

*The Utopian Impulse: From the Soviet Union to Silicon Valley*¹

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Anniversaries of momentous historical events often trigger calls to glean some wisdom from those events, some lesson. Yet, in thinking about this particular anniversary – the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution – I find myself uncomfortable talking about what we’ve learned or should have learned from the failures of the Soviet Union.

My wariness stems, in part, from the fact that I’m American and was only nine when the Berlin Wall fell. Also, drawing lessons from history often devolves into comparing real life events against ideal typical models – comparing “real existing socialism” against Marxist or capitalist utopias. If pressed, I suppose I could comfortably say that we’ve become suitably wary of teleological thinking – certainly no one talks about the inevitability of socialism any longer.

That said, Lenin’s three-point plan for a socialist society – produce for people’s needs rather than profit, reward people for contributing rather than owning, and foster radical democracy to protect the agency of working people² – still seems valid. But if the lesson is that we should make sure to accomplish Lenin’s plan next time, it’s not a very useful lesson.

So instead of thinking about lessons I decided to talk a bit about the historical dynamics of capitalism and socialism in a different way, by thinking about the return of the utopian impulse – coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Thomas Moore’s *Utopia*.³

Around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukács wrote: “Just as capitalism generates a

1. This is the revised text of a presentation to the symposium “Revolutions in the Twentieth Century: 1917, 1949, and After,” Tufts University, 28 October 2017.

2. Michael Burawoy and János Lukács (1992) *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

3. First published in late 1516.

utopian vision of socialism, so now communism generates a utopian vision of capitalism as the radiant future of all mankind."⁴ They were writing from the vantage point of Soviet citizens broadly and Hungarians in particular, having just completed roughly a decade of participant observation in the country's mills and factories. The dysfunctions of the Soviet Union fostered new hope for the liberating dynamism of markets and competition.

Yet, the utopian view of capitalism didn't last long in the East, and the West's triumphalism had a decidedly anti-utopian flavor. Fukuyama's "end of history" marked not only the end of any conceivable alternative to capitalism, but also a rather drab beginning. Ideological conflict was now replaced by, as Fukuyama put it, "economic calculation, the endless solving of technological problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of consumer demands." "In the posthistorical period," he declared, "there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual creaking of the museum of human history."⁵ It was as Octavio Paz put it "the twilight of the future."⁶

In the following interregnum that we call neoliberalism, centrism ruled and utopia became taboo, desire for it a symptom of hysteria or unconscious authoritarian impulses. As Fredric Jameson says:

Utopia had become a symbol for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and original sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects.⁷

It was also a time in which, as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiappello argue, critique of capitalism seemed to disappear despite continually worsening material conditions.⁸ The landscape of the post-war compromise was ripped apart and reconfigured, tearing asunder the expectation of the white working- and middle-class for justice and security.

Yet at the end of the century – in fits and starts and derailed by events like 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq – critique returned in the

4. Burawoy and Lukács, *The Radiant Past*, 27.

5. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* (summer 1989): 3–18, quoted in Emilio Sauri (2017) "Literature and De-Development: Latin America at the End of Time" (unpublished paper).

6. Octavio Paz, "La búsqueda del presente," Conferencia Nobel (1990), quoted in Emilio Sauri "The Abstract, the Concrete, and the Labor of the Novel," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (forthcoming).

7. Fredric Jameson (2007) *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso.

8. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiappello (2007) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

West as the contradictions of Third Way capitalism took their toll on rich and poor countries alike. True to form, capitalism had generated its antithesis once more. In the US, the 2008 financial meltdown proved to be a turning point. The legitimacy of the neoliberal project was finally destroyed, and utopian thinking became a point of reference across the political spectrum.

It's intuitively correct to link these two happenings, yet the story is not a neat one. For while neoliberal capitalism lost its legitimacy as everyone watched the US Treasury and later the European Central Bank prop up their economies with a multi-trillion dollar, tax-payer funded bailout – in direct antithesis to neoliberal teachings but perfectly in line with two decades of actual crisis resolution – there was nothing to replace it with. There was no vision to point to.

When the Soviet Union collapsed it was, in large part, a collapse from above and rooted in a deep crisis of legitimacy. In that crisis Soviet leaders looked to capitalism as the way forward. But where to look today? We have the return of a utopian impulse but no clear utopian vision. In fact, there seem to be at least three utopian visions swirling around.

The first is a rightwing vision, rooted in nostalgia, fear, nationalism, and racism, much as Nazism was a utopian project. This vision strokes a desire for a return to a mythical past free from empowered brown people, uppity women, and immigrants. In the US it is the vision of the Tea Party and then Steve Bannon, with Trump is its Guy Fawkes. This is a utopia for *parts* of the white working class, along with a large chunk of the petite-bourgeoisie and the capitalist class. But the rightwing vision is a confused and conflicted vision exemplified by the divisions in the Republican Party. The fraction of the white working class that finds a Trumpian utopia compelling has few shared interests with the American capitalist class. Capital has no desire to return to Keynesianism, not even for white people – they're the ones who got rid of it in the first place.

The second utopian vision is a leftwing utopian impulse. It is a multivocal vision whose aspirants might like Bernie Sanders, support the Black Lives Matter platform, own a pink, knitted hat, or even have a story of camping in a tent at Occupy. This progressive and, increasingly, anti-capitalist vision takes up and weaves together the threads of the alter-globalization movement of the 1990s, the climate justice movement, and the Pink Tide. This vision is sick of neoliberal capitalism and wants something better.

The Left is slowly emerging from what Bourdieu called our deep-rooted economic fatalism: the "belief that the world cannot be any

different from the way it is now.”⁹ But in its present incarnation this left utopian impulse is also a confused and conflicted vision. Raging Twitter wars over how race, class, and gender divide America and a fondness among progressive millennials for hammer and sickle imagery reveal a vision uncertain of the horizon it seeks.

The multivocal nature of the contemporary left does not, however, preclude an inclusive utopian vision. Unlike rightwing fantasies, left demands for “a better world” are not rooted in materially contradictory interests. Shared struggle and good faith debate, some of which are already taking place, have the potential to generate a coherent utopian vision with broad resonance among the large swathes of Americans fed up with capital’s voracity.

The third utopian vision has the most traction: this is the vision of Silicon Valley, of men like Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos who sit at the helm of some of the most highly valued, powerful companies in the world. Facebook and Google lead the way, using their prestige and deep pockets not only to expand their monopolies but to spread their ideas about what society and the future should look like – a future fueled by technological fixes and brilliant entrepreneurs.

After the dot.com bubble burst at the start of this century Silicon Valley lost a great deal of legitimacy. We all laughed about pets.com and other such nonsense. After the crash, it was back to fundamentals and core competencies.

But the future was much brighter for the Valley than many contemporary observers could have guessed. After the 2008 crisis all those masters of the universe on Wall Street, obsessed with quarterly returns and shareholder value, looked jaundiced and unimaginative. Pundits lamented the loss of capitalist vision – dammit, where were our flying cars?¹⁰

Silicon Valley, fueled by endless streams of free money care of the Fed, pension funds, venture capital, and others stepped in and said, “We have your vision.” In an about-face from the ideological imperatives of the 1990s and early 2000s, new companies such as Uber, Airbnb, and Amazon seemed blithely unconcerned with profits.¹¹ They ride on their stories, their visions of the future. Elon Musk tells

9. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) “A Reasoned Utopia and Economic Fatalism,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 227, 125.

10. David Graeber (2012) “Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit,” *The Baffler* March: No. 19.

11. Of course, much more can be said about the peculiar conjuncture and political economy that permits this approach to profit.

stories about rockets to the moon and living on Mars and we're enraptured. It has suddenly become acceptable to think big again.

To be sure, the Silicon Valley vision of utopia is as muddled as the others and often veers into dystopia in the same breath. Punchlines like the "Singularity," robots, abundance, joblessness, and artificial intelligence rule the day. Much of this vision falters on "mistaking the tool for its builder" and forgetting about society.¹² But through it all there is a common thread. Indeed, when one scratches beneath the surface, rightwing utopian visions and the dreams of men like Peter Thiel share much in common. The Silicon Valley utopian vision is an elite vision, it is an ideology that imagines a society led by the efforts of a brilliant few, with no hindrance from the state or the bumbling masses.

As Ellen Ullman observes, "these true believers, envision a clean technical solution to human problems, conceived of in co-working spaces, clear glass boxes, and conference rooms." In this vision "the government is anathema, a pit, the muck in which dreams of changing the world will forever sink."¹³

In this vision there is no politics and no privacy. It is the digital panopticon and our bodies are the new frontier of accumulation.

Capitalism has revived the struggle for a radiant future through its rapacious destruction of people and the planet over the past three decades. The legitimating framework of neoliberalism is damaged beyond repair and a new spirit of capitalism is being generated.¹⁴ There is a fierce battle over what the new legitimating framework of capitalism will be. Right now, Silicon Valley seems to be winning.

But the potential for a Marxist utopia remains, not simply because capitalism always seems to generate demands for its antithesis. There is a growing backlash against both rightwing and Silicon Valley fantasies – a backlash increasingly grounded in the understanding that a better future will require a profound rethinking of the power structures that dominate our society. As Burawoy and Lukács said decades ago, "The struggle for socialism is at its dawn, not its dusk."¹⁵

12. Ellen Ullman (2017) *Life in Code: A Personal History of Technology* New York: MCD Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 143.

13. Ullman, *Life in Code*, 295.

14. Nicole Aschoff (2015) *The New Prophets of Capital*. London: Verso.

15. Burawoy and Lukács, *The Radiant Past*, 174.