

# The irresistible (and necessary) temptation of the liberating projects\*

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The dog sees other dogs die, but he does not know – at least, not by the force of syllogism– that he himself is mortal as well. Socrates knows. And because he knows he is capable of irony.

**Umberto Eco**

The orthodox economist, a not very prestigious and short run cultural hero –or, which is the same thing, the governability political scientist, or the consensus sociologist, pecuniarily acknowledged by the market and able of repeated gestures of “seriousness”, “citizen responsibility”, “good behaviour” and so on –sees, sooner or later his pragmatism equals’ prosperity plans plunge one by one. But he does not realise –because he is hindered by the formalisms of his theory construction, the content of his thoughts and the social articulations he is involved in– that, despite the effort, he himself will have to give up his own plans and nonsense, at some unpredictable moment in a future that we imagine, we fancy, or we wish to come soon. Takis Fotopoulos -as radically Greek as Socrates- does realise and he knows. And because he realises and knows, he is able, as many others, to overcome blackmailing by those who award themselves the right to determine the possible and the impossible, to think of the present world crisis with an alternative vocation, and to join the overflowing stream of those who continue, perseveringly and with good reason, plotting truly liberating Utopias and projects.

*Towards an inclusive democracy* takes place exactly within these coordinates –if it is possible to call them this way– and, at least to the Spanish speaking reader, it does it in the best and the most convenient of the circumstances. It is a time of multiple threats, several catastrophes and uncertainty galore, as well as of the decline and suspense of that reactionary biblical promise that believed in its definitive institutionalisation. It is a politically fermenting, agitated and convulsed time that recovers emancipatory longings and energy, and, once more, lodges wide spaces of redesigning and work for that unwithering aim: a society with no dominated nor dominators.

## A little of recent history

To evaluate what I mentioned above, it is worth going through part of recent history - indicating only those points relevant to my reasoning. In the late 60’s, the foundations of

the Welfare State announced its eventual break down. Likewise, the dynamics of capitalist growth –which seemed happy and uncontrollable during the first two and a half decades after the Second World War– offered already some, and very serious, symptoms of weakness. The crisis of this age, though, going beyond those variables, was setting up already as a civilization crisis; the “French May” was not its exclusive effect, but the most symbolic one ever since. The 70’s seemed to be a revolutionary time at the beginning, and they were lived as such by huge sectors of left activists in the five continents, and particularly so in Latin America.<sup>[1]</sup>

The advanced capitalist countries’ tremors would only confirm that this was a revolutionary time. These tremors led to important fissures, such as the collapse of the International Monetary System born in Bretton Woods, and the questioning of its active matrix, following the abandonment of dollar inconvertibility in 1971 and the oil crisis between 1973 and 1975, respectively. It is true that military dictatorships represented a clear retrogression and a dampening down of the enthusiasm, but it was also possible in those years to be inspired by the embarrassing US troops withdrawal from South East Asia, and so enhance the hope for the advance of the “socialist” camp. That was what, deceptively, appeared to happen in Ethiopia, Angola or Mozambique, in Vietnam, Cambodia or Afganistan. It should be reminded, as well, that the 70’s ended with the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and of the dynasty of Somoza in Nicaragua.

While the 70’s were years of complete trust in a determinist and evolutionist conception of history, whose unyielding spreading out was supposedly assisted by revolutionary action, the 80’s would see tendencies in the opposite direction express themselves. The characters of the decade will now be, in order of appearance, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Mijail Gorbachov. The first two -with the *Chicago boys*’ invaluable help- will be in charge of renewing the potentials of capitalistic growth<sup>[2]</sup>, at the same time that they also undertook a vast and still unfinished reconversion of their own states and economies (and those within their sphere of influence). Meanwhile, the third (Gorbachov) will initially proceed to restructure his field, to become, finally, the unintentional spectator of his implosion and shatter. In the late 80’s, then, the “domino effect” will lead to quite a different scenography to what was expected: now those who will fall one by one, as well as and in a block, will be the countries in the Soviet block, offering a major symbolic finis with the tumbling down, stone by stone, of the foreboding Berlin Wall.

Everything was well set so that, at the dawn of the 90’s, people would have to accept –assimilating retrogression and defeat in a bad mood and filled with anger– the emergency of one of the major theoretical–ideological examples of foolishness of the concluding century. That absurdity was what Francis Fukuyama announced, in Hegelian code used in a completely different way than in the Marxist tradition, that the end of history had come and that man’s ultimate fate was none other than the empire of parliamentary democracy and of an unrestricted global market capitalism.<sup>[3]</sup> The only missing element, which would later on join the other elements and impose itself as an outstanding pillar, was the “globalisation” notion –as if to complete the trilogy and the salvation message of the three world power centres and perhaps also suggest that from then on there were no other alternatives but to subscribe and sign a uniformed convenience project. The end of the second millennium in the Christian Era did not look like welcoming the Utopian vibrations coming from the end of the previous millennium . Or, even worse, at the beginning of the 90’s, the Utopia was believed to have come true, under its new neo-

liberal clothing, and all that was left was to wait for the indefinite extension of their domains in the years to come.

However, the unconscious joy and triumphant rapture that came with this new ideological hegemony did not last long. And, although it was announced to be progressive, it turned out to be radically reactionary. First, the Zapatistas shook the Lacandona forest and spoiled the party for the newly signed NAFTA agreement among U.S.A., Canada and Mexico. Then, huge strikes in France and Korea took charge, putting up rough resistance to “neo-liberal” reforms in the field of social security and labour contracts, respectively. Later, popular uprisings in Indonesia and Ecuador made the political-institutional balances stagger in both countries. Besides, the Arcadia, re-conquered through “free” capitalist markets, globalisation and the commercial and indiscriminate appropriation of nature, saw its ephemeral days of wine and roses darken from its own development logic. The financial bubble first collapsed in Mexico in 1994, followed by the corresponding “Tequila Effect”. Then, it left a lavish covering of damage in South East Asia during 1997. Almost immediately after, in 1998, it would mark Russia with its foot prints. Finally, since 1999, it would establish itself with its pressures and perturbations in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. As a culmination and confluence of both sequences, the 20th century would not end before immersing itself in the baptismal font of the so-called “anti-globalisation” movement, as a major summary of the new movements’ flow.

In this picture of events, it can well be stated that the English edition of *Towards an inclusive democracy* (1997) represented on that occasion, in its articulation of that picture, a lucid warning related to the deep meaning of a crisis that already could be sensed and which was not limited then, nor is limited now, to its more evident expressions. The crisis, according to Fotopoulos, is a crisis of the market economy in its very essence, as well as of the growth economy, as its logical consequence.<sup>[4]</sup> A crisis – which has deadly injured the market’s variations and its developmental strategies– that now falls over its own core. A crisis that (I may add, in the same vein of radicalism) can also be interpreted as a shudder for modernity and its power bases. A crisis that requires a lot more to be solved than a rearrangement, a fine tuning and a renovation. Thus, the Spanish edition that I am now presenting finds its exact opportunity -its *kairós*, as would an ancient Greek say- at this very moment that, once more, people see themselves increasingly pushed, encouraged and urged to think and reanimate new liberating projects.

## History and autonomy

Having said that, the question is which are the images history gives back, and which are the representations of those images that people describe? Is history actually designed by our superiors? A succession of ways of production? A linear and foreseeable path of progress? A repetition of eternal cycles ? A stockyard beyond which it is not possible to search for any future? Or, is it still possible for people to find a place for fantasy and conceive History like a chaotic picture in some hyper-space without limits, imaginary and metaphorical, where defiles, ambushes, mazes, transversalities, networks and bifurcations are combined?

According to Fotopoulos, history is, clearly and overwhelmingly, virtuality, bet and risk; *polemos*, *poiesis* and *praxis*; the scenography that the magic hazard of autonomy will offer people. Autonomy, this post-tragic or para-tragic possibility, in which the individuals’ and collectives’ capacity to give themselves their own laws and set their own means is

expressed. Autonomic virtualities, an attribute that neither all societies nor all periods offered or consummated with the same intensity. Nevertheless, it is not bold to say that all societies were able to make their own laws, rather than laws supposedly originated from divinity, or based on immanence, i.e. laws emanating from their hypothetically own and uncontrollable mechanism – a mechanism that takes place above or outside its non-transferable future. Fotopoulos states that this alchemy, this mysterious conjunction, undecipherable in its inner dynamisms, found its first magnificence in the old democratic Athens, between 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, to be repeated later only in very few occasions along the human adventure. [5]

Autonomy is, therefore, nothing else but society's capacity, which is generated consciously and expressly, to think itself, to overcome conditioning and extortion whatever its origin, and fix, with the maximum margin of freedom historically possible, its own cohabitation relations and its own action lines. Moreover, this societal acquisition does not result from any predestination, from any conspiracy, from any fortuity, from any engineering and from any omniscient power able to solve and apply, by its own development, a never-failing construction algorithm. There is no science there, but conscience, as a historical variable, product of the free play of opinions and of the synthesis that this product causes. Conscience of itself, conscience of its needs and wishes, and conscience of its possibilities.

In other words, the autonomy of any collective expresses exactly the opposite of the two great historical conceptions that have predominated throughout the two last centuries. On the one hand, a conception that conceives history as a martial and unrestrained procession of rationality and progress, as the consequence of the "freedom to choose" among the indeterminate market operations. On the other hand, a conception that assumes history to be predetermined to set out from a hidden but all-powerful mechanism, according to which the development of the productive forces can by itself lead to revolution, socialism, and equally unyielding emancipation.

Seeing things this way, the fashionable technocrats will object that it only deals with an undesirable and delighting revival of political philosophy, which is just an eccentricity of thought, decaying already and definitely overcome by the capitalist market's self regulation mechanisms. Or they will say it is a last desperate attempt to question and go beyond the parliamentary democracy institution, or an endeavour bound to fail in view of the inevitable and irreversible consequences of "globalisation victories". However, these individuals cannot exhibit more than their radical short-sightedness and they ignore boastfully that their episodic victories are not absolute nor definitive, but historically limited. They ignore as well, or they resist to acknowledge, of course, their own and evident failure. They also ignore that these things are concrete effects of certain power relations and not the spontaneous spreading out of an invisible and unbeatable rationality. Even worse, they ignore that the liberal tradition itself, to which they claim to belong, has restored long ago in its own field, the reflection on political philosophy. And they ignore that even today's liberal thinkers do not expect justice to be an automatic product, independent from intentional collective action. [6]

Autonomy, then, comes to be the key element of a certain philosophy of history, of a foundational project and also, by extension, of a consequent political practice. For those who have been formed in some of the socialist traditions that have their origin in the First International, it will be easy to find proximities and kinship with the classical anarchism;

particularly with the most markedly “voluntarist” inflection to which Errico Malatesta belongs, in friendly opposition to Mijail Bakunin’s almost “millenarist” and prophetic optimism, or Piotr Kropotkin’s equally trustful scientism.

Despite this implicit familiarity, which Fotopoulos does not explore, it is obvious that his conception draws from an ideologically different genealogy. He leans this genealogy on a slightly diverse theoretical scheme, even when both show various contact and intersection points with the anarchist tradition, especially ever since the “French May”. Thus, the autonomic conception also re-takes and extends egalitarian assumptions, on the basis of a criticism of the domination relation, and tacitly conjectures about the probable subjects of a liberating project around the new social movements.

## **The liberating project**

Autonomy expresses itself in the formulation, adoption and starting of a liberating project and leads to, and is carried about, in a conscious construction of the Utopia. By saying this, I do not consider autonomy as the certainty of a “millenarist” future, or based on delicate social engineering operations (which had such devastating consequences in some classical socialist tendencies), but as the collective ability to build history itself. It is a Utopia that is irrelevant to a neat, finished, architectonic authoritarian design, but that could not do less than recognise itself as libertarian from the start. If autonomy is the basis and the condition for possibility, and freedom the aim of change, an inclusive democracy is the most appropriate expression that Fotopoulos finds to name the character of the organisation scheme, the liberating project, he affiliates to. A project that is fed with those activist stems, whose identity has reached the present day undamaged. Thus, inclusive democracy has developed as a summary, as a synthesis, of the best project traditions in libertarian “municipalitarianism” and social ecology, in feminism and of course, in the autonomist tendencies themselves. Despite being a synthesis, it does not lack those multiple counterpoints with those elements from the different tendencies which Fotopoulos “feeds” on. Besides, according to him, these elements represent insufficient developments, mistaken intuitions, or even contradictions and incongruities with the global and coherent formulation this liberating project is asking for.

Inclusive democracy contains, according to Fotopoulos, at least four dimensions: the political, and also the economical, social and ecological. It is only to this extent -which includes the exhaustion of democracy in all the cohabitation fields- and in its relation to nature, that it is possible to avoid the indeterminate degradation of democracy. The common and predominant use of the concept of democracy has lost its sense, impulse and deep meanings that it once had –even when it was not used. I refer to ancient Athens, the free medieval cities, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, the trade unionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the changes driven by the Spanish anarchist trade unions between 1936 and 1939. Consequently, to avoid this degradation, society has to be fed with its own roots, be fertilised as a space for equality and be founded on a new assembly culture. That is, it has to constitute and complete itself as a public meeting democracy, as a self-managed society, in short, as a direct democracy without mediations. This, Fotopoulos suggests, is the only way the word democracy may regain its recollections and original meaning. Thus, it will conceptually purge itself from the old confusion that has merely identified democracy with a kind of government, with a way of representation and with its corresponding parliamentary containers. All this, in turn, makes a way for a citizenship notion that is far

from limiting itself to that voting exercise, through which citizens abandon sovereignty and give up all responsibility.

Having done these defining clarifications, the circle has now to close logically. Fotopoulos will close it resorting to old organisative principles and interconnection principles among democratic cores. Both kind of principles will probably find their remote origin in the classic Greek leagues and anfictionies, which contemporaneously are shown as federations and confederations.<sup>[7]</sup> The municipality and the confederation **happen to change** Utopia into pan-topia and what now is nowhere tends desideratively to consummate itself everywhere. That is so, taking the municipality as a probable cell but not as necessarily the only one, and the confederation as a conjunctive tissue. Among all these places, the productive cores, self-management will be found as the moment for work liberation, and as a basic plot which the economic dimension of inclusive democracy will be fed from, exercised and orientated. Notwithstanding, it will acknowledge its main axles around its territorial support. These territories will not be able to be capsuled in the tribute and servitude to the Nation-State, whatever their dimension might be. That is independently as well, from the density and thickness of the agreements that they would decide to establish with the fraternal autonomous societies which they are bound to, either eithin or outside the confederation.

I have pointed out that this elaboration expands on the detailed counterpoints with the previous theories it finds closest to, and extends in the details that separates it from them. Notwithstanding, it seems quite clear this does not mean that it lacks quite recognisable records and forerunners. I should mention some examples, and I will not hide my own preferences in my selection. While Cornelius Castoriadis has to do with autonomy and the democratic future, Murray Bookchin and Piotr Kropotkin are involved in the design and shaping of the liberating project.<sup>[8]</sup> Fotopoulos opens, with them and some others, a rich space for dialogues and questioning. Therefore, their project aims cannot be minimized, as if they were a common futuristic speculation, but should rather be considered as part of a trend with well defined political roots, which has nowadays regained an important part of its strengths and virtualities, particularly, in the new-born “anti-globalisation” movement.

Theoretical “realism” and political “possibilism” will probably close ranks once more and will hurry to start, for the 10<sup>th</sup> time, its methodical condemnatory and degradatory routine exercises. And so, they will complaisantly look down on this ambitious large-scale project, as they would have done on any other which offered a liberating change. Moreover, they will continue insisting, to the point of their own fatigue and the others’ annoyance, that there is no other scope for change than the narrow parapet of colourless philanthropy or “development aid”. This will be so, despite the fact that they may already be convinced that history is not a blind alley, and despite the fact that they may have abandoned the idea that society change has arrived to its destination.

Nevertheless, the margin that has nowadays turned narrower again, in several parts of the world, is that of the prestidigitators and illusionists, the space for demagogues, politicians and power dealers. Perhaps people are not in the presence of the successors of those ghosts, who, back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, travelled and scared Europe. Probably there are no trumpets playing at Jericho’s Wall. And the possibility that an apocalyptic outburst takes place in the immediacies of this age is totally uncertain. But one thing is definitely sure: the libertarian breaths and blowings, even the libertarian strong winds have not died, nor

retreated. They have still a lot to do today. In this clamour, in this noisy and renewed din, Takis Fotopoulos' text-pretext will have found more than one echo, more than one chorus expression.

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\* The above text constitutes the Introduction to the Spanish edition of Towards An Inclusive Democracy, *Hacia Una Democracia Inclusiva* (Nordan: Montevideo, 2002)

[1] For an approach, backed by strong empirical evidence, expressing that feeling of generalised crisis and menacing revolutionary perspectives, I recommend consulting Abraham Guillén, *La década crítica de América Latina*, Sandino, Montevideo, 197- specially useful for the beginning of the period and for the tones, events and expectations inherent to our continent. And, for the final years and with more general reach, I recommend André Gunder Frank; *La crisis mundial (1. Occidente, Países del Este y Sur y 2. El Tercer Mundo)*, Bruguera, Barcelona, 1980.

[2] A growth, as Fotopoulos accurately points out in this book, that will not offer during the 80's and 90's the same blooming rates as those boasted of in the 50's and 60's.

[3] By Francis Fukuyama, *El fin de la historia y el último hombre*; Planeta, Barcelona, 1992.

[4] Note that in Uruguay, and particularly, in the financial turbulencies in 2002, it becomes extraordinarily advantageous to apply the elements of this model of analysis. For the moment, the insistence in the decline of the "neo-liberal" model shows up as a quick answer and with immediate ideological resonances. However, it would be rather more critical and penetrating to get deeper into an explanatory discourse that would precisely recount the boisterous tumbling down of the "Uruguayan" –and perhaps regional– growth model.

[5] Fotopoulos' most obvious theoretical ascendant here is Cornelius Castoriadis. Notwithstanding, certain tints between them, one should notice, particularly, Fotopoulos' major generosity when he considers societies and periods which offer examples where a radical autonomy extends, or may extend; see Castoriadis, *La institución imaginaria de la sociedad*; Tusquets, Barcelona, 1983.

[6] In fact, at present, there are two great tendencies, which come from the old liberal stem and seek to legitimate and orientate political acting in the context of a renewed reflection on justice: development liberalism –which incribes philosophers as Isaiah Berlin and Brough McPherson– and neo-contractualism –in which such authors as John Rawls, James Buchanan and Robert Nozick can be placed.

[7] In this ground, a quite obvious record, in the socialist field, could be found in Pierre Joseph Proudhon. *El principio federativo, passim*; by this author is an edition prepared by Juan Gómez Casas in Nacional, Madrid, 1977.

[8] To evaluate proximities and roots, it is of use to consult Castoriadis' text, which has previously been quoted; also, *Fields, Factories and Work-shops* by Piotr Kropotkin, Júcar, Madrid, 1978 and, *La ecología de la libertad. La emergencia y la disolución de las jerarquías* by Murray Bookchin, Nossa y Jara Editores, Madrid, 1999. Obviously, Kropotkin is not taken –nor could never be– in its detailed aspects, once the long separating century has been sifted, in his social reorganisation proposition's internationality and derivations.