

## UTOPIA AND ITS OPPOSITES

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THERE IS SOMETHING strangely self-undermining about the idea of utopia. Since we can speak of what transcends the present only in the language of the present, we risk cancelling out our imaginings in the very act of articulating them. The only real otherness would be that which we could not articulate at all. All utopia is thus at the same time dystopia, since it cannot help reminding us of how we are bound fast by history in the very act of trying to set us free from that bondage.

So much is obvious if one thinks of the accounts one hears these days of abductions by aliens. What renders these tales so suspect is not the strangeness of these beings, but exactly the opposite. It is the farcical familiarity of these creatures, their laughably non-alien alienness, which gives the lie to the agitated reports of their victims. Apart from an extra limb or two, the absence of ears, a disagreeable odour or a few feet of additional or subtracted height, they look much like Bill Gates or Tony Blair. Their speech and bodies are grotesquely different from ours, except for the fact that they have bodies and can speak. They fly in craft which can negotiate black holes but unaccountably spin out of control in the Nevada desert.

Aliens are inconceivably different from us, since they apparently steer such craft with extremely short arms, and speak in sinisterly monotone voices. Beings who hail from civilizations perhaps millions of years in advance of our own nevertheless display a prurient interest in human dentures and genitals. Their messages to our planet are couched in nebulous platitudes about world peace worthy of a United Nations' secretary general, and they will be no doubt be coming up with a few vague ecological observations in the fullness of time. The spurious spookiness of extraterrestrials is dismal testimony to the paucity of the human imagination. Any alien which is able to abduct us is by definition not an alien.

Much the same is true of literary utopias in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is striking about most of these texts, with a few honourable exceptions, is just how absurdly incapable they are of imagining any world definitively different from their own. It is this, not some farrago of outlandish fantasies, which is most unreal about them. In Lady Mary Fox's *Account of an Expedition to the Interior of New Holland* (1837), the inhabitants of utopia have broken so completely with Victorian middle-class convention that they hold casual buffets rather than formal dinner parties. In Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1778), utopia is a country house in Cornwall, an anodyne English pastoral in which female midgets play the harpsichord and tend the shrubberies. For the English, the ideal social order needs to have an old orchard and a couple of herbaceous borders.

The ideal society of Charles Ryecroft's *The Triumph of Woman* (1848) is a drearily high-minded regime full of wholesome puddings, docile, state-funded artists and one pew per person in church. Douglas Jerrold's *The Chronicles of Clovernook* (1846) a tale which becomes peculiarly excited at the prospect of little boys rending their trousers while climbing for apples, enthuses over an imaginary society which still has taxes, prisons and poverty. John Kirkby's *The Capacity and Extent of the Human Understanding* (1745) presents us with a noble savage on his paradisiacal island who has figured out more or less the whole of English eighteenth century religion, almost down to country parsonages, simply by attentively observing the natural world around him. All of this reaches its apogee in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), in which Crusoe finds his way around an exotically familiar environment by exercising a brisk, very English common sense. The novel thus permits us the pleasures of the unknown, while defusing and domesticating its potential menace. It is enheartening for the eighteenth-century reader to watch Crusoe chopping wood and staking out his enclosure, for all the world as if he were somewhere in Surrey.

Something similar is true of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), where the joke is that giants and microscopic creatures turn out to be a lot more like us than their appearance might lead us to expect. Gulliver, too, domesticates the outlandish, as in his indignant rebuttal of the charge that he has had sex with a woman only a few inches high. *Gulliver's Travels* is among other things a Tory smack at the radical notion that there could ever be a world significantly different from the one we know. By no means all utopias or dystopias, in short, belong to the political left, as the anonymous *Great Britain in 1841, or The Results of the Reform Bill* (1832) well illustrates. The narrator of this troubled tract falls asleep in 1831 and wakes up ten years later, to find his brother bending over him looking forty rather than a mere ten years older than when he saw him last. The cause of this premature ageing is the Reform Bill of 1832, which has allowed the state to confiscate their father's property and forced him into exile. The government has likewise grabbed the funds of the universities of both Oxford and Cambridge; England and Ireland have been dissevered, the

king has fled to Hanover, the rioting populace is carrying out summary executions, and the narrator's mother has died of a broken heart.

In a great deal of utopian fiction, alternative worlds are simply devices for embarrassing the world we actually have. The point is not to go elsewhere, but to use elsewhere as a reflection on where you are. Most literary utopias are covert political journalism, constructing their ideal kingdoms simply to promote some parochial obsession in the present. No form of fantasy could be more provincial and prosaic. This apparently most earnest, abstract of literary forms is also one of the most topical and ephemeral. Nothing is more grittily realist than their high-minded idealism. The more urgently relevant to our own political concerns such fictions are, and so the more vivid and powerful, the less utopian they become. By the end of the nineteenth century, after William Morris' great classic *News from Nowhere* (1891), the task of projecting an alternative universe would pass to science fiction, which performed it with a good deal more panache. Though as far as *News from Nowhere* goes, one might recall Perry Anderson's observation that it is one of those exceedingly rare socialist utopias which actually portray the process of revolutionary change as well as the outcome of it.

A good many literary utopias before Morris depicted a future world which only a dedicated masochist would want to inhabit. They are for the most part odourless, anti-sceptic places, intolerably sensible and streamlined, in which the natives jaw on for hours about the efficiency of their sanitary arrangements or the ingenuity of their electoral system. They remind one, in short, of Marx's scornful strictures on the utopian rationalists of his day, whose abstract speculations provided him with a convenient anvil upon which he could hammer out his own rather different political reflections. Marx was quick to spot the futility of what one might call the subjunctive mood in politics – the kind of 'wouldn't it be nice if' fantasies which any progressively-minded intellectual with time on his hands could get up to precisely because such imaginings were utterly unconstrained by material fact.

For Marx himself, the opposite of utopia was not of course some kind of pragmatic realism. Indeed nothing could be more idly utopian. There are two kinds of starry-eyed idealist: those who believe in a perfect society, and those who believe that the future will be pretty much like the present. Those with their heads truly in the sands or the clouds are the hard-nosed realists who behave as though chocolate chip cookies and the International Monetary Fund will be with us in another three thousand years time. Such a view is simply an inversion of *The Flintstones*, for which the primeval past is just American suburbia plus dinosaurs. The future may well turn out to be singularly unpleasant; but to deny that it will be quite different, in the manner of *post-histoire* philosophizing, is to offend against the very realism on which such theorists usually pride themselves. To claim that human affairs might feasibly be much improved is an eminently realistic proposition.

The opposite of utopia for Marx was not the pathological fantasy that the

present will merely perpetuate itself, but what is generally referred to as immanent critique. If Marxism has traditionally set its face against utopia, it is not because it rejects the idea of a radically transfigured society, but because it rejects the assumption that such a society could be, so to speak, simply parachuted into the present from some metaphysical outer space. It could not be that everything we know could suddenly grind to a halt, and something inconceivably different take its place, because we would not even be able to identify what this difference would consist in, having left behind the very language in which we might describe it. If the notion of utopia is to have force, it could only be as a way of interrogating the present which unlocks its dominative logic by discerning the dim outline of an alternative already implicit within it. If talk of utopia is not to be logically incoherent or idly self-indulgent, we have to be able to point, now, to the kinds of activities and capacities which might prefigure it. Authentic utopian thought concerns itself with that which is encoded within the logic of a system which, extrapolated in a certain direction, has the power to undo it. By installing itself in those contradictions or equivocations in a system and where it ceases to be identical with itself, it allows that non-identity to reveal itself as the negative image of some future positivity. If 'immanent critique' is the traditional name for this operation, 'deconstruction', in its institutional rather than narrowly textual sense, is one contemporary synonym for it. Grasped in this light, utopia is what dismantles the opposition between a future which is merely extraneous or supplementary to the present, and the bleak post-modern assumption that there is no 'outside' at all. It recognizes, on the contrary, that the forces which might break the system open also break open the very opposition between 'inside' and 'outside'. Something like this, presumably, is what the young Marx means by speaking of the working class as one which is 'in' civil society, but not 'of' it.

If a transformed future is not in this sense anchored in the present, it quickly becomes a fetish. If we need images of our desire, we also need to prevent these images from mesmerizing us and so standing in the way of it. Walter Benjamin understood that the Jewish prohibition on fashioning graven images of God was among other things a ban on making a fetish of the future, manipulating it as a magical totem in the cause of your present interests. For Benjamin, the Messiah might enter history at any moment, which meant that the future was perpetually open. (He also believed that the Messiah would transfigure everything simply by making minor adjustments.) Projecting the future may just be an attempt to control and manipulate it. The true clairvoyants of our age are those experts hired by capitalism to peer into the entrails of the system and assure its rulers that their profits are safe for another twenty years. But constructing imaginary futures is also self-defeating, since it can end up absorbing the very energies which might have been devoted to realizing them in practice. The opposite of the clairvoyant is the prophet, who contrary to common belief is not concerned with predicting the future, but simply with warning the present that unless it changes its ways that future is likely to be exceedingly unpleasant.

But if Marxism has had little to say of utopia, it is also because its task is less to imagine a new social order than to unlock the contradictions which forestall its historical emergence. Seen in this light, Marxist thought itself is rooted in the epoch which it is aiming to surpass, and will be superannuated by what it helps to bring into being. There will be no radicals in the New Jerusalem, because no need for them. Such phenomena belong to the present just as much as the language of patriarchy or man-management. There would be also a great deal less pity around in a transformed society, since a great deal less to pity.

But if there will be no political radicals – if socialists, feminists, eco-warriors and the like will be, thankfully, no more than a dim, antediluvian memory – there will surely be tragedy, which rules out the more perfectibilist currents of utopian thought. One should think twice before expressing the apparently generous-hearted wish to live in a social order which had passed beyond tragedy. For it is by no means clear that you could root out tragedy without extirpating the sense of human value on which it depends. Tragedy is deeply interwoven with our freedom, relatedness and autonomy, and it is hard to see how it could be abolished, as some more hubristic strains of utopianism have imagined, without eradicating these too. Herbert Marcuse liked to imagine a future in which human beings were so changed that the very act of offering physical violence to each other would make them sick. One would just have to hope that this did not prevent surgery too.

In his work *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams argues two kinds of socialist-humanist case against the orthodox ideologies of tragedy. The first, ‘democratizing’ case is that tragedy should not be regarded a privileged, exceptional event, the death of princes or the fall of heroes, but part of the texture of common social life. It is a smash on the roads, a broken relationship, a futile death. The second, ‘politicizing’ case he advances is that tragedy is an historical phenomenon – the long tragedy of class-society, for example – which is in principle capable of being resolved. The problem is that these two arguments are exceptionally hard to reconcile with one another, unless you imagine that futile deaths and broken relationships can also be somehow definitively transcended.

The problem is also that the abolition of oppressive political systems does not itself diminish the tragedy of their dead and discarded victims. Whatever the historical outcome for their successors, that experience remains, so to speak, absolute and irreparable for the victims themselves. When Benjamin remarks that it is memories of enslaved ancestors which drive men and women to revolt, not dreams of liberated grandchildren, he finds a way of using or (in a Brechtian phrase) ‘refunctioning’ the dead themselves, summoning their shades to the service of the political present through the rituals of mourning and remembrance. For Benjamin, even nostalgia can be a revolutionary force, just as the conspicuous consumption of the bourgeoisie could be made, in a daring dialectical twist, to prefigure the material abundance of a socialist future. But he does not imagine that such re-functionings of the dead could ever retrospectively justify the indignities they suffered.

If Marxism is anti-utopian, then, it is also because – except its wilder, more ‘cosmic’ flights of fancy – it does not allow itself to be entranced by the dream of a society from which all conflict would have vanished. On the contrary, once some of the eminently engineered conflicts of the present have been resolved, we might be better able to identify what our true contentions really are. Once we have left behind the absurdity by which such ultimately unimportant human differences as gender, ethnicity, national identity and the like have been turned by our rulers into terrains of political battle, we may be able to clear the air a little and spot what genuinely divides us. If socialists may feasibly have hope, one reason is because the contradictions to which they address themselves are, for all their formidable power and centrality, much more modest, transitory affairs than, say, death or physical suffering or moral humiliation. This is not, needless to say, to suggest that they will be resolved – just that they fall into the category of things which in principle can be. ‘Bad’ utopia persuades us to desire the unfeasible, and so, like the neurotic, to fall ill of longing; whereas the only authentic image of the future is, in the end, the failure of the present.

Utopian thought is hardly in fashion in these sceptical, politically downbeat days, though a certain strain of post-modernist thought has peddled a particularly grotesque brand of it. This is the diseased fantasy that we no longer need to look to a future because the future is here already, in the shape of a perversely idealized view of the capitalist present. It is not so much that the future is infinitely deferred, but that it is with us already, perhaps without our recognizing it as such, in the guise of the hedonistic subjects and libidinal circuits of contemporary consumerism. To pronounce history at an end is in one sense to call the future off, declare it cancelled for lack of interest; but it can just as well be seen as the claim that the future is here already, since the only future we shall ever witness will be a repetition of the present.

This, to be sure, is a very different view of the future from that of the revolutionary avant-gardes earlier in our century, who also saw the future as somehow already with us, since only that which quite literally did not exist – future time – could be an adequate image of the transformation of the present. The word ‘futuristic’ thus comes in common parlance to mean, ironically, the very latest thing – to function as a description of the present, not of that which will supersede it. In a revolutionary epoch, it is as though the present can only be grasped in its lack of self-identity – in the way that it is even now trembling on the brink of some absolute negation which brims it full of meaning even as it drains it of substance. The future, in the ‘pure’ temporality of modernism, is just a way of describing the present’s lack of coincidence with itself, the way its truth lies in its ceaseless self-surpassing. For Marx, similarly, the ‘truth’ of socialism lies not in some steady state of the future, but in the way in which a self-divided present is even now struggling to go beyond itself.

A post-modernist scepticism of utopia, however, is generally less because some ideal future is thought to have already arrived, than because – capitalist reality being now global and apparently immovable – the best we can do is

decorate our cells, rearrange the deck chairs on the sinking liner, prise open the odd fissure in this otherwise seamless monolith into which a stray beam of freedom or enlightenment or gratification may infiltrate. This, need one say, is to pay an extravagant compliment to one of the most sickeningly fragile systems which history has ever witnessed. It is to confuse the question of the formidable power of capitalism with the question of its stability – to fail to grasp that in one sense the capitalist system is as unstable as it is precisely because of its power. Any form of life with a built-in dynamic to universalize itself is bound to ensnare itself in its own strength, since the more it proliferates, the more fronts it breeds on which it can become vulnerable. For a system to intermesh so many different regions of reality is for it to spread its sway only at the cost of multiplying its potential points of breakdown.

The idea that there is anything graven in stone about this roller coaster of a system is laughable enough; but so is the assumption that its victims are now so spiritually lobotomized, so passive and docile, that they would be unlikely to twitch an eyebrow were the Second Coming to take place in their front gardens. This may be the view of some jaded cultural theorists, but it is certainly not the view of Whitehall or the White House. If there is one moral certainty in all this, it is surely that people will rise up against the system the moment it is rational for them to do so. That is to say, the moment when it becomes tolerably clear that there is nothing any longer in the system for them; that the perils and discomforts of disaffection outweigh the meagre gratification of conformism; that sheer apathy is no longer materially possible; that even an obscure, untested political alternative would be better than what they are landed with; and that anger at the unjust way in which they are being treated is more powerful than fatalism and fear.

Such moments don't of course come often, since it is rational not to rebel against a social system, whatever its grave deficiencies, as long as it is still capable of delivering you just enough gratification to outweigh the risk and laboriousness of seeking an alternative. Once it is not capable of this, however, men and women will take to the streets as surely as night follows day. But though they may take to the streets, they may well not take to socialism – perhaps because, in the view of some commentators, the days of the doctrine are now strictly numbered, so that it won't be around by the time this upheaval happens, if indeed it ever does. But this, too, is an unlikely ground for political pessimism. It is quite probable that socialist ideas will survive, given their historical tenacity and political relevance. And their survival is important in at least one respect, which is that without them – without some kind of socialist organization and direction – a good many more people are likely to get hurt in periods of mass disaffection than might otherwise be the case. There are many things to be said against mere anarchy, one of the more pertinent being that it wreaks a lot of unnecessary human havoc. If we are to minimize the human cost of such social upheaval, we need some idea of how to channel those energies most constructively. And whether this could be done or not is extremely unclear. If there is

any ground for political scepticism, then, it is surely here, not in the fantasy that the capitalist system is omnipotent or that the working class will never care for anything but cable television or that the only radicals left around in ten years time will be soft-bellied social democrats.

What is most truly utopian about the thought of Marx, so one might claim, is its distaste for the instrumental. Marx is pained by the notion that what he calls human powers and capacities should be subjected to a dreary means/ends rationality, and looks to a social order in which men and women would be able to realize such powers and capacities as self-delighting ends in themselves. They would no longer be called upon to justify themselves at the lofty tribunal of History, *Geist*, Duty, Party or Utility, but would live instead as though their energies were self-grounding and self-legitimizing, which for Marx, as a good Romantic humanist, they are. To attend to the use-value of persons, rather than to their exchange-value, is just another way of putting the same point. Human beings for Marx do indeed, by virtue of their 'species being', have a sort of function, which is to realize their powers and faculties as sensuous ends in themselves. But this is in a way to claim that their function is to be functionless at least if you see 'function' as the abstraction from the particularity of a thing for the sake of some end external to it. It is one of Marx's most precious insights (though by no means one unique to his work) that what we call morality just *is* this constant unfolding of creative human powers and capacities, not some grim set of strictures hedging it round. In this, indeed, he is a thoroughly traditional moralist in the tradition of Aristotle, as opposed to a Kantian moralizer.

One of the many ironies of Marx's thought, however, is that in order to achieve a society in which the grip of instrumental reason might be somewhat relaxed, we stand in need of the most rigorously instrumental forms of thought and action. A few men and women, to be sure, may try to live in this utopian, anti-instrumental style now; but as one of their number, Oscar Wilde, candidly recognized, this can only be a valid rather than offensively privileged form of life if it somehow comes to prefigure a social order in which this life-form would finally be available to everyone. The theme of Wilde's magnificent essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* is that the only good reason for being a socialist is that you don't like having to work, and that those like Wilde himself privileged enough not to have to labour are thus 'reminders' of a time when labour will exercise less of a fetishistic power over us all. It is a necessary insight, as well as a mischievously self-serving one: just lie in bed all day and be your own communist society. But it has somehow to be reconciled with the unavoidably instrumental procedures necessary to achieve socialism – a process in which the means would seem to run counter to the ends. Those who most faithfully strive to bring about a new social order may thus not be the best images of that order themselves. What if the process of bringing it into being is in contradiction with the very values it represents?

The problem with leftists used to be that they were so taken up with political means that they were at some risk of forgetting or even obliterating the ends

which those means were meant to serve. One might well feel a mite nostalgic for this error, since what we have nowadays is more commonly the reverse: a radicalism which is enthralled by the end-in-itselfness of pleasure, *jouissance*, and the like, but which is distinctly less enthused by the rather more prosaic business of laying the ground by which they might be available to more than a few privileged souls. In this situation, a dash of vulgar instrumentalism might well not come amiss. But there is no reason to imagine that these two dimensions of socialism, the utopian and the instrumental, can be always and everywhere harmoniously united. In this respect at least, the left has always been a broad church which spanned the shaggy-haired prophets and the buttoned-down committee folk, the wild-eyed visionaries and the horny-handed barricade builders. It is unrealistic to suppose that these will always be synthesized within the same body. Blake and Rimbaud were not good committee men, and we do not look to James Larkin for neo-Platonic illumination.

There is one aspect of this tension between the utopian and the instrumental which has not been much examined, but which is especially relevant to our own less-than-sanguine political situation. One of the more creative forms of dissent from the instrumental principle has been a certain leftist faith that, politically speaking, one does what one has to do in a certain disregard for the likely historical outcome. This is largely because the historical outcome in question, given the forces which the left confronts, is likely more often than not to be fairly bleak. This, surely, is part of what Walter Benjamin meant by blasting an event in the struggle of the dispossessed out of the continuum of history. He meant among other things that we should suspend for a moment the historical failure to which the event actually led, snap it off, so to speak, from its less than triumphal consequences, so as to attend all the more vigilantly to the powers which the event incarnated.

If this is what it means to think non-teleologically, rather than (as in a certain post-modern fancy) the notion that history is a chain of aberrations, then one can see its force. And one can see its force not least in a political epoch when the left's chances of success have become notably constricted. It would of course be fatal to use this non-instrumental, non-teleological form of thought simply to rationalize our failures. For Benjamin, this anti-teleology is finally in the service of political achievement, as we redeem these scattered moments in the revolutionary imagination, constellating them into a pattern which forms an alternative to the ruler's image of history and which plays its part in political action in the present. The opposite to the crass triumphalism of our rulers is hardly a squalidly masochistic cult of failure. What the left pits against the power of the right is not failure, but a transfigured concept of power. But just as revolutionary eras highlight certain kinds of socialist value which are obscured in less affirmative times, so the reverse may also be true. In more barren political periods, it is possible for us to retrieve what one might call the more Kantian side of Marxism: the deontological imperative that one does what one considers to be politically right even if it is unlikely to bear much political

fruit. Who, we may then ask, are these fair-weather socialists who leap euphorically on to the political bandwagon when it is rolling merrily forward, only to jump off again when it stalls? Those men and women who faced Stalinist firing squads with revolutionary slogans on their lips were hardly contemplating success, at least not for themselves. In one sense, their gesture had all the futility of an existential *acte gratuit*; certainly they could not profit from it, and for all they knew, nor could anyone else either. But in spurning the instrumental in this way, they sketched at the point of death a utopian gesture which might, just, for all they knew, bear fruit for the living.