



The Objects of Utopia: New Lamps for Old

Alan W. Moore

review of:

Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier and Patrick Reedy (2007) *The Dictionary of Alternatives*. London: Zed Books. (PB: pp. 256, £16.99, ISBN: 9781842773338)

In a 1997 talk in Prague, Cornelius Castoriadis described capitalism as the largest kind of utopic imaginary, an ‘absurd’ illusion of endless expanding material consumption (Castoriadis, quoted in McLemee, 2004). What system then is realistic? Whatever it is, in its past or embryonic form, its description is sure to be found within the *Dictionary of Alternatives*.

This is a reference book of differences – ideas, movements, leaders, economies, communities. It is a guidebook to the kingdom of mammals scurrying unnoticed in the brush behind the dinosaurs of today.

It is also an inventory of the utopian objects. This dictionary lists that which has been largely unthinkable, unnameable, that which has been prohibited from mainstream discourse and consigned to the covert realm by the institutional regimes of the postmodern era.

This *Dictionary* is a clear sign that the wind is changing. As Immanuel Wallerstein observes in the catalogue of the 2003 Venice Biennale, ‘utopistics’ is a “study of the better” not the perfect. In a world in structural crisis, marked by a struggle between hierarchical and democratic systems “history is on no one’s side” (Wallerstein, 2003). A book like this *Dictionary* can serve as the kind of tool box Wallerstein says can help move us towards a model.

A pre-eminent world systems analyst, Wallerstein was speaking in a catalogue for an art exhibition, in the section called Utopia Station. It is clear that this *Dictionary* is about function not fiction. These authors teach in schools of management and business. Just as critical cultural studies migrated into communications departments, so the study and understanding of different modes of social and economic organization seem to have become essential for the pursuit of business in the era of globalized communication.

This institutional academic turn is certainly part of capital's own adaptation to the emergent forms of economic and political organization that may be understood to lie 'beyond' it.

This book may foreshadow an intensification of the subducted conflicts within capitalist economy between the knowledge/information and the extractive/destructive industries. The recent history of this quiet struggle includes the dot com crash, the strategic denial of the 'green' and the global war on nothing.

The *Dictionary* is a tight and useful little book. The entries are gem-like marvels of concision. My problems with it are mostly pedantic. The bibliography is separated into sections, so it's tricky to run down citations which are by author and date. The bibliography is cursory; but as the authors point out, 'the many websites relevant to entries' are easy to find. The *Dictionary* is a new kind of book, one intended to function as a reference supplement to an ever-changing and enlarging body of knowledge online.

It would be easy to critique it as an insufficient academic product, one that rehearses the inadequacy of most books one sees about business. Yet the bibliography this book requires would fill another and far larger volume. Instead, the *Dictionary* is a handful of hard-shelled seeds thrown upon bare ground, confident that the air – that is, the internet – will provide sufficient nourishment for further growth and development.

A more substantial issue concerns the UK-centric nature of the work. For example, under 'Intentional Communities' the list omits the invaluable work of Timothy Miller on American communes. But arguments between Brits and yanks aside, the work seems insufficiently post-colonial. Developments in the lands beyond the West are understood mostly through the lens of their effects on the centre.

But again I remind myself how recent this renewed attention to lost forms of utopic striving is. Despite its authoritative form – as 'dictionary' – the book is really a set of questions rather than answers.

So then: Does the very western idea of utopia have explanatory or rhetorical force outside the birthplaces of capitalism? Is it not even in its very homeland perhaps a profound conservatism, straining to hold on to the half-remembered practices of smaller moieties that were existent before modern nations and capital. The new empowered all-devouring world system as ever tramples local arrangements. Obsoleted in the face of the new circumstances, these are forgotten.

Is that not what is happening now in regions where traditional societies have remained strong? (at least until the neo-colonial wars of the postmodern era tore them apart), as the apostles of neo-liberal capitalism seek the as yet unconverted to commodify, while demonizing and destroying the indigenes and traditionals who stand in the way.

The brief entry here on the women's Chipko movement – the original tree-huggers of India – is an instance of the extraordinarily inventive forms of resistance to gluttony developed in 'developing' countries.

The global anti-capital resistance movement, inspired as it was by Zapatismo, may still be in some early phase of relation to these practices of resistance rather like the primitivism of modern artists looking at African sculpture.

This is all great – it’s fun to think differently, given here such abundant information about the possibilities. And the *Dictionary* shows clearly that this is not a question of initiating doomed starts from half-understood premises, but rather remembering those forgotten – new wheels for old chassis.

references

- McLemee, S. (2004) ‘The Strange Afterlife of Cornelius Castoriadis’, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 26.
- Wallerstein, I. (2003) ‘Meeting Immanuel Wallerstein’, in F. Bonami (ed.) *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*. New York: Rizzoli, 369-389.

the author

Alan W. Moore does not write the comic books. (Sigh.) He is an art historian who has visited recently at University of South Florida and Kennesaw State University teaching contemporary art and critical theory. He has written on artists’ groups, cultural districts and cultural economies. As a young punk he worked with the artists’ groups Colab and helped start the cultural center ABC No Rio. Secret services take note: Now that his contract is up, he is looking forward to resuming his career as a nomadic revolutionary. Stop him before it is too late...
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