

Miguel Abensour: Emancipation through Utopia

By Nicolas Poirier

Miguel Abensour profoundly renewed thinking about democracy. His political philosophy paid close attention to the desire for emancipation and was based on an original conception of utopia breaking with the mythology of the ‘ideal city’ or of a ‘good society’.

Looking back over Miguel Abensour’s work, one is immediately struck by the wide range of topics and authors on which he focused. However, in order to fully grasp the wealth of his contributions, it is important to take into account the overall framework underpinning his thinking. From his reflections on the link between melancholia and revolution in Auguste Blanqui and Walter Benjamin’s work to his examination of Emmanuel Levinas’ thinking, particularly in terms of the relationship between the ethical and the political, Miguel Abensour always strove to engage with the possibility of emancipation by giving full weight to the notion of utopia; utopia understood not as the early stages of a revolutionary project proper, but instead as something always linked with democracy, as the ultimate form of politics itself. It is in this context that, as humans, we seek to free ourselves from domination, by opening up spaces in the present where we can imagine something different and by paving the way for breaking with the curse that power represents when it is exercised by one individual over another rather than when it derives from collective action.

Miguel Abensour remained true to the inquiry underpinning his doctoral thesis in the 1970s (supervised by Gilles Deleuze) on the relationship between Marx and utopia. Unlike the somewhat fossilised Marxism prevalent at the time, M. Abensour defended the notion that Marx’s thinking contained fundamental utopian components.¹ M. Abensour went on to become Professor of Political Science at the universities of Dijon, Reims, and Paris 7, edited a

¹ See Miguel Abensour, *Pour une philosophie politique critique* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2009), p. 44.

collection for Payot publishing house, and remained closely tied to the Collège international de Philosophie, of which he was president in the mid 1980s. Throughout this trajectory, he continued to explore the ‘dark continent’ of utopia, all too often depicted by liberal right-thinking as the matrix for a lethal form of politics or presented in caricatured terms by dogmatic Marxism as a naïve dream of a better society lacking the means to actually become reality.

Towards a critique of politics

In order to fully grasp the multiple facets of such a singular body of thought as that developed by M. Abensour, then this is where we need to begin: building out from this rediscovery of the utopian aspects that constantly inform societies’ sometimes vague desire for change, but also from an approach to bodies of thought that looks to their novelty, even when they are not framed as revolutionary in and of themselves. It is important to make a distinction between the critical side to M. Abensour’s work, looking forward towards something as yet non-existent, and its interpretative side, looking back over the utopian frameworks that have made their mark on history and that conveyed the promise of other worlds. These two dimensions are not, however, mutually exclusive: they overlap at various points and in various places. In this respect, the collection ‘*Critique de la politique*’ [Critique of Politics] for which M. Abensour was editor, first for Payot and then, from 2016, for Klincksieck, perfectly embodies this intent to never separate critical thinking from patient rereading, in which bodies of thought are interpreted according to their power of invention, far beyond the confines of narrowly academic and erudite analysis. With the expression, ‘critique of politics’, M. Abensour was referring to a group of thinkers whose work was informed by a shared desire for freedom, as well as by practices and events demonstrating that human beings can find the means to escape servitude within themselves. According to the collection’s statement of intent, this critical approach meant taking a very clearly determined point of view: thinking and writing about politics from the perspective of the dominated.² This is why, by refusing to base its radical democratic demands on supposedly indisputable philosophical grounds, this critique of politics was expressed in the here and now, on the side of ‘those at the bottom’ to use M. Abensour’s words.³ This marked a clear break with the overarching perspectives that had all too often served to justify the drift of politics towards authoritarianism, not to say totalitarianism, imposed from above upon the fundamentally rebellious masses.

In this regard, what authors as varied as Maximilien Rubel, Claude Lefort, Theodor W. Adorno, Pierre Clastres, Hannah Arendt, William Morris, and Walter Benjamin have in

² See *ibid.*, p. 49.

³ *Ibid.*

common (and M. Abensour draws on all of them in his thinking) is a certain libertarian tendency, a propensity to think the political in terms of the greater masses for whom the exception, ultimately, proves to be the rule.⁴ A recurrent question informed M. Abensour's work overall: 'why does the dominated majority not revolt?' And the authors he read, interpreted, and even published all shed light on this paradox, which, according to him, was first formulated with brio by La Boétie.⁵ In this regard, M. Abensour was an editor for whom publishing was a form of critical thinking in its own right. The 'Critique de la politique' collection can be viewed as a space not so much where the thinking of a 'master' or figurehead took shape, targeting an audience eager to agree, but rather where utopian reflections explored social and political realities, through original research by thinkers concerned with outlining a form of politics dispensing with the dividing line between those destined to rule and those doomed to obey.

What utopia is not

The real originality of M. Abensour's reflection on utopia lies in the fact that it is always connected to a broader examination of the forms that democracy, in its authentic sense, should take: from the outset, thinking about utopia means considering the possibility of a politics expressed through the simple rejection of any domination, i.e. the division between those with the right to govern and the others. When, unlike M. Abensour, one refuses to consider democracy and utopia together,⁶ the fundamental specificity of both is lost, paving the way for the notion that utopia must always inevitably drift into totalitarianism.

The argument running through many of the texts devoted to this topic by M. Abensour consisted in pointing to two common misinterpretations of the issue. He contended that utopia is often viewed as the matrix for a conception of a future society that focuses on what should come to be – the 'ideal city' – without taking into consideration the banal reality of what actually *is*. In this sense, utopia is doomed to come up against two stumbling blocks. The first is that of impotence. Because it refers to an ideal society that is simply the fruit of the human imagination, utopia is incapable of providing the means for any encounter between the ideal and reality. Engels, in particular, provided a systematic critique of utopia that ran along these lines, defending the idea that, on a theoretical level, 'scientific socialism' goes further than 'utopian socialism' and that in order to be efficient, revolutionary praxis must turn to the former.⁷ However, this opposition between science and utopia was never present

⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See Miguel Abensour, *Pour une philosophie politique critique, op. cit.*, p. 349

⁷ See Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970).

in Marx's work, as M. Abensour himself pointed out.⁸ This, though, is not the only criticism levied against utopia. A second commonplace argument suggests utopia is the matrix for totalitarianism. From this perspective, utopia is at its most dangerous when, rather than remaining a harmless dream lacking in substance, it sets about trying to implement the ideal of a just society. According to this argument, trying to give utopia material form means conceiving of social reality as something that can be shaped according to the intent of those effecting reform. This would therefore mean imposing a schematic ideal on society and that society would have to conform to this ideal, with all its inevitable faults, with the harmful result that coercive policies would be used to eliminate any social forces resisting this attempt. In this scenario, it is necessary to prevent both democracy and legitimate desires for freedom from being corrupted by the pipedream of a utopia that is in fact lethal. Once in power, the utopian ideal, by claiming to change society without taking its actual reality into account (i.e. the fact it is not infinitely malleable) inevitably leads to a form of politics that forces people as they are to fit into a mould defining how they should be.⁹

M. Abensour defended the opposite idea, namely that there is no intrinsic link between utopia and totalitarianism: in his view, totalitarian domination, which has its origins in Bolshevism, was built on repressing the utopian tendencies that sparked off the Russian Revolution and made it possible to create authentically democratic bodies such as the workers' councils.¹⁰ For him, this misinterpretation came from equating utopia with the myth of an ideal society miraculously at peace due to the silencing of dissent, whereas, on the contrary, it was the totalitarian project of a fully integrated society that fuelled this lethal fantasy.¹¹ M. Abensour's key contribution to the debate surrounding utopia was to break with this mythology of the 'good society' allegedly capable of transcending social conflict but which runs the risk of endangering utopia precisely when it appears evident to itself. And there is indeed a threat here: 20th century history is replete with examples of what can happen when a revolutionary plan for transforming society – fuelled by a desire to entirely rebuild humanity and rethink its essential constituents – is corrupted. To take just one, extremely central, example: whereas at the beginning of the 20th century communism represented the project of a society freed from poverty and exploitation, by the end, it had taken on the shape of alienation, as if proving that any desire for radical emancipation was inevitably liable to be reversed and have the opposite result, namely tyranny. Therefore, and this argument was central in Miguel Abensour's thinking, the history of revolutions ultimately ended up being linked with the history of oppression, thanks in particular to historian François Furet, and the

⁸ See Miguel Abensour, *Utopiques I*, 2000 and 2011, reed. (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2013), pp. 47-48 and 63-90; *Utopiques II*, 2010, reed. (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2013), pp. 15-16. Here, Abensour's thinking resembles that of Maximilien Rubel who also contributed to revealing 'another' Marx, poles apart from Altusser's 'theoretical anti-humanism'; see *Marx critique du marxisme* (Paris: Payot, 1974; reed. Petite Bibliothèque Payot/Critique de la politique, 2000), p. 413-424.

⁹ At any rate this is the risk of utopia according to Yolène Dilas-Rocherieu in *L'utopie ou la mémoire du futur* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2000), p. 391-394.

¹⁰ See Miguel Abensour, *Pour une philosophie politique critique*, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

¹¹ See *ibid.*

very idea of revolution was framed as only conceivable from within the category of totalitarianism.

The 1989 turning point, marked by the fall of Soviet communism, resulted in the victory of liberal democracy, consigning to the ash heap of history not only the tyrants whose disastrous policies completely distorted the project of an emancipated society but also all those who had participated in the various revolutionary experiences which collapsed in bloodshed (from the June days in Paris in 1848 to the 1919 Spartacist uprising or the Paris Commune). To frame this issue in the terms used by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer regarding the Enlightenment, an endeavour of critical reflexivity, confronting utopia with its own blind spots and lethal excesses, is the only way to ward off the ever-present risk of an emancipatory project becoming its exact opposite.¹²

The new utopian spirit

M. Abensour's work on this constellation of authors (William Morris, Pierre Leroux, Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch, Emmanuel Levinas), but also on moments that he described using the expression a 'new utopian spirit', is very important from this perspective. It shed new light on a central theme in political thought, entirely redefining the problem and providing the tools to reframe it in its full complexity, far from any of the clichés mentioned above. In this regard, it should be noted that, in some ways, M. Abensour took up Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach, which had already shown that the moment of difference was constitutive of the very principle of identity, thus delegitimising all efforts to coincide with oneself through a totalising attempt to absorb the outside world and alterity.¹³ People drawn together in a given community that contributes to creating their identity should not close in on themselves in an endeavour to protect themselves from everything that might enter that community and change it. From this point of view, just like individuals, societies should never give in to the fantasy that they have attained a perfect form that need only be reproduced. For M. Abensour, this new utopian spirit was characterised by the marked intention to renounce myths of the perfect society, cleansed of the threatening presence of history and its irrevocable contingency. According to him, this was expressed by rejecting notions of a promised land and a return to an ancestral home, associated with a renewed conception of utopia wherein separation is accepted on its own terms; this is a far cry from the ideal of an intensely close community in which people renounce their uniqueness in order to become part of a whole that necessarily negates their singularity.¹⁴

¹² See *ibid.*, p. 352-353.

¹³ See Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 43-45.

¹⁴ See Miguel Abensour, *Pour une philosophie politique critique, op. cit.*, p. 353.

While this new spirit of utopia is resolutely focused on the future in a perpetually renewed search for a possible ‘elsewhere’, this occurs within a constitutive relationship to the present, endlessly shaped by the longing for something else. If one begins by acknowledging that it is in the here and now that humans must change their lives, then it is understandable that utopia and democracy should be conceived together, for it is at the heart of the present that creation seeks to emerge, the moment of creative indeterminacy breaking out of a causally determined temporal process. According to M. Abensour, the fact that a completely just society will never exist did not mean that utopia was necessarily a failure, nor that such a notion must be vain, absurd, or even dangerous; on the contrary, this is what made it not only possible and desirable, but also necessary. That human beings are incapable of coinciding with themselves and that society cannot close in on itself and become perfect, were, in his view, non-issues. The future is not the end point of a historical process offering redemption for the suffering of the present, anymore than utopia can provide the key to an unparalleled social state defined by overall peace and an end to conflict, which M. Abensour, in Claude Lefort’s wake, considered to be the primary dimension of human freedom.¹⁵

The gap between what humans seek to be and what they actually are – and for M. Abensour, this distance was precisely what utopia signified – should not be understood as a deficiency, in the sense of a failing at the heart of human beings meaning that they are not immediately manifest but only become so in the future, at the end of a process. On the contrary, or at least if we follow Hannah Arendt’s thinking (among M. Abensour’s key references), this means that actions do not have a beginning and an end that can be distinguished once and for all. Meaning is not given to action by moving past the present towards a future posited as the ultimate end, but instead by causing a breach in time and creating a new beginning allowing for creativity and the unpredictable.¹⁶ It is in this sense that utopia can be seen as something that takes place alongside and within the present, unlike the perverse project of creating a new form of humanity which implies rejecting everything in the imperfect present slowing down the march of history towards perfect happiness.

Towards a critical-utopian political philosophy

M. Abensour’s thinking about utopia, which is the thread that ties together all his work, was marked by a very clear concern with never losing sight of the historical conditions making the birth of this novel utopian spirit not only possible but also thinkable. As we have seen, this new imagination breaks with messianic politics oriented towards a future of redemption. From this perspective, the present structured by the conflict specific to

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 20 to 26, especially p. 23.

¹⁶ On this point, see Étienne Tassin, *Le trésor perdu. Hannah Arendt, l’intelligence de l’action politique* (Paris: Payot&Rivages, ‘Critique de la politique’, 1999), p. 301-302. Étienne Tassin’s original and novel reading of Arendt’s work is partly influenced by Miguel Abensour.

democratic life is essential to these innovative forms of utopia, driven by an unfaltering demand to bring about change in the here and now and the concomitant refusal to sacrifice the present in the name of a brighter future. In this sense, it is more political philosophy (which originates with Plato) that stands out through its desire to impose its own norms, according to an a priori notion of the 'common good',¹⁷ on a social reality that is fundamentally resistant to being ordered in this way. Philosopher Karl Popper was the first to express this idea, which, from his perspective, calls into question a form of constructivism that claims to found a new social body and entirely new institutions upon simple notions of what is Good and what is Just. M. Abensour claimed something quite different though and, unlike K. Popper, did not reject the idea of utopia. By following the same interpretive line he took regarding Hannah Arendt, M. Abensour believed that the main criticisms levied against utopia (it refuses to take into account the world as it is, it focuses unilaterally on principles to the detriment of people's lived political experience) could in fact be turned against political philosophy as a whole, which is marked by the Platonic origins from which, in his view, it had never fully managed to break away.

The main failing that mars philosophy's attempts to think through the political – by providing both a means to take its measure and criteria to lend it legitimacy – consists in its considerable difficulty in conceiving of political action as anything other than a mode of theory, or, to put it differently, as an activity that should be regulated according to external norms.¹⁸ Here, M. Abensour fell in line with Hannah Arendt but also Cornelius Castoriadis or even Jean-François Lyotard in their shared critique of Platonic political ontology:¹⁹ Plato's thinking leads to the political being understood not in and of itself as an area of human affairs with its own substance and dignity but rather as a function of philosophy, of which it is simply a subordinate field. And, to take up M. Abensour's reading of Arendt, this is what then allows the problems of the city-state to be envisaged in terms of political philosophy.²⁰

However, it would be a mistake to think that M. Abensour rejected political philosophy on principle because it was supposedly crippled by unwieldy metaphysical postulates unsuited to respecting the plurality that is a prerequisite for any political existence for humans. He sought to draw on everything philosophy can bring to the table when it comes to broaching the essential features of the political; however, he did so without linking the political to any underlying ontological structure and viewing it as nothing but a derivative expression of that structure. Instead, he approached it in terms of its own phenomenology, free from the temptation of imposing an overarching unity on human multiplicity.²¹ This desire to tie together thought and experience in a relationship intrinsically linked to plurality places M. Abensour's brand of political philosophy at equal distance from, on the one hand,

¹⁷ See Miguel Abensour, *Pour une philosophie politique critique*, op. cit., p. 35.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 31-33.

¹⁹ See Cornelius Castoriadis, 'La pensée politique', *Ce qui fait la Grèce. 1* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), especially p. 274, 286-288 and p. 305-310.

²⁰ See Miguel Abensour, *Hannah Arendt contre la philosophie politique ?* (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2006), p. 84-85.

²¹ See Miguel Abensour, *Pour une philosophie politique critique*, op. cit., p. 32-33.

those who hoped to re-establish political philosophy on the grounds of the specificity of its inquiry in the face of sociological reductionism and, on the other, those who, conversely, contested this return to political philosophy. For the former, it was a fallacy to only examine the political within the framework of a science positing its categories (the State, power, the law, justice) as self-evident and limiting its field of inquiry to analytical description of political phenomena, without questioning their essence or the principles from which they draw their reality. If philosophical thinking wants to remain faithful to its usual approach, then it must aim to ground political institutions in reason by comparing actual social mores and political practices with a pre-determined standard. The second group, who tended to fall in line with the Bourdieusian legacy, contested this return to political philosophy: in their view, while it claimed to be renewing a discipline pushed aside by the rise of the social sciences, it in fact simply reinstated an old conservative tradition in an updated form. To their minds, the main and inherent failing of political philosophy lay, methodologically speaking, in its idealism, which reduced it to speculative inquiry deprived of empirical foundations; but also, and perhaps even more importantly, in its difficulty in calling into question the social world and shedding critical light upon it, given that its focus on finding foundations did not allow it to pay real attention to the realities of social struggles and political conflicts. The only critique political philosophy could provide, in their view, consisted in deploring the conflicts tearing apart the city-state and undermining the philosophical concern with ordering things according to an overarching rationality.

However, according to M. Abensour, while it was important not to reduce the political to the issue of power, a notion in itself erroneously equated with domination,²² it was also necessary to avoid accepting the premises of an academic discipline that confines its account of democratic reality to the narrow circle of the representative regime and the State of law, as if there were no alternative between, on the one hand, a democracy held up to public obloquy qua a political regime destined to hide the realities of domination from those it dominates and, on the other, a democracy that should only be practised in moderation in order to avoid falling into the excessive demands for 'ever more rights'.²³ In M. Abensour's thinking, politics is about much more than politics in the meaning ascribed to it by those in charge of public affairs. It also contains hidden promises and underlying meanings that are waiting to be teased out; it is informed by impulses and a taste for freedom that does not necessarily go hand in hand with the requirement of equality.²⁴

²² See *ibid.*, p. 12-14.

²³ See *ibid.*, p. 28-29.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 45.

Conceiving of democratic anarchy

M. Abensour aimed to outline a way of conceiving of democracy that was open to the ‘completely other’, leaving room for all the emancipatory potential of actions driven by the desire for freedom, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem in terms of universal history. This critical approach allowed for the conception of an ‘an-archic’ politics, in the most relevant sense of the term, that cannot lay claim to any underlying authority lending it legitimacy and must therefore arise from the creativity of individuals within a collective group.

In this regard, it is important to point out M. Abensour’s tendency to call the State into question, consistent with the libertarian inspiration informing his thinking as a whole. His interpretation of Marx offers a perfect illustration of this critique of the State. The value of M. Abensour’s rereading of some of Marx’s somewhat forgotten texts, for example the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, lies first and foremost in the emphasis he placed on the specifically political dimension to Marx’s thinking; an aspect which, for far too long, was neglected by the traditional Marxist historiography that framed him as an economic or perhaps social theorist, but in no way as a thinker focusing on politics, not even critically, or on democracy.²⁵ If we look, for example, to Marx’s texts written in the heat of the moment about the Paris Commune, it is easy to understand what M. Abensour wanted to show when he claimed that running through all Marx’s work was a desire to think about ‘true democracy’ through a radical critique of the state: M. Abensour’s interpretation consisted in foregrounding Marx’s marked emphasis on challenging the State as an essential political form and not just in its current form. From this perspective, Marx could be seen as having developed a conception of ‘true democracy’ necessarily conceived of as the advent of a form of politics drawing on a desire for freedom and constructed against the State, in a permanent process of insurrection.²⁶ For M. Abensour, the value Marx placed on the Paris Commune as a revolutionary and therefore novel event derived above all from its authentically democratic nature.

Here, the expression ‘true democracy’ consists in conceiving not so much of one political regime among others, even if it is the best or ‘least-worst’, but rather of a political experience relating to a particular form of action contesting the order of established domination. This tendency is indeterminate; it is impossible to ascribe a specific end to it, a point at which one might say it had achieved its goal. In this sense, it is utopian, in that there is no specific locus where it is achieved in an ultimately ideal form of justice and social relations. From this point of view, for M. Abensour democracy is neither the best of regimes nor the lesser evil; rather, it shows what humans can achieve together when driven by a shared desire for equality and freedom.

²⁵ See Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State. Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 1-13.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 86.

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