

# Back to the Future: The Contemporary Left and the Politics of Utopia

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# Back to the Future: The Contemporary Left and the Politics of Utopia

Dennis Soron

Jacoby, Russell. *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books 1999)

Singer, Daniel. *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1999)

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Utopistics, Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: The New Press 1998)

FEW DEVELOPMENTS could seem more unlikely in our current political and intellectual climate than a sudden reawakening of “utopian” energies on the left. Indeed, in most progressive quarters, the long winter of neoconservative reaction and capitalist triumphalism has given rise to a pervasive sense of impotence and despair — feelings which are hardly conducive to the kind of expansive, hopeful, and visionary thinking we normally associate with utopianism. Confronted by a sustained political, economic, and cultural offensive from the right, those on the left have been driven largely into defensive positions, aspiring at best to preserve what remains of the welfare state and momentarily stave off further rollbacks and defeats. In a strange process of ideological inversion, the advocates of a regressive *laissez-faire* programme have succeeded in presenting themselves as the heralds of a bold new future, and in painting the left as anachronistic, resistant to “change,” blind to the dizzying possibilities of global capitalism and its exciting range of technological accoutrements. Disoriented and overwhelmed by the seemingly unalterable trajectory of current economic and political events, and chastened by its own strategic failures and compromises, the left has proven to be no match for neoliberal forces with a clear vision of the future and ample reserves of missionary zeal.

Dennis Soron, “Back to the Future: The Contemporary Left and the Politics of Utopia,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 47 (Spring 2001), 203-16.

In these rather dispiriting circumstances, the recent resurgence of interest in "utopia" among a number of thinkers on the left may initially strike the unsuspecting reader as rather counter-intuitive. In addition to the three works to be examined in this review essay, a whole array of recent writings, including the pieces gathered together in this year's themed issue of the *Socialist Register*, have set forth to critically explore the utopian ideals needed to inspire and sustain political struggle on the left as we step uncertainly into a new millennium. However out of tune it may seem with the decidedly cynical and pessimistic temper of our times, this new wave of utopian thinking directly addresses the left's urgent need to overcome what Raymond Williams presciently identified as its "damaging loss of belief in the practicability of thinking and shaping the future."<sup>1</sup> As Williams and other radical thinkers have been quick to underline, utopianism is not to be confused with a proclivity for fantasy and otherworldly abstraction which distracts from the practical demands of organizing and resisting. Indeed, it is better thought of as a means of reinvigorating political practice, of infusing often exhausting and demoralizing struggles with a meaning and purpose which points beyond the pressures and constraints of present circumstances. In this respect, as Pierre Bourdieu has recently suggested, the political viability of the left today crucially depends upon its ability to challenge the deeply entrenched political "fatalism" of ordinary people and once again inspire them with "the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Bourdieu and others have argued, the task of restoring a utopian horizon to the project of the left offers an opportunity for theorists and activists alike to shift from an exclusively critical and reactive stance towards immediate problems and crises to a more creative consideration of long-term strategies for constructive change. To this extent, a revitalized left utopianism offers to carry us beyond the purely negative mandate of "resisting," "subverting," "transgressing," or "deconstructing" dominant forms of social power, forcing us to clarify our own normative moral and political commitments and delineate some of the positive features of the society that we aspire to build.

Unfortunately, this "positive" task has long been forestalled by a largely successful campaign to disparage and pathologize the utopian dimensions of socialism and "progressive" politics more generally. At the most simple level, this has manifested itself in a patronizing attitude towards the "bleeding heart" impracticality of leftists whose pie-in-the-sky ideals presumably don't square with the basic and permanent facts of economics and human nature. Beyond this kind of avuncular condescension, however, lie inflated fears of something much more ominous: the perverse utopianism of "social engineers" who, armed with blueprints for the perfect society, are ready to demolish time-honoured institutions and

<sup>1</sup>Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London 1983), 8.

<sup>2</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, translated by Richard Nice (New York 1998), 82.

create a “brave new world” in which all aspects of public and private life conform to the tyrannical rationality of their master plan. As Fredric Jameson suggests, this pathologized conception of utopianism is evident in Burke’s criticism of the rationalistic ethos of the French Revolution, which warned of “the violence that was bound to emerge from the hubris of human attempts to tamper with and transform the organic fabric of the existing social order.”<sup>3</sup> This classic staple of conservative alarmism achieved a renewed currency in Cold War ideology with the rise of what Jameson calls the “Gulag Industry,” comprising a wide range of scholarly and journalistic efforts to inculcate the idea that any “utopian” attempt to break with established forms of liberal capitalism leads inexorably towards Stalinist tyranny and bloodshed. In the post-Soviet world, this type of anti-utopian rhetoric has by no means diminished, although its stakes have lowered considerably. Taking their cue from the work of Popper and Hayek, contemporary neoliberals have been quick to denounce as “utopian” even the most timorous attempts to interfere with the “spontaneous” or “organic” workings of the free market. Thus, in a “post-socialist” world, utopian desire increasingly cedes place to a narrow type of economic pragmatism, and the crucial question underlying public policy becomes not what kind of world we would like to collectively create, but what kind of world the “economy” or “market” necessitates.

In *The End of Utopia*, Russell Jacoby offers a bracing attack against the stultifying pragmatism and complacency that has set in across the spectrum of contemporary politics, powerfully insisting that “in an era of political resignation and fatigue, the utopian spirit remains more necessary than ever.” (181) Using his considerable gifts as a rhetorician and satirist, Jacoby endeavours to redeem and celebrate the utopian impulse by both debunking current theses about the “end of history” and goading his fellow-travellers on the left into adopting a more radical, hopeful, and audacious program for the future. As he argues, contemporary capitalist society, in spite of its accelerated pace of technological change and the hyperkinetic surfaces of consumer culture, is a world fatefully devoid of transformative social imagination — one in which “the utopian spirit — a sense that the future could transcend the present — has vanished.” (xi) The unrelenting force of Jacoby’s polemical broadsides here may alienate some readers, but its ultimate purpose is to shake us from any passive or expedient acceptance of current socio-economic realities as somehow inevitable, and to awaken us anew to the core utopian belief that “the future could fundamentally surpass the present ... that the future texture of life, work and even love might little resemble that now familiar to us ... that history contains possibilities of freedom and pleasure hardly tapped.” (xi-xii)

From the outset, Jacoby acknowledges that his effort to revitalize utopianism on the left runs fundamentally against the grain of received wisdom in our own

<sup>3</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham 1992), 335.

“post-historical” era, a time in which “little seems more quixotic or irrelevant than defending the utopian impulse.” (180) As he argues, the inglorious collapse of “actually existing socialism” in Eastern Europe has widely been held to represent not merely the failure of one flawed type of socio-economic system, but the ultimate bankruptcy and exhaustion of all alternatives to liberal capitalism. By this reasoning, most traditional arguments about the need for fundamental social change have simply become pointless, for history itself has pronounced a final moral verdict on all presumptuous attempts to improve or transcend the current order. This damning verdict, as Jacoby describes it, stridently insists that utopian ambitions have not merely proven to be irredeemably impractical or unsound, but that they have been the prime cause of violence and oppression in recent history. Jacoby sets himself squarely against the popular idea that “the horrors of the modern world can be attributed to utopians,” arguing that “the bloodbaths of the twentieth century can be as much attributed to anti-utopians — to bureaucrats, technicians, nationalists and religious sectarians with a narrow vision of the future.” (166) Taking Arendt’s account of Eichmann as an illustration of this point, Jacoby suggests that many of the historical evils habitually attributed to wild-eyed utopians could more convincingly be placed on the shoulders of those who quietly and uncritically reconcile themselves with the routine horrors and injustices of the world in which they happen to find themselves.

Ironically enough, Jacoby argues, it is precisely this kind of morally disengaged acceptance of the status quo that current types of anti-utopian rhetoric are designed to encourage. In this regard, Fukuyama’s conception of the “end of history” can be read less as a serious intellectual argument than as a rather transparent attempt to eternalize contemporary capitalism, to undermine any vantage point from which its own weaknesses and limitations might be critically scrutinized. Whatever the seeming novelty of such eschatological claims, their goal is only too predictable: indeed, ours is hardly the first society to legitimize itself by effacing its historical boundaries and writing its own peculiar structures and imperatives into the unalterable order of nature. As Jacoby realizes, the utopian impulse has always functioned to counteract this eternalizing tendency relativizing prevailing social orders and placing them in relief against more desirable historical possibilities. Revisiting Adorno’s philosophical reflections on this question, Jacoby asserts that the “standpoint of utopia” — a perspective which works to defamiliarize the present moment and thus render it open to creative transformation — is the indispensable precondition of radical thought and action. Unfortunately, as Jacoby argues, much of the contemporary left has ceased to view current social realities from the “standpoint of utopia,” hoping only to incrementally manage and correct a system whose basic imperatives it takes as given, and thereby reconciling its own aspirations with what Adorno calls “the degraded utopia of the present.”

For Jacoby, the ongoing contraction of radical political aspirations does not merely reflect a strategic reaction to unfavourable circumstances; instead, it reveals

that the left's project is no longer anchored in any compelling alternative vision of the future. Within the domain of formal politics, he argues, the left has abandoned its traditional dream of fundamentally transforming society, adopting in its stead a pallid variety of liberal reformism whose outermost ambition is to curb the predatory excesses of the market economy and "include more people in the established society." (33) To this degree, it has increasingly shown itself to be far closer to Popper's idea of "piecemeal reformism" than to the same author's conception of "utopian social engineering." Beyond the domain of formal politics, Jacoby suggests, the veneer of genuine radicalism persists within some quarters of the academic left, but here grandiose claims about "subverting the fundamental structures of modern western civilization" belie a politics which is equally un-utopian. Indeed, such grandiosity is itself a symptom of the extent to which the contemporary left has been confined to an academic hothouse and deprived of any foothold in most important domains of public debate. As Jacoby bemoans, the intellectual left increasingly retreats from important battle-lines, making a virtue of its self-proclaimed "marginality," and communicating in an opaque jargon which merely ambiguates its own political position and restricts it to internecine theoretical debates. Thus, within the highly ritualized and status-driven world of academia, "radicalism" is progressively emptied of political substance and transformed into what Bourdieu has referred to as "a cult of transgression without risk." <sup>2</sup>

In the absence of any utopian vision for the future, Jacoby suggests, radical politics inside and outside of the academy has devolved into a rather toothless form of liberal pluralism. At a time of widespread disillusion with traditional versions of socialism, he argues, cultural pluralism has by default become the lodestar of radical thought and practice: "Stripped of a radical idiom, robbed of a utopian hope, liberals and leftists retreat in the name of progress to celebrate diversity. With few ideas on how a future should be shaped, they embrace all ideas." (32-33) The problem here, he emphasizes, is not that cultural diversity and "difference" are unworthy ideals, but that they provide little utopian inspiration in themselves when not allied with an explicit challenge to the fundamental economic and political imperatives of advanced capitalist society. In the absence of this kind of challenge, Jacoby asserts, ostensibly "subversive" or "transformative" versions of pluralism merely uphold the long-held values and self-understandings of liberal society and its cultural marketplace. For much of the post-war period, he recalls, pluralist ideals were consistently invoked to attack the collectivist ethos of state socialism, providing "cold warriors" with a conformist defense of capitalism and a means of stigmatizing all radical challenges from the left. While less explicitly apologetic, the retreated types of pluralism now on offer have failed to disentangle themselves from the basic norms and values of our own liberal market order. For this reason, Jacoby takes issue with dominant versions of multiculturalism, which aim not to transform current political and economic structures so as to foster a genuine diversity premised on social equality, but to lift barriers which prevent a select

number of individuals from marginalized groups from climbing the ladder of existing institutions. On similar grounds, Jacoby is wary of the intellectualized pluralism of some postmodern thinkers, whose abstract celebrations of "multiplicity," "fluidity," and "contingency" ring rather hollow for people who, in an era of aggressive downsizing and economic restructuring, already suffer from too much instability in core areas of their lives.

In spite of its considerable appeal, Jacoby's attempt to reclaim utopianism for the left succeeds more in highlighting the limits of current oppositional practice than in pointing the way to a new type of radical politics. Rejecting the narrowly instrumental ethos of contemporary politics, he harkens back to the wilful impracticality of thinkers such as Paul Lafargue and Charles Fourier, whose utopian visions offered working people a future of glorious indolence and unlimited sensual indulgence. Jacoby's affection for the outlandish and eccentric aspirations of such eminent utopians ultimately leads him to reaffirm the rebellious spirit of 1968, entreating us to "be realistic" by "demanding the impossible." However unproductive this type of left utopianism may seem, he provocatively argues, it has the important practical consequence of raising the stakes of political contestation and forcing otherwise indecisive centrist liberals into adopting more progressive positions. This limited concession to "pragmatism" aside, Jacoby's utopian ambitions are unfortunately accompanied by a seeming disdain for all immediate political struggles which engage in practical and limited ways with present social circumstances. If such concrete struggles, when measured against the yardstick of utopia, appear irredeemably paltry and banal, then left politics ultimately becomes a matter of staying hopeful and looking forward to a moment when a full frontal assault on the existing social order can be successfully mounted. In disavowing any serious concern with practical political strategy, Jacoby inadvertently walks into the criticisms which Marx levelled at the utopian socialists of his day, whose grand visions of the future took little account of the actual historical terrain of social struggle on which their emancipatory goals were to be realized. In this sense, Jacoby's interventions here often seem motivated less by a desire to reinvigorate contemporary politics than by a desire to emotionally recapture the fading spirit of Sixties' radicalism. Indeed, his brand of utopianism invariably smacks of the nostalgia of a middle-aged academic yearning for the freedom and insouciance of his youth, a time when the future seemed wide open and full of stirring possibilities.

To the extent that Jacoby's image of "utopia" is imbued with a rather hazy nostalgia, one emerges from this book without a clear sense of his own positive vision for the future. Aside from a few general affirmations of the value of *leisure time, creativity, and conviviality*, Jacoby offers little more here than a systematic destruction of a range of intellectual and political opponents who are, to his mind, insufficiently utopian. In this regard, his take-no-prisoners mode of intellectual combat offers to further entrench sectarian divisions on the left that a truly "utopian" spirit might otherwise hope to overcome. While Jacoby generates some genuinely

provocative and incisive criticism in this book, his polemical steam-roller tends to flatten opposing positions and unnecessarily polarize complicated debates. Unfortunately, Jacoby seems to aim his strongest fire at those thinkers on the left — such as Nancy Fraser — who have attempted to overcome such rigid polarizations and establish points of intersection between the concerns of different theoretical and political camps. In this respect, while many of his criticisms of contemporary identity politics are well-taken, his overriding will-to-debunk leads him to virtually disregard the utopian impulse lurking in radical versions of feminism, multiculturalism, queer politics, and so on. Indeed, alongside the traditional aims of socialism, goals such as gender equality, racial harmony, and sexual freedom, among others, should not fail to fire the utopian imagination to which Jacoby appeals. Instead of simply encouraging us to smugly shake our heads at the radical pretensions of liberal feminists and multiculturalists, Jacoby might have devoted more effort to considering constructive ways in which the social concerns which they imperfectly address might be successfully integrated into a truly radical and “utopian” project.

Immanuel Wallerstein's *Utopistics* offers a marked departure in both tone and content from Jacoby's sharp and colourful attempt to resuscitate the radical spirit of utopianism. Methodical, earnest, and scrupulously free of all irony, this slender volume offers at best a very limited and tentative concession to the value of utopian thinking as a catalyst for progressive social change. At one level, Wallerstein declares his desire to rehabilitate the utopian impulse, which has often been disparaged for retrograde political purposes by conservatives and others, anxious to defend existing social inequalities and injustices. He shows little patience for the quietistic and religious overtones of traditional conservative anti-utopianism, which is “underpinned by theological doubts about human tampering with God's world, along with skepticism in the human capacity to make reasoned, wise, collective decisions.” (5) In his view, this vein of anti-utopianism illegitimately invokes divine authority to discourage “conscious collective intrusion into existing social structures,” thereby undermining the very foundation of democratic politics. (5) Without wanting to minimize the failings of Soviet-style communism, Wallerstein also criticizes the ways in which the collapse of “actually existing socialism” has been “used to suggest that no alternative to our existing system is realistic or even remotely desirable.” (67) Conscious of the ways in which anti-utopian rhetoric has functioned to restrict collective debate about desirable forms of social change, he sets out in a hopeful spirit to explore the range of historical choices which lay before us in the 21st century.

If Wallerstein demonstrates a notable aversion to anti-utopianism, however, he also shows a strong desire to purge his project of the negative connotations of utopianism itself. To this end, he draws a sharp line between his own preferred brand of “utopistics” and those unrealizable “utopian visions” that have historically stoked the fires of fanaticism and violence and led to terrible atrocities. Wallerstein emphasizes that he, unlike the bloodthirsty utopians of yore, is not interested in any



single-minded plan to realize paradise on earth, but rather in "the serious assessment of historical alternatives ... the sober, rational and realistic evaluation of human social systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity." (1-2) As if to further underline his unimpeachable humility and realism, he stresses that the guiding inspiration for "utopistics" is not a fixed image of the ideal future, but merely "an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future." (2) What seems to trouble Wallerstein the most about traditional forms of utopianism is their apparent moral absolutism, their intransigent faith in one overarching vision of the ideal society which discourages the self-critical and conciliatory spirit needed to negotiate a democratic process of progressive change. In contrast to this type of absolutism, he implies, "utopistics" is mercifully free of inflexible moral imperatives, and offers itself primarily as a neutral technical procedure, a means of adjudicating various social options and determining the most efficient way to move forward.

Wallerstein adduces both theoretical and historical grounds for his endorsement of "utopistics." At a theoretical level, he presents utopistics as an analytical technique for questioning and reorienting the priorities of social action, one that successfully integrates elements of science, politics, and morality. In the most formal terms, utopistics designates a procedure for challenging the established ground rules of given social orders and discerning "routes to greater substantive rationality." (78) In making "substantive rationality" the cardinal virtue of utopistics, Wallerstein is at pains to distinguish it from the purely formal and instrumental rationality that inspired the dystopian visions of Weber and Kafka. For him, the pursuit of substantive rationality does not inexorably lead to an "iron cage" of bureaucratic administration, but rather to a social system that rationally embodies the priorities assigned to it by our ongoing moral and political choices. As crucial as this concept is to his analysis, however, Wallerstein fails to adequately specify whether substantive rationality represents a normative or a procedural ideal; that is, whether "substantively rational" social orders are necessarily just and humane ones, or are merely effective vehicles for other arbitrary value systems. Reluctant to commit himself to any particular normative conception of "utopia," Wallerstein seems to suggest that "utopistics" can help us exclusively in determining the best strategy for realizing the particular social ends that we "choose" for ourselves. At the same time, he argues, utopistics requires us to scientifically understand the ways in which our choices are conditioned and limited by the structural logic of social systems that, independently of our will, "come into crisis, bifurcate, and transform themselves into something else." (89)

At a historical level, Wallerstein claims that utopistics has a particularly crucial role to play in helping us to successfully navigate our way through the peculiar systemic crises that have come to a head in recent decades. As he argues, contemporary capitalism is currently experiencing a period of "transformational TimeSpace," a time of historical transition in which the normal operation of the

socio-economic system is giving way to a number of structural instabilities that are increasingly difficult to resolve within existing political and cultural arrangements. For Wallerstein, this process of systemic breakdown increasingly manifests itself in a wide-reaching "crisis of legitimacy" within advanced capitalist society, one that is rapidly undermining not only traditional forms of social and political authority but also popular faith in global capitalism itself. In both social and ecological terms, we are increasingly forced to collectively confront the "structural limitations on the process of endless accumulation of capital" that are "coming to the fore currently as a brake on the functioning of the system." (89) For the most part, Wallerstein remains optimistic that this advancing systemic crisis will not lead to authoritarian forms of rule designed to restore order and preserve entrenched forms of economic and political power. Indeed, he remains hopeful that this crisis can be seized upon by the left as a strategic opportunity to begin creating a more democratic and equitable social order. As the current socio-economic system falters, Wallerstein suggests, its basic structures become more susceptible to fundamental scrutiny and reform, and consequently "individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the world than such action can have in more 'normal' times." (35) Thus, at a time when clearly discerned progressive alternatives are in urgent need, utopistics is "not merely relevant, but our prime concern." (3)

Originally delivered as a set of lectures at the University of Auckland in 1997, the three small chapters that compose this book fall considerably short of the analytical and historical depth of some of Wallerstein's earlier works. Ultimately, what mars this work the most is its ambiguous and inconsistent message, which vacillates wildly between utopian hope and apocalyptic gloom. From the outset, Wallerstein's "utopian" desire for a consciously willed transformation of contemporary society fits uneasily into his rather mechanistic interpretive framework, in which all aspects of life ultimately derive from the implacable mutations of the "world system." In historical terms, this confusion allows Wallerstein to speak of a range of modern political revolutions simultaneously as "intrusions of hope," which spurred on popular dreams for a better world, and as mere reflexive symptoms of world-systemic "bifurcation" in which even "the enthusiasms for the revolutions shown by some, and the enormous hostility shown by others, were part of the mechanisms of the system." (13) In contemporary terms, it enables him to refer to the current political landscape as both one "which leaves full rein for our agency" and as one marked by "fundamental structural problems for which there is not only no easy solution but perhaps no prospect of alleviation." (64, 62-3) Wallerstein thus miraculously speaks out of both sides of his mouth at once, insisting on the current possibilities for progressive social change while announcing the inexorable arrival of a "dark time" of untold misery and oppression. In many instances, Wallerstein seems less a bringer of utopian hope than a prophet of doom,

foretelling a coming period of "disorder, disarray and disintegration" that will "be terrible to live through" but fortunately will "not go on forever." (63)

Far from providing us with a "sober" and "realistic" assessment of the "zones open to human creativity" under current historical conditions, *Utopistics* manages in its own odd way to combine a harsh structural determinism with a rather naïve voluntarism. For much of his book, Wallerstein seems to imply that under "normal" conditions, history is entirely structurally determined, and that "the free will factor" only operates during periodic moments of "transformational TimeSpace." By all accounts, this is quite a clumsy and unconvincing way of inserting human agency into the historical process, one that fails to account for the complicated interplay of structure and agency in all historical situations. As much as Wallerstein seems to underestimate the importance of human agency within "normal" historical circumstances, he also seems to overestimate the power of conscious will and "choice" during times of historical crisis. Here, he risks adopting an extreme type of voluntarism, implying that in times of social-systemic breakdown "we" — as an undivided collectivity — can simply step back and "choose" to create a new form of society. In this model of historical change, struggles arising from conflicting social interests and aspirations are strangely absent, as master and slave sit down together out of a shared desire to create a better, more "substantively rational" world. In this respect, Wallerstein presents himself as a latter-day St. Simon, trusting that all sectors of society will concede to the need for fundamental social change once convinced of its eminent moral soundness and reasonability. Indeed, his voluntaristic emphasis on the role of "choice," and his tendency to override questions of social division and conflict, both suggest that he imagines the "utopian" project of the left less as a collective process of democratic struggle than as a top-down exercise in system design by a technocratic caste of managers with formal accreditation in the science of "utopistics."

In *Whose Millenium? Theirs or Ours?*, Daniel Singer offers a "utopian" message which is at once more intellectually cogent and more politically astute than those provided by Jacoby and Wallerstein. Like both of these authors, Singer expresses his impatience with the reactionary common sense of the "post-socialist" era, whose gore-drenched images of communist utopianism serve "obvious political purposes — to frighten people, to warn them that any radical resistance, any serious search for change, is bound to end in a bloodbath." (236) As he insists, the radical left today must resolutely refuse to be brow-beaten into silence and resignation by such rhetoric, and must show a willingness to boldly yet self-critically "reinvent" its own utopian project. At a time when most ordinary people have increasingly little influence over the fundamental decisions that determine their lives, he argues, a reinvigorated socialism needs to embrace the task of helping such people to resist the dismal future currently being prepared for them by their political and economic leaders and acquire the democratic capacity to shape a future more attuned to their own needs and aspirations. Encouraging socialists to creatively

reclaim and transform their much-maligned utopian heritage, Singer provocatively asserts that “if any attempt to change society, and not just mend it, is branded angrily and contemptuously as utopian, then, turning the insult into a badge of honour, we must proudly proclaim that we are all utopians.” (259)

As an unrepentant utopian, Singer’s search for an alternative future initially finds him revisiting aspects of the recent past that have both foreclosed radical hope and publicly discredited the political and economic programme of the socialist left. Reflecting soberly on the decisive failure of Soviet communism, Singer affirms the fact that this century’s “Marxist tragedy” bears an important message for socialists and non-socialists alike, although not necessarily the one which has been seized upon and promoted by the reigning establishment. In the previous decade, he asserts, organs of mainstream opinion have unceasingly drummed home “the same overwhelming message: the Soviet Union was socialism and this is the final funeral for socialism; history has come to an end; capitalism will now rule forever; rebels of all lands, get it into your heads: there is and there can be no alternative.” (55) The dramatic collapse of state socialism, and the seemingly inevitable wave of neoliberal globalization that has followed in its wake, have both functioned to entrench the idea that “there is no alternative” (TINA) as the fundamental premise of contemporary public discussion. What has resulted is not only a marked narrowing of political and economic debate, but a “religion of resignation” in which growing numbers of people passively resign themselves to the current capitalist system as if it were somehow decreed by “fate.” In this context, Singer’s utopian ambition is “to discard TINA, to start a genuine debate over a possible alternative, and in the search for it — at the risk of being branded dangerously utopian — to venture beyond the capitalist horizon.” (2)

This search, as he realizes, can draw inspiration from a very different historical conclusion about the events of 1989. For Singer, the real conclusion to be drawn from the end of “actually existing socialism” is not that our own socio-economic order is eternal and unassailable, but that “when a system is obsolete, sooner or later it will have to yield, and when people inspired by an idea enter the stage as actors in their own drama, they can shape history.” (55) This is a message that offers considerably less consolation to our current corporate and governmental elite, particularly as the flaws of “actually existing capitalism” come into full view and point to its own impending historical obsolescence. If capitalism now has no serious opponent, Singer suggests, “it has no bogey, no alibi, no excuse, either. It is there in its nakedness.” (14) For a glimpse of this nakedness, Singer argues, we need only look at the catastrophic course of market reforms in Russia and other eastern-bloc countries, where capitalism has led to skyrocketing economic hardship and social disintegration without any meaningful expansion in political or civil freedoms. Elsewhere, the instability of global financial markets, the unaccountable power of corporate capital, and the troubling legacies of rampant commodification, ecological devastation, and Third World poverty, all serve to indict an economic system

that is indifferent to human welfare and decoupled from popular control. Moreover, Singer argues, neoliberal reforms within the metropolitan heartland of advanced capitalism have, by dramatically increasing social inequality and economic insecurity, increasingly undermined the material and cultural basis of popular consent and generated new forms of mass resistance. Taken together, these developments threaten not only to unravel the neoliberal consensus, but also to expose capitalism itself to collective scrutiny and political opposition.

Thus far, Singer claims, established institutions on the left have proven largely incapable of providing political focus for popular discontent and fostering a broad-based movement which is both democratic and anti-capitalist. Where social-democratic parties have in recent years succeeded in acquiring some level of formal political power or influence, they have invariably fallen into lock-step with the basic social and economic imperatives of neoliberalism and, uplifting rhetoric about the "Third Way" notwithstanding, have effectively abandoned any vision of the future which is not merely a continuation of the present. To a large extent, Singer adds, most sectors of the contemporary labour movement have become moribund and depoliticized, as unions increasingly limit their activities to defending the sectoral interests of their members and providing financial backing for the occasional electoral candidate. In his view, such residual pillars of the institutional left have long ceased to provide the outline of a qualitatively different future, either heartening ineffectually back to the glories of the Keynesian "golden age" or else reconciling themselves prematurely to the benevolent wisdom of "the market." For Singer, the chief sources of hope in the current political landscape are the fledgling extra-parliamentary movements that have, in a variety of locations, recently begun to harness and channel mass frustration with neoliberal globalization. Within this domain, Singer identifies the 1995 French "winter of discontent" as a particularly crucial "ideological turning point," one which signalled a renewed belief in the power of collective action within the long-demobilized metropolitan working classes. As promising as emergent popular movements may be, Singer argues, their political project has remained largely "negative," consisting mainly of symbolic refusals of "the religion of resignation" and efforts to prevent further erosion of the welfare state. While not wanting to belittle the significance of this moment of collective "refusal," Singer hopes that current forms of opposition to "globalization" or "corporate rule" can eventually form the basis of a more co-ordinated counter-hegemonic project which pushes its democratic claims beyond "the capitalist horizon."

In this regard, Singer believes that the left must be steered in a more explicitly "utopian" direction and reconnected with the critical resources provided by democratic traditions of socialist thought. Refusing to engage in the kind of slippery equivocations that mar Wallerstein's work, Singer proclaims that his own utopianism reflects the commitments of not "an ex- or a post-, but ... an unfashionably plain socialist." (7) To a certain extent, this testament of old-time faith is an overstate-

ment, for Singer is motivated not by a desire to recuperate Marx as an “infallible and mummified oracle,” but by a desire to disentangle “old-fashioned” socialism from habits and associations that have undermined its credibility as a contemporary political force. Indeed, if Singer rejects any attempt to collapse socialism into Stalinism, he also underlines the need for socialists to inoculate themselves against the authoritarian impulses lurking within traditional versions of communism. In this sense, furthering the cause of working class self-emancipation in the future means steering clear of the military-like structures of authority and discipline that have typically defined “socialism from above.” Moreover, in attempting to bring the capitalist economy under political control, socialists need to acutely understand the ways in which the communist state, at an earlier historical moment, “instead of becoming an instrument for democracy, became an instrument for administrative coercion and dictation from the top.” (21) Finally, as Singer emphasizes, reclaiming the mantle of socialism does not merely mean relinquishing a range of contemporary political claims — including those of feminists, environmentalist, and so on — that were accorded little importance in “old-fashioned” models of class struggle. In the broadest sense, Singer conceives of socialism as a fully democratic social system, one that affords all people the social means to both develop individually and participate collectively in shaping the conditions of their lives. To this extent, he argues, socialists today should not simply dismiss the “formal” freedoms of liberal democracy, but must strive “to transform existing forms of democracy by filling them with economic substance and social content.” (240)

As an inspiration and catalyst for this broadly-conceived democratic project, Singer’s model of “realistic utopia” goes further than either Jacoby’s deliberate impracticality or Wallerstein’s bloodless and technocratic notion of “utopistics.” Unlike these authors, Singer realizes that radical politics in the dawning millennium must be both resolutely “realistic” and unshakably “utopian”: “*Realistic* since it must be rooted in current conflicts and in the potentialities of existing society. *Utopian* because that is how any attempt to look beyond the confines of capitalism is branded.” (6-7) This unique combination of political realism and utopian idealism allows Singer to be simultaneously more humble and more bold than either Jacoby or Wallerstein. As he maintains, in order for “utopia” not to be merely the idle dream or hobby-horse of alienated intellectuals, it must manifest itself in present struggles, and must be tempered by an awareness of the necessarily slow and complicated nature of social transformation. At one level, this means that the utopian aspirations of the left must not ride on the impossible prospect of a total and instantaneous revolutionary transformation of existing society. At another level, it means that would-be revolutionaries cannot endlessly defer their own utopian goals, but must strive to realize them in their ongoing practices and social relationships, such that “the instrument of the present should somehow prefigure, foreshadow the future.” (252) In this spirit, Singer is at pains in the final section of his book to venture a number of bold economic and political proposals for putting

“utopia” into practice. While these proposals — which range widely from models of democratic economic planning and co-operative production to reforms within the spheres of politics, education, and the mass media — cannot be adequately dealt with in this short space, suffice it to say that they will help to further what Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch have recently referred to as the task of “rekindling socialist imagination.”<sup>4</sup> However provisional it may now be, the new wave of socialist utopianism associated with Gindin, Panitch, Singer, and other like-minded thinkers represents an important initial effort to imagine a democratic future beyond “the capitalist horizon” and — to paraphrase Raymond Williams’ familiar adage — to make hope practical rather than despair convincing.

<sup>4</sup>Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, “Transcending Pessimism: Rekindling Socialist Imagination,” in Panitch and C. Leys, eds., *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias: Socialist Register 2000* (London 1999), 1-29.