

Understanding Utopia

“Utopia” is perhaps the dirtiest word in the political lexicon. And there is some justification for that. The concept has often been employed to justify the worst totalitarian terror as well as otherworldly passivity in the face of real-life misery. Utopia conjures up images of demagogues, dreamers, fanatics, con artists, gullibility, apocalypse, and—perhaps above all—what Samuel Butler, the great Victorian satirist, called *erewhon* (or “nowhere” spelled backward). But this is only part of the story. Utopia has an anthropological appeal, especially for the wretched of the earth. Every civilization has its visions and views about paradise from which, given a certain cosmopolitan sensibility, other civilizations can learn. Utopia is never finished or, as Bertolt Brecht put it in his great play *Mahagonny* (1930), there is “always something missing.” Memory often serves as the repository of forgotten hopes that are intertwined with visions of the *best life* and that contest the suffering produced by the slaughter-bench of history. This inherently incomplete and ill-defined concept of utopia has guided and inspired all the great mass movements of history and every genuine attempt to change the world for the better. Its traces appear in the most varied forms of art, philosophy, and religion. Often these utopian expressions conflict—and it is usually easier to get consensus on what constitutes dystopia than utopia. Nevertheless, utopian investigations can offer insights into what humanity might truly want—or not want—and thereby shape the image of the liberated society.

Envisioning utopia requires a bold imagination coupled with deep knowledge of humanity’s cultural heritage. Utopian images have traditionally had a pastoral quality like the Garden of Eden, or the paradise once identified with the gardens of Persepolis (built by Cyrus the Great in the Persian city of Shiraz), “the land of milk and honey,” or the heavenly gardens-for-the-rich in the film *Metropolis* (1927), or the world of leisure for the poor and the worker depicted in Jean Renoir’s *A Day in the Country*

(1946). All such visions rest on the longing for an organic society without alienation or reification, decadence, or the cultural and scientific complexity associated with modernity. Dystopian critics have condemned such utopias for ignoring the benefits of work, the enjoyment of politics, and the learning process that grows from failure. They have imagined the inhabitants of utopia as living in a quasi-drugged state, mindlessly happy, while lacking individuality and a sense of existential purpose. But such comfortable criticisms are easy to make by those who live comfortably. The wretched of the earth have always understood the liberating character of what Paul Lafargue (Marx's son-in-law) termed "the right to be lazy" and the utopian vision of a bountiful life marked by calm, health, leisure, joy, and play.

Utopia projects a world of social justice, economic equality, and radical democracy. But the "best life" is not reducible to the conquest of scarcity or institutional matters. Utopia projects a transformation with respect to how life is lived and the altered forms of behavior that privilege qualities like kindness and decency, charity and altruism, experimentation, and tolerance. It thereby provides a lens with which to view our world. The invocation of utopia makes us realize that what we have is not necessarily what we want and what we want is not necessarily all we can have. No system and no movement can ever fulfill the always untapped possibilities of human experience. Freedom and desire always outstrip the real. There will always be new possibilities for expanding the enjoyment of life and new discoveries of arbitrary constraint and repression. Few could conceive of the transgendered fifty years ago: the repression that was experienced and the courage to fight it.

Utopian ideals have traditionally had a complex and tension-ridden connection with reality. The way in which they are employed, in fact, provides deep insights into the character of radical political parties and social movements, their specificity, and how they operate. In his classic *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), Karl Mannheim noted how every genuine mass movement has been fueled by utopian impulses. Even social democracy had its visions of the best life crystallized in hugely popular works like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). But such utopian ideals are always tainted and entangled with the particular interests and class base of the movement in question. A partial view of utopia is substituted for a vision consonant with its multiplicity and complexity—and its critical character gets lost. Utopia then turns into ideological slogans and forms suitable for mobilizing the masses. Only "free-floating intellectuals," according to Mannheim, can reflect upon this process and confront such ideological misrepresentations. To a certain

extent, that is also true given the intellectual commitment that visualizing utopia requires. Unfortunately, Mannheim's position is usually criticized for justifying the intellectual's retreat from political life and as support for disengagement. Especially in periods of crisis and intense ideological conflict, however, it also serves as a plea for liberal politics and a rational stance with respect to what are often inherently emotional appeals.

Feelings of resentment and memories of exploitation by the exploited and disenfranchised render utopia susceptible to manipulation by authoritarian or totalitarian movements. Some have identified it with a racially pure or religiously homogeneous or ethnically cleansed society. Others have used it to justify their belief that a particular historical agent alone has the wisdom and knowledge to wield the avenging sword. This view informed the moral relativism of Lenin's vanguard party, its treatment of enemies from the standpoint of expediency, and later the purges of Stalin. The willingness to commit any crime in the name of utopian ends is the precondition of genocide and it contributed to what Camus considered the "pathology" of his age. Utopia is not a free pass by which the end is employed to justify any means that can bring it about. That is because the only way of justifying the end in question is by making reference to the means used in bringing it about. Calling on political actors to develop a plausible (not an absolute but a plausible!) relationship between ends and means is the first step in forming an emancipatory politics.

Human dignity constitutes both the means and the ends of utopia. Kant's famous injunction never to employ people as means to an end inherently confronts all attempts to manipulate utopia. It is always a matter of privileging the ability of individuals to explore their desires, expand their interests, and take control over their lives. So, for example, Marx and Engels never equated communism with any regime, not even the Paris Commune, but instead with the end of "pre-history" and the ideal of a world in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." In such a world, they believed, humanity can finally democratically determine its fate in common, consciously and without reference to external determinants like economic interest. Even more important, however, the classless society must serve as a society in which individualism will flourish.

Utopian experiments undertaken in the past cast a dark shadow over the seemingly pedestrian politics of the present. Many contemporary radicals remain enthralled by the image of that new society and the "new man" who would inhabit it. For many, utopia fuels slogans like "All Power to the Soviets!" and the "heroic stage" of the Russian Revolution (1918–1921) when

it seemed that all things were possible: the cultural avant-garde working for the people, the abolition of money, the transformation of the nuclear family, the end of hierarchy, and international revolution intent upon creating regimes based on soviets or workers' councils. Trotsky crystallized this utopian communist outlook in his *Literature and Revolution* (1924) by insisting that ultimately: "Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser, and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise."

Nostalgia is a dangerous sentiment. It legitimately calls for recasting the past and understanding its value. But it can also easily obscure the arbitrary power exercised in those "heroic" years. The bloodshed, the confusion, the cruelty, and the poverty of those times vanish. Utopia was never real. An idealized perspective remains on what are today anachronistic institutions such as soviets in which, as it was once put to me, "everyone will control everything" (naturally without considering the number of meetings this would entail). Often what is identified with utopia is actually tainted by drab reality. That is why utopia involves a break with the real and, since every compromise involves accommodating alienation, the choice between all or nothing. Differences between existing parties and movements become negligible. Society turns into a seamless whole threatening all forms of critical reflection and individuality. The "system" becomes the problem, not any determinate set of institutions or policies, and anything reeking of reform is suspect. Nothing associated with real politics is radical enough and, in this way, the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. As an all or nothing proposition, therefore, utopian longings can justify passivity as easily as fanaticism. Either way, they are elemental ingredients in what Marx termed "the opium of the masses."

Utopia is inherently unfinished: the society or regime that views itself as utopian, or even firmly on the path to utopia, is dystopian by definition. That is because history does not move in linear fashion. Progress in one realm of society can occur while regression takes place in another. Extraordinary scientific breakthroughs, for example, often accompanied the rise of religious fundamentalism; cultural liberation flourished since the 1960s while economic equality increased. There is no uniform and prefabricated teleological process leading humanity to a happy end. Unresolved conflicts are often carried over from one epoch to the next. So, for example, racism and sexism and religious prejudices are pre-capitalist in character but play

an important role in capitalist society—and, potentially beyond. Tensions exist not only between the whole and its dynamic parts but between the parts themselves. Micro-forms of violence and prejudice constantly appear and contradict self-satisfied notions of progress.

Calling for the mechanical translation of utopia into practice therefore misses the point; utopia celebrates the complexity and diversity of life, the different hopes of different cultures, and the multidimensional character of change. Only as a regulative ideal that might guide radical politics, but that resists being realized, can utopia highlight the inherent tension between humanity and its works, the power of the imagination and the demands of political power. Utopia will then provide radicals with both a sense of modesty by highlighting the ever-changing content and character of liberation. In order for that to occur, however, utopia must remain utopian. Only then can it illuminate the always limited exercise of freedom, and the ongoing need for at least the glimmer of an insight into the way forward.