

UTOPIANISM, ANCIENT AND MODERN

by Irving Kristol

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Men are dreaming animals, and the incapacity to dream makes a man less than human. Indeed, we have no knowledge of any human community where men do fail to dream. Which is to say, we know of no human community whose members do not have a vision of perfection — a vision in which the frustrations inherent in our human condition are annulled and transcended. The existence of such dreaming visions is not, in itself, a problem. They are, on the contrary, a testament to the creativity of man which flows from the fact that he is a creature uniquely endowed with imaginative powers as an essential aspect of his self-consciousness. Only a madman would wish to abolish men's dreams, i.e., to return humanity to a purely animal condition, and we are fortunate in having had — until recently, at any rate — little historical experience of such madness. It is true that, of late, certain writers — notably Norman O. Brown — hold out the promise of such regression as a kind of ultimate redemption. But even their most admiring readers understand that this is largely literary license, rather than a serious political agenda.

On the other hand, and far more common, there are also madmen who find it impossible to disentangle dreams from reality — and of this kind of madness we have had alas, far too much experience. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a good part of modern history takes place under the sign of this second kind of madness, which we familiarly call "utopianism."

I am using the term, "madness," advisedly and not merely to be provocative. The intellectual history of the past four centuries consists of islands of sanity floating in an ocean of "dottiness," as the British call it. We don't see this history in this way, and certainly don't study it in this way, because — I would suggest — we have ourselves been infected by this pervasive "dottiness." Just look at the cautious and respectful way our textbooks treat the French utopian theorists of the 19th century: Saint-Simon, Comte, Fourier, and their many loyal disciples. It is no exaggeration to say that all of these men were quite literally "touched in the head" and that their writings can fairly be described as the feverish scribbles of disordered minds. Fourier, for instance, divided humanity into no less than 810 distinct character types and then devised a social order that brought each character type his own special brand of happiness. He also believed that, in the ideal world of the future, the salty oceans would benevolently turn themselves into seas of lemonade, and that men would grow

tails with eyes at the tip. Saint-Simon and Comte were somewhat less extreme in their lunacies — but not all that much. To read them, which so few actually do today, is to enter a world of phantasmagoria. O yes, one can cull "insights," as we say, from their many thousands of pages. But the inmates of any asylum, given pen and paper, will also produce their share of such "insights" — only it doesn't ordinarily occur to us that this is a good way of going about the collecting of insights. It is only when people write about politics in a large way that we are so indulgent to their madness, so eager to discover inspired prophecy in their fulminations.

It is not too much to say that we are all utopians now, in ways we no longer realize, we are so habituated to them. Further than that: we are even utopian when we think we are being very practical and rational. My own favorite instance of such subterranean utopianism is in an area where one is least likely to look for it. I refer to the area of city planning.

William H. Whyte, Jr., in his excellent book, *The Last Landscape*, has pointed out that, if you examine the thousands of plans which now exist for shiny, new, wonderful cities, there is always one thing that is certain to be missing. That one thing is — a cemetery. In a properly planned city, the fact that people die is taken to be such an unwarranted intrusion into an otherwise marvellous equilibrium that city planners simply cannot face up to it. After all, if people die and are replaced by new and different people, then the carefully prescribed "mix" of jobs, of housing, of leisure-time activities — all this is going to be upset. Modern city planning, whether in the form of constructive New Towns or Cities Beautiful, is inherently and radically utopian in that it aims to bring history to a stop at a particular moment of perfection. The two traditions of urban planning I have just mentioned disagree in their attitude toward modern technology and modern industrial society — the one wishing to minimize their influence, the other wanting to exploit their potentialities to the utmost. But both are, as a matter of historical fact, descended from various 19th century utopian-socialist movements, and neither of them can bear to contemplate the fact that men are permanently subject to time and changing circumstances.

That is why city planners are so infuriated when someone like Jane Jacobs comes along and points out that the absence of

im·pri·mis (im-pri' mīs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

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old buildings in their model cities is a critical flaw – because old buildings, with their cheap rents, are needed by the small entrepreneur, the bohemian intellectual, the dilatory graduate student, the amateur scholar, and eccentrics of all kinds. These are the people who give urban life its color, its vitality, its excitement – and who, moreover, play an indispensable role in the dynamics of urban growth and decay. But growth and decay are precisely what most offend the utopian cast of mind, for which time is an enemy to be subdued. And this is why the dimension of time is so rigorously excluded from modern city planning – and from modern architecture too, which derives from the same utopian tradition. Ask a city planner or an architect whether his work will grow old gracefully, and he finds your question incomprehensible. His is the perfection of art, which is immune to time, which does not age or wither or renew itself. That human beings and human societies do age and wither and renew themselves is for him only an immense inconvenience, and he cannot wait until our social sciences shall have resolved that problem.

I want to call your attention to the interesting and important fact that this utopian cast of mind I have been describing is quite rational – only, it has ceased to be reasonable. And this divorce between rationality and reasonableness, which is characteristic of so many forms of madness, is also a crucial feature of modern utopianism.

Rationality has always been taken to be a criterion of utopias. This, in turn, means that utopian dreaming is a very special kind of dreaming. All of us are aware, for instance, that there is a difference between a vision of paradise or heaven on the one hand, and a vision of utopia on the other. The Old and New Testaments – or the Koran, for that matter – do not present us with utopias. It would be ridiculous to take literally or seriously any specific remarks that are found in these documents concerning the social or economic structure of heaven, or the mode of governance to be found there. Similarly, all depictions of man in his unfallen condition are not meant to be analytically scrutinized. Dreams of this order do tell us something about the nature of man, but only in the most general and allusive way. They are a kind of myth, a kind of poetry, not a kind of political philosophy. And that is why all religions take such a very dim view of those among their adherents who give too much detailed attention to such myths. It is taken as a sign of either mental instability or willful heresy when someone begins speculating in some detail about how things really were in Paradise, or how they are likely to be in Heaven. To ask questions – or worse, to give answers – about, say, the relation between the sexes in Paradise or Heaven is to transgress the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Such speculation is ordinarily forbidden, or at least frowned upon by religious authorities.

Utopian thinking, in contrast, is a species of philosophical thinking, and arises historically at that moment when philosophy disengages itself from myth and declares its independent status. Which is to say, of course, that it is first observable among the Greeks. Plato's *Republic* is the first utopian discourse we know of – a work of the philosophic imagination. There are myths in *The Republic*, of course, but they are recounted as myths, not as authoritative history. Moreover, *The Republic* is constructed before our eyes, step by step, by dialectical discourse among reasoning men. Though the end result will certainly strike many of us as being quite an absurd picture of an ideal society, there is nothing illogical in it, nothing miraculous, nothing superhuman. It is a possible society, violating none of the laws of nature and inhabited solely by men who are governed by recognizably human motives and passions.

All this is clear – and yet this clarity is but the occasion for a larger mystery which scholars have been exploring for two millenia now. What was Plato's intention? Was he being solemn throughout or playful throughout? How seriously did he mean us to take his ideal society? And if he did mean us to take it seriously, *in what way* did he want us to take it seriously?

These questions continue to be debated today, and will doubtless be debated forever. The view of Plato's utopia which I find most plausible – it is a view derived from the writings of Professor Leo Strauss – is that it is primarily a pedagogic construction. After all, Plato was neither a fool nor a madman – we could take Aristotle's word for that, even if his other dialogues did not make it evident – and he was not likely to confuse a philosopher's imaginings with the world as it is. Even if he did believe that the society described in *The Republic* would be the best of all possible societies – and we must assume he did believe it, since he says so – he almost surely did *not* believe that it was ever likely to exist. For it to come into existence, as he makes plain, you would need a most improbable conjunction of circumstances: an absolutely wise man given absolute power to construct a new social order – to do it without let up or hindrance or restriction of any kind. This is not a logical impossibility – if it were, there would have been no point in writing *The Republic* at all. On the other hand, it is so unreal a possibility that a reasonable man would not allow it to govern his particular attitude toward any particular society at any particular time. As Professor Strauss puts it, Plato's utopia exists in words, not in deeds. The one existence is as authentically human as the other – but there is a world of difference between them.



This is, I should say, the basic attitude of all classical, pre-modern utopian thinking. Constructing a utopia was a useful act of the philosophical imagination. Contemplating such a constructed utopia – studying it, analyzing it, arguing over it – was a marvelous exercise in moral and political philosophy. Both the construction and the contemplation were an elevating affair, leading to self-improvement of mind for those talented few who were capable of it. It also provided one with an

invaluable perspective on the essential limitations of one's own society — a philosophical wisdom about things political that was superior to the reigning conventional political wisdom. But all of this was, in the highest sense of the term, "academic." Utopias existed to produce better political philosophers, not better politics. True, the existence of better political philosophers *might*, at some point, have a benevolent effect upon the society in which they lived. But the odds were overwhelmingly against it, and in his practical conduct of life the supreme virtue for the philosopher, as for everyone else, was prudence.

All of this is most perfectly and beautifully exemplified in the last of the classical utopias, Sir Thomas More's treatise which introduced the word itself, "utopia," into our Western languages. More's *Utopia* stands as an indictment of the gross imperfections in the social and political orders of his day. It was a most subversive document — but its aim was to subvert only young students of political philosophy, who could read the Latin in which it was written, and who could then be spiritually transported into the "no-where" (the literal meaning of the Greek term, *eutopos*) which was the philosopher's realm of freedom. More himself, as we know, went into the service of King Henry VIII in order, as he explicitly informs us, to minimize the evils which a ruler may introduce into the world as it is — the "everywhere" which is a very different place from the philosopher's "nowhere." In loyally serving King Henry, he never repudiated his utopian vision; he never apparently had the sense he was in any way "compromising" it; and he certainly never pretended that he was engaged in "realizing" it. He simply thought that, as a political philosopher with a superior vision of the ideal, he might prudently influence the politics of his time toward somewhat more humane ends. He failed utterly, as we know, and paid for his failure with his life. But he was not at all surprised that he failed, nor was he shocked to discover the price of his failure. A less utopian statesman than the author of *Utopia* it is hard to find. And yet there was not an ounce of cynicism in him. His nobility of character consisted precisely in the fact that, even as he could imagine the world as it might be, he could also live and work in the world as it was, trying to edge the latter ever so slightly toward the former, but experiencing no sour disillusionment at his ultimate lack of success. Such a perfect combination of detachment from the world, and simultaneous attachment to it, is as exemplary as it is rare.

After Sir Thomas More, we are in the modern era, the era of utopian-ism. By utopianism I mean that frame of mind which asserts that utopias are *ideals to be realized* — to be realized in deed and not merely in words, in historical time and not merely in the timelessness of speculative thought. This conception of utopia is so familiar to us, and so congenial to us, that when we call someone "utopian" we mean no more than that he is unduly optimistic about the time necessary to achieve the ideal, or perhaps unduly enthusiastic about his particular version of the ideal. The notion that a utopia is an ideal to be realized does not strike us as inherently unreasonable — we ask only that men be not too exigent in demanding their perfect society here and now. *That*, we say, is to be "utopian." In contrast, the ancients tell us that to demand a perfect society in the foreseeable future is to be mad; while to expect a perfect society to exist at all, at any time, is to be utopian. By the standards of the ancients, the modern era and its modern societies are suffused with quite unreasonable expectations, and have therefore an equally unreasonable attitude toward political reality. We confuse words with deeds, philosophical dreams with the substantial actualities of human existence. And, of course, the ancients anticipated that from such a dire confusion only disaster could result.

Just how it happened that the utopian mode of thought emerged so strongly in the 16th and 17th centuries is something that our historians can only partially explain. Perhaps we ought not to demand more than partial explanations from them — such a mutation of the human spirit is, one might say, as

inexplicable as it was unpredictable. Still, it does seem clear that certain identifiable trends of thought, all in their different ways, contributed to the event. These trends can be identified as millenarianism, rationalism, and what Professor Hayek calls "scientism."

Millenarianism is an intrinsic aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and without it there would be no such thing as the *history* of Western civilization, as distinct from the *chronicles* of Western peoples. It is from the millenarian perspective that both Judaism and Christianity derive its very special sense of history as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end — a conception of historical time that is not to be found in Oriental thought, which seeks and finds ultimate perfection only in a denial of time's meaning, and in a transcendence of time by the contemplative and withdrawn individual. The dynamics of Western civilization are organically linked to this profound belief in "the end of time" as a prospective historical event. This belief always created immense problems for the religious authorities, and Church and synagogue responded with efforts to impose reasonable limitations upon this millennial expectation. In both Judaism and Christianity those who attempted to "hasten the end," whether through magic or politics, were defined as heretics and were expelled from the religious community. This did not prevent such heresies from bubbling up, again and again — but the church did contain them, or even assimilate them (as in the case of the Franciscan movement), for more than a thousand years. In the 16th century, however, as religious authority fragmented under the impact of what we call the Reformation, these millennial expectations overflowed, and have never been entirely subdued since. What we now call the "prophetic" element in Judaism and Christianity became the intellectually and even popularly dominant element. Indeed, in the United States today you can claim prophetic status and justify any excess of prophetic fervor on the basis of nothing more than in introductory course in sociology.

What makes modern millenarianism so powerful — one is tempted to say irresistible — is its association with modern scientific rationalism and modern technology. Scientific rationalism also emerges in the 16th century, persuading us that reality can be fully comprehended by man's abstract reason, and that therefore whatever exists should be capable of being rationally explained in a clear and consequential way. As applied to all social institutions, this came to mean — it is, indeed, the essential meaning of that period we call The Enlightenment — that existing institutions could be legitimized only by reason: not by tradition, not by custom, not even by the fact that they seemed to be efficacious in permitting men to lead decent lives, but only by reason. It was against this mode of thought, an inherently radical-utopian mode of thought, that Edmund Burke polemicized so magnificently. It was against this radical-utopian temper that modern conservatism emerges. Modern conservatism found it necessary to argue what had always been previously assumed by all reasonable men: that institutions which have existed over a long period of time have a reason and a purpose inherent in them, a collective wisdom incarnate in them, and the fact that we don't perfectly understand or cannot perfectly explain why they "work" is no defect in them but merely a limitation in us. Most ordinary people, most of the time, intuitively feel the force of this conservative argument. But these same ordinary people are defenseless intellectually against the articulated and aggressive rationalism of our intellectual class — and this explains why, when modern men do rebel against the unreasonableness of modern rationalism, they are so likely to take refuge in some form of irrationalism. The 20th-century phenomenon of fascism is an expression of exactly such an exasperated and irrational rebelliousness against the tyranny — actual or prospective — of a radical-utopian rationalism.

But neither millenarianism nor rationalism would, by itself, have been able to sustain the utopian temper had it not been for the advent of modern technology, with its large promise of

human control over human destiny. There is nothing dreamlike about technology: it works — and because it works, it gives plausibility to the notion that modern man is uniquely in the position of being able to convert his idealized dreams into tangible reality. It also gives plausibility to the notion that, because the development of technology — of man's control over both nature and man — is progressive, therefore human history itself can be defined as progressive, as leading us from an imperfect human condition to a perfected one. The ancient Hebrews, the Greeks, the Christians all felt that there was a diabolical aspect to the power of technology; they saw no reason to think that men would always use this power wisely, and thought it quite probable that we would use it for destructive ends. But modern technology, emerging in a context of millenarian aspirations and rationalist metaphysics, was not bothered — at least not until recently — by such doubts. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* is the first truly modern utopia — a society governed by scientists and technologists which, it is clear, Bacon thought could easily exist in fact, and which he proposed as a very possible and completely desirable future.



As one looks back over these past centuries, the wonder is not that there has been so much change and tumult, but rather that there has been so much stability. The main currents of modern thought are all subversive of social stability — and yet, the bourgeois - liberal societies of the last two hundred years managed somehow to keep triumphantly afloat. They did this, essentially, by diffusing power — economic power, social power, political power — throughout the body politic, so that the utopian spirit was constantly being moderated by the need to compromise various interests, various enthusiasms, and even various utopian visions. No modern liberal society has failed to

express its faith in the potential of science and technology to radically improve the human condition. No modern liberal society has failed to insist that its institutions are created by — and legitimated by — human reason, rather than by mere tradition or custom, and certainly not by divine revelation. And no modern liberal society has ever explicitly rejected the utopian goals and the utopian rhetoric which are spawned by the millenarian spirit. These goals and this rhetoric, indeed, are by now clichés: “a world without war,” “a world without poverty,” “a world without hate” — in short, a world without any of the radical imperfections that have hitherto characterized every world actually inhabited by man. But, what rendered these beliefs less explosive than, in their pure form, they are, was the liberal individualism that bourgeois society insisted they accommodate themselves to. In short, what made bourgeois society so viable was the *domestication* of modern utopianism by liberal individualism.

It was a viability, however, that was always open to question. The trouble with living in a bourgeois society which has domesticated its utopian spirit is that nothing is permitted to go wrong — at least very wrong, for very long. In all pre-modern societies, a mood of stoicism permeated the public and private spheres. Life is hard, fortune is fickle, bad luck is more likely than good luck and a better life is more probable after death than before. Such stoicism does not easily cohabit with the progressive spirit, which anticipates that things natural will and *ought* to get better. When they don't — when you are defeated in a war, or when you experience a major malfunctioning of your economic system, then you are completely disoriented. Bourgeois society is morally and intellectually unprepared for calamity. Calamity, on the other, is always ready for bourgeois society — as it has always been ready, or always will be ready, for every other society that has existed or will exist.

When calamity strikes, it is never the utopian temper that is brought into question — that is literally an unimaginable possibility — but rather the liberal individual policy in which this temper has been housed. At such a moment, indeed, the utopian spirit flares up in anger, and declares, in the immortal words of the 19th-century French utopian socialist, Etienne Cabet, “. . . Nothing is impossible for a government that *wants* the good of its citizens.” This sentiment expresses neatly what might be called the *collectivist imperative* which always haunts bourgeois-liberal society — and which can never be entirely exorcised, since it derives from the utopian world-view that all modern societies share. Once it is assumed that history itself works toward progressive improvement, and that we have the understanding and the power to guide this historical dynamic toward its fruition — once such assumptions are made, it is only a matter of time before the state is held responsible for everything that is unsatisfactory in our condition. There is, after all, nothing else that could be held responsible.

Having made that statement, I must quickly modify it. For more than a century, bourgeois-liberal society *did* have one powerful inner check upon its utopian impulses, and that was the “dismal science” of economic theory. Classical economic theory insisted that, even under the best of circumstances, the mass of the people could expect only small, slow increments of improvement in their condition — and, under the worst of circumstances, could anticipate an actual worsening of their condition. The cornerstone of this theory was the Malthusian hypothesis that the pressure of population among poorer people would tend to wipe out the gains of economic growth. This hypothesis was accepted by most thinking men of the 19th century, and helped shape a climate of opinion in which great expectations could not easily flourish, except on the margins of society where all sorts of intellectual eccentricities were naturally to be found. But the discovery by modern economists that technological innovation had rendered Malthusianism false — that increasing productivity could easily cope with population growth — removed this formidable check upon the utopian temper. Indeed, economics

itself now became a discipline which constantly challenged the conventional limits of economic possibility. And in this challenge, the role of the state was crucial. Whereas it was once thought that the state had to accommodate itself, like everyone else, to the iron laws of economics, it now became common to think that the state could pretty much write the laws of economics to suit itself. Our liberation from Malthusian economics — one of the truly great intellectual accomplishments of this past century — was quickly perceived by journalists, politicians, and even many among our better-educated people as a liberation from all economic constraint. The result is that the idea that “. . . Nothing is impossible for a government that *wants* the good of its citizens,” once a radical proposition, now sounds rather conventional. I don't know that any American politician has actually said it, in so many words. But a great many politicians are strongly implying it — and it is even possible that more than a few of these politicians actually believe it.

The strength of this collectivist imperative is such that it feeds on itself — and most especially (and most significantly) on its own failures. These failures are as immense as they are obvious — and yet it is astonishing how little difference they seem to make. One would have thought that the catastrophic condition of agriculture in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba would have brought these economies into universal disrepute. Yet no such thing has happened. These regimes are extended infinite moral and intellectual credit for their utopian ideals, and their credit ratings seem little vulnerable to their poor economic performance. Similarly, in the Western democracies, the tremendous expansion of government during these past three decades has not obviously made us a happier and more contented people. On the contrary, there is far more sourness and bitterness in our lives, public and private, than used to be the case; and these very governments, swollen to enormous size, are visibly less stable than they were. Nevertheless, the response to this state of affairs among our educated classes is to demand still more governmental intervention — on the theory that a larger dose of what should be good for us will cure the illness caused by a smaller dose of what should have been good for us. The ordinary people, whose common world always anchors them more firmly in common sense, are skeptical of such a prescription — but they have nothing to offer in its place, and will in the end have to go along with it. As someone once said, you can't beat a horse with no horse — and the collectivist ethos does seem to have the field to itself these days.

But what about the liberal-individualist ethos? Is that not today, as it was a century ago, an authentic alternative? Some eminent thinkers say it is, and I would like nothing better than to agree with them — but, in truth, I cannot. The liberal-individualist vision of society is not an abstract scheme which can be imposed on any kind of people. For it to work, it needs a certain kind of people, with a certain kind of character, and with a certain cast of mind. Specifically, it needs what David Riesman calls “inner-directed” people — people of firm moral convictions, a people of self-reliance and self-discipline, a people who do not expect the universe to be offering them something for nothing — in short, a people with a non-utopian character even if their language is shot through with utopian clichés. The kind of person I am describing may be called the *bourgeois citizen*. He used to exist in large numbers, but now is on the verge of becoming an extinct species. He has been killed off by bourgeois prosperity, which has corrupted his character from that of a *citizen* to that of a *consumer*. One hears much about the “work ethic,” these days, and I certainly appreciate the nostalgic appeal of that phrase. But the next time you hear a banker extolling the “work ethic,” just ask him if he favors making installment buying illegal. When I was very young, it was understood that the only people who would buy things on the installment plan were the irresponsibles, the wastrels, those whose characters were too weak to control their appetites. “Save now, buy later,” is what the work ethic used to prescribe.

To buy now and pay later was the sign of moral corruption — though it is now the accepted practice of our affluent society. A people who have mortgaged themselves to the hilt are a dependent people — and ultimately they will look to the state to save them from bankruptcy. The British have a wonderful colloquial phrase for installment purchasing — they call it buying on “the never-never.” The implication is that through this marvelous scheme you enter a fantasy world where nothing is denied you, and where the settling of all accounts is indefinitely postponed. This is a consumer's utopia — and more and more, it is as such a consumer's utopia that our bourgeois society presents itself to its people.

The transformation of the bourgeois citizen into the bourgeois consumer has dissolved that liberal-individualist framework which held the utopian impulses of modern society under control. One used to be encouraged to control one's appetites — now one is encouraged to satisfy them without delay. The inference is that one has a *right* to satisfy one's appetites without delay — and when this “right” is frustrated, as it always is in some way or other, an irritated populace turns to the state to do something about it. All this is but another way of saying that 20th century capitalism itself, in its heedless emphasis on economic growth and ever-increasing prosperity, incites ever more unreasonable expectations, in comparison with which the actuality of the real world appears ever more drab and disconcerting. It doesn't matter what economic growth is actually achieved, or what improvements are effected — they are all less than satisfying. Ours is a world of promises, promises — and in such a world everyone, to some degree or another, automatically feels deprived.

Let me give you an illustration that, I think, makes the point nicely. The historic rate of growth of the American economy, over the past century and a half, has averaged about 2.5 percent a year. By historic standards, this is a fantastic and unprecedented achievement — it means that the national income doubles every twenty-eight years. But is this a source of gratification to us? Do we go around complimenting ourselves on doing so well? One can answer these questions by asking another: What if the President of the United States were to declare tomorrow that it was his firm intention to sustain this rate of growth of 2.5 per cent a year? What would be the reaction? I think one can safely say that most Americans would think he was being pretty niggardly and mean-spirited. And there would be no shortage of politicians who would point out that 3 per cent was really a much nicer number, and 5 per cent nicer still. Does anyone doubt that they would be listened to? The proof that they would be is the fact that no President, in our lifetime, is going to mention that 2.5 per cent figure — it's too *real* a number, and is therefore offensive to our inflamed political sensibilities.

But one cannot continue in a condition in which reality is always offending our expectations. That is an unnatural condition, and sooner or later people will be seeking relief from it. Oddly enough, even though utopianism gives rise to the collectivist impulse, the collectivist state seems to be one way in which the fires of utopianism are dampened. The institutionalization of utopianism is itself an answer to utopianism. Thus the Christian Church had its origins in a utopian impulse, but the Church then functioned to control and pacify this impulse. The Church solved the problem of the Second Coming by announcing that it had already happened, and that the Church itself was its living testimony. Similarly, in Russia and China today, the regimes of these nations, born out of secular messianism, announce that there is no further need for messianism since their states are its incarnation in the here and now, and there is nothing further to be messianic about. This gives these regimes a double attraction to many people in the West: they affirm utopianism while offering a deliverance from it. This explains what is at first sight a paradox: the fact that so many of our Western intellectuals will simultaneously follow a utopian thinker like Herbert Marcuse in denouncing the bourgeois status quo and at

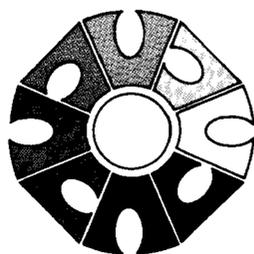
the same time praise Maoist China or Soviet Russia where Marcuse's works are forbidden to be published. Indeed, Marcuse himself is involved in this paradox! The paradox dissolves, however, if one realizes that the utopian impulse in the end, must actively seek its own liquidation — because it is impossible to sustain indefinitely; the psychological costs become too great. Utopianism dreams passionately of a liberation from all existing orthodoxies — religious, social, political — but, sooner or later, it must wearily and gratefully surrender to a new orthodoxy which claims its passions even as it compromises its dreams. The interesting question is whether the various emerging forms of collectivist orthodoxies in our time have the spiritual resources to establish a new order in which men can achieve some kind of human fulfillment. The evidence, so far, is that they do not — they seem to be morally and intellectually bankrupt from the outset. Marxism may be the official religion of Russia and China, but it is a religion without theologians — there isn't a Marxist philosopher worthy of the name in either country — and it is a religion whose holy scriptures, the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, are unread by the masses. These orthodoxies are sustained *only* by coercion — which means they are pseudo-orthodoxies, exuding an odor of boredom which is also the odor of decay.

Where does that leave us — we who inhabit the “free world” — the post-bourgeois bourgeois world? It leaves us, I should say, with a dilemma — but a dilemma which is also an opportunity. The opportunity is simply the opportunity of taking thought, of reflecting upon our condition, trying to understand how we got where we are. This does not sound like much — and yet it is much, much more than it sounds. For the real antidote to utopianism is a self-conscious understanding of utopianism. A utopianism which knows itself to be utopian is already on the way to denying itself, because it has already made that first, crucial distinction between dream and reality. And once that distinction is made — as it was made in classical, pre-modern philosophy — both the legitimacy of the dream and the integrity of reality can be preserved.

The modern world, and the crisis of modernity we are now experiencing, was created by ideas, and by the passions which these ideas unleashed. To surmount this crisis, without destroy-

ing the modern world itself, will require new ideas — or new versions of old ideas — that will regulate these passions and bring them into a more fruitful and harmonious relation with reality. I know that it will be hard for some to believe that ideas can be so important. This underestimation of ideas is a peculiarly bourgeois fallacy, especially powerful in that most bourgeois of nations, our own United States. For two centuries, the very important people who managed the affairs of this society could not believe in the importance of ideas — until one day they were shocked to discover that their children, having been captured and shaped by certain ideas, were either rebelling against their authority or seceding from their society. The truth is that ideas are *all*-important. The massive and seemingly-solid institutions of any society — the economic institutions, the political institutions, the religious institutions — are always at the mercy of the ideas in the heads of the people who populate these institutions. The leverage of ideas is so immense that a slight change in the intellectual climate can and will — perhaps slowly, but nevertheless inexorably — twist a familiar institution into an unrecognizable shape. If one looks at the major institutions of American society today — the schools, the family, the business corporation, the federal government — we can see this process going on before our eyes.

But just as it is ideas that alienate us from our world, so it is ideas which can make us at home in the world — which can permit us to envision the world as a “homely” place, where the practice of ordinary virtues in the course of our ordinary lives can indeed fulfill our potential as human beings. In such a world, dreams complement reality instead of being at war with it. The construction of such a world is the intellectual enterprise that most needs encouragement and support today. It will, on the surface, look like a mere academic enterprise, involving as it does a re-examination and fresh understanding of our intellectual and spiritual history. But such a re-examination and fresh understanding is always the sign that a reformation is beginning to get under way. And a reformation of modern utopianism, I think we will all agree, is what we are most desperately in need of. Only such a reformation can bring us back to that condition of sanity, to that confident acceptance of reality, which found expression in Lord Macaulay's tart rejoinder to Francis Bacon: “An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia.”



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