

Facing the Fold

From the Eclipse of Utopia To the Restoration of Hope

Been down so long it looks like up? Does the prospect of a double dip cloud your future? Just as many of us could see nothing but boundless growth during the go-go years of the late 1990s, so have many fallen into a pessimistic slough following the last two years of economic woe.

Some might like to reach for good old cyclical as a rationale for recovery. “What goes up must come down; what goes down must come back up.” But I’d like to reach even higher: toward those good old utopias.

We lost something when we hurled utopian thinking into the dustbin of history. And hurled it we have. Too bad! For utopian thinking had its moments. To the extent that various utopias, from Plato’s *Republic* to the works of Thomas More and Samuel Butler, allowed their readers to lift their sights from a miserable present toward a better future, to just that extent those utopian fantasies provided hope.

When Ernst Bloch wrote the three volumes of *The Principle of Hope* he was opening an imaginative space for fantasy, clearing the ground for imagination and creativity. His *Spirit of Utopia* wasn’t handing down a recipe for perfecting humanity in perfect dwellings in perfect cities. When Barack Obama advertises the *Audacity of Hope*, he isn’t pressing for the perfection of human nature.

I want to hold on to the aspirational aspect of utopian thinking by liberating it from the debilitating stain of perfection. I want to lay out a case for optimism by linking it, paradoxically, to pessimism. Precisely by paying attention to prospects for disaster—nuclear, biological, or environmental—I want to clear a space for a *scenaric stance* that holds best case and worst case scenarios in mind at once. This is the way to face our unpredictable future responsibly. This is the way to grapple with uncertainty and act nonetheless. This is the way to deal with the passage of time.

Once upon a time, there was no truly historical time. The ancient Greeks thought that time moved in a circle, cyclically like the seasons. Call that first chapter the time of *tradition*. Then came chapter two, the time of *modernity* with its optimistic faith in progress. Then came chapter three, postmodernism with its pessimistic doubts regarding progress, and the eclipse of utopia. But this won’t do. As it is written in Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Likewise with hope. We need it. So now it’s time to move beyond postmodern time. Now it is time to take up a new stance toward time, a *scenaric stance*. Let’s call it *facing the fold*.

Let's trace the history of utopian thinking through its first three chapters, the better to get a running jump across the chasm of pessimism that postmodernism bequeaths us. And let's *not* burden ourselves with a title so bulky as post-postmodernism. Let's look ahead, and not backwards toward a postmodernism that has run out of steam.

The Cyclical Time of Tradition: Chapter One

Once upon a time there was the time of no history, the time of the ancients and the traditionalists in which the basic features of reality were understood to be unchanging and eternal. More than two millennia before Darwin, Aristotle taught that the number of species is fixed, not evolving. For Plato, time was “the moving image of eternity.” Plato's ideal Forms don't change. They are eternal.

The forms of everyday life that were consistent with this image of time followed tradition, as they still do in some, but ever fewer, parts of the world. Daughters expected to live lives very much like their mothers', and sons expected to live lives very much like their fathers'. Identities and aspirations were reflected in last names like Jackson, Johnson and Clarkson.

In Homeric times, if you wanted to know how to build a boat, you recited to yourself those lines in the *Iliad* that described the building of boats. You didn't try to design a *better* boat. The very idea of progress—as J.B. Bury's classic, *The Idea of Progress* makes clear—is a modern invention.

Yes, there was a distinction between better and worse, and there were aspirations to gain access to the idea of the good. But those aspirations were not so much toward the good yet to come. The love of wisdom, philosophy, was an upward quest toward eternal ideals, toward a kind of great blueprint in the sky that did not change.

Modernity and Progress: Chapter Two

Following the first “chapter” when time was regarded as “the moving image of eternity,” there came the time of progressive history and evolution. Starting with hints in the works of Vico and Herder in the 18th Century, then gaining full articulation in the works of Hegel and Darwin in the 19th Century, this sense of progressive history came to define the very spine of modernity. From getting better every day in every way to “Better living through chemistry,” the march of progress through advances in science gained a firm foothold in western culture.

During this second chapter in the history of utopia, the quest for the good no longer followed an upward path toward eternal truths. Instead a more worldly path lay in the direction of a better future. Invention flourished. People imagined better boats, and built them. In some of the earlier utopian literature you find an amazing amount of space devoted to things like drainage systems. Sewers were a big deal, as they

needed to be given important discoveries relating public health to good hygiene. But just as people were inventing better boats, so they invented better utopias. The very nature of utopian thinking underwent its own form of progress.

When you look at the history of 19th century utopian thinking you see an evolution away from the physical particulars of cities and towards the more ethereal aspects of the human spirit. Utopian thinking passed through a period during which it shifted from architecture, city planning and drainage systems to psychology, philosophy and states of mind. So by the time Karl Mannheim published his *Ideology and Utopia* a century later, he wasn't concerned with city planning; he was almost entirely focused on the chains that bind men's and women's minds.

Let's call it *the sublimation of utopia*. In modern and postmodern times, the terms 'utopia' and 'utopian' have come to connote more about minds than about bricks and mortar.

Postmodernism and the eclipse of utopia: Chapter Three

The march of progress hit some speed-bumps in the 20th Century: senseless deaths in the muddy trenches of the First World War, the Holocaust, the advent of nuclear weaponry and humanity's ability to extinguish itself by our own technologically enhanced hands. Just as Hegel served as the philosopher who could render (more or less) articulate the world-historical actions of Napoleon and thereby induce a broad self-consciousness regarding *the promise of modernity*, so the French heirs of Hegel—Alexandre Kojève, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—rendered (more or less) articulate these world-historical atrocities and thereby induced a broad awareness of *the threats of postmodernity*.

Socio-political utopianism in the 20th century foundered on the shoals of failed revolutions. The improvers of mankind had their chances and each, one after the other, ended in their own respective versions of a reign of terror. The American experiment succeeded, but it was based not on some grand vision of a social order that would improve men's and women's souls. Quite the opposite: The founding fathers held a more modest belief that people left to their own devices would get on with their lives best if you let them make up their own minds about how to make a living, how to raise their children, how to relate to their immediate neighbors, and how to pray. In short, the American experiment was based on the idea of individual liberty. Unlike the French and Russian and Chinese revolutions, each of which turned oppressive, the American Revolution was fought by people who were not motivated by some shining ideal of a life very different after the revolution. They just wanted to get the Brits off their backs and get on with living life *their way*.

The founding fathers were very clear about wanting to leave everyday life pretty much as it was. Let the butcher continue to be a butcher and the baker continue to

bake. Let people raise their children as they wished and worship as they pleased. There was no moving rhetoric about a new and better humanity, no strategic vision with goals and objectives very different from life in rural New England or urban Philadelphia. Just a commitment to the preservation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

For all the faith in individual progress that the American Dream allowed, there was very little by way of collective dreaming—for the race, for the species, for the human condition. But here lies the rub: After the sublimation of utopia, the eclipse of utopia means flushing out the baby of a better humanity with the bathwater of utopian living arrangements.

God knows the bathwater of utopian politics was dirty. “The final solution,” seventy years of Soviet communism, China’s cultural revolution—these were political, ideological fantasies that caused so much misery that most rational survivors of the 20th century look back and say, *never again*. We now know better than to listen to tyrants and philosopher kings with their bright ideas about classless society or a thousand year *Reich*.

But what about the baby? Can’t we hope for a better humanity? Haven’t we seen progress with respect to slavery, racism and sexism? Granted, a partial eclipse of utopia might save us from crackpot schemes for the radical reform of human nature by Jacobin revolutionaries. But the total eclipse of utopia shuts out the light of hope for even a fairly gradual, evolutionary rather than revolutionary, improvement.

Call this third chapter the time of decline, the time of postmodernism. Every day in every way we’re getting worse and worse, from the pollution of the atmosphere to the extinction of species to the threat of terrorism, and on, and on... Reading Sir Martin Rees and his doomsday scenarios in *Our Final Hour*, we’re told that the human species has no better than a 50/50 chance of surviving the 21st century. The so-called march of progress is by no means assured by advances in science. To the contrary, advances in science may be our undoing. Even though less apocalyptic than nuclear holocaust, we are made increasingly aware of several more insidious threats: CFCs and the ozone hole, CO₂ and global warming, the relentless withering of biodiversity...

This declinism is tired, tiresome, and tiring. Such pessimism gets us nowhere, but it enjoys a certain intellectual respectability just because it is so dark. The lowered brow of the pessimist cannot possibly be taken as naïve. The pessimist has looked into the abyss and, by god, he has not flinched. Such courage! No sugar coatings for him! No rose-tinted glasses!

The fourth turning: A Tragi-comic Future

Now time itself is taking yet another turn, a fourth turning. We no longer live in the ahistorical or circular time of the ancients. Nor do we enjoy the optimistic, progressive time of the moderns. Nor, hopefully, the apocalyptic closing time of the postmodernists. Now we live in the tragi-comic time of multiple scenarios. Now the future is flying at us both faster and less predictably than ever. Surprise is its middle name. There's promise to be sure, but risk just as surely. Our research labs are churning out discoveries at an unprecedented rate. The life expectancy of individuals is increasing even as the life-expectancy of the species, according to Sir Martin Rees, is not.

Neither as optimistic as modernity nor as pessimistic as postmodernity, the sensibility appropriate to multiple scenarios is one of wide-eyed wonder at the nearness of Heaven and Hell both to us and to one another. The sheer proximity of best case and worst case scenarios induces a psychic shear factor between updrafts of hope and downdrafts of despair. Should one laugh or cry? Or master a capacity for both each and every day?

This fourth form of lived time—the first being the traditional, the second progressive, the third apocalyptic, and the fourth tragic-comic—has about it a certain intensity. The stakes are high. Choices matter. It would be half-right but also half-wrong to call it *existential*: Half-right in its sense of urgency and its call upon our sense of freedom and responsibility; but half-wrong to the extent that the existentialists themselves were poised between the moderns and the postmoderns, and for the most part pretty gloomy about it—all that gazing into the abyss, Being-towards-Death, and European brooding.

The fourth attitude toward time peeks through the gloom with Woody Allen's wry humor asking, "What Ate Zarathustra?" Or Ken Kesey's question, "Whose movie is this?" Or Hunter Thompson's gonzo sensibility; or R. Crumb's Zippy the Pinhead asking, "Are we having fun yet?"

Martin Amis caught a piece of this new attitude toward time and history in his *London Fields*. "We're all coterminous," he writes, referring to the imminent ecological apocalypse that looms over his novel. "We used to live and die without any sense of the planet getting older, of mother earth getting older, living and dying. We used to live outside history. But now we're all coterminous. We're inside history now all right, on its leading edge, with the wind ripping past our ears. Hard to love, when you're bracing yourself for impact."