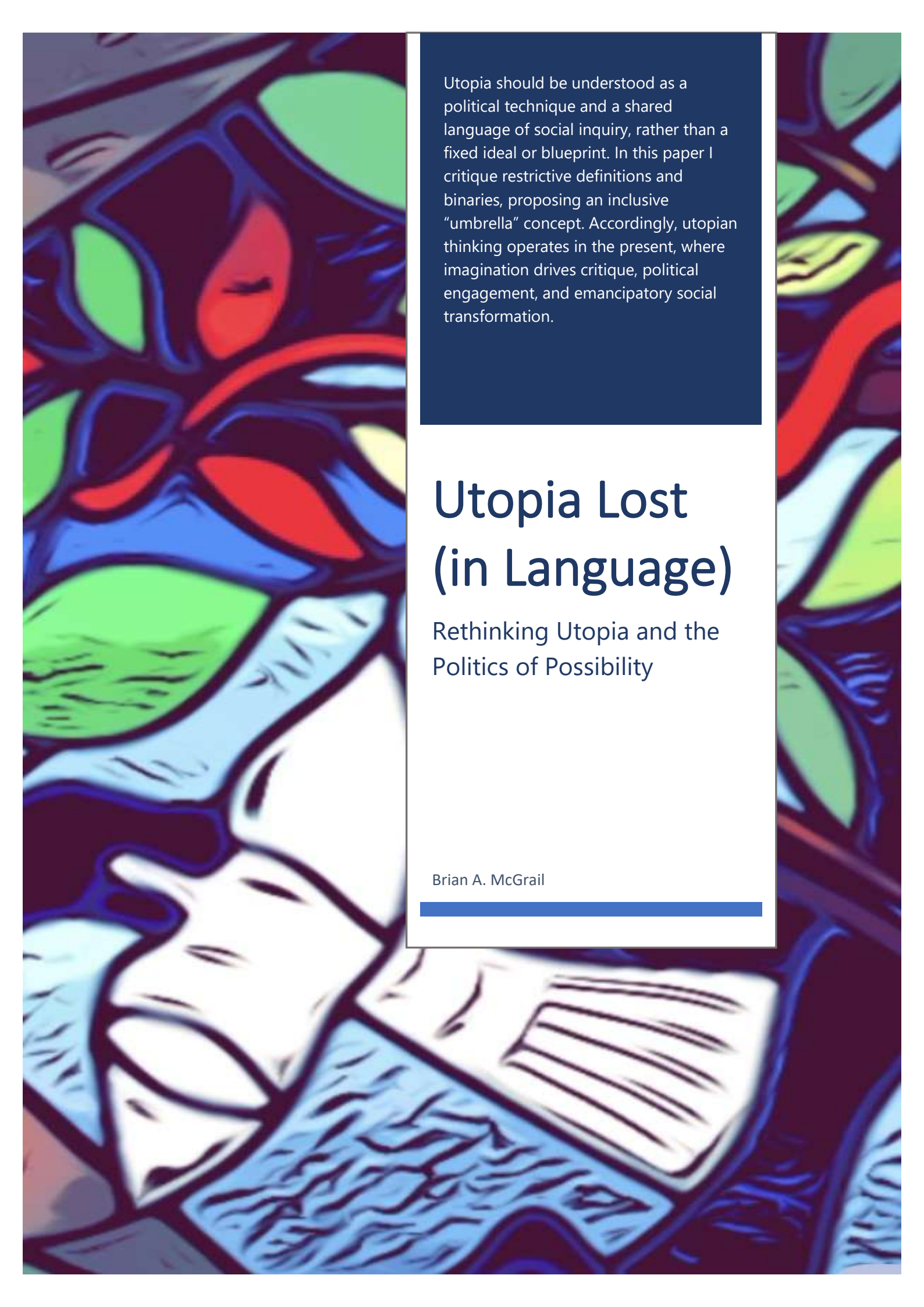




Utopia should be understood as a political technique and a shared language of social inquiry, rather than a fixed ideal or blueprint. In this paper I critique restrictive definitions and binaries, proposing an inclusive “umbrella” concept. Accordingly, utopian thinking operates in the present, where imagination drives critique, political engagement, and emancipatory social transformation.

Utopia Lost (in Language)

Rethinking Utopia and the
Politics of Possibility

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Published by Socialising Sense

www.socialisingsense.net

Utopia Lost (in Language): Rethinking Utopia and the Politics of Possibility

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First published 2026.

Gorebridge, Midlothian, Scotland.

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Utopia Lost (in Language)

In terms of utopian studies, I am primarily interested in utopianism as a political **technique** (see McGrail, 2011) and as a **language** of social investigation and deliberation. In this sense, utopia is a 'place' occupied by **the utopian** (writer, critic, practitioner, citizen) which lies beyond the 'now-here' but is, obviously, more than 'no-where'. Therefore, the place called utopia is never 'impossible' by dint of it already being occupied by mortal beings who choose to speak its language and use its technique – those who make the effort not only to dream (and criticise) but express their political desires in public fora. Regarding the 'failure' of utopia, I understand the *absence* of politically imaginative effort (due to prevailing social conditions) to be the central danger in undermining emancipatory social justice rather than any risk arising from utopic dreaming (or the concept of 'utopia') itself (*a la anti-utopians* like Gray, 2007). Utopia fails when it is limited to, or bounded by, the 'ideals' generated under a specific social form, such as capitalism (with both its liberalist and/or socialist dreaming). The latter are outcomes of utopianism, as an activity, being suppressed and confined to peculiar (subjectively or culturally invested) dreamers and, thus, not open to 'all'. Consequently, I aim to build a positive case for utopianism by remapping its core parameters regarding shared meanings (the language of utopia).

Whilst the utopian is always **somewhere**, even if only in dream or nightmare, and is often in **dialogue** (real and imagined conversations) with others and themselves, the authorial position of the utopian often gets lost in 'everyday' references **to** utopia (as literary or architectural 'blueprint') and concentration on a **vision** ('the good place'). This focus or concern runs parallel to, and can even hide, the 'place' of the gesticulating voice and what the utopian is 'doing' (exploring / experimenting). Consequently, key questions can go unasked, namely, from where does the utopian speak in political, social, spatial, and/or temporal senses? And how did 'they' (as a specific individual or member of a social group) get there? Furthermore, what drove them 'into' (their) utopia in the first place? Indeed, what kind of utopian are they as a result (egalitarian, liberal, dictatorial, colonial, cultist, naturalist, conservationist, bank 'nationaliser', modernist, totalitarian, technologist, messianic, democratic, anarchic, emancipatory)?

Personally pushed to define utopia as a 'good place', I would choose Habermas' reference to *an ideal speech situation* (1968; 1972), Arendt's (1963) *On Revolution* invocation of *town councils* (following the American revolution), Freire's (1974) *deliberative democracy*, Kropotkin's *mutual aid*, or Pannekoek's *council communism* as my exemplars. Such 'visions' merge utopia-as-technique with utopic practice (means with ends) in a way Robert Owen's or Le Corbusier's 'plans' for social engineering never could (plans or ends in which they reserve the 'rights' to utopian place and space – the means – for themselves as 'architects'). But such contrasts also raise issues about what is 'meant' by utopia and if there is a better way for us (those interested in **utopian critique**) to talk about utopia? It strikes me that there is benefit in doing so, to pursuing this path, towards creating the most "striking" of all "conceivable" worlds (Manuel & Manuel, 1979, p.29).

A Question of Language

While conversations about utopia are enlightening, a persistent problem entails talking at 'cross-purposes', since diverse meanings of 'utopia' are constantly in play, including but not limited to the activities elided under the term. Sargent (2010) usefully breaks *utopianism* into 3 core categories:

(1) literary utopias (with 6 distinct purposes); (2) utopian practice (the 7th ‘purpose’ of literary utopias, which is to become ‘real’), and (3) utopian social theory (as reflective method). This gives purchase on the activities involved, but Sargent’s text and presentation (language) retains binary formulations that should be challenged to address misconceptions about ‘utopianism’.

My first aim, therefore, is to ‘rejuvenate’ utopian language (and discussion) by contesting definitional conventions while highlighting utopian social theory’s capacity to develop an analytical framework which can untangle problematic ‘conflations’ (within the conventions). Significantly, rejuvenating utopian language may support clearer conversations by which undemocratic (authoritarian) past ‘failures’ may be avoided, not least by making positive references to utopia more widespread, even possible, in public debate. Indeed, I find Gray’s anti-utopianism suspect in railing against **a technique** he subconsciously utilises himself – namely, his belief in and promotion of liberal democracy as the ‘best of all possible worlds’. Much of what follows emerged from teaching a 10-week Open Studies short course over a decade (2009-18) at the Centre for Open Learning, University of Edinburgh. This was part of lifelong learning provision, with learning outcomes premised on open critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and the notion of developing a ‘democratic intellect’ (Davie, 1961) by encompassing learners within utopian activity.

Language Conventions in Utopian Studies

Asking the ‘average person’ what is meant by utopia typically produces disdainful references to **impossible** idealistic (political or social) states. This is hardly surprising given the 20th century’s experimentation with exclusionary (and exterminatory) ‘ideal states’ on the back of totalising, reductive ideologies. Yet, ask amongst those who have studied utopianism for decades, such as Manuel and Manuel (1979), and their opening conclusion is that utopia refers to the ‘best of all **possible** worlds’. The contrast between these two conceptions is wide but explaining the difference by reference to the relative ‘ignorance’ of one group compared to the other might merely overlook the prospect that our conversations (discourses) on utopia produce this divisive bifurcated outcome!

That is, it is not the scepticism of the ‘learner from the street’ that has ever concerned me (as a pro-utopian) but the accumulating mound of misnaming, misuses, and misdiagnoses which have worked their way into print – a leadership of poor examples. In the 21st century we, collectively, need to deal with the tragedy of utopia being designated an ‘unwelcome’ (or irrelevant) technique within the context of an ‘unquestionable’ political reality (which is, itself, a ‘utopian’ ideal). And this entails turning a critical eye inwards, to examine the language we (utopians) have grown up with and adopted.

It strikes me that discussion of utopia is premised on several definitional / language conventions which cloud, rather than illuminate, utopian processes. Some examples include:

- the conflation of utopia with ‘eutopia’ (good place), which confines utopianism to the production of ‘graven images’ (Adorno), pictorial narratives, or artistic snapshots.
- the binary opposition of utopia and dystopia, which often delegitimises ‘utopia’ as uncritical.
- the coalescence of apocalypse with Armageddon (or the ‘end of the world’), which masks the positivity within messianic utopianism (the role of the seer over that of the rapture); or
- the designation of Marx as ‘anti-utopian’, which removes his significance (as seer) and restricts the meaning and relevance of utopia (to Marx’s dismissal of graven images produced by ‘socialists’ who, alas, remained firmly within the realm of wage-labour relations).

This list is by no means exhaustive but forms the basis of a small collection upon which my following discussion makes a start.

The Utopian Trajectory

Given the multiple meanings attached to 'utopia' it is necessary to place the utopian, as technician, within a temporal / historical trajectory which outlines the various options available when conceptualising utopia / utopias. It should be noted that utopias never arrive or arise as singularities and, hence, the concept of **heterotopia** is significant to any study of utopianism. Heterotopia refers to 'other spaces' (Foucault, 1967) whereby the existence of one 'place' is dependent upon (interdependent with) another. The simplest example is utopia being a contrasting (negation) of real space – it's inverse or opposite. The fact one place is 'not' real and the other 'is' does not matter. And the concept extends to Thomas More's Utopians having a religion within their very own paradise (utopia *within* Utopia) as well as the monotony of factory production requiring the fairground or holiday resort for its survival (a real space of temporary 'wish fulfilment' which helps another real space function: Hetherington, 1998).

Figure 1 (*Utopian Trajectory: Past, Present, Future Envisioned and Unknown*) visually sums up key points of consideration. A black horizontal line points from left to right at ground (earthly) level. The arrow represents human historical time (opposed to circular clock time) divided into three well-known phases (*trptych*) encountered in much utopic thinking (after Joachim di Fiore). First, there is a single line representing a past time of unity prior to social division (harmony, unity or independence before a fall). Second, the line 'divides' to represent a period of disharmony, strife and struggle in the present. Thirdly, and finally, there is reunification and re-harmonisation represented by a single line (the future).

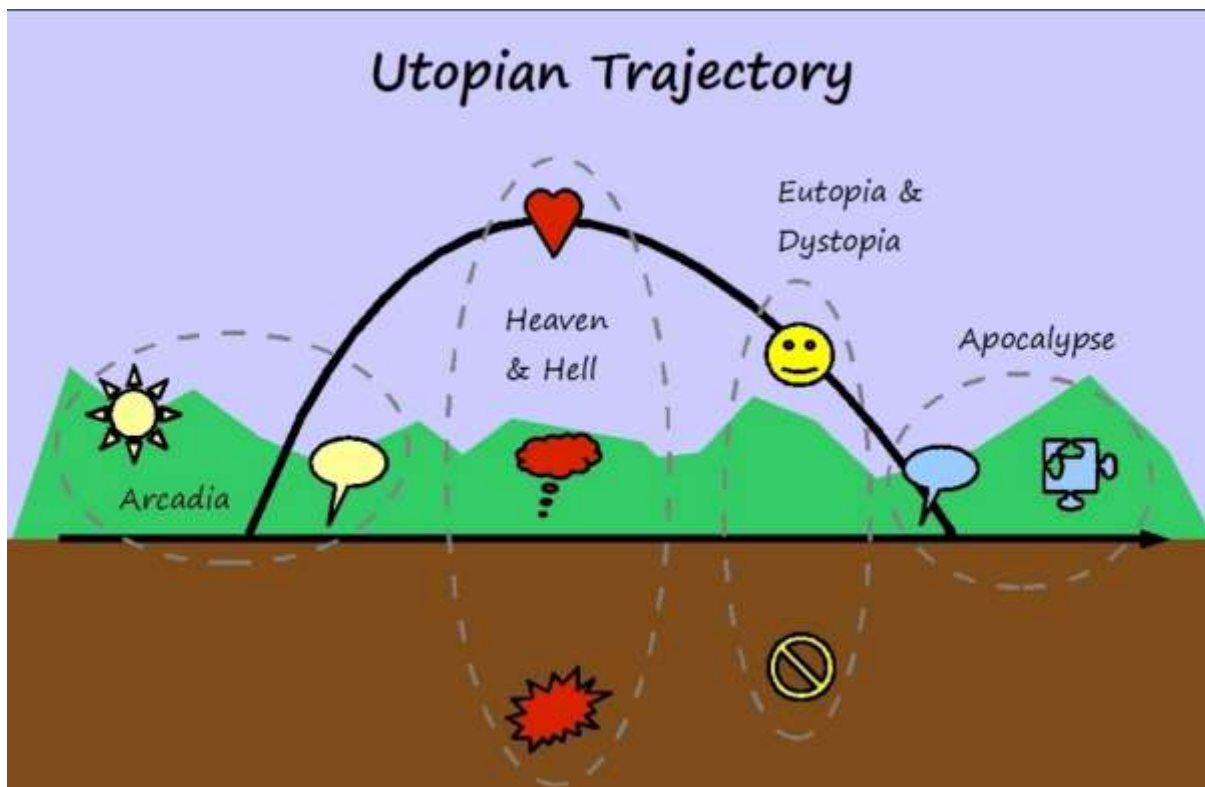


Figure 1: Utopian Trajectory – Past, Present, Future Envisioned and Unknown.

Let's place our utopian thinker/doer at the centre of the image, moving within the present (the only place they can *possibly* exist) between yellow and blue speech bubbles and producing the red 'thinking' bubble. These various chronological positions can be taken up, on earth. Our utopian is always stuck between Heaven and Hell, which are ex-chronic (outside of time) and cannot be entered by the living. Heaven and Hell are static (unchanging) dream spaces which, nevertheless, play a political and social role in shaping the actions of the earthbound. They can act as memory or fortune-telling ('heaven on earth' – past or present) or warning (damnation) but are 'everlasting' (eternal). The term 'paradise' (not included in the diagram) is more ambiguous as it can be used to refer to both ex-chronic and euchronic (good time) places. Indeed, up until the 17th century many Christians believed the Garden of Eden continued to exist *somewhere* on earth – a place where the risen dead would walk once again after the Final Judgement – but this 'paradise' was not 'heaven' (e.g., certain forms of Millennialism see ascendancy to heaven coming with the end of 'paradise' on earth).

The term Arcadian helps point to utopias of a 'Golden Age' which, it is claimed, were or, at least, 'could have been' earthbound. Numerous utopians, from Trump's 'Make America Great Again' through Zionism's 'right of return' to Islamist Caliphate builders make recreation the focus of their utopian desires. But even when HG Wells, in *The Time Machine* (1895), invokes a potential future 'descent' of humanity (into two *species* of weakly Eloi at the mercy of cannibalistic Morlocks), he drew on claims that people *used to be* of stronger character and the modern world is making them weak. It is a theme which echoes Jean-Jacque Rousseau on noble savages or Adam Ferguson on the pitfalls of increasing opulence amongst the working classes. This form of utopianism is anti-modern. The yellow 'speech bubble' sits inside the era of division (the present) since the Arcadian claims insight that their Golden Age has, in some sense, passed and now needs to be reclaimed or rebuilt.

At the other end of the trajectory, the Apocalyptic signals 'a' (more often 'the') time-to-come. Some versions of apocalypse flesh out details (the Bible's Revelation describes the 12 gates to heaven; Marx claims relationships will involve "from each according to his ability..."), but many do not and apocalypticism feature in the Trajectory as a jigsaw piece (something 'yet' to be worked out, including 'how to get there?'). Again, the blue 'speech bubble' sits inside the present, though the speaker's location can be before (rather than within) the time of tribulation. That is, tribulation can be 'now' (the time of the apocalyptic writer) or in the future. Given the wars of the 20th century, it could be argued that Marx lived before the time of 'tribulation' whilst his writing was 'the apocalypse' (literally meaning 'revelation'). Though it is as easy to argue Marx was at the centre of his tribulation in the mid-19th century.

Both the Eutopian and the Dystopian write/act in the present but, compared to the Arcadian and Apocalyptic, their utopic visions are 'at hand' (near future, predictable, with detailed focus) and, thus, more 'possible' regarding the actions to be taken and the specifics which can be offered. As Manuel and Manuel (1979, p.13) note, it is important for any effective utopia (I would add 'of any type') to be "inspiring" – a utopia must draw resources towards its enactment, but such demands run the gauntlet of failure in being either 'boring' (too near the present, and uninspiring) or 'fanciful' (falling into the realms of the 'impossible'). With Apocalypticism this can take the form of the 'date' of tribulation, rapture or judgement being too close to the present, so the time-to-come 'passes' and then needs 'updating' (e.g., the Catholic Apostolic Church and its 19th century disciples). For the Arcadian the new Golden Age is always 'just' out of reach – things are never quite 'how they used to be'. Meanwhile, the Eutopian is **required** to set themselves up with an opportunity to fail, and the Dystopian seeks such failure (since anything else would be their own tragedy). Significantly, all these positions can be taken up by the same utopian, simultaneously, with a heterotopic integration of past, present, future envisioned, and the unknown (see, for instance, Marge Piercy's, 1976, *Woman on the Edge of Time*).

Utopia: An Umbrella Term

The term 'utopia' started life with a highly specific meaning, as the comic title of Thomas More's (1515) dialectical novel. Famously, he coined *utopia* not just by combining two Greek words ('ou' meaning *not* and 'topos' for *place*) to produce 'no-place' or 'nowhere', but by corrupting his combination and switching the Greek 'ou' for the Latin 'u' to create the bastardised "transliteration" **utopia** (see Manuel & Manuel, 1979). Such a 'schoolboy' language error communicated More's joviality to his elite (classically trained) humanist readers. However, an additional pun was encountered in pronunciation, which implied the second meaning of 'good place', since the equally implied combination of 'eu' (Greek for 'good') and *topos*, would produce **eutopia**. Interestingly, the first Italian translation of *Utopia* referred directly to 'Eutopia' in its subtitle.

These multiple meanings also form the basis of contemporary misunderstandings when the term 'utopia' is deployed, conventionally speaking. In everyday use utopia is used to imply 'good place' and the distinction between eutopia (good place) and utopia (nowhere) is lost. From what I have outlined above, the significance and advantage of using **utopia** as an umbrella term needs serious consideration, where it can cover all forms of 'nowhere' (and 'no time' or 'time that never was' – that is, **uchronia**), including writing, practices, and methods (and how they are connected *heterotopically* to both real places and/or other 'nowheres'). 'Utopia' can be applied to the study of arcadias, apocalypcias, eutopias, and dystopias (and several other 'places' in between: autotopias, and eupsychias (see Manuel & Manuel, 1979, for their examples of usage). Doing so is important in highlighting the role of utopian **technique** and the political imagination, especially regarding our ability to act in the 'real' world (e.g., the relationship between arcadian or apocalyptic clarions, an impending or actual calamity, and hence the requirement to 'do' something – a process in which *socialised* 'picture' making plays its part).

Arcadia: Womb-like Home Coming

Having noted the position of 'the arcadian' above, a few additional points can be made to help identify the arcadian moment as it appears in other forms of utopia. Arcadia suggests the comfort of childhood memories, and at the social level Marx referred to ancient societies as the childhood of humanity. Trumpettes (followers of Trump's MAGA movement) are seeking comfort in their understanding of the USA in 1950 (or Hamilton's earlier tariff-based national economy). The term 'arcade' represents the wooded, shaded groves of the Greek (Peloponnesian) peninsula which city-dwelling Athenians envied for simplicity and lack of social complications. Such arcadian notions are not just about the 'past' but consistently feature in distant utopian 'presents' and proximal utopian 'futures'. More's Island of Utopia has a channel (river) leading to a womb (lake), whilst William Morris lauds the beauty of ancient artisanal labour in post-apocalyptic, post-capitalist London. Arcadias capture notions of 'coming home' and 'return', being ecologically radical but, nevertheless, typically conservative in their morality and ethics. But they are, no doubt, utopian in referring to past 'times' or 'natalities' which represent the imagined "best of all possible worlds". Whether as separate pictorial stories, or as heterotopic components within futurist eutopias / dystopias, the Arcadian moment reminds us of an anti-modern element (the dialectical contradictory progression that higher is also lower, that advancement is barbarian) within nearly all utopianism.

Is Dystopia such a Bad Place? Is Eutopia such a Good one?

One impact of adopting utopia as an umbrella term is that the utopia-dystopia **binary** (as a formulation) loses its 'sense'. Dystopias are utopias and not 'opposed' to them. Dystopian writers

are not anti-utopians but fully signed-up adherents to the utopian technique. Indeed, despite dystopia being taken to mean ‘bad place’ (in opposition to ‘good place – *eutopia*), the Greek prefix ‘dys’ designates simple ‘impairment’. A **dystopia** is, therefore, an **impaired** place – and often an impaired **eutopia**, so perhaps not all that bad! And, at least, ‘good’ for some.

This chimes with experience of eutopia/dystopia in literary utopias. The ‘impaired place’ in dystopian novels is not just ‘good for some’ but ‘most’ (e.g., the computer-simulations of the *Matrix* before the ‘fall’), otherwise it would not exist. So, who is sustaining it, promoting it, working for it, and why? A distinction must be made with **Hell** because dystopia is earthbound, ‘possible’, but (importantly) open to adaptation (it is *recoverable* or *redeemable* in historical lived time).

A pertinent example is Zamyatin’s OneState (from his 1924 novel *We*). Rulers of OneState decide society has reached a state of perfection (eutopia). So, everyone must undergo the great “operation” to remove their imagination (*fantasiectomy*). With this capacity removed, nothing will ever change, leaving OneState permanently flawless, no longer impaired (*dystopianised*) by the possibility and danger of social change (through imagination) nor contagion (from new ideas).

Of course, a paradox arises when the reader considers who is telling OneState’s tale! How do we ‘know’ about OneState? About this story? The narrator is post-apocalyptic in the sense of **knowing** what is happening (their ability to imagine things differently is being ‘wiped’), but future reflection may be calamitous to the eutopian state (because knowledge of a different prior world may bring about a revival of the imagination and, through this, bring the existing ‘good place’ into question, to the brink of ‘change’). Zamyatin’s novel takes the form of 40 ‘records’ (written by a dissident before their operation) which can reveal the truth to readers who have undergone the great ‘operation’. **‘We’** are those readers – our efforts, in reading, are plunging OneState back into a state of impairment! Is then dystopia, the impaired place *with* imagination, preferable to the eutopia expunged of idea making?

Indeed, the ‘bleak’ theorisations of Adorno (1966), Foucault (1977), or Deleuze (1992), involving culture, power and control **webs** beyond the reaches of ‘hope’, hold out the possibility of cajoling readers into ‘actions’ against these ‘dominant’ cultures, powers, and controls which then make the predicted future **impossible** by making it deniable and then denied! Such ‘doomsayers’ are often accused of lulling ‘workers’ into a state of hopelessness and apathy, but the bleakness of the landscapes on offer can have the opposite political effect regarding ‘action’. Meanwhile, anodyne and ubiquitous pictorial manifestos of great utilitarian ‘happiness’ may engender true apathy precisely because no ‘alternatives’ can be imagined – the graven image (which Adorno reminds us is proscribed in the Bible) is too dazzling, tempting, or comforting. Subsequently, those who offer ‘hope’ may need to carry a warning label.

Eutopia as Autotopia: Perpetuation in Time

OneState can also be used to sum up issues of automatic ordering (such as natural – including biological, or technical determination). The term **autotopia** refers to a place which does nothing except perpetuate itself (with both Heinrich, 2012, and Bonefeld, 2023, reminding us that Marx defines ‘capital’ as “self-valorising value”). Zamyatin rightly highlights where the imaginative (and their imagination) represent the corruption of such natural or technical ‘orders’. OneState becomes a *eutopia* but having achieved this condition it must now constantly reproduce itself ‘as is’. In this manner, OneState becomes an autotopia which lies at the ‘end of history’ – a concept widely connected with the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1806) and the American historian Francis Fukuyama (1992).

In his Interwar (1933-38) Paris lectures on Hegel, the Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1967) described the state of the 'end of history' by referring to a Japanese tea ceremony, that is, to a ritualistic daily performance, as a time of quiet and stillness. 'History', by comparison, is raucous! Meanwhile, Fukuyama summed up his 'end of history' as the universal domination of liberal capitalist culture, as a system which could not be surpassed. But do these visions confuse historical and clock time, that is, human with animal time?

An obvious counter-reference would be Marx's discussion of bees and the complex beauty of their hive construction. Bees don't need to imagine how to build a hive; they simply repeat the behaviours of prior generations. But humans are very different 'by nature' – we are imaginatively negating social (conversing) beings. Hence, when Marx comes to his overall conception of historical change, he sees the coming revolution as representing the end of 'prehistory' – a period in which humans have been unable to live fully as 'human'. That is, is this because we have been performing tea ceremonies? Contrastingly, Marx's post-apocalyptic world is one where historical actors produce an explosion in ideas – an unrelenting restlessness in social life, bursting open for the first time. This generates the image of a utopian flourishing as the 'end of prehistory', and not an autotopian 'still life'.

Comparatively, autotopias are regular, boring perpetuations 'in' time, representing a specific sort of time (monotonous, ahistorical, uniform: Bentham's panoptical time of endless value production). Autotopias expunge – as they must do – the imagination because it dangerously leads to either apocalyptic rupture (the Book of Revelation), historical/messianic awareness of a different life (Benjamin), event-time in the heterotopic fairground (the 'let's get away from it all' of Dickens), the meandering uncontrollable daydreams of Bloch, or sudden acts of spontaneity (Zamyatin), where the supposed 'worker' opts for a day in the pub or sunbathing (replacing one 'vision' of the future with another) – the government's 'graph' of projected productive output *shifts*, no matter how minutely.

Interestingly and revelatory is the extent to which literary, architectural, and artistic 'picture' utopias encapsulate boring, regular, and unchanging 'autotopic' worlds, but with eutopia-as-autotopia the 'good place' quickly turns sour. The utopian technique (a political and social event of interaction) is sacrificed to the momentary capture of what is 'good' for a conservative minority (often a minority of 'one' – the writer, the philosopher king).

Thus, the Autotopian (writer) necessarily takes up a God position. As Boethius (524) noted, God sits outside of lived, chronological time. A top a hill, God watches those in temporal existence trudge round the hill's perimeter. Such mortals cannot see around the bend in front of them, yet from above God sees everything that lies ahead. But are the lower mortals really marching round the bend or only doing so under 'instruction' from above? To what extent can they break free, and make their own path? Thus, one failure of any utopia is that it becomes an autotopia, precisely at a point when the utopians within it do not realise such a calamity has occurred. 'They' have lost their critical separation from their own graven image.

Apocalyptia: Spaces of revelation and post-revelation

A highly misused term in utopian conversation is **apocalypse**, Greek for 'revelation'. What is typically meant or implied is 'Armageddon', the Biblical battlefield where the Israelites were slaughtered – a place of destruction and tribulation. But as revelatory spaces, apocalyptia cover a much broader range of places, including those within the mind, along with the social, geographic and temporal position of the writer (the apocalyptian).

All utopians (as writers, seers, preachers) live **post-apocalyptically** in so far as something, for whatever reason, has already been 'revealed' to them. 'They' have visionary insight. Historically, this came about via divine intervention (the voice of God, angels from on-high, disturbing dreams) though latterly scientific discovery played a bigger role (via predictive extrapolations from patterns discovered in research). Apocalyptians (or post-apocalyptians) are driven to share some insight others cannot (yet) see, even when what they 'know' ('feel') remains vague and out-of-focus. The 'revelation' may be experienced via event, be purely speculative (based on faith in change), or arise from a position of knowledge/power, including access to **informatories**, such as libraries, education systems (including teachers), and exclusive forms of intelligence, which others lack access to or are not socialised within.

Going back to Boethius, living at the edge of time (the 'end of history') – and where is our 'present' if not at the edge of known time? – provides an alternate position (to that of God 'above') from which 'all of history' can be seen (Gunn, 1987) and evaluated. Standing at the end of 'history' presents the apocalyptic with an omnipotent 'place' from where all of 'time' (well, at least, the past understood within their culture's historical narrative) is viewable. For Hegel, Fukuyama or Marx, historical purpose (the meaning of social life) is 'revealed' through historical progression, though differences remain about whether their own post-apocalyptic situation is finalised (it is with Hegel and Fukuyama) or yet-to-be finalised (with Marx). Their visions might not seem utopian (or eutopian) in the conventional sense (no picture 'visions' are offered) but their **technique** clearly is – part of a uchronic technique developed, in part, from 18th century philosophical historians (Hutcheson, Turgot, Smith, Ferguson, and Condorcet).

Significantly, Marx highlights the *positivity* of apocalyptic thinking in so far as his 'end of prehistory' represents the beginning of history 'proper'. Marx understood all prior social forms (modes of production), and his own (capitalism), as representing 'pre-historic' arrangements with no guarantee that there would be any future move towards a full emancipation of humanity. And only at the latter point would humans become complete historic beings precisely because everyone would be able to take part in shaping their own future through mutual engagement in humanity's social future (a development involving Hegel's **mutual recognition**). In Arendt's (1958) terms, it would not simply be an elite who would participate in political 'action' (what she terms *viva activa*), with 'others' reduced to a condition of 'labour' (doing the monotonous autotopic effort to reproduce what is), but 'everyone' engaging in the making of the best of all possible worlds. To misquote one of Marx's most famous phrases, the 'apocalypse' is nothing to fear since everything is to be gained from it. And in this sense, Marx's application of utopian technique can be viewed as one exemplary performance (see below).

The Uses of Utopia: Utopians, the Present, and the 'beyond'

Defining 'utopia' as an umbrella term and pushing its meaning beyond the conventional 'ideal state' pictorial narratives ('eutopia') leads to questioning when and where utopian **technique** has been deployed in my 'broader manner'. The extent of Manuel and Manuel's (1979) coverage indicated how widespread utopian thought has been within the Western tradition, though they tended to focus on works (by their chosen authors) which were the most 'utopian'. For example, selecting Kant's essay 'Idea for a World History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View' over his 'philosophical' output (Manuel & Manuel, p.519).

But as a technique I would argue utopianism crops up in many divergent and surprising places. One example is the work of Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith claims we are **all** able to 'judge' and make judgements based on what he calls "indirect sympathy". Direct sympathy arises wherever we have experience of something (an event or action) that enthuses or

hurts us. By contrast, indirect sympathy refers to our capacity (as humans – and all humans are capable of this) to use our **imagination** to gain insight as to how it feels to be someone else, to experience something we have not (or ‘not yet’). We imagine ourselves in others’ shoes even when we have no direct experience of a feeling, emotion or sentiment. For Smith, “indirect sympathy” is “the **conception or imagination** of what we **might** gain or suffer **if we were** to act in society with such [imagined] associates” [my emphasis] (Smith, 1759, VII. iii. I. 3). Hence, did Thomas More ever imagine what it was like to be one of his Utopians?

But a ‘utopia’ of the pictorial kind (and even of the uchronic kind) does not need to be the focal point of our imaginative capacity. As a utopian **technique** it can be applied to what appear to be much more mundane affairs. For example, if someone is a private property owner (if ‘we’ are private property owners), how can a ‘judgement’ on the morality of private property ownership be obtained? An obvious answer would be to turn to someone who does not own any such property, like a homeless person or unemployed ‘vagrant’, but that does not deliver the kind of neutral position (to judge private property ownership) required, due to the recognitive structure of bourgeois society and ‘the Rights of Man’. As Locke notes in his *Treatise on Civil Government* (1690), every ‘man’ has property in his own body, that is, he owns his own ‘labour’ (power) and has the ‘right’ to sell this, but not – by grace of God – himself (i.e., sell himself into slavery). To this end, Marx indicates the **mutually recognitive** nature of exchange relations in *Capital* (1867, Ch. 2) – whatever is ‘exchanged’ must be done so on the basis that the parties are properly recognised ‘owners’ of the commodities being traded. Forced exchange is slavery and does not ‘fit’ the peculiar ‘ideal’ relationship of capital to labour power. Hence, in an ideal bourgeois society ‘all’ citizens are private property owners, even if they have ‘nothing’ except what’s inside their own skin (their labour power – ability to perform labour – is their only ‘good’).

It is within this ‘commercial society’ (bourgeois or capitalist context) that Smith sets the dilemma. If I have a dispute over the height of a hedge with my neighbour, one means of non-violent recourse would be to seek a ‘third party’ arbiter, who has no interest in the property in question. By such means private property disputes are settled in bourgeois society. However, if it turns out that the third party ‘judge’ happens to be my first cousin, my neighbour will call ‘foul’ – the situation is corrupted since the ‘judge’ is deemed to have an ‘interest’.

However, this is **not** the same situation as asking (as many ‘communist’ utopians have) after the benefits (or costs) of private property **per se**! Even if we do find a true third party to a neighbourly dispute, the ‘judge’, in a bourgeois society, will be a private property owner ‘in general’ – they will have their own private property to look after and, hence, will officiate on the basis that private property is a ‘good thing’. The deeper question becomes, how can anyone **in** bourgeois society judge whether private property ownership **per se** is a social good in a (commercial) society where everyone experiences life as such an ‘owner’? Even if someone is ‘homeless’ in such a society (appears to own ‘nothing’) they (a) still hold (**possess**) abstract ‘rights’ to property (their labour power / body) and (b) their experience of life is steeped in property-owning relationships (e.g., they **strive** to become an owner). Following Gunn (2011), the implication is that any unbiased judge of the *per se* condition of private property (Smith’s ‘impartial spectator’) must sit in **another world**, one where **they** are **not** a private owner. But who experiences life *outside* private property other than one of More’s (or Plato’s) Utopian communists?

Thus, one internal (immanent) critique of private property (from within bourgeois society) can come from the **imagination** – from a ‘place’ (a no-where) in which the subject has the capacity to **sympathise indirectly**. And such sympathising can, literally, come from ‘no-where’. This outlook differs from the conventional Marxist (historicist) position that (somehow) ‘workers’ hold a privileged or unique position (perspective) from where they can criticise the bourgeoisie *externally*,

as if they have no 'interest' in existing conditions of existence (see Gunn, 1987) – the “nothing to lose” position overlooks the fact that workers do have something to lose, and this is what binds them to wage slavery. Furthermore, this **failed** privileging rests on **force** of circumstances rather than a deliberate **desire** for something new, something imagined, which arises from indirect sympathy with either situations ‘yet to be’ experienced or past / distant situations that have been ‘forgotten’. In classic **prefigurative** terms, can emancipation ever arise out of *enforced* action – a shove rather than a freely-initiated step? Even when cajoled into action by the pessimism of dystopia, emancipatory political action still entails the ‘pull’ of a new world generated from within – consequently, is there something imaginable worth living for?

Is capitalism a utopia worth living for?

Of pertinence, in considering such uses of utopianism (regarding social judgement), is the construction of Marx’s argument in *Capital* (Vol. 1): a point to which Bonefeld’s (2023) critical theory of economic compulsion draws attention (alongside the work of Heinrich’s 2021 detailed commentary). What Marx presents in Sections 1 and 2 (Ch. 1-6) of *Capital* is nothing short of a most amazing **utopian landscape**. Just as Zamyatin took the mathematical calculus of his industrial world and extrapolated this to its logical ends (to a world where people became Numbers, and sexual relationships were decided by computerised assignment), Marx takes ‘the Rights of Man’ and pushes these to their logical utopian ends – a realm of purified relations of nothing but individual equality. The marketplace of commodity exchange is expunged of racism, xenophobia, sexism and misogyny. There are no Lords nor Bishops, or other forms of extra-economic domination, nor of ‘office’ holders garnering resources via their charisma. Every commodity owner stands equal to (equivalent with) every other commodity owner. Indeed, their interrelation takes the form of the ‘things’ (commodities) that ‘objectively’ represent their owners, such that all human characteristic differences (height, age, gender, language, ethnicity, kin) have been removed, excepting the speed at which anyone, and everyone, must make ‘things’ (commodities, including services) to survive.

This is a **utopia** because when Marx wrote *Capital* (the 1860s) no-one had ever experienced a world in which social characteristics did not make a difference. Marx presents readers with a ‘colour-blind’ world at the height of the American Civil War, when ‘colour’ meant everything. Nevertheless, and weirdly, Marx’s account can be taken as an accurate representation of ‘reality’; of the incessant social driver of ‘cost price’ and the desire to preserve one’s ‘capital’ (retain its value), come what may. As Bonefeld notes, Marx outlines the ‘perfect’ landscape of bourgeois exchange relations: there is no ‘cheating’ and ‘defrauding’, each *mutually recognises* (Ch. 2) the private property of others (no theft nor plunder), and workers are paid ‘fairly’ – the true equivalent value of what their commodity (labour power) is worth. Workers do not exist on wages below their true cost of reproduction. It is a dream world, too good to be true; policemen, judges, lawyers, and social workers can retire. And yet, the outcome of all this idyllic removal of oppression is still **exploitation**. Even under such ‘ideal conditions’, capitalism ends in (must end in) the purchase of one party by another (*the Other*), with both entering the factory: one “smug” in the knowledge he will become wealthier, and the other looking forward to nothing but “a good tanning” (Marx, 1867, Ch. 6). The accumulation of capital would be rendered impossible without this non-equivalent exchange between equivalents.

In this manner, Marx uses the conception of an **ideal world** (a level of abstraction) which no-one had ever experienced but, nevertheless, an ideal everyone in his society *understood* as a **social goal** – their equalisation in and by the market. The world of bourgeois ‘Rights’ is **utopic**, and it is essential that ‘we’ see this world (our ‘reality’) as an imaginary social construct. Like Zamyatin, Marx pushes the ‘present’ towards its dystopian horizon, though such negation never pushes out the possibility of its **alternate** (of taking the ‘best’ in the present, to see where that leads). Indeed, this is what many

capitalist ‘techno-utopians’ do, which merely emphasises the *openness* of the *utopian technique* and highlights the class-divided foundations of existing society. Utopianism critically depends upon which **class perspective** forms the utopian’s starting point, and the resultant utopias will vary in outlook, shading, orientation to the coming light, rapidity of movement, engagement with the Other, moral atmosphere, etc. It is a language and technique open to all.

Conclusion

Famously, Marx describes capitalism as being pregnant with its replacement, which indicates that the commune exists in the here and now, and in more than the imagination. He notes the *co-operative* nature of capitalist work – the bringing together of humans in collective shared endeavour, unlike any previous mode of production. As such, utopia, as the “best of all possible worlds”, is not a condition of romance nor picturing far away hills. Rather, it is an ongoing activity which takes numerous class (or modal) forms (i.e., competing *potential* modes of production, each vying to be the future by offering a vision of what that future could be). We might consider our ‘existing’ capitalist society as the real present, but it has never escaped the requirement to offer its *potentiality* (as utopia). We are in a fight. Maintaining the status quo entails utopian imagination, and so does bursting this ‘status quo’ asunder.

Hence, opening up utopic conversation to as many as possible, to ‘all’, is central to “class struggles” (“Hitherto, history is the history of class struggles”: Marx and Engels, 1872). Otherwise, how are ‘We’ (to use Zamyatin’s title) to know the extent of which modes of production (ways of becoming, more than being) might be possible? And if anti-utopianism represents fear of utopia, it is necessary to name and define (give language to) what is being feared, through discourse on, and within, utopianism. Consequently, responsibility falls on ‘us’ pro-utopians to question and qualify the language of utopia (such as highlighting its unhelpful or limiting fixations, e.g., the didactic blue-print or picture utopia, the opposition of utopia and dystopia, etc.) rather than leaving it to the ‘Others’.

[Started 8th May 2024; this version 4th June 2026]

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