

Introduction

Minor Utopias and the Visionary Temperament

The history of the twentieth century is almost always written as the story of a series of catastrophes. Over four decades, I too have contributed to this apocalyptic vision of the recent past. Yet for many years I have felt that this dominant historical narrative is incomplete. This book is an attempt to fill in some of what has been left out. In particular, I want to tell the story of moments in the twentieth century when a very disparate group of people tried in their separate ways to imagine a radically better world. I term these people “minor utopians,” to differentiate them from others whose “major utopias” wound up producing mountains of victims on a scale the world had rarely seen. “Major utopians” like Stalin and Hitler murdered millions of people in their efforts to transform the world.

No one can claim that historians of the twentieth century have spent

too little time on Stalin and Hitler. Interest in their lives and crimes is perennial and, at times, alarmingly voyeuristic. Evil fascinates. Instead, I want to suggest that while attending to the shadow of the Holocaust and the Gulag, it is worthwhile to turn to more obscure facets of recent history of a very different character. Alongside the major utopians, there have been minor utopians, people who configured limited and much less sanguinary plans for partial transformations of the world. This book attempts to tell their story. It is not a continuous one, but a series of moments of possibility, of openings, of hopes and dreams rarely realized, but rarely forgotten as well. The contrast between major and minor utopias and utopians forms the core of this book. Let us consider what this distinction can yield.

The Utopian Tradition

“Utopia” is a term coined by Thomas More, the sixteenth-century English divine and statesman. The term means “no-place,” not to be found on the map. It exists; we just haven’t found it yet. The term is easily (and intentionally confused) with “Eutopia,” the place of happiness. This homonym suggests something about what utopia is, and also the playfulness of its inventors.¹ By speculating on the empty spaces on the map, we are in a position to define better the ones we know, or think we know.

Since the time of Thomas More, hundreds of literary utopias have been conjured up.² In the twentieth century, there have been many of them, and of their mirror image, “dystopias,” nightmares about a place or a time where absolute evil has triumphed.³ Through George Orwell’s *1984* (1948) or Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), to take two well-known examples, millions of readers have come to know about utopia and its perversions. Science fiction has utopian elements, though it sometimes substitutes the ambiance of the exotic for social thought.

Utopia is more than a literary phenomenon. It has been the core, the driving force, of many political and social movements. Many people in

this century have believed that fundamental elements of conflict and misery can be eliminated once and for all through social action. They imagine not only piecemeal reform, but root and branch transformations. The founders of the kibbutz movement in Israel were utopians; their achievements are matters of dispute. Vast projects of urban development have emerged from utopian visions; the results have been mixed at best.⁴ There is no doubt, though, about the outcome of other utopian projects. Under communism and under fascism, gigantic plans for the transformation of society through murderous social engineering and the elimination of internal enemies produced massive suffering and injustice on a scale which beggars description.

It would be a mistake, though, to see the utopian temperament as a form of derangement, a mild or severe mental disorder leading inevitably to ruin. Religious movements have always harbored utopian elements, though only occasionally have they dominated the mainstream, as in Iran after the fall of the Shah in 1978.⁵ Ecological groups believe in saving the world in another way, just as the nuclear disarmament movement believed in the 1960s and 1980s. Their hopes are directed toward averting catastrophe rather than toward constructing an ideal society. But the first is, of course, a precondition for the second.

Utopia is a discourse in two contradictory parts. First, it is a narrative about discontinuity. It is a story through which men and women imagine a radical act of disjunction, enabling people, acting freely and in concert with others, to realize the creative potential imprisoned by the way we live now. But secondly, since the narrative is written by men and women rooted in contemporary conditions and language, it inevitably shows where they are, even as it describes where they want to be. Utopias force us to face the fact that we do not live there; we live here, and we cannot but use the language of the here and now in all our imaginings.⁶ That is why the work of the imagination is such a powerful entry point into the historical contradictions of this (or any other) period.

Utopia, in sum, is a fantasy about the limits of the possible, a staging of what we take for granted, what is left unsaid about our current social conventions and political cultures. Those who expose these silences,

often playfully, begin to disturb the contradictions in the way we live.⁷ As Paul Ricoeur has argued, “from this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted.”⁸ What is made strange is made contingent, and what is contingent need not last forever.

Minor Utopias

This book is not a history of twentieth-century utopias, though it is important to recognize the enduring character of the utopian tradition. As I have noted, the term “utopia” is now thoroughly discredited by contamination through association with the crimes of the great killers of the twentieth century. Major utopias of that kind have indeed been constructed by politicians turned gardeners, in Bauman’s phrase, “weeders” of the undesirable elements in our world. Major utopians uproot, cleanse, transform, exterminate.⁹ Their totalitarian visions, and their commitment to the ruthless removal from the world of those malevolent elements blocking the path to a beneficent future, are at the heart of what I term “major utopias.”

In this book, I want to explore a different cultural and political space, one sketched out in 1982 by Gabriel García Márquez in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature. In Stockholm, standing in the place of his master William Faulkner, who had received the prize three decades before, García Márquez reflected on Faulkner’s refusal to accept annihilation as man’s inevitable fate: “Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.”¹⁰

In light of García Márquez’s plea, I will tell the story of what may be

termed “minor utopias,” imaginings of liberation usually on a smaller scale, without the grandiose pretensions or the almost unimaginable hubris and cruelties of the “major” utopian projects. In each chapter, I analyze visions of partial transformations, of pathways out of the ravages of war, or away from the indignities of the abuse of human rights. Such imaginings are powerful and sketch out a world very different from the one we live in, but from which not all social conflict or all oppression has been eliminated.

This notion of minor utopias is illustrated in Tom Stoppard’s recent theatrical trilogy presenting the ideas of the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Alexander Herzen. The central character, Herzen urges his son (and the rest of us) to sail toward the “coast of utopia,” but never to imagine that there is some holy grail to be found inland.¹¹ Herzen, in this sense, was indeed a minor utopian; a visionary without a blueprint of a future society in which social conflict no longer existed.

What distinguishes nineteenth-century from twentieth-century visions is the social context in which each unfolded. Many utopian projects of the nineteenth century were constructed against the backdrop of the upheavals associated with the French and the industrial revolutions, and the social movements spawned by each. In the twentieth century, some visionaries followed in this tradition, but others took as their point of departure a different set of upheavals arising from collective violence. It is the emergence of total war which has set the twentieth century apart and which has given to many twentieth-century visions their particular coloration and urgency. The complex and subtle dialectic between minor utopian visions and massive collective violence is at the core of this book.

Languages of Social Transformation

In the early part of the twentieth century, projects of social transformation centered around nation or social class as the carriers of a better future. In the second half of the century, such visions had different inflections and emphases. From the 1940s, and increasingly after 1968,

minor utopians have focused less on nation and social class and more on civil society and human rights.

This contrast must be qualified. To be sure, since the 1960s the struggle for civil rights has been central to the history of the United States, Northern Ireland, and South Africa from the 1960s. But alongside this well-known trajectory was another one. The dream of a new human rights regime announced by René Cassin in 1948 (see chapter 4) was about the individual, not as a member of a social class or nation, but as the common denominator of humanity. Cassin spoke for human rights, not for civil rights. The notion of *Autogestion*, or local autonomy, central to the events of 1968 (see chapter 5), originated within the Marxist tradition, but quickly moved outside of it, to privilege ecological, feminist, and transnational perspectives developed on the local and urban, rather than exclusively on the national level. The quest for what is termed “global citizenship,” so evident in the 1990s and after (see chapter 6), emerges directly out of the struggle for human rights and humanitarian action.

While social thinking in the early and in the later twentieth century overlap, the discourse of social transformation has shifted. At the end of the century, the quest for world peace had lost its mobilizing force. So had the Marxist tradition. Ebullient capitalism still had its advocates, but the gap between “north” and “south,” and between rich and poor within the “north” has made capitalist triumphalism look threadbare at best. The early years of the twenty-first century seem light years away from the optimism of the Paris expo of 1900. Too much blood and too much suffering separate the two. In the space vacated by these earlier projects, late-twentieth-century visionaries adopted a more limited, decentered, eclectic, transnational approach, which paradoxically aims at the construction of “global civil society.”

Critical Distance

This is not a book of advocacy. One danger of this kind of cultural history is the adoption of an uncritical stance towards thinkers and their

projects. Hagiography serves no useful purpose, even though some of the figures whose ideas are surveyed in this book lived admirable lives. In exploring these visions of possible futures, I draw on two perspectives.

The first is a variation of Marx's dictum that men make history but not in the way they think they do, not under the conditions of their choosing. Visionaries imagine alternative forms of social life, but not in the way they think they do. They frequently carry within their thinking the very contradictions they seek to supersede. Thus Woodrow Wilson's notion of self-determination never escaped from the imperialist setting which he both decried and embodied. The 1937 Paris expo was a paean to the creative power of science. But this vision collided with the manifestly destructive power of science in the Spanish Civil War. The Basque city of Guernica was obliterated by bombing in the weeks preceding the opening of the expo, and this inspired Picasso's contribution to the Spanish pavilion. The world's fair of 1937 contained both imaginings of peace and depictions of war. This book explores the ways in which the visions of minor utopians are grounded in the here and now. This precludes detaching these visions from the prejudices, assumptions, and contradictory behavior of the individuals and social groups which produce them. Envisioning the future is frequently a way of trying to break with the past while unwittingly revealing the hold of the present on the way we think and live.

The second critical standpoint derives from the work of the historian Reinhart Koselleck. His interpretation of historical thinking creates a useful framework for the study of social visions in a time of collective violence. He posits a binary and asymmetrical relationship between what he terms the space of experience, or what appears to be the momentum of past events, and the horizon of expectations, or how we project that experience into the future. Experience is finite; expectations are infinite. There is an asymmetry, therefore, between what he terms the "past in the present" and the differently configured "future in the present"; the tension between the two generates our understanding of historical time.¹²

It may be useful to adapt this framework for our purposes. At certain moments, the link between past and future is fractured. War and other forms of collective violence destroy even the semblance of a link between the two. The space of experience is radically altered, and no one can predict the trajectory of future events. We can no longer see the antebellum horizon of expectations. The two world wars were among these radical disruptions; so were wars of decolonization, such as those in Algeria and Vietnam. So were civil wars and internal convulsions such as the ones which destroyed Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. So, it seems, was 9/11. Not all such events radically destabilize our sense of historical continuity. The resilience of some social groups or religious communities shields them at times from these ruptures. Others are not so fortunate. In some places and at some times of social turbulence or disturbance, a gap opens up between experience and expectations. In this domain, minor utopias emerge.

Many visionary projects arise in a period of collective violence. This pattern is evident throughout this book. The First World War led directly to the assertion of self-determination as a principle of what was intended to be a new international order, one that held the promise of outlawing war. The rise of fascism and the convulsions of the Spanish Civil War precipitated reflections whose traces are evident in the 1937 Paris expo. The Second World War and its crimes against humanity form the backdrop for the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is impossible to separate the events of 1968 from the convulsions surrounding the war in Algeria, which ended in 1964, and the war in Vietnam, about to enter its most deadly phase. And the viciousness of the civil war in the Balkans, genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, and domestic repression in Latin America were at the center of many of the issues elaborated in the 1990s and after regarding crimes against humanity. The following chapters tell very different stories, but violence casts a shadow on each of them.¹³

Principles of Selection

Why have I chosen the years 1900, 1919, 1937, 1948, 1968, and 1992 to bracket the chapters of this book? Some dates are unavoidable: 1919 and 1968 are determined by political events of the first magnitude. But others are more arbitrary: 1937 was the eve of the Second World War, but the nations presenting displays of their national achievements in the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Métiers de la Vie Moderne in Paris in that year had other agendas. Their visions of the future contrasted bleakly with the harsh realities of the time. Similarly, the framing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was so close to the liberation of the death camps of the Second World War that the document may appear to be an act of defiance more than an advance in international affairs. But the contradictory or counterintuitive character of these visions is part of their intrinsic interest. I have chosen 1992 rather than 1989 in part because the visions of global citizenship which emerged at the beginning of the 1990s so clearly echoed and transformed elements present in the celebration of globalization in the Paris expo of 1900 which we survey in the first chapter. In addition, the literature on the fall of the Soviet empire and the communist era is still too marked by Western triumphalism to permit a judicious account of that critical moment in twentieth-century history. Perhaps it would be wise to approach 1989 with the same hesitancy as Chou En-lai did when, in 1970, Henry Kissinger asked him what he thought of the French Revolution. Too soon to tell, was the response.

The six episodes I explore here tell neither an exclusive nor a comprehensive story. But together they deserve to be part of any considered history of the twentieth century. The first three chapters deal with visions of peace, based on the centrality of nation and social class; the latter three describe visions of liberation, some collective, some individual, based on the centrality of civil society and human rights. It is only by placing these visions alongside the history of catastrophe that we can get a fuller sense of the turbulence and the tragedy of the historical period—what Eric Hobsbawm has felicitously termed “the age of extremes”—in which we live.¹⁴ If Oscar Wilde were alive today,

perhaps he would have offered a slight variation on one of his aphorisms: “A map of the world that does not include [minor] utopias is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail.”¹⁵