

The dangers of Utopia

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The theme of utopia has an uplifting side and a dark side. The uplifting aspect is the idea of being part of a movement to free ourselves and others from oppression and injustice. This is simultaneously exhilarating and addictive. The addictive part of utopia, however, always ends up trumping the initial idealism. Why? Utopians inevitably adopt a messianic image of the world.

There have been three messianic revolutions in history: the American, French and Bolshevik revolutions. All three were global because their leaders and followers were convinced that the founding principles were universal. Utopians ultimately end with the goal of converting the world, that is, the creation of a new “man” on a global scale. Noble ends are never achieved because the means used become diabolical. The historian Barbara Tuchman writes that “revolutions produce OTHER men, not NEW men”¹.

Albert Camus, the French existentialist author lived through the rise of Hitler and fascism, Stalinism and the turbulence in French colonial Algeria. In his writings Camus assumes there are no transcendental values; yet, he does not accept a philosophy of nihilism. Camus believes that the world can and ought to combat oppression, suffering and tyranny. He simply opposes revolution as the means to this end.

In his book *The Rebel*, Camus distinguishes between a rebel and a revolutionary. A person living in oppression may find, according to Camus, that violence is necessary (all else having failed) to overcome an inhumane and intolerable reality. Rebellion is, in this situation justified; revolution is not. In a rebellion the immediate goal is to end the specific oppression, not, as in revolution, to create a “new man” with common values throughout the world.

Camus defines revolution and the use of force to create utopia as “the rational use of terror to establish future justice”². In *Noces* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes that “revolt is balanced by consent and the realization that the world is not entirely evil”³. Revolution, on the other hand, begins with consent but becomes authoritarian.

Images of a utopia are created ones. It is impossible to talk about justice and peace if one does not have an image of a just community and a world without violence. Myth plays an important role in the creation of images of utopia. Western civilization begins with Hebraic imagination and the Adamic myth of good and evil. It is followed in historical sequence by the Hellenic imagination which includes the Promethean myth along with Plato’s and Aristotle’s understanding of image and myth; the Medieval imagination refers to the Christian synthesis of writers such as Aquinas and

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¹ Moyers, Bill. Interview with Barbara Tuchman. *A World of Ideas: Conversations with thoughtful men and women about American life today and the ideas shaping our future*. New York: Doubleday, 1989, p. 13.

² King, Adele. *Camus*. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964, p.29.

³ Ibid, p. 30.

Bonaventure; the Transcendental imagination would be illustrated in the writings of Kant; the Existentialist imagination in the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre; the Parodic imagination would be found in the works of Althusser, Foucault and Derrida; and, today's Postmodern era in the works of Beckett and Pynchon.

Our task in transcending the Postmodern era is to see that imagination is nourished but not in an utopian sense. John Paul Lederach, a professor of Peace Studies at the Kroc Institute of Peace Studies, Notre Dame University, defines moral imagination as "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist"⁴. Lederach builds upon Camus while promoting the use of one's moral imagination to create greater justice and peace through the philosophy and theology of nonviolence. In this conceptualization the moral imagination is at the core of understanding that creating more justice and peace is an art, not a science. Thus, the imagination "must emerge from and speak to the hard realities of human affairs"⁵. Justice and nonviolent communities are relational. Building positive relationships is an art and must be imagined prior to efforts to create them. This is the realistic alternative to creating images of utopias.

The moral imagination of Lederach also incorporates a positive view of pessimism. This pessimism is "not a bad attitude, a lack of engagement, or bitterness gone wickedly off track"⁶. "If simple answers are reached as if complexity did not exist, then as Oliver Wendell Holmes suggests, they are not worth a fig"⁷. Revolutionaries refuse to accept complexity as do most proponents of utopia. A rebel, however, is by definition a realistic pessimist. Creating greater justice through rebellion acknowledges complexity and does not image or try to create utopia.

Instead of using the imagination to create a utopia, the world can become more just and peaceful if the imagination is used to understand the complexity of historical relationships. Regarding conflict and injustice in this context would lead one to return to the indigenous cultures in which violence is defined as a disruption in the life narrative of a person, community, people⁸. To heal this violence the imagination is central to the ability to "re-story", that is, reconnect the life narrative. The success of this effort is to be found in strengthening relationships, and not in starting revolutions with the goal of creating utopia.

Each one of us ought to "exercise" our imaginations and share our images of a more just and peaceful neighborhood, community, nation and world with others, for the purpose of dialogue. We may find ourselves supporting rebellions, but we ought to oppose revolutions. To adhere to the idea of a messianic revolutionary spirit that will create utopia is to fail to imagine, as Camus did, the absurdity of human nature and the human condition. The fundamental problem with the idea of utopia is that utopians are incapable of imaging this absurdity. Lederach's understanding of the gift of pessimism, in contrast, recognizes and offers a path to transcend the absurd through the moral imagination.

⁴ Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. IX.

⁵ Ibid, X.

⁶ Ibid, p. 55.

⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

⁸ Ibid, p. 140.

Lederach in paraphrasing Hannah Arendt states:

We live in a certain paradox as human beings precisely because we are beings that live by the meaning things have for us. Our God-given place is this. We have the capacity to remember the past, but we have no capacity to change it. Not even God can change the past. We have the capacity to imagine a different future, but we have no capacity to fully predict much less control it. Try as we might, nobody controls the future⁹.

Utopians, by definition, believe they not only can, but are obligated to control the future. The ends justify the means for all shades of utopianism. The world definitely needs greater justice and peace. Our efforts to achieve this ought to be grounded in Lederach's "gift of pessimism".

⁹ Ibid, p. 148.