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SETTING FIRE TO PAPER UTOPIAS: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF IDEALISM IN POLITICAL THOUGHT?

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So, the utopia has fallen out of favour. How could that have happened? Isn't the utopia a place that is ideal in regards to justice, to needs, to institutional structure? Who could possibly have a problem with that?

People take utopias seriously—that's the problem. The utopia is—and always was—beyond the reach of reality: a thought experiment, an ideological fantasy, an expansion of the moral imagination. So long as it is kept in its place, the utopia is as harmless as it is useful. Taken as a precise blueprint for the future, however, it is bound to fail, often catastrophically. It is simply the misuse of a thing for a function it wasn't supposed to fulfill.

Sir Thomas More coined the term in his elaborately titled *A Truly Golden Little Book, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining, of a Republic's Best State and of the New Island Utopia*, published in 1516. The name translates from Greek as 'not-place' or 'no place', but it also draws in the homophone Eutopia which translates as 'good place'—a sly pun which might imply that goodness is an impossible destination.

Accordingly, it is not obvious that More intended 'Utopia' as a model for the ideal state. While he used the device of 'Utopia' to float appealing political ideas, such as collectivism and religious tolerance, other Utopian customs were inconsistent with his staunch Catholic views. It is more likely that the function of 'Utopia' was as a novel point of comparison, a place from which his readers could re-assess the troubled state of Europe, trouble which caught up with More eventually. In 1535, having gotten off side with King Henry VIII, More lost his head to an executioner's axe.

The road to 'Utopia', then, is literally a road to nowhere. But what a tempting road to travel, especially when you're unhappy with the present or exhausted by the past.

Take, for instance, the composer John Cage. His disappointment in America fuelled a keen interest in utopian ideas, and in the introduction to his 1972 book, *M*, Cage excitedly describes what he believed was a real-world utopia in the making: China under Mao Zedong. Mao's writings impressed Cage deeply. He praises Mao's 'clear-headedness' and describes feeling refreshed by 'the news that people of all ages (the very young and the very old, and the "usual" able-bodied) were working together to turn desert into garden'. Reinforcing this fantasy of China as a selfless paradise, he repeats an anecdote from an American friend, Jumay Chu, who had visited China that year:

'Jumay told me she had asked a Chinese factory worker whether he was happy. (He was doing work to which he had been assigned that she herself wouldn't have enjoyed doing because it was repetitive and boring.) The factory worker didn't understand her question. He was doing his work as part of China's work; he was one person in the Chinese family.'

With the benefit of hindsight, of course, Cage sounds monstrously naive. The Cultural Revolution was still unofficially in action during 1972, only properly concluding with Mao's death in 1976. In the meantime, Mao's ill-defined demands to purge the nation of its enemies had turned the nation against itself, legitimizing violence amongst its citizens. By the end of the 1960s, tens or hundreds of thousands were dead—no one really knows. Historical and cultural artefacts were destroyed and ethnic minorities crushed. In such fearful times, the factory worker that Cage describes would have been unlikely to give a straight answer, especially not to a foreigner asking about his individual happiness. Such an endorsement simply does not allow for a fuller assessment of Mao's complicated legacy, a grand confusion of tragedy, cruelty, folly and lasting modernisation.

Which brings us to the more pejorative meaning of utopia, as intrinsically foolish or whimsical.¹ In this sense, utopias are like so many pies in the sky, liable to end up on the faces of those that reach for them. Cage, for example, took the visionary rhetoric of Mao at face value because it crystallized his own

collectivist yearnings, and in doing so he fell for Mao's political game. After all, one of the functions of Mao's writing—in addition to detailing his socialist ambitions—was to reinforce his power.

In Cage's defence, no one knew the full extent of what was occurring in China, and doubtless he would have taken a more nuanced view if he had. Moreover, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with Cage's collectivist ideals—especially when our faith in the 'invisible hand' of the market is steering our species toward economic and ecological havoc. Nevertheless, any artist who chooses to stand behind some normative project in the real world is surely accountable for the consequences that follow, as is anyone else who operates in the normative realm—be they activists, journalists, policy analysts, politicians or voters.

The major distinction for artists is that their practice is relatively isolated from the mechanics of power, so their gestures have little impact and thus diminished responsibility. While the Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti committed modern art's most notorious political blunder by endorsing fascism, no one could seriously hold him responsible for its rise.² He was a harbinger of sorts, a portent of the ideas that enabled fascism to grow, just as Warhol, Koons and Hirst are symptoms of the neoliberal idealism which have inflated their art prices and, more recently, destabilized many modern economies.³ It is one thing for an artist to endorse a political idea, quite another for a politician to do the same.

This relative powerlessness is something that art shares with my own discipline, the field of political theory. There is sometimes a comical distance between political theory and political action, comical insofar as political theorists appear to lack any influence over their own subject matter. It seems that if a political theorist saw two children on the verge of death, one from malnutrition, the other from preventable disease, our hero might seclude himself in a library and devise an appropriate principle of priority. The artist, on the other hand, might put something in a white room.

The problem, some commentators have argued, is that contemporary analytical philosophy has become a factory for utopias, for theories of justice which are characterized by a conscious lack of concern for action in the real world. Accordingly, political theory has entered a phase of self-assessment, of navel-gazing, not unlike the art world's own scrutiny of its practices and institutions, where the question 'What is Politics?' is raised anew. An overview of this debate could be of interest to politically oriented artists, to illuminate the many ways one can approach the political.

In recent years, a number of political theorists have advocated a shift of focus toward the real, toward the actual state of human affairs, rather than abstract models of human potential.⁴ No one doubts that normative theories have a place in the study of politics, but the concern is that political theory has been swamped by normative approaches, reducing the discipline to a moral philosophical study of the public sphere. In this respect, say critics, political theory has lost any sense of the political, of the contested and messy nature of politics. The empirical dimension, on the other hand, has been left to political science, which looks alarmingly ever more like a sub-discipline of economics.

For these realist critics, the golden bull is John Rawls, the most influential twentieth-century political philosopher in the Anglo-American world. His theory of 'justice as fairness' looms over the discipline, a point about which other political theorists orient themselves, in agreement or otherwise.

Rawls's first book, humbly titled *A Theory of Justice* and published in 1971, is long, dull, dry, meticulous and tiresomely impressive. His first move is to ask us to imagine the ideal form of society, as if we were to become a member of it. Crucially, he forces us to be impartial by imposing a 'veil of ignorance', so that we do not know what position in that society we will hold, whether we will be old or

young, rich or poor, talented or otherwise, and so on. From this 'Original Position', we are then asked to consider—with Rawls's persuasive guidance—the basic structure of the social institutions that we would reasonably agree to, pursuing our rational self-interest in consultation with our moral intuitions. His presumption is that reasonable people would agree on a utopia of liberal egalitarianism, a society that would take care of us no matter what hand we were dealt in life, a place that was preeminently fair, if a little dull. (Which raises the question, memorably made by the 1993 film *Demolition Man*, do we actually want to live in an ideal society?)

Broadly, Rawls's critics fall into two sorts: those who dispute his theory, and those who dispute his approach. The former sort are essentially involved in the ongoing renovation of Rawls—annexing, trimming or polishing certain aspects of his theory, an ongoing endeavour which constitutes a large part of analytic political philosophy over the last forty years. The latter sort of critics include those that I've already described, who argue that Rawls's approach is aloof from political reality, a liberal vision with troubling distortions of fact. After all, the individuals who populate Rawls's 'Original Position'—rational, self-interested, stripped of social identity—are nothing like the people who really populate this planet, embedded in cultural and social histories, caught in gender categories, and guided by feelings and instincts and folk wisdom.

To Rawls's credit, he was well aware of this issue and drew a distinction between ideal theory and non-ideal theory. Only the latter was obliged to consider the facts of the world, taking seriously the issues of feasibility and practical impact. Ideal theory, on the other hand, was based purely on moral principles from the bottom up; this was its moral strength and, of course, its pragmatic weakness. Yet, as long as such utopias are not applied 'as is' upon the world, then what does it matter if they aren't sensitive to the facts? The outright rejection of ideal theory, as one writer recently put it, is simply 'utopophobia'.⁵

This seems largely right. There is a place for pure utopianism, for theories untainted by facts. After all, facts about the world only ever seem to limit our moral horizons, and rarely ever extend them. But what sense is there in developing a theory of justice with no ambition of applying it to the world? How is it that analytical political philosophers can work day and night to sculpt ideal ethical systems, competing with their colleagues for moral superiority, yet claim to have no interest or responsibility for how these systems are implemented, nor if their systems are still attractive when put into practice? By making the ideal/non-ideal distinction, political philosophers have simply outsourced the issue of implementation to whoever might be interested (social scientists? policy analysts? politicians?). This doesn't seem to satisfy the range of activities that political theory should be engaged in.⁶

On this point, the critics are undoubtedly correct: the discipline of political theory, as a whole, needs to focus more on real politics. But should we therefore run into the arms of realism? After all, realism in its purest form is profoundly conservative. It has nothing to say about the future, nothing to say about the injustices it finds, nothing to say at all except for what the status quo *really* looks like.

Indeed, whenever 'realists' make prescriptive claims, even the most modest proposals, they are revealing their detachment from perfect realism, smuggling in prescriptions under the banner of description. It happens surprisingly often: 'realists' slide from observations about the plurality of social life, or the essential contestability of political concepts, into proposals for agonistic pluralism or deliberative democracy. This is not to say that their observations are wrong, nor that their proposals aren't attractive; it is to say that a different sort of argument is required. The fact that we do sometimes disagree is no reason to claim that we *ought* to sometimes disagree, just as the fact that we *do*

sometimes act self-interestedly is no reason to claim that we *ought* to act as such. Perhaps there are good reasons for acting these ways in certain situations (or for choosing to resist the temptation), but such reasons cannot be derived alone from the existence of that phenomenon.⁷

A utopia orientates change; it gives us bearings in the messy world of real politics. Even though it is a 'not-place', a figment of the imagination, the utopia can indirectly shape the world by guiding non-ideal policy and motivating political action; while the dystopia plays the same role in reverse, a warning rather than an invitation. As Raymond Geuss remarked, 'An imagined threat might be an extremely powerful motivation to action, and an aspiration, even if built on fantasy, is not nothing, provided it really moves people to action.'⁸ Yet Geuss, as a realist, warns against taking this too far, against fully surrendering the distinction between fact and mythology. It is not inconsistent, he argues, for a realist to admit the influence of religion upon the real world, yet to simultaneously deny the plausibility of religious claims about truth and morality. This is the fleet-footedness that advocates of idealist principles need to cultivate, the ability to recognise what is admirable and what is absurd about their dreams.

Consider one of the more successful idealist projects of recent history, the human rights regime. It promotes the rights that humans have simply by virtue of being human. As a diagnosis of the human condition, the notion of human rights is somewhat ludicrous, an existential tautology which wills itself into being. At the same time, however, it is sensible to recognise that the human rights regime has had a substantive and often positive impact on the world, especially by providing us with a language and a set of institutions that can constrain the powers of the state—that wondrous yet terrible invention. In this sense, we might commit to human rights for purely practical reasons, like Pascal wagering to believe in God.⁹ Moreover, by tinkering with the human rights regime's tangible manifestations, we can reinforce the positive impacts of rights and curtail the negative—for, yes, there are times when even rights go bad.

By slipping between these perspectives, between idealism and pragmatism, between the prescriptive and descriptive, one can develop a more sophisticated attitude toward the political. I chided John Cage for his fulsome endorsement of Mao Zedong, yet who knows what worrying commitments we hold today. Is it sensible, for instance, to have unqualified support for humanitarian aid when some organizations are tainted by ulterior motives and questionable impacts, and when others are accepting funds from states which regard the humanitarian sector as a new source of soft power? Or what about the unconditional relativism of certain post-modern theories, which are beginning to look suspiciously like apologia for complacency in the face of global injustice? By recognising the different roles that political ideas can play, it is possible to applaud an idea's merits without offering unqualified endorsement, or to criticize its faults without rejecting it completely.

To sum up, there are distinct ways in which an artist or theorist can engage with the political. First, one can use their imagination to create utopias, to concoct possible worlds that are not responsible to the limitations of the here and now. This is utopianism or ideal normative theory. Second, one can engage theoretically with the real world, with an emphasis on feasibility, in which case the utopia should only serve as a compass bearing, a distant star to navigate by. This is non-ideal normative theory or prescriptive theory. Third, one can attempt to stand outside of ethics and focus purely on description, examining the ideologies and utopias that inform political behaviour. This is pure realism or descriptive theory. And finally one can roll up their sleeves and 'do something real', dirtying their hands in the pursuit of what one believes to be right. This, of course, is political action.

Most importantly, though, the artist or theorist should be aware of slippage between these roles; they must keep track of *which* hat they have on *when*. It is fine to be an idealist, a pragmatist, a realist, or an activist, and it is better still to be all four—but confusing these categories can be a dangerous game. People who presume to embody all in a single proposition are likely to be fools or would-be tyrants.

As for the question of whether art belongs to any particular category, the answer is emphatically no. Artists can, should and will do whatever they want, which includes dismissing the topic of politics altogether. Certainly, from a historical perspective, it is possible to see artists slipping into any of these roles. The artistic equivalent of non-ideal theory, that muddled middle ground between idealism and reality, is propaganda or didactic art, compromised as it is by political and communicative considerations. The history of art is, of course, brimming with examples of the utopian and the descriptive, perhaps due to art's traditional emphases on the imaginative and the figurative. The latter role especially, the role of the 'artist as witness', has generated some of the more canonical examples of political imagery. (I'm thinking of the usual suspects: Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, Picasso's *Guernica*, and so on—not entirely unmotivated by normative concerns, but at least free of didactic propositions.) In this descriptive role, art has perhaps been surpassed by photojournalism, but the representation of political ideas, decoupled from normative claims, remains fertile ground for artists, trading ideological structure for the human form.¹⁰

As for political action, for implementing real change in the world, it seems to me that the artist—and indeed the political theorist—has not a lot to offer. That isn't their point, their strength, their function. While some have tried to bridge the divide between art and agency-situationism most obviously—it is an awkward straddle, usually requiring one role to usurp the other. Furthermore, art and political theory have a slow turnaround time, an elite audience, and an elitist conceptual language; it is not the stuff of widespread change. The young Adolf Hitler, a working artist and aspiring architect, understood this fact, regrettably. Artists or theorists with an interest in political activism are best to engage in political activism—this is simply the most efficient application of energy.

Because, in the final analysis, the real political work is done by the world, by a messy mélange of political agents with mixed motivations, by individuals and states and ideologies which all shape one another, by contingency, chance and unintended consequences. In this practical sphere, our most direct influence is as normal citizens who vote at elections, join public protests, donate money to charities, boycott certain products, enter the civil service, or ignore the whole ignoble mess and retreat like Matisse to paint flowers and fruit bowls. Dissident artists are really just dissidents; art just the vehicle for their dissent. As artists and theorists, the best we can do is tinker with ideas, refining them and replicating them, and the world will either respond or it won't.

he wanted. See Günter Berghaus (1996), *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, Providence, Rhode Island: Berghahn Books.

3. Curiously, an Associated Press report of protests in Wall Street on 29th April 2010 mentioned that one of the placard-holding protestors had a jewel-encrusted skull with the words 'Financial Terrorists'. Conversely, such skulls can also be seen in the window displays of European jewellery stores. Such is the ambivalent influence of Hirst's *For the Love of God*.
4. See, for instance, Bonnie Honig (1993), *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Chantal Mouffe (2005), *On the Political*, Abingdon, New York: Routledge; and Raymond Geuss (2008), *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
5. David Estlund (2008), *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
6. See Marc Stears (2005), 'The Vocation of Political Theory: Facts, Principles, and the Politics of Opportunity', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4: 325-50; and Michael Freeden (2005), 'What should the "Political" in Political Theory Explore?', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13: 113-134
7. I am not one to declare that you cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Indeed, I think that, in a broad sense, all normative claims derive from facts about biology, psychology, culture, geography, and so on. However, I do endorse David Hume's original wariness of people who slip unreflectively between is-talk and ought-talk, a far subtler distinction. See Richard Joyce (2007), *The Evolution of Morality*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press; and Kwame Anthony Appiah (2008), *Experiments in Ethics*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
8. Geuss, *ibid*.
9. Pascal decided that it was better to believe in God for the prudential reason that the small chance of spending infinity in Hell outweighed the earthly benefits of atheism. Similarly, we might choose to believe in human rights for fear of what the world would be like without them.
10. For an example of a non-normative analysis of political concepts, see Michael Freeden (1994), 'Political Concepts and Ideological Morphology', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 2 (2):140-164.

1. Curiously, this more cynical interpretation of the word emerges some time after More coined it, first attributed to Roger North in 1734 who declared, 'Young men, for want of experience, [...] create Utopias in their own imagination, and calculate according to their present fancy.'

2. In *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), Marinetti's feverish hymn to the prospect of a merciless mechanical age, he declared: 'We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.' Unfortunately, he got what

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