

Mao and Utopianism

In summing up “the essence of Mao’s political role, and its profound ambiguity,” the concluding paragraph of Stuart Schram’s very useful book, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, goes directly to the central problem of my essay. Schram wrote:

Eternal rebel, refusing to be bound by the laws of God or man, nature or Marxism, he led his people for three decades in pursuit of a vision, initially noble, which turned increasingly into a mirage, and then into a nightmare. Was he a Faust or Prometheus, attempting the impossible for the sake of humanity, or a despot of unbridled ambition, drunk with his own power and own cleverness. More of the later than used to be imagined, no doubt, and yet something of the former as well. Even today, the final verdict, both on the man and on his thought, must still remain open.¹

For Schram, then, insofar as he either attempted “the impossible for the sake of humanity” or “was drunk with his own power and own cleverness,” Mao was an admixture of both “utopian” and “despot” in some yet to be resolved combination. But since for Schram, neither quality is to be admired, this leaves us no choice but to consider Mao’s policies during his three decades of rule as without redemption. Schram, in fact, is more sympathetic than this conclusion would suggest, and this turns, critically, I believe, on the question of Mao’s “utopianism.” In what follows, I will not speak directly to charge of despotism and instead concentrate on the utopian character of his thought and action. But to do this, I need to look more carefully at the attribution “utopian.”

What is a utopian? In his important book, Krishan Kumar argues that “utopia is not universal,” and “appears only in societies with the classical and Christian heritage, that is, only in the West.”² Kumar has in mind Thomas More, who, he says, invented utopia. This sense of “utopia” is clear enough: “The Golden Age, the Ideal City, the Land of Cokaygne,” “ideal otherness.” For Kumar, Plato’s Republic “is the only classical text looks even remotely like More’s Utopia,” and, as M.I. Finley, has noted, it is the only text from antiquity that remotely looks like any sort of utopia (p. 24). Why is More’s work “utopian” and Plato’s work is not?

There is a distinction here of some importance. Kumar argues that Plato makes it clear that “the state that he has sketched is not a blueprint for the practical guidance of some future reformer, but an ideal to be contemplated in the present by the individual mind” (p. 25). On this reading, Plato is not offering a picture of the Ideal State. He is not supposing that any real, existing state would look very much like his Ideal State. Indeed, “Plato’s example was followed not so much by the utopian writers but the political philosophers and political theorists of later centuries,” by e.g., Bodin, Harrington, Locke, and Rousseau. These writers “lay down various postulates, propositions and presumptions about the nature of man and society,” in terms of which prescriptions follow about (say) the ideal constitution. Contemplating “the ideal constitution” is also utopian, but unlike the former sense, there is no requirement that the details be fleshed out so as to invite imaginative participation. It is thus simply an error to accuse Marxists, for example, of a

failure to provide “blueprints,” which they explicitly and rightly disavow. Nor, even more important, need it be supposed that the abstract ideal, for example “democracy,” as in in Rousseau, Dewey or Marx, will have some already envisaged institutional form. Rather, on the most plausible construal, the abstract ideal defines a goal and the principle, e.g., “participation” guides action. Given the ideal, our aim should be increase “participation” however and wherever we can.

But if there need be no claim that the ideal will be realized, it is essential that it *could be* realized. Political theory, as noted, either explicitly or implicitly “lays down various postulates, propositions and presumptions about the nature of man and society.” It will be a foolish utopianism which lays down presumptions which are inconsistent with what is know to be either humanly or socially possible. It is easy to argue that a social order which required of its members total selflessness or universal love is not probative, and one might dismiss the anarchism of (say) Kropotkin on such grounds, but there is nothing utopian about assuming that individuals are capable of knowing their interests and of participating in decisions which affect them. Unfortunately, it will not always be obvious whether assumptions have been overstretched. The overcoming of any sort of division of labor seems very farfetched; so too, the elimination of all inequalities. But so, indeed, is the idea, so dominant today in many quarters, that “markets should be free,” as if, indeed, history gave us no evidence of the self-destructive tendencies of unconstrained capitalism. All we have is history, and while it gives glimpses of what may possible (that is, consistent with humans and societies as we have known them), it surely has not tested all of the possibilities. Where the thought of Mao stands as regards assumptions for his “ideal” we can consider momentarily.

Indeed, utopian thought directed as articulating an abstract (but realizable) ideal which can guide practice is not only not to be rejected, but is absolutely essential. Mannheim was quite correct to insist that if there is any hope that we can shape history, then “reality-transcending” ideals are necessary. It is in this sense that Kumar notes, rightly, that “socialism has been, to date, the last utopia” (p. 421). With Mannheim, we should here be more than fearful of the belief, so popular now that, since “socialism” has been tried and found wanting, it is at best utopian in just the sense that it is an *impossible* ideal. “There is no alternative”(TINA) is then either an Ayn Rand, individualist, free market utopia or as perhaps more usually, a vision-less politics, a politics whose only goal is to maintain (a manifestly less than ideal) status quo. (This was well put by former President Bush who was reported to have asked: “What is this vision thing?”) “The disappearance of utopia,” as Mannheim says, “brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing.”³

It is quite one thing, however, to articulate ideals and quite another to suppose that one can bring about some concrete realization of an ideal by a sheer act of will. Kumar notes, correctly, that Marxism, as a putative “scientific socialism,” distanced itself from the idea that the envisaged future could be realized “before the time was ripe.” This idea has usually been associated with the characteristic determinist and eschatological version of Marxist theory of history, such that the socialist “stage” (on later writings, “the first stage” of the “two-stage” development to “communism) would follow, inevitably, only

upon the full maturation of the capitalist “stage” of development. This idea, fully articulated only in the 2nd International, of course, was challenged by Lenin, and then by Mao.

We need first of all to assert that nothing in history, except for change itself, is inevitable: If indeed, if historical outcomes were inevitable, then, as above, “man himself becomes no more than a thing.” Put another way, what happens in history is the product of human action, but since the consequences of actions are never fully predictable—there are always unintended consequences--outcomes are inevitably contingent. Even what will probably happen may not happen. But “the time is not ripe” argument raises a critical problem as regards practices which may be judged to be utopian. Put simply, actors must ask: Given the prevailing conditions, what is possible? But this raises new problems.

First, how large is the gap between the existing reality and the envisaged (and highly abstract) future? Second, between the (merely) possible and the (certainly) impossible, there is a range of probability: from the likely or highly probable to the almost certainly impossible. Plainly, there is nothing utopian about acts which intend but minimal change and whose outcomes, accordingly, are highly likely—even if, even here, these will have unintended consequences. On the other hand, one is manifestly utopian if one supposes that one can, even with some dramatic effort, produce the almost certainly impossible.

If the gap is large, then we need to speak of revolution. We think of revolutionaries as those who aim to bring about a radically new social structure. They must, accordingly, have an alternative abstract ideal. We also nearly always think of revolutionary action as insurrectionary, involving considerable violence. The two ideas are not logically connected since one could bring about a radically new structure without insurrection. To be sure, because agents in old structures resist change, violence is the rule.

Classically, the coup d’etat is followed by effort to destroy the old order and replace it with the new. Revolutions in this sense are very often disappointments. Accordingly, there is a tendency to believe that revolutionary actors (in this sense) are *necessarily* utopian.

It is clear enough why this is so. Where the gap between the present and the envisaged future is large, there will be many unintended consequences. Moreover, to suppose that revolutionary action can fill the gap runs against all that we (now) know about social change. In all but the most radically unstable social systems, systems of belief, practices, and institutions are well-sedimented historically, so much so that, as Marx well recognized, they seem “natural.” People will continue to act on their old beliefs and try to reproduce their old habits even in what are imagined to be new structures. The result of revolutionary action will likely be chaos followed by a long and difficult effort to keep people from reproducing the old structures. This, too, will characteristically involve violence.

The foregoing anti-revolutionary argument is as hold as Edmund Burke's polemic against the revolution in France. But the argument need not issue in a conservatism. Marx thought that socialist revolution need not be insurrectionary and might well come by parliamentary means. But even if it did not, he knew very well that after state power had been conquered, social transformation would be a long slow process. The new society would have to be born from the old. Although it is too often overlooked, in the *Communist Manifesto*, following "the victory of democracy," Marx and Engels set out a profoundly gradualist program of social change: the elimination of rents (think here of Keynes), a progressive income tax (NB the assumptions here!), a central bank issuing credit (Alexander Hamilton!), free education for all. Marx and Engels *do not* argue, significantly, that the new economy will be centrally planned nor that decision-making will be in the hands of elite subset of "the party."

Of course, in neither Russia nor China, did Lenin and Mao have the conditions envisaged by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto*, and, course, they knew this. One might argue, accordingly, that in both cases, "the time was not ripe" and that, accordingly, both were viciously utopian. But this an obvious confusion. The time was not ripe for what? Surely, the time was ripe for *the conquering of state power*: what is actual is possible. To be sure, they were socialists and their goal was to produce socialism. But this was an abstract ideal to be realized in action. Since there is nothing impossible about this ideal, the real question becomes: what did they seek to accomplish *after* the conquering of state power? Did they ignore, discount, or misconceive actually existing conditions and, urged by a vision of the unfilled future, make *unreasonable* demands on the "unripe" reality?

While I believe that they did not, any answer to this question will be contestable. And it is important to see why. First, there is the problem of having an adequate grasp of the existing situation, including judgments about what other actors will do in response to one's one actions, and more generally, making judgments about the consequences, unintended and intended. No one will have a perfect understanding, and surely our understanding, after the fact, will be better than could have been available to the actors at the time of their actions. For example, Lenin, Bukharin and Trotsky came to agreement on the Bolshevik coup only because they believed that there would be revolution in Germany. Trotsky put the matter: "If the peoples of Europe do not arise and crush imperialism [N.B., not "capitalism"]. We shall be crushed—that is beyond doubt." Given the trajectory of the war, the revolutionary situation in Germany and the status of the SPD, this was not unreasonable. Of course, there was no revolution in Germany, the "allies" intervened in support of the counter-revolution, and the problem of holding together the new Soviet Union, still less of transforming it, took on entirely new dimensions.⁴

The understanding of existing reality defines the parameters of "reasonable" demands on the unripe future. But here again, there will be reasonable disagreement defined specifically in terms of how far one is willing to press the existing reality. That is, in addition to empirical questions about the consequences of present actions, there are questions of whether the risks to be taken—and taking *some* risk is inevitable—are justified. One might be cautious or one might take great risks. But there is no general answer to this question: Depending on the circumstances, caution may justified or

unwarranted. Great risk might be foolish or fully justified. As with the core assumptions regarding human nature and society, there is a range: at some point, policies become groundless and therefore “utopian” in the sense that one is seeking to do the impossible.

Given this background, then, I turn, finally, the question of Mao. For me, as regards both his core assumptions regarding human nature and society and as regards his willingness to take risk to move China towards his visionary goal, Mao was prepared to take greater risks than either Marx or Lenin. But, for me, at least, it cannot be said that he attempted the impossible or that he believed that will could overcome all obstacles.

It is often said that Mao underestimated the force of self-interest and that he made unreasonable assumptions about the willingness of people for self-sacrifice. It is a striking feature of the present, not only in the West but in China as well, that “human nature” is thought to be fundamentally self-interested, if not selfish, and unchanging. This is, of course, at the center of the prevailing dominance of market ideology all around the globe. The triumph of Reaganism/Thatcherism and the collapse of “actually existing socialism” in the USSR and Eastern Europe have, of course, propelled this ideological posture.

But most talk about “human nature” is purely ideological. Humans are capable of both greed and sacrifice. How they do in fact act is as much a matter of the social environment and specific circumstances of action. Mao surely did encourage and structure sacrifice—and got it—just as current propagandists encourage and structure greed—and often get it. Whatever one may say about either stance, neither is utopian in any useful sense. Indeed, what is utopian is the assumption that greed is good for everybody, since it assumes that, unleashed in a “free market,” the result is a wonderful “harmony.” But of course, there is no “harmony,” since there are not, never has been, nor likely will there be, “free markets” (in the required sense). One may as well assume a harmony of selflessness co-operators!

It may be argued, however, whether Mao assumed that the sacrifices demanded would be short term: “three years of struggle, followed by a thousand years of happiness.” As many have noted, The Great Leap was surely a stunningly ambitious attempt to realize a socialist vision, but the utopian quality of this was not so much the idea that critical elements of the socialist vision of eliminating alienation, and of achieving strong democracy and socialist justice could be immediately initiated. The campaign went some way in implementing these goals. The problem was: Could this be done along with economic development, and at what speed? Schram quotes a long 1955 text from Mao which concludes that a socialist society might be built “over three five-year plans, but to build a strong, highly industrialized socialist society will require several decades of hard work, say fifty years, or the entire half of the present century” (p. 112). But Schram argues that by the middle of 1955, Mao had changed his mind. I note here only that the evidence he presents is less than convincing. Still, it seems that Chinese propaganda did promote the idea that the period of sacrifice would be short.

Mao saw rightly that Marxists were mistaken in holding that no elements of the socialist “future” could be implemented until “the material productive forces” had reached some unspecified development. Soviet workers were sacrificing, and, as well, they

labored under conditions of the worst sort of alienation and had no say whatever in determining the conditions of their lives. They were told that “theory” required this. But, of course, such “theory” is easily contested (and indeed has been fatally contested!) Having rejected the theory, Mao could come to a very different understanding of the problem. Of course, if one assumes either the Marxist theory of the 2nd International, or, indeed, the dominating mainstream liberal theory of capitalism and democracy, it is easy to call Mao “utopian,” but this assumes, presumptively, that the only plausible socialist alternative to liberal capitalism is Soviet-style “socialism.” Mao did not believe this—and he had good reasons not to.

As Riskin has argued, almost from the beginning, Mao had criticized the Soviet model: its extreme centralization, its bureaucratic and technocratic institutionalization, its “neglect of the human initiative.”⁵ Moreover, as was plain enough, if neither the Chinese nor the Soviets had appropriate levels of “material productive forces” for the “transition” to “communism,” there was for China, the added fact of the immensely larger rural population. It would be the worst form of utopianism to suppose that even under the most favorable of circumstances, there was any rate of industrialization which, as Riskin notes, could rapidly include the bulk of the Chinese population into a modern non-agricultural economy (p. 4f).

The communes were a nearly self-evident theoretical “solution.” By means of the communes, revolutionary goals would not be separated from revolutionary means. “The communes were to abolish the distinctions between town and countryside, between mental and manual labor, between workers, peasants, and intellectuals—and indeed even hasten the abolition of the internal functions of the state.”⁶ To be sure, this is almost always taken (as by Meisner) to be a utopian solution. And, of course, they did achieve what was hoped for. “Three years of struggle” became five, then ten and still no “happiness.” But if we see why we think of this as utopian, it is critical to make a judgement about why the experiment failed.

First, it is quite clear that under economic conditions of relative autarchy of the units, there will be sacrifices in the standard of living: items of mass consumption so taken for granted in the advanced industrial societies will simply not be available. On the other hand, whether this a “sacrifice” will be function of expectations: what needs and wants are created and which then demand satisfaction. Maoist propaganda surely undermined its own credibility, perhaps because of its optimism regarding the gains and the speed at which they would come, but surely with its failure to anticipate or acknowledge the catastrophic famine.⁷

Second, it is quite clear as well that there will need to be some form of macro-economic coordination if there is to be any significant industrial development—a requirement exacerbated by the fact that within months of its genesis, the Chinese State was at war in Korea against the US led forces of the United Nations. The Chinese had accepted both Soviet assistance and the Soviet model of central planning. They had, if precipitously, rejected markets as coordinating macro-economic mechanisms. Although communes surely

did allow for greater participation and initiative and thus did prefigure the communist goal in real terms, how then would development proceed?

Riskin notes that if Mao rejected the 'one-big-workshop' model, his alternative was an utterly untheorized 'many-workshops' approach (p. 7). Indeed, Riskin finds no serious Chinese discussion of socialist macroeconomic (or middle-range economic) organization, a failure on the present view which promoted all the ensuing difficulties, and which, accordingly, made his policy seem "utopian." That is, on the present view, the problem was not so much Mao's "utopianism" but the absence of what, in retrospect, was a failure to articulate a genuine socialist alternative to the Soviet model which would be pertinent to the situation in China. It is of no small importance to note that most thinking on this topic does very little better than did the Chinese.⁸ The tragic upshot for the Chinese is summarized neatly by Riskin:

...in the face of continuous Maoist assaults on the ideology of central planning and the corps of specialists who implemented it, the centre progressively lost the capacity to plan effectively. Yet when the disorganization produced by mass campaigns became excessive, Mao, seeing no alternative, would acquiesce in the restoration of central planning, crippled as it was. At the same time, individual administrative organs, localities, and enterprises, unable to rely on the centre for resources needed to carry out plans, increasingly sought to ensure their own operations through 'self-reliance,' which came to mean the hoarding of materials and the establishment of duplicative operations. China got caught on a path between poles—rigid centralism and chaotic administrative decentralization—each of which seem a lesser evil only when farthest away (p. 7).

No discussion of Mao and utopianism would be complete without some comment on the Cultural Revolution and on Mao's "voluntarism."

It is important to say what "voluntarism" might mean. First, it sometimes refers to the Mao's rejection of the idea that outcomes depend entirely upon "objective" factors which are independent of the wishes or wills of persons. On this view, there are "objective laws" of history and, accordingly, a necessity to what occurs (or does not.) This view, as already noted, makes for an agent-less history. But if we are to have agents in history, then we must admit that however constrained (and enabled) people are by the circumstances of their lives, they make choices and that these have consequences on what then ensues. There is contingency in history exactly because "consciousness" and "will" are variables in historical change. For example, Mao wrote:

Conscious activity is a distinctive characteristic of man...This characteristic is manifested in all of man's acts, but nowhere more strongly than in war. Victory or defeat in a war is decided on the one hand by the military, political, economic, and geographical conditions, by the character of war and by international support on both sides. But it is not decided by these alone; these alone constitute the possibility of victory or defeat; they do not themselves decide the issue. To decide

the issue, subjective efforts must be added, efforts at directing and waging the war, i.e., conscious activity in war (Quoted from Schram, Thought, p. 55).

Second and related is the idea, discussed above, that socialism can come only after the material productive forces have been developed. But of course, there is nothing obviously wrong or utopian about a socialism which is *not* industrial or “post-scarcity.”

Third, it may refer to the idea that will and the moral energy of people can overcome all obstacles. No doubt that Mao was a populist and had a strong faith in the masses and perhaps especially the “poor and blank” rural masses.⁹ No doubt also that he counted heavily both on their commitment to the new society and, as noted, to their willingness to work for the new society; but there is little evidence that he believed that material conditions could simply be ignored or less radically, that they could, with sufficient persistence, be overcome. For example, there is nothing extraordinary or utopian in saying that “the subjective creates the objective,” for this need not mean that “the objective” is created out of thin air, but that what is created is created by people working purposively with materials at hand. (Cf. Schram, Thought, p. 132). The text just quoted continues:

People who direct a war cannot strive for victories beyond the limit allowed by the objective conditions, but within that they can and must strive actively for victory (p. 55).

The case of the Cultural Revolution is more problematic and troubling. Schram is surely correct that it was not the “necessary nor ineluctable culmination of Mao’s approach to revolution.” But it is much less clear that it was utopian thinking that led him to it or that the policy was irrational and predictably disastrous. No doubt, Mao was willing to take risks to restore key elements of the socialism that had been achieved and no doubt, the policy got wildly out of hand, with, consequently, dramatic unintended consequences. As with the Great Leap, if China was to be saved from anarchic dissolution, in response to these unintended and unpredictable consequences, Mao was forced to swing the pendulum again. That the whole episode was tragic is clear enough; on whether it was a risk worth taking, reasonable people can perhaps disagree.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 206.
- ² Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 19.
- ³ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), quoted by Kumar, p. 424.
- ⁴ See my discussion in *War and Democracy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Chapter 11.
- ⁵ Carl Riskin, *China's Political Economy: The Quest for Development Since 1949* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 6.
- ⁶ Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), p. 192.
- ⁷ Riskin notes that “both natural conditions and human error contributed to the situation, although their relative shares of the blame cannot be assessed.” No doubt, however, as he says, “Great Leap policies not only helped create the crisis but also caused costly delay in ameliorating it.” (p. 137). Especially critical here was “the politically motivated exaggeration of the size of the harvest and the destruction of objective reporting systems...” While any assessment of Great Leap policies must include the famine, the magnitude of the disaster has tended to distort a balanced view of the Great Leap.
- ⁸ This is hardly to place to offer any sort of discussion of these troubling issues. The central problem, strangely ignored by most Marxists, is the dilemma between putative “efficiencies” of planning and alienation (as defined by Marx). If allocation and distribution is planned, then presumably, one can achieve specific economic goals; but the price is lack of any sort of participation by workers or by workers as consumers. By far the best discussion is Diane Elson, “Market Socialism or Socialism of the Market” (*New Left Review*, Nov/Dec 1988, p. 3-44). The central planning model shares with neo-classical theory in defining efficiency in terms of “equilibrium,” but the centralized coordinated plan is an *ex ante* equilibrium. On this view, the planners play the role of Walrasian auctioneer. If planners could do this, only the planner would not be alienated: Everyone else is as much in the dark as they would be in a capitalist market economy. But it cannot work in any case. Not only must the planner know more than he could, but things change through time. So, as is clear enough, the price of central planning is both unfreedom and failure, the result of an inadequate grasp of alienation and of the necessary incapacity of any planner (as Hayek rightly saw) to have all the critical relevant information. This is the key. If we are to overcome alienation and allocate to satisfy our goals, each of us must be have all the relevant information regarding our interdependencies if we are to act freely and cooperatively. Elson’s abstract scheme to accomplish this is not in the least “utopian.”
- It is of considerable importance to notice that real markets do better in rational allocation than planned economies not because prices do what neoclassical theory says

they do, but because by means of *decentralization* `only a fraction of information about production possibilities and demand needs to be processed at any one time, in any one place' (p. 43). Whatever stability there is in capitalism depends critically on at least this much information being available. It is the feature of decentralized knowledge which can be generalized and expanded in socialized markets.

⁹ An excellent account may be found in D.W.Y. Kwok, "Mao Tse-Tung and Populism," *China: Development and Challenge*, edited by Lee Ngok and Leung Chi-Keung (Center for Asian Studies: University of Hong Kong, 1979).