

Opinion

A Utopia for a Dystopian Age

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THE STONE JUNE 26, 2017

The term “utopia” was coined 500 years ago. By conjoining the Greek adverb “ou” (“not”) and the noun “topos” (“place”) the English humanist and politician Thomas More conceived of a place that is not — literally a “nowhere” or “noplacé.” More’s learned readers would also have recognized another pun. The pronunciation of “utopia” can just as well be associated with “eu-topia,” which in Greek means “happy place.” Happiness, More might have suggested, is something we can only imagine. And yet imagining it, as philosophers, artists and politicians have done ever since, is far from pointless.

More was no doubt a joker. “Utopia,” his fictional travelogue about an island of plenty and equality, is told by a character whose name, Hythlodæy, yet another playful conjoining of Greek words, signifies something like “nonsense peddler.” Although More comes across as being quite fond of his noplacé, he occasionally interrupts the narrative by warning against the islanders’ rejection of private property. Living under the reign of the autocratic Henry VIII, and being a prominent social figure, More might not have wanted to rock the boat too much.

Precisely that — rocking the boat — has, however, been the underlying aim of the great utopias that have shaped Western culture. It has animated and informed progressive thinking, providing direction and a sense of purpose to struggles for social change and emancipation. From the vantage point of the utopian imagination, history — that gushing river of seemingly contingent micro-events — has taken on

meaning, becoming a steadfast movement *toward* the sought-for condition supposedly able to justify all previous striving and suffering.

Utopianism can be dreamy in a John Lennon “Imagine”-esque way. Yet it has also been ready to intervene and bring about concrete transformation.

Utopias come in different forms. Utopias of desire, as in Hieronymus Bosch’s painting “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” focus on happiness, tying it to the satisfaction of needs. Such utopias, demanding the complete alleviation of pain and sometimes glorious spaces of enjoyment and pleasure, tend, at least in modern times, to rely on technology. The utopias of technology see social, bodily and environmental ills as requiring technological solutions. We know such solutions all too well: ambitious city-planning schemes and robotics as well as dreams of cosmic expansion and immortality.

The utopias of justice are perhaps even more familiar. Asking, typically, for great personal sacrifice, these utopias call for the abolition of all social injustice. While the French Revolution had its fair share of such visions, they reached an apotheosis in 20th-century Marxist politics. Despite his own personal rejection of utopianism, Lenin, high on his pedestal addressing workers in October 1917, came to be the embodiment of all three forms of utopia. At the heart of the Soviet vision there were always those burning eyes gazing intently, and with total confidence, toward the promised land.

Today, the utopian impulse seems almost extinguished. The utopias of desire make little sense in a world overrun by cheap entertainment, unbridled consumerism and narcissistic behavior. The utopias of technology are less impressive than ever now that — after Hiroshima and Chernobyl — we are fully aware of the destructive potential of technology. Even the internet, perhaps the most recent candidate for technological optimism, turns out to have a number of potentially disastrous consequences, among them a widespread disregard for truth and objectivity, as well as an immense increase in the capacity for surveillance. The utopias of justice seem largely to have been eviscerated by 20th-century totalitarianism. After the Gulag Archipelago, the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields and

the Cultural Revolution, these utopias seem both philosophically and politically dead.

The great irony of all forms of utopianism can hardly escape us. They say one thing, but when we attempt to realize them they seem to imply something entirely different. Their demand for perfection in all things human is often pitched at such a high level that they come across as aggressive and ultimately destructive. Their rejection of the past, and of established practice, is subject to its own logic of brutality.

And not only has the utopian imagination been stung by its own failures, it has also had to face up to the two fundamental dystopias of our time: those of ecological collapse and thermonuclear warfare. The utopian imagination thrives on challenges. Yet these are not challenges but chillingly realistic scenarios of utter destruction and the eventual elimination of the human species. Add to that the profoundly anti-utopian nature of the right-wing movements that have sprung up in the United States and Europe and the prospects for any kind of meaningful utopianism may seem bleak indeed. In matters social and political, we seem doomed if not to cynicism, then at least to a certain coolheadedness.

Anti-utopianism may, as in much recent liberalism, call for controlled, incremental change. The main task of government, Barack Obama ended up saying, is to avoid doing stupid stuff. However, anti-utopianism may also become atavistic and beckon us to return, regardless of any cost, to an idealized past. In such cases, the utopian narrative gets replaced by myth. And while the utopian narrative is universalistic and future-oriented, myth is particularistic and backward-looking. Myths purport to tell the story of *us*, our origin and of what it is that truly matters for us. Exclusion is part of their nature.

Can utopianism be rescued? Should it be? To many people the answer to both questions is a resounding no.

There are reasons, however, to think that a fully modern society cannot do without a utopian consciousness. To be modern is to be oriented toward the future. It is to be open to change even radical change, when called for. With its willingness to ride roughshod over all established certainties and ways of life, classical

utopianism was too grandiose, too rationalist and ultimately too cold. We need the ability to look beyond the present. But we also need More's insistence on playfulness. Once utopias are embodied in ideologies, they become dangerous and even deadly. So why not think of them as thought experiments? They point us in a certain direction. They may even provide some kind of purpose to our strivings as citizens and political beings.

We also need to be more careful about what it is that might preoccupy our utopian imagination. In my view, only one candidate is today left standing. That candidate is nature and the relation we have to it. More's island was an earthly paradise of plenty. No amount of human intervention would ever exhaust its resources. We know better. As the climate is rapidly changing and the species extinction rate reaches unprecedented levels, we desperately need to conceive of alternative ways of inhabiting the planet.

Are our industrial, capitalist societies able to make the requisite changes? If not, where should we be headed? This is a utopian question as good as any. It is deep and universalistic. Yet it calls for neither a break with the past nor a headfirst dive into the future. The German thinker Ernst Bloch argued that all utopias ultimately express yearning for a reconciliation with that from which one has been estranged. They tell us how to get back home. A 21st-century utopia of nature would do that. It would remind us that we belong to nature, that we are dependent on it and that further alienation from it will be at our own peril.

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