

# To know a thing is to know its end: On why utopia is crucial to a revival of socialist consciousness

by Frank Brenner  
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It seems strange to write about utopia in the shadow – and now the ghastly light – of war, and yet the subject is rarely more compelling than at such a time. These remarks were occasioned by an exchange of letters I had this past summer with Nick Beams from the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) on the relationship of Marxism and utopianism. (The correspondence is included as an appendix at the end of this essay.) The first half or so is a reply to Beams, since I feel that his views, though indicative of prevailing and longstanding opinion within the Marxist movement, are seriously misguided. That led to a discussion of the broader implications of utopianism in today's political environment as well as a consideration of some of the history of the issue within the Marxist tradition, notably the tension between science and utopianism that turned the latter into a virtual taboo. A definitive account of all these matters would require a book-length discussion, but I think these remarks are sufficient to make the case that a renewed attention to utopianism is vital to a rebirth of a socialist culture within the working class. There is a direct relevance of these issues to today's anti-war movement. If the mass protests are not to degenerate (as the anti-globalization movement has) into a largely impotent venting of frustration, then the fight against war has to go beyond just being a fight for a peace that is little more than an interlude between bloodbaths. It has to become instead a fight for a world where barbarisms like an 'oil war' can never take place. And that is impossible without a fundamental shift in the consciousness of the working class, which is the only social force capable of bringing about revolutionary change. The central point I am making is that it is just because the proletariat is the only conceivable revolutionary subject of history that utopia is important: class consciousness will never be revived until socialism becomes once again a great social ideal, the focal point for the aspirations and dreams of the broad mass of workers, young people and intellectuals. In the midst of military conflagration, we need to put utopia back on the map of the world.

## 1. Socialists and the masses

According to Beams, it will not be socialists but the masses who will run socialist society, and so there is no need for socialist policies – which he refers to disparagingly as 'prescriptions' – on issues like the family, work, the environment etc, let alone a coherent vision of what socialist society will be like. There is a basic truth here – that the working class must emancipate itself – which is fundamental to the socialist project. But never before has this been interpreted to mean that socialists don't need to have a program. Otherwise, what point was there to *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Transitional Program* and the many other programmatic documents of revolutionary Marxism? Beams pulls out

a quote from Marx on the Paris Commune to justify this position (which I take up in the next section), but he simply ignores the great burden of evidence to the contrary, including most obviously the experience of the Russian revolution: Lenin and Trotsky did not disappear once the masses had taken power through the soviets; on the contrary, their leadership – and their socialist ‘prescriptions’ – became more important than ever.

The point here is that there is no contradiction between the masses emancipating themselves and socialists running society. This is for two reasons. First, socialists are not alien elements – or ‘outside agitators’, as the bourgeois stereotype would have it – stirring up otherwise docile workers; rather, socialists are the most conscious and determined section of the working class. So emancipation isn’t the work of the masses *as opposed to socialists*, but a process in which socialists play an integral – and necessarily a leading – part. (The middle class origins of many Marxists, including the greatest ones, does not change this, since what is decisive is class allegiance, and that is determined by what one fights for, not who one’s parents were.)

Second, the term ‘masses’ is an abstraction that tends to obscure important social and political differentiations which become acute in a revolutionary crisis. Some workers will actively oppose the revolution: to imagine them running anything in a socialist society is perverse. Others will be politically neutral: to foist responsibilities on them right away for a revolution they have barely begun to understand will probably do little more than antagonize them; their political consciousness (and more broadly, their general cultural level) will have to be patiently nurtured. So for a considerable period of time the running of socialist society will be in the hands, not of amorphous ‘masses’, but of *class conscious workers* – in other words, that section of the class (necessarily a large portion of it and hopefully a majority) whose political consciousness has been shaped by the revolutionary socialist movement. This, it needs to be emphasized, is what is meant by ‘socialists running society’ – i.e. not a small clique of party bureaucrats but a broad section of workers imbued with socialist consciousness. And that very consciousness is itself the best guarantee against bureaucratization, though clearly the instituting of workers’ democracy and workers’ control over production have to be central concerns of the revolution and spelled out in unequivocal terms in any revolutionary program.

But it is completely wrong-headed to make a rigid distinction between workers’ emancipation and socialist leadership precisely because that emancipation is only achieved through workers becoming socialists themselves. Without socialist consciousness – i.e. without freedom from the invisible shackles of middle class prejudice and habits of thought that makes it possible in the first place for the working class to become the subject of history – talk of workers’ democracy becomes largely hollow. Which in turns means that deflecting virtually every question about socialist policy with the response that ‘the masses will deal with it’ is an evasion, like a ‘no comment’ comeback to an embarrassing question. More to the point, *it tells the masses nothing* – it ignores an important part of the struggle to win them to socialism, the ‘bridge’ that a program can create for workers between the atomized consciousness of bourgeois individualism and the class consciousness of socialist solidarity.

Beams makes it sound as if the only alternative to saying nothing is ‘prescriptions’. But surely it is possible for Marxists to provide leadership on matters like the family or the environment without turning into bureaucratic browbeaters, radical do-gooders or apologists for capitalism. We can bring to bear on these issues not only the best ideas available in these fields but also matchless critical-historical insight and a revolutionary social perspective that often make it possible for Marxists to think ‘outside the box’ of prevailing ideological assumptions. To develop policies on this basis doesn’t supplant the masses; rather it can be instrumental in bringing them to life, politically speaking.

Of course a program must always be subordinate to an overall political perspective, but a perspective which largely ignores programmatic issues is likely one which *downplays the significance of the struggle for socialist consciousness*. It isn’t hard to see this implication in Beams’s position. If by the sheer act of participating in a revolution the undifferentiated masses can, as it were, leap out of their skins and transcend a lifetime of oppression and backwardness to the point of being able to carry through the mammoth task of socialist construction *on their own*, i.e. without any guidance or ‘prescriptions’ from socialists, then one has to wonder why they would need these same socialists to lead them in making a revolution in the first place. One has to wonder, in short, why they would need a *change* in consciousness at all. And from here it isn’t a big stretch to a mechanical determinism, since if consciousness is no longer a central and pressing concern, then all that matters are the objective forces that will ‘inevitably’ give rise to revolution and socialism. But if the numerous shattered revolutions of the past century prove anything, it is that consciousness matters enormously, that no struggle for socialism can be successful without it. And that is why program – and vision – matter as well.

(A final point: let us assume for a moment that what Beams has in mind is actually not socialism but communism, i.e. a completely classless society where any vestige of social oppression has long since been overcome. Certainly in such a society there wouldn’t be any need for socialists to run anything because there wouldn’t be anything to run, the state having withered away. And needless to say, matters like family life and the environmental situation also would have undergone radical transformations, making any proposals we could come up with today superfluous. But this resolves nothing because there is still the question of what to do during the years and even generations it will take to make the transition to communism. And this question is of major importance politically because it is what sets Marxism apart from anarchism, which is also opposed to socialists running anything and imagines that somehow it will be possible to leap to a classless and stateless society the morning after the revolution. In any case, when Beams defines socialism as “a form of society in which the working class for the first time in human history takes political and economic power into its own hands,” he make it clear that he is indeed talking about this transitional society and not a distant communist future, where there will be no working class and no need for it to take power.)

## 2. Marx on the Commune

Since much of Beams's letter is made up of quotes, 'a battle of quotes' is unavoidable in this and later sections, though the content of the ideas being discussed should make it evident that this isn't an exercise in Marxist scholasticism. Beams is wrong to think that the quote he takes from Marx's writings on the Paris Commune<sup>1</sup> validates his position, and this is clear both from an analysis of the quote in its context (as I'll get to shortly) as well as the larger context of Marx and Engels's political history. This is because, contrary to what one would expect if Beams were right, Marx and Engels did not turn their backs on socialist 'prescriptions' after the Commune, but instead showed a renewed interest in programmatic issues. Thus, a year later when they came to write a new preface to *The Communist Manifesto* on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, they amended it to include a new demand – the dictatorship of the proletariat. While it is true that in that preface they also made a point of saying that they felt some of the original ten demands were now antiquated, this didn't mean that programmatic issues per se were no longer important. In fact that same year (1872), Engels wrote a series of articles on the housing question which reiterated the *Manifesto*'s 'prescription' about abolishing the distinction between town and country, and three years later Marx penned the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, a work widely considered "Marx's most important statement on organization in the future communist society," to quote from one editorial preface.<sup>2</sup> Clearly in Marx's mind the experience of the Commune had not obviated the need for a socialist vision, though obviously the latter is not to be understood in a classical utopian sense.

(For the record it is worth noting that Rosa Luxemburg thought highly enough of the *Manifesto*'s demands to revive them during the German revolution of 1918-19, and two decades later Trotsky was of the opinion that they had "regained completely their true significance." Indeed, even today it is remarkable how relevant some of these demands still are.)

When it came to the Commune, there is no question that Marx's emphasis was on drawing every possible lesson from a truly decisive historical experience – the first time the working class had taken power into its own hands, albeit for only a few months and only in one city. The key thing was to study the actual course of the struggle, especially the startling new forms that working class power had taken. With characteristic genius and at what must have been fever pitch, Marx threw himself into this work, absorbing every detail of the events as they unfolded and producing the finished text of *The Civil War in France* literally two days after the last massacre of Communards in Paris. Lenin, himself on the eve of an even greater revolutionary upheaval, would later capture Marx's mood precisely: "He saw in the mass revolutionary movement, although it did not attain

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<sup>1</sup> Here is the passage cited by Beams: "The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through a series of processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is itself pregnant."

<sup>2</sup> David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 564.

its aim, an historic experiment of gigantic importance, ... a practical step more important than hundreds of programs and discussions ... There is no trace of utopianism in Marx, in the sense that he made up or invented a 'new' society. No, he studied the *birth* of the new society *out of* the old, and the forms of transition from the latter to the former, as a natural-historical process. He examined the actual experience of a mass proletarian movement and tried to draw practical lessons from it."<sup>3</sup>

So, it isn't surprising to find Marx inveighing against "ready-made utopias" and "ideals" foisted on this living movement. Marx was aiming these remarks particularly at other political tendencies in the French working class. While there were still some remnants around of the old utopian socialist groups, for example the Fourierists, their role in the Commune was negligible, so it was hardly worth Marx's time to attack them. It was the followers of Blanqui and Proudhon (both socialists broadly defined, the former a promoter of revolutionary conspiracies and the latter a forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism), who between them ran the Commune, and it was particularly them that Marx had in mind in these remarks. As Engels explained in his 1891 introduction to Marx's book: "But what is still more wonderful is the correctness of much that nevertheless was done by the Commune, composed as it was of Blanquists and Proudhonists. Naturally, the Proudhonists were chiefly responsible for the economic decrees of the Commune, both for their praiseworthy and their unpraiseworthy aspects; as the Blanquists were for its political commissions and omissions. *And in both cases the irony of history willed – as is usual when doctrinaires come to the helm – that both did the opposite of what the doctrines of their school prescribed.*"<sup>4</sup> Against such doctrinaires and their 'prescriptions', it is understandable that Marx would want to stress that the proletariat has "no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is itself pregnant."

But one doesn't spend so much effort learning lessons unless they are needed. The Commune had opened up a whole new vista of revolutionary development, but it also had ended tragically: the new society hadn't been set free, it had been aborted. Clearly the mass movement on its own, or under whatever makeshift leadership it had, wasn't enough. The answer to bad doctrine wasn't the rejection of doctrine – or of program or ideals for that matter – just as the answer to doctrinaire leadership wasn't the rejection of the need for leadership. Actually, there were some people who did think this way: for Bakunin and his anarchist followers the principal lesson of the Commune was that all politics, including socialist politics, were bad. Not surprisingly, several months after the Commune Marx and Engels forced through a split with Bakunin's tendency inside the First International and set a course that eventually led to the setting up of mass socialist parties. It is in this context that their previously referred to interest in programmatic issues and a vision of the communist future needs to be understood.

Here, it is only necessary to add that these concerns were not absent even during the Commune, as is evident from a striking passage in the first draft of *The Civil War in France*. Marx begins by noting that while the Commune had hoisted the red flag and

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<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, pp. 32, 42, emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> Marx and Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, pp. 30-1, emphasis added.

declared the emancipation of labor as its goal, it necessarily had to focus its efforts during its brief existence on the defense of Paris against the counter-revolution. He then vents his indignation at “some patronizing friends of the working class” who have made “the great discovery that after all workmen are rational men and whenever in power always resolutely turn their back upon socialist enterprises,” by which they meant utopian socialist collectives. These people completely missed the point. The great utopian socialists, though “clearly describing the goal of the social movement,” lived in an era before a mass movement of the working class was feasible, and so they compensated with their “fantastic pictures and plans of a new society.” But because these utopian schemes such as Fourier’s phalansteries were now rendered irrelevant, this did not mean that the final goal of socialism was also passé. “From the moment the working men’s class movement became real, the fantastic utopias evanesced – *not because the working class had given up the end aimed at by these Utopians, but because they had found the real means to realize them* – but in their place came a real insight into the historical conditions of the movement and a more and more gathering force of the militant organization of the working class. But the last two ends of the movement proclaimed by the Utopians are the last ends proclaimed by the Paris Revolution and by the International. Only the means are different and the real conditions of the movement are no longer clouded in utopian fables.”<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between utopianism and Marxism as it is presented in this passage is markedly different from the way that relationship is usually understood by Marxists. By the latter I mean essentially the view that once Marxism had made socialism into a science, utopianism became irrelevant. The primary text on which this view is based is Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and there is no question that there, as elsewhere, both he and Marx subjected utopian socialism to a profound critique that was crucial to the whole project of a scientific socialism. But that critique didn’t render utopianism irrelevant, any more than the advent of Marxism rendered Hegel’s philosophy or Smith and Ricardo’s political economy irrelevant. The development of Marxism was a dialectical one, a ‘transcendence’ that terminated the ideologically rooted illusions and limitations of its predecessors, while at the same time preserving – or perhaps more correctly, rediscovering – their positive content. This is widely understood in relation to Hegel, whose influence on Marx was evident long after the latter had settled accounts philosophically with Hegelianism. The utopian socialists, however, have been ignored, even though there is ample indication in the writings of Marx and Engels that the ideas of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen continued to play an important role in their thinking. The fact is that *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* is itself hardly a justification for this neglect, with its often effusive praise of the utopians (“we delight in the stupendously grand thoughts and germs of thoughts that everywhere break out through their phantastic covering”), praise that at times seems to go overboard, as when Engels claims that Fourier “uses the dialectic method in the same masterly way as his contemporary, Hegel.”<sup>6</sup> If nothing else, this is a rather strong recommendation for reading Fourier. It has been pointed out that the English title of Engels’s pamphlet adds to the confusion, since it suggests an opposition between two kinds of socialism, whereas the German original

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 165-6, emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> F. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, pp. 36, 39.

conveys a different sense of the relationship – *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft* – the development of socialism from utopia to science.<sup>7</sup>

I'll have more to say about that relationship later, but to get back to the quotation from Marx, if the only difference with regard to utopianism is over means rather than ends (and I believe this does express Marx's basic position), then the great socialist utopians, and more generally utopianism as a standpoint, still have something important to say to us. Obviously this has nothing to do with the traditional notion of utopianism as the conjuring up of imaginary societies, but the problem is that this is much too restrictive (and pejorative) a notion. Above all, it excludes utopian vision in the sense of *foresight*, of anticipating or prefiguring the possibilities of human liberation rather than inventing them. Marx was a utopian in this sense, as was Lenin. But Marxists have lost sight of this kind of vision for far too long because of the sweeping dismissal of utopianism that passes for Marxist orthodoxy.

### 3. Socialism and the family

One shouldn't have to argue over whether socialists need a policy on the family. Since we are fighting to create a world where people can live fully human lives for the first time in history, it is obvious that this goal is inconceivable without an overhaul of the institution responsible for the socialization – i.e. humanization – of children, and where in class society the earliest and often deepest wounds are inflicted on the human personality. From its origins, socialism has been linked to the struggle against the oppression of women, and Marx and Engels openly defied the stifling morality of the Victorian age by calling for the abolition of the family and denouncing marriage as legalized prostitution. It is quite a comedown to go from that stirring precedent to the pat response that we have 'no prescriptions'.

While Beams devotes much of his letter to this subject, bringing in long quotes from Trotsky, his position remains untenable. Again, framing the issue in terms of 'prescriptions' is just a way of avoiding the real problems. Of course no one is going to disagree with the position that it isn't the business of socialists to dictate to people how to live their personal lives. But to say *only this and nothing more* ignores, first and foremost, the fight against sexual oppression and backwardness. Everything from wife and child abuse to domestic drudgery to abortion rights to access to daycare to the institution of marriage and on and on – it is simply incredible that to all this our response should be that we have 'no prescriptions'. Beams talks in the most general terms about "the development of consciousness" in socialism, but he completely ignores the measures that need to be taken in order to make it possible for that development of consciousness to take place. As I said in my earlier letter, this amounts to an acquiescence to backwardness, irrespective of Beams's intentions.

The nub of the issue is that the problems of the family will not automatically disappear once socialism has arrived. Beams concedes that with the conquest of power by the

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, p. 30.

working class, “all the rubbish of the past” will not be “immediately cleared away.” But this is just dodging the issue: it isn’t a matter of whether these problems will go away immediately but whether they will go away *on their own*. The gist of Beams’s position is that they will, and he claims that any other position is tantamount to a rejection of materialism. I’ll come back to that claim later on, but it doesn’t take much reflection to see how untenable this position is. Wife and child abuse will not automatically disappear with the advent of socialism, nor will sexual repression or religious superstition. They will only be overcome by the revolution taking active measures, ranging from the protection of women and children from violence to a broad-based campaign for cultural enlightenment.

Beams’s approach is thoroughly passive, and yet nothing could be more remote from the standpoint of classical Marxism on this issue than passivity. Here is a characteristic statement from Trotsky: “A revolution does not deserve its name if, with all its might and all the means at its disposal, it does not help the woman – twofold and threefold enslaved as she has been in the past – to get out on the road of individual and social progress. A revolution does not deserve its name, if it does not take the greatest care possible of the children – the future race for whose benefit the revolution has been made.”<sup>8</sup> This obviously wasn’t someone who believed that the oppression of women and children would automatically disappear under socialism.

And just to show that this was not merely rhetoric, here is a description of the Bolshevik record in this field in a recent social history of Russian sexuality: “Soviet legislation and social policy on issues of marriage and procreation in the 1920s were the most daringly progressive in the world. As early as 1918, women were accorded full equal rights with men in all social and private areas, including marriage and family relations. Women had the right to choose their surname, place of residence, and social status. Their involvement in productive labor was supposed to ensure them economic independence of men. If they became pregnant, they were entitled to paid holidays. To relieve women of onerous ‘domestic servitude,’ the state began to set up a system of crèches, nurseries and communal food supplies. Medical service for mothers and children were expanded and improved and became entirely free.”<sup>9</sup> Also, to the list of measures cited here one should add the ending of marriage as a religious institution, the right of divorce, the right to an abortion and the decriminalization of homosexuality. This is a record that speaks for itself. All one could add is that by today’s standards this would still be a “daringly progressive” program in many parts of the world.

(Beams reads Trotsky’s warning against “a clumsy, almost brutal attempt at interference” in private life as a blanket condemnation of socialist measures on the family, but this isn’t credible given the Bolshevik record. A bit of historical context makes clear what Trotsky was getting at. It is hardly surprising that the revolution provoked an enormous amount of confusion over issues like sexuality, including within the party itself. The social historian

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<sup>8</sup> L. Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 53. Incidentally, this idea goes back to the utopian socialist Charles Fourier who maintained that “the extension of the privileges of women is the basic principle of all social progress” (*The Theory of the Four Movements* [1808], p. 132).

<sup>9</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, p. 55. It should be noted that this writer is not a Marxist and is quite critical of the Bolsheviks in other respects.

I just cited recounts some of the debates over the issue in the Twenties, including the contributions of one Aron Zalkind, a prominent psychologist and party member who authored several books on the subject as well as something he called the “Twelve Sexual Commandments for the Revolutionary Proletariat.” The preamble states: “Sexual life is permissible only in so far as it encourages the growth of collective feelings, class organization, creative endeavor in work and military activity.” The second “commandment” calls for abstinence before marriage; the third declares that “sexual involvement with a class enemy, moral enemy, or object unworthy of one’s love is just as repulsive as the sexual involvement of a human being with a crocodile or orangutan”; the ninth states that “sexual choice must be based on class” and that “love relationships must not involve elements of flirtation, frivolity, coquettishness and suchlike methods of sexual conquest”; and the tenth states simply that “one must not be jealous.”<sup>10</sup> Clumsy and brutal describes this rather well. Zalkind was neither a marginal figure nor an ignorant one: he served on the Institute for Communist Education and the Communist Academy, both organs of the Central Committee. I think it is fair to assume, then, that this is the sort of thing Trotsky had in mind. This isn’t a socialist policy for the family but a harbinger of Stalinism.)

There is another aspect to this issue that Beams ignores – that socialists have a goal in this field, i.e. the development of collective forms of family life. Of course this is not a ‘prescription’ to be enforced by coercion or bureaucratic edicts. But it is a goal that requires active intervention by the revolution on a number of fronts: most immediately measures to free women from domestic servitude, but also, and over a longer term, the encouragement of new forms of communal life. Beams has nothing to say about future forms of the family except that they “will develop on the basis of the constantly evolving forms of economic and social organization which will arise in socialist society.” This is a truism: the family will change because society will change. The whole point of socialism, however, is that for the first time in history human beings will *consciously direct* those changes, including in the family. Again, what is notable here is the passivity of Beams’s approach: one is tempted to describe it as a kind of socialist ‘laissez-faire’.

Though clearly the freeing of women from domestic drudgery and the burden of childcare is directly bound up with the economic restructuring of society, these problems won’t disappear on their own either. It needs to be added that policies on these issues can play a major role in developing socialist consciousness – that is, before the revolution – because of their deep impact on everyday life. To take one obvious example, daycare is an absolute scandal in bourgeois society – for everyone but the wealthy the cost of daycare is a crushing burden, assuming that one can even find room for one’s child in a space that isn’t a firetrap. Few issues could bring home more graphically the superiority of a socialist economy than the demand for access to free, quality daycare as a right of every child. But if we imagine a vast expansion under socialism so that daycare becomes universally accessible, then this in itself becomes a bridge to collectivizing family life. The same is true for the setting up of collective kitchens and laundry facilities. Indeed, there already exists a ready-made model for collective kitchens in that exemplar of contemporary capitalism – the fast-food restaurant. Socialist literature that speaks to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 57-8.

issues like these, that takes an everyday feature of life like the local MacDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken and turns it into an object lesson in socialism by showing how, once corporate profit is no longer a factor, the lives of millions of families can benefit from food that is nutritious, as well as being fast and good-tasting – that kind of literature can have a significant impact on class consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

All that being said, however, a collective family isn't just the nuclear family plus daycare or a collective kitchen. There are deep sexual and emotional bonds between lovers, and between parents and children that must also be accommodated within a collective family. In that sense the collective family doesn't abolish the nuclear family but transcends it in a dialectical sense, i.e. it preserves romantic love and parental love while doing away with the repressive relationships and social alienation that make family life such a misery in bourgeois society. But of course this isn't preservation like an insect in amber: love too will evolve. The whole point of the collective family is to make it possible for both children and parents to break out of what Wilhelm Reich once called 'family-itis', that stifling atmosphere of emotionally overloaded and compulsive family ties that breed so many deep and abiding psychological problems. It hardly requires any far-fetched 'utopianism' to see the need for children to have strong emotional bonds to a network of 'mothers' and 'fathers', while retaining an especially close relationship to one or two. Indeed, this need has been evident for so long now that a number of attempts at collective family life were made even within bourgeois society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the best known being the Israeli kibbutzim. As I'll get to in a moment, similar attempts were made in the Soviet Union.

As to romantic love, one of its defining features (as Freud noted) is the intense desire to shut out the rest of the world so as to be completely alone with one's lover; and one could add as a consequence of this the common tendency for love to be a zero sum game, whereby falling in love with one person means falling out of love with someone else. Again, one doesn't need to engage in wild speculation to see that the 'edge' of obsessiveness and desperation that characterize love today will abate in a world where people are raised in collective families, and in a culture that doesn't repress and/or fetishize sexuality.

Of course such changes cannot be imposed on anyone, but this doesn't define the limits of socialist action. In *Problems of Everyday Life*, Trotsky discusses the importance of encouraging model "collective housekeeping units" which group together "the most enterprising and progressive families," and he quotes the Bolshevik public health commissar Nikolai Semashko about the value of these model communities as "practical propaganda." Trotsky goes on to say that "for a thought-out scheme, initiated from above, the time is not yet ripe," which obviously implies that eventually a time would be ripe, probably for some form of planning that went beyond the level of isolated models to the setting up of communities.<sup>12</sup> The point is that even where state measures cease, socialist

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<sup>11</sup> These brief remarks are only suggestive and can't do justice to the contradictions of the fast food industry under capitalism, which Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* has done much to bring to light. But it is evident from that book (and the recent hit documentary *Supersize Me*) that it is only because of capitalism that fast food has to equal junk food.

<sup>12</sup> *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 42-3.

leadership doesn't, that it isn't just a matter of letting things 'evolve', but of making use of a variety of approaches to achieve the final goal. In this case, the approach harkened back to the old utopian socialist collectives, a 'negation of the negation' in dialectal parlance – the return of utopian methods within the context of a mass social revolution.

(The terrible material conditions the Bolsheviks had to work under never gave much room for these model collective families to grow, and with the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy they were suppressed. For a rare and insightful discussion of these collectives, see Wilhelm Reich's "The Struggle for a 'new life' in the Soviet Union," usually printed as part of the volume *The Sexual Revolution*. Reich, who based this work on his own observations during a visit to the Soviet Union in the late Twenties, makes the point that these collectives suffered not only from the lack of material resources but also from a lack of theoretical understanding, particularly about the nature of sexuality. One might say that their problem wasn't having too many 'prescriptions', but rather having too few.)

Given everything that has been said so far, it should be evident that socialists *should have* a great many things to say about the family – from programmatic demands to fight backwardness and sexual oppression to educational material about the goal of a collective family and the nature of personal life under socialism. And never has there been a greater need for this material than now. The nuclear family today is in an advanced stage of disintegration, something that even the professional liars of the mass media have to admit to, and no one within the entire spectrum of bourgeois public opinion has anything to offer except platitudes about 'family values' along with lots more of the economic oppression and social and moral degradation that is destroying the fabric of family life in the first place. Under these conditions, socialists should be taking every opportunity to bring our goals to public attention, including the new kind of family life that would be possible in a society finally free of class oppression. This is why Beams's approach to these issues is so wrong-headed: it cuts off any consideration of the socialist future when that kind of vision could prove invaluable in promoting socialism as a great political and moral ideal.

Finally, let me address Beams's philosophical criticism. According to him, anyone who thinks that the overthrow of capitalism is "not sufficient to do away with social backwardness" is rejecting materialism, because such a position must mean that this backwardness is not only a product of social environment but that it is to some extent inherent in the working class. First, it needs to be said that if this is right, then Lenin and Trotsky were idealists because they plainly didn't believe that backwardness would disappear on its own, they believed instead that it had to be fought using 'all the might and means' of the revolution. The problem here is that Beams's argument is based on a mechanical notion of materialism, one that conceives of individual psychology as little more than a direct reflection of external reality. Trotsky painted a much more complicated picture when he came to consider the changes in the Soviet family after 1917: "In regard to family relations and forms of individual life in general, there must also be an inevitable period of disintegration of things as they were, of the traditions inherited from the past which had not passed under the control of thought. *But in this*

*domain of domestic life the period of criticism and destruction begins later, lasts very long, and assumes morbid and painful forms which, however, are complex and not always perceptible to superficial observation.*"<sup>13</sup>

If this is true of traditions handed down through generations, it is also true of the internalized past within each individual, particularly those painful feelings that have been repressed into unconsciousness but that still exert a powerful influence on the shape of the individual's character (or rather, exert such an influence precisely because they have been repressed). There is nothing idealist about this; on the contrary, it would be idealist to suppose otherwise, i.e. that the past simply vanishes and that the mind is largely transparent, which would mean that human beings are essentially empty ciphers. (An image that comes to mind here is the title character in Woody Allen's movie *Zelig*, who fits effortlessly into every social context because he has only a shadow existence.) Of course this does not mean that mental life or the sway of tradition is impervious to social reality; the point here is that the relationship is a complicated one because these are not aspects of life governed by reason, and so change is much slower and much less noticeable than is the case with conscious thought, and even when change does come, it can assume unexpected and unintended (e.g. "morbid and painful") forms. And nowhere does this past weigh more heavily than on the most intimate human relationships.

This has nothing to do with any notion that backwardness is inherent in the working class: the repressed feelings in the unconscious aren't the product of genes but of lived experience, especially of childhood, and traditions are bound up with the historical forms of development of the family and of social life generally. In other words, backwardness isn't biology but a congealed, unexamined past. But just because it isn't biology does not make it any less real, any less powerful, or any more likely to disappear on its own. So it is entirely appropriate to warn that without a *conscious social intervention*, backwardness will persist and perpetuate itself. The content of that intervention is what this discussion is about – the fight against sexual oppression and the socialist transformation of the family, since the only way to address problems at the root of human personality is to change the way human beings are brought up.

(As to Beams's claims that my views express "hostility" to the working class, that they bear the "hallmark" of "petty bourgeois socialism" etc, all this denunciation is based on my supposed belief in the inherent backwardness of the working class, a belief invented by Beams. Denunciations of this sort amount to nothing more than a form of name-calling, and as such represent an abuse of Marxism.)

#### 4. Vanishing of the utopian spirit

There is an old line of argument that goes: everyone has a philosophy, and even if you think you don't have one, this is only because you've never consciously thought about the one you have. The same can apply to vision in a revolutionary movement: there is always a vision, but so long as it remains unacknowledged and therefore unreflected

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 38, emphasis added.

upon, it becomes a vision *by default*, i.e. one that uncritically absorbs assumptions from the prevailing ideology. And not surprisingly, the prospect such ‘vision’ opens up is never that of a brave new world but of an ‘ideal’ version of the present world, minus its worst abuses but retaining many of its essential features. The place of utopia becomes a blind spot.

But this sort of political myopia is a general affliction. In the last two decades in particular, utopian thought has been marginalized almost to the point of extinction. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ‘the end of history’ was proclaimed, that is the end of any possible future outside of capitalism. After 9/11, we now have ‘the end of irony’, which is to say the end of official tolerance for any sort of oppositional stance, no matter how minimal or half-hearted. And then there is ‘the end of the meta-narratives’ proclaimed by post-modernism, which dissolved knowledge and truth into solipsistic relativism. The upshot of all of these ‘ends’ has been the end of hope, of any widespread sensibility that the world can be significantly different than it is.

A few years ago, the left-wing social historian Russell Jacoby published an important book on this subject, titled, appropriately enough, *The End of Utopia*. Sketching out his theme, he explains: “We are increasingly asked to choose between the status quo or something worse. Other alternatives do not seem to exist. We have entered the era of acquiescence, in which we build our lives, families and careers with little expectation the future will diverge from the present. To put this another way: A utopian spirit – a sense that the future could transcend the present – has vanished.” Jacoby immediately feels compelled to specify what he means by utopian because the word “today connotes irrelevancies or bloodletting. Someone who believes in utopias is widely considered out to lunch or out to kill.” That in itself says a good deal about the contemporary zeitgeist. He then provides a serviceable definition of utopia – “a belief that the future could fundamentally surpass the present . . . , the notion that the future texture of life, work and even love might little resemble that now familiar to us . . . , the idea that history contains possibilities of freedom and pleasure hardly tapped.” He adds: “This belief is stone dead.”<sup>14</sup>

A good example of this malaise is the ideology of multiculturalism. “Multiculturalists see only culture and hardly attend to economic imperatives. Yet how can culture subsist apart from work and the production of wealth?” The moment that economics enters the picture, it becomes evident that most cultures “rest on the same infrastructures,” that cultural pluralism doesn’t correlate to any “economic pluralism.” But nobody in the field discusses this: “The economic structure of society . . . stands as the invariant; few can imagine a different economic project. The silent agreement says much about multiculturalism. No divergent political or economic vision animates cultural diversity. From the most militant Afrocentrists to the most ardent feminists, all quarters subscribe to very similar beliefs about work, equality and success. The secret of cultural diversity is its political and economic uniformity. *The future looks like the present with more*

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<sup>14</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*, pp. xi-xii.

*options*.”<sup>15</sup> This last remark captures concisely the narrowed horizons and debased hopes that are endemic in contemporary culture.

Jacoby’s specialty is the academic intelligentsia, but the relevance of his theme goes far beyond that layer: among other things, it casts a revealing light on the politics of the radical left. As it so happened, several months after the publication of his book, the anti-WTO demonstrations took place in Seattle, marking the emergence of the anti-globalization movement as a political force. It might have seemed that this development called for some qualification of the ‘end of utopia’ thesis, but instead it amounted to a confirmation. In defining itself as ‘anti-globalization’ or ‘anti-capitalist’, the movement backhandedly acknowledged its lack of coherence about what it was fighting *for*. To be sure, it was a movement full of youthful energy and progressive instincts: those who took to the streets were clearly looking for a way out of the social impasse of capitalism, and far from taking the economic structure of society for granted, they made it their central concern. But none of this automatically led to a revival of utopian spirit; indeed, pretty much from its inception the movement fell prey to reactionary ideas, notably the uncritical identification of globalization with globalized capitalism, which bred illusions in national capitalism and hence the nation-state as a supposed bulwark against globalization. ‘Anti-capitalism’ turned out to be something of a misnomer since it was only anti-certain-kinds-of-capitalism, i.e. the MacDonald’s and Starbucks variety. But defending the ‘home-grown’ brand as preferable to its globalized competitors is the kind of dead-end choice Jacoby was talking about, i.e. “between the status quo and something worse.” The notion that neither the local coffee shop nor the Starbucks are the limits of human possibility, or that besides capitalist rapaciousness a globalized economy might also contain a new basis for global solidarity of the oppressed – that ideas like these receive no public attention whatsoever attests to the vanishing of the utopian spirit.

(In her recent book, *Fences and Windows*, Naomi Klein, one of the leading voices in the anti-globalization movement, makes a virtue out of this lack of vision: “[W]hen critics say that protesters lack vision, they are really objecting to a lack of an overarching revolutionary philosophy-like Marxism, democratic socialism, deep ecology or social anarchy. That is absolutely true, and for this we should be extraordinarily thankful.”<sup>16</sup> She goes on to claim that “rather than one solution, there are thousands, slowly coalescing into an alternative economic model.” But on the evidence, all that is “coalescing” out of this eclecticism is a politics of the lowest common denominator, one that can easily be co-opted by the establishment.)

Things aren’t any better when it comes to groups that are avowedly socialist. In the plethora of tendencies that constitute the leftovers of the Sixties radicalization, one finds all sorts of programmatic statements and demands, but almost nothing about what socialism would mean. A typical example is a pamphlet called *The ABC of Socialism*, put out by the International Socialists in Canada. In sixty odd pages and eleven chapters, it covers a wide range of topics from the unions to racism to sexual liberation to students, Quebec, the NDP, etc. It has a chapter on ‘what is a socialist revolution?’ (which is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 39-40, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows*, p. 26.

mostly about what it isn't, i.e. Stalinism), and one on 'why we need a revolutionary party'. But there is nothing – not a chapter, not even a few paragraphs – on socialist society. And yet this is a recruitment pamphlet whose ostensible purpose is to win people to ... socialism! The word is there in the title and in the name of the group, but as an ideal to inspire workers, as a goal that is passionately espoused and that informs every policy and campaign – socialism doesn't exist.

The most we are told is that “all the objective, material conditions exist today for a world without hunger, poverty or oppression,” and that we need to replace the profit drive of capitalism “with a world driven by a different motive, the satisfaction of human need.”<sup>17</sup> This is generic ‘anti-capitalism’ (fittingly enough the cover is a shot from Seattle), and there isn't much, if anything, here that many liberals or social democrats would object to. Being against hunger, poverty and oppression hardly distinguishes one as a revolutionary, and as for changing ‘motives’, this is so vague a formulation that it could easily pass (perhaps intentionally so) for the liberal banality about the need for greedy souls to undergo a change of heart, like Ebenezer Scrooge. In the absence of any discussion about what socialism is for, about the far-reaching transformation of social life that it would bring about, the basic message of this kind of ‘anti-capitalism’ is not a call for a new world but a plea to make the present one a better place. Not surprisingly, then, the message is also ‘non-prescriptive’, and along much the same lines that Beams argues: the IS makes a point of emphasizing its belief in “socialism from below,” and so presumably anything resembling a socialist program or vision would pre-empt the masses. But these people are also believers in ‘pressure from below’, claiming that one of the tasks of militants in the unions is “to pressure union leaders to represent rank and file interests.”<sup>18</sup> It doesn't take a lot of political insight here to connect the dots: these appeals to ‘below’ become a cover for opportunism, since the less that is said about socialism, the less this jeopardizes the niche this group has made for itself as a ‘left’ faction within the labor bureaucracy. It would also jeopardize their relationships with the various identity politics movements – i.e. black nationalism, feminism, gay liberation – whose whole perspective is geared to achieving a future that “looks like the present with more options.”

But opportunism is always rooted in political pessimism, the adaptation to ‘practical realities’ inevitably expresses the abandonment of revolutionary ideals, the vanishing of utopia. Eventually even the idea of revolution becomes hollowed out: we are told, for instance, that “revolution is not about one big bang, or a single push, that changes one regime to another,” but rather that it “involves a prolonged period of economic, social and political crisis.”<sup>19</sup> This is presented as the view of Marx and Engels, but that is an obvious distortion. Classical Marxism certainly conceived of revolution as a prolonged period of crisis, but it also understood that within each such crisis there is always a climactic moment, a “big bang,” when the working class needs to seize power and when it needs a leadership willing to do that – a leadership that hasn't existed in the great majority of revolutionary crises of the past century. To take the ‘bang’ out of revolution is to obscure the break that separates the future from the present. Instead, revolution

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<sup>17</sup> Abbie Bakan, *The ABC of Socialism*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

becomes merely a generalized crisis, a relatively seamless (and painless) transition from one world to another, as in the reformist ideal of evolutionary socialism. But we know how this story ends – not with the emergence of a new world but with the endless extension of the old one. And for the masses it isn't even the old world with more options, but with *less*. Those who oppose utopianism in the name of 'realism' always end up as the worst sort of utopians, pinning their hopes on the truly impossible dream of a capitalism 'with a human face'.

## 5. Vision by default: democracy and work

The International Committee isn't the IS, but it would be facile to suppose that the revolutionary movement is entirely immune to the ideological pressures that manifest themselves in a crude and therefore relatively transparent way in the middle class radical milieu. Given the anti-utopian zeitgeist, to brush aside socialist policies and vision as prescriptive means leaving oneself open to a 'vision by default', one that inevitably tends in the direction of "the present with more options." And that is evident from a number of Beams's remarks. For instance, there is the statement: "Government of the people, by the people and for the people will become a reality for the first time." This may be a great ideal, but it has never been the Marxist ideal – which isn't a government of any kind, no matter how democratic, but the *abolition* of the state. (One is reminded here of Oscar Wilde's acerbic comment: "High hopes were once formed of democracy; but democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people."<sup>20</sup>) Even in the transitional period after a revolution, when a state will continue to exist, socialism will mean a radical transformation of democracy: the vast apparatus of state repression – police, courts, military – will be taken apart, and 'representative' pseudo-democracy will be replaced by direct democracy. (These are, of course, the lessons – embodied in the socialist 'prescription' of the dictatorship of the proletariat – which Marx drew from the experience of the Paris Commune.) In other words, democracy will cease to be windowdressing for the dictatorship of the wealthy few that it is within capitalism, and become instead the dictatorship of the great majority against this minority of oppressors. It is hard to understate the magnitude of this change: this is a democracy that would be unrecognizable to anyone alive today. But when presented in terms of the most famous stock phrase of bourgeois democracy, it becomes all too recognizable – not as anything radically new but as an expansion of the democracy we already know.

Another glimmer of this 'vision by default' comes in Beams's remarks on work in the initial WSWS article. Given that this was a response to a reader's questions about life under socialism, it was remarkable that he had nothing to say about reduction of the workday, i.e. about freedom from the curse of toil, which is nothing less than the centerpiece of human liberation under socialism. Instead, he focuses on productivity and technology: with the information revolution, it will be possible for people in socialist society to "develop their capacities to the maximum" because this will mean that "productivity is developed to the greatest extent." Beams sees this as merely a reformulation of the *Manifesto*'s famous line about socialism being "an association in

<sup>20</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" in *De Profundis and Other Writings*, p. 30.

which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” but as I pointed out in my previous letter, he actually inverts the meaning here by shifting the emphasis from human development to productivity. Of course productivity and efficiency are not irrelevant, economic life will not disappear under socialism, but the purpose of socialism is not more productivity but *an end to the tyranny of economics over human existence*. For all his expertise on economics (or perhaps because of it), Beams cannot see the wood for the trees. Fundamentally, Marxism is not an economic theory but a *critique* of political economy, one made from the standpoint of the deeply humanist values expressed in the Marxist theory of alienation. In the absence of utopian vision, those values inevitably get obscured.

This is a familiar pattern. In a postscript to his great biography of William Morris, E. P. Thompson raises “the whole problem of the subordination of the imaginative utopian faculties within the later Marxist tradition,” which he sees producing a tendency to fall back “again and again into the ‘common-sense’ or habitual values of the host society” (i.e. what I have been calling here ‘vision by default’), and he makes mention of one such common sense value that Marxists are especially susceptible to – “the Utilitarian’s earthly paradise – the maximization of economic growth.”<sup>21</sup> What makes this attractive is that it looks so scientific and objective, but like bourgeois economics (itself the offspring of utilitarianism), it is a rationalization for alienation. A socialist vision, as opposed to a utilitarian one, subordinates productivity to human development, and that means support for ideas that often run directly counter to the maximization of economic growth, ideas like ‘the right to be lazy’. Paul Lafargue’s defiant little pamphlet on the subject, however, has been all but ignored within the Marxist tradition, which itself says something about the lingering influence of utilitarian ‘common sense’ on that tradition.

*The Right to be Lazy* (1880) is a passionate denunciation of the work ethic, of the misery and ruination that comes from a lifetime of being a beast of burden. “In capitalist society work is the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity,” and later Lafargue calls work “the most terrible scourge that has ever struck humanity.” He calls on the proletariat to “proclaim the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and more sacred than the anemic Rights of Man concocted by the metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution.” He demands that work be restricted to no more than three hours a day, “reserving the rest of the day and night for leisure and feasting.” Work, he envisions in socialist society, “will become a mere condiment to the pleasures of idleness.” Terms like laziness and idleness obviously rub utilitarian sensibilities the wrong way, which was Lafargue’s intention, though this also makes it easy to dismiss his work as a defense of ‘couch-potato-ism’. But seeing as his exemplars of ‘laziness’ were people like Aristotle and Plato, Phidias and Aristophanes, it is quite obvious that Lafargue’s isn’t an argument for doing nothing, *but rather for doing what you want*. The right to be lazy is really the right to leisure, the right to a life where the great majority of time is devoted to developing oneself as a human being.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Postscript: 1976,” in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 792.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy*, chapters 1, 2, appendix. This work is available on-line at [www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue).

Lafargue sounds a note almost never heard within Marxist literature, which tends to treat ‘labor’ as sacrosanct, often not making any distinction between toil, i.e. work imposed by economic necessity, and the kind of work that is freely engaged in out of interest and pleasure. It is a note, however, that runs right through the popular folk tradition, as in the hobo’s heaven described in the American folk ballad “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” (itself a variation on the age-old theme of the land of Cockaigne, El Dorado, etc.) a place where free food and drink abound, all “the cops have wooden legs” and “Where they hung the jerk/That invented work.” Mainstream Marxism has a distinctly tin ear when it comes to understanding mass consciousness on this issue. To state the obvious, the great majority of humanity work only because they have to; their real life, i.e. the meaningful part of their existence, only begins when work ends. This doesn’t change the objective significance of one’s class position, but it makes a huge difference as to how the individual worker understands his life, including his work. Marxists are quick to present themselves as defenders of the right to work, and of course this is a legitimate demand against unemployment. But we have virtually nothing to say about the long-term goals of socialism, which are not about the right to work (Lafargue in fact called his pamphlet “a refutation of the Right to Work”), but about the right to be *free* of work, something which taps into a much deeper aspiration of workers – and especially of young workers – than the immediate need for a job.

(In an 1884 lecture on “Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil”, William Morris covered some of the same ground as Lafargue, but developed the theme in a somewhat different direction. For Morris, the opposite of toil isn’t laziness but [as the title indicates] useful work, though the latter incorporates “hope of rest” as one of its essential characteristics, along with “hope of product” and “hope of pleasure in the work in itself.” From Lafargue’s [and Marx’s] standpoint, toil could never be entirely eliminated, some measure of it would still be imposed by economic necessity, but the objective of socialism was to reduce this to an absolute minimum. Morris wants to transform even this minimum. If toil were brief, if everyone could work at a variety of jobs, if workplaces were pleasant environments and if one were confident of the usefulness of the work one was doing – then toil would no longer be the bane of one’s existence, and as such it would cease to be toil as we understand it today, even though this would still be work imposed by economic necessity. This picks up on ideas that go back to the utopian socialists, especially Fourier, and there are echoes of this in Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* where he talks about “the abolition of labor,” though fundamentally Morris is generalizing on his own experience in the Arts and Crafts movement. There are some remarkable passages in this lecture, including the ideas of “sham wealth” and “false demand” which anticipate consumerism, and at the very least, the key distinction Morris makes between useful work and useless toil should be axiomatic in socialist literature. Instead, Morris suffers from even more neglect than Lafargue within the Marxist tradition.)<sup>23</sup>

Also in this context it is worth citing a remarkable passage from the *Grundrisse*, which shows that Lafargue’s ‘utopianism’ was very much in line with Marx’s own thinking.

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<sup>23</sup> William Morris, “Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil” in *Signs of Change*. This lecture is available on-line at [www.marxists.org/archive/morris](http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris).

The passage is a consideration of what happens after capitalism, when ‘economy of labor-time’ is no longer the criterion of wealth: “As soon as labor in its direct form ceases to be the principal source of wealth, labor-time ceases, and must cease to be the measure of wealth, and therefore exchange-value must cease to be the measure of use-value. The surplus labor of the masses ceases to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the leisure of a minority ceases to be the condition for the development of the general capacities of the human mind. Thus there collapses production based on exchange-value, and the immediate process of material production loses its sordid and contradictory form. *The free development of individuals, not the shortening of necessary labor-time in order to create surplus labor [becomes the aim of production]; it is thus now a matter of reducing to the minimum the necessary labor of all society, so as to make possible the artistic, scientific, etc., education of individuals through the leisure and resources thus created.*” When the masses appropriate their own surplus labor and necessary labor time will be determined “by the needs of the social individual” rather than the profits of the ruling class, then the development of the productive forces will “increase so rapidly that the leisure of all will increase despite the fact that production will be directed towards increasing the wealth of all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all the individuals. *Thus it will no longer be labor-time that will be the standard of wealth, but leisure.*”<sup>24</sup>

True wealth is leisure – this affront to utilitarian common sense is at the heart of the Marxist vision of freedom. Nor is this far from the notion of progress contained in Baudelaire’s famous remark that “true civilization consists not in gas, not in steam, nor in turning tables, but in the diminution of the traces of original sin.” In a world where leisure is the standard of wealth, ‘original sin’ – i.e. surplus repression and guilt – will no longer mutilate psychic life.<sup>25</sup>

## 6. Vision by default: the environment and social equality

Work is not the only area where an underlying utilitarianism has had a debilitating effect on the orthodox Marxist tradition. This is also evident on the environmental crisis, or rather in how little Marxists have to say about it, apart from critical attacks on middle class movements like the Greens. And yet few issues demonstrate more graphically the destructiveness and bankruptcy of capitalism: when sunshine becomes a carcinogen and parents have to worry if their children get too much fresh air, then it is hard not to feel that something is terribly wrong with the state of the world. Every ecological disaster – oil-coated coastlines, ozone holes, cities literally choking to death from smog – is potentially a powerful argument for socialism, but only in the context of a coherent vision

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Ernest Mandel, *Marxist Economic Theory*, p. 679, emphasis added. Martin Nicolaus gives a somewhat different translation of this passage in his edition of *Grundrisse*, pp. 705-6 and 708.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, p. 81. The term “surplus repression” is taken from Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*. The distinction – an indispensable one for any Marxist conception of psychology and human nature – is between the basic repression that is necessary for the socialization of children and the surplus repression that is imposed by the demands of class oppression, i.e. the added psychic toll that makes human beings acquiesce to spending their lives as beasts of burden.

of socialism that shows how a new harmony with nature is bound up with the ending of class oppression. Instead, environmental issues get tacked on as an afterthought, something that will be dealt with, whenever and however, once capitalism is gone.

The underlying problem here is that the environmental crisis demands a rethinking of some fundamental aspects of economic life, not only about the social relations of production (i.e. property), but also about the productive forces. Socialism is not just the familiar industrial world bequeathed to us by capitalism plus social ownership of the means of production. Human needs now become the determining factor in production, but those needs are rooted in nature, and so the needs of nature also assume a vital importance. Indeed, this way of conceiving the problem is still one-sided because nature is seen in a passive way, as having significance only to the extent that it is useful to humanity, instead of being seen as a living system of which humanity is itself an integral part. We become free not by escaping nature but by recovering it and recovering our place within it. This will entail reimagining many things – where and how we work, where and how we live, and how we move from place to place.

It will also entail a critical examination of technology – and, frankly, given the slaughter now going on in Iraq for control of oil, it is hard to see how the forms of technology can be neatly separated from the crisis of capitalism. To be sure, Marxists have been right to insist that in capitalist society the primary problem is not technology itself but the social uses to which it is put. But this distinction is not absolute, a point made by Istvan Meszaros in his book on the Marxist theory of alienation. Commenting on a passage from a letter by Marx where he first made this distinction between technology and its socially determined application, Meszaros writes: “This distinction, however, cannot mean that technology itself is *totally* neutral in this respect, for all determinants are also themselves determined. Technology is neutral *in principle*, but a given form of *established* technology is not. Every form of technology has its limits not only in the quantity of its products but also – and this is the relevant point here – in the *quality* of human needs it is best suited to satisfy. This implies the danger of distorting the whole range of human needs in the direction of the ‘minimum resistance’, or the ‘optimal allocation of human resources’ etc., which in its turn – since consumption reaches back to production – can again enhance those potentials of the given technology which in the first place tended to produce seriously distorting affects.”<sup>26</sup>

When we look at the automobile as a prime example of established technology, it is surely legitimate to raise the question as to whether we haven’t reached – or indeed gone well beyond – its limits as a technology best suited to meet human needs, especially if we conceive of the latter as incorporating the needs of nature. It is common knowledge that an electric car has been feasible for decades, but the economic interests of the auto and oil industries have prevented it from being produced. Hence the distortion of human needs, as Meszaros indicates, because economic pressures make it easier (‘minimum resistance’) to maintain an established technology than bring in a better one. Or to put this another way: it isn’t that capitalism gives people what they want so much as making

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<sup>26</sup> Istvan Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, p. 247, emphasis in the original. The letter referred to is from Marx to Annenkov, 28 Dec. 1846.

people want what it has to give. A cleaner car is still a car, however: it would change nothing insofar as traffic jams and urban congestion are concerned, the absurdity of a population spending long hours immobilized in machines meant to move them places. Obviously an important part of the solution is a vast expansion of mass transit, but inevitably the nature of the city itself needs to be rethought.

(A recent article in *The New York Times* cites some facts which help put the whole problem of cars and urban congestion into perspective. In 1977, the average speed of a car in central London was 12 miles an hour, “or a little faster than the top running speed of a domestic pig.” By the turn of the millennium, that speed had dropped to less than nine miles an hour, “meaning that car travel through Britain’s capital was generally as slow as by coach a century ago.” In New York City, the average traffic speed is even slower – seven miles per hour. Over a million cars a day crowd into Manhattan, and the result is a startling regression in terms of the human need for transportation. One notable example is the Brooklyn Bridge: back in 1907, when it was being used by trolleys as well as cars, it was carrying 426,000 people a day, whereas “now, with space only for cars, it carries far less than half that number and is often jammed.”<sup>27</sup> Even from a utilitarian viewpoint, this is insane.)

Moreover, we need to consider the nature of technology on a global scale: would, for instance, socialism mean that everyone in the world would have a car? This point is taken up in a recent book by an American academic Joel Kovel: “Are workers – not just in the industrial West, but also in China, India, Indonesia and so on, as required by the internationalist ethos of socialism – to have more cars, even ecologically better cars, without further deterioration of ecologies? Questions like this scarcely arise in socialist discourse, which, however much it may surpass capital morally and economically, has significant trouble going beyond capital’s fatal addiction to growth ... We should seek not to become larger within socialism, but more *realized*. Bach did not quantitatively expand music, making it louder and more insistent like degenerate forms of rock music that mirror capitalist relations; he rather saw more deeply into its possibilities and realized them. So would it be expected for an ecological society, where the ideal of growth as such simply needs to be scrapped. *Sufficiency* makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks health care or succor in old age. This can be done at a fraction of the current world output, and would create the ground for ecological realization.”<sup>28</sup>

I think there are some important truths here, despite the large objections that can be raised to Kovel’s left-Green ‘ecosocialism’. First, the needs of nature cannot be infinitely reconciled with the utilitarian paradise of maximum economic growth: to sustain a level of economic activity that would provide a car for everyone in the world would have a devastating ecological impact. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this paradise is no paradise at all: it is the all-too-common counterfeit of bourgeois society that passes off *more* as equal to *better*. The whole appeal of consumerism and the American Dream rests on this illusion. I would argue with the term ‘sufficiency’ because it is suggestive of a

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<sup>27</sup> Randy Kennedy, “The Day The Traffic Disappeared,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, pp. 207-8, emphasis in the original.

bare-bones existence, whereas the standard for socialism has to be a life free of economic worry. But the underlying point still holds: there is no reason why such freedom requires endless economic growth. This does not mean a rejection of technology or a reversion to primitivism. The point is rather that, for the first generations after a revolution – whose priorities at any rate will be the elimination of global hunger, poverty and disease – the emphasis will be not so much on technological change as on consolidation, on sorting out what best meets human needs and what works best ecologically. This does not mean the end of progress, but a different kind of progress – one that is measured by human fulfillment and by an increasingly creative dialectic with nature. And out of that, inevitably, new forms of technology will arise, though these will have nothing of the frenetic character of market-driven changes that are the norm under capitalism.

Finally, there is the issue of social equality. As a rallying cry against social polarization this is indispensable, but a rallying cry isn't the same thing as a vision. Much the same point can be made about democracy – these are means to an end, not the end itself. The final goal of socialism is a liberated humanity envisioned in the old utopian communist slogan 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'. This is a goal that transcends equality, which as Marx pointed out, "is still constantly stigmatized by a bourgeois limitation," i.e. it still bears the vestiges of a society based on relative scarcity because it levels unequal individuals to an equal standard.<sup>29</sup> The aim of socialism is freedom from all such standards, no matter how equal or fair; it is the bringing into being of a society where, again, the determining factor in life will not be economic necessity but human development. And that development will necessarily be as different – and therefore as unequal – as human beings are. It is the bourgeois stereotype of socialism that presents it as a leveling of all individual differences to a gray uniformity. In fact the real enemy of individualism is capitalism, as Wilde observed: "The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is. Private property has crushed true Individualism, and set up an Individualism that is false." It is only socialism that will bring about the flowering of "true, beautiful, healthy Individualism" because "nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols of things."<sup>30</sup> This will be a true individualism because it will no longer come at the cost of oppressing others and of spiritually disfiguring or debasing oneself.

Of course social equality is an essential part of the struggle for socialism that will make possible this burgeoning of true individualism, but they are not the same thing, and the more that we lose sight of that distinction, the more we run the risk of political disorientation, i.e. of turning means into ends. And it is hard to see how that danger can be avoided when we say virtually nothing about the goals of socialism, and even declare that saying nothing is a matter of principle. Socialism is not just more democracy, more equality, more productivity. To say *only* that is to present socialism essentially as 'more of the same', the world that we already know but with "more options," (although in the case of productivity, 'more' would strike most workers as *less*, since productivity is associated for them with the misery of alienating labor). In other words, it means obscuring the enormous change in lived experience that socialism will bring about, the

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<sup>29</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 568.

<sup>30</sup> "The Soul of Man under Socialism," pp. 25-6.

promise of a new life that more than anything else can make socialism into a great beacon of hope.

Beams dismisses such concerns. He claims that only middle class radicals would find a vision “of social equality and genuine democracy” insufficiently inspiring. Actually, as my comments on the IS were intended to show, radicals by and large share Beams’s sort of vision. And there is a disturbing implication in this remark – that workers wouldn’t be interested in visions and ideals, that this is the kind of thing that only radicals would bother about. This is the voice of ‘common sense’, and one can only wonder whether behind the invective about middle class radicalism there doesn’t lurk a middle class stereotype about the working class. I don’t think it is hard to find evidence of an interest in, even a hunger for, utopian vision within the masses. As Ernst Bloch showed in *The Principle of Hope*, traces of utopianism can be found in a huge range of social, psychological and cultural phenomena, in everything from daydreams to fairy tales to dancing, from science to science fiction, from high culture to popular culture. This is especially evident in the various trends within youth culture, from the swing culture of the Thirties (which in Germany became associated with defiance of Nazism) to the counter-culture of the Sixties to punk to the rave culture of the Nineties. Here is an observation from a recent account of rave culture in Britain: “[D]uring the first enthusiasm for it, rave culture was claimed by its supporters to break down barriers of race, class and sexuality. Some people hoped that the sociability of the dancefloor – the hugs, the bottles of water passed around, the shared smiles – would carry over into more pluralist and tolerant attitudes in daily life.”<sup>31</sup> Of course these hopes were soon dissipated, which is a familiar pattern in bourgeois society: embryonic yearnings of the kind Bloch uncovered end up being distorted and manipulated, drawn into all sorts of political, religious and cultural deadends, precisely because they are embryonic and therefore barely conscious of themselves as yearnings for something deeper than an immediate wish. But that pattern is inevitable only to the extent that bourgeois culture retains its longstanding monopoly over dreams and hopes for a better life, i.e. as long as the social horizon is limited to “the present with more options.” That monopoly will only be broken when socialism *as an ideal* is able to capture the imagination of the masses, as was the case at the turn of the past century, before the terrible betrayals of socialism by Social Democracy and Stalinism.

In any case, Beams is convinced that his approach “will prove immensely attractive” to workers, and in essence this is its principal justification. But one hardly needs the test of time to prove this: most workers, and many middle class people for that matter, *already* support “social equality and genuine democracy.” But they aren’t socialists – which means that support for this ‘vision’ doesn’t lead on its own to socialist consciousness. One could amend this to say that it isn’t democracy and equality themselves that give rise to socialist consciousness, so much as demonstrating to workers that these goals aren’t viable under capitalism. But then it becomes crucial to demonstrate what sort of society they would be viable in. There is a fundamental problem here that cannot be passed over. There is no such thing as unconscious freedom. Freedom isn’t something that one arrives at by a happy coincidence, having set out on an entirely different road (i.e. the road of

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<sup>31</sup> Dave Haslam, “Strangeways Here We Come,” in *London Review of Books*, 23 Jan. 2003, p. 29.

‘the present with more options’), anymore than freedom can be the inevitable outcome of blind necessity – the outcome, that is, of unfreedom. The Marxist dictum says that freedom is the *recognition* of necessity, which means the struggle for freedom requires a leap, a breakthrough, of consciousness. And you cannot generate socialist consciousness by hiding away socialism.

## 7. The making of a taboo

A historical overview of the relationship of Marxism and utopianism is beyond the scope of this essay. But it is possible to say a few things about the origin of the anti-utopian bias evident in mainstream Marxist thought, including in the views expressed by Beams. The root of this problem (as of many others) can be traced back to the period of the Second International, i.e. roughly from the Paris Commune to the outbreak of the First World War. This is a fascinating and also a troubling period in the history of Marxism. For the first time ever Marxist parties become mass movements and one can speak of the flourishing of a socialist culture within the working class. Marxist orthodoxy assumes its essential shape in this period, and not coincidentally this is also when Bernstein’s reformism emerges, the prototype of all the later revisions of Marxism that have had such disastrous consequences for the fate of socialism. Nothing, of course, could be more anti-utopian than the Bernstein motto: ‘The movement is everything, the goal is nothing.’ And not surprisingly, one of the principal charges that Bernstein leveled against his orthodox opponents, and against Marx himself, was that they were closet utopians. It is Bernstein who pushes the counterposing of utopianism and science to its logical conclusion. “One has not overcome Utopianism,” he declares, “if one assumes that there is in the present, or ascribes to the present, what is to be in the future.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, it wasn’t just fantasies about perfect societies *but the entire future* that was now out of bounds, as far as Bernstein was concerned. The moment you step beyond the present, the moment you engage in any anticipation of the future, let alone holding out a vision of a better world – at that moment you have left science and entered the forbidden territory of utopianism.

But even the most narrowly defined science would have trouble with this, since the purpose of most research is precisely to predict the future. What this particularly undermines is any notion of lawful development, especially of history (and in this sense one can see Bernstein as a forerunner of the attacks on ‘historicism’ by Karl Popper, another staunch opponent of utopianism). But for Bernstein (as for Stalin), theory was very much an afterthought: his interests were ‘practical’, as his methods were narrowly empirical. Even his famous call to go ‘back to Kant’ wasn’t so much conscious partisanship of the ideas of that philosopher (about which he knew very little, as Plekhanov pointed out), as a convenient slogan for attacking the Hegelian dialectic, that gigantic affront to common sense. And it was common sense that was at the core of Bernstein’s challenge to Marxism. Marx had predicted certain things, those things hadn’t come to pass, hence Marxism itself, or at least large parts of it, had to be scrapped. A note

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<sup>32</sup> E. Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, p. 219.

written on the back of an envelope and found among his papers after his death contains the whole basis of Bernstein's 'critique' of Marxism: "Peasants do not sink; middle class does not disappear; crises do not grow ever larger; misery and serfdom do not increase."<sup>33</sup> His attack on these revolutionary 'dogmas' of Marxism captured perfectly the viewpoint of the layer of union bureaucrats and SPD parliamentarians who had emerged during decades of economic expansion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and who ran the vast party apparatus, virtually a state within a state. These were people whose entire political life was bound up with 'practical' issues, and the more they turned into 'stakeholders' in the system, the more the official party doctrines of revolution and socialism struck them as impractical, i.e. 'utopian'. (A small but telling indication of this was the way revolution came to be referred to by the SPD leadership as the great *Kladderadatsch* – which translates as the great crashing mess, which as one historian notes, is "not exactly the way to describe what you passionately long for."<sup>34</sup>) Indeed, one of Bernstein's principal arguments in *Evolutionary Socialism* was that the party should stop pretending to be something that it wasn't, i.e. a revolutionary movement, and openly declare itself for what it really was, a party of reform. (And one of the ironies of this history is that the bloodbath of the First World War, which exposed the utter vacuousness of Bernstein's critique of Marxism, also brought about the open triumph of his perspective within Social Democracy.)

The orthodox reply to Bernstein, notably by Kautsky, challenged the accuracy of Bernstein's facts or argued that they didn't prove what he claimed they did. This was legitimate insofar as it defended the scientific validity of Marxism, but even in this respect the issues tended to be cast in narrowly empirical terms. What no one questioned was Bernstein's essential premise that utopianism and Marxism were mutually exclusive. Indeed, Kautsky was as eager as Bernstein to disavow any connection to utopianism. "I am thoroughly convinced that it is not our task to invent recipes for the kitchens of the future," he once declared,<sup>35</sup> which was essentially how the entire party leadership viewed the issue. Indeed, one historian writes about it being "one of the universally respected taboos" within the party that no one talked about what would happen after the revolution, and by way of illustration points out that "between 1882 and 1914, the party journal *Neue Zeit* (edited by Kautsky) contained only *one* article dealing with future society and that this was Kautsky's own discussion of *past* millenarian societies."<sup>36</sup> Whenever the issue came up in public debate, party leaders tended to deal with it facetiously (as in Kautsky's remark about recipes), if at all. Yet this was such a glaring gap in SPD politics that even a reactionary like Bismarck could make political hay out of it. "Bismarck mocked [SPD leader August] Bebel with an invitation to an evening's conversation where he 'would hope at last to learn how Herr Bebel and his comrades really imagine the state of the future for which they would prepare us by tearing down all that exists, that we cherish, and that protects us.'"<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Utopianism and Marxism*, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Sebastian Haffner, *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918/19*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> K. Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*, Part II: "On the Day after the Revolution." The work is available online at [www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky](http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky).

<sup>36</sup> *Utopianism and Marxism*, p. 38, emphasis in the original. The historian cited here is J. P. Nettl.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-9.

It was this unreality of the socialist future *within* socialist ideology that was crucial to the effectiveness of Bernstein's position. Unlike Kautsky and company (but like Bismarck), Bernstein had a vision of the future: his attack on socialist utopianism really amounted to another kind of utopianism – that of a bourgeois liberal. In that sense, his claim that nothing from the future could be ascribed to the present can be also be read as a claim that there is nothing in the future *except the present* – in other words, 'the present with more options.' The attenuation of class contradictions, the growth of a prosperous middle class, the expansion of democracy – Bernstein took trends (as he saw them) from a temporary period of bourgeois prosperity and expansion, and simply extended them into the future to arrive at the familiar reformist utopia of evolutionary socialism. Bernstein's 'science' was nothing more than a rationalization for his reactionary form of utopianism, his way of disqualifying any notion of the future that was at odds with the endless perpetuation of the present. And since his orthodox opponents shared his antipathy to *socialist* utopianism, they had virtually nothing to offer as an alternative – and eventually many of them, including Kautsky and even Plekhanov, ended up with a view of the future much the same as Bernstein's.

(In passing, it is interesting to note that the taboo against utopianism seemed to provoke, as taboos usually do, a fascination with what was forbidden. The SPD leaders were drawn to utopian subject matter: Kautsky wrote a book on Thomas More, Bernstein wrote a pioneering work on radical political thought in the English Revolution which focused attention on the importance of utopian communists like Gerrard Winstanley, and Bebel wrote a book on the life and theories of Fourier. It was almost as if one could indulge a guilty pleasure so long as the brand of utopianism one was dealing with was safely in the past. Bebel, however, was something of an exception, as I'll get to shortly.)

The only Marxist who discerned what was at stake in Bernstein's attack on utopianism was Rosa Luxemburg. To be sure, this didn't make her a defender of utopianism in any conventional sense, but in her brilliant polemic against Bernstein, *Social Reform or Revolution*, she underscored the central importance of the socialist future in Marxist theory. Indeed, for her this was just what allowed Marx to unlock the mysteries of capitalism, as she explains in the following passage: "But what precisely is the magic key which enabled Marx to open the door to the deepest secrets of all capitalist phenomena and solve, as if at play, problems that were not even suspected by the greatest minds of classic bourgeois political economy, such as Smith and Ricardo? Nothing other than his conception of the whole capitalist economy as an historical phenomenon – not merely, as in the best of cases with the classical economists, concerning the feudal past of capitalism, but also concerning the socialist future. The secret of Marx's theory of value, of his analysis of money, his theory of capital, his theory of the rate of profit, and consequently of the whole existing economic system is – the transitory nature of the capitalist economy, its collapse: thus – and this is only another aspect of the same phenomenon – the final goal, socialism. And precisely because, *a priori*, Marx looked at capitalism from the socialist's viewpoint, that is, from the historical viewpoint, he was enabled to decipher the hieroglyphics of capitalist economy. And because he took the

socialist viewpoint as a point of departure for his analysis of bourgeois society, he was in a position to give a scientific base to socialism.”<sup>38</sup>

In a sense, Luxemburg is making the obvious point that Marx first had to be a socialist before he could develop scientific socialism. Bernstein had raised a similar point, but as part of his indictment of Marxism: “Marx had accepted the solution of the Utopians in essentials, but had recognized their means and proofs as inadequate.”<sup>39</sup> According to Bernstein, the whole problem was that Marx held on to these socialist ideals even when his science contradicted them, and so his work was fatally flawed by this residue of utopianism, (which Bernstein was claiming to rescue it from). But Luxemburg turns the tables on this argument: without those socialist ideals, Marx would never have been able to turn socialism into a science. It was because his social vision extended beyond the horizon of class oppression that Marx could see capitalism as a product of history rather than the incarnation of reason (or of human nature) that bourgeois ideology made it out to be. It needs to be emphasized that Luxemburg’s point is not merely the commonplace one that Marx took an historical approach to political economy, which is typically how the matter is viewed by Marxists. The classical political economists, as she notes, had already adopted such an approach as regards the past, specifically feudalism. What was different about Marx – and what made it possible for him “to decipher the hieroglyphics of capitalist economy” – was that “*a priori*” he “looked at capitalism from the socialist’s viewpoint,” in other words that *his historicism encompassed a future beyond capitalism*.

## 8. A brief history of happiness

It is worth dwelling on this point because it has important implications for our understanding of Marxism. Here is how Marcuse, in his book on Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, contrasts Marxism with Hegelian philosophy: “[I]n Hegel’s system all categories terminate in the existing order, while in Marx’s they refer to the negation of this order. *They aim at a new form of society even when describing its current form*. Essentially they address themselves to a truth to be had only through the abolition of civil society. Marx’s theory is a ‘critique’ in the sense that all concepts are an indictment of the totality of the existing order.”<sup>40</sup> The idea that intrinsic to Marx’s categories is “a new form of society” even when they are being used to describe existing reality is essentially the same point that Luxemburg was making. Marcuse draws particular attention in this regard to Marx’s theory of alienation, basing himself on Marx’s early writings, especially the *1844 Manuscripts* (which hadn’t been published in Luxemburg’s time). Like many other commentators, he notes that the theory of alienation is (implicitly and at times explicitly) a theory of what an *unalienated* world would be like. “An ‘association of free individuals’ to Marx is a society wherein the material process of production no longer determines the entire pattern of human life. Marx’s idea of a rational society implies an order in which it is not the universality of labor but the universal satisfaction of all individual potentialities that constitutes the principal of social organization. He contemplates a society that gives to each not according to his work but his needs.

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<sup>38</sup> R. Luxemburg, *Social Reform or Revolution*, in *Selected Political Writings*, p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> *Evolutionary Socialism*, p. 210.

<sup>40</sup> H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p. 258, emphasis added.

Mankind becomes free only when the material perpetuation of life is a function of the abilities and happiness of associated individuals.”<sup>41</sup>

What is interesting here is how Marcuse rereads the relationship between materialism and idealism on this basis. Marxist theory is in “full contradiction to the basic conception of idealist philosophy” because unlike the latter the Marxist standpoint is predicated on human happiness. “The idea of reason has been superseded by the idea of happiness.” (To avoid unnecessary confusion, this is not a renunciation of reason but just the opposite. In dialectical philosophy, ‘superseding’ does not mean canceling out. Rather, to cite Marcuse’s definition of the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*, it is an “abolition [that] also carries the meaning that a content is restored to its true form.”<sup>42</sup>) Marcuse goes on to say that historically, because of the division between mental and manual labor in class societies, “the life of reason was a life of higher dignity. It dictated individual sacrifice for the sake of some higher universal independent of the ‘base’ impulses and drives of individuals.” From this idealist standpoint, reason and happiness were mutually exclusive. “Hegel had emphatically denied that the progress of reason would have anything to do with the satisfaction of individual happiness ... Reason could prevail even though the reality shrieked of individual frustration: idealist culture and the technological progress of society bear witness of that.”

But “the idea of happiness” – i.e. the aim of an unalienated existence – could not be reconciled with this reality. This produced a break with idealism, but it also produced a break with the old materialism. “Historical materialism appeared at first as a denunciation of the materialism prevalent in bourgeois society, and the materialist principle was in this respect a critical instrument of exposé directed against a society that enslaved men to the blind mechanisms of material production. The idea of the free and universal realization of individual happiness, *per contra*, denoted an *affirmative* materialism, that is to say, an affirmation of the material satisfaction of man.”<sup>43</sup> This affirmation restores materialism, indeed reason as a whole, “to its true form,” but by the same token this means that reason which isn’t infused with the purpose of bringing about human happiness, reason which has lost sight of the place of utopia on the map of the world, is reason that inevitably degenerates into rationalizing, into adapting in one way or another to a reality ‘shrieking’ of misery and frustration. Utopia isn’t the antithesis of reason but its essential purpose, its *telos*.

Given the complexity of the issues involved, these remarks are obviously a bare outline, but a coherent discussion of utopia isn’t possible without some discussion of the question of happiness. The word itself poses a problem since it covers very different kinds of experience. Classical philosophy already drew a distinction between hedonism – simple, usually bodily, pleasures – and eudaimonism – the far more complicated feeling that one is living a good or worthy life. Hedonism is really about joy, which is to say an inherently ephemeral feeling, whereas eudaimonism, though more lasting, is also an experience which necessarily encompasses no small measure of suffering, i.e. of unhappiness from a

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 293.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp. 293-4, emphasis in the original.

hedonist standpoint. It would seem obvious, then, that a Marxist conception of happiness is fundamentally eudaimonist, which is certainly true, but the problem is more complicated than that. Eudaimonism directly ties happiness to virtue: the happy life is the virtuous one. But historically virtue has been a code for repression. This is evident enough in traditional Christian theology but the classic statement of virtue as repression is the prototypical and grimmest of all utopias, Plato's *Republic*. The social hierarchy of this ideal state based on slavery is rooted (or justified) in a hierarchy of the soul. The latter is divided into desire, courage and reason, and one's place in the social order reflects the predominance of one or another of these forces: 'base' people (slaves, peasants) are dominated by desire whereas in the caste of guardians (i.e. the ruling elite whose souls, according to the 'Noble Lie', are made out to be of 'gold') reason must prevail. Virtue in this context is a rigorous code for the repression of desire, for holding in check the dark, animal nature of man, a code that must be enforced with eternal vigilance. This vision of ruling class communism (in the sense that the elite live in a barracks-style communalism) is a utopia of ascetic monasticism, one that derives, as Ernst Bloch points out, from Plato's idealization of Spartan militarism.<sup>44</sup>

Aristotle's conception of happiness marks an important departure from Plato because for him virtue is no longer a transcendent good but rather a matter of practical judgment, of how best to achieve a desired end. The emphasis in Aristotle is on moderation, most famously in his doctrine of the golden mean, where virtue is seen as finding the right balance between a deficiency of a quality and an excess of it, e.g. courage as the mean between rashness and cowardice, pride as the mean between vanity and humility etc. The idea of virtue – and certainly the specifics of some of the virtues Aristotle discusses – seem anachronistic to a modern reader. But what remains of great significance is Aristotle's linking of virtue and happiness to human nature: virtue is the highest expression of human capacities, and happiness is the composite of the virtues, i.e. a life dedicated to flourishing as a human being. An enquiry into happiness is therefore an enquiry into what it means to be human.

Aristotle's own answer is that it is reason that makes us distinctively human, and so for him a life of reason – i.e. of contemplation – is the highest happiness, the most fulfilling life. The conception of human nature, as the earlier quote from Marcuse indicated, ultimately stems from the division of mental and manual labor within class society: the counterposing of reason to 'base' or 'animal' instinct is fundamentally a truncated and repressive view of human nature, albeit in Aristotle's case one that is more moderate than in Plato.

(To call it repressive is not the same as calling it reactionary: in their time, both Plato's and Aristotle's understanding of human nature mark a major advance over the amorphous and largely mystified conceptions that preceded them. Indeed, the notion of a psychological life really begins with them and the *Symposium* remains one of the most profound insights into the nature of love ever written. There is an important truth in the equating of repression and human nature; as Marcuse writes near the opening of *Eros*

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<sup>44</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, v. 2, p. 488.

*and Civilization*: “According to Freud, the history of man is the history of his repression.”<sup>45</sup> But the history of man also includes the history of man’s domination over man. In other words, repression encompasses more than just that taming and shaping of instinctive impulse that is essential for the individual to become part of any human society; it also encompasses that extra, or as Marcuse termed it, surplus repression necessary for imposing the inhuman burden of class oppression. However, it was only possible to disentangle these two aspects of repression when the ending of class oppression became a living possibility.)

Aristotle also makes an important distinction between mere self-control and virtue: the latter isn’t a matter of grimly doing one’s duty despite one’s wishes and desires; the virtuous person actually takes pleasure in virtue, and he is able to do so because he has been educated to think that way (though inconsistently Aristotle also suggests that virtue is only possible for those who are innately good). In any case, from a modern perspective, it is evident that this doesn’t do away with repression, it merely turns education into the means for imposing it.

But irrespective of that, to link eudaimonism to human fulfillment has vast implications for social life because it calls for a social order capable of fostering human fulfillment. But it was impossible for Aristotle to conceptualize those implications. Thus, he writes, when contrasting hedonism and eudaimonism, that “anyone at all, even a slave, no less than the best person, might enjoy bodily pleasures; but no one would allow that a slave shares in happiness, if one does not also allow that the slave shares in the sort of life needed for happiness. Happiness, then, is found not in these pastimes, but in the activities expressing virtue.”<sup>46</sup> Virtue and happiness are therefore the prerogative only of the upper classes, of those who do not have to slave for a living. Which means, as Marcuse noted, that eudaimonism “reconciles particular happiness with general unhappiness.”<sup>47</sup> But this aristocratic conception of virtue is plainly ideological, born of a world where life was inconceivable without slavery. In different historical circumstances, there is no inherent reason why the slaves should not have – or rather should not take for themselves – a share in human life and happiness.

In the later Western tradition, the link between virtue and happiness becomes increasingly tenuous. Instead, the association of virtue with asceticism in Christian morality becomes overwhelming. Happiness seems to be banished from human existence: life this side of the grave is nothing more than a vale of tears. But the desire for happiness lives on underground, both in the naively hedonist daydreams of the Land of Cockaigne (or the German *Schlaraffenland*) within medieval popular culture as well in the various Adamite religious heresies that spring up, preaching a prelapsarian lifestyle including a free sexuality untainted by sin. (This social impulse receives its most extraordinary artistic expression in Hieronymus Bosch’s masterpiece *The Garden of Delights*).

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<sup>45</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Vintage edition), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Terence Irwin, p. 283

<sup>47</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “On Hedonism,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, p. 168.

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is a eudaimonist vision in which, as with Aristotle, the emphasis is on moderation, which is why the book, along with the countless imitations it spawned over the next two centuries, have been termed "utopias of calm felicity."<sup>48</sup> But More is only able to reconcile virtue and happiness because of a largely benign view of human nature, one in which passions are taken to be naturally mild and gentle.

"Tranquillity is the highest good," writes historian Frank Manuel of More's ideal world. "Since only moderate pleasures are deemed to be pleasures at all, there is nothing to disrupt the order of calm felicity."<sup>49</sup> As Fourier's modern-day biographer Jonathan Beecher explains, "Although most of the thinkers in this tradition rejected Christian asceticism and the mortification of the flesh, they still espoused the contemplative ideal and defined happiness in terms of moderation, balance and self-discipline."<sup>50</sup> In effect, happiness is achieved in these utopias not by gratifying human needs and desires, but by diminishing them. Indeed, More even allows for the existence of slavery in his utopia, despite his eloquent indignation at the social injustice of his time.

With the Enlightenment, the link between virtue and happiness becomes all but severed. Kant, for one, takes it virtually as a given that happiness and morality have nothing to do with each other. At root this expresses the transformation of happiness into a private, purely subjective matter, which reflects the dissolution of traditional social bonds, and along with them any meaningful context for shared feelings within a community. As social relationships become reduced to a cash nexus, happiness becomes each individual's 'own business'. It is a measure of how far along this process already was in Kant's time that the only way he could imagine virtue and happiness ever coinciding was through divine intervention. Just as indicative of this growing atomization of society is the fact that while utopias don't disappear in this period, their influence does. In that emblematic document of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopedie*, there is not even an entry for utopia, and the entry on happiness treats it from the standpoint of individual psychology, i.e. solely as a subjective experience. According to a summary of it in a comprehensive survey of Western utopian thought, the article "holds forth on the insipidness of an enduring state of pleasant tranquillity that is not interrupted by intoxicating transports of pure passion. Unfortunately the human condition cannot tolerate the perpetual infiltration of violent pleasures, and the most perfect happiness we can hope to achieve in this life is a state of tranquillity broken here and there by a few pleasures."<sup>51</sup> It is notable that More's ideal of calm felicity is now, two centuries later, merely insipid, and this reflects a deeper understanding of human nature, evident especially in the writings of Diderot and Rousseau. But it is also notable that this knowledge doesn't seem to lead anywhere except back to calm felicity, only this time not as some brave new world but as the best of a bad lot.

(This broad generalization needs some qualification. With Rousseau, who is not only an Enlightenment *philosophe* but also the first great Romantic, the remarkable emotional honesty of his works seemed to call for a world where intense feelings no longer had to

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<sup>48</sup> Frank E. Manuel, "Toward a Psychological History of Utopia" in Frank E. Manuel, ed. *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, p. 72.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, p. 298.

<sup>51</sup> Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, p. 424.

be repressed. As the Manuels explain: “A society that would make all its members feel with the same passionate sincerity as Rousseau’s characters [the reference is to his hugely popular novel *La Nouvelle Heloise*] – that was the ideal state of man. Rousseau summoned all Frenchmen to express their natural emotion. Hundreds of letters addressed to him bear witness that he had come to represent an emotional emancipation. It was now allowable for everyman to utter what he felt in his sentiments of love. Why not in his feelings of rage against the aristocratic evils of society?” In other words, with Rousseau a link is established between psychological and social repression that would later be central to the thought of the utopian socialists. Some mention should also be made of the Marquis de Sade who pushes the hedonist argument against repression to its logical extreme: it is a virtue is to ‘give in’ to one’s nature, i.e. to indulge whatever desires or fantasies one may have, and a vice to repress them. In effect, Sade takes the purely subjective notion of happiness as far as it can go. He even tries – albeit somewhat ironically – to develop a utopian vision on this basis, but his chief legacy is the unintended one of demonstrating that this relentless pursuit of pleasure can only produce a nightmare world of dehumanization.)

The emergence of utopian socialism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century marks a profound change in the history of happiness. First of all, utopia ceases to be a fantasy island that is literally nowhere and becomes instead a possible future. According to the historian Frank Manuel, these utopias would be more appropriately called “euchronias”<sup>52</sup>, i.e. the dream is to be realized in time. Which meant that this was a dream to be realized *by everyone*: there could be no reconciliation of subjective happiness with general unhappiness. To cite Beecher’s biography of Fourier again: “He was simply unable to accept human suffering as a necessary part of things. And he was unable to accept doctrines that purported to explain or justify suffering as anything else but specious rationalizations. On the contrary, he argued, humans were meant to be happy. A rich and full life was the ‘destiny’ of every man and woman, and the only limits that could legitimately be placed on an individual were those inherent in his or her instinctual endowment. It was his conviction that both physical suffering and emotional deprivation were *avoidable* that gave Fourier’s critique of civilization its extraordinary urgency and comprehensiveness.”<sup>53</sup> This is true of Saint-Simon and Owen as well.

But what was most jarring was that this was not a dream of moderation and tranquillity, but of the fullest possible development of the passions. Happiness, writes Fourier, “consists in having many passions and many means of satisfying them.”<sup>54</sup> In a sense this is hedonism, a term that Fourier for one was not averse to, but it is very different than the hedonism of Sade because it is not longer a purely subjective pursuit of pleasure and it is also far from uncritical about the nature of pleasure itself. For Sade every desire was natural, but for Fourier, many desires were themselves the products of repression: as he said with specific reference to Sade, “This taste for atrocities is simply a consequence of the suffocation of certain passions.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Fourier’s thought is remarkable for its insight into the mechanism of repression: “It is easy to compress the passions by

<sup>52</sup> “Toward a Psychological History of Utopia,” p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, p. 219.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, p. 95.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu, eds. *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier*, p. 353.

violence. Philosophy suppresses them with a stroke of the pen. Locks and the sword come to the aid of sweet morality. But nature appeals these judgments; she regains her rights in secret. Passion stifled at one point reappears at another like water held back by a dike; it is driven inward like the fluid of an ulcer closed too soon.”<sup>56</sup> This is a clear anticipation of Freud a century later. But this insight into psychological repression is also an insight into social repression: unless “sweet morality” and the state violence that enforces it are ended, then the full development of the passions are inconceivable.

In a deeper sense utopian socialism is a return to eudaimonism, to the exhilarating notion that happiness – understood as human flourishing – is the purpose of life. But the insight into repression casts a critical light on eudaimonism as well as on hedonism: for the first time ever, the question of happiness is posed not in terms of diminishing human nature to adapt to an oppressive social order but just the reverse – the social order has to be changed to allow for the fullest development of human nature. But this reversal is only possible because of a profounder understanding of what it means to be human. The rigid counterposing of reason and passion, and along with that the sweeping rejection of ‘base’ instincts and desires (i.e. everything to do with what Freud would later call the unconscious) are now seen as the hallmark, not of humanity, but of inhumanity. Indeed, for the Romantics, contemporaries of the utopian socialists, passion was what defined humanity as against the deadening reason – the soulless utilitarianism – of bourgeois society. And passion was itself reason, as William Blake understood – “A tear is an intellectual thing” – only this meant a very different kind of reason, one that could only seem completely mad to a world dominated by the reason of the marketplace. Of course Blake is a prime example of this, but so were all the leading utopians; indeed, Fourier was so notorious as a ‘madman’ in his day that sometimes when he went walking in the Palais Royal in Paris children would taunt him: “*Voilà le fou: riez!*” – Here is the fool – laugh at him.<sup>57</sup>

Above all, utopian reason was ‘mad’ because it anticipated a state of society where the division of mental and manual labor would finally be overcome. For Fourier variety was not a mere spice of life but an essential requirement of human nature, what he called the “butterfly passion,” and the world he envisioned was the complete opposite of bourgeois society where almost all individuals are straitjacketed into doing the same job endlessly for their entire lives. Marx and Engels picked up on this idea, making it central to their understanding of alienation in bourgeois society and also their vision of communism: “[A]s soon as the division of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, p. 238.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 486.

cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fishermen, shepherd or critic.”<sup>58</sup>

(Interestingly, this passage and a related one about art have been criticized on the grounds that Marx is valorizing dilettantism<sup>59</sup>, but such criticism is only indicative of the problem the passage is addressing. This is the same cast of mind that has turned ‘amateur’ into a derogatory term. Dilettantism is, in any case, only the flip side of the rigid specialization of bourgeois society, and in communist society, both will disappear. It isn’t just that people then will be able to master a variety of skills and professions, it is also that they will no longer think of the various fields of human knowledge as rigidly divided in the way that we do in our present culture. It is only in a world where the tension between the personal and the social interest is almost unbearable that individuals can only manifest their creativity by constraining themselves to a narrow range of experience. But even within class society there are no lack of culture heroes – e.g. da Vinci, Blake, Goethe – whose pursuit of truth couldn’t be neatly confined within one ‘specialty’.)

In any case, with the utopians, particularly Fourier, the problem of happiness is no longer a matter of whether or not to ‘give in’ to one’s desires but of acknowledging them as part of one’s *human* nature and integrating them into a fully developed personality. An excellent example of this comes up in Fourier’s treatment of sexuality. In his utopian socialist communities known as phalansteries, everyone would be entitled to a satisfying minimum of sexual pleasure, and he referred to this as the “sexual minimum,” considering it as much of a necessity to happiness as a guaranteed minimum standard of living. This doctrine, and indeed the entire book in which he expounded his sexual theories, *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux* (The New World of Loving), so scandalized his followers that they suppressed it, and it was only published in the 1960s.<sup>60</sup>

But the Victorian squeamishness of the Fourierists, predictable though that was, missed the essential point their leader was making: he had proposed the sexual minimum not because he was obsessed with sex, but rather because he was trying to find a way to overcome the almost universal obsession with it that bourgeois morality had brought about. As Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu explain in their useful introduction to a volume of selected writings of Fourier: “By guaranteeing orgasm, Fourier sought to liberate men from an unhealthy fixation on coition. If Fourier implied that the act of love is basically a discharge of pent-up energy or the satisfaction of a physiological need, it was because he looked beyond orgasm to a world of more subtle and complicated human relationships which were themselves made possible only if sexual appetite were appeased. The goal of the sexual minimum, then, was a higher order of erotic pleasure. Fourier’s apparent naturalistic reductionism was actually intended to overcome the tyranny of the genitals, not by falsely pretending to transcend sexuality, but by incorporating it in all amorous relationships.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 53.

<sup>59</sup> See S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, p. 114.

<sup>60</sup> Fourier went along with this suppression in the vain hope that appearing more respectable would make it easier for him to win over bourgeois public opinion. The book came to light through the efforts of a French scholar who became interested in Fourier through the work of surrealist Andre Breton.

<sup>61</sup> *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier*, p. 56.

Leaving aside the feasibility (or desirability) of guaranteeing orgasm, there remains a vital point here: ending the tyranny of the genitals is as essential as ending the tyranny of economics if a genuinely human existence is to be possible. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse would explore much the same territory, only this time incorporating the advances of Freudian psychology: his vision of a non-repressive civilization entailed a redirecting of libido to “eroticize normally non- and anti-erotic relationships between individuals, and between them and their environment.”<sup>62</sup> In communism, eros replaces cash as the primary nexus between human beings.

But there remained fundamental problems which utopian socialism didn't and couldn't address. First and foremost was an understanding of history. Unless happiness was grounded in truth, it could be little more than wishful thinking. Marxist criticism of utopian socialism rightly focused on this ahistoricism: the utopians presented themselves as individual men of genius who had fathomed eternal truths about reason and human nature, and on this basis they presumed to reorganize the world. Their appearance, as Engels noted sardonically, is “a mere happy accident.” They “might just as well have been born 500 years earlier, and might then have spared humanity 500 years of error, strife and suffering.”<sup>63</sup> Leaving aside the isolated, though sometimes brilliant, insights that both Saint-Simon and Fourier were capable of, to the extent that they tried to present an overall theory of history, it was to see the latter as little more than a catalogue of errors which would naturally be overcome now that the truth had been revealed. So the role of necessity in history – i.e. what accounted for the form of these ‘errors’ and above all for the evolution of one set of ‘errors’ out of another – was left completely obscured.

It was actually Hegel who first raised this criticism, not about utopian socialism but about eudaimonist philosophy. As Marcuse explained: “Hegel fought against eudaimonism in the interest of historical progress.” When he famously remarked that, “History is not the stage of happiness,” Hegel was objecting not to happiness as such but to a viewpoint that tried to reconcile individual fulfillment with social misery. As Marcuse noted, we commonly speak of “human happiness,” and this very term points beyond personal contentment or mere subjectivity.<sup>64</sup> To break through this limitation required having an objective basis for happiness, and that could be only be found in the realm of society and history.

The other major problem has to do with the nature of desire itself. The subjective approach to happiness accepts desire uncritically and considers the problem of happiness solely as a matter of gratification. Such an approach, as Marcuse states, “is unable to distinguish between true and false wants and interests and between true and false enjoyment. It accepts the wants and interests of individuals as simply given and as valuable in themselves. Yet these wants and interests themselves, and not merely their gratification, already contain the stunted growth, the repression, and the untruth with which men grow up in class society.”<sup>65</sup> As I noted earlier, Fourier for one already

<sup>62</sup> *Eros and Civilization*, p. ix.

<sup>63</sup> *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> “On Hedonism,” pp. 160-1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.

recognized this as a problem, but without a scientific understanding of class relations, his perception was necessarily limited. In any case, it would have been impossible for him, or for Marx for that matter, to have anticipated the extent to which false wants and interests generated by consumerism dominate individuals and infest virtually every aspect of social life today. One might add here that false wants tend to generate false happiness, a situation which produces increasing levels of despair and mental illness. The point here is not that there is anything wrong with wanting material objects: the happiness one can get from a comfortable home, good food or nice clothes is real enough. The point is that what is false is the endless preoccupation with such objects: happiness becomes emptied of any human content and the void is filled with possessions. It is possible to resist being dominated by these wants on a personal basis, but this sort of resistance still isn't happiness.

Happiness in the sense of human flourishing “presupposes freedom: at root, it is freedom,” writes Marcuse. And this means that the only meaningful alternative to consumerism has to be on social rather than on personal terms: “The liberation of potentialities is a matter of social practice.”<sup>66</sup> But what needs to be added is that the struggle for freedom can only be *motivated* by the promise of happiness. Thus Marxism (whether Marxists choose to be aware of it or not) is much more the *fulfillment* of, rather than a departure from, utopian socialism: it isn't that Marxism has made utopia irrelevant; quite the contrary, it is that Marxism demonstrates how utopia can come about in history. To recall an earlier quote from Marx, the fundamental difference with the utopian socialists is over means, not ends. And in this respect it is possible to speak of utopia as the ‘end’ of history, but in a completely different sense than this phrase assumed in the bourgeois triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. For someone like Francis Fukuyama, the ‘end’ of history means its termination: capitalism is all there is ever going to be, *ad infinitum*. From a Marxist standpoint, the ‘end’ of history means its essential purpose, the actualization of the possibilities inherent in it, the ages-old “dream of something” that Marx once talked about which humanity only needs to become conscious of in order to make it real. And unlike the bourgeois conception, this is an ‘end’ which is itself open-ended: a society conforming to human nature is as limitless as the possibilities within human nature.

But if Marxism shows how utopia can come about in history, the crux of that ‘how’ is the proletariat, the agent history provides for the realization of a fully human existence. But for that realization to happen, the proletariat must realize itself: it must come to know itself as a class, and more precisely as a great social force – great enough to change the world. And that can only happen if it is imbued with a great social ideal, if it passionately believes in the historical ‘end’ which it alone has the power to bring about. Hence a ‘return’ in a dialectical sense to utopianism, to a vision of a socialist future than can help bring to life the consciousness of the working class as a revolutionary force. This is a vision that rests on a scientific foundation, it is a prefiguring of possibilities inherent in the world as it is, and is thus qualitatively different from the fantasy worlds of the early socialist utopians. But it is a vision nonetheless, and its power to raise consciousness derives from the appeal it makes to imagination.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, pp. 180, 190.

In regards to imagination, it is worth bringing in here the famous passage in *Capital* about the architect and the bees: While “a bee puts to shame many architects in the construction of her cells, [...] what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will.”<sup>67</sup> Imagination, then, is the very quality that “stamps” labor as “exclusively human.” While this is hardly a definitive account of imagination, I think it is useful in this context in that it suggests some important parallels to the process of revolution: if the proletariat is ever to become the architect of a revolution, if it is ever to achieve its great historic labor of giving the “stamp” of a fully human existence to social life, then first it will have to “raise” that goal “in imagination.” Utopian vision is not an alternative to reason and science *but its essential complement*: through the image of an unalienated existence, through the popularization of a Socialist Dream, workers can find their historic purpose as a class by coming to realize that their own happiness is irreconcilable with the world as it is.

Obviously this was not how the SPD saw the issue. How then does one account for their “taboo” about discussing the socialist future? This clearly wasn’t some kind of irrational inhibition on the part of Kautsky and his comrades. They saw the case against utopianism as an essential tenet of orthodox Marxism, and they would have pointed to such canonical texts as *The Communist Manifesto* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in support of their view. And nothing much has changed in the last century insofar as this remains a tenet of Marxist orthodoxy. The orthodox standpoint is valid to the extent that the critique of utopian socialism was crucial to the project of a scientific socialism, but what it ignores is that Marxism, as I argued earlier, does not rule out utopianism in a more broadly defined sense, i.e. as an anticipation of the possibilities of human liberation rather than the invention of schemes for a perfect world. What the quote from Luxemburg tells us is that without that sort of anticipation, scientific socialism itself would never have come into existence. And as even a casual reader would know, there are such anticipations scattered through many of the best known works of Marx and Engels: the *1844 Manuscripts*, *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto*, the *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. One can also include here Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, though anticipation here takes the form of a dialectical return on a higher level of some of the features of primitive communism. In passing, it is worth noting that near the end of that book Engels mentions that he had originally intended “to place the brilliant critique of civilization scattered through the works of Fourier by the side of Morgan’s and my own,” but that he couldn’t spare the time.<sup>68</sup> It is a small but telling indication of how the utopian tradition continued to engage Marx and Engels, how for them it was not simply an empty husk that had been discarded once Marxism became a science, but that it remained an important source of ideas.

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<sup>67</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, v. 1, p. 174.

<sup>68</sup> F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, note, p. 174.

## 9. Matriarchy: discovery or invention?

Because *The Origin of the Family* raises an interesting problem about the relationship between utopianism and science, I am going to allow myself a digression here. The scientific basis of this book was the anthropological work of Bachofen and Morgan regarding matriarchal societies, which Marx and Engels saw as an achievement on a par with Darwin's. But unlike the evolution of species, matriarchy has little, if any, scientific standing today. For instance, in a recent definitive work on mothering, where one would expect considerable attention to be paid to matriarchy, the author simply states: "Indeed, outside of myth, I know of no evidence that any matriarchal society ever existed."<sup>69</sup> This seems to be pretty much the consensus within contemporary anthropology, and the only significant challenge to it comes from a notably unscientific quarter – feminist believers in 'goddess' worship. A recent book by an American academic Cynthia Eller called *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* presents a wide-ranging and (at least to a non-specialist) convincing argument as to why the evidence for matriarchy is not credible. Her argument is lent weight by the fact that she herself is a feminist and therefore predisposed to defending the existence of matriarchy, but once she began delving into the anthropological record she found that poking holes in the theory of matriarchy was "like shooting fish in a barrel."<sup>70</sup>

Eller notes that the "the scattered remains left to us from prehistoric times are open to a variety of interpretations," and while it is still technically possible that some form of prehistoric matriarchy may have existed (simply because the gaps in the record are so big that it is hard definitively to rule in or rule out anything), the truth is that the evidence which does exist points in another direction, and that the evidence advanced in support of matriarchy is either much more ambiguous than its defenders admit or else actually proves the opposite of what they claim. In fact, matriarchy, at least as contemporary feminists construe it – and, in its fundamentals, the way it is presented in the Bachofen-Morgan-Engels line of thought – is one of the least plausible interpretations of prehistory. "It does not represent historical truth; it is not a story built or argued from solid evidence, and it presents a scenario for prehistory that, if not demonstrably false, is at least highly unlikely."<sup>71</sup>

It isn't possible here to review Eller's evidence which covers the archeological and ethnographic records, prehistoric art and artifacts, as well as some insightful remarks about the dangers of reading myths or literature as history, (a notable example being Aeschylus' the *Oresteia*, which is commonly cited as evidence in 'matriarchalist' accounts, including Marxist ones). One conclusion is worth citing, however, and that has to do with the economic role of women in prehistory. Matriarchalists contend that because in hunter-gatherer societies it was women who did the gathering and foraging, and because it was their work that provided the largest share of the food, therefore the

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<sup>69</sup> Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*, p. 252.

<sup>70</sup> Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

value of their work would translate into a higher social status. But it doesn't take much reflection to see the fallacy of this claim. In the antebellum South, most of the labor was done by black slaves, but this didn't mean that "social power, authority, and respect accrue[d] to them as a result," quite the contrary. The same basic point holds true for prehistory: "those who hold power make others work for them. Economically speaking, the quickest index to social power would seem to be who is working least, not who is working most. The fact that women work harder in horticultural societies should, if anything, arouse our suspicion that these cultures are dominated by men."<sup>72</sup> And Eller goes on to draw the conclusion that while "there is no reliable connection between forms of subsistence and women's status," the "one broad pattern" that can be discerned is that women's status "is lower than men's, whatever the prevailing economy or women's specific place in it. Within this generalization, however, there is a staggering amount of variation, from vague nuances of differential personal autonomy or authority to unmistakable sexual slavery."<sup>73</sup>

From this book and from other critical studies, there doesn't seem to be much doubt that the classic Bachofen-Morgan-Engels picture of matriarchy is not tenable. (In the introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Michele Barrett reviews the factual and methodological criticism of the book, notably problematic assumptions about the sexual division of labor, about the relationship of matriliney to matriarchy, about the significance of kinship terminology and about the supposed sexual freedom of women in group marriages.<sup>74</sup>) Even if some form of matriarchy does turn out to have existed, it will probably be much less definitive than, or in other ways significantly different from, the theory as Engels presented it. In fact, Eller takes note of the work of a group of socialist feminist anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s who tried updating Engels's book, but with what she characterizes as "tepid" results: "The best these anthropologists could serve up was the notion that human beings in small-scale 'band' societies treated women and men equally, until property ownership, an incipient state, agricultural technologies, or even intergroup trade came into existence. Such a matriarchy was thin to begin with and easily gave way before the smallest signs of what we have come to think of as social progress."<sup>75</sup> This paints a very different picture than the one Engels portrays, i.e. of a vibrant matriarchy suffering a "world-historic defeat" in the transition to patriarchy.

(Though Eller doesn't mention it, one of the more ambitious works along the line of socialist feminist anthropology from this period is *Woman's Evolution* [1974], a 500-page tome by Evelyn Reed, a member of the American Socialist Workers Party and wife of leading party intellectual George Novack. Reed's book rehearses many of the myths that Eller debunks, but what is particularly striking is its biological determinism. Her basic argument is that because of their maternal instincts women possess a natural superiority over men, who are hobbled by "individualism, competition and striving for dominance over other males," and for this reason "it was the female that led the way over the bridge

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 109-10.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 112-3.

<sup>74</sup> Michele Barrett, "Introduction" (1986) to *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, pp. 13-22.

<sup>75</sup> *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, p. 35.

from animality to humanity.”<sup>76</sup> Though Reed presents this as a development of Engels, it is actually a repudiation of his labor theory of human origins because the key factor accounting for the transition from ape to human is no longer labor but maternal instinct. Resorting to biology when accounting for what makes humans distinctly human is theoretically bankrupt, and to argue for the inherent superiority of women is as reactionary as claims for the inherent superiority of men. Matriarchy becomes little more than a feminist fairy tale, whose basic message is that life was better when women ran things.)

We are left, then, with a work of Marxist science in which the science is no longer credible, and indeed, judging by what Eller says, hasn't been so for most of the past century. Obviously this wasn't Engels's intention: he was relying on the best scientific evidence available to him at the time. (However, Eller claims that “Engels was far more enthusiastic about both Morgan and the concept of matriarchy than Marx had been,” and she refers to Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* as evidence for this claim.<sup>77</sup> If this is true, then it would suggest that Engels was predisposed to believing in matriarchy, perhaps because it seemed to provide scientific confirmation of the inherent goodness of human nature, though elsewhere, e.g. his pamphlet on Feuerbach, his views seem anything but naïve on this score, as he cites with approval Hegel's critique of that cardinal tenet of the Enlightenment.) In any case, Engels's book is about more than matriarchy: it is an indictment of the oppression of women within class society, as well as an essential text on the origins of private property and the state, and as such it retains its relevance even if it turns out that primitive communism wasn't a ‘golden age’ of sexual harmony. What this would mean is that modern communism isn't so much the revival of an ancient past as the realization of an ancient dream. *The Origin of the Family* takes on a different kind of legitimacy, a utopian one. The book ends with a famous quote from Morgan: “A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past ... Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes.”<sup>78</sup> This remains valid as a vision of the future even if it may no longer be credible as an evocation of the past.

## 10. Bebel's ‘transgression’

As to the fragments of utopian anticipation scattered through Marx's writings, the American academic Bertell Ollman has shown that it is possible to bring these fragments together and reconstruct from them a relatively coherent vision of communism, albeit one that is far less structured and with many more gaps than any conventional utopia. In justifying this intellectual exercise, Ollman notes that in “an 1851 outline of what was to become *Capital*, Marx intended to present his views on communism in a more systematic

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<sup>76</sup> Evelyn Reed, *Woman's Evolution*, pp. 48, 69.

<sup>77</sup> *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, p. 194, n. 3.

<sup>78</sup> *The Origin of the Family*, p. 175.

manner in the final volume,” and he also cites a letter from Engels to Marx which talks about “the famous ‘positive’, what you ‘really’ want”, which remained among the many things Marx was never able to get to. Ollman reasonably concludes from this that “Marx’s objection to discussing communist society was more of a strategic than of a principled sort.” And he proposes a number of concerns to account for this strategic objection on Marx’s part: first, the need to distinguish Marxism, especially in its early years, from the various utopian socialist movements; second, an awareness by Marx that people tend to change their politics “generally in reaction to an intolerable situation in the present and only to a small degree because of the attraction of a better life in the future,” which meant that visions of communism would not be “an effective means to promote proletarian class consciousness”; and finally the fear of burdening his analysis of capitalism with a necessarily sketchy outline of a future society which might undermine “in the minds of many the scientific character of his entire enterprise.”<sup>79</sup>

This is a perceptive reading of Marx’s attitude, and it also suggests how the orthodox view of utopianism came about – what had been a strategic objection for Marx hardened into a dogma, a taboo, for his orthodox followers. It became a dogma because Marx’s original concerns weren’t relevant any longer, or at any rate not to the same extent as they had been during his lifetime, and yet the objection to utopianism not only persisted but became more vehement – as a rationalization for the party bureaucracy’s growing antipathy to socialism. Needless to say, a mass party like the SPD wasn’t in any need of distinguishing itself from utopian socialist sects who had completely faded out of existence decades earlier. As for utopian speculation, far from undermining the credibility of Marxism, it could have contributed to enhancing interest in socialism. There was in this period, as one historian points out, an “immense appetite for utopian speculation manifested in the overwhelming success of the German translation of [Edward] Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*.” The SPD leadership ignored this phenomenon (even though Bellamy’s book was an explicitly socialist utopia), but their political opponents on the right reacted quite differently: they “rapidly filled the vacuum with cheap novels portraying the hell of future socialist society and, even more sinisterly, developing utopian visions of strong leaders, international power and racial purity. The left thus abandoned this great reservoir of utopianism to be poisoned by the right.”<sup>80</sup>

Actually this wasn’t entirely true. There was one instance where the SPD had dipped, as it were, into this “great reservoir of utopianism,” and that was with the book *Women and Socialism* by party leader August Bebel. While its main focus (as the title indicates) was on the social problems and needs of women, the last hundred and fifty pages or so were devoted to an extensive discussion of what life would be like under socialism. (Hence, the title of an abridged version of the book put out by a Soviet publisher – *Society of the Future*). Bebel first wrote *Women and Socialism* in 1879, but kept adding material to it as it went through what would eventually be fifty editions. It proved to be incredibly popular: one historical study of workers’ libraries in Germany up to 1914 shows that “Bebel’s book was far and away the most purchased and borrowed.” The same study

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<sup>79</sup> Bertell Ollman, “Marx’s Vision of Communism: A Reconstruction,” in Seweryn Bailer, ed., *Radicalism in the Contemporary Age*, v. 2: *Radical Visions of the Future*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>80</sup> *Utopianism and Marxism*, p. 39.

cites the opinion of a contemporary political opponent of the SPD that *Women and Socialism* “had undoubtedly created a greater belief in socialism in the popular mind than Karl Marx’s biting criticism of bourgeois economics was ever able to.”<sup>81</sup>

The book still makes worthwhile reading (as do the writings of Lafargue, Morris and others in what one might call the ‘Marxist utopian’ tradition). Bebel takes due note of the standard orthodox objections (similar to Beams’s) to this sort of enterprise, i.e. that “no one can know exactly how future generations may mould their social organizations and how they will satisfy their requirements,” etc.<sup>82</sup> And he makes it clear that he is only dealing with future developments in a general way, and only to the extent that they can be understood as evolving from the analysis of class society. Having made these relatively minor qualifications, however, Bebel shows no compunction about ranging far and wide in his discussion of the socialist future. He spends considerable time on the future of work and of agriculture, reflecting the interests of the mass audience he was addressing. “It should be repeated over and over again,” he writes at one point, in a telling rejoinder to the bourgeois stereotype of socialism, “that the new society does not want to live in a proletarian way, that it demands a life fit for highly civilized people, and this for all its members, from the first to the last.”<sup>83</sup> He is not averse to discussing the quality of consumer goods or the development of fashion under socialism (“People will undoubtedly dress more practically and more attractively than they do today”), and then segues from this seemingly innocuous topic to make an important point: “This scramble and chase from one fashion to the other, and from one style to the other, reflects the nervous tension of our age most graphically. No one would want to assert that there is sense in this rushing and scurrying, or see it as a sign of the health of society. *Socialism alone will produce greater stability in society’s habits*; it will make rest and enjoyment possible and free people from the bustle and excitement holding sway at present. Nervous tension, the scourge of our age, will then disappear.”<sup>84</sup> While one can detect here, as throughout the book, the influence of the utopian socialists, especially Fourier, this is still a striking application of their ideas: long before the ‘age of anxiety’ had become a catchphrase, Bebel was offering socialism as a solution to it.

There are sections on topics one would expect (e.g. abolition of the antithesis between mental and physical labor and of the antithesis between town and country, withering away of the state, ending the oppression of women), but also on topics seldom if ever discussed in Marxist literature, such as a socialist education system, overpopulation and sexuality, the future of food preparation (“Communist Kitchen”) and even the future of viniculture! Obviously Bebel, in this one instance, had no problem with discussing “recipes for the kitchens of the future.” The section on overpopulation and sexuality bears some mention because it contains some astute observations. Against Social Darwinism, Bebel writes: “Our Darwinians are always out of luck when they begin to extend their theories to humans, because they resort to crude empirical methods and forget that although man is the highest animal, he, unlike all other animals, is versed in the laws of

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in *Utopianism and Marxism*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>82</sup> A. Bebel, *Society of the Future*, p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 31-2, emphasis in the original.

Nature and can adapt them to his own purposes and make good use of them.”<sup>85</sup> This would be a good starting point for a Marxist critique of the reductionism so fashionable in science today, especially the reduction of mental life to brain physiology. On sexuality, while conceding that this is a matter about which science in his day was still groping in the dark, Bebel does make the point that “the gratification of the sexual instinct and conception are not the same thing.”<sup>86</sup> That puts him a good deal ahead of the crude materialism that dominated conventional Marxist thinking on the subject during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a viewpoint which limited any consideration of sexuality exclusively to its relationship to reproduction. (Actually, even more common than this crude materialism was – and still is – the view that sexuality is a subject outside the proper concerns of Marxism. Many of the other subjects Bebel wrote about – from fashion to socialist education to the “communist kitchen” – would fall under a similar ban. Indeed, even some of Bebel’s subjects that were entirely in line with Marxist orthodoxy, such as the abolition of the antithesis between town and country, are no longer considered legitimate topics for discussion, as Beams has shown us.)

Bebel’s book, however, is only the exception that proves the rule, or rather the taboo. Nothing came of it in terms of any larger political orientation, despite its popularity and the obvious impact it had on class consciousness. That Bebel was himself working class, and that through his long career in the labor movement and in socialist politics he had come to know German workers and farmers probably more intimately than anyone else in the party leadership, largely explains why it was he who was responsible for this one utopian transgression. His book is full of the trials and tribulations of everyday life; it addresses workers not merely ‘at the point of production’, but in many aspects of their lives that are usually ignored as ‘unpolitical’. “An existence free of cares” is one of his section headings, and it is indicative of his sensitivity to the psychology of rank-and-file workers, housewives, seniors etc. It would be hard to think of anywhere else in Marxist literature that one might come across a passage such as this: “The position of most parents who in their old age depend on support of their children is all too familiar. And how demoralizing an influence is exerted on children, and to a still greater degree on relatives, by the hope of a possible inheritance. What base passions are awakened, and how many are the crimes that such hopes have given rise to – murder, forgery, usurpation of inheritance, perjury and blackmail.”<sup>87</sup> This evokes the lives of ‘ordinary’ people with an almost literary vividness, and so it isn’t any wonder at how popular this work became. Not coincidentally, another contemporaneous socialist utopian work, William Morris’s 1890 novel, *News from Nowhere*, had a similar fate – though it was all but ignored within the Marxist tradition, it developed a significant following in the working class, one indication of that being the British academic Harold Laski’s observation that while on a visit to the Tyneside area during the Great Depression he found copies of the book “in house after house of the miners,” even when most of the furniture had been sold off.<sup>88</sup> Given this kind of reaction, it is hard not to be struck by an anomaly: while utopianism

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 146.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>88</sup> Cited in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 816, n. 83. Laski mentions finding not only *News from Nowhere*, but also copies of *A Dream of John Ball*, another of Morris’s socialist works, in the miners’ houses.

was rejected because it supposedly imposed ‘recipes’ on the masses, it was the masses who seemed most interested in utopianism.

## 11. Class consciousness and useful dreaming

I argued earlier that utopian vision could play a crucial role in raising the consciousness of the proletariat, helping it to realize itself as a revolutionary force. I think the history of Social Democracy confirms this in a negative way: the taboo against utopianism in the SPD was an expression of the party leadership’s underlying antipathy to revolution and socialism, and therefore a hostility to developing the kind of consciousness the working class would need to bring socialism about. But Marx too had his “strategic objection” to utopianism, as Ollman put it, and one of the concerns accounting for that was that workers are more likely to change their politics because of problems in the present rather than promises about the future, so talking about the latter wouldn’t do much to promote class consciousness. Given today’s anti-utopian zeitgeist, it is worth considering whether this concern still has validity.

Ollman makes a relevant point in this regard. He writes that while “getting workers to understand their exploitation as a fundamental and necessary fact of the capitalist system ... is the ‘high road’ to class consciousness,” it is also true that “the inability to conceive of a humanly superior way of life, an inability fostered by this same exploitation, has contributed to the lassitude and cynicism which helps to thwart such consciousness. Viewed in this light, giving workers and indeed members of all oppressed classes a better notion of what their lives would be like under communism is essential to the success of the socialist project.”<sup>89</sup> I think that instead of ‘high’ or ‘low’ roads, it would be better to speak of two interdependent parts of the same struggle, but Ollman is getting at an important truth when he talks about “the lassitude and cynicism” that tend to thwart class consciousness.

Here we need to understand how the betrayals of socialism over the past century have impacted the great mass of workers. To them, it is not a matter that socialism was betrayed *but rather that it has failed*. Overwhelmingly, their image of socialism has been fashioned by the nightmare of Stalinism – police state repression, a regimented society, forced labor, food lines, pervasive misery – in short, the antithesis of “the idea of happiness” that animated Marxism. It isn’t enough, then, to focus on their exploitation under capitalism, because while they may agree about the circumstances of their own struggle, that won’t necessarily win them to socialism. Most often, in fact, it leads elsewhere – to resignation, or to the idea that the problem is the particular supervisor, company, union official etc. rather than the system. Or even if there is some acknowledgement of the systemic nature of the exploitation, the solution is typically seen in individual terms, such as finding another job or getting more training or moving to another town or even starting a business – in other words, it leads to various forms of middle class consciousness. Even the idea of betrayal doesn’t necessarily lead to socialist conclusions; if anything, it is far more likely to lead to “lassitude and cynicism,” to the

<sup>89</sup> “Marx’s Vision of Communism: A Reconstruction,” p. 38.

belief that struggle itself is pointless because the ‘big shots’ always sell out the ‘little guys’.

Obviously this doesn’t mean that Marxists should stop explaining to workers how they are being exploited or how they are being betrayed. The point is rather that such explanations on their own are not enough: if the crucial point is to convince workers of the larger social and political ramifications of their struggle – i.e. how whatever is gained or lost affects the prospects of all workers, and through that, to one degree or another, the fate of society as a whole – then this can only become evident *in light of a socialist future*. The ideology of trade unionism – with its negotiations, contracts, grievances, i.e. its endless haggling over small change – inculcates a very different view of the world, a tunnel vision that is blind to any of the broader political implications of workers’ struggles. In essence, this is just a variation on the ideology of the marketplace: workers ‘stick together’ but for the sole purpose of getting the best ‘price’ for their ‘wares’, i.e. their labor power. Within the culture as a whole, bourgeois individualism is the prevailing viewpoint, and again the thrust of this ideology is that the meaning and purpose of one’s life has nothing to do with anyone else’s (the sole exception being family), that we are all so many free floating atoms and that, to cite a famous Margaret Thatcherism, “there is no such thing as society.”

What is missing, then, isn’t just class consciousness but a sense that one’s life – and the life of one’s class – are bound up with a larger social purpose. In other words, what is missing is socialism as a mass ideal, its association in the minds of millions of workers with their hopes for a better life, with their dreams of freedom and their desire for justice. A century ago, that association was widespread, which is why there was a thriving socialist culture in the working class. A small but intriguing aspect of that culture was, of all things, *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. This point is made in a recent account of Baum’s work by Bloch scholar Jack Zipes: “When Dorothy Gale returns to Kansas at the end of her adventures in the Land of Oz, she declares that there is no place like home and appears content to be back on the farm with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. The MGM film based on *The Wizard of Oz*, with which most people are nowadays more familiar than the novel, reiterates the message about home sweet home. But it is all a lie. Dorothy does not yet know what home is, and only those readers familiar with L. Frank Baum’s fourteen fairy-tale novels about Oz know that home cannot be found in America. Home is Oz, a transcendent utopian paradise, that must be protected from America.” In a later book, the features of Oz as a socialist society are spelled out in some detail: there are no poor people and no such thing as money, people help each other freely, everyone works according to his ability and receives according to his need, there are no bosses, etc.<sup>90</sup> Another of the Oz novels, written during the First World War, includes a denunciation of militarism. Baum was not political in any traditional sense and his social background was middle class, but this makes the political subtext of his novels all the more interesting because it shows the extent to which socialism was ‘in the air’ in this period, so that when anyone, even a writer of fairy tales, dreamt of a better world, they dreamt of that world as being socialist.

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<sup>90</sup> Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, pp. 159, 179-80.

The great betrayals of socialism severed that association, and capitalism was able to fill the vacuum, with consumerism on the one hand and with the portrayal of socialism as totalitarianism on the other, epitomized by such dystopias as *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*. Indeed, the contrast between 19<sup>th</sup> century utopias and the dystopias of the 20<sup>th</sup> century says a great deal about what became of socialism in popular consciousness. This nightmare vision of socialism remains the prevailing view, and so any prospect for the revival of socialism is inconceivable without a historical reckoning with the Stalinist and other labor bureaucracies, one which exposes the great lie that equates Leninism and Stalinism and which vindicates the politics and history of the Trotskyist movement.

Here it is necessary to take issue with Jacoby who writes: “Anarchists, Trotskyists and new-leftists might despise Stalinism, but they partake in the wider left and share its fate. This is indisputable. The demise of the Soviet Union and its Communist allies eviscerates the idea of socialism. Intellectually cogent protests in the name of an unsullied socialism or ‘classical’ Marxism are both necessary and useless.”<sup>91</sup> Jacoby’s political shortcomings, as an adherent of the Frankfurt School, are on display here. First, he misses the essential point about the Soviet Union: it was far less its demise that eviscerated socialism than its prolonged existence as a Stalinist monstrosity. What is worse, he identifies the fate of socialism with the fate of Stalinism, and it would be hard to think of a more damning concession to anti-utopianism than that. This underlying pessimism, even as Jacoby is arguing against such moods, is rooted in the blind spot that all ‘Frankfurters’ have when it comes to the proletariat. In this respect, Jacoby’s views amount to standing orthodox Marxism on its head: instead of the proletariat without utopia, he gives us utopia without the proletariat. One-sidedness of either kind cannot save socialism from evisceration.

We need to patiently explain the lessons of history and we need to trust in the ability of workers to absorb them. This isn’t an empty hope: great political struggles always arouse a widespread hunger for knowledge. Moreover, we need to put the betrayals of socialism into some perspective. The socialist revolution is the greatest transformation ever attempted in history – the first time that power passes to an unpropertied class. To have expected to bring that off, on a global scale no less, without setbacks and betrayals is hardly credible. This isn’t meant to gloss over the tremendous price in death and destruction that humanity has had to pay for those defeats. It is rather to insist that socialism is not a ‘one-shot deal’, that the response to the failures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for anyone who hasn’t resigned himself to oppression is to try and try again, until we get it right.

But one has to want to try. Before workers can make their way through the tangle of socialist history in this past century, they must want to have socialism. This is the crucial gap that utopian vision – in the altered sense that I have been using here – can fill. We have to rescue socialism from its association with totalitarianism in popular consciousness, and an indispensable part of doing that has to be a comprehensive vision of the new life that socialism will make possible. Only then does the history of the past century assume its true significance, only then does the focus shift from failure to

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<sup>91</sup> *The End of Utopia*, p. 13.

betrayal, and with that the possibility of demonstrating that betrayal was not – and is not – inevitable.

It is interesting in this regard to compare two images of class consciousness, one from the dawn of the last century (when socialism was a mass ideal) and one from near its end (when it wasn't). The first is from Trotsky's *Results and Prospects*, written a year after the 1905 Revolution. In addressing a familiar argument that the working class has to regenerate itself morally before it can make the revolution, Trotsky shows that this amounts to the absurdity that workers need to have a socialist psychology before socialism exists. He distinguishes between such a psychology of altruistic high-mindedness and what he calls a "conscious striving towards socialism." He considers the latter to be the only meaningful psychological prerequisite for the revolution and he goes on to characterize it this way: "[I]n spite of his remaining philistinely egoistic, and without his exceeding in 'human' worth the average representative of the bourgeois classes, the average worker knows from experience that *his simplest requirements and natural desires can be satisfied only on the ruins of the capitalist system.*"<sup>92</sup>

While Trotsky makes this assertion as if it were axiomatic, four years earlier, in *What is to be done?*, Lenin had put forward a different view – that the most a worker can achieve based on his own experience, i.e. spontaneously, is trade union consciousness. "The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc."<sup>93</sup> Obviously there is a significant gap between this and a level of understanding that the basic needs of workers "can be satisfied only on the ruins of the capitalist system." Trotsky's remark, it seems evident, reflects the experience of the revolution he had just lived through: rather than the spontaneous consciousness Lenin was talking about, what Trotsky's "average worker knows from experience" incorporates the revolution and its political ferment, and particularly the impact of socialist ideas on the masses. In other words, such a worker has already gone an important step or two beyond trade unionism: he associates his present misery with capitalism and, above all, he understands that there is an alternative.

The second image is from the French general strike of 1995. This struggle demonstrated a remarkable degree of militancy, of class consciousness in a narrow, literal sense. And probably the highest expression of that militancy was the way the strike was run – through "general assemblies," i.e. daily mass meetings of the strikers held on each work site. This structure had come about out of justified distrust for the various union and reformist party bureaucracies, the idea being that keeping control of the strike through direct, mass democracy would prevent any sellout from happening this time. But this in turn exposed a deeper problem. (What follows is based on the reporting of the International Workers Bulletin [IWB], predecessor of the WSWS.) The meetings tended to be dominated by those forces who had a political line, i.e. bureaucrats and middle class radicals. The bureaucrats hid their organizational affiliations and tried to boost their

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<sup>92</sup> L. Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, pp. 229-30, emphasis in the original.

<sup>93</sup> V. I. Lenin, *What is to be done?*, pp. 31-2.

credibility as militants with ferocious verbal assaults on the government, none of which committed them to any serious political struggle to bring down the government. The radicals glorified the strike movement but said nothing about the role of the bureaucrats and nothing about the question of political power. One can think of these general assemblies, then, as a kind of political theater in which each of these types was playing a part that was entirely predictable from their essentially reactionary politics. But what then of the masses? At every meeting there would come a point when “the microphone was offered to anyone who wanted it. Here supposedly was democracy in action! The difficulty was that rank and file workers had little to say. They didn’t feel able to counter the union officials, or they shared a similar political outlook. Everything was taking place in front of their eyes, but the lack of a revolutionary political perspective rendered them unable to see the process of betrayal.”<sup>94</sup>

There is something missing here. No doubt the problem is the lack of a revolutionary perspective, but this becomes a circular argument: workers will only adopt such a perspective when they see that they are being betrayed by their misleaders, but since they cannot see a betrayal even when it is happening right in front of their eyes, how then will they ever come to revolutionary politics? What is missing is the “conscious striving towards socialism” that Trotsky could all but take for granted back in 1905. Indeed, as the report indicates, workers in many cases share the political outlook of the bureaucracy or else have nothing that they can articulate as an alternative. To be sure, workers are not the helpless pawns of ruling class ideology that the Frankfurt School or the Althusserians make them out to be. There is a great deal of healthy anger and skepticism towards the system that develops spontaneously, but what keeps it from turning into a “conscious striving towards socialism” is the almost universal belief that there is no alternative to capitalism. Or rather There Is No Alternative – TINA; apparently this is now such a commonplace of social and political discourse that it literally has been turned into an acronym.<sup>95</sup>

Utopian vision is crucial if we are ever to break through this impasse. In *What is to be done?*, Lenin spoke famously about the need to bring socialist consciousness to the working class. Of course he would not have thought of this in terms of utopianism, but unlike Bernstein, Kautsky et al., Lenin understood the role that vision and dreams can play in political life. This is evident from an extraordinary passage in *What is to be done?* that has received little attention in the orthodox Marxist tradition, despite the book’s canonical status. The passage comes at the end of a chapter where Lenin is envisioning the long-term impact of a revolutionary newspaper, how it can be instrumental in training a layer of working class leaders “who would take their place at the head of the mobilized army [i.e. of the proletariat] and rouse the whole people to settle accounts with the shame and the curse of Russia.” He adds: “That is what we should dream of!” This in turn provokes some mock-horror as Lenin imagines the disapproval of what today we would call a ‘politically correct’ comrade to the supposedly scandalous notion of dreaming: “I ask, has a Marxist any right at all to dream, knowing that according to Marx mankind always sets itself the tasks it can solve, etc.”

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<sup>94</sup> David Walsh, *French Workers in Revolt*, p. 38.

<sup>95</sup> See *The Enemy of Nature*, p. 253, n. 2.

After poking fun at this mechanical formalism, Lenin addresses the relationship of dreaming and politics and here he quotes at length from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literary critic and philosopher Dimitri Pisarev. “‘There are rifts and rifts,’ wrote Pisarev of the rift between dreams and reality. ‘My dreams may run ahead of the natural march of events or may fly off at a tangent in a direction in which no natural march of events will ever proceed. In the first case my dream will not cause any harm; it may even support and augment the energy of the working men ... There is nothing in such dreams that would distort or paralyze labor-power. On the contrary, if man were completely deprived of the ability to dream in this way, if he could not from time to time run ahead and mentally conceive, in an entire and completed picture, the product to which his hands are only just beginning to lend shape, then I cannot at all imagine what stimulus there would be to induce man to undertake and complete extensive and strenuous work in the sphere of art, science, and practical endeavor ... The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dreams, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.’” Lenin then adds: “Of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement.”<sup>96</sup>

How true that still is! In passing, it is worth noting that Pisarev was a follower of Chernyshevsky, the leading 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian socialist in Russia, and for that matter the name *What is to be done?* is itself an homage to Chernyshevsky, who had written a famous utopian novel with the same title in the 1860s. (Marx, incidentally, thought enough of Chernyshevsky to keep a portrait of him by his bedside.) These remarks make a basic distinction between dreaming as an escape from reality and dreaming as anticipation of a possible future. Lenin would elsewhere refer to the latter as “useful dreaming” and Ernst Bloch in his monumental exploration of utopia developed the idea into a category he called *docta spes* – educated hope. Lenin had the party membership in mind in these remarks, but there is no fundamental difference in this regard between members and workers generally: without useful dreaming, i.e. without mentally conceiving “in an entire and completed picture” the outcome of revolutionary struggle, it is indeed hard to imagine “what stimulus there would be to induce” the proletariat “to undertake and complete” the “extensive and strenuous work” of revolution. And therefore in the broader context of *What is to be done?*, utopian vision – understood as useful dreaming – becomes a crucial part of the struggle to bring socialist consciousness to the working class. The experience of the past century – above all the nightmare of Stalinism – has only made the need for utopian vision all the more pressing, and the lingering taboo against it all the more untenable. It is therefore high time that someone spoke up again for dreaming within the Marxist movement.

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<sup>96</sup> *What is to be done?*, pp. 166-7.

## 12. Appendix: Letter to the WSWS editor by Frank Brenner and a reply by Nick Beams

*The WSWS editorial board refused to post the following letter. Instead, Nick Beams replied privately to me on the board's behalf. When I requested that both letters be posted, the board turned down that request as well. FB.*

July 24, 2002.

To the editor:

I want, if only belatedly, to register my strong disagreement with Nick Beams's reply to a reader about life under socialism ("Some questions and answers on life under socialism", WSWS, May 30, 2002, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/may2002/corr-m30.shtml>). It seems as if we have lost sight of Oscar Wilde's famous remark that "a map of the world without utopia on it is not worth looking at," because from Beams's remarks it is impossible to get a sense of where utopia is in the outlook of contemporary Marxism.

The reader, GS, writes in asking what work, the family, morality etc. would be like under socialism, and the first thing he is told by Beams is that the very asking of such questions demonstrates a "false understanding of socialism" rooted, moreover, in Stalinism and social democracy! And yet nothing in GS's letter substantiates this summary judgment by Beams. Indeed, what is plainly evident from the tone and substance of the letter is that GS is someone new to socialist politics who likes the WSWS - which probably makes him (for convenience's sake, I'll assume GS is a him) fairly representative of most of the website's readership. And the questions he has about socialism are also fairly representative of the concerns of a great many people, including many workers. I don't see what purpose it serves to paint such concerns with the brush of Stalinism and social democracy beyond dissuading anyone else from asking such questions.

Moreover, this is hardly a credible reading of the lessons of history. Here we have just come through a century overshadowed by the great betrayals of socialism, and yet when people ask us about our vision of socialism, the gist of our response is to refuse to discuss the matter! Surely, given the long nightmare of Stalinism, it would seem all the more incumbent on revolutionary Marxists to spell out as clearly as possible our project for reorganizing society.

But no, says Beams, that is all so much laying down of rules and prescriptions; people in socialist society will decide these matters for themselves. If this is all there is to say on the matter, then frankly one has to wonder why Marx and Engels bothered to write *The Communist Manifesto*. Why this ignoring of the obvious? GS is asking about our program. All his questions are in essence one question - *what would socialists do if they ran society?* Surely a movement that calls for a revolution has to have a convincing answer to that question, and that means policies on a wide gamut of social issues and a

clear vision of the kind of society this revolutionary program is meant to bring about. Otherwise, there is something fundamentally unserious about the call to revolution.

Of course it is impossible (to say nothing of unnecessary or undesirable) for everything to be worked out in advance, but this is really beside the point. It is a political vision of human liberation that is called for here - indeed a vision is just what GS was asking for - not a fanciful blueprint of a perfect society. Marxism is certainly not utopian in this latter sense, but if by utopian we mean essentially what Wilde meant, that is a vision of a better world beyond the horizon of class oppression, then it needs to be said that Marxism has always been utopian in this sense, as is amply evident from Marx's writings.

When we get to specifics, the problems with Beams's approach become evident.

Take the family for example: typically Beams insists that there can be "no prescriptions," merely stating that "the ways in which people choose to live will be decided by them." But what of the prevailing backwardness - the oppression of women, the patriarchal family etc.? One can only suppose that Beams expects these oppressive forms of family life to disappear on their own once capitalism is gone. But there are no grounds for making such an assumption. On the contrary, when it comes to matters such as family and marriage, people tend to reproduce the conditions of their upbringing: if they have been raised in backwardness, they "choose" backwardness. As Trotsky notes in *Problems of Everyday Life*, the patriarchal family does not simply disappear on its own, it needs to be replaced by a more advanced form of the family, and this will only be possible through a long and persistent struggle for social and cultural enlightenment. Given these exigencies, there is something disingenuous about a 'no prescriptions' approach: whatever its intentions, it really amounts to *acquiescence* to backwardness.

On the environment, Beams is equally 'non-prescriptive', speaking vaguely of taking the matter "into consideration," but giving no indication as to what the content of that might be. Again, one has to assume that once capitalism is out of the picture, resolving this problem will be a relatively straightforward matter. But the history of Stalinism makes it plain that this isn't the case: its horrifying record, capped by the experience of Chernobyl, demonstrates that the mere absence of capitalist property relations is not by itself enough to guarantee protection of the environment. The ending of capitalism is a necessary but also *insufficient* condition for dealing with this crisis. We need a program that addresses this problem directly, and to the extent that we avoid formulating one, there will be a tendency to adapt to the prevailing ideology. (In that regard, Beams's uncritical use of the Green buzzword "sustainability" is symptomatic.)

Though this is far too complex a subject to be dealt with here, I would like to throw out one idea. Or rather to recall an old one that has long lain dormant in the Marxist tradition - the demand in *The Communist Manifesto* for the "gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country." Today, this seems remarkably prescient. In many ways, the key to the crisis of the environment is the crisis of the human environment, and for the great majority of the human race now that means cities. Cities that have grown, especially in the last century, to inhuman proportions, with ruinous effect not only on the world

around them but on the inhabitants within them. (One example among many that could be cited here: in Toronto, which has a population of 3 million, the local medical association estimates that a thousand people a year are dying prematurely from respiratory ailments due to pollution.) Only by addressing the staggeringly unbalanced and (from the standpoint of a socialist economy) insane cramming of millions of people into tiny pockets of land will it be possible to establish a new harmony between man and nature. The real value of the *Manifesto's* demand isn't in its immediate practical implications (which is why 'demand' is something of a misnomer) but rather in the vision of a different way of life that it opens up, in the re-imagining of the interplay of work, home, school and community that it calls for. This is beyond the scope of even the most 'radical' environmentalists, who (assuming they haven't veered off into outright anti-humanism) can only imagine 'sustaining' the present misery by cleaning up some of its worst abuses.

Finally, a few words on work. Quoting the famous line in the *Manifesto* about communism being "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all," Beams allows how this "might perhaps have been considered somewhat 'utopian' in the past," but that now it is in "line with the development of technology itself." He then goes on to give this concept what is in effect a 'post-utopian' formulation: "In the era of the information revolution, productivity is developed to the greatest extent under conditions where all members of society can develop their capacities to the maximum." But this reformulation entails an important, if unintentional, shift in meaning: in the *Manifesto* the crux is *human* development, but in Beams's version the crux is "productivity." People get to "develop their capacities to the maximum" only because this develops productivity "to the greatest extent." In other words, productivity is no longer a means but an end. And always implicit in social arrangements where human beings are not ends in themselves is the threat of compulsion: in this case, it is evident that individuals will *have to* "develop their capacities to the maximum" because otherwise productivity will decline. But with compulsion we are back to the old oppressive filth of class society.

If "free development" really is free, then this must also mean the freedom *not* to be productive, in other words, the freedom not to have one's life determined primarily by economic considerations. (Hence Paul Lafargue's passionate defense of the right to be lazy.) But a society based on free development would necessarily re-define productivity in terms of human fulfillment, overcoming the alienating divide between necessity and inclination by valorizing precisely those activities that people feel most passionately about but that are today relegated to the margins of life, to so-called 'leisure' time. In socialist society it will be toil, i.e. labor imposed by economic necessity, that will be relegated to the margins, while work that is engaged in freely out of interest and pleasure will assume central importance. Beams makes no distinction between these two kinds of work and, even more troubling, fails to mention what has always been one of the great objectives of the socialist revolution - to liberate human beings from toil by reducing the work day to the absolute minimum necessary.

Socialism will mean a tremendous change in the fabric of social existence, in the texture of lived experience, and yet there is little or no sense of that in Beams's remarks. Quite the contrary, he seems to be going out of his way to suggest the opposite - that things will go

on much as they have before, but in a better, more rational way. Sustainability, productivity, a 'hands-off' approach to the family - this has about it the feel of an all-too familiar world, not a leap to a new life.

The problem here is a reductive view of Marxism that focuses on it as a science and largely neglects its humanist and visionary sides. One of the most telling things in this exchange is when GS asked about ideals that could inspire youth to fulfill their potential and Beams all but ignored the question, referring to it only in passing. To take such matters for granted is to ignore the lessons of the past century. Socialism is not a scientific inevitability. While the objective pre-conditions for socialism already exist, the pre-conditions for barbarism exist as well. What will be decisive in determining the outcome is class consciousness, and to develop that we have to be able to inspire workers and youth, to provide them with a great social ideal and a powerful vision of a better life. If we dismiss such concerns as 'unscientific', then we only demonstrate the narrowness of our science and of our Marxism. For several generations now the ruling class has had a monopoly on visions of a better life, notably the American dream, which has played an immense ideological role in preserving capitalism. We need an alternative vision, a Socialist dream, in which freedom and the promise of a happy life become associated with socialism in the minds of millions of people. Ideals and dreams are insubstantial things, but we ignore them at our peril.

Frank Brenner

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September 15, 2002

Dear Frank Brenner,

The differences we have on my reply to GS boil down to one essential question. You write: "All his [GS's] questions are in essence one question—what would socialists do if they ran society?"

The point I was making, and to which you so strenuously object, is that socialist society is *not one* which is run by socialists. Rather it is a form of society in which the working class—the overwhelming majority of the population—for the first time in human history takes political and economic power into its own hands.

An examination of Marx's writings, from his "early" critique of Hegel in the 1840s to his "mature" writings on the Paris Commune in the 1870s, will show that this was at the heart of his conceptions. For example, he hails the Paris Commune because it was "essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the emancipation of Labour" (Marx and Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, p. 75).

There is a very important conception here: the emancipation of labour is not to be worked out through a series of prescriptions handed down from some authority, but must be worked out by the masses themselves.

And following this passage Marx writes: “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to **work out their own emancipation**, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through a series of processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is itself pregnant” (ibid, p. 76, emphasis added).

This was the point I was making when I wrote that socialist society will “develop on the basis of the activity of the members of society who, for the first time in history, consciously regulate the control of their own social organisation as part of their daily lives, free from the domination and prescriptions of either the ‘free market’ or a bureaucratic authority standing over and above them.”

However, this conception, or vision, of social equality and genuine democracy—the realisation of which, by the way, will involve the greatest social overturn in the history of humanity—is not sufficiently radical or inspiring for you.

Your hostility is an expression of your basic class outlook, which reflects the social interests not of the working class, but a section of the radical middle classes.

A hallmark of such petty-bourgeois socialism is its assertion that it is not enough that the masses themselves begin to run society—they must somehow be directed. And who shall carry this out—the enlightened petty-bourgeois radical.

This basic hostility to the working class comes out most clearly in your position on the family. You take me to task because “Beams expects these oppressive forms of family life (patriarchy and the oppression of women) to disappear on their own once capitalism is gone” and claim that there are “no grounds for making such an assumption.”

In my reply to GS I emphasised that the creation of socialist society comes about through the exercise of conscious control by the associated producers over their economic and social organisation. This development of consciousness has a direct bearing on family life.

In the concluding pages of *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky explains the historical development of mankind in terms of the growth of consciousness over the unconscious and the overcoming of the subordination of man to natural and social forces over which he has no control.

“Man first drove the dark elements out of industry and ideology,” he writes, “by displacing barbarian routine by scientific technique, and religion by science. Afterwards he drove the unconscious out of politics, by overthrowing monarchy and class with democracy and rationalist parliamentarism and then with the clear and open Soviet dictatorship. The blind elements have settled most heavily in economic relations, but man is driving them out from there also, by means of the socialist organisation of economic life. This makes it possible to reconstruct fundamentally the traditional family life.”

Your assertions—that there are “no grounds” to expect that oppressive forms of family life will disappear with the ending of capitalism and that the socialist organization of the economy is not sufficient because “people tend to reproduce the conditions of their upbringing” and will “choose” backwardness in the future—have far-reaching implications.

They signify that you reject, at the most fundamental level, the materialist conceptions of Marxism. If the overthrow of capitalism and the raising of the economic and cultural levels under socialism are not sufficient to do away with social backwardness, then it must be because this backwardness is not only a product of the social environment but is, at least in part, the result of characteristics inherent in the working class. Whether or not you care to recognise it, this is where your position leads. And from this it follows that such a working class needs to have some kind of authority—suitably enlightened of course—exercised over it so that its backwardness can be kept in check.

Of course, I do not attempt to claim that with the conquest of political power by the working class all the rubbish of the past will be immediately cleared away. But I do insist that the future forms of family and social life will not arise as the result of “prescriptions” by any authority—no matter how “enlightened”—but will develop on the basis of the constantly evolving forms of economic and social organisation which will arise in socialist society.

You attempt to call on Trotsky’s book *Problems of Everyday Life* to support your assertion that my insistence on “no prescriptions” really amounts to “acquiescence”. However, an examination of the essays contained in that work shows that Trotsky speaks entirely against you.

In the first place, Trotsky makes clear that ending the oppression of women and the conditions of family life in general are bound up with broad economic and cultural development.

“As long as woman is chained to the housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all the chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme” (Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 38).

“[T]he way to the new family is twofold: (a) the raising of the standard of culture and education of the working class and the individuals composing the class; (b) an

improvement in the material conditions of the class organized by the state. The two processes are intimately connected with one another” (ibid, p. 42).

The question of family life is bound up with the question of morals.

“It is only the seizure of power by the working class which creates the premises for a complete transformation of morals. Morals cannot be rationalized—that is, made congruous with the demands of reason—unless production is rationalized at the same time, for the roots of morals lie in production. Socialism aims at subordinating all production to human reason. But even the most advanced bourgeois thinkers have confined themselves to the ideas of rationalizing technique on the one hand (by the application of natural science, technology, chemistry, invention, machines), and politics on the other (by parliamentarism); but they have not sought to rationalize economics, which has remained the prey of blind competition. Thus the morals of bourgeois society remain dependent on a blind and non-rational element. When the working class takes power, it sets itself the task of subordinating the economic principles of social conditions to a control and to a conscious order. By this means, and only by this means, is there a possibility of consciously transforming morals.

“The successes we gain in this direction are dependent on our success in the sphere of economics. But even in our present economic situation we could introduce much more criticism, initiative, and reason into our morals than we actually do. This is one of the tasks of our time. It is of course obvious that the complete change of morals—the emancipation of women from household slavery, the social education of children, the emancipation of marriage from all economic compulsion, etc.—will only come about in proportion to the extent to which the economic forces of socialism win the upper hand over the forces of capitalism” (ibid, pp. 29-30).

As for the question of prescriptions, Trotsky warns against “the danger of a clumsy, almost brutal, attempt at interference in the private life of the individual.” The state, he insists, should use “great caution” in its incursions into family life and “its interference must be solely concerned with according the family more normal and dignified conditions of life; it must guarantee the sanitary and other interests of the workers, thus laying the foundations for healthier and happier generations” (ibid, pp. 66-67).

On the question of the environment I have nowhere suggested that the mere absence of capitalist property relations will resolve all questions. What I have emphasised is the need for democratic planning. One can agree that the “gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country” must form the basis for a re-organisation of the present chaotic environment. All manner of proposals can be brought forward.

The crucial issue is how will decisions be made regarding their implementation—which particular plan will be adopted. As Trotsky pointed out in another context, no doubt different “parties” will gather around different proposals.

This underscores the point I have been seeking to emphasise: that under socialism

*To know a thing is to know its end*

decisions about the organization of society, whether it be on the environment, the length of the working week, the payment of a living wage to all members of society whether they work or not—choosing between the different alternatives in all these and other areas of social life—will be made on the basis of a genuine democracy, ensuring real social equality. Government of the people, by the people and for the people will become a reality for the first time.

Such a perspective may not inspire the middle class radicals—you suggest that according to my conceptions, under socialism “things will go on much as they have before, but in a better, more rational way”—but I am sure it will prove immensely attractive to the international working class.

Yours sincerely,  
Nick Beams