

TECHNOCRACY AND ORGANIZATION: UTOPIA AND THE QUESTION OF VALUE-PLURALISM

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Introduction: Whither Utopia

At this late date, it seems cliché to once again criticize the flaws of utopian thinkers. There is a general consensus, at least within the parameters of neoliberal orthodoxy, that the collapse of the Berlin Wall signaled the end of grand utopian designs. But this verdict was always premature, and the utopian impulse is still very much with us. Indeed, both cyber-utopians as well as transhumanists speak in almost religious terms about the emancipatory possibilities of technology. In this regard, however, they simply represent the latest expression of technological utopianism, or the belief that science and technological progress will finally eliminate social contradictions and establish lasting unity within (post)human societies.

In this essay I propose to examine the underlying philosophical assumptions which animate the worldview(s) of technological utopians, and I intend to criticize technological utopianism for its failure to grapple with the problem of value-pluralism. The first part of the essay sketches out my conceptualization of utopia in a general way, and then discusses technological utopias as a subset of the larger class. The next section of the paper highlights examples of technological utopias in Western modernity, with a specific focus on Bacon's *New Atlantis*. In the third part of the essay I develop a series of objections to technological utopianism which depart from Isaiah Berlin's work on value-pluralism, and in the final section I offer concluding remarks.

Part I: What is Utopia?

In an important study which charts the evolution of utopian concepts, Ruth Levitas has highlighted the fact that there is no consensus on how to define the word 'utopia'; indeed, she describes the field of utopian studies as "an ideological battleground" (Levitas 3) where literary scholars, political theorists and polemicists (among others) stake out conceptual territory against the backdrop of a contested history. There are significant tensions, for example, between descriptive and evaluative uses of the term, and the utopian impulse is manifested differently across space and time

Thus, it is essential to approach the task of attempting to demarcate utopia conceptually with an appropriate degree of modesty. Nevertheless, in any discussion of utopia it is important to sketch out how the term is being used, even if it is deployed in idiosyncratic ways. Moreover, in any essay which proposes to criticize aspects of the utopian tradition, it is important to understand what, precisely, is being criticized. Therefore, it is necessary to describe, at least in a schematic fashion, the way(s) in which I propose to use the term here. While it is impossible to construct a definition of utopia which is completely immune to counterexamples and potential criticisms (and the conceptualization I propose is certainly no exception), we can at least attempt to minimize the number of possible objections raised, and this is my goal in the present essay.

As Ruth Levitas has noted, there are at least three different strategies for delimiting the concept of utopia. The first is to focus on the content of a specific definition, and more particularly its normative understanding of what constitutes a good society. The second approach emphasizes literary form as a way to define utopia, while the third method identifies functionality as the key to identifying utopian impulses. Levitas herself highlights problems

with each of the alternatives, and contends that a better approach is to define utopia as “the expression of the desire for a better way of living” (8).

There are significant virtues to Levitas’s definition. First of all, it resonates with the conclusions of Ernst Bloch’s monumental and authoritative study *The Principle of Hope*, which compellingly demonstrates the importance of desire for the utopian tradition. Secondly, it is general enough that it encompasses a wide variety of utopian experiments. Finally, it allows us to incorporate an important element of utopian traditions which is all too often obscured by attempts to provide a rigorously objective definition; it recognizes that there is an ineliminably subjective dimension which animates utopian impulses, and this dimension is crucial in terms of understanding the motivations of the various individuals who participated in any number of the grand utopian experiments. In short, it’s a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of any satisfactory definition of the term.

At the same time, it is odd to suggest that the desire for a better future is, in and of itself, sufficient to define either the utopian impulse or utopia itself. It seems evident that we have any number of desires which relate to social improvement that we wouldn’t necessarily characterize as utopian; rather, they often emerge from reformist sensibilities. The utopian tradition, unlike political or cultural movements which attempt to reorganize particular institutions within existing sociopolitical arrangements, is generally characterized by revolutionary impulses. Utopianism is the demand for fundamental transformations which will introduce harmony into a world of chaos and disorder (Gray, 3).

In addition to the problem of minimizing the ambitions associated with utopian projects, however, perhaps the most significant difficulty with Levitas’ proposed definition is that it tries

to describe phenomena which are highly diffuse and heterogeneous in a single sentence. A better alternative is to employ a Wittgensteinian family-resemblances style approach which attempts to identify a core set of features shared by various utopian movements. This gambit is consistent with the strategy of Lyman Tower Sargent (one of the foremost scholars in utopian studies) who argues that we should think of utopia (at least in the West tradition) as a constellation of ideas and phenomena which have emerged as disparate groups have struggled for a better world (Sargent 2). In addition to the desire for a better future, then, I will follow Kolakowski in claiming that utopians believe that “a definitive and unsurpassable condition is obtainable, one where there is nothing to correct anymore” (132). A first corollary of Kolakowski’s conception is that utopia consists in the elimination of social contradictions, broadly construed; thus, the utopian vision is characterized by the insistence that we can dissolve social antagonisms and thereby produce harmony within the new order. A second corollary, which is here adopted from Berlin’s “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, is the principle that we can resolve the apparent contradiction between differing sets of values (Berlin, 5-6). Thus, a critical aspect of utopian belief-systems is the idea that we can ultimately eliminate the conceptual tension which characterizes, for example, the relationship between liberty and equality, or clemency and justice.

Under the genus of utopia broadly construed, however, there are a bewildering variety of species; if we survey the history of utopian politics over the past four centuries, for example, we can find exemplars of religious utopias, saturnalian utopias, industrial utopias, agricultural utopias, etc. (Manuel and Manuel 1-29). In this essay I propose to focus on a specific subset of this broader class: namely, technological utopias. Technological utopians, qua utopians,

endorse, at least implicitly, the normative principles/operative assumptions outlined above (i.e. the belief that the utopia they envision represents an unsurpassable horizon for the human species, as well as the idea that in their privileged vision of utopia antagonisms will dissolve and harmony will reign). In addition, however, they adopt an important belief about the means used to arrive at the utopia in question: they posit that we can eliminate the divisions in society through the use of technological means. Thus, the technological utopian has an immense confidence in the power of technology; s/he contends that if we merely unleash the power of technical mastery we can eliminate the problem of immiseration, and through the elimination of immiseration we can ultimately remove the cause of social divisions. Moreover, technological utopias are organized according to generally technocratic principles in which the solution to every social pathology is ultimately derived from the measured application of scientific expertise. In the following section, I will highlight examples of technological utopias which are scattered throughout the history of Western modernity. In order to uncover the origins of the technocratic vision, however, I proposed to begin with a brief overview of Hannah Arendt's critique of Plato in *The Human Condition*.

II. Technological Utopias in Modernity

One of the earliest Western utopias was sketched out in Plato's *Republic*, and it exhibits the various characteristics I have ascribed to utopian writing/practice with remarkable clarity. In Book Four, to cite merely one example, we discover that Plato's ideal city (the *Kallipolis*) is the perfect embodiment of justice; the various elements of the city are unified in a harmonious order which mirrors the arrangement of a well-ordered soul (Plato, 435a-439a). Indeed, in

many ways it provides the template which future utopian designs would emulate; as Hannah Arendt writes, Plato “was the first to design a blueprint for the making of political bodies [and it] has remained the inspiration of all later utopias” (Arendt, 227).

What Arendt finds significant and even remarkable about *The Republic* is the fact that the philosopher first of all acquires knowledge about the Forms and then applies his/her knowledge to the design of a new social order. In this regard, the first social engineers of the Western tradition were Plato’s philosopher-kings. Indeed, at 550b of *The Republic* Socrates says that the philosopher-king contemplates divine and orderly objects, and he will attempt to remake the polis based on his desire to replicate the beautiful symmetry of the Forms in the realm of human affairs. In order to execute the task of creating utopia, however, the philosopher must begin by eliminating every trace of the old impurities which prevent the people from assenting to the rule of the wise. Thus, Socrates says that the philosophers “would take the city and the people’s characters as their sketching slate, but first they would wipe it clean...They would erase one thing, I suppose, and draw in another, until they had made people’s characters as dear to the gods as possible” (Plato, 501a-501c).

While Plato’s utopia is not a technological utopia per se, it does establish the model which technocratic social engineers would later adopt. Technological utopians in modernity were enthralled by the idea of demolishing the traditional foundations of existing economic/political arrangements in order to reconstruct them according to a rational model or template which would guarantee the emergence and preservation of social harmony. It was necessary, they believed, to build the new society on a more secure foundation than tradition

or authority. The new social order would have reason as its foundation, with scientists and central planners in control of its organization.

One of the first technological utopias in the history of Western literature is Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, which was initially published in 1624. Bacon's sketch of utopia is narrated by one of the sailors on an expedition which departs from Peru in search of the Orient and finds itself lost at sea, with diminishing provisions and dwindling hope. By chance they sail into the port of an island called Bensalem, where they are taken in by the inhabitants and nursed back to health. During their stay, the members of the crew are regaled with stories about the city's wealth and prosperity. They are ultimately introduced to an elder who belongs to an institution known as Salomon's House, which was founded by one of Bensalem's greatest kings. The Salomon's House is an institution which functions both as a college of scientific research and the center of political rule. In describing the purpose of Salomon's House, the elder offers a characterization which could easily double as the motto of the Enlightenment: "The End of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (Bacon, 480). Thus, by uncovering the basic scientific principles which govern the world, the elders simultaneously acquire the capacity to exercise mastery over nature. Likewise, they have learned how to exercise mastery over their fellow citizens, and during a conversation with one of the island's inhabitants Bacon's narrator is informed that "there is not under the heavens so chaste a nation as Bensalem; nor so free from all pollution or foulness...For there is nothing amongst mortal men more fair and admirable, than the chaste minds of this people" (Bacon, 476-77). Indeed, for Bacon knowledge is power and technology will emancipate us from

iniquity and suffering; as Mulford Q. Sibley comments, “[i]n the *New Atlantis* technique is king: men speculate primarily to exploit and ‘conquer’ Nature, and the conquest almost automatically lead[s] to better men and women” (Sibley, 17).

This confidence in the capacity of science and knowledge to liberate us from the travails and divisions which have plagued human societies from time immemorial is a theme which recurs throughout the technological utopian tradition. It plays a prominent role, for example, in Condorcet’s *Outline of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published in 1795. At the beginning of his discussion of the tenth and final epoch of human history, Condorcet avers that in the same way that the natural sciences can predict phenomena with ever greater certainty by uncovering the invariable laws which govern the universe, we can similarly discover general laws governing our moral/intellectual faculties which will help us to predict the future of the species (Condorcet, 265). He anticipates that we are entering a period of immense progress in which political/economic inequalities will begin to dissolve, thanks at least in part to free-trade, the dissemination of the revolutionary energies unleashed in America and France, and the introduction of public education.

The most dramatic part of Condorcet’s argument, however, is his insistence that we can also anticipate the perfection of the human condition. He has an immense confidence in the capacities of science to eliminate suffering, and while he acknowledges that there are limits to human cognition, it is nevertheless the case that we can use new methods and technologies to gradually organize our knowledge and reduce complex phenomena to simpler formulas. Indeed, he believes that improvements in technology will lead to greater productivity, decreases in the amount of labor time necessary to perform essential tasks, a reduction in the

number of accidents and improved health. Likewise, one generation will pass on its wisdom to the next, and as a result the human race will continue its march towards perfection.

Condorcet's faith in the power of technology, knowledge and science exercised an immense influence within the French utopian tradition. Thinkers such as Saint-Simon and Comte would echo his reverence for the social engineers who wielded their expertise with the intention of creating a harmonious social order, and this almost religious belief in the power of technology played a critical role in any number of nineteenth century utopias beyond the French orbit, such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Likewise, the emphasis on social engineering would serve as the backbone of various utopias throughout the twentieth century, such as Skinner's *Walden II*. Indeed, the siren's song of technological emancipation continues to echo in the contemporary visions of singularity-utopians such as Ray Kurzweil (2006), as well as the more fantastic predictions associated with the Human Genome Project, which promise to liberate us from our frailties through the power of genetic engineering.

III. Technological Utopias: Second Thoughts

In this section I will sketch out my primary objections to technological utopias. I'll begin with concerns which specifically pertain to technological utopias, and I then turn to a deeper problem which haunts any utopian project, at least as I've defined it in the present essay.

Virtually all of the technological utopias I have mentioned here are governed by technocratic models of thinking in which social divisions are eliminated through the concerted use of applied science. Indeed, an implicit assumption of the technological utopians is that every social division or cause of disharmony is soluble according to scientific means. Yet this

assumption is deeply problematic, given that social division is often a product of disagreements concerning culture and/or values, and such disputes are almost never brought to a successful resolution through technological measures.

Moreover, one of the most striking features of the technological utopias I've discussed in the previous section is their immense confidence in the emancipatory power of knowledge and technology as an applied science. But if we examine the two concepts in turn, we can see that neither science nor technical progress are goods in themselves (Kitcher 147-166). If we think for a moment about science, for instance, it quickly becomes evident that we can use newly acquired knowledge for either benevolent or malevolent ends. As for technology, there is an implicit assumption that the application of science will necessarily lead to a better society, but as the experience of modernity has demonstrated this is a flawed premise. The same coal plants that fuelled the magnificent progress of the Industrial Revolution spewed disease and death into the atmosphere. The same railways that allowed us to span continents and bring nations together were used to facilitate rapid and efficient transportation from the peripheries of Europe to Auschwitz and Treblinka. And when we split the atom, which undoubtedly represents one of the greatest scientific triumphs of the twentieth century, we discovered a miraculous new source of energy. Yet as Oppenheimer remarked when recalling his experience of watching the first atomic explosion, we simultaneously unleashed Thanatos, as the smoldering ruins of Hiroshima would eventually attest. As Adorno and Horkheimer note in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster" (3).

In response to this point, a technological utopian might argue that while science/technology aren't good in themselves, they are unambiguous goods when they are

wielded by social engineers who have the necessary expertise to make the requisite decisions about how to order society. Indeed, most technological utopias rely heavily on centralized planning of one kind or another (Hayek, 165-182). Leaving aside obvious concerns about the concentration of power, however, there is a larger problem: authors such as Bacon and Condorcet tend to presuppose a quasi-utilitarian conception of the good. While it is certainly true that utilitarianism represents a compelling vision of moral life, it's important to acknowledge that it is deeply controversial from the standpoint of metaethics and political theory (Nozick 42-45; Rawls, *Theory*, 183-192). There are real concerns, for example that it fails to recognize the importance of basic rights, and that it subsumes ethical decision-making under the heading of mathematical calculation. It may, of course, turn out that utilitarianism is best able to account for our basic moral intuitions, or we may decide that we should endorse utilitarianism after further reflection, but we have to concede that it is an immensely controversial approach to political decision-making, and we shouldn't simply assume that it is the most appropriate normative theory for organizing society (as technological utopians all too often do).

Yet there is an even deeper problem which haunts all utopias, technological or otherwise. This is a classic argument initially developed by Isaiah Berlin, and the basic criticism is that utopian thinkers assumed that we could, indeed, bring conflicting values into harmony with one another. Recall my earlier claim that disagreements within communities often arise from differing value-judgments, and at the limit there are certain disputes which we can't resolve simply by forcing values to align with one another. If it is ultimately possible to resolve such differences by aligning competing values with one another, the force of the objection is

significantly diminished. It is precisely at this point, however, that we can feel the power of Berlin's critique. He contends that there are certain sets of values which necessarily clash with one another. To cite merely one case, there are times when we feel tugged by the countervailing weight of our desire to render justice vis-à-vis a person who has wronged us, and our equally forceful desire to exercise mercy or clemency. Or to mention Berlin's own example, suppose that as a society we value both equality and liberty. As he writes, "[e]quality may demand the restraint of liberty of those who wish to dominate; liberty...may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to leave room for the liberty of others, to allow justice or fairness to be exercised" (Berlin 12).

Is it feasible to suppose that technical advances will ultimately allow us to escape from the kinds of conceptual dilemmas highlighted by Berlin, as authors such as Bacon, Bellamy, etc. seem to assume? There are clearly moral disagreements which result, at least partially, from resource scarcity, and to that extent we can anticipate that if we increase the aggregate number of resources available while keeping the demands for a resource as well as the total population constant they are potentially soluble. But it's clearly the case that not every disagreement in the realm of values is resolvable through purely technical means (think, for example, of the dispute between defenders of abortion rights and their opponents).

What prevented the technological utopians from recognizing this admittedly banal point? One potential answer to this question is that most technological utopians implicitly assumed that the inhabitants of utopia would share a common vision of the good, and as I've noted above it typically has a distinctly utilitarian orientation. If it's the case that we have a

monistic conception of the good and our community is homogeneous, then any number of questions do, indeed, become purely technical. If we all agree, for example, that we should arrange our community in such a way that resources are distributed in an absolutely equitable way (although in practice this is frightfully difficult to achieve, even in the most simple forms of social organization), then we simply have to determine how to achieve this end as efficiently as possible. As soon as we encounter the pluralism which characterizes many human societies, however, the solution is no longer this straightforward.

IV. Conclusion: "...there is no social world without loss"

In a strangely poignant footnote which serves as a commentary on Berlin's discussion of value pluralism, Rawls avers that

values clash and the full range of values is too extensive to fit into any one social world; not only are they incompatible with one another, imposing conflicting requirements on institutions, but there exists no family of workable institutions that can allow sufficient space for them all. That there is no social world without loss is rooted in the nature of values and the world, and much human tragedy reflects that (Rawls, *Liberalism*, 197).

In this passage Rawls grasps the essential undoing of any utopia, technological or otherwise: human societies contain multitudes of diversity and difference. Although our world is rapidly being transformed by the forces of globalization, it is still eminently possible to encounter pluralism in the world, and we can anticipate that no matter how powerful the impetus towards homogenization becomes we will always find individuals and, at the limit, entire cultures who refuse the Faustian pact with Western neoliberalism (i.e. more capital, investment and IMF loans, but only if you privatize vast sectors of the economy, drastically cut social spending, impose austerity measures, etc.).

What this entails, as Rawls clearly understands, is that there is no social space which can definitively reconcile every value. There are, no doubt, forms of political/social organization which can accommodate a significant amount of pluralism; indeed, any number of liberal democracies across the globe have achieved remarkable success in this regard. But even the most liberal regime encounters limits in terms of how much diversity it can tolerate, and this limit is, as Berlin rightly insists, a conceptual one; certain values are not only contingently, but necessarily, in conflict with one another.

As Rawls notes, the irreducible pluralism of values is one of the great sources of human tragedy. As Hegel understood, it is at the core of Sophocles' *Antigone*, where two sets of ethical commands clash with one another (Hegel 263-268), and it is precisely this sense of the tragic that the defender of utopia lacks. Oscar Wilde famously said that a map of the world which has no place for Utopia isn't worth perusing, but it's also important to note that Utopia has no place for tragedy, and to that extent it is indeed, as Thomas More rightly understood, no place at all.

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