

The Triple Confusion of Utopia

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Utopias arise out of a desire for perfection, and have often led to destruction and savagery. Why does enthusiasm for a transfigured community propel itself so rapidly into violence and evil? What unfathomable process causes the dream to transform itself into such a nightmare? Why do we bring on ourselves the evil that we abhor?

The most common criticism of utopia is that it is ineffectual: utopia desires a specific outcome but declines to exercise the means to achieve that end. In short, it is the same criticism that Marx levelled against the utopian 'idealism' of the moralist.

The utopian moralist scorns the idea of understanding the dynamic of the social forces that will facilitate change in a given situation. He fails to understand the appropriate means for this end. He may be overflowing with good intentions, but he is unable to carry out the social good that he feels so passionately about. Worse still, his position may unwittingly allow the system to remain exactly as it is, or it may even help create a society that is the very opposite of the one he envisions and hopes to shape.

This criticism is accurate but insufficient. Why does the utopian overlook the means? Isn't this utter madness? There must be a deeper reason behind this refusal, which must be the result of a confusion that manifests itself through three complementary factors.

1. *Confusion between the desired end and the end result of action.* Within an ethical framework, the ideal society can function as a regulating notion that spurs political action; and it may also be part of a collective programme, as an objective to be attained. But in utopia, the projected or intended end is identified with the final situation at the end of a chain of actions. As such it is a specific occurrence within other occurrences. This is where two concepts of 'end' are often and easily confused. On one hand the term 'end' refers to an intended objective that has yet to be achieved, and on the other hand it refers to a final situation that is the result of a concrete action.

Heavenly Jerusalem is a beacon of virtue but it is also an end, though distant, that

is both beloved and foretold; when we identify it with *this* earthly occurrence, produced by *this* particular behaviour of ours, it forces us to violate everything completely in order to achieve it. The idea of an emancipated society is what regulates our political actions, in the interest of encouraging freedom and justice. But if that society is a specific situation that exists in a specific place in history so that we may achieve it with our actions, we have no choice but to act to make it happen, no matter what.

2. *Confusion between the representation of the system of values and a concrete occurrence.* One of the characteristics of utopia, as we mentioned before, is that in our minds it represents an exemplary society in which certain intended or projected values are to be fulfilled. Now, that mental image may become confused with a specific social situation that places itself in the path of history. Given that utopian society is opposed to the present situation, it must situate itself at some other moment of the temporal dimension; however, it will have its moment. In eschatology, it is a singular event that will occur at some point in the future, because it has been foretold; otherwise it must situate itself in a lost, primordial past that must be revived in a new moment in the continuum of time. Thus the 'nonplace' is conceived of as a place, and is as such a spatial-temporal occurrence in real history.

In the anarchist and scientificist interpretations of marxism, the desired society is the end point of a causal chain of historical events. But it will be a specific kind of society, both stateless and classless, that will be the one to achieve the most truly desirable society, the one envisioned as utopia. Here, as well, the 'nonplace' is conceived of as a specific situation. It is a concrete occurrence, situated in a space and moment in time; it belongs to history.

The society represented in utopia is a paradigm in which a superior order of values has been achieved. If we understand it as an historic event, present or future, then the event is the complete embodiment of those values. As such, that social situation will, objectively speaking, be worthy of emulation, like no other. The struggle to implement that society is a conflict between absolute good and evil, between the greatest value and its lack thereof. There is no compromise possible between the two; there are no middle grounds. In the name of the political situation we are creating, the most perfect, we must destroy the society that opposes it.

3. *Confusion between rules of conduct and mandates.* The ideal society has a normative character. Its rational function is to act as a rule of conduct: it orients and directs political action but is never fully realized. If it were, then it would no longer be a rule. Ideal society is an idea that regulates behaviour.

This is true because projected values are necessarily different from any concrete situation. They are manifested through facts, they are evident, but they never crystallize in any concrete good.

If the proposed end is identified with a terminal event and the representation of ideal society is identified with an historical situation, then the value system will jibe with *that* particular historic situation. In other words, that concrete situation *must* come about. The projection of the most valuable society no longer functions as an idea that regulates any and all political action, for it now generates a mandate: the perfect society must be created. This doesn't entail acting in such a way that certain values are fulfilled in each and every action – the question at hand is that of pro-

ducing a real effect: the creation of a specific historical situation. It imposes itself upon the previous reality in a way that is traumatic: it will necessarily provoke violence. Between the existing society and the new order that tries to impose its authority, there is no room for compromise. Each individual must decide whether to help achieve this desirable historical outcome or cling to the existing situation. Each individual must make this choice – of one side or another. The defenders of justice, sworn to their new order, free of all possible contamination, are those who will be responsible for putting an end to hardships and carrying out the good. And the will to carry out the good happens through a decisive, clean break: by destroying the existing infamy. As such, this violence is simply the flipside of pure devotion to the goal at hand. The purest individuals cannot bear the existing corruption; the *fraticelli*, disciples of the most holy, the divine Francis, will do what they have to do to annihilate the corrupt with their holy violence. The Jacobin revolutionaries are the just, guided only by their civic virtue. They have renounced all personal interest, but their desire to truly build the society they want, they will have to instigate terror. The Bolsheviks are the new Jacobins for they, in the very same way, have dedicated their lives to the final end of and liberation from human exploitation, and to achieve this goal they must eliminate the society they so despise. But they are the only ones – nobody else can do this – who are capable of building a society to replace the existing one. For this reason they must subject all those who disagree with their efforts to the worst kind of tyranny imaginable, even the workers whom they have promised to liberate. By trying to achieve it in the here and now, no matter what the cost, in a propitious moment in time and space, the dream turns into a nightmare. In one scenario, it is the monsters of religious purity that turn on us; in the other, it is the monsters of reason. *Qui fait l'ange fait la bête*.

The will that is determined to create the perfect society through action can achieve this with faith. For the new society to emerge, those working toward it must believe that it will become a reality. In the utopias that demand voluntary decision in order to be achieved, the belief in certain facts tends to manifest itself through moral values. Virtuous is he who is prepared for the advent of the Kingdom and invokes it; he belongs to the group of the elect. Virtuous is he who believes in the republican homeland, defending it with his blood and destroying 'the enemies of the nation'. His dedication to the new republic, alongside the Jacobins, places him among the incorruptible. Virtuous, as well, is he who believes in the eradication of exploitation, as foretold by the theory, and fights against the oppressors, unafraid of dirtying his hands. In all of these cases there is a tendency – spoken or unspoken – to ascribe a moral value to the faith that a particular occurrence will come to pass: *parousia*, the republican homeland, communism. He who does not believe will act against the desired society, will be a conspirator of evil, and will have to be eliminated.

The flaw with utopia is not that it places social facts in direct conflict with values that transcend them; nor is it wrong in establishing and declaring the difference between the real society and the one it envisions. On the contrary, in fact: this is a requisite of all forms of moral regeneration. The flaw resides in the confusion between the envisioned scale of values and a particular historical event; by making it manifest in a singular historical fact. Its flaw is idolatry.

The projection of values should function as an ideal that helps to guide collective

action, without ever being fully achieved. As such it is not to be identified with any concrete situation, which would necessarily be beholden to a dominating order. When it is, it becomes utopia, and then it may inch dangerously close to its very opposite: ideology.

What happens if the society proclaimed by the utopian vision does not arrive when the Revelation or theory predicts it will? In this case, there is an alternative. One possibility is to indefinitely postpone the advent of the ideal society. 'It didn't happen because we weren't able to predict the precise moment it would, the process has been interrupted temporarily, or postponed, but it will come, later, much later. . . .' This position maintains, as before, the same belief in the inevitable nature of the desired end, and maintains its faith just the same, but simply postpones the realization of the goal. Those who fall into this category, however, will have to revise those previous beliefs of theirs which had predicted the advent of the desired society, now that it has not become a reality. This does not mean that any of the basic convictions must change, but they will need to be modified, and new information must be added and doctrine interpreted in order to justify the postponement of the desired end.

The other possibility is to continue insisting, against all evidence, that the desired ideal situation has in fact been achieved, but that it is merely in its initial phases. Reality simply needs to be interpreted properly so that we may clearly see that the proclaimed ideal society has in fact been achieved.

One paradigmatic example of this is the shift that took place from the primitive Christian church, filled with eschatological hope, to the sacramental church, considered to be the realization of the 'communion of the saints' on earth, or the 'City of God'. Utopia has not been achieved; *parousia* is not on the horizon. And so an alternative presents itself. Postponement is one option, for it allows the anticipation of the final event to be limited to a sect of the elect; this was the solution of various eschatological Christian communities (joachimites, evangelicals, anabaptists, etc.). The other option is the safer one: that of believing that utopia has been achieved, in some sense at least. Christ has returned and he lives on in his Church; the Church is his body; the existing Christian community is already the ideal 'City of God'; the transfigured man is the Christian purified by the sacraments conferred by the Church: the 'Kingdom of God' as it was foretold is already here, among us. The 'new world' that has been proclaimed is identified with this society, the community of the faithful, but it will also be more fully confirmed at the end of days. History continues to rest upon the notion of an ultimate end that gives it its meaning, but in this Christian society the initial indications are already there, offering a guarantee for the future that has been foretold. Utopia has been incorporated into the doctrine that justifies the Church's power. No longer is it a cry of repudiation against an existing situation or an invocation of a different society altogether; now it is the acceptance of the existing society, which prefigures and guarantees the arrival of the desired ideal community. And so utopia has become ideology.

Revolutions offer more modern examples of a similar process. Revolution sees itself as a rupture, a new beginning starting from zero. But the society that has been foretold does not materialize. In the face of this frustration, two diverging positions will emerge. The first one is that of postponement. The revolution has been interrupted, or distracted but at some point in the future it will get back on track and the

promise will be realized. This is Babeuf on the French Revolution, Trotsky on the Soviet revolution, Gilly on the Mexican revolution.

The second reaction to this frustration is obstinacy. We declare that the ideal society we so desire is already here, and that we are living it. This is true because our society is achieving the ideals of the revolution, protecting it against enemies and at the same time guaranteeing its perfection in the future. The present society is in fact the one desired as utopia, and at the same time it is the only society that is able to ensure its proper fulfilment in the future. This is a step that the Jacobins take, if unconsciously, when they declare their dictatorship to be the realization of the revolutionary nation and its only mode of survival. But an even clearer example of this is the proclamation of '*socialism in one country*'. Stalinist totalitarianism is presented as the authentic socialism, and at the same time as the guarantee of its advancement toward its perfection, in communism. The notion of change coagulates into a permanent system. Utopia has become incorporated into an ideology of domination.

And so a hybrid is created. Might we call this a 'utopian ideology'? By definition that would be a gruesome contradiction in terms. Utopia is conceived of as a clean break from an existing power, while ideology signifies the consolidation of an existing power. Ideology can only be 'utopian' through deceit: by presenting the existing power system *as if* it were the society dreamed of as utopia – or at least as if it were the only society capable of guaranteeing its full realization. The Church of Rome already fulfils the 'communion of the saints'; the Jacobin dictatorship is the only safeguard and backbone for a fraternal, free republic; and the totalitarian Soviet state is the realization of socialism.

Ideologies that try to justify themselves as utopias acquired a terrifying strength in the 20th century. They are the monsters of unbridled power. In these ideologies, the triple confusion I explained earlier reaches its most extreme point. The ideal society is recognizable in the instituted political system, because in this particular society either utopia itself or its incipient beginnings have already been achieved. The end of time is here with us in the present day. There is no end outside present-day society. There is no way out. As such, if there is one obligation that must be carried out in achieving this desired society, it is the obligation of consolidating the present social order in which that society manifests itself. Any and all disobedience is inadmissible; any and all dissent is a step backwards; there is no legitimate dissidence in the name of superior values, given that only the present system can guarantee the realization of those values. The most radical of investments operates in this way; the notion of rupture becomes the notion of reiterating the social system that appropriated utopia to itself. At the same time, any future attempt at rupture is denied, as well. This is the ideology of absolute domination, because it excludes all dissidence – or, rather, because it perceives all dissidence as reaction, as a step backward toward the society rejected by utopia. To question the precepts of the Church is to oppose the society Christ dreamed of; to contradict the public health committees is to conspire against the nation; to disagree with the policies delineated by the party's Central Committee can only be construed as a betrayal or an alliance with the defeated bourgeoisie.

There is no regime in existence that has been able to invent a form of domination

more perfect than that of transforming utopia into an ideology. By incorporating utopia, ideologies effectively prevent escape from the system of domination. The ideology incorporates the end values of utopia, and at the same time claims it is the only mode of guaranteeing the achievement of those values. As such there can only be one moral path, the one that is established by the ideology. When it comes to the election of those values, plurality is unacceptable: there is but one sole notion of the life that will lead to the highest end, and it is the life that has been indicated by the repetitive mindset of the social state that has already been achieved. This absolute type of ideology is very common in religious fundamentalism, in which the purest society – the one God predicted and intended for his worldly creatures – is already here on the premises, so to speak, and manifests itself in a single law, approved by God's earthly representatives, his prophets. And it is expressed in the sole, revealed truth that legitimizes the new order that obeys the Koran or the Bible.

The modern forms of absolute ideologies are totalitarianisms. They attempt to achieve the final utopia: the perfect community, the emancipated society or the empire of a superior race. Humanity has reached its end; history has ended. There is no longer any need to seek utopia, for the totalitarian State has fulfilled it. By confusing it with an historic situation, utopia has given rise to a terrible mode of thinking: the justification of absolute power in the name of the supreme good.

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