In Defense of Utopia

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In a number of recent and forthcoming articles and papers, I have argued that while utopia can be dangerous, utopian visions are absolutely essential, that we must choose utopia.[1] Today, I want to try to give you the essence of that argument while also relating it to some new issues. Let me summarize my argument:

1. Hope/desire for a better life in this life is a central aspect of the human experience.
2. That hope/desire has often been distorted by ideology and religion.
3. That hope/desire has often been captured to serve the economic and political ends of the powerful.
4. When that hope/desire is distorted or captured, it can become dangerous.
5. That danger usually comes about because the hope/desire is warped so that the better life is only for a select few or in-group, thus creating an out-group, an other, who can be neglected, harmed, even killed to achieve the end. Such groups have included members of other religions, indigenous peoples, other ethnic groups, ideologies, and so forth. The boundaries of the other have often been changed to include some formerly in the in-group.
6. Even so, that hope/desire for a better life is the only effective means of overcoming such distortion/capture.

Let me give a particularly relevant example, a pattern observable in the Americas: colonies produce utopias for the colonists and dystopias for the colonized. The colonized are now effectively using the vision of their own eutopia against the dystopia they were thrust into. Canada and New Zealand have responded most positively, but the entire indigenous rights movement is based on utopian visions.

This last point applies to other social movements like the women's movement, where many feminist utopias have helped shape the movement. With the exception of environmentalism, utopian literature is less obvious in other recent social movements, but what I have called social dreaming is quite common.

Think of the great Spanish utopians of the period of colonization, one of whom is

being recognized through this meeting, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566) and Vasco de Quiroga (1470–1565). In 1537, Pope Paul III felt the need to declare the Indians human. Both the utopians Las Casas and Vasco de Quiroga, limited as they were by their time period and beliefs, wanted to create a world in which the indigenous peoples, who were being defined as alien, non-human others, were instead treated as human beings worthy of respect. Another utopian, Roger Williams (1603?–83) in colonial North America, reported an Indian saying, 'We wearne no Clothes, have many gods, And yet our sinnes are lesse: You are Barbarians, Pagans wild, *Your* Land's the Wilderness' (Williams, *Key into the Language of America* [1643] qtd. in George H. Williams, 1962: 103).

The Dutch sociologist F. L. Polak argued that if we lost the vision of eutopia (he called it 'positive images of the future'), western civilization would fail, and he contended that we were already moving in that direction when he was writing in the 1950s. The US architect and social critic R. Buckminster Fuller entitled one of his books *Utopia or Oblivion*: *The Prospects for Humanity*. That was in 1969. I want to say something similar (and I do not limit this to western civilization); if we lose eutopia, if we lose hope, we lose our humanity. But there are both inclusive and exclusive utopias, and the differences between the types provide one of the main reasons for utopia being both necessary and potentially dangerous.

In the 20th century and so far in the 21st century, it is all too easy to make a case against utopias. In the 20th century, we saw the utopias of communism and fascism turned into their own dystopias. With the fall of communism, we saw the establishment of a free-market utopia that for many people rapidly became its own dystopia. And in the 21st century, we seem to be reverting to exclusive utopias that are for most people inseparable from dystopia. George W. Bush is as much a utopian as the Taliban and other Islamic extremists, and they are both certain that they are doing their god's work. Both of them *know* that they have the truth, and with power and the willingness to impose their truth, they create dystopia in the name of utopia.

I have argued for many years that the only way to overcome utopia become dystopia is with a new eutopia, but we have seen the communist utopia/dystopia replaced with the free-market utopia/dystopia and should recognize that something more has to be said. One of the problems can be seen in the relationship between utopia and ideology, but not as used by Karl Mannheim.[2] Ideology, as most commonly used today, refers, with variations on the basic themes, to:

> . . . a system of values and beliefs regarding the various institutions and processes of society that is accepted as fact or truth by a group of people. An ideology provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and, in doing so, organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable. (Sargent, 2006: 3)

As such, every ideology contains a utopia, and the problem with utopia arises when it becomes a system of beliefs rather than what it is in almost all cases, a critique of the actual through imagining a better alternative. I think of utopia as a carnival/funfair mirror in reverse; we hold the distorted contemporary society up to the mirror and it shows us a better possibility.

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One thing that constantly irritates me in writing about utopias is the use of the words 'perfect' and 'perfection'. In English the words mean finished, completed, without future change. Thomas More did not pretend that the society in his *Utopia* was perfect; Edward Bellamy's eutopia *Looking Backward* is changing, and did change in that he wrote a sequel that had differences. H. G. Wells says that the eutopia in *Men Like Gods* is rapidly changing. The only utopias that I can think of that can be said to be perfect are some myths of an earthly paradise and some of the depictions of heaven that were popular in the late 19th century.

The overwhelming majority of utopias were not written as depictions of unchanging perfection. I think of them as like a photograph which captures a moment in time that has had a past and will have a future, and that future will be different, although less so than the past. Northrop Frye wrote that 'most utopias have built-in safeguards against radical alteration of the structure . . .' (1967: 31) and saw this as a problem, but it strikes me as simply to be expected. If you have finally gotten something to work, you want safeguards against 'radical' – and the word radical is important – changes in the structure, but that does not suggest that the utopia should be considered perfect. Change is possible, even expected, just not *radical* change.

Think of the originating text, More's *Utopia* (1516) and its imposition of slavery for leaving town without permission, or *A Pleasant Dialogue betweene a Lady called Listra, and a Pilgrim* (1579), probably by Thomas Nicholas, which has a peculiarly vicious system of punishment to enforce honesty; for example, a judge found to have taken a bribe has his leg sawn off with a wooden saw. J. C. Davis, in discussing his definition of utopia, says 'The utopian is more 'realistic' or tough-minded in that he accepts the basic problem as it is: limited satisfactions exposed to unlimited wants' (1981: 37) and later says, 'The utopian mode is one which accepts deficiencies in men and nature and strives to contain and condition them through organisational controls and sanctions' (370).[3]

The examples of the utopia become dystopia of communism and fascism led thinkers like Karl R. Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and Jacob L. Talmon in *Utopianism and Politics* (1957) to argue, as Talmon put it:

> Utopianism is based upon the assumption that reason alone – not habit, or tradition, or prejudice – can be the sole criterion in human affairs. But the end of this assumption is that reason, like mathematics, must command universal consent, since it has sole and exclusive truth. In fact, reason turns out to be the most fallible and precarious of guides; because there is nothing to prevent a variety of 'reasons' from cropping up, each claiming sole and exclusive validity, and between which there can be no compromise, no arbiter except force. (13)

And there is a case here. Too much reason, be it in the 16th or the 20th century, can produce dystopia. But so can too little reason. The dystopias that are bedeviling us in the 21st century are based on faith and tradition not reason. If I simply replace reason with faith and tradition in the statement by Talmon just quoted, the result is the same. It is not utopianism that is at fault, it is the insistence that a particular utopia is the only correct way of living that is the problem.

One of the dominant themes in the writings of Isaiah Berlin serves, in a quotation

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from Kant, as the epigraph of one of his books – 'Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built'. Berlin puts this insight into a cultural and national context, saying:

> Freedom . . . is . . . to be at home, not to be impinged upon by what is not one's own, by alien obstacles to self-realisation whether on the part of individuals or civilisations. The idea of the earthly paradise, of a golden age for the whole of mankind, of one life which all men live in peace and brotherhood, the Utopian vision of thinkers from Plato to H.G. Wells, is not compatible with this. (Berlin, 'Apotheosis', 225).

Berlin relates this, in what was the title of one of his essays, to 'The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West'.

As I was working on an earlier version of this essay I came across a book by the economist Albert O. Hirschman that had a title that seems to me to sum up the message of utopianism, *A Bias for Hope*. Certainly, utopias are pervaded with that bias. And, I argued in the first essay I published on utopias that even dystopias have a positive message in that they are most often explicitly warnings of what will happen if we don't shape up. The dystopian is a Jeremiah telling us of the consequences of our actions but holding out the hope that we can change (Sargent, 1966).

Are there utopians today? Yes, and for good and ill. As I suggested earlier the Islamic extremists and the neo-conservatives in the United States are both hoping to impose their visions of the good life on a mostly unwilling world. But, fortunately, there are also other utopians, ones who believe that these utopias are in fact dystopias, utopians who are in the model of Las Casas and Vasco de Quiroga. Oppositional utopianism is essential to keep alive the vision of a world without 'others', without an oppressed. And we only need to look around us to see these utopians alive and well in our world. Some might not agree with all my examples, but I see utopianism in Liberation Theology, which has spread from its roots in South America into Black, Womanist and Mujerista in the United States, all of which keep alive a vision of a world without debilitating divisions based on class, gender, ethnicity and race. I see it in those Islamic theorists who argue for an inclusive rather than an exclusive Islam. I see it in the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, which, with other groups and movements throughout the world, specifically keeps alive the dream of a world in which indigenous peoples are not suppressed and can live a life they choose. I see it in the World Social Forum, which provides an outlet for thousands of individuals and groups to meet and develop alternatives to the dominant ideologies and the movements that would suppress rather than free. I see it in the continuing relevance of movements like feminism and environmentalism that remind us of ways we can change our own lives. I see it in the thousands of intentional communities still in existence or being founded where people choose utopia for their own lives now, and work with others to create their vision. There are more such communities in existence today than at any time other than the height of the communal movement in the so-called Sixties. And I see it in the fact that authors still write positive utopias to hold up a vision to us and dystopias to tell us it is not too late to change. And these authors are also writing more complex works in which the utopias are troubled and the dystopias hold out hope.

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Utopia become ideology can be dangerous. A utopia that insists on conformity to one model can also be used as a tool of repression and has been all too often. Thus, personally, I opt for what Albert Camus called 'the relative utopia' and, much more recently, John Rawls has called the 'realistic utopia' (4–6, 11–12), but it is also my case that this is the dominant model in utopias and communities. Most utopias aim to improve the human lot not by repression but by enhancement, and as long as we do not aim for perfection or eliminate the possibility of change, such utopias can stand up to the all-too-prevalent dystopias of the present. We need utopias today, and we need the people who choose to try to live their good life today in experimental communities, because they just may help us find the way forward out of the morass brought about by those ideologues willing to impose their version of the good life on all of us. We must never give up the search for eutopia.

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Notes

The definitions I use are:

Utopianism – social dreaming.

Utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia (below).

Eutopia or *positive utopia* – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

Dystopia or *negative utopia* – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived. The first use of this word is usually ascribed to Negley and Patrick's 'Introduction' to their anthology, but there were much earlier uses. Deirdre Ni Chuanacháin has recently noted a 1747 use by Henry Lewis Younge in his *Utopia or Apollo's Golden Days* (Dublin: Ptd. by George Faulkner) spelled as 'dustopia' used as a clear negative contrast to utopia. Before this discovery, the earliest usage appeared to be in 1782. See Patricia Köster, '*Dystopia*: An Eighteenth Century Appearance', *Notes & Queries* 228 (n. s. 30, no. 1) (February 1983): 65–6, where she says that the first use was in 1782 by Noel Turner (1739–1826) as dys-topia [first three letters in Greek] in 'Letter VIII' of his *Candid Suggestions in Eight Letters to Soame Jenkins, Esq.* (London, 1782), 169–72. John Stuart Mill used 'dys-topian' in the House of Commons. *Hansard* (12 March 1868, page 1517, column 1) reports him saying 'I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable, but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.' According to the *OED*, Cacotopia was first used by Jeremy Bentham in his *Plan of Parliamentary Reform, in the Form of a Catechism* (1818, Bowring edition of his *Works*, 3: 493).

Utopian satire – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.

Anti-utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

Critical utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and

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space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre.

Critical dystopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia.

Intentional community – a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed-upon purpose (14–15). The term was first used in 1948 with the founding of the Fellowship of Intentional Communities (with the exception of 'critical dystopia', these definitions come from Sargent 1994).

1. These include Sargent (2003); Sargent (2004a); Sargent (2004b); 'Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action', a paper given at the University of Limerick and the National University of Ireland Galway in 2003; 'The Intersection of Utopianism and Communitarianism', a paper given at the Utopian Studies Society of Europe, Porto, Portugal, in 2004. This presentation is based most explicitly on this most recent paper.

2. Unfortunately, when one mentions these terms in tandem, the specter of Mannheim rises from the grave. Most people aren't even aware that the book generally available under the title was not written by Mannheim in the form it exists; it was put together by the first editors/translators from a book of that title and a miscellany of essays. And while the book as most people have it contains some valuable insights, Mannheim scholars generally rate it as among his least valuable pieces. Also, utopian scholars seem to enjoy ripping the concepts out of context and applying them to places they do not belong.

3. Davis's approach raises a question not often addressed by students of utopia, the role of law within the utopia rather than as a means of bringing it about. Miguel Ángel Ramiro Avilés has addressed this question in his *Utopía y derecho* and in an exchange in *Utopian Studies* with Shulamit Almog (2001, 2003).

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