The Path to Utopia

Author(s): RUSSELL KIRK

Source: *Southwest Review*, SPRING 1955, Vol. 40, No. 2 (SPRING 1955), pp. 163-170

Published by: Southern Methodist University

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43467004

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POINTS OF VIEW

The Path to Utopia

RUSSELL KIRK

MUCH OF MY LIFE I have been plagued by people who have read Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. They buttonhole me and expound. Some are ancient mariners, and some are retired grocers, and some are paperhangers down on their luck. In the market square of an old Scottish town, a lank man sells flowers on Saturday mornings; once, when I stopped by his stall, he looked me up and down and inquired, "Have ye read Sir Thomas More's *Utopia?*" The question has become almost a password for the quarter-educated and the fantastic. I rather think it would amuse Sir Thomas More, a high-minded practical statesman, to find his little fantasy become the stock in trade of the direct-mail bookseller and the inspiration of twentieth-century eccentricity. To More, the book probably was merely a pleasant diversion, in the manner of his time, written in moments of leisure to tickle the fancy of other men in their leisure; surely he did not expect anyone to give life to his dream. As a Christian humanist, More knew that Utopia never was and never will be, and that we are not made for Utopia.

Sir Thomas More did not die for Utopia: he died for principle. These two are very different. More chose to be God's servant before serving his king neither because he thought the church of his age was perfect, nor because he expected to point the way to some future terrestrial paradise. He died for a law that transcends the enactments of the state, and for the past. As a Christian humanist, he believed that past and present are one — or, rather, that the "present," the evanescent moment, is infinitely trifling in comparison with the well of the past, upon which it lies as a thin film. More did not believe that either church or state, in times past, had been perfect: he did not die for yesterday's Utopia. More did not believe that either church or state, in times to come, would be perfect, so long as this world endures: he did not die for tomorrow's Utopia. He did die for a great tradition, and for certain principles of justice and order which, though never wholly realized, make existence tolerable for mankind. More knew that although we cannot create a heaven on earth, we have it quite within our power to create a hell on earth. Sir Thomas More, in fine, was no utopian.

A professed Christian, indeed, cannot be a professed utopian. Professor Eric Vogelin is now engaged upon a historical and political work of the first importance, tracing the course of the Gnostic heresy that the Kingdom of Christ may be realized terrestrially. Lord

Percy of Newcastle, an eminent Anglican thinker, makes a similar case against "liberal" utopianism in his recent book *The Heresy of Democracy*. And Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, for some years, has been reminding the Protestant world that we simply are not made for perfection. The recent books of Josef Pieper and Romano Guardini remind us that the prophecies of the Apocalypse cannot be ignored with impunity, for the Anti-Christ is a secular utopian. Our fallen and sinful nature, in the eyes of the sincere Christian, will not be redeemed until the end of all things; to presume to establish a brummagem paradise upon earth, predicated upon a fallaciously optimistic notion of human nature, will expose us to the peril of a reign of unreason. There never has been a perfect age or a perfect society, and there never will be. All the political contrivances of mankind have been tried before, and none of them have worked very well.

This is not to say that the Christian humanist believes that all ages are the same, or that all evils are necessary evils. The Christian humanist never has shared the opinion of the liberal historian (right down to H. A. L. Fisher and certain living American thinkers) that nothing ever really happens in history. One age may be much worse than another; one society may be relatively just, and another relatively unjust; men may improve somewhat under a prudent and humane domination, and may deteriorate vastly in an insensate time. But the gospel of Progress as the inevitable and beneficent wave of the future—a doctrine now irreparably shattered by the catastrophes of this century—never deluded the Christian humanist. He does not despise the past simply because it is old, nor does he assume that the present is delightful simply because it is ours. He judges every age and every institution in the light of certain principles of justice and order, which we have learned in part through revelation and in part through the long and painful experience of the human race. When the Christian humanist says that much is wrong with our own time, that it is out of joint, he does not mean that things ever were ordered perfectly, in all respects, in some past epoch; nor does he have a vision of a future society in which all the imperfections of human nature will be wiped away, and all desires will be perfectly satisfied. He can be a historical eclectic: he may approve this feature of one age, and that feature of another age, and disapprove a great deal in any period. It is simply silly to ask him whether he would like to live in the eighteenth century, or the thirteenth century, or the first century. No living man would find life tolerable, even were such existence conceivable, in any age but his own; it is like asking a man if he would like to annihilate his personality and be someone else. A man of the eighteenth or thirteenth or first century, transposed to our age, would find this epoch similarly intolerable for him.

If a Christian humanist, for example, says that he thinks the Ages of Faith gave men a tranquillity of soul which the twentieth century lacks, it is pointless to ask him if he would like to have the medieval plague back again. Of course he wants nothing of the sort; he is not saying that the Middle Ages were Utopia; he is simply maintaining that in one respect men of the Middle Ages were better off than we are. In other respects, we may be better off than they. There is no necessary connection between faith and the plague; the religious thinker who criticizes our society is not bound to maintain that one time is all white and another time all black; he can pick and choose. If we pick and choose discreetly, we may hope to improve our own society considerably, though we never will succeed in making our society perfect. Human history is an account of men running as fast as they can, like Alice and the White Queen, in order to stay where they are. The brute lies so close under the skin of the man that only by constant attention to the enduring principles of justice and order can we contrive to make society tolerable. Sometimes we grow lazy, and then society sinks into a terrible decline. We never are going to be able to run fast enough to arrive at Utopia. And we should hate Utopia if ever we got there, for it would be infinitely boring. What really makes men love life is the battle itself, the struggle to bring order out of disorder, to strive for right against evil. If ever that struggle should come to an end, we should expire of ennui. It is not in our fallen nature to rest content, like the angels, in an eternal changelessness.

I do not think that the Christian humanist, or the conservative, or the realistic statesman, ever has been a utopian. The eminent utopians of the past hundred years, on the contrary, have been liberals and socialists. Edward Bellamy represents them at their most naïve, Robert Hutchins at their most enlightened condition. They are influential among us still, in defiance of the disillusioning experience of this century. Mr. Hutchins, for instance, in his recent book *The University of Utopia,* suggests that a principal function of the university is to lead us toward Utopia. After some slashing attacks upon the modern Sophists, he ends with the following creed for Academicians:

> The leading articles of the American faith are universal suffrage, universal education, independence of thought and action as the birthright of every individual, and reliance on reason as the principal means by which society is to be advanced. To the extent to which the American people have now forgotten or distorted these ideas, to that exent they have strayed from their own path. This was the path to Utopia.

Well! Is this the freedom of the human reason for which Socrates drank the hemlock? Universal suffrage — a means to an end, at best; universal education, which so often prefers uniformity to attainment, and compulsion to volition; independence of thought and action — with what motive? reliance on reason to "advance society," not to make the human person his own master. These things are good, indifferent, or positive evils, according to how they are employed. They are not ends. They have no sanction but expediency. And the path to Utopia? There is no path to Utopia, in the university or anywhere else; for there is no Utopia. One of the principal functions of the Academy, where society is concerned, is to save a people from utopian fancies. The ancient university from which I happen to hold a degree was established expressly to confute the social utopianism of the Lollards.

Such a vague utopianism as Mr. Hutchins still professes, however, is not liable to do much mischief. A far more ominous utopianism glowers forth from a recent book by Mr. William H. McNeil, *Past and Future,* which rejoices in the prospect of an omnipotent world-state, relieving men of the unpleasant necessity of ever coming to man's estate, fulfilling the worst vaticinations of Tocqueville and Burckhardt. It is a great comfort, having read such a book as this, to recall the catastrophic history of utopian designs.

For several years I have been observing at close range the rapid decay of the most recent of utopian undertakings, the socialist concept of an equalitarian and classless and perfected Britain. I have seen the things, and talked with the men; to this end, I have slept in some of the most howling slums in Britain, and in some of the most splendid country houses. It was with some surprise, then, that I read in Mr. Paul Pickrel's review of my *Program for Conservatives,* in the January, 1955, number of *Harper's,* that he thinks I am "filled with something like rage" at "almost any attempt at systematic observation." It is quite true that I do not believe we can arrive at any reliable knowledge, in important matters, merely by writing questionnaires, getting some people to answer them, and making what we will of the mass of results. The mass-interrogation method of observation suffers initially from the researchers' own prejudices (often unconsciously held) in the framing and interpretation of the questions, and from the difficulty of extracting people's real convictions by the process of formal interview. Nor do I think that truth is simply the common denominator of opinion. With Hilaire Belloc, I believe in close and accurate observation, and that got at first hand, through subtle processes—through knowing the people and the very landscape. I still think that an experienced man with some degree, however small, of imagination is a better observer of mankind than is a hired interviewer with a check-sheet, or even a punch-card system. I may be wrong; I often am; but I am about to sketch here the large outline of my own observations of the decline of utopian schemes in Britain.

MARX contemptuously called the socialistic schemes of his contemporaries "utopian"; but, in truth, Marxian socialism always has itself been utopian, too, looking forward to the withering away of the state, the establishment of the classless society, and the termination of the class struggle by a changeless and perfect condition of mankind. The inspiration of modern English socialism has been complex, but almost without exception that inspiration has had Utopia stamped upon its face—whether derived from Owen, or Morris, or the Christian Socialists, or the Dissenting chapels, or from Marx. The grand assumption of the British Socialists has been that human nature can be profoundly altered for the better by the planned direction of social institutions, and a society established thereby which will satisfy all human desires and put an end to the violence, cupidity, and bitterness of heart which have been present in all societies of the past. This utopianism never was more pronounced than in the hour when the Attlee government took office. Mr. Bevan predicted that, once in power, the Socialists would do such things that never again could a Conservative party hope to govern Britain; Mr. Strachey foretold that the Socialists would even extend the span of human life indefinitely in the British Isles; Mr. Attlee expressed his confidence that all the world would follow the pattern Britain was about to set. A great deal of water has gone over the dam since then, and I know of no leader in the whole of the Labour party nowadays who indulges in such prophecies.

The present disillusionment and incertitude of the British Socialists have been produced by a variety of causes, three of which seem to me to be particularly powerful: practical experience of the difficulties, social and financial and moral, that accompany any undertaking to adapt an old society to an abstract scheme of reform; dismay at the shape of things in Russia; and grave misgivings over whether a regime of the omnicompetent and impersonal state really is what Socialists want for themselves, now that the possibility is at hand—these second thoughts extending all the way from the officers of the great trades-unions to Mr. G. D. H. Cole. Such a conflict of views lies behind both the idolization of Mr. Bevan by some of the young lions of the Labour party, and his rejection—decisively and perhaps finally—by the established leaders of the party. The Socialists never were revolutionary; now they are ceasing to be utopian.

This change has penetrated down to the broad base of Labour support. About four years ago, I was riding on a bus through Ayrshire. At one village, a young woman got aboard and sat down by me, and proceeded to converse with the American visitor. She was a schoolteacher. "You'll be going to the Bobby Burns country," she said.

I answered that I would be passing through.

"Bobby Burns was a great poet," she told me. "You have great writers in America, too, of course. Now Howard Fast—is he out of jail yet?"

I said I believed he had been let out.

"And the Russians have many great writers," she went on. "They love Bobby Burns in Russia. Everyone there reads Burns."

"Aren't there difficulties in translation?" I asked.

She favored me with a glance full of suspicion and reproach: "They are masters of translation in Russia."

"Have you been there recently?" I ventured.

"Yes, only last summer," she said. "Everyone is so happy in Russia. I went with a group of teachers and workers. Everyone loves his work there."

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"To Moscow, and then down to the Crimea. We had a week in the Crimea."

"Were there any people in the Crimea?" I asked, quite as innocently as before.

But this was fatal to our friendship. Her eyes dilated, for she knew I knew, and that I knew she knew. "There were many people on the *beaches*," she said, frigidly; and then a glum silence prevailed until the bus reached her stop. On leaving, she looked back at me in wrath, saying, "I just want you to know that there are things going on in America that we don't approve of here in Scotland."

I don't suppose that my schoolmistress was a member of the Communist Party; she was rather shaken in her admiration of the Soviets, even then, not liking to be reminded of the liquidation of the Crimean Tartar Republic; and by this time, very likely, she is not looking eastward at all. The gradual but complete disillusionment with the U.S.S.R. has affected the whole temper of socialist thought in Britain. Russia remained a model in the eyes of many Socialists until very late. Things would be handled more moderately in Britain, of course, and there would be no violence, and liberty would get much more respect; yet the Russian vision of a New Society haunted the imagination of many members of the Labour party so long as they could cling to any shred of faith. The mission of Mr. Attlee and his colleagues to China notwithstanding, the vision of the Soviets as a rather overbold version of English reform is now thoroughly dissipated. Mr. George Brown, Labour M.P. for Belper, recently described Soviet Poland, which he had visited, as the realization of Orwell's *1984*. The communist utopia is unlikely ever to capture the imagination of Englishmen again.

George Orwell, incidentally, has been incalculably influential, since his death, in turning the minds of Englishmen against collectivistic utopias—more influential by far than ever he was when he lived. The effect of *1984* upon public opinion goes far to refute the argument that ideas merely reflect the great social and material currents of an age. Orwell's terrible novel reflects his own seasonable disillusion, it is true; but his prophecies are of the order that create subsequent events. It has been said that Orwell influenced everyone except the people he wanted to move, the intellectuals of the Left; yet they, too, now are confessing the truth of his indictment. The BBC's presentation of *1984* last December was generally commended by Socialists, especially by those who feel uneasy about the recent heavy tramp of Ingsoc; indeed, the only people who protested against the program were certain persons who felt that such disagreeable possibilities ought not to be discussed in public. Very probably, at least until the next election, Socialist candidates will be saying much more about what they intend to conserve than about what they intend to reform.

The speech of Sir Hartley Shawcross to a Labour meeting on December 18, 1954, suggests the way that the wind is blowing. "It is no use turning back over our shoulders all the time to Karl Marx, and applying all sorts of restrictions, curbs, and freezes. We must deal with the very different world of today . . . and go forward to the creation of an expanding, rising economy." He put forward a six-point program for winning the next election: increased earnings, through productivity, for both workers and shareholders; efficiency, rather than nationalization for nationalization's sake; improvement of the housing schemes by permitting local authorities to sell houses to tenants (rather than continuing to subsidize rentals) and by checking the sprawl of amorphous housing-estates into agricultural land; guaranteed markets for agriculture; expenditures to raise the standard of living in backward areas abroad; and "a free educational system in which all sections, middle classes as well as poor, can feel confidence."

Now these are not merely conservative policies for a Socialist to advocate: they are so conservative as to be acceptable to many Tory M.P.'s, and some of them are more conservative—the remarks on housing, for instance—than what most Conservatives have ventured to say. These are the policies of a party which has given up Utopia for the old English custom of muddling through. These are the policies of a party which has rejected Mr. Bevan, in part at least, because of a suspicion that Mr. Bevan would be too fond of power. And even if one turns to the supporters of Mr. Bevan, a relative moderation and retreat from utopian ideology is evident among most of them: Mr. R. H. S. Crossman, perhaps the most interesting and mercurial of all the younger Socialists, talks of the sinful proclivities of human nature, the danger of concentration of power, the folly of applying Western notions abstractly to colonial peoples, and much else that a doctrinaire American liberal would label "conservative."

In a number of respects, the abandonment of utopianism by the Socialists is a heartening phenomenon: it reduces the danger and disharmony of doctrinaire class antagonism in politics, and it means that more attention will be paid to the real and pressing problems of British life and power, and less to ancient grudges. Yet it is not yet clear whether the Socialists, if indeed they really are giving up utopianism, are prepared to replace utopian ideals with some coherent political principles. If the dogmas of equality of condition and of state ownership of industry gradually are allowed to sink into desuetude, just what will be the animating spirit of the party? The Socialists conceivably may find themselves in the unpleasant plight of politicians who have no desire or ability to shore up the old order of English life, and yet no plan of action for reforming society. The disillusioned utopian sometimes comes down to the state of the dog in the manger, unwilling to confess the validity of anyone else's principles and unable to produce any lucid principles of his own. And this is not an age which can dispense with principle, though it has had an overdose of ideology.

IT SEEMS TO ME that utopianism is on the wane in most countries, including the United States. I hope that this decline is not to be accompanied by a decay of faith in abiding principles of justice and order. To believe in the possibility of social perfection is one thing; to believe in the necessity of a moral system to govern politics is a very different thing. Having inveighed for some years against utopianism, recently I have been entertained to find myself accused of being a utopian. This dread charge originated, so far as I can determine, with a "revisionist Marxist" editor of an English journal, who resented my supposition that there are any gods at all, now that the Marxist god is dead. The indictment was promptly echoed by the editor of a Tory monthly, who was embarrassed by my implied criticism of a certain ineptitude in the leadership of his party. "Utopianism" thus was equated with any dissent from the doctrine that whatever is, is right. Being a utopian, I must have a perfect model of society some-where in time; and since I disavowed any belief in a future perfection, necessarily I must believe in some past utopia. My critics decided that this must be the eighteenth century; even Paul Pickrel joins the chorus.

The trouble with this chain of reasoning is the stubborn fact that—so far as we have any right to "prefer" one century to another, a foolish pastime—I dislike the eighteenth century above nearly any other in history. It was, as Carlyle says, a time of shams and phantasms and buckram masks. It was an age of gilded selfishness and frivolous intellectuality—an age almost without a heart. I do not care for its architecture, and I do not much fancy its politics. The men of the eighteenth century whom I most admire, Burke and Johnson, were resolutely opposed to the spirit of their age. The most we can learn from that time, probably, is politeness and a kind of cold humanitarianism. The French Revolution was at once a product of the time and a reaction against it. Because one dislikes the Old Regime, one does not have to love the catastrophe of the Revolution: as Tocqueville said of his countrymen, halfway down the stairs we threw ourselves out of the window in order to get to the ground more quickly.

When I write of justice and order in society, then, I am not recommending the Old Regime, or the squirearchy, or any other "Utopia" of dead days. A Utopia that is gone by is a much less mischievous notion than a Utopia which is yet to be; but we need something more to redeem modern society from its violence and its boredom. This does not mean that we can afford to ignore the past. "The dead alone give us energy," Le Bon says; and, in politics, historical knowledge is the only reasonably reliable sort of knowledge. To reckon without the past is to expose ourselves to the wildest sort of utopianism. History is chastening to human presumption: it has a long record of broken social fancies. And, on the positive side, we should be impoverished without it. To admire, for instance, the character of Falkland is not to conjure up a utopia of the "squirearchy," any more than to admire the wisdom of Aquinas is to conjure up a utopia of the Holy Roman Empire.

To think that society can really be reformed by any grandiose program of positive legislation or expenditure of money is itself the grossest of utopian delusions. There is no Grand Design to remedy the ills of the twentieth century—a disappointing statement, perhaps, but ineluctable. Real improvement can come only from those "few suggestions about this and that, most of them quite acceptable and quite pallid" which Mr. Pickrel despises. If anyone has One Big Suggestion, colorful and invigorating, I shall be very glad to listen to him; but I doubt whether anything of the sort will be forthcoming.

Real improvement, I repeat, can come only from ideas which at first seem puny and insufficient—from them, and from internal improvement of the individual conscience (in which latter, according to Baudelaire, all real progress consists). In one sense, but in one only, the true humanist and the theist and the conservative are utopians: they believe that the possibility of near-perfection does indeed exist, but it exists only within individual human beings; and when that state is attained individually, we call it sanctity. Utopia is conceivable only in the implication of the title of a story by Stefan Andres, "We Are God's Utopia." Imagination, as Napoleon said, does indeed rule the world; and though the conservation of our civilization scarcely can be achieved by any program of positive legislation, it may yet be attained by a working of men's minds and hearts.

Yet we dare not leave out of consideration the "social context," the social institutions which give us the possibility of freedom of thought and independence of action and courage of decision. The day already has come in a great part of the world, and may be closer to us than we think, when the private courage which Mr. Pickrel praises is not merely insufficient, but inconceivable. How much courage does Winston Smith have, in *1984?* The bravest act he performs is to drink to the Past. Unsupported by any "social context" or system of moral certitude, he is utterly overwhelmed, depersonalized, by O'Brien and Ingsoc. He is living in a realized utopia—which, like all realized utopias, is hell upon earth. O'Brien describes this utopia:

> There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy. There will be no art, no literature, no science. When we are omnipotent we shall have no more need of science. There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always . . . there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless.

Against such a future as this, our chief protection is the knowledge of the past. If all reflective observation of the past is condemned as "utopian" and "nostalgic," then indeed we will be quite as imprudent as was Winston Smith in drinking to the snows of yesteryear. But it is not yet forbidden to profit from the wisdom of our ancestors. A generation gone, Paul Elmer More advised young men not be afraid to be called "reactionary." I now advise them, in my feeble way, not to be afraid to be called "nostalgic." It is hard to be smitten with a devil-term, but harder still to submit to the iron domination of Utopia.

America's Myths of Europe

ERIK VON KUEHNELT-LEDDIHN

IT IS an old commonplace that America is myth-ridden and that most Europeans fall victim to these myths. It took the writer of these lines many years to rid himself of the clichés which Americans fabricate about their own nation and which then become such pernicious traps to Europeans. Yet myths create countermyths, and while Europeans have been taught to see in Americans a nation of "healthy, young barbarians"—fancy Henry James, Henry Adams, or William Faulkner being "healthy, young barbarians!"—many an American has been persuaded that the Europeans represent an agglomeration of effete, effeminate, and ineffectual tribes inhabiting an "Old World." Still, it will always remain very difficult to judge a people as a whole, to subject it to valid generalizations, or to draw comparisons between entire nations.

Thus, to hint at a current commonplace,

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