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Why Has 'Utopia' Become a Dirty Word?

Mark Stephen Jendrysik

Author's note: This essay summarizes some of the key ideas from my book *Utopia*, published in 2020 as part of the Key Concepts in Political Theory by Polity. The author wishes to thank Lyman Tower Sargent whose recent essay "Utopia Matters! The Importance of Utopianism and Utopian Scholarship" (*Utopian Studies* Vol. 32, No. 3, 2021) helped refocus my thinking on the key question of just how to define utopia and utopianism.

The question "why has "utopia" become a dirty word?" can be answered in many different ways. First, in the twentieth-century utopia became conflated with Marxism. Regimes purporting to advance Marxist ideology (however defined) placed themselves at the vanguard of history and proclaimed the creation of new people and a new regime of justice. When the pretensions of such regimes were revealed to be lies, utopian dreams of all sorts were declared discredited. Second, fascist regimes proclaimed themselves in league with the future in a way that appeared utopian to the naïve or cynical. When the crimes of those regimes were laid bare, utopia was once more discredited. (In my view, to call the Nazi regime or gulag states part of a utopian project does violence to the idea of utopia and renders it meaningless.) Third, the formal utopias of the past, such as those of Plato or More, have features that offend modern sensibilities such as slavery, fixed caste systems, eugenic marriage arrangements and ethnocentrism. Such "blueprint" utopias are justly criticized for treating human beings as pure abstractions. Fourth, utopian experiments in communal living, while numerous and often successful, are generally ignored by the press and public. Only the most grotesque cult-like communities become objects of public interest. Fifth, bad faith arguments against utopian thought and action say that since

utopia is about perfection in political, social and economic life,¹ and since such perfection cannot be attained, utopia must be a lie. In this case, we should always keep in mind that any ideas or policies that might improve the lives of the vast majority have always been declared to be “impossible.” Sixth, a “longing for the end” a desire for some sort of apocalyptic closure, grips millions or perhaps billions around the world. Why bother to try to make the world a better place when the end of days, whether in form of a second coming or in a secular end such as climate change, is immanent. Perhaps Nietzsche was right when he said “we are tired of man.” Finally, the post-cold-war triumphalism of liberal democracy and capitalism, Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” declared that utopia had been achieved. He claimed liberal democracy and capitalism represented the end state of human development. But those dreams were revealed to be false. All these factors lead to a rejection of the utopia and utopianism as useful categories of political analysis and action. As Immanuel Wallerstein said “utopias are breeders of illusions and therefore, inevitably, of disillusion. And utopias can be used, have been used, as justifications for terrible wrongs. The last thing we need is more utopian visions”² Utopia has also become a dirty word because it is always easier to see evidence of anti-utopia or dystopia in this fallen world. We should always remember that human beings have shown a tragic ability to create real world dystopias. The Nazi death camps, the Soviet gulag, “re-education” camps, the concentration camps for refugees that appear all over the world in even the most supposedly free countries, “reservations” and “reserves” for native peoples, the wars that rage all around the world, the list is sadly endless. Dystopia, not utopia, seems the inevitable outcome of our current course of political, economic and environmental breakdown.

Proclamations of the death of utopia occur with regular frequency. Fredric Jameson, perhaps the leading contemporary scholar of utopian ideas, suggests that utopia’s end can be seen in the current economic division of the world. In the impoverished half of the world, in the face of

¹ To avoid tedious repetition, in this essay, “political” means political, social and economic.

² Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics: Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: The New Press 1998): 1.

“misery, poverty, unemployment, starvation, squalor, violence and death ... the intricately elaborated social schemes of utopian thinkers become as frivolous as they are irrelevant.” Meanwhile, in the rich half of the world “unparalleled wealth, computerized production, scientific and medical discoveries ... seem to have rendered utopian fantasy and speculation as boring and antiquated as pre-technological narratives of space flight”³

Utopia is also a dirty word because we can look at the world and see that some people have attained it, perhaps at the cost of condemning their fellow human beings to misery. As Iain Banks says “the rich have always had utopia ... They were in a relatively utopian place in the pyramid but it was only for a tiny number of people. The rest was the immiseration of the multitudes.”⁴ Today, millions of human beings live like kings, or even gods when compared to the past. The inhabitants of the rich world seem to flaunt their comfort and wealth in the face of global misery.

Does utopia still have a place in present-day political thought and action? Calling a political demand or policy proposal “utopian” marks it as impossible or naïve and seems to have become quite an effective way of killing new ideas. We may reside, if popular culture is to be credited, in a post-utopian or dystopian age. Frontiers, even the high frontier of space, seem to have been closed. Technology, once the harbinger of human liberation, now appears on the cusp of making humanity obsolete. Fashionable despair rules the intellectual horizon. Youth are repeatedly told that their lives will be less rich, less meaningful than their parents’. Jameson believes that utopian thought, faced with the triumph of “late capitalism,” has been left voiceless, unable to articulate a coherent challenge to the oppression and despair of the present time.

Slavoj Žižek sees a failure of imagination at the heart of our current crisis. “Popular imagination is persecuted by the visions of the forthcoming “breakdown of nature,” of the stoppage of all life on earth – it seems easier to imagine the “end of the world” than a far more modest change in the mode of production.”⁵ Our malaise goes deep. In our current age, it has

³ Fredric Jameson “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 35.

⁴ “‘Utopia is a way of saying we could do better’: Iain Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson in Conversation,” ed. Val Nolan, *Foundation* 43 (2014): 65.

⁵ Quoted in Philip Wegner, *Shockwaves of Possibility* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2014): 89.

become fashionable to declare that progress is a lie, democracy a sham and human liberty an impossible dream. Authoritarian populism is resurgent. “Realists” denigrate utopian dreaming in favor of a hard headed (in their view) vision of a world in which power defines justice. Reaction seems in full flight. Reason and science seem to have been rejected. We see the return of magical thinking and the recreation of an enchanted world. Utopia has become identified with impossible dreams. Dystopian visions dominate our popular entertainment as zombies roam a desolate planet and children hunt each other for the entertainment of decadent elites.

Perhaps confusion about the nature of utopia and the wholesale rejection of the idea in recent times stems from a lack of rigor in definition. As Lyman Tower Sargent, the grand old man of utopian studies, says: “In a field as broad and rich as utopian studies, we are never going to agree, so we need to be explicit about the way we use key works, *and actually use them that way.*”⁶ We should keep in mind that utopia is a contested term making a single definition almost impossible to fix. But in order make the systematic study of utopia and utopian thought possible, utopia must be defined in a manageable way, keeping in mind there are exceptions to any rule. The idea of utopia is highly plastic and can be made to fit almost any political, economic or social system. It extends in all directions and can encompass any human endeavor. As Ernst Bloch said in his classic work on utopian theory, *The Principle of Hope*, “so far does utopia extend, so vigorously does the raw material spread to all human activities, so essentially must every anthropology and science of the world contain it.”⁷ The danger should be obvious, we can make utopia mean almost anything and attach utopian ideas to almost any human action.

To avoid the problem noted above, any useful definition of utopia and utopianism must be based on two foundational assumptions, first, any “utopian” vision that demands some unwillingly sacrifice to benefit others is wrong. Any vision that loves humanity, but discounts the well-being and the very survival of specific humans cannot be utopian. Human beings cannot be treated as abstractions. They must be seen as individuals, each with unique value. In our times,

⁶ Lyman Tower Sargent “Utopia Matters! The Importance of Utopianism and Utopian Scholarship,” *Utopian Studies* 32 (2021): 461 (emphasis in original).

⁷ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1986): 624.

no theory that treats people as mere cogs in a wheel or parts of a machine can be considered fully utopian. Second, utopia seeks freedom from fear, from want, from arbitrary power, from the limits imposed on us by nature. It seeks to create communal unity and a society that works together for the common good. But attaining all of these goals, or even one of them, is inherently problematic since freedom works against unity, and unity works against freedom. Utopia must allow citizens to voice demands for change and, if necessary, freely exit. A key challenge to any modern utopian theory remains how to encourage democracy and local control while avoiding the oppressive unity imposed by the tyranny of the majority and the potentially false harmony enforced by custom and norm.

Ruth Levitas provides a definition that helps explain the place of utopia in political thought:

The core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively. Its expressions explore and bring to debate the potential contents and contexts of human flourishing. It is thus better understood as a method than a goal – a method elaborated ... as the Imaginary Reconstruction of Society.

Utopia is a method, a means of approaching the existing political, social and economic world, situating critique and most importantly, providing alternatives. Utopia provides a platform to criticize our times and to work towards something better. Utopian thought provides an alternative to present social, economic and political organization and can spur action. The “Imaginary Reconstruction of Society” must be followed by efforts to really reconstruct society. It is not enough to criticize, we must also provide answers to our seemingly insurmountable problems. As Levitas says, “the task before us is to build the Republic of Heaven. Utopia... entails refusal, the refusal to accept that what is given is enough.”⁸

⁸ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013): xi and 17.

To have meaning and power, contemporary utopian political thought must engage in an active defense of ideas of equality and common purpose. Thinking in utopian ways “enables each of us to become a whole person, an active citizen, empowered to join with each other in the collective work of deep social transformation.”⁹ As such utopian political thought must reject modest goals and end points. Our current crises force us to demand what seems impossible. After all, the once impossible has become possible often enough. The ideal of equality, of treating our fellow human beings as subjects worthy of respect and not objects to be used, would have been understood as blasphemous madness for much of human history. (Such a position could be seen as a violation of the will of God or the gods, or as a violation of the immutable laws of nature.) A key principle of utopian political thought must remain making sure that no one can turn property (or money) into power. This might require small scale communism, or anarchist libertarianism with full exit, or it might require a form of radical democracy where most offices are filled by lottery. We must be open to radical speculation at all times. Like Plato, we must recognize that no existing society and perhaps none we can currently imagine fulfills all our expectations.

Utopian political thought must aim at human liberation. One hundred years ago H.G. Wells provided a set of clear guidelines for utopian thought and action. He said we must recognize “the essential value of all such speculation lies in this assumption of emancipation, lies in the regard toward human freedom, in the undying interest of the human power of self-escape, the power to resist the causation of the past, and to evade, initiate, endeavor and overcome.”¹⁰ But utopian speculation is not limitless or ungrounded. We must understand that we cannot fully escape the past or the traditions and lifeways we inhabit and that the wholly self-creating (or re-created) individual is a dangerous myth. Our emancipation can only occur in the context of our liberation in concert with that of our fellow human beings. We may find in utopian political thought the means to free humanity from fear, want and all the other oppressions that limit our

⁹ Tom Moylan, “Transgressive, Totalizing, Transformative: *Utopia’s* Utopian Surplus,” *Utopian Studies* 29 (2018): 321.

¹⁰ H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Penguin Classics 2005): 13.

potential. Utopians must continually fight against the dystopian idea the one person's freedom requires the oppression of others.

Utopian thought opposes "realism" whenever realism means "be reasonable" and temper demands for change. For utopia to have any meaning in our contemporary political debate its adherents must demand what seems impossible. Otherwise, they have already surrendered the liberation that comes with dreaming. Realism, by its very nature (acting within the constraints of the current times and the apparent power relations therein) inhibits change and more importantly inhibits our ability to creatively imagine change.

While Jameson notes the decline of utopia, he also noted its absolute necessity. He says "it is difficult to imagine any radical political programme today without the conception of systemic otherness, of alternative society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive."¹¹ Utopian thought is vitally necessary to any healthy community. People must be allowed and more importantly, allow themselves to dream, to launch their thought beyond what is socially expected and rewarded. If utopia is dead or meaningless what is left of human aspiration? Ideas that were once thought of as impossible have sometimes come true. Goals that seem out of reach in one generation are realized in the next. Now, I am not arguing for some simple-minded concept of inevitable and unstoppable progress. What I am saying is that without the dreaming that is often condemned as utopian, nothing can be accomplished. The impossibility of perfecting human societies should not be an excuse for not trying.

Utopian thought is at its best in such times as these. Not because it posits impossible dreams, but because it seeks to overcome the limits that cruelty and evil seem to place on human possibility. If we can make a mental leap and escape the dangerous mind-set that pretends that the statement "life isn't fair" is the height of wisdom or that "might makes right" is the apex of

¹¹ Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," 36.

political thought, we just might be able to find a path toward something better. The only way to be realistic in such a world is to demand what that world believes to be impossible.

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