

IN DEFENCE OF UTOPIA

Daniel Singer

'Anywhere out of this world'

Baudelaire

'Be realistic, ask for the impossible'

May 68 slogan

Each period has its bogeys and its significant dirty words. One of the favourite insults at present seems to be the term Utopian, meaning in the best of cases foolishly Quixotic, though used most often as a nightmarish adjective soaked with all the blood of the *gulag*.

In the concise Oxford dictionary Utopia is defined as '(Book published by T. More in 1516 describing) imaginary island with perfect social and political system; ideally perfect place or state of things [=nowhere, f Gk *ou* not + *topos* place]'. My old copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* calls it 'an ideal commonwealth whose inhabitants exist under perfect conditions' and enumerates a long list of visionary writers and their works from Plato and his *Republic* through Francis Bacon and Tommaso Campanella to William Morris and H.G. Wells. The *Larousse* adds two utopias a *rebours* – the Brave New World of Aldous Huxley and Orwell's 1984. All three dismiss 'utopian' with varying degrees of contempt: the first as typical for 'an ardent but unpractical reformer'; the second as applicable to 'a visionary reform which fails to recognise defects in human nature'; the French as wishful thinking ('taking its desires for reality').

My aim here is not to examine the historical evolution of the image of an ideal society.' Nor is it to repeat the Marxist criticisms, inaugurated by Engels, against vain attempts to alter society radically, based not on the real contradictions of that society but on the imaginary projections of an ideal against which the reality must be judged and condemned. My purpose is much narrower. It is to stress that in the current context the absence of a vision of the future, of a project, of a radical alternative cripples and paralyses the potential movement from below and may divert it in dangerous directions. It is to ask why the Establishment, which has always tried to do so, is now so particularly successful in persuading the people that its regime is eternal, that there is nothing beyond its horizon.

In a sense, the problem we are facing is not new. It is as old as socialism itself and the inevitable duality of its struggle, which can be summed up in shorthand: a socialist movement has to fight within the framework of existing capitalist society and provide solutions which ultimately lie beyond that framework. If it concentrates too much on that future it runs the risk of sectarian isolation. Yet if it limits itself to struggle within the system, it loses its original *raison d'être*, the search for a radically different society. Naturally, the Establishment has always tried to present its reign as final and the Fukuyamas with their end of history are not a latter-day invention. The relevant question is why, in peddling such wares, our Establishment is more successful than its predecessors?

Part of the explanation, at least, is linked with the collapse of the Soviet system and the identification, for so long and by so many, of the socialist dream with stalinist and post-stalinist reality. It is important to repeat that the Soviet experiment began in conditions of backwardness unforeseen in Marxist projections; that when the Bolshevik Revolution failed to spread, primitive accumulation in Russia produced a despotism both bloody and Byzantine; and that there were a good many on the socialist left to condemn its crimes, the more so since they were committed in the name of socialism. It is important to say, but insufficient, because the attraction of the first victorious workers' revolution was such that millions of people believed that what was being forged in the Soviet Union was socialism. Particularly before the last war, eminent visitors could genuinely proclaim: 'I have been over into the future and it works' (Lincoln Steffens) or assert that the USSR was 'a land where utopia was becoming reality' (Andre Gide).

The confusion was further confounded by the fact that Stalin, while trampling the principles, was careful to preserve the vocabulary. The Soviet Union was a 'proletarian dictatorship' even if the workers exercised no power whatsoever. 1936, the year of the great purges and of terror at its highest, was also the year when 'the most democratic' constitution was promulgated. And after the war the countries of Eastern Europe became 'people's democracies' when the people were deprived of any say in matters concerning their fate. This yawning gap between theory and practice, expressed in Orwellian newspeak and perpetuated by Stalin's successors, was a major factor in demoralisation, in the popular resentment and, ultimately, in the total rejection of socialism.

The dream was lumped together with reality and this enables current propagandists to put the blame on utopia. In Russia in particular, people like Mr Yeltsin's right-hand man, Gennady **Burbulis**, yesterday teacher of Marxism-Leninism, today preacher of the capitalist gospel (after all, what matters is the preservation of power!) used to describe the Soviet Union as a Marxist paradise and now brand it as Marxist hell, but seem to have no doubt about its socialist nature. Actually, it is absurd to attribute the

sufferings of the Soviet people to the utopian ambitions of their masters. Did Stalin dream of equality? Did he try to tackle the social division of labour, to abolish the hierarchical order, to dismantle the mighty state? Were Brezhnev or Chernenko driven by the goal of socialist revolution? To ask such questions is to raise a laugh. And yet the verbal association between socialism and the stalinist system does the trick. For some time to come, the very idea of moving in a direction other than that of a capitalist society will be treated as dangerously utopian and associated in Russia with barbed wire and in Eastern Europe with the Soviet tank. For how long may depend on the pedagogical capacity of 'really existing capitalism'.

Nevertheless, the destruction of the Soviet legend cannot, on its own, explain the current distaste for utopian projections, especially if we keep in mind that, while the neo-stalinist system collapsed spectacularly in 1989, the myth itself was shattered a third of a century earlier. Stalinism was a curious mixture of terrible oppression and almost religious belief. The traumatic shock came in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev, the keeper of the shrine, told the faithful that their dead demigod was stinking. People of the younger generation can hardly imagine the grief and prostration the 'secret speech' provoked amid Communists and sympathisers. A new period had begun. In eastern Europe, the ruthless believers were succeeded by more pragmatic time-servers. In the western world it was the age of disenchantment. After the invasion of Hungary a few illusions were still left, but once the Soviet tanks had entered Prague not even the faithful party-liners seriously claimed that the future was being forged in the East. Therefore, a quarter of a century later, we must seek some additional reasons to explain why the search for a different society is so unfashionable in the West. We must look at the weakness of the western Left: the submission of **Social-Democracy** and the bankruptcy of Communism.

Social-democracy is now a misnomer. It has lost not only its original meaning, but also the one it acquired after the Bolshevik Revolution. In theory, at least, the Social-Democrats, too, were committed to the socialisation of the means of production, the transfer of power to the working people, the withering away of the state, in short to the abolition of capitalist society. Only they claimed that this could be achieved gradually, without a break and within existing institutions. Admittedly, their anti-capitalist zeal could be described as lacking passion, yet they felt compelled to claim they were dreaming of a different world. Then, in the conflicts of the Cold War and the thirty years of unprecedented capitalist expansion, all pretences were dropped. The French Socialists, when **François Mitterrand** was elected President in 1981, were probably the last ones to suggest that one could 'change life' by changing society. Two years later they were kneeling in front of the golden calf and became high priests of financial orthodoxy. By now Europe's Socialists may differ from America's Democrats by their attitude towards the state or their connection with

labour unions, but they are no more 'utopian' seekers of a different society than, say, Bill Clinton.

Western Communists, for a time, did have this utopian dimension. Indeed, they were convinced that they were part of an international army which, on the Russian front, was actually forging the future. But those days are long gone. After the invasion of **Czechoslovakia** even the obedient parties like the Portuguese or the French ceased to present Russia as an example. To accuse the much more independent Italian CP (or PCI) of having stuck to the neo-stalinist model is, therefore, totally unjustified. The real indictment is that, having discarded the model, it put nothing in its place. Partly because it did not examine the roots of the Soviet crimes, i.e. the nature of the regime, it did not analyse either the fast changing structure of western **capitalism** and the socialist answers these changes required. And so, when the Berlin Wall collapsed, the **PCI** was ideologically bare and tried to recover its poise through exorcism, by putting on new robes and calling itself PDS, the Democratic Party of the Left. By now a prisoner of the ruling ideology, it found itself with a potential movement, a tradition, a heritage and no perspectives whatsoever – in historical terms, an actor doomed to leave the stage.

But why should the western left bother about a global alternative? Among currently unfashionable words 'total', cleverly confused with totalitarian, and *weltanschauung*, the conception of the world as a whole, treated as the path to the *gulag*, come quite close to the top. It is natural that, shaken by the protest movement of the sixties and threatened by the economic crisis of the ensuing decade, the Establishment should have condemned any attempt to link separate revolts into a coherent whole as the greatest sin. But this process also provides the obvious answer to the question above. Our system, like any other, has its inner coherence. Its social sciences, particularly economics, are exercises in formal logic, never questioning the basic premises on which the argument, and the society, rest. An opposition not seeking a radical alternative has a similar posture and is reduced either to mere protest or to tinkering with the existing structure. The political scene is full of illustrations.

Take, for instance, the debate over the integration of Western Europe connected with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. In France, in the verbal battles preceding the referendum, the Socialists were perfectly consistent when they shared the pro-Maastricht platform with representatives of the moderate Right. Having surrendered to capital at home in 1983, they were pursuing the same line on a European scale nearly ten years later. (Equally coherent was the conversion to Europe of the British Labour Party, which stopped pretending that it might one day implement policies so radical that they would **clash** with the neo-liberal framework of the European Community). Indeed, those who had to do a great deal of explaining were the left-wing opponents of Europe's capitalist integration, preaching either a *non* or a plague on both your houses.

If they wanted to remain true to themselves, they had to stress that their negative attitude towards the Europe of big business had no jingoist connections; that they were ready to give up shibboleths of sovereignty to build things together with the working people of other countries; that the bourgeois nation-state was for them, at best, a provisional platform for starting radical changes which could only succeed by spreading; that only a Europe building a different society could have the will and the means to stand up to the United States. In other words, not to be confused with reactionary nationalists, left-wingers had to show that their opposition to the capitalist construction was based on an alternative conception, the vision of the United Socialist States of Europe, which would not be states for much longer. The same can be said of most topical problems: privatisation, the role of the state, the control of international finance or western intervention throughout the world. The voice of the Left is so desperately weak in all such debates, because socialists seem to have lost the capacity to think in terms of a different project.

Yet is it still possible to build such projections after the terrible Soviet experiment and the dramatic collapse of great expectations? Yes and no. In a sense, a project is now more indispensable than ever. After all **that** has happened, people may still be driven by their conditions to rebel, but they will not enter a coherent movement, will not join a potentially hegemonic bloc capable of long term action without knowing the goal and the route to be travelled, the end and the means. It will not be possible to sell them 'pie in the sky' or to dismiss their demands on the grounds that Marxist classics refused to indulge in such speculation. The classics of Marxism, after all, did not live through the Stalin era.

The precedent, however, points also in the opposite direction. The main lesson of the abortive attempt is that when people are deprived of their power of decision, even in terrible moments in the heat of battle, the provisional absence of democracy tends to become permanent with tragic consequences. Never again will the movement be conceived as an armed battalion within a society requiring barrack-room discipline. Socialism, to echo Rosa Luxemburg, cannot be a Christmas present for those who voted well; it is by definition, a conquest from below. Hence, it cannot be built thanks to a blueprint drawn at the top and imposed from above. The vision of a different society must be elaborated collectively and in the open. It must take into account the spectacular changes in the capitalist world and answer all the awkward questions (eg whether the greatly altered working class is still the main agency of historical change). Even so, the project itself is bound to be flexible, provisional if socialist construction is seen as a conquest by the working people, advancing stage by stage and changing themselves as they change society.

The utopian dimension must be seen in this context. I have always **thought** that one of the main attractions of **Marx's** thought was the complex

combination of historic necessity and political will or, to put it crudely, that the revolutionary transformation was both the result of the development of the productive forces and an upheaval, the 'world upside down'. What, linked together, was an asset became a drawback when torn apart. On one side, you had the search for a shortcut without awareness of economic reality and, on the other, the belief in the mechanical progress of productive forces which, on their own, were to give birth to a socialist society.

Of the two, the cult of growth, which has brought humankind to the verge of self-destruction, did probably more harm to socialism. The emergence of ecology as a separate force is one striking illustration of the failure of the socialist movement to fulfil its *task*.⁴ But productivism had another consequence, too. The crucial preoccupations of Marxism were reduced to a liturgy used on rare festive occasions. The Soviet Union invented a new way of extracting surplus but not any different patterns of production and consumption. Stalin's slogan – to catch up and overtake America – remained the goal of his successors and when, instead of gaining, they began to lose ground in this race, they were totally bewildered. One reason for Mikhail Gorbachev's utter failure to take the system on the road towards 'democratic socialism' was that his vision of a socialist society was nothing more than prosperous capitalism with a degree of social security."

All this does not imply that the state of economic development is irrelevant. The romantic rebellion against the horrors of capitalism has inspired fruitful analyses and passionate *indictments*.⁵ The search for socialism, however, cannot be confused with the quest for paradise lost. It is forward looking even when it rejects the idea of technological progress as neutral and not socially determined. The snag is that the only modernity we know is capitalist and the two terms, therefore, tend to be confused. The confusion is particularly ambiguous in the fashionable discussions where 'post-modern' problems are treated as if property relations, class conflicts or the hierarchical division of labour were things of the past, almost irrelevant to the new age. Nationalism, racism, foreign intervention are put on the agenda as moral issues unrelated to their social context. Even work is treated as if all that mattered was the organisation of leisure, leaving labour to be exploited in capitalist production.

These are clearly digressions, abstract discussions ignoring, intentionally or not, the true nature of 'really existing capitalism'. The true difficulty for socialists is that they must view various aspects of **modernisation** – the size of the plant, technological innovation, the organisation of labour – not only as they affect working people immediately, but also as they will affect them in the future when they, the associate producers, will run the self-managed society. Thus, the socialists must at once condemn capitalist modernity and seek within it potentialities for another mode of development. Their project will inevitably be utopian in the sense of

untried, venturing into uncharted territory. This dimension, nevertheless, is badly needed to stretch the normal exercise of politics – the confrontation between what is and what can be done – beyond the artificial frontiers set by the establishment.

Indeed, the most difficult task for the socialist movement is to preserve a permanent link between its current defensive struggle and that vision at once distant and crucial. The assumption that socialism must be universal, covering the whole globe, obviously does not mean that all revolutions will take place simultaneously; the fact that it must abolish the production of commodities does not imply that the market will vanish overnight; and the notion that the state must ultimately disappear will not prevent that state from being used in the meantime to eliminate classes and inequality. Hardly anybody now conceives the revolutionary process as the seizure of the Winter Palace followed by an inexorable march towards a classless society. Even in the best of cases, if the revolution were to happen in an advanced economy like that of the United States, the transition would be long and the road full of pitfalls. The end of capitalism, to borrow a concept⁴, is not the end of the reign of Capital. But it is imperative that all along the road we should know where we are heading, that we are advancing towards a world in which exchange value has been replaced by use value, social inequality has vanished together with classes and people have gained mastery over their fate; in short, not towards a post-modern but towards a post-capitalist society moved by its own, still unknown contradictions.

But why should we at all embark on such a long, dangerous and uncertain journey? Look at the capitalist world around you, plain to see now that it can no longer conceal its features by turning the light on its allegedly communist rival. Incidentally, the disappearance of that rival shows that the tremendous expenditure on arms in the last half century was not a burden imposed by the 'red peril' but an indispensable part of the existing economic system, though one yielding diminishing returns. The lengthening lines of the jobless confirm that capitalism, while stimulating the technological inventiveness of humankind, then turns its achievements not into a new life but into profits and unemployment. The gap between the rich and mighty on one side and the poor and outcasts on the other, far from narrowing, widens even in the privileged countries of advanced capitalism.

As to the distance between the haves and the have-nots on the world scale it has become indecent, exploitation combined with charity beating all records of hypocrisy. We impose our terms of trade, squeeze the third world beyond any possibility of repayment, precipitate the horrors of war and then rush to the rescue. And we show it all – obviously not the exploitation, but the starvation, death and the white knight in his tank – in full technicolour to the awed audience watching it throughout the world.

For, with our technological genius, we have invented instruments of communication and discovery which debase our understanding and prevent us from looking beyond the capitalist horizon.

Part of their ideological power lies in our own weakness, in our tacit acceptance that change can be merely marginal. It is time to wake up, to revive the slogan which, a quarter of a century ago, in May 1968, echoed through the streets of Paris, time to be realistic enough to ask for the impossible, for what our system, its high priests and pundits, its propaganda machine and its mass media have as their task to describe as impossible or, if you prefer, dangerously utopian. From Bosnia and its 'ethnic cleansing' or the former Soviet Union, where atavistic forces may be unleashed anytime by the explosive mixture of ideological void and economic collapse; from the fires in racist Los Angeles or Rostock with its xenophobia. *Ein* volk. . . . Most modern voices and ghosts from the past remind us that the barbarians are not at the gates, they are amongst us, ready to rule and to run amok once again, if we don't wake up soon enough and so not start building a different world, however utopian this may sound today.

NOTES

1. Among the fairly recent books on the subject see *Bronislaw Baczko: Lumières de l'Utopie*. Payot 1978 and M.Löwy and R. Sayre: *Révolte et mélancolie. Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité!*. Payot 1992.
2. It will also depend on the extent to which the unapplied principles did penetrate the unconscious of the population in eastern Europe. Judging by the complaints of the technocrats there about the thirst of the population for social justice and equality, this factor is very far from negligible.
3. The other is, obviously, the emergence of Feminism as a separate movement.
4. Another reason was that the clique backing him wanted to consolidate its privileged position through private property and deserted him for Yeltsin, when he did not move fast enough in that direction.
5. On this aspect see Lowy and Sayre mentioned above.
6. From Istvan Mészáros. A concept he develops in *Beyond Capital*, Merlin Press forthcoming.