THE UTILITY OF UTOPIAS*

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The utility of utopias rests upon the fact that much of human action, individual and collective, is purposive. Certain intellectual stances—such as analysis of social action in static systems—preclude attention to sequences; and even the theory of social evolution gives scant room to deliberate change. Deliberate change, however, is increasingly characteristic of the contemporary world, and that is how utopias as aspirations for the future come into play. Utopias figure especially prominently in social revolutions and in the ideologies of new nations. The possible roles of the sociologist with reference to deliberate change range from the completely disengaged observer to the engaged participant. The "value problem" is alleviated by the circumstance that common values across cultural systems are becoming increasingly evident. These common values are both materialistic and institutional. Planning a superior future is constrained by current circumstances, but wide latitude is still available in the choice of courses of action.

NEVER in human history have so many people, or has such a large proportion of mankind, been engaged in attempting to remake the environment, to increase our capacity to use the environment for human purposes, and to remodel the rules and social arrangements that govern man's interaction with his fellows. Some of these reshapers of man's destiny are honorable troublemakers in the context in which they find themselves—scientists and engineers, teachers and legislators, social planners and community developers. Others are faced with opposition from constituted authorities, and from the network of traditional restraints that discourage innovation. The first target of the malcontents in those situations is precisely the established social order, which is regarded as inhibiting if not iniquitous.

Man has always been a problem-solving animal, but in the course of his social evolution he has increasingly invented the problems to be solved and the novel goals to be achieved, rather than merely coping with ambiguity and adversity. It is this addiction to discontent and to the search for a better future that I want to explore here, particularly as this activity of the laity relates to the enterprise of sociology as the generalizing science of man's social behavior. Have we, in short, any obligation as social scientists to start taking account not only of the changeful quality of social life but also of the fact that some portion of that change is deliberate? And do we, still as social scientists, have anything positive to add to the fulfillment of human hopes for the future, or are we always fated to counsel the eager traveler that "you can't get there from here"?

ALL IS VANITY

Utopias have fallen on evil days. The derogatory designation "utopian" signifies unrealistic assumptions and unrealizable aspirations. Some of this ill repute is justified. Utopian constructs often violate fundamental principles of social discourse and human survival.

Item: Utopias are sexless or provide for unlimited sexuality. The former alternative clearly bodes ill for continuity beyond the lifetime of the founders. The latter alternative might possibly work, but it has a considerable weight of contrary human experience as at least cautionary evidence that would counsel examination of the importance of enduring emotion in the relations of males and females.

Item: Utopias are unconscionably peaceable, and thus miss the utility of difference and conflict, as well as its realistic probability in any human aggregate.

Item: Mostly the inhabitants of utopias

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After completing this address I discovered that my title had been anticipated. See François Bloch-Lainé, "The Utility of Utopias for Reformers," in Frank E. Manuel (ed.), Utopias and Utopian Thought, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.
appear to be rational adults of somewhat depressing uniformity. Differences in abilities and motivations are given little play, and the uncertainties of childhood socialization are evaded.

Item: Utopias are almost invariably millenialist and consequently static, since where would one go from perfection?

Despite these and other damaging defects, I shall argue that a vision of the future is not vain, nor vanity in the Biblical sense. And I shall further argue that, despite serious intellectual inhibitions, sociologists have some scientific stake in forecasting and even in implementing the future that is hopefully better than the present.

It is in this sense that I use the term utopia, that is, a future state of human affairs that more nearly realizes individual and collective goals. Thus no real distinction is drawn between utopia and ideology as long as ideology is future-oriented and not a mere rationalization of the current state of social arrangements.

Because many ideal goals may be approximated but not fully attained, and because goals actually attained do not preclude the creation of new ones, there is no necessary presumption of static perfection. Once the practice of planning the future is firmly established it is likely to persist.

The older intellectual traditions of sociology favored the use of current knowledge for remodeling as well as merely describing the social order. Whether one dates sociology from Plato or from Comte, the Republic or the Parliament of Man represented attempts to envision a future form of social organization that would draw on the best knowledge and wisdom concerning human affairs. What happened to that tradition deserves some brief comment, for the inhibitions I referred to earlier are still very much with us.

THERE IS NOTHING NEW

One of the restraints on sociological utopias has been the type of analytic machinery that many sociologists have used. Analysis of the relations among social phenomena by treating them as parts of a system does not intrinsically require that the system remain in a steady state. The analysis is usually easier, however, if that assumption is made. Almost all of our analytical methods, which are being developed far beyond the capacity of some of us to keep technically competent, are designed to extract more and more information about covariance. Very little inventive skill is devoted to probability chains in sequences of social actions. Theorists and methodologists, despite their manifest differences in other respects, have been remarkably atemporal.

There is surely no need at this point in our intellectual history to beat functionalism over the head once more. No analytic science could dispense with models that are in some way or some degree unrealistic representations of the phenomena that they are designed to put in order. The danger lies not in abstraction but in the use of one model of reality to the exclusion of others. There are notable elements of persistence in the way social behavior is ordered. There are likewise notable elements of what may be called self-regulation in social systems once established. And there are even notable elements of assuring persistence through socialization of the young into predetermined adult roles. But a model of social systems containing only these elements distorts reality in various ways and degrees, and the seriousness of the distortion will differ in time and place. It is probably true that the fit between this analytic model and social reality has been closest in small and relatively isolated tribal societies prior to their being swept into the contemporary world social system. In newly modernizing societies and in post-industrial societies the distortion is rather severe. Not only is large-scale structural change left out of account, but also there is no room for the type of order that rests upon the balancing of discordant interests rather than upon complementarity and mutuality.2 It must be noted, however, that attention to conflict is properly viewed as a corrective to social-system models and not as a substitute.


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It may be well to remind ourselves, in passing, that Durkheim, the reputed father of functionalism, did not hold a purely static view of the universe. It is true that he identified correlation as the prime sociological method, exemplified brilliantly in his analysis of suicide. But it is also true that in Division of Labor and in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life his approach was evolutionary. And Durkheim even permitted himself to look into the future and indeed to express some preferences as to its course.

The mindlessly mechanical versions of functionalism have little affinity with Durkheim. In other versions, individuals are endowed with drives, interests and ends, but collectivities are not. The fear of fallacy (the group mind) has led to the neglect of such realities as national purpose, including individual sacrifices for its realization.

I am suggesting that there is always something new under the sun, some of which was intended. There is nothing unseemly about systematizing our knowledge of coexistence in social phenomena so long as we are not precluded from an analysis of sequences and behavior oriented to the future.

LET THEM HAVE DOMINION

Another intellectual model, and one explicitly dynamic in orientation, has had the paradoxical effect of inhibiting attention to the future and particularly the construction of more desirable future states. That model is social evolution; it has recently had renewed attention after some decades in disrepute.

The theoretical scheme of evolution—resting upon variability, differentiation, and selective adaptation—has been linked here and there with notions of progress: the fittest survive; more highly organized forms have competitive advantages over simple organisms. Intelligence and culture can be viewed as evolutionary emergents, lending reality over the long term to the Biblical promise to men: "let them have dominion. . . ."

Although innovation may be viewed as the social equivalent of biological mutation in accounting for variability, the evolutionary model is poorly designed to include purpose. Chance rather than design is the principal feature of evolutionary change. Que serd, serd. Were some utopian social order to emerge from the processes of evolution, it would be a long time coming, and essentially accidental. Though the creation of the future will surely be marked by trial and error the trials will be mainly deliberate and the successes and failures scarcely credited to chance.

PRESS TOWARD THE MARK

The purposive, goal-oriented, future-oriented character of social life has been a bit embarrassing to social analysts. This embarrassment, we have seen, derives from the use of mechanical and ecological models of social processes, not to mention instinct theories long abandoned. Yet there has been another source of unease as well, and that is the worry over "subjectivism." By a classic semantic confusion, it was supposed by some that if one took account of subjective states of actors under observation, the objectivity of observation itself would be destroyed. To the behaviorist, or positivist in that sense, human behavior is determined but not self-determined.

What remains true is that, almost uniquely, human action is purposive and oriented to the future. (I know about ants relative to grasshoppers, and the alleged forehandedness of squirrels, who often cannot find their caches carefully put by for a less opulent time. Lacking innovative quali-

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4 Durkheim, Suicide, trans. by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951.


7 Especially in the preface to the second edition of the Division of Labor (op. cit.).

ties, these behaviors appear more instinctual than purposive.) At the possible risk of reductionism, I suggest that this propensity of human beings to be goal-oriented probably has something to do with genetic intelligence. However that may be, the propensity is pretty common to mankind, even if the future goals are otherworldly—worldly goals having failed for the common run of mankind. The anesthetic qualities of conventional theology exasperated Marx—properly—because a supernatural set of aspirations was likely to quieten discontent over current injustice.

The intellectual and ideological revolution of our time is that fate has lost standing as an explanatory principle in accounting for poverty and suffering, and the (often whimsical) will of God has fared little better. Mundane explanations are increasingly demanded and mundane solutions earnestly sought. Chance still plays a part in explanations, but chance is essentially an expression of ignorance and is therefore subject to curtailment as knowledge increases.

Even some of our cherished determinism is subject to suspicion. This has been eloquently expressed by Manning Nash in the final passage of his book on the industrialization of a Guatemalan village:

... the human tolls of industrialization are not built into the process itself. They are the result of an image of man in social change which delineates him as the passive agent mechanically responding to immutable forces, or as the pawn in a political chess game, or as the expendable material in an economic vision. The questions we must ask of the process of industrialization cannot be phrased apart from the ineluctable fact that man makes himself, or he is not made at all.⁹

The options are not of course completely open, but they allow for considerable variability and thus for discretion both in structural terms—the exact mode of social arrangements—and in sequential terms—the order in which our more stately mansions are built.

Men act in and often for social collectives.

⁹Manning Nash, Machine-Age Maya: The Industrialisation of a Guatemala Community, Glencoe, Ill. and Chicago: Free Press and University of Chicago Research Center in Economic Development and Cultural Change, 1958, p. 116. Nothing else makes sense of the human condition, and no attempt to reduce this nearly invariant fact of man’s behavior to purely individual actions can do anything else but denigrate and deny the whole meaning of man’s life as a social, and occasionally even as a cultured, animal. The exceptions are clearly on the tails of the distribution in a statistical sense, and clearly pathological in terms of man’s survival as a species, and certainly as the most successful evolutionary form in the competition among species.

As sociologists, all of us are relativists but also determinists. “It all depends,” or “Under what conditions?” are phrases that properly abound in our literature. But we are also generalists: “In every continuing society roles must be so allocated that essential functions are performed by qualified persons.” Or, if that is regarded as tautological,—as many useful generalizations are—we may affirm: “An industrial system is dependent on a monetary system of exchange.” And we also, more or less secretly, harbor the thought that we may be of practical relevance: “If the goal is to secure rapid but balanced economic growth in Xanadu, under conditions 1 through n, then major investments should be made in the training of primary school teachers, at the possible expense of a new cement plant.”

Note that here we assert some deterministic views, some sense of priorities in social causation, for which we have a rather too meager basis in well-established sequences. In this role we either accept the goal, or evade the issue under the guise that we are technicians. As a practical matter of motivation, however, technicians are likely to feel uncomfortable, and may do poorly, in the service of ends that they do not share. All of us have been rehearsed to repeat that the motives for undertaking an inquiry have no bearing on the validity of results, and there is no reason to alter the aphorism. Yet it is surely proper to note the probability that some of the fascination in studying the aspirations and tribulations of new nations and other developing areas is that thereby some of us can indulge suppressed missionary impulses, as we share at least vicariously in a worldly quest for human salvation.

One concrete manifestation that the so-
ciologists' blindness to change and extreme reluctance to admit the phenomena of deliberate change are not shared by men of public affairs is the abundance of 5-year, 10-year, and even longer integrated national plans. These plans may not be the construction of utopias, properly speaking, but they are viewed as steps toward a future seen perhaps dimly. Their first consequence is a deliberate allocation of resources in order to implement the goals.

Though centralized planning does not easily fit the institutional structure of a pluralist society, this does not mean that there are no shared visions and no men and organizations dedicated to their realization. And, to a growing extent, there will be a demand for monitoring social change in the dual sense of close observation of trends and of initiating corrective action when trends are going the wrong way or at the wrong pace.\(^{10}\)

Sociologists are in danger of being crowded right out of the game. Political leaders, their active opponents, and other organized collectivities across the social landscape are trying to remodel political and economic arrangements, and social arrangements not elsewhere classified. On occasion, representatives of organized interests seek the counsel of social scientists on organizational matters, on questions of priorities, on troublesome uncertainties about maintaining a modicum of order while rapid change is set on its way. But what about helping to shape the grand design from the beginning?

Dennis Gabor asserts that we cannot predict the future, but that we can invent it.\(^{11}\) The specific concerns of this thoughtful physical scientist are all-out war, overpopulation, and the challenge of technology. He makes a strong case for optimism. The distinction between predicting and inventing is spurious, however. If we invent the future, we thereby predict it, for deliberate acts will be taken to implement the invention, and we shall be able—no doubt with some slippage—to do what we set out to do.

THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND

There is another tradition in our intellectual heritage, which at first glance was not religious in its orientations to the future, and which at second glance was also not scientific, contrary to the founders’ claims. This is the Marxist version of man and his future, a version which has suffered many amendments and reinterpretations. The details of the cross-currents in this particular theology can interest only the faithful, and, since they are split into sects, only some of them. Yet certain points in the Marxian tradition have had a kind of continuing viability, despite the best efforts of orthodoxy to make them meaningless.

The principal enduring features of Marxist theory are the emphasis on conflict and particularly the role of conflict in producing structural change. To these features one may properly add an emphasis on utopian idealism, for the Marxian tradition has been as utopian as those socialists that Marx criticized. Neither the future foreseen by Marx nor the process of getting there occurred in the places where the prediction was applied. It is as ideology and not as deterministic theory that Marxism has relevance for the future, where the ideology is accepted. The irony of this reversal of Marxist doctrine will not detain us.

Revolutions thrive on utopian images, and without such images they will fail. Nihilist rebellions may be provoked for the single purpose of deposing existing rulers, but unless there is a kind of ulterior purpose, a positive rather than a purely negative goal, institutions will not be changed and a revolution will not have occurred. Indeed a new set of rascals will have succeeded their predecessors.

Marxist theology has a hardy survival power, not because of its scientific accuracy, but because it is a worldly eschatology. It promises mundane solutions and mundane rewards. The Marxists generally have been deluded into thinking of a social system as held together by a conspiratorial group wielding overt and subtle power, and barely containing the deep-seated conflicts of un-


willing or unwitting participants. Yet in utopia, after the revolution, good social arrangements will replace evil ones, and man will no longer set his hand against the commissioners, who are his friends, as he formerly did against the bosses, who were his enemies. When the state withers away, he will be truly master of his destiny. The derogatory use of the term utopian seems especially apt for this particular and powerful ideology.

The fascinating feature of contemporary revolutions and the ideology of new nations is their eclectic quality, as men go about constructing images of the future. The predominant role of the state in economic and social planning is justified under the rubric of socialism, though often political participation by the ordinary citizen is radically limited or manipulated. And continuity with a precolonial past is sought, or continuity with a time prior to a deposed regime. National identity is cultivated, especially where it scarcely exists in multiracial and multi-communal states. And it is precisely the future orientation of the ideology that glosses over current conflicts and complaints. The vision of the future counsels patience with the present. One of the utilities of utopias is that they work, from a pragmatic political view.

AND A NEW EARTH

I pose now a fundamental question. Can we help mankind survive for the next twenty years, or, to be safe, until the end of this century? If we can, and it does, the implication seems clear: that we shall have got over the hump of solving international disputes without resort to ultimate weapons, that the burden of population growth will have been alleviated in poor lands as in rich ones, and that technological change, which is never an autonomous variable, will stop threatening its creator.

The question is, can an evolved, intelligent species survive the reliable means for its own destruction? 12 Comparative interstellar sociology offers no evidence on this. The history of man is ambiguous to the point of absolute uncertainty. But all this presupposes a kind of mechanical fatalism, to which we have been too long addicted, out of fear of our humanity. Of course we can make the future, for no one else is in charge here.

The utility of utopias is simple. In the degree that utopias are taken seriously, they determine the course of present action and become, in a restricted sense, self-fulfilling. This is the point that Wendell Bell has underscored with respect to “images of the future.” 13 The future is the cause of the present in substantial degree, and it is only the failure of sociologists to come to terms with human purpose that has hidden this verity from their view. When sociologists have dealt at all with sequences, their view has tended to be that of the pool table, with the cue-ball set in motion by accidental acts. Surely we know better.

What if we were to construct a new earth? Could we pretend to any technical competence, and could we, even more pretentiously, lay claim to setting human values?

In advance of evidence, I should not suppose that sociologists were exceptionally qualified or exceptionally disqualified in giving advice on the scenario for utopia. Let me comment first on disqualifications, just to get done with it. To the extent that we are embarrassed by human purpose, read it out of our conceptual schemes, and permit no change because that would disturb self-equilibrating systems, we are simply out of the business of constructing utopias or implementing them. Even so, our incompetence is not total and universal. To the extent that we do take account of social values, goal-orientations, and purposive action we can at least examine individual and collective aspirations for the future. Our strong point has been an emphasis on connections and interrelations. And, it must be noted, this has often prompted a cautionary attitude on visionary schemes. But once our attention turns to sequences rather than static connections, our stance may be cautious but it need not be negative.

At the very least the sociologist can properly play the role of observer, including the observation of trends that permit him to


13 Wendell Bell, “The Future as the Cause of the Present,” Plenary Session Address to the American Sociological Association, Miami Beach, August 30, 1966.
be a prognosticator. And because he, the sociologist, is strong on relationships, he may claim some expert capacity to identify secondary and tertiary consequences of plans and programs initiated by others. Incidentally, there is no reason to suppose that all of the side-effects carry negative signs; the conservatism implicit in equilibrium models has led to an excess of caution.

The real crux of the issue is the value question. What model of utopia are we talking about, and who determines the choice? Can a value-free social science say anything about goals, or is it confined to mere instrumentation? The questions are valid enough, in principle, but I suggest that their practical significance has been exaggerated.

The only effective enemy of man is man himself. Now that must give us pause. Is it then the law of the jungle, or Social Darwinism that still explains our state? No, I suggest that mankind has common goals.

Given scarce resources at any given time, there is likely to be a bit of a dispute—perhaps with bloodshed—over their allocation, and indeed over priorities in goals. Yet, despite cultural differences—and some of these are rapidly disappearing in the contemporary world—men everywhere prefer health to sickness and longevity to early death. Men everywhere prefer material well-being to poverty. I am aware of contrary doctrines, and it is always possible that voluntary poverty for the sake of spirituality may command the allegiance of a minority. But the spiritual values of poverty have been vastly oversold. Viewed empirically, values extolling poverty and fixity of social position—values often deeply imbedded in religious doctrine—have been readily abandoned when alternatives have been presented, or indeed when the mere existence of alternatives elsewhere has become known. We have, in effect, exaggerated the significance of cultural differences in human values, for many of these differences simply do not survive the extension of communication that makes the world a single system in important respects.14

If the common values alleged so far smack of crude materialism, two comments are in order: First, health and material well-being are not only valued as such, but also are likely to be essential conditions for more intellectual and esthetic concerns. Second, there is some basis for suggesting the existence (or perhaps emergence) of less materialistic values that unite mankind. One of these might be expressed as the rule of law, that is, the quest for orderly ways of resolving conflicts without bloodshed. The universality of this value may be disputed, but it is certainly one mark of a civilized polity in the maintenance of internal order, and it now appears as a kind of necessary value in international relations. Konrad Lorenz has noted that man, almost uniquely among animal species, has ritualized destruction within the species rather than ritualizing its prevention.15 What remains to be seen is whether man's superior reason is an adequate substitute for the instinctual rituals that inhibit lethal conflicts within other species.

Another value that is even less certainly universal but seems to have spread rapidly in this century is the extension of the common rights of citizens in contrast to differential privilege deriving from wealth, power, or mere lineage.16 Some of those common rights are, once more, access to health services and economic opportunity; others relate to political participation and encounters with the law. And is it not fair to view the end of colonialism as an extension of the concept of citizenship in the world community?

What I am suggesting is that these more or less common goals provide a sufficient basis for building preferable futures and alleviating anxieties about the "value problem." Value problems will still abound, including the sticky questions of who pays the costs and who gets the benefits. Yet these questions will not deter political leaders from planning the future—note, often

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a future that these leaders will not live to see. And it is not clear that social scientists should shrink from complexity. Were that the proper course, we should abandon our calling forthwith and try to find the simple life doing something else.

It is true of course that any future we now seek to construct must take account of present conditions and also of trends that would be extremely difficult to alter. For example, short of a morally untenable destruction of people, many demographic dimensions are already fixed for the rest of this century and beyond. And it would be difficult now to prevent continuing development of computerized data storage and retrieval, with the technical potentiality of developing complete dossiers on every inhabitant within a country so equipped. Yet dangers foreseen are possibly dangers that can be alleviated or prevented.

The utility of counter-utopias, such as Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is precisely admonitory, encouraging prior preventive action to dampen and redirect trends of change. The future will not be exactly as we intended it to be, even if we now had consensus and concerted conduct in the attempt to bring it about. It will be closer to the future desired by engaged individuals and spokesmen for collectivities if we make those hopes explicit than if we take refuge in silly notions of the inevitability of autonomous forces or of “natural evolution.” Although we have been schooled not to exaggerate human rationality, we have perhaps failed to emphasize, and assist, the human potential for sensible action. The picture of man driven is no more intrinsically valid than the picture of man driving on a course chosen by himself.

It would be improper as well as useless to suggest that every sociologist drop his current intellectual concerns to devote his talents exclusively to building a better world. Even if that were the sole acknowledged rationale for our existence as a discipline, which is dubious, we are not well equipped with knowledge as to just how a better world would look, or how it might be brought about. Some of our current careful work is bound to be useful in constructing and reconstructing utopias, even if we have no such lofty ambitions or reject them as professionally improper. My only plea is for indulgence toward our brethren who think that man is worth saving and his lot in life worth improving. A little activism of this ambitious kind will do us no harm at all.

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