Robust Utopias and Civil Repairs

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abstract: In the wake of Marxism, the decline of socialism and the debacle of state Communism, critical social theory must be saved from the narrow letter of the Frankfurt School, though not from its utopian spirit. Criticizing the totalizing packages of modernist utopias, this article tries to sustain the idea of utopia and its connection to critical social thought. It suggests that self-limiting, partial and plural utopias inform the social and cultural struggles of contemporary life. There has not been an end to utopian thought and action, but a movement away from socialism to movements of difference, movements against arms, movements for sexual citizenship, movements to create an ecologically harmonious society. In conclusion, the suggestion is made that what unites and underlies these movements is not a totalizing project, but the shared aim of producing a more civil society.

keywords: civil society ✦ critical theory ✦ Marxism ✦ multiculturalism ✦ totalizing ✦ utopia

Two decades ago, Jean Cohen (1982: xii–xiii) wrote that 'what is needed now is a new theoretical reflection and interpretation of social contestation'. At that time, Marxism was already in its death throes as a theoretical system, yet new and differently critical social movements were everywhere being born. This paradox defined the parameters – the theoretical goalposts – between which a new form of critical thinking would have to arise. Because 'we can no longer ground unity on the fact of labor or in the concept of class', Cohen declared, there had to be a new 'critical theory . . . based on the very plurality of social movements'.

> The task of the critical theorist is to accept the diversity of identities and movements while attempting to develop a theoretical framework capable of defending and promoting the potential complementarity of emancipatory struggles. (Cohen, 1982: xii–xiii)

The paradox that Marxism has died while anti-authoritarian, culturally revolutionary and deeply reformist social movements still thrive holds, of course, that much more force today, and the empirical parameters within which any critical theory must maneuver are even more sharply edged. The death of Marxism and the increasing pluralization of post-industrial and postmodern society make it impossible to ground unity, either social or theoretical, on the aprioris of labor and class. Yet, the very possibility of critical theory rests on finding some unifying reference, or at least some underlying pattern, between the contemporary movements of social criticism and social change.

This challenge has not been met. A new critical social theory has not yet arrived. Postmodernists argue that such foundational thinking is not only impossible, but also ill-advised. The purpose of this article is to suggest that, in this regard, postmodernists may be wrong. My aim is to suggest why, and how, it may be possible for post-foundationalist and non-totalizing, but still general, critical social theory to appear. I do so by tracing out some deeper implications of the paradox that defines our task – the end of Marxism and the rise of critical plurality.

Limited Utopias and Spheres of Justice

The virtual disappearance of the socialist idea of utopia, I wish to suggest, has allowed us to see much more clearly something that has always been there, not only in western but also in all modernizing, or even potentially modernizing, societies. Critical social thinking is not confined to believing in the evils of capitalism or in the particular promise of its abolition. The entire project of utopia, to the contrary, must be understood in a broader, and fundamentally different, way. If we do, we can see, in fact, that critical thinking permeates the entire world in which we live.

Critical theory can be defined as adversarial social thought inspired by utopian reference (see Calhoun, 1995; Benhabib, 1986). Utopia refers to a normatively desirable model of a fundamentally different social order that is held to be regulative for both social thinking and social action alike. An idealized picture of a 'perfectly' functioning world of thought, virtue and action (Entrikin, forthcoming) regulates utopian thinking. The existence of such utopian reference provides the standard for a normative 'ought' that can, in principle, never be reduced to the empirical 'is'. That such oughtness is the distinguishing mark of western reason was Herbert Marcuse's main point in his early, and still perhaps his best, philosophical book, *Reason and Revolution* (Marcuse, 1960).

It is important to note, vis-a-vis postmodern critics of foundationalism, that utopian standards of 'reason' become oughts by virtue of their claim to an uncompromising universalism, which is not the same as suggesting

that they actually embody an universalist position in a foundationalist way. The *claim* to universalizing reason (see Alexander, 1992) provides a standpoint from which to critically evaluate, without fear and without pity, how mundane particulars measure up. The irreconcilable distinction between ought and is, and the universalism it inspires, are lodged in the duality that distinguishes not only Christianity but every other Axial Age religion (Eisenstadt, 1982) from the conservative and homogenizing forces of social life, whether we want to refer to them as traditional, pre-modern, modern, pre-Axial, primordial, or simply mundane. To put the central issue of Axial duality in Christian terminology: we may be of the flesh, but we have an immortal soul.

If we think of utopia in the sense I am suggesting here, we realize that utopian conceptions inform and complement the kinds of differentiated and pluralistic social orders we inhabit today. For utopias to be 'real', it is enough that various conceptions of utopia do, in fact, animate the nooks and crannies, the spheres and subsystems, of such a social order. The reality of utopia does not (empirically), cannot (theoretically), and indeed should not (normatively) depend on its *actual*, that is *complete*, realization. This would entail the replacement of these differentiated, mundane orders with utopia itself.

Differentiation and plurality have always been a central topic of sociological theories, from the classical writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber to the modern theories of Parsons and Luhmann, to our contemporaries, like Habermas, today. But these accounts have been too mundane, too accepting of realism, the genre that so marks, and so distorts, the self-understanding of modernity. For there is not simply differentiation and specialization, and practicality and efficiency, in modern societies. Differentiated spheres are also, as Michael Walzer (1984) has insisted, spheres of justice, and each of these compartmentalized spheres of justice is informed by a distinctive vision of utopia.

These distinctive utopias are sphere specific rather than all embracing. They can be morally viable only so long as they remain confined by pluralism and social and cultural differentiation. This is true despite the fact that, in themselves, the very utopian nature of each distinctive vision, defined as it is by the desire for perfection, intends to exceed the limits of the mundane, to push beyond institutional confines to encompass the ideal. Nonetheless, every sociologist must realize that such perfection is not possible on this earth, and every philosopher must realize that thinking so endangers the inspiring and disciplining tension between the is and the ought. But utopias are self-limiting for another reason as well. In a plural society, utopias compete with one another. This is a good thing. It is what makes them self-limited, and it makes totalization, and totalitarianism, impossible.

If we look only at western history – although, as I have suggested earlier, this approach to utopia can be found in both western and non-western Axial civilizations – we can see how differently and distinctively utopias have informed thought and action. Plato's forms are utopian, providing sphere-specific models of perfection that can never be known by mundane mortals but only by philosopher kings. So also are Aristotle's ethics informed by unrealizable, if more empirically grounded, notions of Republican virtue. Every form of Republican thinking and action after the Greeks has been an effort to institutionalize a utopia, one that demands asceticism and calls for total dedication to the common good. Such utopian effects can be found in Roman law, in the Renaissance city-states, in the American and French democratic revolutions, in the social revolutions generated by Communist ideology, in the austerely idealistic visions of Protestant good government campaigns, in the labor, race and feminist movements. Yet from Romanticism on, utopian visions have also dwelt in the intimate and esthetic spheres, in Wordsworthian communities of love and joy, in Gnostic and mystical efforts to break down the separation of I and thou, in Bloomsburian communities of free sex, pure friendship and unlimited esthetic joy.

Judaism and Christianity codified utopias for the spiritual life, which were conceived as possibly providing a means for this-worldly asceticism, and sometimes this-worldly mysticism (Alexander, 2000a), here on earth. The Golden Rule and Ten Commandments are two utopian mandates passed on from this religious heritage. Kant's categorical imperative translated these sacred utopian norms into secular ethics. Hegel's reason barely concealed its connection to the divine. John Rawls's 'original position' is no more, and no less, than a secular rendition of the Edenic myth of innocence before the Fall. Habermas's idea that an immanent norm of consensus and cooperation emerges out of 'the transparent speech act' may be viewed as yet another rendition of this utopian regulation. So are Durkheim's and Parsons' paired modernist notions of 'society' and 'societal community', and Bauman's postmodern idea of an 'ethics without conditions' (Beilharz, 2000: 58–66). These philosophical and sociological ideas are no less utopian, and no less rooted in the archetypal dualism of the Axial Age, than Martin Luther King's 'beloved community'.

Utopias have, in other words, come in every shape and size, and with vast differences in their social reach and cultural scope. Yet while they are inspired by Axial Age notions of duality and transcendence, their concrete forms develop, empirically, in a more immanent manner. Walzer (1987) has shown how the critical standards that regulate action can be understood as gradual idealizations that develop within the nature of practice itself. Critical thinking is imbedded in the very activity of meaning-interpretation, the activity which both hermeneuts (Gadamer,

1975) and critical-theorists (Habermas, 1977) have construed in a conservative, tradition-upholding way. Within the metanarratives of Axial Age civilizations, the continuous activity of mundane interpretation leads to the construction of idealizing standards for social criticism.

Modern Utopias: The Totalizing Package

The contemporary diversity of utopias and their limits has been obscured by a tendency that fundamentally shaped modern societies, but which may now be coming to an end. Since the mid-16th century, with the rise of radical Protestantism, critical universalism has only seemed to be genuinely utopian if it has been formulated in a 'totalizing' way (see Cohen and Arato, 1992: 45lff.). Totalizing implies several things. In the first place, it suggests foundationalism. The utopian ought is not perceived as immanent to social practice but as a demand that comes from some external standard of absolute, unassailable and objective reason. Because this new critical foundation is perceived as existing outside institutional and individual action, its new standards must be imposed upon them. The old order must then be attacked at its very foundations, destroyed 'root and branch'. This is the second meaning of totalizing. The third implication, which follows logically, is that foundational principles, whether the old corrupting ones or the new utopian ones that replace them, are believed to unfold and ramify through the entire social system, subsuming the codes and processes of every institution. According to this totalizing logic, the fallen and corrupt tone of mundane society is traced to a single 'original sin' whose multiplier effects pollute every institution and every act. Once this polluted foundation is replaced by an alternative one, every part of the future society will be altered in a utopian way.

In political terms, this vision of a totalizing, limitless utopia informs the 'Jacobinism' (Eisenstadt, 1999) of the revolutionary tradition, which can be traced to Calvin's experiment in Geneva and the Puritan Revolution of 17th-century England (Walzer, 1965). Since then, Jacobinism has thoroughly permeated not only political but also many other forms of utopian thinking and action. It has taken not only a left form, in Communism, but also a radically conservative form, in Fascism. Totalizing efforts to reconstruct the political and economic world deny that their critical activities aim at further institutionalizing established, if only partially realized, universalizing principles of reason. They understand their efforts, instead, as putting into place completely new moral premises. Rather than understanding that fundamental and very radical social change may occur within the context of cultural-cum-institutional continuity, totalizing utopias advocate the revolutionary abolition of currently existing social and moral institutions.

This takes us one step closer to understanding how the totalizing tendency, in thought and action, has so disastrously foreshortened, and made so much less visible, the kind of generic critical thinking that informs the pluralism and diversity of modernizing visions. What takes us all the way there, of course, is the idea of 'socialism' itself. The contribution of socialist thinking to the totalizing utopian impulse was to define foundations, both corrupting and utopian, in purely economic terms. The capitalist mode of production provides the economic base, in relation to which every other element is merely an emanation, a superstructure. Guided by scientific reason, the socialist revolution aims to destroy the base, root and branch. It will substitute publicly oriented relations of production to go with the already scientifically informed forces. Once the new foundations are established, everything will change, and more or less all at the same time.

It is by this logic that 'critical theory' in the 20th century became limited to some version or another of Marxian thought, to what Walzer calls 'abstract equality' and the French post-Marxists labeled as *ouvrierisme*; to the Fabian plans and programs for radical economic equality (see Beilharz, 1991), the New Left's visions of post-scarcity, and democratic-socialists' ideas for radical workers' democracy. By focusing narrowly on the broadly economic (see Vandenberghe, 1997–8), such ideas, despite their shades of differences, failed to capture the radically diverse streams of western utopian thought. They were blind to the untotalizing, but nonetheless highly critical and enthusiastic, utopian visions that addressed such non-economic but socially, culturally and psychologically basic issues as gender, race, sexuality, religion and love.

In his recent polemic, *The End of Utopia*, Russell Jacoby (1999), a theorist who remains committed to the Frankfurt School, decries the end of critical thinking, 'the collapse of a belief in the future that might be different', in an 'essential' way, from the world of today. Jacoby asks why intellectuals rarely refer anymore to the possibility for 'complete social restructuring', to the hope for a 'completely transformed' society. He decries the end of 'the idea of revolution' and the failure to believe any more in such utopian possibilities as the 'abolition of work'. Jacoby wrings his hands over a postmodern world preoccupied with feminism, environmentalism, multiculturalism and difference, condemning them for 'a casual rejection of universalism'. What his Frankfurt approach to critical thinking makes impossible for Jacoby to see is that these new issues and movements are not anti-utopias, much less particularisms, but merely utopias of another kind. Jacoby claims that utopia has disappeared, that only 'realism and practicality' remain, that 'cynicism advances' and 'utopia retreats'. In fact, however, it is only the totalizing socialist vision of utopia that has disappeared. Jacoby claims that 'the left has run out of

ideas'. What he really means is that the totalizing versions of critical-left thinking have failed to change.

What I wish to suggest is that this actually is a good thing. As Hannah Arendt realized more clearly than any other advocate of democratic utopian thought, revolutionary ruptures have, almost invariably, led to chaos and authoritarianism and to the reduction rather than the expansion of utopian criticism and utopian-inspired opportunities. The foundationalism of totalizing utopias represent a *simplisme* – a form of simplistic thinking – that distorts our theorizing by focusing exclusively on one branch of society over all others. If an effort at 'root and branch' change does follow, not only logically but practically, the result will be dedifferentiation, the dangerous replacement of complexity by a purifying force, the effort to replace the messiness of real societies with a single, all-embracing radical community.

What this suggests is fundamentalism, not in a religious but in a political and social form. While revolutionary socialism has been by far the most powerful totalizing force of modernity, fundamentalist utopias have taken other forms. There have been market utopias inspired by the economism and materialism of laissez-faire, political utopias of *planification* inspired by welfare states, and totalizing utopian visions of religious, ethnic, racial and scientific kinds. The end of such totalizing utopias, both in thought and action, need not mean, and in point of fact has not meant, the end of utopian and critical thinking. It means the end of fundamentalism. The totalizing package had to be broken apart if utopian thought and action were going to survive. It did break apart, and it survived. Utopian thinking and critical action are thriving, despite the fact that the totalizing package has floated away on the oceans of change.

Limited Utopias: Contemporary Crystallizations

In recent times, the single most dramatic and influential example of such differentiated utopian thought and action was the great anti-Communist revolutions that dominated the decade of the 1980s, from the Polish Solidarity movement in 1980–1 to the 'magical year' (Ash, 1990) of 1989, which unfolded throughout Eastern and Central Europe. These revolutions called themselves 'self-limiting', and they were, by bitter experience, resolutely opposed to the totalizing ambition. They were utopian nevertheless, pursuing an idealized civil sphere of freedom, plurality, participation, legality and convivial association. The new vision of self-limiting civil utopia inspiring these upheavals captured and helped redirect the utopian imaginings of western intellectuals, contributing to a fundamental reconsideration of the strategy of revolutionary rupture and socialism (Keane, 1988; Cohen and Arato, 1992: 29–84).

In the years that preceded these upheavals, movements internal to the western, more developed societies prepared the ground for rethinking utopia. From the 1960s, in fact, political and cultural life in the West was challenged by radical universalizing movements (e.g. Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Jamison and Eyerman, 1994) that were highly critical of their own societies but which departed fundamentally from the totalizing package. The African-American civil rights movement had nothing to do with socialism and everything to do with the idea of civil reform. It dominated the landscape (Baker, 1995) of the USA through much of the 1960s, triggered ethnic and racial identity movements, and exercised profound effects on the general shape of new social movements, both inside the USA and outside it. Second-wave feminism set off a series of dramatic protests for recognition of women's full humanity (Lara, 1998; Alexander, forthcoming), and for making much more diffuse and transparent the boundary between the private and public spheres (Landes, 1998). This utopian effort to reconstruct gender relations and identities intertwined with the effects of the sexual revolution and, along with the repercussions of the movement for civil rights, triggered the gay and lesbian movements. These developments, taken together, defined an entire new arena for critical thinking and social reform – 'sexual citizenship' (Weeks, 1998).

These utopian movements of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality stitched together a new utopian metanarrative called 'multiculturalism', which idealizes difference and attacks homogeneity and assimilation. As a mode of incorporation, this metanarrative has framed and enabled new difference movements in turn, from handicapped rights to transgender identities. If it is true, as Nathan Glazer (1997) has recently felt compelled to acknowledge, that 'we're all multiculturalists now', it is not because of the conservative or mundane character of this development, as Russell Jacoby suggests, but because of the success achieved by hard and long cultural and political struggle. Multiculturalism can be considered anti-utopian only if we take as inviolate the totalizing package of the socialist utopia. Certainly, multiculturalism has no relation to socialism, but neither did the ideal and practice of socialism, whether democratic or revolutionary, ever have any relation to multiculturalism. Socialism, like modernist capitalist democracies, was homogenizing, indifferent to difference.

Nor should the self-limiting metanarrative of multiculturalism obscure the other kinds of non-socialist utopias that have emerged, or re-emerged, in recent social action and social thought. Environmentalism is no doubt the major example, with its utopia of an ecological community. Related but not identical with this are protest movements against nuclear energy, which are also connected to anti-war movements inspired by the utopia of non-violent peace. There are also utopian strands in contemporary

society that are not expressed in social movements at all. Think, for example, of such regulating ideas as 'information society' and 'leisure society', or even the notion of postmodernity itself. These visions are connected to utopian hopes, to visions of life without death or aging, to ideas of play over work, to hopes for participatory and cosmopolitan community. They are utopian because, rather than being concrete and imbedded, they are universalizing, set apart from mundane life as it currently exists. The visions are critical, and they have exercised long-term and dramatic institutional effects. Finally, there are the long-standing utopian streams of modern societies, perhaps the most notable of all being the idea, and ideology, of romantic love, a vision of transcendence that has spawned, and also opposed, the world of free-floating eroticism (Bauman, 1998) that, as Weber noted, already marked the early 20th century.

The Utopia of Civil Repair

Is there any single, general idea or concept that can provide an alternative to the now discredited utopia of socialism? It might seem strange even to ask such a question, since the main thrust of this article has been devoted to clarifying the differentiated, self-limiting utopias that have replaced just such utopian totalities. Yet it would also be strange if the energies of the sphere-specific idealizing movements I have described did not inform, and were not periodically sustained by, some reference to a broader and more unifying ideal. To be general does not mean to be totalizing. It is impossible not to remark upon the continuities and complementarities that underlie the variegated contemporary struggles and enthusiasms for a more perfect life. But it is not necessary to understand these commonalties as a foundation, which each particular utopia emanates from – even less so if the shared ideal itself has an open-ended, dynamic and non-substantialist quality.

Surely this is the case with the newly invigorated idea of 'civil society' (Keane, 1998). This old idea from the 17th and 18th centuries once performed the heroic role of inspiring utopia for the early democratic revolutions. It disappeared with more socially and economically oriented reform programs, and was harshly suppressed, its very utopian quality denied, by the totalizing crusade of revolutionary socialism. Revived by the intellectuals who ideologized the anti-Communist revolutions in the 1980s, it later provided a normative standard for those who overturned, without violence, the authoritarian dictatorships in Latin America and Asia. The spirit of civil society is self-limitation, individual autonomy and plurality, in keeping with its liberal origins, but it also demands trust, cooperation, solidarity and criticism of hierarchy and inequality. Habermas (1984: 328) has spoken of 'the utopian horizon of a civil society'

and Cohen and Arato (1992: 452) have described its utopian aspiration as defined by the ideal of a 'perfectly self-regulating community', one characterized by 'unconstrained forms of solidarity produced through free, voluntary interaction'.

In order to see the self-limiting and differential character of this utopia, one must conceptualize it, not as referring to the entire totality of a social system (e.g. Perez-Diaz, 1998), but as crystallizing one specific kind of social sphere among others, a civil among other, non-civil spheres. It does not supplant the plethora of other utopias that inform our plural societies, but it does, in fact, often perform the task of revising their mode of institutionalization and the scope of their application. Civil criteria, whether in the form of communicative assertions about norms or regulative codifications of law, can enter into the context of other social institutions, through what I have called cultural and social movements of 'civil repair' (Alexander, 2000b, forthcoming). What they try to repair are often the effects of other utopia projects, projects for expanding laissez-faire, for maintaining the homogeneity and perfection of racial and ethnic communities, for sustaining the purity of religions, for maintaining the manifest power and exemplary status of particular gender or sexual identities.

In the midst of these struggles for civil repair, the goal of a more civil society is experienced as utopian and radical. Those carrying banners for gender and racial rights, or for economic justice, feel as if they are going to end domination, that they will eliminate the non-democratic elements of other kinds of utopia once and for all. Civil repair struggles are liminal and dramaturgic, and are carried by the arms of the kind of 'beloved community' so often elegized by Martin Luther King. 'n his famous 1963 speech during the March on Washington, King declared, 'I have a dream', describing a compelling utopian vision of the day when 'all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last!" '. King's words are now memorialized in national monuments throughout the USA and solemnly studied on his birthday in every elementary school classroom throughout the land. They have inscribed a new civil utopia, one with special reference to race.

In fact, every movement of civil repair develops and is inspired by a dream of democratically correcting the relations in a particular non-civil realm, of redesigning some non-civil utopia to make it more compatible with the ideals of autonomy and solidarity at the center of democratic life. These dreams are narrated by the same theme: 'I am a human being, not an IBM card, to be punched and filed', in the words of Mario Savio, the Berkeley student leader. Neither am I only a woman, a black, a Jew, a worker, an illegal alien or a handicapped person. I am also a member

of civil society, and, for this very reason, I am equal and solidary with everyone else.

When the movement for civil repair succeeds or fails, the effort at idealizing civil repair will end, the dreamer will wake up, utopian enthusiasms will cease. They will be circumscribed by the utopias of other spheres, by non-civil ideals of justice derived from personal life, community, family, religion, economy, or reasons of party and state. It is this dynamic that makes for the self-limiting but continuously critical and utopian dynamics of the civil society in this postmodern age.

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