

Bookchin Utopianism

&

Futurism

To build the future from the rich potentialities of humanity, not from paralyzing limitations created by presentday social barbarism; to seek what is fresh, new, and emergent in the human condition, not what is stagnant, given, and regressive; to work within the realm of what *should* be, not what is—these alternatives separate two entirely antagonistic ways about thinking about the world. Truth, conceived as an evolving process of thought and reality, always appears on the margins of experience and practice, even as the center seems triumphant and almost all-pervasive. To be in the minority is not necessarily testimony to the futility of an ideal or a vision; it is often a token of what is yet to come in the fulfillment of human and social potentialities. Indeed, nothing is more insidious than the myth that rapid success and popularity are evidence of truth. Success and popularity, in the sense of a massive human commitment to an ideal, are matters of growth, painstaking education, development, and the ripening of conditions that render the actualization of human and social potentialities the real epochal changes in the individual and society.

To build the future from the social limitations of society, from the stagnant, the given, and the regressive is to see the "future" merely as an extrapolation of the present. It is the "future" as present quantified, whether by expansion or attrition. Vulgarians like the Alvin Tofflers have made futurism into a matter of "shock"; the Paul Ehrlichs into a matter of demographic catastrophe; the Marshall MacLuhans into a matter of media; the Herman Kahns and Anthony Weiners into a matter of technocratic "scenarios"; the Buckminster Fullers into a matter of mechanistic design; the Garrett Hardins into a matter of ecofascistic ethics. Whatever claims these futurists may make for their "visions" or "dreams," their scenarios are notable for one compelling fact: they offer no challenge to the bases of the status quo. What exists in nearly all futuristic "scenarios" and "visions" is the extension of the present — be it into the year "2000." into

space, into the oceans or under the earth. The status quo, in effect, is enlarged rather than challenged, even by futurists who profess to favour "miniaturization" and "decentralization." It is presupposed that the existing political, economic, property, and value systems, often the existing cities, media networks, bureaucracy, multinational corporations, market structure, monetary relations, and even military and police machinery—all, will *continue to exist* in one form or another. Futurists rarely examine their highly conventional presuppositions. Like the customs of archaic societies, the premises of the prevailing society are not merely assumed but rather so completely introjected into futuristic thought that its hierarchical, domineering, and property structure do not even lie on the surface of consciousness. These structures are extended to the future *as such*, hence the future merely becomes the present writ large (or small) with the verbal veneer of a utopian vocabulary. It is interesting to note that Kubrick's cult movie, "2001," retains the military cadres, the scientific banalities, the cold-war ambience, even the fast-food emporia and svelte airline hostesses of the period in which it was produced. The "light show" that explodes toward the end of the movie, a product of the thirties dance floor, is Kubrick's principal concession to the counterculture of the sixties—a culture that has since become a caricature of itself.

Futurism, in fact, is the specious "utopianism" of environmentalism as distinguished from the unsettling logic of ecology. It can afford to be schizoid and contradictory because the society from which it projects its "visions" is itself schizoid and contradictory. That Buckminster Fuller can describe man as "a self-balancing, 28-jointed adapter-base biped, an electrochemical reduction plant, integral with the segregated stowages of special energy extracts in storage batteries," the human nervous system as a "universally distributed telephone system needing no service for 70 years if well-managed," and the human mind as a "turret in which are located telescopic and microscopic self-registering and recording range-finders, a spectroscope, *et cetera*"—and still be described by his dazzled acolytes as an "ecologist," a "citizen of the world" (one may justly ask: which one?), and as a "utopian visionary" should come as no surprise. It would be trite merely to examine the extent to which Fuller's "ecology" parallels La

Mettrie's treatment of man as a machine. What counts is that his constituency often fail to exhibit even a glimmer of insight into his analytically mechanistic outlook and the serious challenge it poses to an organically ecological sensibility. Ultimately, it is not the schizophrenia of Fuller that is startling and the extent to which his acolytes meld his mechanistic contradictions with ecology but, even more fundamentally, the schizophrenia and contradictions that riddle present-day society. If holism implies, at the very least, a unity and coherence of relations, the present-day society is the most fragmented in history.

A society that has substituted means for ends, consistency for truth, technique for virtue, efficiency for the human good, quantity for quality, and object for subject is a society that is literally designed for no other purpose but survival on any terms. To continue to "exist"—whether or not that existence is meaningful, satisfying, creative, and realizes the potentialities of the human spirit—leads to adaptation as an end in itself. Insofar as survival is the only principle or end that guides the behaviour of the present-day society, any means that can promote that end is socially acceptable. Hence solar power can co-exist with nuclear power, "appropriate" technology with high technology, "voluntary simplicity" with media-orchestrated opulence, decentralization, with centralization, "limits to growth" with unlimited accumulation, communes with multinational corporations, hedonism with austerity, and mutual aid with competition.

But beneath this goal of survival is not mere existence as such. The present-day society has a definite character. It is a propertied society that concentrates economic power in corporate elites. It is a militaristic society that concentrates the means of violence in professional soldiers. It is a bureaucratic society that concentrates political power in centralized state institutions. It is a patriarchal society that allocates authority to men in varying degrees. And it is a racist society that places a minority of whites in a self-deceptive sovereignty over a vast worldwide majority of peoples of colour. Taken together, the prevailing society retains assumptions about the economy, politics, sex roles, and ethnic heritage of humanity that are prudently hidden from consciousness. Hence its concern with survival and adaptation is guided by distinct institutions, values, prejudices, and traditions

that must always be open to critical examination. Survival and adaptation keep these assumptions hidden by providing a technique for masking them with the rhetoric of "tolerance" and "co-existence." The society will "co-exist" with anything or any vision that does not follow its logic of critique and fulfillment. To "play the game" with a cordial smile, to mingle the most odious contradictions with courtesy, to seek the lowest common denominator in ideas and constituencies with stylish "sensitivity," to ignore coherence and consistency by appealing to "consensus" and "unity"—all of this makes "coexistence" the device *par excellence* for adaptation, survival, and above all, the domination and sovereignty of the status quo.

The essence of futurism and, for that matter, of environmentalism and Marxism is that the society's institutions, values, and prejudices are not examined in a truly fundamental sense. Where futurism does more than merely extend the present into the future, it often denatures alternatives that are designed to radically replace the present by a qualitatively new society. When Le Corbusier and his traditional opponent, Frank Lloyd Wright, both described the city as a "machine," their disputes over urban gigantism and centralization became meaningless. Their shared notion that human communities can be described in mechanistic terms effaced the real significance of their differences. When Fuller can now describe the earth as a "spaceship," his claims to an ecological sensibility become a travesty of ecology. When MacLuhan can impart to media a capacity to produce a "global village," the contradictory nature of the term itself renders his "utopianism" into a mockery of utopia. Unless we study this society with a third eye that is not born of its institutions, relations, and values, we become ideologically and morally entrapped in presuppositions that have been built into our normal thinking as unconsciously as breathing.

The power of utopian thinking, properly conceived as a vision of a new society that questions *all* the presuppositions of the present-day society, is its inherent ability to see the future in terms of radically new forms and values. By "new," I do not merely mean "change"—"change" that can merely be quantitative, inertial, and physical. I mean "new" in terms of *development* and *process* rather than "motion" and "displacement." The

latter are merely logistical phenomena; they are changes of place and quantity as distinguished from a development that is qualitative. Hence, under the rubric of "utopia" I place only consistently revolutionary visions of a future that are *emergent*, the results of deep-seated processes that involve the radical reconstruction of personality, sensibility, sexuality, social management, technics, human relations, and humanity's relationship with nature. The time lapse that turns present into future is not merely quantitative; it is a change in development, form, and quality.

Utopian thinking has its own history as well as the historically specific visions utopias unconsciously absorb from the society they wish to replace. That More's utopia tolerated slavery, that Andrea's was modelled on the monasteries of his time, that Mably and Morelly based their codes of "nature" on Sparta, and that Rabelais's Abbey of Theleme partly anticipated the court life of Versailles are obvious. Utopias have been modelled on long-gone recollections of tribal society, the Athenian polis, modern "primitive" communities, or, as in Bacon's case, the laboratory, in Sade's the boudoir, and in the contemporary cinema, the "Saturday night" discotheque toward which the entire week converges. What crucially distinguishes utopias, be they real or specious, from each other is the extent to which they are libertarian. From this standpoint, even the remarkable man who devised the word "utopia," Thomas More, could hardly be called a utopian, not to speak of Plato, Campanella, Andrea, Bacon, Defoe, and the so-called "communists" of the Enlightenment, Mably and Morelly, later Saint-Simon, Cabet, and Bellamy.

By contrast, folk utopias like the Land of Cockayne, visions of the future advanced by the Diggers of the English Revolution, Rabelais's Abbey of Theleme, and most notably, Charles Fourier's phalanstery and William Morris's quasi-medieval commune, remain inherently libertarian. What strikes us about these visions is their own seemingly *unconscious* counterthrust to the unstated presuppositions of "civilization" (to use this word in Fourier's sense). Even where they seem to accept the claims of property (Rabelais and Fourier), they inherently deny its authority over freedom. "Do as thou wilt!" — the explicit maxim of Rabelais's Abbey of Theleme and the implicit maxim of Fourier's phal-

anstery — necessarily subverts the power of property by denying the power of authority itself. To the hidden presuppositions of the present-day society, these utopians advance hidden presuppositions of their own which we shall examine below. Hence the need for the *concreteness* of utopian thinking, its specific and day-to-day character, its narrative qualities. Literally, one form of *everyday* life is opposed to another form of *everyday* life. Ironically, the theoretical paucity of utopian thinking, at least in the past, is its *raison d'être*, its hold on the mind and on behaviour. Rousseau realized the importance of that power in *Émile* just as Sade in the *Philosophy of the Bedroom*. Human beings as the embodiment of ideals deal with us without losing their credibility and concreteness. Their very humanness — one thinks here particularly of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, of Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* and *Bougainville* dialogue, and Claude Tillier's *Mon Oncle Benjamin* — engages our humanness in the fullness of life and personal involvement.

The immensity of the maxim, "Do as thou wilt!", is a direct expression of freedom that goes beyond the most expansive notions of democracy, even of the direct democracy practiced by the Athenian popular assembly, the New England town meetings of the 1760s, and the revolutionary Parisian sections of 1793. Ultimately, what these utopians affirm are the claims of *personality* (not merely those of an abstractly conceived "individual") over the power of custom, tradition, and institutions. When the Spanish Anarchists of the 1930s raised the cry, "Death to institutions — not to people," they more closely approximated this fleeting Rabelaisian and Fourierist recognition of personality than any radical movement of our era. Not that institutions as such were abolished in Rabelais's and Fourier's utopias, both of which have a manorial ambience. But their institutions exist to reinforce and enrich personality, not to diminish human uniqueness and creativity. The very tension that emerges between individual and society, so marked even in the decadent phase of the *polis*, is simply removed.

The removal of this tension is the most significant feature of the libertarian utopias. Literally, it is achieved by recognizing not only the claims of freedom but of spontaneous expression. Sexuality,

avowed over technical rationalization, propaganda, happiness, uniformity, and mass mobilization—features that the authoritarian utopians were to share with the authoritarian socialists and, no less pointedly, many futurists of the present day. The historic demand for “happiness” had been replaced by the more liberatory demand for pleasure. The claims of unfettered sexuality, variety, creation, and a full recognition of individual proclivities and personal uniqueness become the ends that efficiency, coordination, work, and technics are meant to serve. The two major divisions of life that were to be opposed to each other by all great social theorists from Plato to Freud—the “realms” of freedom and necessity—are thus integrated.

That the libertarian utopians of the past did not provide “blueprints” for the future that we can regard as acceptable today hardly requires emphasis. “Blueprints,” in any case, were vehicles for a concreteness that pitted the presuppositions of the new against the old. Their need for detail is now irrelevant to an age that requires full *consciousness* of *all* presuppositions, be they the hidden ones of the status quo or of the utopians, to attain a totally liberated ecological society. In a sense, we must now be free of history—not of its memory but its icy grasp on consciousness—to *create* history rather than to be created by it. The historical roots of the old utopians are only too clear to be acceptable to a more demanding era. The Abbey of Theleme was serviced by grooms, farmers, blacksmiths, in short, by an anonymous body of subservient people who could not practice its maxim. Nor did Fourier open his phalansteries to the destitute and the maimed, the victims of the new industrial bourgeoisie he so savagely attacked. Whether any of these utopias were possible on their own terms, within the material context of their own level of technical development, will always remain uncertain. What is important about their vision is its extraordinarily far-reaching radical nature: they had challenged and, in a faltering way, tried to remove the power of need over freedom—indeed, the tainting of the ideal of freedom by archaic notions of need. From this challenge, all else stemmed—the removal of the power of social and economic rationalization over personality, work over play, austerity over health institutions.

Utopia has now ceased to be mythic. The concern of this generation with the future, a concern that emerges from the unimaginable power hierarchy can command physically and psychically, has made utopianism a matter of foresight rather than dreamy visions. Futurism has abolished the future. It has done so by assimilating the future to a present that thereby acquires a stagnant eternity by virtue of the extent to which it permeates the eras that lie ahead. Not to form visions that break radically with the present is to deny a future that can be qualitatively different from the present. This is worse than an abolition of the wisdom of history; it is an abolition of the promise of society to advance into a more humanistic world.

Utopia redeems the future. It recovers it for the generations to come and restores it to them as a future which they can creatively form and thoroughly emancipate—not with hidden presuppositions but conscious artfulness. The greatest utopian ideals—those of Rabelais, Fourier, and Morris—must be projected beyond the limits of their time. Not only do we seek pleasure rather than the small satisfactions of “happiness,” personality rather than the egotism of individuality, play rather than monotonous work, mutual aid rather than competition, beauty rather than austerity; we seek a new unity with nature, the abolition of hierarchy and domination, the fullness of spontaneity and the wealth of diversity.

To draw up a blueprint—a “scenario”—for the realization of such a utopia would be a regression to the hidden presuppositions and the concreteness that earlier utopians opposed to the hidden presuppositions and explicit realities of their own prevailing societies. We do not need the novels, diagrams, character studies, and dialogues that the traditional utopians employed to oppose one form of everyday life to another. That everyday life must be central to the revolutionary project of our times can now be stated explicitly and rooted in a wealth of consciousness and in the commitment of revolutionaries to their movements as cultures, not merely as organizations. More demanding than the “blueprints” of yesterday are the ecological imperatives of today. We must “phase out” our formless urban agglomerations into ecocommunities that are scaled to human dimensions, sensitively scaled in size, population, needs, and architecture to the

specific ecosystems in which they are to be located. We must use modern technics to replace our factories, agribusiness enterprises, and mines by new, human-scaled ecotechnologies that deploy sun, wind, streams, recycled wastes, and vegetation to create a comprehensible *people's* technology. We must replace the state institutions based on professional violence by social institutions based on mutual aid and human solidarity. We must replace centralized social forms by decentralized popular assemblies; representatives and bureaucracies by coordinating bodies of spokespersons with mandated administrative powers, each subject to rotation, sortition, and immediate recall.

All of this must be done if we are to resolve the ecological crisis that threatens the very existence of the biosphere in the decades that lie ahead. It is not a visionary "blueprint" or "scenario" that mandates these far-reaching alterations in our social structures and relations, but the dictates of nature itself. But these alterations become social desiderata because they bring the sun, wind, soil, vegetation, and animals back into our lives to achieve a new sense of renewal with nature. Without recovering an ecological relationship with the biosphere and profoundly altering our sensibilities toward the natural world, our hope of achieving an ecological society regresses to a merely futuristic "scenario."

Equally significantly, we must renew our relationship to each other in a rich nexus of solidarity and love, one that ends all hierarchical and domineering relationships in our species. To decentralize, to develop an "appropriate technology," to aspire to simplicity, all merely for reasons of logistics, technical efficiency, and conservation would be to betray the ideal of human scale, human participation, and human self-development. To compromise decentralization with centralization "where necessary" (to use Marcuse's memorable formulation), to use "appropriate technology" in conjunction with factories, to foster "voluntary simplicity" amidst mindless opulence is to taint the entire ecological project in a manner that renders the ecological crisis unresolvable. Like Gresham's Law, not only does bad money drive out good, but futuristic "scenarios" will destroy the utopian dimension of the revolutionary project. Never in the past has it been so necessary to retain the utmost clarity, coherence, and purposefulness that is required of our era. In a society that

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has made survival, adaptation, and co-existence a mode of domination and annihilation, there can be no compromises with contradictions—only their total resolution in a new ecological society or the inevitability of hopeless surrender.

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