand arising from the pathogenic nature of our present social character, but also as a condition for the sheer survival of the human race. (Fromm, 1997, p. 9)

Fromm’s utopian alternative for a healthier personality and society is to encourage an approach to life focused on ‘being’. Understandably, perhaps, he struggles to define this alternative mode of ‘being’ to an audience habituated to operating in the ‘having’ mode:

By being or having I do not refer to certain separate qualities of a subject as illustrated in such statements as “I have a car” or “I am happy”. I refer to two fundamental modes of existence, to two different kinds of orientation toward self and world, to two types of character structure the respective predominance of which determines the totality of a person’s thinking, feeling and acting. In the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning, one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including my self, my property. .. [T]he being mode of existence means aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world. (Fromm, 1997, p. 24)

In one of his many examples, most relevant to academic Egos perhaps, he distinguishes between ‘having knowledge’ and ‘knowing’:

Knowing does not mean to be in possession of the truth, it means to penetrate the surface [of appearances] and to strive critically and actively in order to approach truth ever more closely. [Yet] our education generally trains people to have knowledge as a possession, by and large commensurate with the amount of property or social prestige they are likely to have later in life. (Fromm, 1997, p. 40)

Fromm’s vision is a mode of ‘being’ that places man inside nature, at one with all that is. In the place of a separate transcendental subject, a false self that is forever afraid of death because it is but a fragile delusion, and never content because it is continually preoccupied with the past memories or future expectations, Fromm puts the idea of a Self that is fully immanent, and hence an

inseparable part of the whole, a wave in the eternal ocean. From this kind of monistic identity perspective, psychological fear of death is eradicated. Having no Ego to defend, no desire beyond the legitimate need for self-preservation, such a person will:

show respect for life in all its manifestations, in the knowledge that not things, power, all that is dead, but life and all that pertains to its growth are sacred, making full growth of oneself and of one's fellow beings the supreme goal of living. (Fromm, 1997, p. 171)

Human psychological growth, according to Fromm's revised psychoanalysis, and similarly according to many Eastern religious traditions, is based on the transformation of what is unconscious into consciousness, or to put it differently, on a greater awareness of reality as it is. This implies full emotional and cognitive acceptance of one's embeddedness in that reality as an interdependent part, so that world and self are seen as one, as 'Suchness'.

The project of modernity has led to what at first sight may seem like the opposite scenario, characterized by an ever increasing sense of separation of self from reality, through identification with false consciousness. But departing somewhat from Fromm's position, I would argue that the sense of separation and controlling possessiveness of modernity (and more so the sense of fragmentation of post-modernity) are not necessarily opposed to Fromm's utopian mode of 'being' in any simple sense, and that his utopia may not be as unachievable as we might otherwise suppose. Rather, like Carl Jung (1875–1961) I see experiences of separation as necessary for the evolution of consciousness in an ontogenetic progression from unconscious unity to individuation and on to conscious unity, and argue that the same applies at a collective level. Given the existential threats we face in the twenty-first century, and given the now obvious relativity of all cultural identities, a collective sense of conscious unity may be a possibility for humanity.

The utopia of now: Eckhart Tolle's model for a new consciousness and a New Earth

In order to illustrate this idea of a historical process of collective individuation, I now would like to discuss a more recent thinker, Eckhart Tolle, whose first work, *The Power of Now*, has been so popular that it sold over two million copies in the first eight years and has been widely reviewed in the popular media, most notably on the Oprah Winfrey Show (Tolle, 2005b). Tolle and 'Oprah' then jointly operated an 'on-line classroom' to instruct hundreds of thousands of people on how to practice the principles of Tolle's mystical philosophy of everyday life. While popularity is not the measure of all things, this does suggest that Tolle's ideas are appealing to many contemporary, post-modern individuals.

According to Tolle, the historical shifts from tradition to modernity and on to post-modernity are part of a historical process that has led us to a climax, a point where our sense of individual separateness has reached an extreme and a point of completion, and thus has become unbearable and reversible:

The compulsive thinker, which means nearly everyone, lives in a state of apparent separateness, in an insanely complex world of continuous problems and conflict, a world that reflects the ever increasing fragmentation of the mind. (Tolle, 2005b, p. 15)

This leads us to a threshold, where it becomes more likely that we might notice the fallacy of our self-identification with mental activity. We are made to confront the fallacy of identification with a supposedly transcendental mind because the resulting state of separation and alienation leads to immense suffering, rather than to a blissful state of transcendental liberation from the material

world. Against the backdrop of this typically late-modern experience, identification with mind may become untenable.

Why is it so hard to let go of the idea of separateness if it causes such suffering, and why is it so difficult to simply recognize that we are a part of the Suchness of Being? The great religious traditions of this world suggest, as does Tolle, that what stops us is ultimately fear of death, arising from false identification with form. Identification with form can manifest as attachment to material possessions or attachment to symbolic possessions such as personal, social, cultural or national identities, as Fromm points out. Entrapment in form can manifest also as attachment to conditioned emotional patterns, which are our standard physical reactions to repetitive and negative patterns of thought. But at the subtlest level, so Tolle suggests, our attachment is to the very process of thinking:

Why should we be addicted to thinking? Because you are identified with it, which means that you derive your sense of self from the content and activity of your mind. Because you believe you would cease to be if you stopped thinking. As you grow up, you form a mental image of who you are, based on your personal and cultural conditioning. The term ego means different things to different people, but when I use it here it means a false self, created by unconscious identification with the mind. (Tolle, 2005b, p. 22)

This Ego, Tolle suggests, is forever afraid of annihilation, afraid that its emptiness could be revealed by a confrontation with Being, which is life itself as it unfolds in the present moment. The Ego is thus forever on the run to try and escape the Now:

To the ego, the present moment hardly exists. Only past and future are considered important. This total reversal of the truth accounts for the fact that in the ego mode the mind is so dysfunctional. It is always concerned with keeping the past alive, because without it - who are you? It constantly projects itself into the future to ensure its continued survival and to find some kind of release and fulfilment there. "one day, when this, that, or the other happens, I am going to be okay, happy, at peace." Even when the ego seems to be concerned with the present, it is not the present that it sees: It misperceives it completely because it looks at it through the eyes of the past. Or it reduces the present to a means to an end, an end that always lies in the mind-projected future. ... [T]he present moment holds the key to liberation. But you cannot find the present moment as long as you are your mind. (Tolle, 2005b, p. 22–23)

Tolle says that what we fear is the death, not of the body, but of the Ego. The body itself is not afraid of death, for it simply is alive and in a way immortal - forever an inseparable part of the stream of life, the universe and eternity. It may be hungry now, but it fears not tomorrow's hunger, nor does it fret at the memory of yesterday's struggles. It is the false self, our identification with mind and associated emotional pain, which fuels our sense of separation and fear of death. The false self struggles to conceal the fact that it is already dead, and always has been, because it is an illusion, a ghost.

According to Tolle, the gateway to a new consciousness and civilization lies not in the future but in the Here and Now, or what he calls 'being present', or simply 'Being':

Why does the mind habitually deny or resist the Now? Because it cannot function and remain in control without time, which is past and future, so it perceives the timeless Now as threatening. Time and mind are in fact inseparable. (Tolle, 2005b, p. 34)

What you think of as the past is a memory trace, stored in the mind, a former Now. The Future is an imagined Now, a projection of the mind. When the future comes, it comes as the Now. When you think about the past, you are doing it Now. Past and Future obviously have no reality of their own — their reality is "borrowed" from the Now — the moment you grasp this there is a shift in consciousness from mind to Being, from time to Presence. Suddenly everything feels alive, radiates energy, emanates Being. (Tolle, 2005b, p. 50)

For Tolle, therefore, conventional utopianism is a form of identification with mind that separates us from the Now, the only place where we can be, act, and experience freedom. It does not mean we cannot reflect on our present condition; indeed, Presence encourages that. And we can also plan ahead to change our circumstances. But Tolle recommends that the only utopia we can ever arrive at is the Now, and that our only road to freedom lies in being present and accepting what is. If we take on a project for improving our circumstances in this attitude of Presence rather than as a means to an end that lies in an ever receding future, he argues, then the road to freedom is no longer an endless struggle but an open space for alert intelligence and enthusiastic action.

Concluding remarks: inner utopia and the world today

Utopian thinkers who are looking to understand what preconditions need to be met for us to imagine a genuinely different and sustainable future civilization would do well to consider closely the insights of Fromm, Watts and Tolle and many others in the tradition of perennial Philosophy. Fromm and Tolle show that imagining and manifesting a better future depends on breaking our identification with form, which at the most subtle level means the thought forms of the mind. The futures we normally chase after simply do not and cannot exist because they are mere projections of our desire to possess. The only site where we can make a real difference is in the Now. As Tolle has argued again and again in his books, it is only by accepting and fully understanding the Now and freeing ourselves from denial that we can see genuine potentials and take meaningful action towards creating a new consciousness and a New Earth (Tolle, 2005a). A better future depends on a better understanding and a deeper acceptance of the Now.

While many objections could be raised against the psychological models of Fromm, Tolle and other modern day proponents of an ‘inner-worldly utopianism’, there is certainly much to be learnt from it. It is of little use to project a tainted imagination into the future that will only reproduce the past, or even to look to the future as a promised land to escape from full awareness and acceptance of, and responsibility for, the present.

From my own life experience as an anthropologist and an immigrant twice over, and hence as a post-monocultural individual in an increasingly post-monocultural world, I would add that this particular Now is a rather special time of historical opportunity for all of us. The current process of globalization is confronting us, every day, with the fact that there is a vast array of options for individuals and groups to construct a mental identity for themselves. Post-modern urban societies are increasingly composed of a patch work of cultures, so that there is no single, unchallenged cultural model of self-hood for individuals to identify with and to be socially supported in. This fragmentation of identity discourses, whether it is simply witnessed as a rupture of social cohesion in the external world or internalized through cross-cultural engagement, reveals that every person’s own mental concept of self is a fragile and rather arbitrary construct among countless other possible mental constructs of a similar kind, in short, it is a product of our personal and collective unconscious and conscious imaginary.

This realization, if we accept the truth of it, encourages us to loosen our identification with a once monolithic modernist sense of self, and to entertain the possibility of having a fragmented self or multiple selves. Faced with the possibility of such an uncomfortable and ambiguous Ego structure, many will try everything to deny the heterogeneity of the post-modern world, will fearfully retract, and attempt to prop up their separate and homogeneous sense of self, if necessary, by eliminating, silencing or marginalizing people with different cultural beliefs. Others will perhaps choose to linger within the new mode of identity, drifting aimlessly amidst the wreckage of the

multiple colliding regimes of truth around them, unwilling to commit to any of these evidently arbitrary identities but at the same time also finding themselves unable to connect to other people in the absence of a shared identity discourse. Many, however, are choosing to make their way into what Tolle calls the Now, into a state of stillness and Presence wherein the mind, and with it both the modern pain of separation and the post-modern pain of fragmentation, lose their power to define who we are. Then the mind with all its rational analytical and imaginary powers is in its rightful place, reduced to serve as a tool for a living Self that is, now, at one with all. This would seem to me the strongest possible foundation for a new civilization.

Notes

1. The spiritual sentiment at the core of contemporary ecological movements is best described in the seminal work of Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess.
2. See Thomas A. Reuter (2016); and on antecedents in puranic literature Romila Thapar (2002).
3. Ethnographic research in anthropology is a special case. This practice leads directly to a confrontation with the fragmentary nature of the self of mentation, which is culturally conditioned, through intense exposure to a second culture. See: Thomas A. Reuter (2006).
4. Cornelius Castoriadis (1998); Clifford Geertz (1973); Paul Ricoeur (1971).
5. Since I am arguing herein for the emancipatory potential of the imaginary, I use the term more in the way that Castoriadis understands it, as ‘radical imagination’, rather than in the somewhat more pessimistic Lacanian sense (Jacques Lacan 1993). I thus largely agree with Castoriadis’ critique of Lacan, as detailed by Peter Dews (2002). However, as an anthropologist, my comparative perspective on cultures also serves as a reminder that all social imaginaries are historically evolved phenomena, resilient but also changeable, whereby major changes seem to require specific preconditions that favor a ‘reimagining’. Since change is needed in these times, understanding such preconditions should be our main focus.
6. A prominent example of this belief that modernity and globalization are cultureless, and will thus eventually eradicate cultural diversity globally, is the work of: Francis Fukuyama (1992).
7. For a more detailed discussion of historical shifts in religion and society in the wake of modernity and globalization, see Thomas A. Reuter (2008).

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