AMERICAN UTOPIANISM IN THE 1960s

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This essay traces the development of utopian concerns in the United States in the 1960s. They evolved out of the culture of the 1950s and out of a considerably less radical reform impulse that fell well within the conventional limits of political behavior. I will also argue that the failure of utopianism left a residue in the 1980s and 1990s whose essence was perhaps even less radical than its original sources. One need not conclude that the defeat of utopianism was inevitable. But there is little that is left that is noble in the aftermath of the failure, although some things that are admirable.

The rise of utopianism

The utopian sentiments of the 1960s were diverse but all had their immediate locus in what I define as the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Civil rights for black Americans had been a minor issue for some at the fringes of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. In the aftermath of World War Two, however, interest in the issue picked up and was crucial in the ideals of American liberalism in the 1940s. Reformers wanted to achieve voting rights for African-Americans, especially in the south; and they desired to end discrimination in housing, schooling, and other areas of public life. Although the 1950s were to some extent a quiescent era, by the late 1950s, the (weak) Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 manifested a stepped-up concern that was continuous with the thinking of the early 1960s under a new Democratic administration.

During the Kennedy presidency there was -or so it seemed at the time-much violence and confrontation as black Americans and many white liberal supporters worked together to end the segregation of American life, again largely but not exclusively in the south. Symbolically the high point of this movement came with the August 1963 March on Washington at which Martin Luther King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech; substantively the high point of the movement came with the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, which guaranteed voting rights for blacks and outlawed segregationist practices.

These were real accomplishments, but the goals were those of formal equality. First and foremost each American had to be considered equal in the voting booth -one individual's vote was as good and as important as anyone else's. In addition the new laws forbad people's making invidious comparisons on the basis of race: a real estate agent could not refuse to sell a house to a

black American family if it had the financial resources to purchase a house. I call these ends those of 'formal equality' because the civil rights movement did not take up whether it was appropriate to insure that the prospective home buyer be provided with the money necessary to buy a house. The civil rights movement, that is, left the social and economic structures of the United States intact; it only provided for equality of treatment within the structure of economic inequalities praised as American capitalism. Richard Nixon, for example, was a genuine advocate of these notions when, during his own presidency almost a decade later, he advocated 'black capitalism'. Thus, while I see the victories of the civil rights movement as real, they did not alter the fundamentals of power in the United States. The goals were well within the American reform tradition that has striven to attain for every citizen full democratic participation in government, and equality before the law.

Things changed with the ascendency of Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) to the presidency and the prosecution of the war in Vietnam. Within the civil rights movement an alteration was occurring that might be attributed to a revolution of rising expectations. Having gained their formal goals, many civil rights leaders called for vague but further reaching modifications in American society. Demonstrators advanced ideas for bringing about economic equality and thus for restructuring the American social order. Earlier successes were not alone in prompting these new and more revolutionary ends. When blacks made their demands in the north, they were greeted by resentment from some people who had supported protests in the south. Anger at white hypocrisy went hand-in-hand with a sense that greater victories would be obtained comparatively easily. LBJ assisted this optimism with his own deep -and for him dangerous- commitment.

The president was from a poor background and had a painful sense of the way cultural disadvantages shaped one's economic and social life for the worse. He was genuinely committed to using the power of the state to help individuals overcome cultural barriers to advancement. Johnson's landmark address at Howard University in 1965 called for substantive as well as formal equality. LBJ surely did not have a clear sense of the dramatic shift in American sensibilities for which he was calling and mistakenly assumed that what he was talking about was consensual. But by 1966 the civil rights movement had effectively spawned a movement for social justice in the United States, a child unlike its parent in some important respects and one that, I believe, deserves the name utopian.

In any event, whereas there was an American agreement that civil rights had a moral authority in the United States, there was deep division about its more demanding offspring. Some Americans supported substantive social justice, but others were equally hostile to African-American complaints about their economic conditions. LBJ was also unable to make good his pledges to underwrite a domestic program that would encompass benevolent policies for blacks, and he exaggerated this division. The war in Vietnam put financial demands on the Johnson administration but, just as significantly, drained energy and intelligence from Johnson's domestic advisors. Indeed, Johnson's rhetorical

support only made his problems worse. He could not provide both guns and butter. By proclaiming that he could, he gave black radicals reason to be more outspoken than they otherwise might *and* he fueled their passion when he had to renege on implied promises. Even with Johnson's good will, although the aims of the post-1965 movement were grounded in values to which Americans had been historically committed, the aims themselves had gone beyond an historical rationale. Radicals suggested that there were deep wrongs in American society and that securing the goals of the post-1965 movement would resolve, once and for all, the social problems to which they were addressed. Overall, Americans did not believe that their society had fundamental flaws; if there were such flaws, perhaps it would be impossible to correct them. Finally, the aims were at odds with the long ingrained notion in America that differences in wealth were good, to some extent a function of initiative, hard work, and individual integrity. The first of the three strands of utopian thought that grew out of the civil rights movement is this black quest for social justice.

The civil rights movement had had many white proponents. Some of these dropped by the wayside as the movement was transformed, but some white partisans accepted the more radical imperatives. Nonetheless, blacks devoted to the more grandiose ends insisted on all black organizations to carry on their work, or threw whites out of the older civil rights organizations. Caucasians began to elaborate their own critique of American society that included a view of the subordinate role of African-Americans but went far beyond a harsh appraisal of race relations to a more universal negative analysis. The second strand of utopianism is the story of this critique and those who put it forward.

The socialist movement has had a minor importance in the United States since the turn of the twentieth century and has had a conventional left critique of the United States. Only a revolution can correct the lopsided maldistribution of income in the United States, its acquisitive materialism, and its meanspiritedness. Yet American socialists -as opposed to communists- were not eager to promote violence as a means to change and, in fact, were unclear about how a metamorphosis should take place. This aspect of American socialism   -its intellectual softness- in part accounted for the low esteem in which it has been held for most of the twentieth century.[1] The struggle for racial equality and the war, however, gave the socialist critique a prominence it had not had for some time and an audience that was more receptive to its ideas. The 1960s also gave a sharper edge to socialist ideas themselves.

The war did not end and the quest for equality was stymied. The 'old left', as the socialists came to be called, argued that one had to expect these wrongs in a capitalist order. Such an exploitative political economy would inevitably be engaged in unjust foreign wars to protect its colonial interests. At home such an economy required an underclass -the blacks- who had to have their indigenous

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1   My statement is contentious. For a recent survey see John P. Diggins, *The rise and fall of the American left* (New York 1992).

revolutionary impulses crushed from time to time. Even the wealthiest sort of capitalist order could not afford to buy off protest, and its very wealth necessitated repression overseas.

At the same time that this argument became widely acceptable, however, the old left did not really get credit for it. Rather, a younger generation of white American radicals -the New Left- adopted its ideas and drew attention to the critique. The New Left leadership was just that group of whites that had now been denied access to militant black groups. Its triumph over the old left was perhaps due to the fact that the younger leftists were less wary of calling for violence to destroy the system. That is, the more general hostile examination of American life became associated with radical political young people. Indeed, they stigmatized the radicalism of their parents' generation as outdated or old fashioned, even though the points of view were similar.

The most widely known New Left group was the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which put forward its leading ideas in the Port Huron Statement (because it met at Port Huron, Michigan) in 1962. The SDS came to national attention at the end of 1964 when it led student demonstrations at the University of California at Berkeley. By 1967-68 SDS represented the most vocal and significant voice on university campuses across the United States.

Some later commentators have written that the student left should be understood in terms of student fears of being drafted to fight in Southeast Asia; or as a function of these students' problems with their parents. Admittedly self-serving fear of the draft and psychological troubles may have motivated these protestors. But such an explanation is incomplete. It must be complemented by a recognition that the war in Vietnam and the state of domestic society in the U.S. were perceived as bad, even evil; there was much that made sense in this perception, and it motivated much political activity.

Political youth brought together by their opposition to injustice at home and abroad, and made coherent by New Left ideology, were affluent students who had matured during the Eisenhower period. They had been reared in a moralistic climate that envisioned the United States as the embodiment of decency and taught that ethical dilemmas were easily and quickly solved when 'good guys' pitted themselves against 'bad guys'. The sixties gave these students a stage on which to act out the simplified sense of morality that their culture had given them in the 1950s. Ironically there were good rational grounds in the 1960s to see that their own country was villainous.

The age and experience of the politicized white youth who are my second strand of utopianism gave them little sense of the limits of what they might be able to achieve. The theoretical nature of their commitments led them to disregard the way in which their goals might be compromised. And violence in the streets of the United States combined with the stalemated war in Asia led the SDS and its various allies to believe that something apocalyptic would occur.

The third strand in my utopian tapestry was also connected to the contemporary past. This strand was similarly composed of well-to-do white young people who came of age in the 1950s. But in the first instance the politics of the

1960s had not galvanized them. They were rather cultural radicals who showed their defiance of American life by hyperbolic and flamboyant choice of clothing; hair that was longer and less clean than was the norm; the free use of mind-altering drugs -mainly marijuana; a sexual ethic that in general called for less inhibition and guilt; and a distinctive music of protest and passion that their parents particularly disliked.

Critics again have charged, again with some truth, that we can explain the cultural radicals by noting that a mass rebellion against parental authority was taking place. Radicals were illicitly working out private, personal troubles in the political, public sphere. Yet this is only a partial explanation. The 1950s were a period in which there were very severe restraints on individual expression. In adolescent fashion, for example, a range of significances was attached to the varying widths -from five to eight inches- of the cuff of a male's pants. But even in the 1950s there was also an undercurrent of rebellion against the dominant cultural norms. The best example is 1950s popular music, dominated by rock'n'-roll and its famous but outrageous purveyors, like Elvis Presley, who imitated the suggestive lyrics and sexual style of many black artists. There were other indicators in the fifties, too. The 'Beatniks' were small in number, but a much larger number of American teenagers got a taste of bohemian life by frequent-ing 'coffee houses', where they dressed up in black garments, played chess, talked seriously, pretended to listen to serious music, and were polite to token African-Americans. Sexual mores were loosening: the 1950s were the time when Jack Kennedy came to power as a politician and began to exhibit the sexual adventurism that some later historians would argue (I think wrongly) undercut his presidency's claim to greatness. Although Kennedy promulgated 'high' cultural values, he was a devotee of Chubby Checker and 'The Twist', and introduced drugs to the White House.[2]

Just as the conventional moralism of the 1950s molded the mentality of the SDS, so too the prior decade influenced the cultural rebellion of the 1960s. The cultural radicals drew on strands evident in the culture before utopianism became chic and merely carried them a few steps further. They were able to effloresce in a climate of opinion that brought everything into question. The cultural radicals were not in any way systematic thinkers and had no program for the transformation of America. But they did hope for a newer world and envisioned an 'open' society. Nonetheless, as the revolution in style gathered momentum, it made a contribution all its own to 1960s utopianism.

From the view of its opponents the alteration in the cultural norms best evidenced the evils of radical politics. The attack on foreign policy or racial customs was not so terrible because it threatened to redistribute income or to alter the military balance of power in Asia. Rather the attack was frightening

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2 The connection of Kennedy to the cultural radicalism of the 1960s is unexplored. For
   material for a study see: Thomas C. Reeves, *A question of character: a life of John F.
   Kennedy* (New York 1991) and Nigel Hamilton, *JFK. Reckless youth* (New York 1992).

because it led to students dancing naked in the streets under the influence of pot. Radical politics was disturbing to its adversaries not so much because it undermined socio-economic fundamentals but because it undermined the ability of the culture to reproduce responsible adults; it seemed to lead to hedonistic excess and the end of civilized culture.

My three utopian strands were separate. At the height of the movement for black equality whites were usually excluded from the action and accused black radicals of a sectarian, if not segregationist, approach to protest. Black radicals were often contemptuous of the frivolous cultural criticism of upper middle class white students. The latter frequently feared the violence of the black movement and sometimes considered the white political radicals as too serious to make a newer world. Indeed, the ethical arrogance and puritanical aspects of the New Left earned the irritation of both cultural radicals and Afro-Americans. Nonetheless, these three strands came together as the quintessential 1960s utopian movement in the United States.

There was a critique of American society -particularly the politcal liberalism of the Cold War- as racist and war oriented, unable to solve social problems at home and driven to expansion and exploitation abroad. To maintain its hold on the reins of power, 'the establishment' not only maintained an economically disenfranchised class but also extruded a repressive culture. This amalgum of different sorts of criticism -both socio-economic and socio-cultural- explains, for example, the popularity in the United States of such a book as Herbert Marcuse's *One-dimensional man* and his concept of 'repressive tolerance'.[3] Marcuse was a European and a Hegelian who wrote in an unintelligible Germanic prose. He was interested in the hegelian aspects of Marx and in Freud, and saw Nazism -for him commercial mass culture and racism- everywhere. But Marcuse joined an economic attack on capitalism to notions of how a better system would liberate human libidinal energies. Just this view of the United States as being economically unjust (especially to blacks) *and* culturally dehumanizing defined American utopianism.

The fall of utopianism

In the late sixties American leaders feared for the future and overestimated the power of utopianism. But national politics showed how conservative the social order in the United States was. In 1968 the utopians managed to weaken fatally the liberalism of the Democratic party, which had dominated political conversation since 1932. Yet they could not replace it with anything more ideal; on the contrary, what came afterwards from the perspective of the left was worse.

The 1968 election itself suggested the stability of the electoral system when two

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3 See: Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man* (Boston 1964) and 'Repressive tolerance' in: Herbert Marcuse ed., *A critique of pure tolerance* (Boston 1965).

old professionals, Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon, squared off for the presidency. But the repudiation of Humphrey gave the victory to the Republicans. Four years later with the war still waging and strident radicals almost beside themselves with rage, Nixon ran again. He made the 'small minority' of dissenters an issue in his campaign. He also appealed to the 'silent majority' of Americans (who surely were not utopians) to reject George McGovern, the Democratic candidate who was the most liberal major party candidate to run for the presidency. A landslide re-elected Nixon. One major consequence of the 1960s was a revulsion against the left that gave the United States twenty-five years of conservative primacy.

Several factors in the American context help to explain the failure of the utopian movement. The war went on for a long time, until 1975. Although it was the moral cancer for the radicals, it had a decreasing relevance to the lives of the average American citizen because Nixon systematically reduced U.S. troop commitments. People were tired of the issue, and were less able to be mobilized against it. It is not, however, necessary to invoke an *a priori* psychology that urges that people can not sustain an impulse for Nirvana over an indefinite period. It is, however, at least true that many fellow travelers of the radicals fell by the wayside. Many students who worked for anti-war candidates in 1968, for example, voted for Nixon in 1972. It was also harder, as time went by, to remain committed to ideals as radicals grew older; and earning a living and family life made their demands felt, not to mention the increasing requirements of an aging body.

In America, moreover, there were many snares for radicals. In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and *The American jeremiad* Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out the function of periodic lamentations against America for falling away from its original transcendent ideals.[4] The regular call for a return to early seventeenth-century Calvinist commitments and the predictable denunciation of present evils helps to *maintain* the system, says Bercovitch. The *Jeremiad* gives an acceptable intra-systematic role to radicals. They become our exhorters and gad-flys. In this respect Marcuse's repressive tolerance was also prescient: by embracing dissent America always seemed able to remove its fangs.

Many black activists were later instrumental in making the political economy and electoral politics minimally attractive to African-Americans. Sometime presidential candidate Jesse Jackson is a good example. Some other sixties radicals recanted their revolutionary ways and made a living testifying how they had been wrong and how wonderful they felt about recanting. Others became well-to-do and middle aged, repackaging 1960s hippie culture for conservative youth in the 1980s and 1990s. The most curious of these de-radicalizing trends occurred in the American university, where many young sixties political activists eventually got jobs when they grew up. Some conservative critics feared what

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4   Sacvan Bercovitch, *The puritan origins of the American self* (New Haven, Connecticutt 1972); idem, *The American jeremiad* (Madison, Wisconsin 1978).

the 'tenured radicals' could do to American society and students in the nineties from their important academic posts.[5] Rather, the lodgment of radicals in the world of scholarship illustrated the capacity of the American system to absorb the most damaging blows, a feature of American culture that conservatives ought to find comforting rather than frightening. By accepting the most hostile arguments as having something of value to tell Americans, the culture, with a miraculous jiu-jitsu, renders criticism harmless.

From this vantage point there is nothing extraordinary in the failure of utopian impulses in the 1960s. What makes the era extraordinary is that for a brief time the leadership of the cultural order trembled in its boots. In the short time it took for the culture to adapt to the critique, America loosened up a bit. Perhaps this is only to underscore the truth of Bercovitch's understanding and the relevance of repressive tolerance. The 1960s were a donkey bridge to our own time in which individuals have a little more personal breathing space in an otherwise more impersonal, more highly bureaucraticized world. In later years most Americans thought that the 1960s were an era of excess -not just in the U.S. involvement in Vietnam but in the opposition to the war, not just in the demands black people made but in the nasty opposition to these demands. But people also have come grudgingly to believe that the sixties correctly demanded a measure of equality for black Americans and have accepted, most of all, the view that in matters of personal taste individuals must be given some of the leeway the radicals asked for twenty-five years ago.

These may be minor changes, small gains if you will. But if one recognizes the sources of the 1960s utopianism, it is not at all strange that the end result of the utopian movement reinstated the basic ideas of the culture. Utopian impulses had been rooted from the start in the conservative soil of the 1950s; the civil rights politics of the early 1960s was contained within the traditions of American history, too; and the mild American socialist critique of society in the United States goes back almost 100 years.

The 1960s in the 1990s

A few years ago I went to the opening of a new, trendy restaurant in Philadelphia. Most of the male diners were younger than I was. I looked around uncomfortably when I noticed that they were all wearing business suits while I had on an open-necked shirt (with a Liberty of London fabric, however!). After I saw some other men about my age dressed more or less identically to me, I relaxed a bit. I have often reflected that one-quarter of a century later perhaps the only difference the 1960s made in our lives was dispensing with a necktie on a more-or-less formal occasion. Now I think that utopia may only be the ability to wear a flowered shirt when one wants to.

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5   See: Roger Kimball, *Tenured radicals* (New York 1990).