

# The Utopian Dilemma in the Western Political Imagination

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## Conclusion

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# Conclusion

I have offered an account of writers grappling with an ancient dilemma that persisted long after the cultural dominance of the aristocratic ethos which originally provoked it. The leaders of the ancient Greek polis faced the dilemma in its purest form as they strove to adapt the culture of the Homeric gods and heroes to their civic needs. Plato imagined a city with laws and a psychology to replace the heroic ethos, and later Greek authors developed a satiric critique of the heroic character which fed modern literature from More to Voltaire and beyond. The classic utopian satires, however, offered little hope that the heroic imperatives of human nature could be laughed out of existence. Their irony applied to utopian ambitions too, leaving a perennial puzzle about the seriousness of utopian hopes. The full flowering of modernity in the revolutions of the late eighteenth century brought with it a truly utopian ambition, the dream of an actual world without heroes, but in doing so it also demanded the recruitment of heroic resources to implement its leveling vision. The dystopias, real and imagined, of the twentieth century showed how utopia, having summoned the heroes it once banished, could become a fatal instrument in their hands.

While I have chronicled the discomforts of the utopian dilemma, I have not, of course, solved it. I doubt it is capable of being solved, for as I wrote at the outset, there are essential values on each side, rival visions of the human good neither of which can be persuasively dismissed. It may be that the utopian dilemma is just another name for politics itself, a perpetual negotiation between the rational interests of the participants and their need for dignity. Readers who have followed my story this far will be in as good a position as I am to draw the moral. Nevertheless, I will take this occasion to sketch a few conclusions of my own.

If, as these pages have shown, a world without heroes—a world of perfect equality—is almost as difficult to imagine as it is to achieve, that is not because the total system of capital makes it unthinkable but because the notion itself is an affront to human dignity and to the imagination which serves it. It is so much of an affront that reforms far less intrusive than the holistic, qualitative change envisioned by utopian theorists evoke stubborn resistance. The problem is not that of grasping the collective of society

as a whole; the problem is that of grasping the collective in other than oppositional terms. Nor should we think that the pessimism fostered by the capitalist theory of selfish individualism is the great obstacle to utopian hopes. It is a mistake, in fact, to believe that the neoclassical economists' conception of individuals as rational utility maximizers leads to radical pessimism regarding social equality. Rational utility maximizers, if they existed, would quit when they had enough, whereas actual human beings keep stockpiling their resources as long as there is someone to outdo. The persistence of the heroic imperative suggests that human beings are indeed fundamentally social creatures but that their social nature is competitive. Perhaps it is incurably so.

The utopian dilemma is also not a problem of desire and repression but a problem of the failure of repression. The heroic impulse will not be denied. Its goal is not pleasure or happiness but superiority on the levels of the individual and the group. Social identity and bonding against the enemy are more important to it even than truth, as current politics in the United States massively confirms; the motto of the day could well be the saying of the seventeenth-century Jesuit Baltasar Gracián—"Better mad with the crowd than sane by yourself."<sup>1</sup> Progressives in this situation might consider lowering the scale of utopian ambition to moderate the backlash, but it is discouraging that even incremental changes in the direction of policies which are already in effect elsewhere can be resisted as utopian. Perhaps there is hope in the increasing participation of women in public life, but that hope rests on the uncertain notion that women are less heroic and competitive than men.

The utopian dilemma cannot be solved by superficial strategies like deconstructing or exposing the constructedness of social distinctions. The distinctions do not need rational bases to keep them in force, and suspicion of this sort tends to undermine the bases of political action itself. In earlier work I have tried to show how difficult it has been for modern intellectuals to develop a coherent sense of agency, and how even the intentions of literary authors have been subject to exclusion.<sup>2</sup> The utopian wish to escape from politics is another element of this modern problem of agency.

What does this story say to those who come to the utopian dilemma from the conservative side—for those, in other words, who resent the utopians' wish to sever culture from its heroic past and the art which served it and who fear the leveling and homogenizing character of utopianism even of the more mobile, "kinetic" sort envisioned by H. G. Wells? The clearest lesson is that the utopian critique of heroic irrationality will not go away. We are too rational to ignore it even if we are not rational enough to abide by it. And perhaps it is the defenders of freedom and dignity who should best appreciate the costs of hierarchy for the people whose freedom and dignity are not served.

The apparently irrepressible character of competitive psychology for many of the writers discussed in these pages may be discouraging, but the

moral force of the utopian critique is just as resilient. It may be sobering to consider how serious are the rivals to collective happiness as the aim of social existence; it may be even more sobering to consider how firmly the imagination takes sides against it. But it cannot be said that modernity's utopian goals have led only to dystopia. Perhaps Orwell struck the right balance. His belief that making the world perfect is a dangerous and ultimately unappealing goal did not discourage him from hoping to make the world fairer and better than it is.

## Notes

- 1 Baltasar Gracián y Morales, *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, ed. Miguel Romera-Navarro (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1954), 261. As Romera-Navarro notes, the saying is repeated by La Rochefoucauld as number 231 of the *Maximes*. My own translation.
- 2 In *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), and in *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

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