Chapter 12

Tradition, Progress and Utopia

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Introduction

Political debate and argument can never be confined to cloistered academics, because political theories are concerned ultimately with reshaping and remodelling the world itself. Change lies at the very heart of politics. Many would sympathize, for instance, with Marx's assertion in 'Theses on Feuerbach' ([1845] 1968) that, 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.' This concluding chapter examines the difficult questions that arise from the issue of change, and from the inevitable linkage in politics between theory and practice. Yet the desire to change the world raises a number of difficult questions.

In the first place, is change desirable? Does change involve growth or decline, progress or decay; should it be welcomed or resisted? Some have turned their faces firmly against change in the name of tradition and continuity. But this has meant anything from an acceptance of 'natural' change to the desire to return to an earlier, simpler time. Such traditionalist views, however, became increasingly unfashionable as the modern idea of progress took root. This implies that human history is marked by an advance in knowledge and the achievement of ever-higher levels of civilization: all change is for the good. Nevertheless, even if change is to be welcomed, what form should it take? This has usually been posed as a choice between two contrasting notions of change: reform or revolution. Whether they are reformist or revolutionary, projects of social or political change have tended to be based upon a model of a desired future society. The most radical such projects have looked, ultimately, to the construction of a perfect society, a utopia. But which political doctrines contain a potential for utopianism? More importantly, is utopian thinking vital for the success of any progressive political project, or is it a recipe for repression and even totalitarianism?

Tradition

Tradition, in the words of Edward Shils (1981), encompasses 'anything transmitted or handed down from the past to the present'. Therefore, anything from long-standing customs and practices to an institution, political or social system, or a body of beliefs, can be regarded as a tradition. However, it may be very difficult to determine precisely how long a belief, practice or institution has to survive before it can be regarded as a tradition. Traditions have usually been thought to denote continuity between generations, things that have been transmitted from one generation to the next, but the line between the traditional and the merely fashionable is often indistinct. Whereas the Christian religion is undoubtedly a tradition, having endured for two thousand years, may the same be said of industrial capitalism, which dates back only to the nineteenth century, or of the welfare state, which first emerged in the early twentieth century? At what point, for instance, did universal adult suffrage become a tradition?

However, a traditionalist stance can take at least three different forms. First, and most clearly, tradition can be associated with continuity with the past, the maintenance of established ways and institutions. Tradition, in this sense, seeks to eradicate change. Second, traditionalism can involve an attempt to reclaim the past, in effect, to 'turn the clock back'. Such a position endorses change providing it is backward-looking or regressive, a goal often inspired by the notion of a 'Golden Age'. Third, traditionalism can recognize the need for change as a means of preservation, adopting a philosophy of 'change in order to conserve'. This implies a belief in 'natural' change. If certain changes are inevitable any attempt to resist them risks precipitating more far-reaching and damaging change.

Defending the status quo

The 'desire to conserve' has been a core feature of the Anglo-American conservative tradition. Instead of advocating a lurch backwards into the past, it preaches the need for preservation, the need for continuity with the past. In essence, this amounts to a defence of the status quo, the existing state of affairs. For some, this desire to resist or avoid change is deeply rooted in human psychology. In his essay 'Rationalism in Politics' ([1962] 1991), for example, Michael Oakeshott (see p. 139) argued that to be a conservative is 'to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss'. By this,

Oakeshott did not suggest that the present is in any way perfect or even that it is better than any other condition that might exist. Rather, the present is valued on account of its familiarity, a familiarity that engenders a sense of reassurance, stability and security. Change, on the other hand, will always appear threatening and uncertain: a journey into the unknown. This is why conservative theorists have usually placed so much emphasis upon the importance of custom and tradition.

Customs are long-established and habitual practices. In traditional societies which lack the formal machinery of law, custom often serves as the basis for order and social control. In developed societies, custom has sometimes been accorded the status of law itself in the form of so-called common law. In the English tradition of common law, for example, customs are recognized as having legal authority if they have existed without interruption since 'time immemorial', in theory since 1189 but in practice as far back as can reasonably be established. The reason why custom embodies moral and sometimes legal authority is that it is thought to reflect popular consent: people accept something as rightful because 'it has always been that way'. Custom shapes expectations and aspirations and so helps to determine what people think is reasonable and acceptable: familiarity breeds legitimacy. This is why people's sense of natural fairness is offended when long-established patterns of behaviour are disrupted. They appeal to 'custom and practice', feeling that they have a right to expect things to remain the way they have always been. Much of the defence of custom is, however, closely linked to the particular virtues of tradition.

The classic defence of tradition in the conservative tradition is found in the writings of Edmund Burke (see p. 348), and in particular in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ([1790] 1968). Burke acknowledged that society is founded upon a contract, but not one made only by those who happen to be alive at present. In Burke's words, society is a partnership 'between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born'. Tradition therefore reflects the accumulated wisdom of the past, beliefs and practices that have literally been 'tested by time' and have been proved to have worked. This is what G.K. Chesterton referred to as a 'democracy of the dead'. If those who 'merely happen to be walking around' turn their backs upon tradition they are, in effect, disenfranchising earlier generations – the majority – whose contribution and understanding is simply being ignored. As what Burke called 'the collected reason of ages', tradition provides both the only reliable guide for present conduct and the most valuable inheritance we can pass on to future generations. From Oakeshott's point of view, tradition not merely reflects our attachment to the familiar, but also ensures that social institutions work better because they operate in a context of established rules and practices.

Edmund Burke (1729–97)

Dublin-born UK statesman and political theorist. Burke is often seen as the father of the Anglo-American conservative tradition. Although he was a Whig politician, and expressed sympathetic towards the American Revolution of 1776, he earned his reputation though the staunch criticism of the 1789 French Revolution that he developed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ([1790] 1968).

The central themes in Burke's writings are a distrust of abstract principle and the need for political action to be rooted in tradition and experience. He was deeply opposed to the attempt to recast French politics in accordance with the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, arguing that wisdom resides largely in history and, in particular, in institutions and practices that have survived though time. Burke was nevertheless not a reactionary: he held that the French monarchy had been partly responsible for its own fate, as it had refuse to 'change in order to conserve', a core feature of the pragmatic conservatism with which he is associated. He had a gloomy view of government, recognizing that, although it may prevent evil, it rarely promotes good. He also supported the classical economics of Adam Smith (see p. 338), regarding market forces as an example of 'natural law', and supported a principle of representation that stresses the need for representatives to use their own mature judgement. Burke's political views were further developed in works such as *An Appeal from New to Old Whigs* (1791) and *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796–7).

Critics have, nevertheless, viewed custom and tradition in a very different light. Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* ([1791–2] 1987) was written in part as a reply to Burke. Paine (see p. 206) argued that Burke had placed 'the authority of the dead over the rights and freedoms of the living'. In other words, to revere tradition merely on the grounds that it has long endured is to enslave the present generation to the past, condemning it to accepting the evils of the past as well as its virtues. In his view, uncritical respect for the past clearly violated modern democratic principles, the central point of which is the right of each generation to make and remake the world as it sees fit. Such a position implies that while the present generation is at liberty to learn from the past, it should not be forced to relive it.

Furthermore, the assertion that values, practices and institutions have survived only because they have worked is highly questionable. Such a view sees in human history a process of 'natural selection': those institutions and practices that have been of benefit to humankind are preserved, while those of little or no value have declined or become extinct. This comes down to a belief in survival of the fittest. Clearly, however,

institutions and beliefs may have survived for very different reasons. For instance, they may have been preserved because they have been of benefit to powerful elites or a ruling class. This can perhaps be seen in Britain in the case of the monarchy and the House of Lords. Indeed, to foster reverence for history and tradition may simply be a means of manufacturing legitimacy and ensuring that the masses are pliant and quiescent. In addition, custom and tradition may be an affront to rational debate and intellectual enquiry. To revere 'what is' simply because it marks continuity with the past forecloses debate about 'what could be' and perhaps even 'what should be'. From this perspective, tradition tends to inculcate an uncritical, unreasoned and unquestioning acceptance of the status quo and leave the mind in the thrall of the past. J.S. Mill referred to this danger as 'the despotism of custom'.

Reclaiming the past

A more radical form of traditionalist politics looks not to continuity and preservation, but rather embraces the idea of backward-looking change. Some, indeed, draw a clear distinction between tradition and reaction, reaction literally meaning to respond to an action or stimulus, to react. A reactionary style of politics has little to do with tradition as continuity, because tradition in this sense is concerned with the maintenance of a status quo which radical reactionaries are intent upon destroying. Far from upholding the importance of the familiar and the stable, reaction can, at times, have a revolutionary character. For example, the 'Islamic Revolution' in Iran in 1979 can be regarded as a reactionary revolution in that it marked a dramatic break with the immediate past, designed to prepare the way for the re-establishment of more ancient Islamic principles. This form of reaction is based upon a very clear picture of human history. Whereas traditionalism sees in history the threads of continuity, linking one generation to the next, reaction sees a process of decay and corruption. At its heart, therefore, lies the image of an earlier period in history – a Golden Age – from which point human society has steadily declined.

The call for backward-looking change clearly reflects dissatisfaction with the present, as well as distrust of the future. This style of politics, which condemns the existing state of affairs by comparing it to an idealized past, can be found in many historical periods. For example, conservatism in continental Europe exhibited a strong reactionary character throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In countries such as France, Germany and Russia, conservatives remained faithful to autocratic and aristocratic principles long after these had been displaced by constitutional and representative forms of government. This

was well reflected in the writings of Joseph de Maistre (see p. 165) and in the statecraft of the early nineteenth-century Austrian chancellor, Metternich, both of whom rejected any concession to reformist pressures and strove instead to re-establish an *ancien régime*. Fascist doctrines in the twentieth century also tended to be backward-looking. Mussolini and the Italian Fascists, for instance, glorified the military might and political discipline of Imperial Rome. In the case of Hitler and the Nazis, this was reflected in an idealisation of the 'First Reich', Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire. Similarly, reactionary leanings can be found in the modern period in the radicalism of the New Right. In embracing the notion of the 'frontier ideology' in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan harked back to the conquest of the American West and the virtues of self-reliance, hard work and adventurousness which he believed it exemplified. In the UK during the same period, Margaret Thatcher extolled the importance of 'Victorian values' such as decency, enterprise and self-help, seeing the mid-nineteenth century as a sort of Golden Age.

The desire to 'turn the clock back' is based upon a simple historical comparison between the past and the present. Forward-looking or progressive reform means a march into an unknown future, with all the uncertainty and insecurity which that must involve. By comparison, the past is known and understood and therefore offers a firmer foundation for remodelling the present. This does not, however, imply blind reverence for history or a determination to maintain institutions and practices simply because they have survived. On the contrary, by breaking with traditionalism, radical reactionaries can adopt a more critical and questioning attitude towards the past, taking from it what is of value to the present and leaving what is not. For example, the New Right recommends the re-establishment of *laissez-faire* economic principles, not on the grounds that they have been 'sanctified by history' but because when applied in the nineteenth century they promoted growth, innovation and individual responsibility. In the same way, if respect for the family and for traditional values did once help to create a more stable, decent and cohesive society, there is a case for renouncing the permissive morality of the present in order to reclaim the values of the past.

However, the prospect of backward-looking change can also have less favourable implications. For instance, the desire to 'turn the clock back' may be based upon little more than nostalgia, a yearning for a mythical past of stability and security. All too often reaction embraces a naive and romanticized image of the past, against which the present appears to be squalid, corrupt or simply charmless. The Golden Age is, at best, a selective portrait of the past and at worst a thoroughly distorted picture of what life was really like. The conquest of the American West, for example, could be linked as easily with the near-genocide of the native Americans as it is with the rugged individualism of the frontier settlers.

Equally, 'Victorian values' could stand for grinding poverty, the workhouse and child prostitution, instead of decency, respect and a willingness to work.

The very idea of a Golden Age, a utopia located in the past, may simply reflect the desire to escape from present-day problems by seeking comfort in historical myths. Just as modern thinkers have extolled the virtues of the Victorian age, the Victorians lamented the passing of the eighteenth century. In that sense, there never was a Golden Age. Moreover, even if meaningful lessons can be learnt from the past, it is questionable whether these can be applied to the present. Historical circumstances are the product of a complex network of interconnected social, economic, cultural and political factors. To identify a particular feature of the past as admirable does not mean it would necessarily have the same character in the present, even if it could be reproduced in its original form. All institutions and ideas may be specific to the period in which they arise. For instance, although *laissez-faire* policies may have promoted vigorous growth, enterprise and innovation in the nineteenth century, a period of early industrialization, there is no certainty that it would have the same results if applied to a developed industrial economy.

Change in order to conserve

The final face of tradition is, ironically, a progressive one. Traditionalists have not always set their faces firmly against change, or only endorsed change when it has a regressive character. On some occasions they have accepted that the onward march of history is irresistible. Quite simply, to try to block inevitable change may be as pointless as King Canute's alleged attempt to stop the flow of the tide. More seriously, blinkered traditionalism that does not recognize that at times change can be natural and inevitable runs the risk of precipitating a still more dramatic upheaval. The motto of this form of progressive conservatism is therefore that reform is preferable to revolution. This amounts to a form of enlightened traditionalism which recognizes that, though it may be desirable to preserve the status quo, an implacable resistance to change is likely to be self-defeating. It is better to be the willow that bends before the storm than the proud oak which risks being uprooted and destroyed.

This progressive form of conservatism is usually linked to the ideas of Edmund Burke. In contrast to the reactionary conservatism widely found in continental Europe, Burke argued that the French monarchy's stubborn commitment to absolutism had helped to precipitate revolution in the first place. 'A state without the means of some change', Burke ([1790] 1968) proclaimed, 'is without the means of its conservation.' This lesson was borne out by the English monarchy which in general had survived precisely because it had been prepared to accept constitutional constraints upon its

power. The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, which brought the English Revolution to an end with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under William and Mary, was a classic example of conservative reform. Similar lessons can be learnt from the 1917 Russian Revolution. The Tsarist regime can, to some extent, be regarded as the architect of its own downfall because of its blinkered refusal to make concessions to the growing movement for political and social reform. Tsar Nicholas II's touching but absurd faith in Divine Right and his refusal to address problems highlighted by the 1905 Revolution, helped to create the social and political conditions which Lenin and the Bolsheviks were able to exploit in 1917. Indeed, while reactionary conservatism often failed to survive the nineteenth century and was finally brought down by its association with fascism in the twentieth century, the Anglo-American tradition of Burkian conservatism has been far more successful. The philosophy of 'change in order to conserve' has, for example, enabled conservatives to come to terms with constitutionalism, democracy and, at times, social welfare and economic intervention.

Enlightened traditionalism is based upon a view of history which differs from both conventional traditionalism and backward-looking reaction. Traditionalism has conventionally tended to emphasize the stable and unchanging nature of human history, highlighting a continuity with the past; backward-looking reaction has a deeply pessimistic view of history, underpinned by the belief that 'things get worse'. Enlightened traditionalism, by contrast with the other two, is based upon the idea of inevitable change which because it is 'natural' is neither to be applauded nor regretted, only accepted. This suggests a view of history as being largely beyond human control and dictated by what Burke called 'the pattern of Nature'. For Burke, such a view was closely linked to the belief that human affairs are shaped by the will of God and so are beyond the capacity of humankind to fathom. In the same way, the process of history may simply be too complex and intricate for the human mind adequately to grasp, still less to control. In other words, when the tide of history is flowing, wisdom dictates that human beings swim with it rather than try to swim against it.

Such a position has been taken up at various points in history. In the USA, for instance, commentators like Luis Hartz (1955) have suggested that no real conservative tradition can be identified. American political culture was shaped by the struggle for independence and is deeply embued with a commitment to progress, the dream of a limitless future. In such circumstances, conservatives have often been more tolerant of change and less suspicious of reform than their European counterparts; and, lacking a feudal past or an *ancien régime* to restore, they have less easily fallen prey to Golden Age fantasies. Indeed, the term 'conservative' has only been widely used in US party politics since the 1960s. In Canada, the

Conservative Party adopted the title Progressive Conservative precisely in order to demonstrate its reforming credentials and distance itself from the image of unthinking reaction. The UK tradition of progressive conservatism is usually traced back to Disraeli in the nineteenth century, the so-called One Nation tradition. It reached its peak in the 1950s as the Conservative Party accepted the social-democratic reforms of the Attlee Labour government. In continental Europe since 1945, a reformist stance has been adopted by Christian-Democratic parties that have attempted to balance a commitment to free enterprise against the need for welfare and social justice.

However, even when it is intended to conserve, change can create difficulties for a conservative. In the first place, there is the problem of distinguishing between 'natural' changes, which if not to be welcomed should at least be accepted, and other forms of change which should still be resisted. This is a much simpler task to accomplish, as Burke did, with the advantage of hindsight. It is much easier to point out that the failure to introduce prudent reform was likely to lead to violent revolution after that revolution has occurred. Quite clearly, it is much more difficult at the time to know which of the many changes being demanded are resistible and which ones are irresistible. A further problem is that, far from promoting stability and contentment, reform may pave the way for more radical change. In some respects, abject poverty is more likely to generate resignation and apathy than revolutionary fervour. On the other hand, improving political or social conditions may heighten expectations and stimulate the appetite for change. This is perhaps what happened in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, when Gorbachev's reforms merely succeeded in hastening the demise of the regime itself by highlighting the deficiencies of central planning and allowing criticism and protest to be more widely expressed.

Progress

Progress literally means an advance, a movement forward. The idea that human history is marked by progress originated in the seventeenth century and reflected the growth of rationalist and scientific thought. A belief in progress, the 'forward march of history', subsequently became one of the basic tenets of the Western intellectual tradition. Liberal thinkers, for instance, believed that humankind was progressively emancipating itself from the chains of poverty, ignorance and superstition. In the UK this was manifest in the emergence of the so-called 'Whig interpretation of history', which portrayed history as a process of intellectual and material development. In 1848, for instance, in the first chapter of his immensely successful *History of England*, Thomas Macaulay was able to write that

'The history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral and of intellectual improvement.' The optimism implied by the idea of progress also influenced socialists who believed that a socialist society would emerge out of, or be built on, the foundations of liberal capitalism. Faith in progress has often amounted to a form of historicism, in that it portrays human history as an inevitable process leading humankind from lower levels of civilisation to higher ones. Not uncommonly, this is reflected in the use of biological metaphors like 'growth' and 'evolution' to describe the process of historical change. However, on what basis is it possible to portray history as remorseless and irresistible progress? Moreover, should progress be steady, evolutionary and reformist, or should it be dramatic, far-reaching and revolutionary?

The forward march of history

The idea of progress was a product of the scientific revolution and has gone hand in hand with the growth of rationalism. Science provided a rational and reliable form of enquiry through which human beings could acquire objective knowledge of the world around them. As such, it emancipated human beings from the religious doctrines and dogmas that had previously shackled intellectual enquiry and promoted the secularization of Western thought. Armed with reason, human beings could for the first time not only explain the natural world but also start to understand the society in which they live and interpret the process of history itself. The power of reason gave human beings the capacity to take charge of their own lives and shape their own destinies. When problems exist, solutions can be found; when obstacles block human advance these can be overcome; when defects are identified, remedies are available. Rationalism therefore emancipates humankind from the grip of the past and the weight of custom and tradition. Instead, it is possible to learn from the past, its successes and failures, and move forward. The process of history is thus marked by the accumulation of human knowledge and the deepening of wisdom. Each new generation is able to advance beyond the last.

A belief in inevitable progress is reflected in the tendency to interpret economic, social and political change in terms of 'modernization' and 'development'. The political and social upheavals through which advanced industrial societies came into existence have, for instance, often been described as a process of modernization. To be 'modern' means not only being contemporary, being 'of the present', but it also implies an advance in relation to the past, a movement away from the 'old fashioned' or 'out of date'. Political modernization is usually thought to involve the emergence of constitutional government, the safeguarding of civil liberties

and the extension of democratic rights. In short, a 'modern' political system is a liberal-democratic one. Social modernization, in turn, is closely linked to the spread of industrialization and urbanization. 'Modern' societies possess efficient industrialized economies and a high level of material affluence. In the same way, Western industrialized societies are often described as 'developed' by comparison with the 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' world. Such terminology clearly implies that the liberal-democratic political systems and industrialized economies typically found in the West mark a higher level of civilization compared with the more traditional structures found in parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. In such cases, 'traditional' implies backwardness. Moreover, to describe the process of modernization in the West as 'development' suggests that it is the likely, if not inevitable, path that non-Western societies will also tread. Human history is therefore portrayed as an onward march with Western societies in the vanguard. They map out a route which other societies are destined to follow.

Faith in the idea of progress is not, however, universal. Many in the developing world, for example, point out that to interpret political and social progress in exclusively Western terms both fails to appreciate the distinctive culture and traditions of non-Western societies and ignores the possibility that there may be other models of development. More fundamentally, the very idea of progress has been called into question. Such a position, usually adopted by conservative theorists, suggests that faith in rationality is often misplaced. As Burke suggested, the world is simply too vast and too complicated for the human mind to comprehend fully. If this is true, 'systems of thought', typically devised by liberal and socialist theorists, will inevitably simplify or distort the reality they set out to explain. Quite simply, no reliable 'blueprint' exists which enables human beings to remodel or reform their world. Where attempts have been made to improve political and social circumstances, whether through reform or revolution, conservatives often warn, in Oakeshott's words, that 'the cure may be worse than the disease'. Wisdom therefore dictates that human beings should abandon the delusion of progress and base their actions instead upon the firmer ground of experience, history and tradition.

Progress through reform

The earliest meaning of 'reform' was literally to re-form, to form again, as when soldiers re-form their lines. This meaning of reform, ironically, has a reactionary character since it implies the recapturing of the past, the restoration of something to its original order. This backward-looking aspect of reform was evident in the use of the term 'Reformation' to describe the establishment of the Protestant churches in the sixteenth

century, because its supporters saw it as a movement to restore an older and supposedly purer form of spiritual experience. However, in modern usage, reform is more commonly associated with innovation rather than restoration; it means to make anew, to create a new form, as opposed to returning to an older one. Reform is now inextricably linked to the ideas of progress. For example, to 'reform your ways' means to mend your ways; a 'reformed character' is a person who has abandoned his or her bad habits; and a 'reformatory' is a place which is meant to help correct anti-social behaviour. For this reason, the term 'reform' always carries positive overtones, implying betterment or improvement. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is contradictory to condemn or criticize what is acknowledged to be a reform.

Nevertheless, reform denotes a particular kind of improvement. Reform indicates changes within a person, institution or system which may remove their undesirable qualities but which do not alter their fundamental character: in essence, they remain the same person, institution and system. For instance, to demand the reform of an institution is to call for a reorganization of its structure, an alteration of its powers or a change of its function, but it is not to propose that the institution itself be abolished or be replaced by a new one. In that sense, reform stands clearly in opposition to revolution: it represents change within continuity. Indeed, in order to advocate reform it is necessary to believe that the person, institution or system in question has within it the capacity to be saved or improved. Political reform therefore stands for changes like the extension of the franchise and institutional adjustments which take place within the existing constitutional structure; social reform, similarly, refers to improvements in public health, housing or living conditions which help to improve the social structure rather than fundamentally alter it. Reform thus amounts to a qualified endorsement of the status quo; it suggests that, provided they are improved, existing institutions, structures and systems are preferable to the qualitatively new ones that could replace them. For this reason, reform stands for incremental improvement rather than a dramatic upheaval, gradual progress rather than a radical departure, evolution rather than revolution.

To advocate reform is to prefer evolutionary change to revolutionary change. In biology 'evolution' refers to a process of genetic mutation taking place within each species which either fits the species to survive and prosper within its environment or else fails to do so, in which case the species will die out. This is what Charles Darwin (1809–82) referred to as 'natural selection'. In this way, higher and more complex species, such as humankind, have evolved from lower and more simple ones like the apes. This is, nevertheless, a very gradual process, taking perhaps thousands and maybe millions of years. However, it is precisely the gradual and

incremental nature of evolutionary change that has encouraged both liberals and parliamentary socialists to advocate reform rather than revolution.

Liberal reformism is often associated with the utilitarianism (see p. 358) of Jeremy Bentham (see p. 359). This provided the basis for what was called 'philosophic radicalism', which helped to shape many of the most prominent reforms in nineteenth-century Britain. Founded upon the utilitarian assumption that all individuals seek to maximise their own happiness, and applying the goal of general utility – 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' – the philosophic radicals advocated a wide range of legal, economic and political reforms. Bentham proposed that laws be thoroughly codified and the legal system be put on a soundly rational basis, with no place being found for traditionalist ideas like common law or metaphysical notions, such as 'natural law' and 'natural rights'. In economic life, the philosophic radicals were keen supporters of the classical political economy of Adam Smith (see p. 338) and David Ricardo (1772–1823), and were thus critical of any attempt to constrain the workings of the market through monopoly or protectionism. Their programme of political reform centred upon the demand for greater democracy, including a commitment to frequent elections, the secret ballot and universal suffrage. Indeed, the zeal of these liberal reformers ensured that during the nineteenth century Britain was transformed from a hierarchic and aristocratic society into a modern parliamentary democracy.

Socialist reformism, which emerged towards the end of the century, consciously built on these liberal foundations. The Fabian Society, for instance, founded in 1884 and named after the Roman general, Fabius Maximus, famous for the patient and delaying tactics with which he defeated Hannibal, emphasized its faith in 'the inevitability of gradualism'. The Fabians openly rejected the ideas of revolutionary socialism, represented by Marxism (see p. 82), and proposed instead that a socialist society would gradually emerge out of liberal capitalism through a process of incremental and deliberate reform. Such ideas were widely taken up by parliamentary socialists in Europe and elsewhere. In Germany, Eduard Bernstein's (see p. 309) *Evolutionary Socialism* ([1898] 1962) marked the first major critique of orthodox Marxism, and championed the idea of a gradual and peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism. This tradition of socialist reformism constitutes the basis of modern Western social democracy. In *The Future of Socialism* (1956), Anthony Crosland (see p. 309) defined socialism not as the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a system of common ownership, but as steady progress made towards the goal of equality, a more equitable distribution of rewards and privileges in society. This, he argued, would be brought

Utilitarianism

Utilitarian theory emerged in the late eighteenth century as a supposedly scientific alternative to natural rights theories. In Britain, during the nineteenth century, utilitarianism provided the basis for a wide range of social, political and legal reforms, advanced by the so-called Philosophic Radicals. Utilitarianism provided one of the major foundations for classical liberalism (see p. 29) and remains perhaps the most important branch of moral philosophy, certainly in terms of its impact upon political issues.

Utilitarianism suggests that the 'rightness' of an action, policy or institution can be established by its tendency to promote happiness. This is based upon the assumption that individuals are motivated by self-interest and that these interests can be defined as the desire for pleasure, or happiness, and a wish to avoid pain. Individuals thus calculate the quantities of pleasure and pain that each possible action would generate, and choose whichever course promises the greatest amount of pleasure over pain. Utilitarian thinkers believe that it is possible to quantify pleasure and pain in terms of utility, taking account of their intensity, duration and so forth. Human beings are therefore utility maximizers, who seek the greatest possible pleasure and the least possible pain or unhappiness. The principle of utility can be applied to society at large using the classic nineteenth-century formula of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'.

However, utilitarianism has developed into a cluster of theories. Classical utilitarianism is act-utilitarianism, in that it judges an act to be right if its consequences produces at least as much pleasure-over-pain as those of any alternative act. Rule-utilitarianism, rather, judges an act to be right if it conforms to a rule which, if generally followed, would produce good consequences. What is called utilitarian generalization assesses an act's rightfulness not in terms of its own consequences, but on the basis of its consequences were the act to be universally performed. Motive-utilitarianism places emphasis upon the intentions of the actor rather than upon the consequences of each action.

The attraction of utilitarianism is its capacity to establish supposedly objective grounds on which moral judgements can be made. Rather than imposing values on society, it allows each individual to make his or her own moral choices as each alone is able to define what is pleasurable and what is painful. Utilitarian theory thus upholds diversity and freedom, and demands that we respect others as pleasure-seeking creatures. Its drawbacks are philosophical and moral. Philosophically, utilitarianism is based upon a highly individualistic view of human nature that is both asocial and ahistorical. It is by no means certain, for instance, that consistently self-interested behaviour is a universal feature of human society. Morally, utilitarianism may be nothing more than crass hedonism, a view expressed by J. S. Mill (see p. 256) in his declaration that he would rather be 'Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied' (although Mill himself subscribed to a modified form of utilitarianism). Utilitarianism has also been criticized for endorsing acts that are widely considered wrong, such as the violation of basic human rights, if they serve to maximize the general utility of society.

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Key figures

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) A British philosopher and legal reformer, Bentham was the founder of utilitarianism and laid down the basis of philosophical radicalism. His moral and philosophical system, developed as an alternative to natural rights theory, was based upon the belief that human beings are rationally self-interested creatures who calculate pleasure and pain in terms of utility. Using the 'greatest happiness' principle, he developed a justification for *laissez-faire* economics, advocated a wide range of legal and constitutional reforms, and, in later life, supported political democracy in the form of universal manhood suffrage. Bentham's major works include *A Fragment on Government* ([1776] 1948) and *Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation* ([1789] 1948).

James Mill (1773–1836) A Scottish philosopher, historian and economist, Mill helped to turn utilitarianism into a radical reform movement. Using Benthamite philosophy, he attacked mercantilism, the church, the established legal system and, especially, the system of aristocratic government. Mill supported what he called 'pure democracy' as the only means of achieving good government, defined as government in the interests of the governed, or at least in the interests of the 'greatest number'. On this basis, he recommended a progressive widening of the franchise, frequent elections and a secret ballot. Mill's best known work is *Essay on Government* (1820).

Peter Singer (1945–) An Australian philosopher, Singer has employed utilitarianism to consider a range of political issues. He has argued in favour of animal welfare on the grounds that an altruistic concern for the well-being of other species derives from the fact that, as sentient beings, they are capable of suffering. Animals, like humans, have an interest in avoiding physical pain, and he therefore condemns any attempt to place the interests of humans above those of animals as 'speciesism'. However, he accepts that altruistic concern does not imply equal treatment, and he does not accord animals rights. Singer has also used utilitarianism to justify increasing assistance from rich to poor countries. Singer's major works include *Animal Liberation* (1975), *Practical Ethics* (1993) and *How Are We to Live?* (1993).

Further reading

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about through a gradual process of social reform, involving in particular the expansion of the welfare state and the improvement and extension of educational provision.

Reform as a process of evolutionary change has a number of advantages over revolution. In the first place, by bringing about change within continuity, reform can be brought about peacefully and without disrupting social cohesion. Even when the cumulative affect of reform amounts to fundamental change, because it is brought about in a piecemeal fashion, bit by bit, and over an extended period, it is more likely to be acceptable, even to those who are at first unsympathetic. This was apparent in the establishment of political democracy in most Western societies through the gradual extension of the franchise, first to working-class men, and finally to women. By contrast, revolution reflects an attempt forcibly to impose change on society. As such, it dramatically polarizes opinions and deepens divisions, and is often accompanied by violence, which may be regarded as morally unacceptable. A second argument in favour of reform is that it is prepared to build upon what already exists, rather than simply discard it. In this way, reform appeals to a pragmatic style of politics in which policy is dictated more by practical circumstances than by abstract theory. To some extent, reform accepts what conservatives have traditionally taught: all theories and systems of thought are liable to be defective. To break completely with the past by bringing about revolutionary change is, in effect, to enter unknown territory without a reliable map for guidance.

Third, reform appeals to the best empirical traditions of scientific enquiry. Reform is an incremental process: it advances by a series of relatively small steps. Modern welfare states, for example, have not been constructed overnight; they are developed over a period of time through reforms which progressively extend the social security system, expand health and education provision and so forth. In the USA, the welfare programme of the 1960s built upon foundations laid under F.D. Roosevelt in the 1930s. Similarly, the Attlee reforms in the UK in the 1940s extended programmes which had been introduced by Asquith before the First World War. The virtue of incrementalism is that it proceeds through a process of 'trial and error'. As reforms are introduced their impact can be assessed and adjustments can be made through a further set of reforms. If progress is founded upon a belief in rationalism, reform is simply a way of bringing about progress through on-going experimentation and observation. Evolutionary change is therefore a means of expanding and refining human knowledge. To rely upon reform rather than revolution is to ensure that our desire to change the world does not outstrip our knowledge about how it works.

Progress through revolution

Revolution represents the most dramatic and far-reaching form of change. In its most common sense, revolution refers to the overthrow and replacement of a system of government, quite distinct from reform or evolution where change takes place within an enduring constitutional framework. However, the earliest notions of revolution, developed in the fourteenth century, denoted not so much fundamental change as the restoration of proper political order, usually thought of as 'natural' order. This created the idea of revolution as cyclical change, evident in the verb 'to revolve'. Thus, in the case of both the 'Glorious Revolution' (1688) in Britain, which established a constitutional monarchy, and the American Revolution, through which the American colonies gained independence, the revolutionaries themselves believed that they were re-establishing a lost moral order rather than creating a historically new one.

Nevertheless, the association between revolution and fundamental changes also has a long history. The English Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s, which culminated in the 'Glorious Revolution', involved the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. The American Revolution not only achieved independence but also led to the creation of a constitutional republic, the United States of America. The modern concept of revolution, however, was most clearly influenced by the French Revolution (1789), which set out, openly and deliberately, to destroy the *ancien régime* or old order. The French Revolution became the archetypal model for the European revolutions which broke out in the nineteenth century, like those of 1830 and 1848, and decisively influenced the revolutionary theories of thinkers such as Marx (see p. 371). In the same way, the Russian Revolution (1917), the first 'socialist' revolution, dominated revolutionary theory and practice for much of the twentieth century, providing an example which inspired among others the Chinese Revolution (1949), the Cuban Revolution (1959), the Vietnamese Revolution (1972) and the Nicaraguan Revolution (1979).

Competing theories of revolution tend to lean heavily upon particular revolutions to bear out the characteristic features of their model. Hannah Arendt's (see p. 58) *On Revolution* (1963), for example, focused heavily upon the English and American Revolutions in developing the essentially liberal view that revolutions reflect a quest for freedom and so highlight the failings of the existing political system. Marx, on the other hand, looking to the example of the French Revolution, regarded revolution as a stage in the inevitable march of history, reflecting the contradictions which exist in all class society. In reality, however, no two revolutions are alike; each is a highly complex historical phenomenon, containing a mix of

political, social and cultural features that is, perhaps, unique. The 'Islamic Revolution' (1979) in Iran, for instance, represented a backward-looking movement attempting to establish theocratic absolutism, quite at odds with the Western idea of revolution as progressive change. The East European revolutions (1989–91), which saw the overthrow or collapse of orthodox communist regimes in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, created the spectacle of a socialist revolution being itself overthrown by a revolution which, to some extent, sought to resurrect pre-socialist principles. Among other things, this cast grave doubt on the conventional notion of historical progress.

Revolution may indeed be another example of an 'essentially contested' concept. It may be impossible to decide objectively whether a revolution has taken place since there is no settled definition of 'revolution'. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of features which are characteristic of most, if not all, revolutions. First, revolutions are periods of dramatic and sudden change. Revolutions involve a major upheaval which takes place within a limited time span. When the term 'revolution' is used to describe profound change brought about gradually over a long period of time, as with the Industrial Revolution, it is being used metaphorically. In some cases, however, an initial and sudden upheaval may give way to a longer and more evolutionary process of change. In that sense, the Russian Revolution started in 1917 but continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, its goal of 'building communism' still not having been completed. Secondly, revolutions are usually violent. By challenging the existing regime, revolutionaries are forced to operate outside the existing constitutional framework, which means resorting to an armed struggle or even civil war. There are nevertheless many examples of revolutions brought about with little bloodshed. For example, only three people died in August 1991 as tanks attacked the barricades around the White House, the Russian parliament building, during the failed military *coup d'état* which, by the December, had led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Third, revolutions are popular uprisings, usually involving demonstrations, strikes, marches, riots or some other form of mass participation. David Beetham (1991) has suggested that the defining characteristic of revolution is extra-legal mass action, brought about, in effect, by the loss of legitimacy. The level of popular involvement is, however, often difficult to calculate. From one point of view, for example, the Russian Revolution of November 1917 had more the character of a *coup d'état* than a popular revolution, in that power was seized by a tightly knit band of Bolshevik revolutionaries. Nevertheless, this misses the point that the Bolshevik seizure of power was the final act in a process that had started the

previous March with the collapse of the Tsarist regime amidst a wave of popular demonstrations. Finally, revolutions bring about fundamental change, not merely the replacement of one governing elite or ruling class by another. A revolution therefore consists of a change in the political *system*, in the very foundations of a society.

A preference for revolution over reform is based on the belief that reform is little more than a sham. In effect, reform serves to perpetuate that which it appears to condemn. This has been the analysis of generations of revolutionary socialists, who have seen reformism not so much as a means of achieving social progress but as a prop of the capitalist system. In *Social Reform or Revolution* ([1899] 1937), for instance, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) attacked the reformist drift of German socialism by portraying parliamentary democracy as a form of 'bourgeois democracy'. She castigated electoral politics as a form of 'parliamentary cretinism', which betrayed rather than served the proletariat. Perhaps the most outspoken critic of reformism, V.I. Lenin (see p. 83) argued in *The State and Revolution* ([1917] 1973) that parliamentary elections amounted to nothing more than deciding 'every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament'.

In the view of revolutionaries such as Luxemburg and Lenin, reformism should be condemned on two counts. First, it misses the target: it addresses superficial problems but never fundamental ones. Revolutionary socialists argue that exploitation and oppression are rooted in the institution of private property and thus in the capitalist system. Reformists, on the other hand, have turned their attention to other issues, such as economic security, broader welfare rights and the struggle for political democracy. Even when such reforms have improved living and working conditions, they have failed to bring about root-and-branch change because the capitalist class system is left intact. Second, reform may not only fail to address fundamental problems, it may be part of the problem itself. Revolutionaries have alleged that reform may actually strengthen capitalism, indeed that capitalism's susceptibility to reform has been the secret of survival. From this perspective, the development of political democracy and the introduction of a welfare state have served to reconcile the working masses to their exploitation, persuading them that their society is just and fair. In that sense, perhaps all reform has a conservative character: it serves to bring about change but within an established constitutional or socio-economic framework. Such a line of thought clearly has an appeal that extends well beyond socialism, and has led to the emergence of revolutionary forms of doctrines such as anarchism, nationalism, feminism and religious fundamentalism.

Utopia

The term utopia was coined by the English scholar and Lord Chancellor, Thomas More (1478–1535), and was first used in his *Utopia* ([1516] 1989). More's work purported to describe a perfect society supposedly set on an idyllic South Pacific island. Commentators, however, have disagreed about whether his purpose in writing the book was advocacy or satire, or whether his primary concern was religious or political. The word 'utopia' is derived from two sources, the Greek *ou topos*, meaning 'no place', and the Greek *eu topos*, meaning 'good place'. In everyday language, a utopia is an ideal or perfect society. The ambiguity in More's term nevertheless lives on. The term 'utopian' is often used pejoratively to refer to beliefs that are impossible or unrealistic, linked to unachievably high goals. It is therefore unclear whether utopia as 'no place' implies that no such society *yet* exists or that no such society *could* exist. A series of further controversies surround utopia and utopianism. For example, does utopian thinking have to conform to a particular structure or have a particular function, or do all projects of political or social enhancement have a utopian character? Moreover, which political doctrines offer the most fertile ground for utopian thinking, and how varied have been the models of a political utopia? Finally, is the utopian style of thinking healthy or unhealthy, and why has it been largely abandoned by contemporary political theorists?

Features of utopianism

Utopias are, among other things, imagined worlds. Imagined worlds have a long history in literature, religion, folklore and philosophy. Most traditional societies and many religions have been based upon a myth of Golden Age or Paradise. In most cases, these myths conjure up the image of a past state of perfection which gives existing society a set of authoritative values and helps to build a shared sense of identity. In other cases, these myths also embody expectations about the future. For example, the Garden of Eden in Judeo-Christianity represents a state of earthly perfection that existed before humankind's 'fall'; however, this idea of the 'Kingdom of God on earth' has been kept alive by millenarianism, the belief in a future thousand-year period of divine rule, which will be inaugurated by Christ's second coming. Plato's *Republic* is often seen as the first clearly political utopia. In it, Plato (see p. 366) described a society that would combine wisdom, justice and order, in that philosopher-kings, the Guardians, would rule; the military class, the Auxiliaries, would maintain order and provide defence; and the common citizenry, the Producers, would attend to the material basis of society.

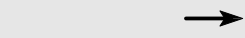
However, utopian thinking in its modern form has more specific cultural and historical roots. Utopianism as a style of social and political theorizing is essentially a Western phenomenon, which emerged from the eighteenth century onwards in association with the Enlightenment. Not only did a faith in reason encourage thinkers to view human history in terms of progress, but it also, perhaps for the first time, allowed them to think of human and social development in terms of unbounded possibilities. Armed with reason, humankind could remake society and also itself, and this process was, potentially, endless. The idea of social perfection was, thus, no longer unthinkable. The impossible dream had thus become an achievable goal. This new style of thinking was given powerful impetus by the French Revolution of 1789, which, as a project of wholesale social and political transformation, appeared to suggest that all things were possible. Examples of this emerging utopian impulse can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* ([1762] 1969), which advocated a radical form of democracy based, ultimately, on the goodness of 'natural man'; Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* ([1791–2] 1987), which defended popular sovereignty and individual rights over hereditary privilege; and Robert Owen's *A New View of Society* ([1816] 1972), which advocated a 'rational system of society' based upon cooperation and communal ownership.

Utopianism is therefore a very particular style of social theorizing. Its central theme is that it develops a critique of the existing order by constructing a model of an ideal or perfect alternative. As such, it usually exhibits three features. First, it embodies a radical and comprehensive rejection of the status quo; present society and political arrangements are deemed to be fundamentally defective and in need of root-and-branch change. Utopian political projects have therefore tended to be revolutionary rather than reformist in character. Second, utopian thought highlights the potential for human self-development, based either upon highly optimistic assumptions about human nature or upon optimistic assumptions about the capacity of economic, social and political institutions to ameliorate baser human drives and instincts. Society cannot be made perfect unless human beings are perfectible (if they were perfect already there would be no need for utopianism; utopia would exist already). Third, utopianism usually transcends the public/private divide in that it suggests the possibility of complete or near-complete personal fulfilment. For the alternative society to be ideal, it must offer the prospect of emancipation in the personal realm as well as in the political or public realm. This explains why much utopian theory has gone beyond conventional political thought and addressed wider psycho-social and even psycho-sexual issues, as in the writings of theorists such as Herbert Marcuse (see p. 280), Erich Fromm ([1955] 1971) and Paul Goodman (see p. 367).

Utopianism

A utopia is literally an ideal or perfect society. The term was first used in *Utopia* ([1516] 1989) by Thomas More. Utopianism is a style of social theorising that develops a critique of the existing order by constructing a model of an ideal or perfect alternative. However, utopianism is not a political philosophy nor an ideological tradition. Substantive utopias differ from one another, and utopian thinkers have not advanced a common conception of the good life. Nevertheless, most utopias are characterized by the abolition of want, the absence of conflict, and the avoidance of violence and oppression. Socialism in general, and anarchism and Marxism (see p. 82) in particular, have a marked disposition towards utopianism, reflecting their belief in the human potential for sociable, cooperative and gregarious behaviour. Socialist utopias, as a result, are strongly egalitarian and typically characterized by collective property ownership and a reduction in, or eradication of, political authority. Feminism (see p. 62) and ecologism (see p. 193) have also spawned utopian theories. Liberalism's (see p. 29) capacity to generate utopian thought is restricted by its stress upon human self-interestedness and competition; however, an extreme belief in free-market capitalism can be viewed as a form of market utopianism. Other utopias have been based upon faith in the benign influence of government and political authority. Plato's (see p. 21) *Republic* (1955), the earliest example of political utopianism, advocated enlightened despotism, while More's society was hierarchical, authoritarian and patriarchal, albeit within a context of economic equality.

Criticisms of utopian thought fall into two categories. The first (in line with the pejorative, everyday use of the term utopian) suggests that utopianism is deluded or fanciful thinking, a belief in an unrealistic and unachievable goal. Marx (see p. 371), for instance, denounced 'utopian socialism' on the grounds that it advances a moral vision that is in no way grounded in historical and social realities. By contrast, 'scientific socialism' sought to explain how and why a socialist society would come into being (Marxism's utopian character is nevertheless evident in the nature of its ultimate goal: the construction of a classless, communist society). The second category of criticisms holds that utopianism is implicitly totalitarian, in that it promotes a single set of indisputable values and so is intolerant of free debate and diversity. The strength of utopianism is that it enables political theory to think beyond the present and to challenge the 'boundaries of the possible'. The establishment of 'concrete' utopias is a way of uncovering the potential for growth and development within existing circumstances. Without a vision of what could be, political theory may simply be overwhelmed by what is, and thereby lose its critical edge.



Key figures

Robert Owen (1771–1858) A Welsh socialist, industrialist and pioneer of the cooperative movement, Owen's thought was based upon the belief that human character is formed by the social environment, and he therefore asserted that progress requires the construction of a 'rational system of society'. He particularly opposed organized religion, the conventional institution of marriage and private property. Owen advocated the construction of small-scale cooperative communities in which property would be communally owned and essential goods freely distributed. Owen's principal work is *A New View of Society* ([1816] 1972).

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) A French anarchist, Proudhon attacked both traditional property rights and communism, arguing instead for mutualism, a cooperative productive system geared towards need rather than profit and organized within self-governing communities. His famous dictum, 'property is theft', rejected the accumulation of wealth but allowed for small-scale property ownership in the form of 'possessions', a vital source of independence and initiative. Proudhon's major works include *What Is Property?* (1840), *Philosophy of Poverty* (an attack on Marx) (1846), *The Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851) and *The Federal Principle* (1863).

Peter Kropotkin (see p. 26) Kropotkin's work was imbued with a scientific spirit and was based upon a theory of evolution that provided an alternative to Darwin's. By seeing 'mutual aid' as the principal means of human and animal development, he claimed to provide an empirical basis for both anarchism and communism. He looked to the construction of a society consisting of a collection of largely self-managing communes within which life would be regulated by 'liberty and fraternal care'.

Paul Goodman (1911–72) A US writer and social critic, Goodman's anarchist and anti-authoritarian ideas had a considerable impact upon the New Left of the 1960s. His enduring concern with personal growth and human well-being, reflected, in part, in his interest in Gestalt therapy, led him to support a communitarian brand of anarchism, progressive education, pacificism, an ethic of sexual liberation, and the reconstruction of communities to facilitate local autonomy and face-to-face interaction. Goodman's major works include *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), *Communitas* (1960) and *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals* (1962).

Further reading

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An alternative to conventional utopian thinking has been developed in the form of 'dystopias', inverted or negative utopias whose purpose is to highlight dangerous or damaging trends in existing society. The two best-known literary dystopias are Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ([1949] 1954). Orwell's vision of excessive state control, relentless surveillance and pervasive propaganda drew attention to tendencies that were evident in twentieth-century totalitarianism. In many ways, however, Huxley's vision has proved to be more prescient, in that it envisaged the mass production of human beings in laboratories and the suppression of freedom through the use of drugs and prevalent indoctrination. A further example of a dystopian analysis was Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920), which developed a powerful critique of Soviet society by taking some of the implications of the 1917 Revolution to what he believed to be their logical – and inevitable – conclusion.

Political utopias

Political utopianism is defined more by its structure than its content. Although only a minority of utopian thinkers have set out to describe a utopia, by providing a full and detailed picture of a future ideal society, all of them have employed the idea of at least a radically improved society to draw attention to the deficiencies of existing society and to map out possibilities for personal, social and political development. There is no agreement, however, about what utopia will look like. Each model of the perfect society reflects the values and assumptions of a particular thinker and a particular political tradition. Nevertheless, as all utopias are supposedly perfect, certain common themes tend to recur in utopian thought.

For political and social arrangements to be perfect, what features have to be in place? In the first place, want must be banished. It would be difficult to regard a society as perfect if significant levels of poverty exists. Most utopias are therefore characterized by material abundance and the abolition of poverty. For example, Karl Marx's (see p. 371) conception of communism was based upon the assumption that, no longer fettered by the class system, technology would develop to a point that material need would be eradicated. Communism is, then, a post-scarcity society. However, this does not necessarily mean that all utopias must be materially prosperous; want may as easily be abolished by banishing materialism and greed as by ensuring material abundance. This can be seen in the ecological utopias of the modern Green movement, which are often based upon post-industrial simplicity and significantly scaled-down consumption levels.

Second, utopian societies are usually characterized by social harmony

and the absence of conflict. Conflict between individuals and groups, and, for that matter, conflict within the individual between competing values and impulses, is difficult to reconcile with perfection, because it will result in winners and losers. A society characterized by competing interests is doomed to imperfection both because it is unstable and because not all interests can be fully satisfied. In order to sustain the idea of conflict-free social harmony, utopian thinkers have usually had to make highly optimistic assumptions about human nature or highly optimistic assumptions about particular social institutions.

Third, utopian societies offer the prospect of full emancipation and unbounded personal freedom. Repression and all forms of unfreedom are, by definition, social imperfections, in that citizens are unable to act as they would choose to act. The only exception to this would be in the case of restrictions upon freedom that supposedly serve the long-term interests of individuals, as in Rousseau's belief that people can be 'forced to be free'. Most utopian theories therefore envisage only a limited role for government and perhaps no government at all.

Utopian theories have developed very largely out of the socialist and liberal political traditions, the two traditions that most clearly embody the optimism of the Enlightenment. The utopian impulse is particularly strong in the case of socialism. Socialism is based upon the belief that human beings are essentially sociable, cooperative and gregarious creatures. Greed, competition and anti-social behaviour therefore exist only because humans have been corrupted by society, and in particular by capitalism and its associated evils, poverty and social inequality. For many socialists, indeed, socialism has, in effect, served as a model of a realizable utopia, offering, as it does, the prospect of free, harmonious and equal social development. So-called utopian socialists, such as Charles Fourier (1772–1831) and Robert Owen, carried out practical experiments in socialist utopianism by setting up small-scale communities, organized on the basis of love, cooperation and collective ownership. The Marxist tradition gave this utopianism a supposedly scientific basis, in explaining how class-based societies would collapse under the weight of their own internal contradictions while classless and stateless communism would ensure full and free social development. The utopianism of classical anarchism, as reflected in the work of thinkers such as Proudhon and Kropotkin, was derived largely from the attempt to take socialist collectivism to its logical extreme and demonstrate how social harmony could be reconciled with unfettered freedom. Although twentieth-century socialism largely abandoned utopianism, as social democrats sought to forge a compromise between socialism and capitalism, some socialist thinkers turned once again to utopianism in the hope of re-engaging socialism with youthful idealism and radical critique. The explicitly utopian ideas of

neo-Marxist thinkers such as Ernst Bloch ([1959] 1986) and Herbert Marcuse influenced the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and helped to fuse the notions of personal and political liberation.

The relationship between liberalism (see p. 29) and utopianism is more ambiguous. The stress within liberal theory upon egoism and self-interest has usually kept the utopian impulse at bay. Indeed, the social-contract theories that underlie much of liberal thinking about the state and government are based precisely upon the need for a compromise between pursuit of freedom and the maintenance of order. A society of unrestricted freedom, a 'state of nature', is from this point of view, a recipe for strife and barbarity. On the other hand, the liberal belief in reason, and the associated faith in education, creates a potential for utopianism based on the potential they create for human self-development and social betterment. A social-contract theorist such as John Locke (see p. 268) could therefore express a near-utopian idealism when discussing the issue of education. The link between rationalism and utopianism was developed very clearly in the work of the pioneering anarchist William Godwin (see p. 338). Godwin turned social-contract theory on its head, in that he argued that education and enlightened judgement would ensure that people in a stateless society would live in accordance with truth and universal moral laws. In other circumstances, liberal utopianism has drawn heavily upon the idea of a self-regulating market, taking Adam Smith's (see p. 337) idea of the 'invisible hand' of capitalism to its logical conclusion. Thus, although human beings are essentially self-seeking creatures whose economic interests conflict, the workings of the market deliver equilibrium and general prosperity because people can only satisfy their interests by, unwittingly, satisfying the interests of others. In the writings of thinkers such as Murray Rothbard (see p. 339) and David Friedman (1989), this has led to the construction of anarcho-capitalist utopias in which unrestricted market competition reconciles economic dynamism with social justice and political freedom. 'End of history' theories, such as those associated with Fukuyama (1992), are also underpinned by a form of market utopianism.

End of utopia?

Enthusiasm for utopian thinking has peaked during very particular periods: the late eighteenth century, particularly in the years following the 1789 French Revolution; the 1830s and 1840s, a period of early industrialization and rapid social change; and the 1960s, coinciding with an upsurge in student radicalism and the emergence of new social movements. However, utopianism has always been a minority political concern, and it has attracted, at times, fierce criticism. Most political doctrines are non-utopian and some are explicitly anti-utopian.

Anti-utopianism in fact grew steadily during the twentieth century, fuelled in particular by disillusionment with 'actually existing' socialist utopianism in the form of orthodox communism, what began to be portrayed as 'the god that failed'. Some commentators, indeed, traced the seeds of totalitarianism back to the structure of utopian thought. Moreover, since the late twentieth century, it has become increasingly fashionable to see the future less in terms of hope and expectation and more in terms of impending crisis, even doom. Has utopia been finally removed from the map of possible human futures?

Critics of utopianism have attacked it in various ways. For example, although Marxism has clearly utopian features, Marx and Engels dismissed anarchism and the ideas of ethical socialists such as Owen and Fourier as examples of 'utopian socialism' rather than 'scientific socialism'. According to Marx, the former amounted to mere wishful thinking, the construction of morally attractive visions of socialism without consideration being given to how capitalism was to be overthrown and how socialism was to be constructed. By contrast, 'scientific socialism', or

Karl Marx (1818–83)

German philosopher, economist and political thinker, usually portrayed as the father of twentieth-century communism. After a brief career as a university teacher, Marx took up journalism and became increasingly involved with the socialist movement. He moved to Paris in 1843, later spent three years in Brussels and finally, in 1849, settled in London. He worked for the rest of his life as an active revolutionary and writer, supported by his friend and life-long collaborator Friedrich Engels (see p. 83).

Marx's work provides the basis for the Marxist political tradition (see p. 82). It was derived from a synthesis of Hegelian philosophy, British political economy and French socialism. His early writings, known as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* ([1844] 1967), outlined a humanist conception of communism based upon the prospect of unalienated labour in conditions of free and cooperative production. The ideas of historical materialism started to take shape in *The German Ideology* ([1846] 1970) and are given their most succinct expression in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Marx's best known and most accessible work is *The Communist Manifesto* (with Engels) ([1848] 1976), which summarizes his critique of capitalism and highlights its transitional nature by drawing attention to systematic inequality and instability. Marx's classic work is the three-volume *Capital* (1867, 1885 and 1894), which painstakingly analyses the capitalist process of production and is based, some argue, upon economic determinism.

Marxism, was based upon a theory of history that supposedly demonstrated not only that socialism is *desirable* but also that it is *inevitable*. The danger of utopianism, from this perspective, is that it channels the political energies of the proletariat away from the only strategies which can, in the long run, bring about social emancipation. By this standard, Marx's clearly utopian early writings, such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* ([1844] 1968), which stress the moral benefits of communism, can be distinguished from his mature 'scientific' work, which is grounded in historical materialism.

A more thoroughgoing critique of utopianism, however, has been advanced by conservative thinkers. Conservatives oppose utopianism on two grounds. In the first place, they view human nature as imperfect and unperfectable, rejecting one of the foundation stones of utopian theory. People are innately selfish and greedy, driven by non-rational impulses and desires, and no project of social engineering is going to alter these stubborn realities and establish universal 'goodness'. All human societies are therefore characterised by imperfections such as conflict and strife, delinquency and crime. Second, utopian projects invariably suffer from the arrogance of rationalism: they claim to understand what is, frankly, incomprehensible. As all models of the desired future are doomed to be defective, political projects that aim to establish a perfect society are destined to produce outcomes quite different from the ideals that inspired them. This can, for example, be seen in the mismatch between Marx's model of communism and the realities of twentieth-century communism. As Oakeshott put it, conservatives will always wish to ensure that 'the cure is not worse than the disease'.

The most damning criticisms of utopianism have been produced by liberal thinkers such as Karl Popper (1963) and Isaiah Berlin (see p. 261), both of whom were influenced by the experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism. For Popper, utopianism was dangerous and pernicious because it is self-defeating and leads to violence. He defined the utopian method as a way of reasoning in which, rationally, means are selected in the light of an ultimate political end. Rational political action must therefore be based upon a blueprint of an ideal state and of a particular historical path. This form of reasoning is self-defeating because it is impossible to determine ends scientifically: whereas means may be rational or irrational, ends are not susceptible to rational analysis. Moreover, this style of reasoning will result in violence because, lacking a scientific or rational basis for defending ends, people with conflicting ends will not be able to resolve their differences through debate and discussion alone. Political projects that are linked to ultimate ends are thus destined to clash with other such political projects.

Berlin's critique of utopianism associated it with monistic tendencies he believed were embodied in the Enlightenment tradition. The Enlightenment belief in universal reason resulted in the search for fundamental values that would be applicable to all societies and all historical periods. Rationalistic doctrines therefore tend to advance a single true path to perfection, thereby denying legitimacy to alternative paths and rival theories. In practice, this leads to intolerance and political repression. Berlin asserted that conflicts of values are intrinsic to human life; not only will people always disagree about the ultimate ends of life, but each human being struggles to find a balance between incommensurable values. Such a view demonstrates that utopia is, in principle, impossible. From this perspective, the purpose of politics is not to uncover a single path to perfection but, rather, to create conditions in which people with different moral and material priorities can live together peacefully and profitably.

Quite apart from attacks on utopianism, there has been an unmistakable turning away from utopianism since the 1960s and early 1970s. This period saw a proliferation of utopias, with, for instance, the construction of radical feminist models of the post-patriarchal society and the growth of 'New Age' thinking among ecological theorists. The decline in such thinking, however, has been associated with a general process of de-radicalization which has had a particular impact upon socialism. It is notable that modern protest movements, such as the anti-globalization or anti-corporate movement, devote most of their energies to highlighting the failings of existing society, and give far less attention to analysing the nature of the desired future society. Growing dystopian pessimism about the future has been shaped by a variety of factors. One of these has undoubtedly been the emergence of globalization in its various forms. Globalization, for instance appears to have removed the idea of a viable alternative to capitalism and the market, narrowing economic options to, at best, a choice between alternative forms of capitalism. This has had profound implications for utopianism because socialist collectivism, traditionally the most fertile ground for utopian thinking, is no longer regarded as practicable. Moreover, in creating a web of interconnectedness that pays little attention to traditional geographical and political boundaries, globalization has created a world of uncertainty and risk. So-called chaos theory has emerged in an attempt to make sense of this intensified 'connectivity', explaining how relatively minor events in one part of the world can have potentially catastrophic consequences in another part of the world. This has created a heightened vulnerability and powerlessness, as the fate of individuals, communities and even nations seems to be shaped by forces outside their control and, often, beyond their understanding.

An additional source of pessimism about humankind's prospects stems from a growing sense of impending ecological disaster. As corporate power has been strengthened in relation to government and industrialization has spread to new parts of the globe, the pace of resource depletion and the rate of pollution have accelerated. Problems such as 'global warming' create the impression of a world out of control. The spectre of a growing divide between humankind and nature has, once again, reversed one of the key themes found in utopian thought. Much dystopian gloom in the twenty-first century has focused upon the impact of science upon humankind and society. Once one of the foundation stones of utopianism, science has come to be seen by many as a growing threat, creating the prospect of a 'post-human' future. Francis Fukuyama (2002) expressed such concerns about the consequences of the biotechnological revolution. In particular, he warned that the ability to manipulate the DNA of one's descendants would have profound implications for what it means to be human and will, potentially, have terrible consequences for the political order. John Gray (2002) has used these and other developments to argue that humans should be viewed in the same way as any other animal. Free will is an illusion and, as with animals, the destiny of humans is determined by factors quite beyond their control. Indeed, he went as far as to suggest that humankind's inclination towards genocide has been significantly enhanced by scientific and technological advance. Since the human species has become a threat to Gaia, the planet itself, it may, quite simply, have become dispensable.

Summary

1 Tradition refers to a desire to resist or perhaps reverse historical change. It can take one of three different forms: conventional traditionalism or the desire for continuity with the past; reactionary traditionalism, the wish to 'turn the clock back', reclaim a past Golden Age; or enlightened traditionalism, the belief that a flexible attitude to change can help in the long run to preserve a governmental or social system.

2 Much of Western political thought is underpinned by the idea of progress, the belief in human advance and development, reflected in the spread of material affluence and the growth of personal freedom. Reform and revolution can be contrasted as means of bringing about progress. Reform holds out the prospect of change through consent and respects the virtues of caution and pragmatism. Revolution, on the other hand, has the capacity to bring about fundamental, root-and-branch change.

3 Utopianism is a style of social theorizing which advances a critique of existing society by developing a model of a perfect or ideal alternative; it is usually based upon highly optimistic assumptions about human nature. Most utopian theories have been developed within the socialist and liberal traditions. However, utopianism has been criticized as wishful thinking and sometimes as implicitly totalitarian. The utopian impulse in political theory has weakened significantly in recent years, a trend associated, among other things, with concern about globalization and the impact of science.

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