Trivium

Revue franco-allemande de sciences humaines et sociales - Deutsch-französische Zeitschrift für Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften

22* | 2016

Le national-socialisme et la société allemande

Utopique et impensable. A propos d'un article de Hans Mommsen publié en 1983

Utopisch und Udenkbar. Zu einem Aufsatz Hans Mommsens aus dem Jahr 1983

Jane Caplan

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/trivium/5405>

ISSN: 1963-1820

Publisher

Les éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'Homme

Electronic reference

Jane Caplan, « Utopique et impensable. A propos d'un article de Hans Mommsen publié en 1983 », *Trivium* [En ligne], 22* | 2016, mis en ligne le 09 décembre 2016, consulté le 08 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/trivium/5405>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2020.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Lors du colloque « Streiten um der Verantwortung willen », organisé les 18 et 19 novembre 2016 à Bochum en souvenir de Hans Mommsen, Jane Caplan, professeur émérite d'histoire au St Antony's College, University of Oxford, s'est interrogée sur la difficulté qu'a éprouvée Hans Mommsen d'aller au-delà de l'analyse du processus qui a mené à la « solution finale », de dépasser l'année 1942 et de se plonger en tant qu'historien dans ce qui a été la réalité des camps d'extermination. Le point de départ de la réflexion de Jane Caplan est un problème de traduction que le titre même de l'essai de Mommsen a posé aux traducteurs anglais. Lors de la traduction du texte allemand en français, « La réalisation de l'utopique : la 'solution finale de la question juive' sous le Troisième Reich », republié dans ce numéro de *Trivium*, cette difficulté ne s'est pas posée dans les mêmes termes. Le commentaire de Jane Caplan, cependant, ne se limite pas aux aspects de traduction mais aborde une question fondamentale de l'écriture de l'histoire et éclaire d'une façon particulière le travail de Hans Mommsen. Nous remercions Mme Jane Caplan pour l'aimable autorisation de publier ici sa contribution au colloque de Bochum.

I.

- 1 In 1983, Hans Mommsen published an essay on the genocide of the Jews in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, in an issue devoted to 'the history of Jews in Germany between

assimilation and persecution'.¹ Three years later, an expanded version of the essay was issued in English translation, in a collection published by the German Historical Institute in London.²

- 2 We all know the argument of this essay and its place in the historiography, so I will not summarize it. What I want to talk about is the status of the essay *as a text*: specifically, how the German and English versions offer some semantic discordances or gaps through which we can intrude interpretation. I want to suggest that the accidents of translation can be mobilized into productive dialogue.
- 3 The original German title of Mommsen's essay was 'Die Realisierung des Utopischen'. However, in the course of its publication in English, this came to be translated as 'The Realisation of the Unthinkable' – in German this would be 'des Undenkbaren'. The translators of the essay have told me that they originally wanted to use the literal translation, 'Utopian'. But the editors decided that this word carried more positive connotations in English than in German, so that a direct translation would be inappropriate.³
- 4 I am not entirely persuaded by the translators' explanation. For one thing, the English text itself finds it impossible to avoid the word 'utopian'. In the very first paragraph, we find a phrase – 'the unimaginable utopian dream [of extermination]' – which doesn't even appear in the German original.⁴ I will come back to this.

II.

- 5 Mommsen does not use the word 'undenkbar' in his essay, but I think this unwritten word nevertheless shadows his writing. 'Unthinkable' is precisely what 'Utopian' is *not*. Utopia is a literary experiment in what *can* be thought, even if it cannot be realised. Hence the name Thomas More gave to his imagined society: Utopia, meaning 'nowhere'. (It is worth remembering, incidentally, that More's Utopia was an artificial island excavated by the forced labour of slaves and soldiers.) In his study of 17th-century English utopian literature, J. C. Davis calls utopian fictions 'curious essays in the rejection of social reality'.⁵ This form of words is echoed in Mommsen's comment on Hitler's reluctance 'die ideologische Scheinwelt, in der er lebte, mit der politischen und sozialen Realität zu konfrontieren'.⁶ Mommsen took on the task of disclosing the historical relationship between what could be *both* thought *and*, horrifyingly, realised.
- 6 There is a tension here. Utopian fictions propose an ideal, harmonious society that is for these very reasons impossible, unrealisable. Indeed, the fictions of utopia should be read not as precise prefigurations of the future, but as critiques of the actually existing state of social relations. Yet they may also be invocations of the possibility of alternative realities: what Ernst Bloch called 'the ontology of not-yet being'.⁷ Marx and Engels rejected contemporary efforts to practice utopianism, as the negation of history by reason. That was also the position of Karl Popper, the reasonable critic of utopianism as a misguided form of rationality.⁸ What is ideal in the thinkable is, irrespective of its vision of social harmony, likely to become something monstrous in the attempt to realise it.⁹ If the English retain a more benign view of what utopian means, it is perhaps not only because of our tradition of utopian fictions, but also because we have not lived through the 20th-century attempts to make this impossible

translation of the ideal into the real at the level of entire societies: attempts in which horror is born.¹⁰

III.

- 7 I'd now like to return to the phrase I quoted at the beginning, from the English version of Mommsen's essay: 'the unimaginable utopian dream [of extermination]'. This phrase does not occur in the German original, as I have said, but I assume Mommsen approved this text, and I think it points to the unease at the heart of interpretations of the Final Solution/Holocaust which his text as a whole discloses. Its self-contradictory phrasing – a dream which is also unimaginable – is a pointer to the challenge facing the historian. Mommsen asked how, historically, it was possible to arrive at that previously unthought non-existent. How did something become thinkable, and thereby actionable? Or, to expand this to the full process, what was the path from non-existence, to existence in thought, and then to existence/enactment in the real? In his answer, Mommsen might be seen as echoing, in perverse form, Ernst Bloch's view that utopia is not a telos, but the process of getting there.
- 8 Into this process Mommsen inserts a gap between thinking and realisation which, paradoxically, is the foundation of his interpretation. It was not Hitler himself who made the transition between thought and its enactment. Rather, Hitler used his metaphorical, utopian vision to protect himself against the contradictions of the real world, in an act of repression which enabled the genocide without commanding it. The return of this repression in the real world was the more prosaic ambition of Himmler and the SS to accomplish the millennium in real time.¹¹
- 9 The historian also faces the challenge that depicting the genocide exceeds, as Mommsen wrote, the 'Vorstellungs- und Darstellungskraft der Historiker'.¹² One can read the language of the English essay as a doubling of this problem of representation: an event that was unthinkable/unimaginable at the time (until it was imagined and realised), and one that is unimaginable to the historian (until he confronts its realisation on the page). I think this was a hurdle that Mommsen found it hard to overcome. Once his narrative has reached the year 1942, the further discussion becomes patchy and abbreviated, with what is, to me, an unintegrated section on labour camps. Fluency does not return until he embarks on his conclusion.¹³
- 10 You could say this is simply because the story Mommsen wanted to tell ended in fact in 1942, with the inception of something he was prepared to describe as 'the Final Solution' or genocide. But I wonder whether it is also the case that Mommsen could not bring himself to translate onto the page what he accepted was, finally, the realisation of the Nazis' utopian project in history?¹⁴ It is as if he could focus with great clarity on process, as he did so brilliantly in so much of his work on Nazi Germany, but not so keenly on the outcome it led to. In this text, Auschwitz finally remains both 'unthinkable' and 'nowhere'.

NOTES

1. 'Die Realisierung des Utopischen', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9 (1983), 381-420.
 2. Hans Mommsen, 'The Realization of the Unthinkable: The "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" in the Third Reich', in Gerhard Hirschfeld, ed., *The Policies of Genocide. Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (London 1986), 93-144. Thanks to Gerhard Hirschfeld and Alan Kramer for information on their translation, which is also credited to Louise Willmot.
 3. How the translators actually hit on the word 'unthinkable' I don't know. Judging by library catalogues, it's a word which appears to be more common in English than is its German equivalent.
 4. *Policies of Genocide*, 97.
 5. J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society* (Cambridge 1981), 12.
 6. 'Realisierung des Utopischen', 397.
 7. P. Thompson and S. Zizek, eds., *The Privatization of Hope. Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia* (Durham NC, 2013), Introduction.
 8. Karl Popper, 'Utopia and Violence' (1963), reprinted in *World Affairs* 1986, 149/1, 3-9.
 9. Gregory Claeys (among others) disputes perfection or impossibility as the criteria of utopia: 'Utopia...is not the realm of the impossible...[it] explores the space between the possible and the impossible'. For Claeys, utopia, despite its prefix, is not 'nowhere' but always 'somewhere'; although I would argue that utopia is imagined as a place which is not the actual historical context of its projection; Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia. The History of an Idea* (London 2011), 15.
 10. 'Dystopia' in its original coinage doesn't refer to a realised but negative utopia, but to a vision that itself is the reverse of ideal. The word was coined by J. S. Mill in a parliamentary speech in March 1868 (House of Commons Hansard, 12 March 1868) on Tory government plans for the Church of Ireland: 'It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.' ('Cacotopia' was the term in use before this, perhaps from Bentham.)
 11. 'Realisierung des Utopischen', 398-9.
 12. *Ibid.*, 1.
 13. 'Realization of the Unthinkable', 124-6; followed by concluding summary, 126-9.
 14. I have to admit here that I share something of this resistance. I am unable to remember, however many times I have read this, the precise layout and chronology of the Auschwitz/Birkenau extermination complex: it's as if my mind simply refuses to absorb this knowledge.
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Schlüsselwörter: Holocaust, Drittes Reich, Übersetzung

Mots-clés: Holocaust, Troisième Reich, translation

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Jane Caplan est professeur émérite d'histoire au St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Pour plus d'informations, voir la notice suivante.