

Utopia and Historical Actions

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The below is translated from Kondylis' 1994 essay.¹

Utopia and Historical Action

Today, one enjoys widespread agreement in reading the collapse of communism as the defeat of utopia and claiming that utopian thought and utopian inspired actions have been conclusively repudiated. The argument was popularized by the thesis that the fragility and futility of communist endeavors traces back to its utopian premises, wherein the fundamental impossibility of a practical implementation drove those same communists to bridge the gap between theory and practice by taking recourse in inhumane violence and oppression, leading to, briefly, “totalitarianism.” The link between utopian dreams and totalitarian rule or the transition from the one to the next seemed inevitable, and this gloomy fatalism was fundamentally opposed to a modesty or resignation regarding finding ultimate truth or universally binding ways of life that would allow universal tolerance and thereby a humane politics. Such explanations or opinions are well received in societies where the hedonistic attitudes, value pluralism, and skepticism towards ultimate meaning mix in diverse variations, to engender or encourage behavior that is essential to the business of mass production and mass consumption. Ultimate goals and complete solutions can only be conceived by large collective subjects; in Western mass democracies, however, the atomization of society has progressed so far that someone off the street is hardly inclined to step out of “self-actualization” and identify with supra-individual ventures. It is not just utopia writ large that seems suspect—everything that would presumably entail sacrifice arouses suspicion.

What interests us here is not primarily the social factors by which the condemnation of utopia found widespread favor in the name of humane-pluralist tolerance, but instead the implicit or unspoken assumptions it is logically predicated on. Implicitly or explicitly, it is assured that letting go of the desire to establish utopia on earth will add substantially to the world's well-being, as it

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is precisely the struggle to realize the impossible that engenders the worst violence; the extremity of the means is attributed to the unattainability of utopian objectives. Without a doubt the gap between utopian model and current reality can spur violence, drawn out and intensified to the extent that bridging those gaps runs up against insurmountable barriers. The question is whether this is exclusively the fate of utopian inspired actions or whether it is unavoidable for all large-scale political actions that set goals that later turn out to be impossible to realize. The difference between these two forms of action often becomes blurred in the vernacular; nevertheless let us take the politically and sociologically specific sense of “utopia,” as it will prove to be important to the problem at hand. There are historical examples of ambitious plans for action that in no way aimed to shape politics *urbi et orbi* according to imaginations of eternally perfected utopian harmony that were nevertheless unrealizable as their initiators or executors misjudged the means available or the constellation of forces at play. If actions could only be planned like so, the same vicious circle would take hold: the illusion of the feasibility of the goals would lead to the intensification of violent force, as every setback would be met with ever more vigorous efforts to break through the (increasing) resistance. Those who know history—and not just since Napoleon—can cite examples in support of this fact. Certainly it can be proven that battles or simply pursuits that were in no way motivated by the realization of utopia sometimes caused more sorrow than the crimes of the utopians. In fact it is exceedingly difficult to find a form of violence or atrocity committed exclusively in the name of utopia and not also in the pursuit of imperialist, nationalist, religious, racist, or other *machtpolitischen* ends. It is easy, however, to demonize one side and play down long past crimes or suppress them from memory. But even if one holds the Christianization of the Saxons in the 8th-9th century to be more humane than life and death under soviet occupation in the 20th, even if one prefers the interrogation methods of the Inquisition to those of the GPU, one must admit that striving for utopia is not to blame for the two largest catastrophes of our century—that is, the two world wars and their preludes and aftermaths—even when these utopian endeavors played out during the same period.

A further remark is in order. Violence exercised in the name of utopia cannot be attributed directly to striving for the realization of utopia and utopian endeavors alone. It can indeed be the case that someone in political leadership, acting under the auspices of the realization of utopia, gussies up *machtpolitische* objectives and that the violence that follows in reality serves the latter—without any appreciable effect on nor even the slightest consideration for the success of the utopian project. The compulsory collectivization and forced industrialization in the former Soviet Union, which is frequently cited as the zenith of utopian recklessness and brutality, was taken on not least in the expectation of an attack and the *machtpolitischen* consideration of repelling such an attack—which, by the way, is clearly and repeatedly offered as explanation by the Soviet leadership at the time. Without strong heavy industries the Soviet Union would not have existed. Not just production of tanks and planes, but also the creation of

an army that could handle machines and equipment of all sorts. Finally, it entailed the destruction of agrarian village communities and a rapid familiarization with industrial work on the part of large masses of the population. We do not want or need to downplay the atrocities involved to make an unbiased historical assessment today: the forced industrialization and compulsory collectivization made the epochal victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany possible in due time. Moreover, there is much to be said for the tight central control of the economy and the de facto enslavement of the “Werkstätigen” with the goal of solidifying the party’s monopoly on power against centrifugal tendencies in the multinational state or empire. These facts suggest that the intensive exercise of violence on a large scale was, if one wishes to be exact, not the result of a stubborn desire to realize the classless society, but to the contrary, accompanied the (silent) farewell to utopia and hinged on *machtspolitik*, which in connection with the development of new social hierarchies and with the utopia still being invoked to inspire or disarm the masses, was only natural and expedient. The dynamism of the claimed utopia had in the meantime largely shrunk to the required stasis of legitimizing ideology.

Struggle for the (alleged) realization of utopia is not necessarily more violent than that provoked by ambitious non-utopian objectives, nor can the abolition of utopia by itself bridge the gap between plans for action and existing reality. Another assumption expressed by the critics of utopia appears weak as well, that is, their attribution of the collapse of communism to the unrealizability of its messianic promises. One who argues such must also be able explain why Christianity as an idea and institution has held up for two thousand years, when the commandment of love has not been realized to any appreciable extent, nor have the last judgment and kingdom of God brought the saeculum to an end. That is: the disintegration of communism in contrast with the longevity of Christianity must be explained in terms of what differentiates the two from one another, and not based on their similarities; among the similarities we have both the messianic promises and the failure to materialize. The counterexample of Christianity is particularly insightful in our case; a look at other, less emphatic, utopias leads to open dialogue as a procedure for reconciliation of social conflicts and the autonomous subject that can at best be realized only approximately; very often they just provide a façade behind which particular interests entrench or power struggles are carried out. This, however, in no way blocked liberalism as a sociopolitical movement, ruling the majority of the largest and richest nations, spanning the entire planet through imperial expansion, finally transforming into modern Western mass democracy under pressure from forces and conditions of production, but also, on the surface, under the banner of the same utopian slogans. The conservatives, who since 1789 harkened back to traditional rule of *societas civilis* and disparaged or mocked the utopian nature of liberal natural rights, were bitterly disappointed in their prophecies; such misanthropic teachings could never come to pass in practice. The liberal utopia, in fact, did not need to bring its nominal value to reality to fulfill its historical function; it was enough for people to mobilize for liberal purposes and, following the social

victory of its advocates, live on in the form of an ideology legitimizing the institutions at hand. The full realization of underlying utopian designs is unnecessary for the continued existence of these institutions—one suspects that this would even be a hindrance. The solid continued existence of institutions capable of governance was in any case the reason that the utopian society was taken seriously and commanded respect—just as the factual political and military might of the Soviet Union demanded in-depth engagement with Marxist theory on the part of those least deceived by the relationship between soviet ideology and soviet reality. The widespread abandonment of this activity following the dissolution of the communist institutions and power relations is a poignant reminder of the priority of the *Realpolitischen* and confirms our conclusion *ex negativo*: as communism is historically constituted as a *realpolitische* phenomenon and not as a utopia, its collapse was for *realpolitische* reasons that could have brought any other imperial entity to its knees, not the failure of utopian promises by themselves.

This discussion of the main arguments put forward by the critics of utopia leads to the question of their unspoken assumptions, closely related to the former and founded on classical rationalist prejudices, that is, the usual platitudes of “common sense.” Behind the argument that the collapse of communism traces back to its unrealizability lies the notion that ideas in history are to be understood by their nominal value and implemented in practice with as little compromise as possible. On this matter, we will respond to the question of if and in what sense utopia is realized. Next, we will take on another rationalist prejudice of the critics of utopia, wherein according to their aforementioned arguments, the gap between utopian plans and historical reality must spawn violence, though it cannot be bridged by violence. By overlooking the fact that the asymmetry between plans for action and reality does not solely arise from the utopian character of the former, the converse is implied: that there can and should be a more or less exact correspondance between subjective intents and objective results of historical action; intentions that inadequately account for reality must lead to a wreck in practice. The only solid and ethically defensible form of praxis is the ends remaining when examined in terms of their realizability and the commensurate means, so that the discrepancy between means and ends that begets violence can be avoided.

It goes without saying that such a schema for historical action must curtail both the duration and the number of people involved. Evidently, the more the harmonization of means and ends and accompanying rational course of action, the shorter the time this course occupies and the fewer actors participate—and the more confined the goals are. Only under such conditions can the subjects’ actions be examined: whether the results correspond to intentions and whether the intentions are realized as originally conceived. Collective actions, which stretch over longer periods or even generations, necessarily lack such transparency and do not grant such tight control. Within the cumulative formation of the collective that carries out such actions, the intentions and the motives of the individuals meet, and their interactions give the actions a sense, which in all likelihood

no one wanted or hoped for, wherein the final goal of the actions is constantly reformulated and finally—if at all—detours along many reinterpretations. If one were to accept the aforementioned rationalist preconception that assumes the actors are definable and calculable at all times, one could indeed question whether collective actions even merit the name “actions” on account of their long duration. Such doubts are dispelled when we do not cater to a subjective and inflexible definition of actors but rather the objective fact that there are historical epochs that are distinguished from others by particular features. These features (works of technical civilization as well as ways of thinking and behavior) are *Objectivierungen* and crystallizations of the collective actions of many generations and manifold actors that operated largely independently from one another, with different motives and under many banners—fostering historical trends that they did not know or only foresaw approximately, only outlining a unified meaning in retrospect.

The long waves of historical action, which only quiet down provisionally after the emergence of new social formations, emerge from actions whose course and consequences cannot be overseen or controlled by particular actors; it is hardly surprising that the surpaindividual stems from the surpaindividual. Actions by means and ends that can be rationally coordinated, however, unfurl as short waves, which in the course of time are swallowed by the large waves of collective action. Subjective intents of particular actors and rational plans for action come to be diverted and channeled according to the often unforeseeable effects of the heterogony of ends that flows into great collective creations or debacles. It is not necessary that the short waves of action originate in rational plans in order to be able to produce the long waves of collective action. Thus it is not at all true that only rational acts yield the desired results, or conversely, that irrational acts—that is, those that “bypass reality”—only bring about undesired ones. No matter how rational their corresponding components are, the large waves of historical action will be set in motion by the energy that is held in the short waves, dispersed or interspersed, being absolutely necessary—seen purely mechanically or rationally—for the attainment of the final result. As the accumulation of smaller efforts and particular goals in themselves can turn into a new historical quality, so too can the search for the absolute be put into service for a new historical relativity.

At this point the torrent of utopia flows into the river of collective historical actions that drains into the long waves. It would in fact be historically useless or outright harmful to allow historical action to be reduced to the short-winded schema that the rationalists presuppose. And they would likewise be unable to untangle realities wherein every action is unmoored from the “rationality” of particular actors, when they consist purely of the stuff of dreams and indulge dogged effort to turn the existing matter into the stuff of dreams. It cannot be denied that the components of the uncompromising dream live within all utopian designs: they give wings to them and ultimately lift them to action. It cannot be put into words, but nevertheless lies behind all that can be said of utopias. It merges with desires, yearning for ultimate harmonious regulation

of human coexistence, concerning the realization of very subjective and very intimate matters, aiming for inner quiet and bliss, often wishing even to conquer the biological frailty of man, sickness, and death. This aspect of utopia could be ascribed a transhistorical or anthropological character, as here it is not just a particular concrete evil to be overcome, but evil in itself in general. Oppression, war, and suffering mark the human condition in every place and every era, and that is why the desire for their ultimate abolition includes a desire for overcoming history and every finality, in turn, makes a statement on the true nature and ultimate possibilities of humanity. If utopian designs were reduced to these components or dimensions, they would form an undiluted expression of the pleasure principle, belied at every step by the reality principle. The desire for overcoming the reality principle by the total realization of the pleasure principle always lies in the background as motivation for utopian actions, but this desire in itself does not confer historical effectiveness to such actions. It needs modifications and mediations to seize the bridges to reality and give a point of contact so that actions can abide in their necessary historical relativity. The absolute dimension of utopian plan is now provided with another side, which we will call the period specific. This deals not in the desires for salvific bliss and the appearance of immortality where possible, but rather it first and foremost entwines with the utopian model for society. However deeply these two aspects of the utopian may merge, they must be distinguished from the historical function in the record. The difference is both logically valid and historically legitimate when we consider that the modern utopia comes onto the scene as a city-novel and remains there until the framework of the Marxist utopia links the ideal of the classless society to the demand to abolish “alienation.” It is to be expected that in the aftermath and above all under the influence of the mass democratic desideratum “self-actualization,” the subjective dream of fulfillment ruled the realm of the utopian. Regardless of how one judges the general significance of both aspects within the utopia across time, utopia unfurls its historical effects by the force of the period specific aspects of its societal model. It brings developmental trends to the fore, that flow straight into the emerging societal formation; it is realized in an approximate and twisted form by the mechanisms of the heterogony of ends, while the search for deliverance from all pain and sickness remains unfinished and historically impotent in itself, it continues the search for a societal model anew.

From the perspective of rationalist prejudice, the contrast between utopia in general and reality is one-dimensional and inflexible, and it is conceived alongside or even confused for the opposition between undoable and doable. The utopia does not simply pass reality by—if that were the case it would in fact be nothing more than a limit, not the motivating force of collective actions. Instead, between utopia as societal model and sociopolitical reality exists a two-dimensional and flexible polarity. The utopia negates reality by transcending it, and by the extrapolation of incipient trends, in whatever form, anticipates the future. The utopia negates the present reality, insofar as it turns against concrete aspects of the latter and even constructs its societal model as a negation

of concrete phenomena. Even when one is inclined to discount the utopia as a dream, there are no formless dreams, and researchers should take historical and sociological account of the forms of utopia at hand, just as the psychoanalyst does for individuals by other methods in his domain. As the dream of utopia negates concrete phenomena in the name of absolute objectives, it becomes concrete itself by this very act of negation. It ties in with the present, and as a call to action shows the way prescribed by the negation of its concreteness. Put another way: the period specificity of the utopia arises from the turn against the elements of the contemporary reality that are considered to be the roots of existing hardships. The description of the ideal societal condition results in unremitting conflict with the present, and thereby the present comes to negatively determine the utopian. In its polemic against the present, utopia stands opposed not just to anthropological constants and ultimate goals that it should relieve; the opposition between utopian condition and present is not only moral and logical, but also direct and tangible. The utopian institutions constitute means for the realization of the future and at the same time means to fight the present and that which stands in the way of utopia. Thus the description of the final state of affairs also includes an implicit or explicit contention with the problems of the transition to it. The utopian societal model thus acquires a hermaphrodite character. The primary strategic claims, raised in the name of the dream, stand beside the secondary and tertiary claims that are ultimately meant to serve the absolute goal but at the same time offer the prospect of sociopolitical action under current conditions. The latter claims can be supported by representatives of social forces that do not endorse utopian objectives as such—and it becomes apparent that overcoming the existing situation in the sense of the immediate demands of the utopians need not only lead to the realization of the absolute dimension of utopia, but can serve *realpolitischen* objectives.

The period specificity of the utopian societal models explains the diversity and the heterogeneity of the materials from which they are built. In the institutions or technical remedies proposed to satisfy needs and deliver lasting peace to the collective on a just basis, we encounter, in frank, coded, or inverted form, experiences of the present and expectations of or worries about the future of a particular epoch. Designs mirror their era, either different elements contrary to the present or to anticipating different future trends. The language that serves the utopia at the time is also period specific; it can originate in politics, theology, anthropology, or science, from which conclusions are drawn regarding the forces that operate outside the narrow utopian setting. The modern utopia as period specific construct is characterized early on by its hopes that science and technology release the utopia from the hereafter, but also uncouple it from primitivist imaginations; it should not be just a return to a bygone golden age, but constitute a fundamentally new achievement in history. In this way the modern utopia appropriates ideas of progress, which—just as much as belief in technology—inspired not only the utopians. With this narrower perspective the sense of our thesis becomes clearer: utopia anticipates the future precisely by articulating itself in the language of contemporary fundamental socio-historical

trends. Many people are inspired by the sometimes astonishing forecasts that are found in technological utopias and express wonder at how many of them, for a long time conceived on more or less speculative grounds and bold extrapolations from prominent hypotheses, are meanwhile realized. They often lack the sense or the willingness for similar determinations regarding political utopia.

As remarked, the description of the utopian final state contains an explicit or implicit examination of the problems of transitioning to it. These problems understandably impose themselves insofar as the utopian societal model becomes a program for political actions; they become urgent when actors invoking this program reach an influential or even ruling position in society without being in a position to realize their promises *hic et nunc*. The utopia's reference to the present and period specificity amplify because the original design comes to incorporate motives and auxiliary constructs meant to accommodate explaining or legitimating the absence of the realization of utopia and permit actions hinging on the absence of utopia but acting in its name. On the basis of theoretically secondary constructs, organizational mechanisms, primary in practice, take shape, indeed, as the lever of historical action, which unfurls in long waves over generations and produces epochal outcomes in accordance with the heterogeneity of ends. The predominance of the *ecclesia militans* over the *ecclesia triumphans* hinges on the perpetual postponement of the advent of the kingdom of god and the extension of the *saeculum*. In the Marxist context, the analogous impossibility of an immediate installation of a classless society accounts for the primacy of the party during the time of "socialist build-up" before the end state of communism. Had the utopias at hand turned out to be incapable of incorporating such theoretically auxiliary constructs in the underlying design and then subordinating action to the logic of these auxiliary constructs and not the ideal design, they would have quickly disappeared from the scene, as soon as it emerged that the eschatological promise would not be fulfilled in the foreseeable future.

The reason that the Marxist utopia ruled the world-historical scene for a good hundred years, supplanting anarchist etc. utopias relatively easily, lies not least in its aptitude for organizing and legitimating political actions meant to attain utopia precisely when the absence of utopia was necessary. In the preutopian reality, practice remained *real-* or *machtpolitisch*, and period specific. The period specificity of the utopian, moreover, established a measure by which Marxism, not without pride, could be defined as a science in contrast with common utopias. Contemporary philosophy, national economics, and history imprinted Marxism's intellectual build, which participated in all the big debates as analysis of the capitalist present as much as a prophecy of the communist future and frequently could dictate its themes and judgments. It was not just the mobilizations of vague desires and dreams, but the shaping or, one might even say, the disciplining of the absolute dimension of the utopian by this period specific aspect to which Marxism owes its considerable historical effect. And this effect was in no way transitory, as today's critics of utopia continue to assert.

The Marxist utopia seeped into its epoch just as deeply as it let itself be con-

tingent on its era. This can evidently only be done in a paradoxical and contradictory way—as one would expect, recalling the unrelenting heterogeneity of ends. Thus it was realized to a lesser degree where its representatives achieved political power and ruled, and to a greater degree where it was expected to be realized according to its original predictions and strategies, that is, in the industrialized, developed West. The communists naturally had to deny that the West found itself closer to the goals of the historical movement as its own area under rule. For them the realization of utopia had become a question of power, that is, they had to identify utopia and their own rule. By their worldwide activity they fostered trends rooted in their utopian societal model, and they did this in two ways. They believed, that utopia must and should be established on the whole planet if at all, as the development of the world market by the capitalist revolution had unified world history once and for all. Accordingly, their own revolution was for decades directed as a world revolution from a national center of power. Thereby they contributed directly and indirectly, positively and negatively, to a political unification of the modern world and to an increase in the degree of interconnection of planetary politics. The degree of interconnection today came to be in anticipation of a planetary-scale utopia, if also under other hopeful banners. On the other hand, the communists, by their effect or immediate influence within the large industrialized nations, helped bring about the dissolution of oligarchic liberalism and transition to egalitarian mass democracy. In these nations important premonitions or demands of the utopian social model came to be realized in modified form—admittedly not in the way Marxism had predicted, but perhaps by the unfolding of forces to which it attributed key world-historical functions. Technology and industry yielded a then unforeseeable dynamic, which in the meantime led not only to social polarization and proletarian revolution, but also to defusing the class oppositions and the development of a fundamentally egalitarian societal formation—representing an astonishing first in world history. The social material inequality was not eliminated, but the overcoming of the scarcity of goods and the new exigences of division of labor gradually brought along with it the simultaneous dissolution of the traditional bourgeoisie and the traditional proletariat. But it was not only the Marxist insight into the coupling between productive forces and the inevitable breakdown of class structure of bourgeois society that was vindicated: the principle of material equality, which socialism had mobilized against the formal freedoms of the bourgeoisie, dominates the ideological realm today despite factual inequality. The entwining of the utopian with the long waves of historical change is also noticeable in complementary intellectual movements that accompanied the great turn from bourgeois liberalism to mass democracy, such as the artistic avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century or the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s, that had a strong utopian element and deeply influenced the attitudes and daily life in mass democracy, if in domesticated form.

The classless society was also realized on the basis of overcoming the scarcity of goods, and if it was only realized as a caricature, the reason is simply that it

could not have been realized if not as a caricature. In general it can be said that the period-specific, not the absolute, dimensions of utopias can be implemented in practice. Likely everything in a utopian model can be realized—except its actual desire: the dream of completely and finally overcoming struggle and sorrow. This concern is not a concrete historical quantity, but rather an anthropological constant. Actions remain historical and concrete, and therefore achieving its actual utopian desire is not within the scope of action; it functions only as the motivation for necessarily relative historical acts. Seen this way, the utopia must suffer a direct defeat each time, and despite this, by indirect ways and means, carry the day—and the part that will be defeated each time is its anthropologically ineradicable aspect, that cannot be eliminated by any historical defeat. The collapse of communism therefore does not mean the final abolition of utopia from world history; rather it is the defeat of a large nation that made use of utopia in its struggle to attain world power and dominance—exactly as every other modern world power that steps onto the stage must preach universal historical ideas. During the cold war, anticommunists often rightly pointed out the *machtpolitische* instrumentalization of utopia on the part of the Soviet Union. Today, they err in their logic when they invert the order and declare the Soviet Union to be the sword of utopia, and then count this as a defeat of the underlying utopia. On the other hand, they overlook that communism in the east was defeated precisely by the mass democratic realization of utopia in the West, which despite all its shortcomings, connected the masses to the “system” and took the winds out of the revolutionary movements’ sails. The utopia seems to be historically exhausted in the postcommunist present and without recognizable function; this is not only due to the obvious failures of its absolute concerns, but also the imperceptible implementation of its relative objectives. The future will reckon with utopia anew, in whatever form, as long as historical actions unfold in long waves by specific processes and shape whole epochs. It could fall silent forever, should the movement of planetary history find itself at an impasse, in which political actions are justified with regard to the partition of materials that have become scarce and ecological goods that have become limited on a heavily populated planet. Then any spirit of embarkation, required for the emergence of utopia, would slowly wane; ideologies that legitimize hard discipline and hierarchy would be in demand. After the achievement of the positive utopia in western mass democracies, the so-called “negative utopia” on a planetary level may be near.

Glossary

- Machtpolitik
- Realpolitik