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The dialectic of utopian images of the future within the idea of progress☆

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ABSTRACT

F. Polak and K. Mannheim's reconceptualization of the role of the utopist as a radical/revolutionary who acts to shatter present reality and reconstruct it according to a vision of the future is evaluated in the light of K. Popper's critique of utopian engineering; also, Popper's proposal of piecemeal engineering is critiqued and found deficient. Polak's thesis of a vital image of the future is tested on the basis of J. B. Bury's idea of progress and found to be modern-born. The historic roots of the dominant utopian image of the future (within the idea of progress) are clarified as the technological/consumer society within industrial civilization. However, as this modern thesis become dystopic, an antithesis, in the form of utopian socialism, emerged to contend with the dominant utopian image of the future throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The dialectical struggle between contending utopic images of the future within the idea of progress brought about the progressivesocialist synthesis, which in turn, opposed by reactionary neoliberalism (a "counter-utopia), has realized a new, postmodern thesis – as global sustainable development – a reconstructed, 21st century utopian image of the future.

> One could say that the encounter between utopia and the idea of progress is a double movement: utopian discourse assimilates the themes peculiar to the idea of progress, by transforming them; on the other hand, historical discourse adapts and modifies utopian themes (B. Baczko, in Utopian Lights, p. 114).

In F. Polak's foundational contribution to futures studies (Polak, 1971a), he posits social critique and systematic reconstruction as the fundamental criterion of a "utopist," whose utopia serves as a "... buffer for the future, as a driving force toward the future, and as a trigger for social progress" (p. 178). The utopist is an "eternal questioner," writes Polak (1971a), the "prototype of the revolutionary and radical spirit," whose task is to hold up two mirrors—"one to reflect the contemporary generation, and one to reflect a counter-image of a possible future" (p. 179). Polak's characterization of a utopist is strikingly similar to that of Mannheim (1949), who writes that only those "orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time" (p. 173). The reconceptualization of a utopist as a radical or revolutionary who acts to shatter

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present reality and then reconstructs it according to his/her vision of the future is justified in order to distinguish between the passive (thus harmless to the status quo) otherworldly dreamer and the proactive thinker who does not merely engage in idle philosophical speculations about the future or "science fiction," but also *acts into this world* as a catalyst to realize a better future. As Mannheim (1949) relates, though an "ideological" state of mind be "incongruent with reality," it is not yet "utopist"—one can only be "utopist" when one actualizes the utopia and proactively works to "burst the bonds of the existing order" (p. 173)[1].

Within Polak's "two mirrors" of the revolutionary utopist, the one reflecting "the contemporary generation" represents the function of social critique since it involves self-reflection as a trigger for social evolution—through the unpacking of the fundamental assumptions and values underlying the belief system that forms and permeates the structure of a particular society or civilization. In other words, by exposing implicit assumptions in the idealist structures of a paradigm, one obtains objective social consciousness, which leads to foresight concerning social evolution, development, activism, and (at times) revolution. The assumption is that, when armed with such consciousness, the image of the future is clarified; consequently, the door is open for "reconstruction"—the function of the "other mirror" in the realization of alternative futures as venues for social change.

However, Polak and Mannheim's recasting of the utopist as a radical revolutionary is problematic, to say the least. As pointed out by Popper (1966), the radical utopist pursues ideologically fixed utopian "ends" and often justifies and advocates violent means to achieve such ends. It is the "uncompromising *radicalism*" prepared to make wholesale, sweeping changes to wipe the slate clean in order to construct or realize its ultimate political aim or Ideal society that Popper (1966) objects to and regards as "dangerous" (p. 157, 161–162, 164). Its historicism and asceticism jettisons reason and replaces it with "a desperate hope for political miracles" in order to realize the utopist's "dreams of a beautiful world"—springing from an intoxication that is essentially Romanticist at heart, appealing to "our emotions rather than reason" (p. 168). Also, the implementation of the utopian blueprint usually leads to a centralization of power (rule by the few or dictator), and since the ultimate aim is uncompromising and has abandoned reason, differences of opinion among utopists often leads, "... in the absence of rational methods, to the use of power instead of reason, i.e. to violence" (p. 161).

Popper (1966) notes a number of problems related to utopian engineering, which he says is nothing more than "the application of the experimental method to society" for the sake of social reconstruction as a whole, based on a blueprint of the ultimate aim. For the success of this social experiment, countless sacrifices are made, and powerful interests get involved (p. 163). However, since this large-scale social reconstruction effort necessarily takes place over long periods of time, ideas and ideals change, so the successors of the grand project may not view the blueprint the same way as those who originally conceived it; especially as the experiment meets certain social challenges during implementation, the ultimate aim begins to change during "... the process of its realization. It may at any moment turn out that the steps so far taken actually lead away from the realization of the new aim. And if we change our direction according to the new aim, then we expose ourselves to the same risk again. In spite of all the sacrifices made, we may never get anywhere at all." (p. 160). Because the experimental method involved in utopian engineering has no experience to base itself upon, the practical consequences of such sweeping changes are difficult to predict and often lead to social catastrophe; hence, states Popper (1966), "*it is not reasonable to assume that a complete reconstruction of our social world would lead at once to a workable system*" (p. 167).

What Popper (1966) advocates, instead, is what he calls "piecemeal engineering" in which a blueprint of society and ideal state does not necessarily play a significant role in the pursuit of happiness and perfection on earth; in fact, rather than focusing on achieving the greatest good, the piecemeal engineer will, instead, adopt the "method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent *evils* [my emphasis] of society..." (p. 158 As Popper (1966) relates, it is easier to reach "... a reasonable agreement about existing evils and the means of combating them than it is about an ideal good and the means of its realization" (p. 159). Also, rather than large-scale reconstruction efforts involving the whole of society, piecemeal social experiments are carried out incrementally, on a small-scale, under realistic conditions, which permits for repeated experiments and continual readjustments. Even if we consider the possibility of wholesale reconstruction efforts, they can only work where the piecemeal method "... has furnished us first with a great number of detailed experiences, and even then only within the realm of these experiences" (p. 164), for the experiment we learn most from is one that proceeds rationally with the alteration of one social institution at a time; only in this way can we learn how to

> ... fit institutions into the framework of other institutions, and how to adjust them so that they work according to our intentions. And only in this way can we make mistakes, and learn from our mistakes, without risking repercussions of a gravity that must endanger the will to future reforms (p. 163).

Popper's piecemeal engineering – a method distinguished by reason, pragmatism, incrementalism, and compromise – has been the prevailing approach to purposeful social change in modern society while revolutionary utopian efforts at wholesale social reconstruction do not have a very good track record—a checkered history at best. Accordingly, it must be granted that Popper's criticism of utopian engineering accurately points out the defects of the radical approach to social change that Polak and Mannheim seem to advocate. On the other hand, Popper's piecemeal approach, which he paints in glowing terms, has defects that Popper completely ignores; moreover, Popper's analysis does not appreciate the historical role of the utopist

[1] Here we encounter echoes of Feuerbach and Marx, who both sought to reconceptualize the role of the philosopher (then personified in the figure of Hegel) as one who does not merely interpret history but actively works to change its course.