The Utopian Vision of the Future (Then and Now): A Marxist Critique

Bertell Ollman

1.

Oscar Wilde said that any map that doesn't have utopia on it is not worth looking at.[1] There are few quotes I've cited as often or with as much pleasure as this one. Yet, there is something in the sweeping nature of the claim that has always left me unsatisfied. In examining utopian thinking, I will also try to distinguish what is valid and useful in Wilde's claim from what is not.

Before starting on our meta-journey to utopia, however, there are a few ambiguities in the meaning of "utopia" that need to be clarified. The term comes from Thomas More's famous work, *Utopia,* where it is used to mean both an ideal society and also one that doesn't exist anywhere. Later, utopia also came to be used to refer to a society that did not exist because it could not exist; it depicted an impossible dream. An ideal as yet unrealizable, or unrealizable because impossible? This ambiguity in the term's meaning has teased but no doubt also stimulated writers on the subject from More's day (early sixteenth century) to our own, and also accounts for the delight or dismay with which different people have reacted to the charge of being a utopian.

In most discussions of this subject, utopian thinking has simply been equated with having a utopia, whether of the first or second kind. Clearly, this is inadequate, for if we take utopia as meaning an ideal that exists nowhere but could, then anyone who thinks society can be improved and has some idea of what that would look like (and who does not?) can be labeled a utopian, and we've learned nothing worthwhile about any of them. But if we understand utopia as an impossible ideal—besides begging the question of what is possible—this only gives us the main result of utopian thinking; it doesn't tell us anything about the process that led to it. As a criterion for determining what is and isn't utopian, it is not sufficient. More troublesome, it may not even be a necessary criterion, since utopian thinking may on occasion produce a vision of the future that is realizable. What, then, is the connection between having a vision of the future, whether realizable or not, and utopian thinking?

The confusion surrounding our topic is due largely to the conflation of three distinct elements: having a vision of the future, realizable or not; the impulse to speculate about the future using one’s hopes, wishes, wants, and dreams; and the construction of one’s vision out of just such materials. It is the latter that is the chief characteristic of utopian thinking. We have already indicated that virtually everyone who voices their dissatisfaction with the status quo has a vision of the future that differs in at least some respects from the present. Certainly, this is true of Marx, whose vision is far more complete and systematic than even most of his followers realize.[2]

The impulse to speculate about the future is even more widespread. Hoping, after all, is natural, as is wishing, wanting, dreaming (including daydreaming), anticipating, and fantasizing. We have all engaged in these activities, some have let them run unchecked, some have shared them with others, some groups in the population—usually subaltern ones—have done more of it, and some societies and ages in history have been particularly marked by it. The Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, wrote a three volume work cataloguing such human qualities, trying to free them from the self-delusion and escapism that all too often accompany them. Even that consummate realist, Lenin, can be found approving of daydreaming if the dreams are based on objective reality and one accepts the responsibility for realizing them. There is without any doubt the motivation to achieve a better, happier, more secure, and more fulfilling life in all of us, and our imagination has a role to play both in helping us clarify what this is and in stimulating us to act upon it. To this extent at least, the roots of the emancipatory project can be said to exist within human nature itself.

While everyone has utopian impulses, however, only some use them as the main raw material for constructing their vision of the future, only some, therefore, qualify as utopian thinkers. Furthermore, wishing for a better future, speculating what this might consist of, is not always and everywhere progressive or even political. Capitalism, after all, has proven very effective in co-opting free-floating utopian impulses. Fashion, for example, is but one example of how our desires for happiness, beauty, and community are cynically manipulated and turned into a means for enriching the few. Lotteries, rock concerts, and mass spectator sports are others. Given forms that are sufficiently distant from the main battlegrounds of the class struggle, even the most radical impulses can be rendered safe for the status quo.

2.

From what Marx and Engels said on this subject, utopian thinking would appear to have the following characteristics:

1. The vision of the future is constructed primarily—though not necessarily exclusively—out of hopes, wishes, and intuitions, whether envisioned by an individual or taken from the writings of other utopian thinkers, or some combination of the two.
2. Constructed in this way and from such materials, this vision is externally related to whatever analysis one may have made of present conditions (each is viewed as logically independent of the other).
3. But without any necessary connection between the two, there is no need for extensive analysis of the society in which one lives, and as a rule there is very little.
4. Constructed from one's hopes and wishes, and logically set off from one's understanding of the present, the vision of the future generally precedes whatever social analysis is undertaken and occupies a central place in the thinking process.
5. The future, so constructed, then serves as an independent standard for making evaluative judgments of whatever conditions and events come into one's study of the present and the past.
6. Finally, as a result of all the foregoing, there is a serious overestimation of the role that moral arguments rooted in this conception of the future play—and can play—in bringing about the desired reforms. Of all these interlinked characteristics, it is the first one that is decisive, since it engenders all the others.

If this is utopian thinking, then, who are the utopians? Three groups deserve this name. First, and foremost, there are the creators who set down, often in considerable detail, the vision of an ideal society that they had captured in their mind's eye. The contents of these ideals vary a great deal as do the proportion of fact to fantasy, but the brotherhood of man, equality between the sexes, sharing of most earthly goods, checks against tyranny, and an emphasis on education as the chief means of producing good human beings appear often enough for these utopian visions to have been a major springboard for all the socialist thinking that came after. Whether a particular ideal was meant as a blueprint from which a new society (or world) was to be constructed, or as a standard from which existing institutions could be judged, or simply as an aid to philosophical speculation—or some combination of these—is not, in the last analysis, as important as the central lesson set out in all utopias, which is that society is a product of human beings and that if they don't like the one they are living in, they can remake it. In a world where most people have always taken their society as given, what an extraordinary impetus this must have been to think critically and to act.

The second group of people who deserve to be called utopians are the settlers who came to live in the hundreds of communities—mostly in Europe and America, and mostly in the nineteenth century—that were inspired by these visions. And, third, there is the much, much larger group of people, then and now, who have adopted most of the utopian mode of thinking that we described above.

While there has probably always been some utopian thinking, the first comprehensive utopian imaginings of which we have a record emerged in ancient Greece. The most famous of these is the caste bound society ruled by philosophers in Plato's *Republic* (late fifth century B.C.)—though Lycurgus's (fascist?) utopia, which served as the model for Sparta, preceded it by four centuries. Unfortunately, of the few communist utopian visions produced in the Hellenic world—those of Zeno the Stoic, Iambulus, and Euhemerus—very little is known. A case can also be made for including the declamations of some of the Hebrew prophets—like Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—among these early utopian works.

Rome doesn't seem to have produced any utopian literature, nor did Christendom—unless one counts Jesus' tales in the *New Testament*—until the surge of peasant rebellions in the late Middle ages gave us a few religiously inspired visions of a heaven that people could enter before death. Then, with all the turmoil caused by the rise of capitalism, the Renaissance and the Reformation, a spate of secular utopias appeared, particularly in England—led by the future Chancellor of England Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516)—and, not so coincidentally, Italy. Though many utopian works appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, More and Plato continued to dominate the field. It was only in the eighteenth century with Jonathan Swift's literary masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and, later, Morelly's *Code of Nature* (1755), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), with their huge influence on the thought and language of the most radical elements in the French Revolution, that More and Plato ceased being the standard against whom every new utopian was measured.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, a beginning so filled with hope only to end in apparent failure, a period that also saw the rapid development of industrial capitalism, with its puzzling combination of new wonders and old misery, the process of creating and discussing ideal visions of the future preoccupied dissident intellectuals more than ever before. The first half of the nineteenth century was the high tide of utopian modeling, of the construction of and participation in utopian communities, and of utopian thinking generally. It was also the time when utopianism became clearly, if not always consistently, committed to an anticapitalist agenda, when "utopia" shed its socially ambiguous character and came out stamped as “utopian socialism,” with all earlier versions of the genre now read (and often misread) in this light.

The most compelling figure in this utopian renaissance was the French traveling salesman, Charles Fourier, who published eight books between 1808 and 1828 laying out in exquisite detail, with everything carefully numbered and measured, what many—including this writer—believe is the most imaginative and psychologically sophisticated utopia of them all. No one who reads his account of how to combine work, education, and games will ever look at any of these activities as he or she did before. If Fourier’s communities represented an attempt to return to a simpler, pre-industrial form of existence, his contemporary and chief competitor, the French aristocrat, Comte de Saint-Simon strove in his many works to build his utopia with the aid of the most developed technologies and planning stratagems of the time. And if Fourier wished to start small (though he fully expected his communities to spread quickly across the entire planet), Saint-Simon envisioned his ideal society on the scale of whole nations and continents. Between these two intellectual giants, it seemed as if French consumers of utopian visions had all the choices they could handle, when—a little later (1840)—Étienne Cabet offered them in *Voyage to Icaria* the most communist, rationalist, atheist, and democratic utopia of them all.

In England, most socialist thought in the first half of the nineteenth century revolved around the more pedestrian utopian vision found in Robert Owen’s *New View of Society* (1813). As a former capitalist, and probably the only person to come from this class to produce a socialist utopia, Owen enjoyed the singular advantage of being able to put his own money behind his ideas, while Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Cabet wasted a good deal of their time scrambling after funds. No one stressed the importance of education in forming character more than Owen, and therefore of socialist education in forming new human beings. How people who received a capitalist education could be expected to make a socialist community work, however, is a question that he, along with the great majority of his utopian colleagues, neglected to ask. Later in the century, Owen’s countryman, William Morris, probably the most versatile artist of his time and a self-proclaimed follower of Marx, produced a popular utopia in *News from Nowhere* (1890) that—quite un-Marx like—drew more from his idealized notion of the medieval world that capitalism had destroyed than from the technically advanced society that it had made possible. His contemporary, Edward Bellamy, America’s only major entrant in the utopian derby, did just the opposite in *Looking Backward* (1890), which combined a New World sensibility, an appealing love story, and good timing (the class struggle was at its height), with neither too much nor too little imagination to become the most widely read and influential utopian tract of all time. The dispute over how much importance to give to technology and to size and complexity in constructing a socialist ideal that split the French followers of Fourier and Saint-Simon was also replayed a half-century later in the Anglo-Saxon world, albeit on a smaller scale, among the supporters of Morris and Bellamy.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, despite the popularity of Bellamy and Morris, there was a decided falling off in the production of utopian works and in the number of new utopian communities. Many of the older, established utopian communities also faded and died out during this period. Since the horrors of capitalism to which modern utopian socialists had responded grew larger and worse during this period, it would appear that the main explanation lay in the rapid spread of Marxist and anarchist alternatives among the groups most affected by these developments. Socialism had taken a more "scientific" as well as a more activist turn, and the school of socialism that sought to change the world through the force of its ideal—embodied in a community if possible, restricted to paper if not—has never recovered. Utopian works continued to be written, and occasionally new utopian communities, both lay and religious, would spring up, but the numbers were not there, nor the degree of interest, nor the broad influence on intellectual life that we saw earlier.

It was against this restricted background that the twentieth century opened with a cluster of utopian science fiction works by the English socialist, H. G. Wells. No sooner did science get under way in the modern era, of course, than science fiction appeared and with it the frequent coupling of social and technological speculation. But it was only in the twentieth century that science fiction utopias—both in print and on film—became such a large part, and perhaps the largest part, of the output of the utopian socialist school. What stands out even more, however, about the main utopian works of the past century—such as the Russian Yevgeny Zemyatin's *We* (1928), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *1984* (1945)—is their character as satires and their use to criticize what their authors considered the misshapen form of socialism in the Soviet Union (though much of Huxley's critique also applied to capitalism). From a means of winning people over to the ideal of socialism, the utopian novel had become one of the most effective means of frightening people off it. And while utopias that direct their sharpest barbs at capitalism continued to appear, none of them have had the impact of these dystopian warnings.

It is in part to correct this mismatch and refurbish the goals of socialism (or what some call its "soul," "spirit," or "values") that the call has gone up from many people on our side, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, for more and better utopian socialist works. But besides leading to a flood of positive references to utopian socialism in journals where one least expected it, there is little indication that this policy has achieved any of its desired objectives. Could it? Is utopian socialism of any kind and to any degree compatible with Marxism? For me, this is the key question. And in preparing my answer, I have gone from defining utopia, to explaining utopian thinking, to identifying the utopians and their more important accomplishments over time. But before introducing Marx's dialectical approach to analyzing society and the criticisms of utopian thinking that follow from it, the matter of who is and who isn't a utopian requires some further qualification.

The main utopians of the nineteenth century, for example, did not consider themselves utopians, which they understood as impractical dreamers. In their eyes, they offered solutions that would work. But dreamers are not utopians, only dreamers. They become utopians by adopting a mode of thinking in which dreams, hopes, and intuitions play a bigger role in constructing their vision of the future than their analysis of the present. To be fair to them, the nineteenth century "fathers" also engaged in some analysis, in Saint-Simon's case a great deal, which only goes to show that there are few out and out utopians even among the classical bearers of this label. Being utopian doesn't preclude some realistic assessment of existing society and even some practical political involvement; just as opponents of the utopians may occasionally fall into utopian forms of thinking. What determines one's classification, therefore, is the *degree* of importance given to wishes and hopes in constructing the ideal and the *relative* importance of this ideal in one's subsequent thinking and actions.

Apart from socialists off building model communities and waiting for their example to spread across the world, there are few thoroughgoing utopians on the left today. Yet, most American radicals carry a significant strain of utopian thinking in their DNA. In part, this is due to the absence of a strong Marxist tradition with its preference for engaging in systemic analysis before tackling any social problem. But modern capitalism, with its need to make people believe they can make it while denying the great majority the means to do so, raising hopes and expectations and dashing them to the ground only to raise them again, and with its ubiquitous advertising, lotto, and talk of the American dream, is peculiarly adept in producing unrealistic dreamers who are also utopian thinkers.

Futurology has become something of a capitalist growth industry involving not only those who respect existing property relations but many who do not. The various social movements are particularly affected by the frame of mind that sets out ideals—a pollution-free environment, racial/gender/ethnic equality, an end to hunger, durable peace, etc.—before making any analysis of the encompassing capitalist system, and then offering highly charged moral solutions that blithely ignore what would have emerged from such an analysis. Rather than telling my many comrades in the social movements, if the shoe fits, wear it, I am only suggesting that if you find yourself wearing this shoe, you may want to consider why it fits.

3.

Marx's approach to the future could not be more different. Like virtually everyone else in his day, Marx was astounded by the scope and rapidity of the changes that were occurring all around him, but also by their contradictory nature. The enormous growth in the production of wealth, for example, came along with an increase in the worst forms of poverty; progress in science and technology that had a potential for making work much easier only succeeded in speeding up the pace of work and lengthening the working day; even the increase of personal freedom due to the abolition of various feudal ties came on the back of an even greater decrease in freedom due to the unforgiving conditions in which people were forced under pain of starvation to live and work (or what Marx was later to call the "violence of things").[3] Meanwhile, more and more of the world was becoming privatized, commodified, fetishized, exploitable and exploited, and alienated as "all that is solid melts into air."[4] Some were delighted by these developments, most were appalled, and everyone was amazed. What did it all mean? And what, if anything, could be done about it? There was no lack of answers, only of convincing ones. No doubt, there were people who wished to put the genie back into the bottle (as there still are) and others who retreated into a fantasy world of their own making, but here and there a few people tried to understand what was happening, to grasp it in depth and in all its contradictoriness, with its good and bad sides and how different groups were affected by each, and to view it as an internally related whole that arose out of feudalism and seemed to be headed in a particular direction. In the forefront of those engaged in this Herculean effort of discovery and *uncovery* was Karl Marx.

The first step Marx took to unravel the mysteries of capitalism was to make a detailed investigation of the capitalist mode of production, or the specific ways in which wealth is produced, distributed, exchanged, and consumed in our form of society together with the relations between the classes involved in these processes (or what Marx was later to call “capital accumulation” and “class struggle”). After tracing the broad patterns found in the interaction between these processes and relations within the mode of production and those in a few other sectors of capitalist society, Marx set out to look for their preconditions in the past. The second step in this systematic use of the dialectical method is to look backward from the present. His main guiding question is—what had to have happened in the past for capitalism to appear and function as it does now? And his search for answers is as much deductive (proceeding from what he found in his survey of the present) as inductive. Then turning around—in the decisive third step—he takes what he has learned about preconditions reorganized as a set of overlapping contradictions, and projects them forward into the present…and beyond.

By following this procedure, Marx is able to conceive of the present as the future of its past which is in the process of becoming the past of its own future. What is now the result (capitalism) of its own preconditions is viewed as the precondition of what will soon become its result and its own negation. The point is that any conditions which arise in historical time are capable of disappearing in historical time. The broad relations they had with whatever helped bring them into being are reproduced when these conditions themselves are in the process of giving way to what comes next. Capitalism took and transformed but also rejected a good deal of its own preconditions, and will receive the same treatment from the society that follows it. In this way, examining what happened in the evolving relation between capitalism and the society from which it emerged can be an important guide to what socialism is likely to take, transform, and reject from capitalism. And throughout, it is organizing the major tendencies involved as contradictions—that is, as mutually dependent processes that simultaneously support and undermine one another while building up to a major collision up ahead—that enables Marx to project both the possibility of a socialist revolution and the kind of society which can follow from it.[5]

Besides the enormous material wealth and the equally impressive attainments in science, technology, medicine, education, organization, politics, and culture bequeathed by capitalism (that survive partly altered as part of the resolution of capitalism’s major contradictions), the most important contribution to constructing the new socialist society comes from the interests of its new ruling class—the working class (understood economically as those who help produce value, but politically, as everyone who is forced to sell their labor power in order to survive, a much larger group). While most people recognize the role of class interests in Marx's projection of a socialist revolution, relatively few are aware of its crucial contribution to Marx's vision of socialism and communism. Consequently, the question often arises: Why will the workers once in power act in the way that Marx believes they will? To begin, it is obvious that every new ruling class has used its power over the state to serve its most important interests. If this is so, then the real question is: Why would the workers once they achieve power do anything else?

The answer is that they would not. But—here is the difference—their main class interest at this time, as distinct from that of every previous ruling class, would be to abolish the unequal social and economic conditions that underlay the exploitation from which they suffered under capitalism. To achieve this, the workers would have to pursue thoroughgoing democratic and egalitarian policies that would quickly undermine the various non-economic as well as economic forms of oppression carried over from the earlier period. Only in this way can the workers further enhance their power as a class (a power based on numbers, solidarity, and cooperation) in order to defend their victory in the revolution (something they dare not take for granted) but also to undertake the difficult tasks involved in building a socialist society. Unlike earlier ruling classes, which derive their power from all the ways they are/have more than everyone else, the power of the workers as a ruling class comes from the kind and degree of equality established between all the people in their society.

Equality, in socialism, is not just a goal; it is an interest and therefore a need. For, the only way white, male, heterosexual, American, Christian workers can completely avoid the danger of becoming less equal than others is to treat *all* the workers who were subjected to non-class as well as class oppression under capitalism (without whom, it should be noted, the revolution would not have succeeded and whose involvement in the struggle will have created many new links between all workers) as their equals. And only the unity born out of such equality will allow the working class, taken as a whole, to reshape the material and other *indispensable* advantages bequeathed by capitalism in ways that best serve their own class interests and, over time, everyone's deepest human interests and needs.

Taken together the above arguments suggest that the priority Marx gives to class has nothing to do—as is sometimes said—with idealizing workers, or with believing that exploitation is morally more objectionable than other forms of oppression, or that workers suffer more from exploitation than others do from racism and sexism. Rather, class, class interests, and class struggle serve as Marx's main categories for investigating the role of people in society because they provide the surest means for analyzing how capitalism works and develops, what in it requires a major overhaul, with whom this can be accomplished, and—emerging from all this—what, in broad outline, the day after tomorrow (if we are lucky enough to have one) will probably look like.

4.

Utopian thinking, of course, is not without its redeeming features, and before detailing my criticisms of this school the most important of these features deserve to be mentioned. Speculating about the future, for example, unrestrained by any analysis of the present can be a very liberating experience. By this I mean it not only feels good but can help some individuals break out of an unthinking acceptance of the status quo just by showing that there is something else, if only in our imagination. It is a way of living, if only fleetingly and subjectively, in another realm with other expectations and values. Touching on hitherto unsuspected sources of pleasure, it can also heighten people's dissatisfaction with the oppressive routines of daily life, piquing the desire for something better. All this can play an important role in triggering critical consciousness, particularly in the young and very young, and this holds as much for our new utopians as for the ones Marx knew.

In more creative minds, utopian thinking can also provide first approximations of real possibilities and even invent new forms of social interaction that may prove useful later on. Fourier's idea that education should combine both class room and work life experience is an instance of this. Contrasting some feature of the present with a wholly imaginative construction also helps clarify for many what is lacking in the present, advancing their dissatisfaction with it and serving as a criticism of it at the same time. Before there was an analysis—such as Marxism—that showed how our society actually works and its potential, real potential, for something totally other, the contributions made by utopian thinking in such matters was invaluable.

No one was more aware of the contribution of utopian thinkers, particularly Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Owen, to the socialist project, nor more generous in his praise for them, than Marx (along with whom I also include Engels). He saw that in the works of the utopians "there is the anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world."[6] In the *Communist Manifesto*, he and Engels proclaimed that the utopians "attack every principle of existing society. Hence, they are full of the most valuable material for the enlightenment of the working class."[7] And there are many other such comments. Without question, Marx himself benefited enormously from both the insights and spirit of the utopian tradition when he made his own break from capitalism. Yet, this leaves us with only half of the picture.

In the first draft of his “Civil War in France,” Marx said that it was the utopians who supplied the Paris Commune with its main goals—the suppression of the wage system and the end of class rule—though it was left to the Communards to find ways to attain them.**8** But in the final version of this work, this praise is replaced by the well known remark: “The working class…have no ready made utopias to introduce. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing society is pregnant.”**9** It is from such evidence that Vincent Geoghegan, one of our leading scholars on this subject, concludes that “Marx and Engels left an ambiguous legacy in which vigorous attacks on utopianism accompanied clear utopian speculation.”**10** Well, not quite. What Marx was intent to emphasize by his published remark is that communism is not an ideal that exists ready-made in some people’s imagination to which the activities of workers only needs to be matched. Rather, communism exists within the present as its potential—“the old collapsing society is pregnant” with it. Revolutionary practice is directed to transforming the old society “to set free the elements of the new” one. It is an actual potential, one discoverable through the kind of analysis Marx undertakes, that gets realized, and not a disconnected idea some clever people have thought up.

Marx’s critique of the utopians, then (and this bears repetition), is never directed against their having a vision of the future, and seldom against its contents—though there is much in the contents of the main utopian writings with which he disagrees—but to the speculative manner by which they arrive at their vision and the effect of this approach on their thinking, way of arguing, and general political stance. While the positive accomplishments of utopian thinking are not insignificant, therefore, there is a high price to pay for them.

5.

More specifically, the main criticisms Marx makes of the utopians are as follows: (1) utopian thinking tends to produce visions of the future that are unrealistically rigid and complete; (2) there is no basis for determining if a vision constructed in this speculative manner is desirable, if it really is the “good” society; (3) equally, there is no clear way of determining if it is possible, that is whether people will ever be able to build such a society, and, if they do, whether it will function as expected; (4) by taking up the space allotted to the future in our thinking, utopian visions undermine the possibility of making a dialectical analysis of the present as a temporal dimension in which the future already appears as a potential; (5) utopian thinking results in ineffective ways of arguing; and (6) it also leads to ineffective political strategies.

To elaborate briefly on these points: First, if one's analysis of present society is limited to its more distasteful features, there is little to keep one from drawing up a picture of the future that is more exact and finished, in the manner of the utopians, than what we currently know or could easily discover allows. Leaving nothing to the imagination of future generations also betrays a singular lack in one's own imagination as well as a certain dogmatism. There must also be enough slack in the vision to enable adjustments called for by the specific historical circumstances in which socialism will come into being as well as people's different economic, geographical, and cultural conditions.

Second, there is no basis for deciding whether a vision of the future produced in this manner is good, let alone ideal. Each utopian thinker, after all, has drawn upon his own hopes, wishes, and dreams, and what manner of evidence is this? As a rule, the utopian thinker himself is unable to say what elements have gone into his vision, which, we can be sure, differs in many important respects from the visions of other utopian thinkers. Who should we believe, and why should we believe them, except in so far as our own hopes and wishes overlap with theirs? When, on occasion, some principle, religious or lay, or a conception of human nature is offered up as an ethical warranty, our uncertainty is just pushed back a stage. For one either accepts an ethical rule or agrees with a conception of human nature, or one doesn't. They are not the kind of beliefs to which evidence applies, other than as illustrations for those who already hold them.

Most utopians, of course, recognize that there is widespread and unnecessary suffering in society, but without carefully analyzing it, without trying to understand *exactly* who is doing what to whom and why, without examining the larger context that makes this possible and getting a bead on how it has developed and is still developing, without all this, the act of believing that some other arrangement would be better is purely and simply faith. We want to know—better in what sense and for whom? Denied access to the present and past, the answers to such questions generally rely on the intrinsic moral and/or aesthetic qualities of one's utopia—hence the literary form taken by so many utopias—and on the presumed identity of the writer's hopes and fantasies with those of his audience. The point of this objection is not that a particular utopia is not ideal, or at least better than other visions of the future, or at a minimum full of elements that qualify for such praise—all this may in fact be so—but there is no good reason for believing it.

Third, aside from being ideal societies, utopias are also held up as possible societies, hence practical alternatives to what now exists. But if utopian thinkers can give no good reason for believing that their personal vision represents something that would be good for all of us, the claim that their ideal is also possible is equally groundless. Our criticism, it should be noted, is not the common complaint that a particular utopia is impossible because nothing like it ever happened before, or that what it depicts is too extreme. From the vantage point of someone living in feudalism, nothing would appear more extreme than modern capitalism. As for the absence of precedents, recorded history is to a large degree the story of things happening for the first time, and there is no reason to believe that the surprises that await our descendants will be any less extreme than those sprung upon our ancestors.

Some utopians, of course, have tried to make a case for the possibility of their ideal by claiming that it has already existed somewhere, if only for a brief time. Thus—they claim—we can bring it back, and it can work. William Morris held up fifteenth century England, and some Christian utopians have used life among the early Christian communities in this way. In looking for parallels, however, wishful thinking interferes with historical accuracy, so that the similarities that do exist are stretched to cover the even more numerous differences that render such comparisons useless for the purpose at hand. In short, those who rely on precedents to argue that their utopia is possible are no more convincing than those who cite the lack of precedents for believing them impossible.

Human nature, understood to include what people really want as well as what they are capable of, is also offered in support of the practicality of the utopian ideal. People, it is argued, being what they are, cannot help realizing the advantages of utopia, and, once this bridge has been crossed, making it work. But, in most cases, the people that the utopians describe are much like themselves, which speaks to their limited imaginations and the personal roots of their utopias, but it also shows an inadequate understanding of the dialectical relation between human beings and the evolving conditions in which they live and work. Expecting the change from capitalism to socialism to occur all at once, for example, the utopians omit the relatively long period of transition that Marx foresees between the two social formations. This transition begins with a struggle to found a revolutionary movement within capitalism, continues into the revolution (the greatest educational experience of all for Marx), and concludes in the early efforts to build socialism after the revolution. Further, Marx believes that the transformation in people's nature that is required for them to be able to live in socialism can only take place through the mediation of the workers' class interests, given the workers' key class interest in developing a thoroughgoing democratic and egalitarian society if any of their other main class interests are to be satisfied. By becoming class conscious, therefore, workers not only make it possible to abolish capitalism but to live in socialism. Unaware of the need for a transition to prepare people for life in socialism and with no sense of the importance of class, and therefore of working-class interests and consciousness, the utopians' conception of human nature makes no case at all for the practicality of their ideal(s).

Fourth, utopian thinking also undermines one's ability to analyze the present when and to the degree that this takes place. It is apparent that prioritizing and emphasizing the future in the manner of utopian thinkers preempts the time and even the interest required to make a serious study of the present. But utopian thinking also sets up interference of a more organic kind. Imagining a future disconnected from present trends and struggles, that doesn't emerge from the present but is drawn from other sources, leaves us with a present, our everyday reality, without a future, since what it would ordinarily give rise to has been bumped by whatever the utopians have put in its place. Thus, utopian thinking presents us with consequences (the ideal) without causes, i.e., causes capable of producing such consequences—and therefore too with causes (what exists now) that have no apparent consequences. It is not a matter of the present losing some of its potential; its entire future dimension has been wiped out. Hence, it is not only the future that gets distorted in utopian thinking but also the present. It is futureless because it does not itself exist as a cause of its own future.

Being without an organically connected future, what sense can be made of the present? A lot of what is most important in present society, particularly as regards its dynamics, is not very visible at this moment. It only becomes more so as its effects begin to be felt, that is in the future. In separating the future off from what is going on right now, utopian thinkers, of course, have only done what those historians, who like to think of themselves as constituting a separate discipline, have often done to the past, that is set it apart as something logically other than the present rather than viewing it as the internally related preconditions for our present. Breaking up change and development in this manner—into a past, a present, and a future, each phase securely locked into its own separate compartment—it is difficult to grasp how our actual past gave rise to what we are living through now, and how this present (emerging as it has from its past) will issue into the particular future that awaits us. There is an organic evolution here, but disconnecting its main stages in this way keeps people from grasping it. We should not wonder, therefore, at the difficulty most people experience in fixing on even such central features of our society as capital accumulation and class struggle, which only exist in the present as mutually dependent processes in evolution *from*something *toward* something. But with these processes out of focus, reduced to their static and immediately apparent aspects, the social dynamic for which they are largely responsible—what Marx calls the “law of motion” of the capitalist mode of production—can never be brought into view.

Abolishing the internal ties between past, present, and future also makes likely a common misuse of the present, the stage with which we are of necessity most familiar, as a model for understanding the past and the future. The approach involves taking what we find in present society as the standard for what existed before, forcing square pegs into round holes wherever necessary to make the point. In this way, the political economists, in what Marx calls their “Robinsonades” after Robinson Crusoe, projected both attitudes and social relations of the capitalist present back into the origins of society. The present simply serves them as a mirror in which they claim to catch the reflection of earlier times. Without any attempt to uncover the organic ties between the two, however, they have no basis for distinguishing what is unique in the present from what isn’t, and what is natural from what is historically conditioned. The same error occurs in the other direction when people project some part of our present arrangements and their own desires, strengths, and limitations into the indefinite future. This is the irrational basis on which many reject the possibility of any kind of communism—claiming it is contrary to “human nature” as they see it in themselves and their friends—but it also accounts for a lot of what is most timid in the utopian tradition.

Fifth, utopian thinking provides us with a weak and ineffective way of arguing for socialism. Here, I am not concerned with validity, but with whether the utopian argument works. Does appealing to the idea of a better society in the absence of any serious analysis of the present one succeed in winning supporters to the socialist cause? The utopian argues that his vision is a good society, a possible one, and one that is relatively easy to construct, without offering any of the evidence from which we would ordinarily conclude that something is good, possible, or practical. By constructing a vision of the future out of hopes, wishes, and the like, the utopian thinker has made a kind of end run around the channels that usually carry such claims. Criticisms of present-day society as falling short of the utopian ideal is of the same nature; it begs the question of whether this is the right standard to apply. Can it be convincing?

There is no doubting the popularity of some utopian writings. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* was one of the most popular socialist tracts of all time. More recently, the American psychologist B. F. Skinner's *Walden II* has also met with considerable success. We don't know, of course, except in a general way, who reads these works—maybe most readers are already attracted to socialism—and there is no necessary connection between popularity and effectiveness. William Morris maintained that dreams of a better future could move people who were left unaffected by arguments couched in the terms of political economy, and the widespread impact of Martin Luther King's extraordinary speech, "I Have a Dream," would seem to support this view. But, even if we assume that most readers of utopian literature are not socialists and that the vision they acquire from such works move them in a leftward direction, several questions remain: Toward what kind of socialism? Accompanied by what actions? And how long do the political effects of such moral and emotional appeals last? Empirical evidence, by which I don't mean anecdotes, would be very useful, but to my knowledge none exists. We are left, therefore, with examining the nature of the utopian argument.

Why socialism? There are many ways to answer this question, probably the most important are as follows: First, and—for Marxists—most decisive, if you are part of the working class, broadly defined, socialism is in your class interests. (Another version of the same answer is, Why capitalism?, where capitalism is shown to be in the interests of capitalists and opposed to the interests of workers.) Second, socialism would do away with the power of money in politics and introduce democratic decision making into all walks of social life. Third, it is the only effective means of abolishing the material misery and other inequalities associated with capitalism, as well as the profit-motivated destruction of the material environment that will soon render our planet unlivable. Fourth, organizing production and distribution to serve social needs on the basis of a democratically arrived at plan is more rational than allowing the vagaries of an uncontrolled market (and there is no other kind) to determine both. Fifth, it is also more efficient, since unlike capitalism (especially in times of crisis) it would make full use of all the factors of production—machines/factories, raw materials, and workers. Sixth, it would make imperialist wars unnecessary as ways of dealing with these crises. Seventh, it would also make the lying and selling that defiles so much of our public life unnecessary, and liberate knowledge to serve all humanity rather than the profit interests of a few. Eighth, it would make the various oppressions that disfigure capitalist society—of blacks and women, for example—dysfunctional for the economic order as well as illegal, and set about expunging their allied prejudices from people's minds. Finally, for the first time in history—with dog-eat-dog competition and mutual indifference gradually giving way to global cooperation and mutual concern—socialism would establish the conditions in which everyone would be free to develop his/her full potential as a human being.

There is no question but that some elements of Marx’s projected future can be found in each of these arguments for socialism, so the main difference—again—between the utopians and Marxists is not over which school has a vision of the future but over how they arrived at it and the role it plays in their thinking and practice. For Marxists, all arguments for socialism are based on an analysis that demonstrates that capitalism is not only responsible for our worst social and ecological problems but contains the means for their solution as well as the seeds of the new world that would follow.

By contrast, in the absence of an equally objective study in what needs to be corrected, utopians rely heavily on the meaning of such key concepts as “freedom,” “justice,” and “rights” to make their case. Unfortunately, these terms have been so manipulated by the capitalist consciousness industry that most of them have been turned around to mean the near opposite of what most utopians would like to convey with them. So that most people today would probably understand freedom as the right to be left alone, equality as formal equality, justice as what you get in the courts, the right to work as a way to avoid joining a union, and so on. For utopians, as indeed for other social reformers, these loaded terms convey little and convince less.

Arguing from an unexamined belief in a better world and using the characteristics of this imagined world as a standard for judging our own is also, of course, a version of ethical and religious thinking. There, too, an ultimate standard is erected that stands apart from our everyday lives, which is then used as a basis for making judgments regarding the here and now. While analysis of the present plays no significant role in arriving at the content that ethical, religious, and utopian thinkers pour into their absolute principles, divine laws, and visions of the future respectively, it often makes a limited appearance later as part of figuring out how best to apply the judgments derived from them. Too little, too late. The crucial work of identifying problems and looking for how to solve them has already begun—though indirectly and without full awareness of the choices made—with the adoption of the absolute standard. Unfortunately, as we have seen, what there is to analyze at this point has already been systematically distorted by constructing a notion of the present that has been separated off from its real past and potential futures at the start.

If utopian argument has a lot in common with religious argument, why hasn't it experienced the same kind of success? Religious movements, as we know, have convinced countless millions of their truths and continue to do so. Unfortunately for utopians, they lack, in the very nature of the case, several qualities that have made religious appeals so effective. Of these the most important are the promise of an afterlife, fear of divine retribution, the satisfaction that at least somebody "up there" loves you, and, possibly, rituals. Recognizing their comparative disadvantages, followers of Saint-Simon tried to transform their political movement into a religion, but they couldn't bring themselves to promise life after death, nor could they invent a retribution that struck sufficient fear into the hearts of the faithful, or provide an emotional substitute for the love that is missing in most people's lives. Recycled Christian ritual proved not to be enough. In competition with religious appeals, utopians are in the position of someone trying to sell a car without a motor. Occasionally, they make a sale, but where they do it is usually to someone who is predisposed to operate with external norms because they already belong to a religion, or conduct their lives on the basis of one or another ethical principle, or are young idealists, by which I mean people who are endowed with unusually strong utopian impulses and who have not yet made a serious effort to analyze society.

Further, as in most ethical and religious disputes, arguments based on a utopian vision of the future are convincing only to those who accept the basic assumptions, or in this case, the hopes and dreams out of which the vision has been constructed. It might be necessary to clarify these assumptions or to draw out their links with the problems at hand, but it never pays to attack (or defend) the measure of the good with facts. Adopted without the benefit of analysis, an absolute standard is immune by definition from whatever later analysis might uncover. Consequently, arguments for utopia often turn into painting its virtues in still more brilliant colors or in ever greater detail. Most of Fourier's writings, for example, rehash the same vision, trying—with considerable creativity it must be admitted—to bring readers to accept that this is, in a sense, what they already believe and want. To the extent that an identity of ultimate values exists, he has a good chance to succeed. Where it doesn't, and it often doesn't, the appeal will fall on deaf ears. And, within the framework established by utopian thinking, nothing further can be said.

But perhaps the most important argument against the utopian way of arguing is that, though it addresses *our* ideal future, it carries out the debate on *their* terrain. Instead of forcing capitalists and their "paid hirelings" to defend what is intolerable and unnecessary in present-day society, it allows them to sit back and pick holes in whatever sounds untidy or unlikely in our hopes for the future. It does capitalists the immense favor of letting them go on the offensive, rhetorically speaking. Marx's analysis, on the other hand, which focuses on the irrational workings of the capitalist system and its devastating effects on our lives, is essentially a way of putting the capitalists in a defensive position from which no amount of rationalization will free them. It is the difference between arguing why society should be changed in ways the utopian thinks best, where most of the evidence that would ordinarily apply is either unavailable or unconvincing, and describing the prison in which we are all being held captive (including what can be glimpsed of freedom from the many holes in the walls), in which the self-serving content of the warden's excuses has been revealed beforehand. Let the capitalists try to talk themselves out of this, is what Marx seems to be saying. It is when they cannot, and when enough of us recognize they cannot, that the walls of the prison (financial cornices and all) will be torn down.

Sixth, and last, utopian thinking leads to adopting ineffective political strategies for bringing about the desired changes. For the utopian thinker, the ideal society will come into being when enough people recognize that it is both good and possible. But, as we have seen, there is no compelling reason why anyone should accept either of these claims. Nor can it be said that utopian arguments succeed by other means. Reformulated, repackaged, fictionalized, and personalized, their literary merit may pick up a few more followers. It is always possible that the fantasies featured in a particular utopian vision will appeal to some people whose thinking is structured along similar lines (see the discussion of ethics and religion above), but so far this has never been enough.

To supplement the written word, therefore, many utopian thinkers have set up models of what they favor—workplaces, household arrangements, and even whole communities—believing that the example will convince larger numbers of the desirability as well as practicality of their vision. But the very conditions of the present that utopians neglect to study ensure that at least some of the pieces that are required for the model to work as expected—including people with the right attitudes—are generally lacking. Also, the larger capitalist context, and especially the market, in which the experiment is forced to operate overwhelms it economically, politically, and culturally at every point the two come into contact. Utopian thinkers have only been able to think otherwise, because, abstracting the future from the present, they have no way of judging how this same present will affect any piece of the future that is set down in its midst.

The same dismissal of present realities in constructing their vision of the future leaves utopians without an adequate grasp of who is likely to favor their project and who is not. Since life in their ideal society would satisfy everyone, it seems to follow that everyone should be in favor of it. And as the intelligence required to understand how the utopian ideal works is equally distributed throughout the population, there is no reason to single out any section or class of people for their appeal. Except one. Those who hold high political office or have a lot of money can, if they wish, do more to bring the utopian vision into being than others. So why not address a special appeal to them? And many utopian thinkers have done just this. Saint-Simon, for example, wrote to Napoleon for help; Fourier advertised in newspapers for capitalist benefactors; and Owen petitioned the English Parliament. And many modern-day utopians continue to make similar appeals to the rich and powerful in our society who are in a position to make a difference. Sometimes it even works, a little bit, for there are a few wealthy radicals.

But the point, of course, is that those who have succeeded by playing according to the existing economic and political rules of our society have every interest in keeping these rules as they are. The same interests also help them fool themselves into believing that these rules are fair (in earlier times they may have added “and God given”). And no appeal, no matter how inventive and aesthetically pleasing, is going to convince most of them otherwise. Meanwhile, the quest for such support is almost certain to result in the watering down of utopian goals as one tries to make them acceptable to everyone—for example, Fourier’s idea of allowing capitalists to draw a profit from his utopian community as a way of attracting needed investment. The same quest, together with the moderation that it induces, also makes it more difficult to win the support of workers and other oppressed groups who have a clear interest in a thorough transformation of society. Utopians make no special effort to attract workers; they don’t see any reason to. In order to grasp why they should, they would have to have made the kind of analysis of society, emphasizing where different groups fit into it and the opposing interests that arise from their positions, that Marx made and the utopians have not.

But without adequate attention to class and class interests, what sense can utopians make of the class struggle and—particularly—of the role that the state plays in it? If communists, including anarcho-communists, have the abolition of the state as one of their goals, utopians often act as if the state has already been abolished. Pursuing reforms that are chiefly of civil society within civil society, utopians tend to ignore how the state contributes to the problems they are trying to solve and the equally complex ways the state ties the hands of any reformers who try to solve them. There is no shortage of complaints, of course, but without a Marxist analysis of the organic relation between the ruling economic class and the state one can never understand why—with only minor and temporary variations—it acts in this way, and what must be done to bring about permanent and thoroughgoing changes. Consequently, there is no recognition of the need for a political revolution, of removing the capitalists from political power so we can take away their economic and social power, even to the relatively modest degree advocated by most utopians. It can’t be done the other way around, achieving economic and social power first, which is essentially what utopians of all kinds try to do, without ever offering the analysis that would justify turning Marxism on its head in this way.

The frightening experiences of the leading French utopians in the French Revolution—Saint-Simon was almost executed—also made the whole utopian movement, in which these thinkers played such a major role, extremely wary of any initiative that might rekindle the fires of revolution. Cabet went so far as to say that if he held a revolution in the palm of his hand he would close his fingers over it and never open them again. Whatever their psychological fears of revolution may hav3.e been, however, the more fundamental problem was (and is) philosophical and methodological. For the main reason that utopian strategies for change are unrealistic is because neither the real conditions that contribute to change nor those that hold it back—especially the state—are examined with any care. Hence, the relations of different classes to these conditions are also missing. But by treating everyone as possible champions of change, those whose position in society makes them part of the solution do not get the attention they deserve, while others, who are part of the problem, are given additional opportunities to derail the progressive movement.

6.

None of the foregoing criticisms, it needs to be stressed, are directed at the contents of the various utopian visions, or at the fact that many people have such a vision, or at the exercise of our common need to speculate about the future. Instead, objections were raised against the construction of ideal societies out of materials furnished by such speculation unaided by an adequate analysis of present conditions and trends, and the effect of such utopias on subsequent thinking and political practice. Yet, like all forms of ideology, there is an important element of truth in the visions of at least the more communist utopians, which gets seriously distorted when separated from their historical context and presented in a one-sided way. Marx’s criticism of the utopians, therefore, can also be seen as a way of recapturing the future for understanding and changing the present in relation to a tradition of thought that started out by being naïve and has ended up being pernicious. In the last analysis, one might say that utopia is too important to be left to the utopians. As

Wilde rightly observed, no map that doesn't have utopia on it is worth looking at. But no map that has only utopia on it is worth taking seriously. An adequate map focuses on our present situation and indicates the potential future contained in it that best serves our class interests, along with the road that leads from one to the other.

Lest we forget: capitalism is an ongoing holocaust, not only against the countless millions it drops bombs on, starves, poisons with pollution, deprives of needed medical care, or works to death, but the even greater numbers it stultifies and strangles slowly with alienation and anxiety ridden jobs and joblessness. At the same time and as part of the same processes, it creates the conditions for something totally new and deeply satisfying. It is what capitalism is, how it works, and where exactly we fit into it that deserves our first and greatest attention, especially as the system's own ideology has turned its most important relationships around or denied their existence altogether. Only such an analysis can clarify why a revolution is necessary, how it can be done, with whom we can do it, as well as the many barriers to its success. It also gives political direction to the overwhelming pain and anger from which everyone who has retained a semblance of self amidst so much human wreckage must suffer. The main impetus to revolutionary engagement, after all, is not the belief that communism is a better society but that capitalism is unbearable and unacceptable. In this context, but only in this context, the realization that communism constitutes a possible and better alternative—that capitalism is also unnecessary—plays its essential contributory role.

Marx was probably correct, therefore, in playing down his vision of the future in his writings. Whether he was also right to give it as little space as he does, however, and whether we today should do likewise are other questions. Probably most influential in guiding his decision was the desire to distinguish his work as sharply as possible from that of the utopians and to avoid giving further ammunition to critics wishing to denounce his work as unscientific. Marx also believed that raising the class consciousness of workers, his major political goal, did not require a fuller presentation of his vision of communism. Already in his day, however, some of Marx's closest collaborators disagreed with this approach and sought to extend their analyses of capitalism to take in more of what people could expect of life after the revolution. At least one of these works proved to be extremely popular: August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*, which contains a long section on communism, was borrowed from workers' libraries in Germany more than any other Marxist work in the pre-1914 period. Despite such exceptions, Karl Korsch's post-First World War complaint that devoting too little attention to imagining the future had made the Marxist tradition overly drab probably had a great deal of truth in it.

For us today, the main concern has to be whether the reasons that kept Marx from integrating more of his vision of communism into his analysis of capitalism still apply, and I don't think they do. There is little likelihood, for example, of confusing Marxism, even with a more explicit conception of communism, with utopian opponents whose very names are difficult to recall. (As for bourgeois ideologists who already criticize Marxism as utopian, they will, of course, continue to do so, but that should not surprise or deter us.) Similarly, the scientific status of Marxism is unlikely to be affected, because the developments in capitalism since Marx's time have brought much of Marx's own future underfoot and multiplied the evidence for the possibility of communism many fold.

As regards the role a vision of the future that is anchored in the analysis of the present can play in raising class consciousness, here too the situation has changed from what it was in Marx's day. Now as then, helping workers grasp the specific nature of their exploitation within capitalism remains the key to raising their class consciousness, but, with capitalist ideologists trumpeting the failure of the Soviet and social democratic models of socialism as the failure of socialism as such, a more direct assault on the pervading pessimism of our time is also needed. Hence, projecting communism as a realistic and desirable alternative inherent in the workings of capitalist society, providing sufficient detail to make it comprehensible, attractive, and believable, has become one of the more urgent tasks of socialist scholarship. And, it is just because we must do more and better on this score than we did earlier that the need to distinguish our vision from utopian thinking, with its numerous wrong turns and cul-de-sacs, has become more important than ever.

7.

When submarines were first invented, Mark Twain was asked whether he could think of any way of dealing with what seemed like the ultimate weapon. If we heated all the water in the world's oceans to the boiling point, he is supposed to have replied, it would be impossible for submarines to operate. But how do we do that? his questioner persisted. To which Twain countered, You asked me what we should do; don't expect me to tell you how to do it. All the main elements of utopian thinking are present here: a desirable goal drawn from hopes and daydreams, unrealistic means, and ignorance of existing conditions. Like all utopians, Twain (or the persona he adopts here) doesn't have any trouble picturing a desirable goal, but he has no idea how to get there. Unless *there*, in this case, is to drive one more nail into the coffin of utopian thinking and provide Marx's analysis with its most colorful counterexample.

Notes

1. Quoted in Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1987), 139.
2. See “Marx’s Vision of Communism” in Bertell Ollman, *Social and Sexual Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1978), 48–98.
3. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, parts I and II (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938), 77.
4. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1945), 17.
5. See “Why Dialectics? Why Now? How to Study the Communist Future Inside the Capitalist Present” in Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 155–169.
6. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress, 1975), 172.
7. Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 57.
8. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *On the Paris Commune* (Moscow: Progress, 1980), 166.
9. Marx & Engels, *Paris Commune*, 76.
10. Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, 34.