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THE UTOPIA SYNDROME

I have ascertained by full enquiry, that Utopia lies outside the bounds of the known world.

—GUILLAUME BUDE

While we pursue the unattainable we make impossible the realizable.

—ROBERT ARDREY

IF a *terrible simplificateur* is someone who sees no problem where there is one, his philosophical antipode is the utopian who sees a solution where there is none.[1]

Ours is an age of utopia. Grandiose, esoteric endeavors are not just a fad, they are a sign of our times. All sorts of *gurus* offer to rush in where angels fear to tread: "The natural state of man is ecstatic wonder; we should not settle for less," states the preamble to the constitution of a Free University. A program offers "a system of human development carefully structured to produce lucid thought, emotional balance, and physical joy and serenity. The result is the total integration of mind, emotion, and body which is man's true natural condition." Another prospectus introduces a course for married couples with the words: "Marriage which means the compromise of love isn't worth the trip." And

[1]Of course, opposites are more similar than the mid-position they exclude. In fact, the simplifiers could be seen as claiming that certain utopias already exist. We might even say that both the simplifier and the utopian strive for a problemless world—the one by denying that certain difficulties exist at all, the other by acknowledging their existence but defining them as basically abnormal and therefore capable of resolution. Thus, if we attempt to keep simplifications and utopias strictly apart, it is for systematic reasons and not because we are unaware of their practical affinity.

the description of a course offered by a highly respectable institution of higher learning confidently promises: "If your perception of yourself is vague and ephemeral, if you feel your relations with others are awkward and mixed-up, this series of lecture-work-seminars may well turn you on to life and its deep richness and meaning for you." But what if somebody fails to reach his natural state of ecstatic wonder, and what if life's deep richness does not unfold itself?

Since 1516, when Thomas More described that distant island which he gave the name of Utopia ("nowhere"), volumes have been written on the subject of an ideal life. Much less has been said, however, about the concrete individual and societal results of utopian expectations. In our own age, these results as well as their peculiar pathologies are beginning to become evident. Virulent, and no longer limited to particular societal or political systems, they prove that utopian attempts at change lead to very specific consequences, and that these consequences tend to perpetuate or even worsen what was to be changed.

Extremism in the solving of human problems seems to occur most frequently as a result of the belief that one has found (or even *can* find) the ultimate, all-embracing solution. Once somebody holds this belief, it is then logical for him to try to actualize this solution—in fact, he would not be true to his own self if he did not. The resulting behavior, which we shall call the *utopia syndrome,* can take one of three possible forms.

The *first* could be called "introjective." Its consequences are more immediately definable as psychiatric than social, since they are the outcome of a deep, painful feeling of personal inadequacy for being unable to reach one's goal. If that goal is utopian, then the very act of setting it creates a situation in which the unattainability of the goal is not likely to be blamed on its utopian nature but rather on one's ineptitude: my life should be rich and rewarding, but I am living in banality and boredom; I should have intense feelings but cannot awaken them in myself. "Dropping

out," depression, withdrawal, or perhaps suicide[2] are likely consequences of this predicament. The program description of a panel discussion on "RAP-Centers" (i.e., Real Alternative Programs—counseling centers where young people can "rap") at the 1971 meeting of the American Ortho-Psychiatric Association summarizes his problem only too well:

> These centers' populations differ from those of classic clinic populations in certain ways, e.g., "loneliness" is experienced as "unbearable" and is chronic; fear of "establishment institutions" or of being considered a "patient" precludes treatment elsewhere; expectation of constant instant happiness is not met and its absence is seen by rap-clients as "sickness"; inherent, indoctrinated concern with police (even when not warranted) is endemic; training in order to "help" is considered unnecessary and even harmful. Yet more people go to RAP-Centers than to Community Mental Health Clinics (54).

Other possible consequences of this form of the utopia syndrome are alienation, divorce, nihilistic world views; frequently alcohol or drugs are involved, and their brief euphorias are inevitably followed by a return to an even colder, grayer reality, a return which makes existential "dropping out" even more appealing.

The second variation of the utopia syndrome is much less dramatic and may even hold a certain charm. Its motto is Robert Louis Stevenson's well-known aphorism, "It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive," which he probably borrowed from a Japanese proverb. Rather than condemning oneself for being unable to effect a utopian change, one indulges in a relatively

[2]See Yalom and Yalom's paper on Hemingway: "When the idealized image is severe and unattainable, as it was for Hemingway, tragic consequences may result: the individual cannot in real life approximate the superhuman scope of the idealized image, reality eventually intrudes, and he realizes the discrepancy between what he wants to be and what he is in actuality. At this point he is flooded with self-hatred, which is expressed through a myriad of self-destructive mechanisms from subtle forms of self-torment (the tiny voice which whispers, *Christ, you're ugly!* when one gazes into a mirror) to total annihilation of the self" (111).

harmless and almost playful form of procrastination. Since the goal is distant, the journey will be long, and a long journey requires lengthy preparations. The uneasy question as to whether the goal can be reached at all, or, if reached, will be worth the long trip, need not be asked for the time being. In his poem *Ithaka*, the Greek poet Constantinos Cavafy depicts this very attitude. Pray that the way be long, he counsels the seafarer, that your journey be full of adventures and experiences. You must always have Ithaka in mind, arrival there is your predestination—but do not hurry the journey, better that it last many years. Be quite old when you anchor at the island. And Cavafy knows of a non-utopian solution: You enter harbors never seen before, and rich with all you have gained on the way, do not expect Ithaka to give you riches. Ithaka has given you your lovely journey, without Ithaka you would not have set out. But Cavafy's wise, conciliatory solution is open only to a few, for the dream of arriving in utopia can be alarming: either as fear of disenchantment or, in Hamlet's sense, that we would "rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of." In either case, it is the journey, not the arrival, that matters; the eternal student, the perfectionist, the person who repeatedly manages to fail on the eve of success are examples of travelers who eternally wander and never arrive. The psychology of the unattainable necessitates that every actual fulfillment is experienced as a loss, as a profanation: for the devout Jew the political reality of the State of Israel is little more than the banal parody of an age-old, messianic longing; for the romantic lover who at long last conquers the beautiful woman, the reality of his victory is a far cry from what it was in his dreams. George Bernard Shaw put the same thought even more succinctly and pessimistically: "There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it."

This form of utopianism becomes problematic in everyday life when a person seriously expects that "arriving"—as opposed to a view of life as an ongoing process—will be completely nonprob-

lematic. It is of interest to us that, for example, many major transitions in life are described in the popular mythology as trouble-free, totally delightful experiences: the newlyweds cheered on by friends and relatives (and, of course, by furniture stores): "we know you will have a happy life together"; the "magic" of the honeymoon; the young couple, about to have their first child, who are met with statements about the joys of parenthood and how much closer this will bring them; retirement as both a state of serene fulfillment and the opening up of new possibilities; the enchantment of (literally) arriving in that distant, exotic city, etc., etc. Yet, as is well known, all these transitions normally involve some personal discomfort, difficulty, and disappointment.

The *third* variation of the utopia syndrome is essentially "projective"; its basic ingredient is a moral, righteous stance based on the conviction of having found the truth and sustained by the resulting missionary responsibility of changing the world. This is first attempted by various forms of persuasion and in the hope that the truth, if only made plain enough, will of necessity be seen by all men of good will. Consequently, those who will not embrace it, or will not even listen to it, must be acting in bad faith, and their destruction for the benefit of mankind may eventually appear justified.[3] Thus, if my life is not in a permanent state of ecstatic wonder, if universal love of everybody for everybody has not yet been actualized, if in spite of my exercises I have not yet attained *sátori*, if I am still unable to communicate deeply and meaningfully with my partner, if sex remains a disappointingly mediocre experience, a far cry from what the numerous sex manuals describe—then this is because my parents, or society at large, by their rules and limitations, have crippled me and are unwilling to concede me that simple freedom needed for my self-actualiza-

[3]These premises are, of course, also terribly simplistic, but there is an essential difference between "simplifiers" and "utopians." With the former, a problem is denied; with the latter a difficulty is seen, indeed proclaimed and fervently attacked, but in a totally counterproductive way.

tion. "Wir vom System krankgemachte Typen" (we, whom the Establishment has made sick): this is how some German radicals describe themselves. But this is also Rousseau revisited: "Que la nature a fait l'homme heureux et bon, mais que la société le déprave et le rend misérable." Robert Ardrey, quoting this opening sentence of *Émile*, believes that it launched what he so aptly calls the Age of Alibi: nature made me happy and good, and if I am otherwise, it is society's fault. The Age of Alibi, Ardrey writes in *The Social Contract*,

> presenting greater sympathy for the violator than the violated, has with elegance prepared us for maximum damage as we face a future of maximum civil disorder. A philosophy which for decades has induced us to believe that human fault must rest always on somebody else's shoulders; that responsibility for behavior damaging to society must invariably be attributed to society itself; that human beings are born not only perfectible but identical, so that any unpleasant divergences must be the product of unpleasant environments; . . . such a philosophy has prepared in all splendour the righteous self-justifications of violent minorities, and has likewise prepared with delicate hands the guilts and the bewilderments of the violated (8).

Within his own framework, Alfred Adler already was quite aware of similar projective mechanisms, e.g., when defining his concept of an individual's life plan. "The life plan of the neurotic demands categorically that if he fails, it should be through someone else's fault and that he should be freed from personal responsibility" (1). And concerning paranoia, Adler writes: "The activity [of the paranoiac] is usually of a very belligerent kind. The patient blames others for the lack of success in his exaggerated plans, and his active striving for complete superiority results in an attitude of hostility towards others. . . . His hallucinations . . . arise always when the patient wants something unconditionally, yet at the same time wants to be considered free from responsibility" (2).

Since in spite, or perhaps just because, of their utopian nature,

such proposed solutions are astonishingly pedestrian and inadequate—in Ardrey's words, the clichés of a century, all tried and found wanting (6)—the belief in their uniqueness and pristine originality can be maintained only by a studious disregard for the evidence of the past. A deliberate disdain not only for the lessons of history, but for the whole idea that history has anything to offer, becomes another essential ingredient of the utopia syndrome. This has the additional advantage of enabling one to see one's own suffering and the sorry state of the world as a unique, unheard-of plight for which there are no valid comparisons. Those who ignore history, warned Santayana, are doomed to repeat it.

We have so far considered cases of self- or world-improvement in the service of an unrealistic ideal in which the attempted change compounds some unchangeable difficulty into a problem. But it also can happen that people will consider the *absence* of a difficulty to be a problem that requires corrective action, and act until they have a full-grown pseudo-problem on their hands. A fruitful matrix for such "problems" is, for instance, puritanism (whose basic rule has been facetiously defined as: You may do anything as long as you don't enjoy it). The premise here is that life is hard, that it requires constant sacrifice, and that all success has to be paid for dearly. Within the frame of this premise, the occurrence of ease, spontaneity, and "undeserved" pleasure, let along of any sort of windfall, is seen as signifying the existence of something wrong or a portent of imminent vengeance of the gods.[4] The woman who upholds motherhood as a glorious sacrifice comes to mind ("Oh yes, I had morning sickness—I enjoyed every bit of it" [91]), or the compulsive husband who lives only for his work—although in their view the problem is usually the

[4]One is reminded of Till Eulenspiegel, who, trudging through the rolling countryside of the Ardennes, cried while walking downhill but laughed while climbing the steep crests. When asked for the reason for this strange behavior, he explained that while going downhill he was thinking of the rise awaiting him on the other side of the valley, but during the climbs he was already anticipating the pleasure of the easy descent.

"irresponsible" behavior of a child or of the spouse. Another example is the bright student who takes all academic hurdles with ease, but increasingly worries about the moment of truth, the final denouement, when it will be obvious that he really knows nothing and has so far only been "lucky." Or then there are the "D-Day specialists"—people who constantly train themselves to be ready for some weird emergency, the occurrence of which is only a matter of time and will require all their physical prowess and survival know-how. In all these cases, the premise involves a negative utopia: the better things are, the worse they really are—so they must be made more difficult. Positive utopias imply "no problems," negative ones "no solutions"; both of them define the normal difficulties and pleasures of life as abnormalities.

Common to all aspects of the utopia syndrome is the fact that the premises on which the syndrome is based are considered to be more real than reality. What we mean by this is that the individual (or, for that matter, a group or a whole society), when trying to order his world in accordance with his premise and seeing his attempt fail, will typically not examine the premise for any absurd or unrealistic elements of its own, but will, as we have seen, blame outside factors (e.g., society) or his own ineptitude. The idea that the fault might lie with the premises is unbearable, for the premises are the truth, are reality. Thus, the Maoists argue, if after more than half a century the Soviet brand of Marxism has not managed to create the ideal, classless society, it is because the pure doctrine has fallen into impure hands, and not because there might be something inherently wrong with Marxism. The same stance is familiar in unproductive research projects, when the attempted solution is *more* money, a *bigger* project—in short, "more of the same."

This distinction between facts and premises about the facts is crucial for an understanding of the vicissitudes of change. We have already referred to it when presenting the nine-dot problem,

where—it will be remembered—it is a fallacious assumption about the problem which precludes its solution, and not the fact that one has not yet discovered the "right" way of connecting the dots within the frame of that premise. That this mistake is far from trivial becomes clearer when we examine it in the potentially fatal context of existential despair. Many people are led to contemplate, or even commit, suicide because, like Hemingway, they are unable to live up to certain expectations. This is why they may begin to experience their lives as meaningless; existential writers, from Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky to Camus, have dealt with the lethal consequences of the lack of meaning. In this form of existential despair the search for a meaning in life is central and all-pervasive, so much so that the seeker may question everything under the sun, *except* his quest itself, that is, the unquestioned assumption that there *is* a meaning and that he has to discover it in order to survive.[5] Flippant as it may sound, this is the difference between much of human tragedy and the attitude of the King of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, who, after reading the nonsensical poem of the White Rabbit, cheerfully concludes: "If there is no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any."

But we are again getting ahead of ourselves by mentioning solutions while we are still on the subject of problem formation. This is almost inevitable, for, as we have seen, a "solution" may itself be the problem. And it is especially so in those areas which are specifically concerned with change, i.e., in psychotherapy and in the wider field of social, economic, and political changes.

As for psychotherapy and utopianism, the question arises if and to what extent treatment may itself suffer from the affliction it is supposed to cure. With the possible exception of the writings

[5]Or cf. Laing: "Illusionment or disillusionment may equally be based on the same fantasy. There is 'an answer' somewhere; or there is 'no answer' anywhere. The same issue either way" (65).

of Alfred Adler, Harry Stack Sullivan, and Karen Horney, most schools of psychotherapy (although not necessarily their individual adherents) have set themselves utopian goals, e.g., genital organization, individuation, self-actualization—to say nothing of the more modern and extreme schools mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. With goals such as these, psychotherapy becomes an open-ended process, perhaps humanistic, but more likely inhumane as far as the concrete suffering of patients goes. In view of the lofty magnitude of the endeavor, it would be unreasonable to expect concrete, rapid change, and in a fascinating, almost Orwellian display of logical acrobatics, the concrete is thus labeled utopian, and utopia defined as a practical possibility. Make concrete change of a concrete problem dependent upon the reaching of a goal which is so distant as to border infinity, and the resulting situation becomes self-sealing, to borrow Lipson's (74) term. For instance, if an acute case of appendicitis is not cured by the power of the patient's prayer, this merely proves that his faith was not strong enough and his demise "therefore" confirms rather than invalidates the doctrine of spiritual healing. Or, to take a less blatant example, if a "neurotic" symptom is merely seen as that tip of the iceberg, and if in spite of many months of uncovering therapy it has not improved, this "proves" the correctness of the assumption that emotional problems may have their roots in the deepest layers of the unconscious, which in turn explains why the patient needs further and even deeper analysis. Open-ended, self-sealing doctrines win either way, as in the bitter joke about the patient who after years of treatment still wets his bed, "but now I understand why I do it."

Utopian attempts at change create impasses in which it often becomes impossible to distinguish clearly between problems and "problems," and between "problems" and "solutions." The unattainability of a utopia is a pseudo-problem, but the suffering it entails is very real. "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequence," remarked Thomas (90). If, in a logical

salto mortale, these consequences are seen as the causes of the problem, it then makes sense to try and change them. If these attempts are unsuccessful (as they have to be), it then makes sense to try more of the same. "The difficult we do right away, the impossible takes a little longer"—a clever aphorism, but a cruel trap for anyone who even half believes in it. The impossible, obviously, takes forever, but in the meantime, to quote Ardrey once more, "while we pursue the unattainable we make impossible the realizable" (5). We smile at the joke about the drunk who is searching for his keys not where he really lost them, but under the street lamp, because that's where the light is best. It sounds funny, but only because the joke makes it explicit that a solution is attempted not only away from the problem (and is therefore doomed to fail), but also because the fruitless search could go on forever—again, the attempted solution *is* the problem. In everyday life situations, this fact usually remains outside the awareness of all concerned; the cure is not simply worse than the disease, but rather *is* the disease. For example: Quite obviously, few—if any—marriages live up to the ideals contained in some of the classic marriage manuals or popular mythology. Those who accept these ideas about what a marital relationship should "really" be are likely to see their marriage as problematic and to start working towards its solution until divorce do them part. Their concrete problem is not their marriage, but their attempts at finding the solution to a problem which in the first place is not a problem, and which, even if it were one, could not be solved on the level on which they attempt to change it.

From the foregoing, one arrives at the disturbing possibility that the limits of a responsible and humane psychotherapy may be much narrower than is generally thought. Lest therapy become its own pathology, it must limit itself to the relief of suffering; the quest for happiness cannot be its task. From aspirin we expect a lessening of our headache, but not also ingenious thoughts, nor even the prevention of future headaches. This, basically, is also

true of therapy. When an eager pupil, in his frantic quest for *sátori*, asked the Zen master what enlightenment was like, he answered: "Coming home and resting comfortably."

On the socioeconomic and political levels, the situation can be viewed as similar, except that there the sobering conclusions to be drawn may appear, if anything, even more shocking and backward. A recent article in a leading Swiss daily summarizes the international monetary situation in terms which sound surprisingly familiar: "We now recognize that for years we have been confusing cause and effects in monetary matters. . . . Without imposing a limitation on our futuristic expectations and their mythical implications, all attempts at fighting inflation are doomed to failure. It can even be said that modern expansionistic policies indirectly create the ills which they are supposed to combat" (24). Similarly, the sophisticated and highly developed social welfare programs of Sweden, Denmark, Britain, Austria, and other countries have reached a point where these programs are *creating* new needs and thereby defeating their own purposes. In the United States, the situation is not much different. In a lecture on what he pointedly calls "The Functions of Incompetence," Thayer recently noted the astonishing fact that between 1968 and 1970—that is, in just two years—social welfare expenditures increased about 34 percent from $11 billion to $14 billion. This proves not only that these welfare measures are needed, but something else: that thousands of specialized jobs are also needed for the implementation of these programs, "and that the continued growth of this part of our total economy will depend upon increasing—not decreasing—the incompetence of the citizenry in all of those dimensions for which there is a welfare program, or for which a program might be invented and funded" (89).

But increased incompetence is not the only problem we are facing. As early as 1947, in his essay "Utopia and Violence," the philosopher Karl Popper warned that utopian schemes must perforce lead to new crises. It is unfortunately much easier, he points

out, to propose ideal and abstract goals and to find enthusiastic followers than to solve *concrete* problems. But, warns Popper, "our fellow men have a claim to our help. No generation must be sacrificed for the sake of future generations, for the sake of an ideal of happiness that may never be realized. In brief, it is my thesis that human misery is the most urgent problem of a rational public policy and that happiness is not such a problem. The attainment of happiness should be left to our private endeavours" (78). And long before Popper, the poet Hölderlin remarked: "What has made the State into hell is that man wanted to make it his heaven."

It would be difficult to define the utopia syndrome more succinctly. But let us go one step further and consider what would happen if utopian change were ever achieved, for instance on the sociopolitical level. It would, first of all, presuppose that the ideal society would be composed of individuals who in their ideal and equal degree of maturity would all be thinking, feeling, and acting alike—a fallacy which conjures up the night-marish image of totally sterile, stagnant masses or of von Neumannian robots, deprived of that vital tension which comes only from the natural diversity of men. And this is the even more frightening aspect: that change, and with it any stirring of individuality and creativity, would have to be outlawed, for it could only be a return from perfection to imperfection. This, then, would be an Orwellian society in which those who in our days clamor loudest for utopian change would be the first to disappear behind barbed wire or the walls of asylums. The vicious circle would be definitively closed and the ideal solution would have become the Final Solution.

The utopia syndrome is a pathology that goes beyond what the more orthodox theories of symptom formation have taught us. If we see in its manifestations merely the results of intrapsychic conflict due to the pressures of an excessively rigid superego (as psychodynamic theory would suggest), or of a neurotically ambi-

tious life plan (as an Adlerian might interpret most of the examples cited), we lose sight of what is crucial: that a certain way of mishandling change, attempted for *whatever* internal or external, "conscious" or "unconscious" reasons, has consequences *all of its own* that cannot be reduced to the status of mere epiphenomena without making the reduction itself part of the pathology. The utopia syndrome is an example of what the biologist would call an *emergent quality*—something more than and different from the sum of the ingredients that go into its making. It is a *Gestalt* in the classic sense of gestalt psychology (Wertheimer, Koffka, Bühler, etc.), a *structure* in the sense of modern structuralism.

As every high school student knows, the introduction of zero or infinity into an equation produces paradoxical results. In the preceding chapter, we examined the consequences of introducing zero. In this chapter, we have examined a way of attempting second-order change which may be called the introduction of infinity. To the best of our knowledge, this possibility is not envisaged by Group Theory, although it could be argued that if the combination rule of a given group is division by infinity, the outcome is the identity member. In this sense the introduction of infinity would be a special case of group property *d*. We are not competent to argue this point, especially since our references to Group Theory are clearly intended to be in the nature of a thought model and not of mathematical proof. But where we believe we are on theoretically safe ground is this: At the root of the protean manifestations of the utopia syndrome there lies a discrepancy between actuality and potentiality, that is, between the way things *are* and the way they *should be* according to a certain premise. This discrepancy calls for change which, at least theoretically, could be applied to either actuality or potentiality in order to close the painful gap between them. Practically there exist many situations in which reality can be changed to conform to a premise. But there are probably as many situations in which nothing can be done about the actual state of things. If in any

one of these situations the postulated potentiality (the "should be" state) is considered more real than reality, then change will be attempted where it cannot be achieved *and* where it would not even have to be attempted if the utopian premise were not postulated in the first place. Thus, it is the premise that things *should be* a certain way which is the problem and which requires change, and not the way things *are*. Without the utopian premise, the actuality of the situation might be quite bearable. So what is involved here is a mishandling of change: first-order change is attempted where only second-order change can lead to a solution.