

## Democracy as an Open-ended Utopia: Reviving a Sense of Uncoerced Political Possibility

Steven Friedman

### Abstract

Utopian thought has been discredited because attempts to re-engineer society using Utopian formulae have invariably produced violence and despotism. But the apparent eclipse of Utopia has left a yawning gap, for economic and social conditions across the globe suggest a need for alternatives to the reigning social order – and thus for Utopian thinking which avoids the pitfalls of ‘classical’ Utopias. This needs to begin by recognising that the chief flaw in earlier Utopias is that they aspired to a world in which contention and conflict were banished. If Utopia is imagined as a state in which contest persists but in which all can contest equally without violence, it becomes a state in which democratic difference is not abolished – as in earlier Utopias – but in which it reaches its fulfillment. By conceptualising democracy as an ‘open-ended’ Utopia we can reconstruct the vision of an alternative which will legitimise neither violence nor the suppression of difference. Utopia is, in the mainstream of social and political thought, no longer seen as a subject for serious discussion. It is necessary that it become one again.

**Keywords:** contention, democracy, revolution, Utopia, violence

There was a time, not that long ago, when the prospect of a vastly better – perhaps even a perfect – world still captured the imagination of many intellectuals and political actors. Indeed, there was a time when to be a ‘progressive’ intellectual – defined loosely as someone who believes in social

equity and human freedom – almost automatically meant a commitment to a vastly different alternative to the status quo. And, while adherents of these different worlds often followed Marx and Engels in angrily rejecting the notion that they were committed to a Utopia, that is precisely what they were seeking if we understand by that term, as John Hoffman invites us to do, a clear alternative to the status quo – ‘an alternative to existing society’ (Hoffman 2009: 56). Until relatively recently, these believers in a different world were connected, directly or indirectly, to mass social movements which brought together millions of people.

Today, this interest in Utopia seems quaint, dangerous or both. Most ‘progressive’ intellectuals have retreated from Utopia, convinced that fundamental change is no longer possible – even if they continue to reject the existing order. Thus the left philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, while continuing to reject the moral foundations of the current order, adds:

not only have I never offered remedies for the condition of liberal modernity, it has been part of my case that there are no remedies. The problem is not to reform the dominant order, but to find ways for local communities to survive by sustaining a life of the common good against the disintegrating forces of the nation-state and the market.

(MacIntyre 1998: 235)

For MacIntyre, the only plausible response to current inequalities of power and privilege is to support attempts by its victims to escape their worst effects – a better world, in this view, is simply not possible.

The few who have remained committed to traditional programmes to forge a new world of social equality lack significant social support: there can be no better illustration than the reality that, in the past few years, the worst crisis in capitalist economies since the Great Depression has failed to mobilise large numbers of people behind a coherent vision of an alternative: the political

effect of the crisis has provided momentum to xenophobia in many Northern states, not to a coherent egalitarian response anywhere. To be 'progressive' today is, in the main, to be restricted to a belief in the piecemeal social amelioration advocated by Karl Popper (1966) without the expectation that it might lead to a qualitatively different social order – and to chiselling out egalitarian spaces in a world which seems to have closed off options for radical but viable change.

Some in the old left might see this retreat from Utopia as a symptom of an unfavourable balance of power which has foreclosed progress and there is some truth in this diagnosis (Friedman 2002). But much of the problem lies not with the obstacles which currently face egalitarian Utopias but with the Utopias themselves. For, while the status quo might be unappealing, previous attempts to translate Utopia into reality have done far more to enchain and cannibalise humanity than to liberate it. And the problem lies not in 'pilot error' – in the inadequate application of viable principles – but in the intrinsic nature of those Utopias. They purported to offer far more than an alternative to that which exists: they proclaimed the possibility of destroying it entirely in order to achieve a perfected human state in which conflict and discord as well as deprivation and want would be abolished. It may have been this ambition which attracted the loyalty of academics and activists – and prompted many to give their lives in the quest for the new world. But it is also this which destroyed the credibility of Utopian projects. None achieved anything close to that which they promised: more importantly, precisely because they envisaged a perfect, static, state, they became vehicles for assaults on freedom and on human lives. Just about anything can be justified if the goal is the perfect society and just about anything was: revolutionary elites, emboldened by the claim that they were achieving the fulfilment of human history, imposed themselves on society and extracted a terrible price in exchange for a quest for an unattainable dream (with them, of course, as the sole guides on the journey to the

promised land). They did so almost invariably by violence – both that used to seize state power and that used to maintain it. This too was inevitable because perfection surely cannot be achieved within an imperfect status quo and so what existed needed to be smashed, not changed – and because the taking of human life is presumably justified if the purpose is the eternal salvation of all humanity.

The tragedy was surely an inevitable consequence of the promise, for the social closure which ‘traditional’ egalitarian Utopias offered lent itself to inevitable disappointment – and disaster. These Utopias were closed in the sense that they posited an end point at which conflict and contention would end. So too, by implication, would politics, understood as the rule-bound clash of interests and ideas – it is no accident that Lenin’s vision of the good society was one in which, in effect, politics was collapsed into administration and so abolished (Polan 1984). Similar strains can be found in Marx’s and Engels’s thought. Thus, for example, the Communist Manifesto’s assertion that: ‘In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (Marx and Engels 2004) appears to posit a society in which conflicts of interest have been abolished and politics is presumably no longer required. As one anti-Utopian puts it:

A ... structural characteristic of utopias seems to be [their] uniformity ... or, to use more technical language, the existence of universal consensus on prevailing values and institutional arrangements .... Universal consensus means, by implication, absence of structurally generated conflict. In fact, many builders of utopias go to considerable lengths to convince their audience that in their societies conflict about values or institutional

arrangements is either impossible or simply unnecessary. Utopias are perfect ... and consequently there is nothing to quarrel about. (Dahrendorf 1958: 116)

It followed that, on attaining power, the Utopians would abolish politics in practice as well as thought by installing themselves as the sole arbiters of salvation's requirements. Ideas which promise complete and perpetual social redemption become powerful weapons of oppression because they enable those who hold power to insist that dissenters are not merely people who hold a different opinion but obstacles in the way of achieving human perfection: indeed, the promise of the perfect society is one of the most potent authoritarian inventions ever proposed for it promises, in exchange for obedience, nothing short of the end of all the social evils which have afflicted humanity. It matters little whether those who invoke these ideas are sincere believers in the classless society or power-mongers using the promise of perfection to entrench their authority: the effect of these Utopias is inevitably to deny freedom in the name of perpetually entrenching it.

This antipathy to politics and the inevitable uncertainty which politics brings also helps to explain why many of the Utopias have often been less than effective in ensuring development and prosperity – and often much less so than that which they seek to replace. Part of the 'closedness' of traditional Utopias was their assumption that perfection could be commanded or imposed on society. Thus, once the political standard-bearers of the traditional Utopias gained state power, they assumed that they could use it to impose a development path on society. After all, if Utopia meant a fixed, defined, end point, one of whose features was the end of strife or contention, a Utopian development path could not emerge by allowing multiple centres of economic power any more than it could be tolerant of multiple centres of political power. If it required the destruction

of existing social and economic power structures, it precluded any possibility of negotiating change within them. And so the command economy became the vehicle of the promised perfection at the cost of snuffing out the energy and enterprise which is crucial to both development and growth – and, of course, at the cost also of denying the agency of the poor and dispossessed.

This critique of ‘left’ Utopias is, of course, not new: on the contrary, it is an important theme in liberal and conservative responses to Marxism. Among the most influential and celebrated of these has been, as noted above, Karl Popper’s critique of ‘Utopian social engineering’ (Popper 1961, 1966). For Popper, this entailed envisaging an ideal state of society, abstracted from current realities, and then seeking to reshape society to fit the ideal. ‘Utopian social engineering ... aims at remodelling the “whole of society” in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint’ (1961: 67). This, he argued, required that rule be centralised in a small group of leaders, that dissent be suppressed and that violence would be essential to impose that vision on society. He proposed, as an alternative, ‘piecemeal social engineering’ which entailed addressing pressing social evils as they appeared and without envisaging a defined end state. This, he argued, allowed for tolerance and reliance on reason and compromise rather than coercion (Popper 1966: 159 ff.).

This position shares obvious similarities to the one proposed here. What it ignores, however, is that the notion of a fixed, defined, social end point on which no improvement is possible – a closed Utopia – is not a monopoly either of the left or of those who seek to change society. Indeed, it is currently far more a liberal or conservative preserve – and, unlike the Utopias of the left, those of the current intellectual mainstream are used to defend the existing order and to propose precisely the approach to change which Popper advocates, one in which the

essentials of the existing order are not challenged. Static Utopias can, therefore, be used to seek to preclude change as well as to insist on it. Popper's proposed approach is not, therefore, an antidote to Utopia; it rejects one variant while providing intellectual justification for another.

As early as the 1950s, the social democratic theorist Ralf Dahrendorf offered a critique of structural functionalist sociology – the antithesis of a left-wing intellectual project – which argued that it adopted precisely the Utopian approach criticised by Popper and others (Dahrendorf 1958). Structural functionalism sees society – in reality, contemporary North American and Western European society – as a harmonious whole in which structures and functions combine to ensure an apparently permanent stability or 'equilibrium'. In this Utopia, Dahrendorf pointed out, change occurs, but only in ways which confirm the essential balance of the system: 'the structural-functionalists insist on his concern not with a static but with a moving equilibrium. But what does this moving equilibrium mean? [The system] ... is maintained by the regular occurrence of certain patterned processes which, far from disturbing the tranquillity of the village pond, in fact are the village pond'. In the Western liberal democracy of the structural functionalist world 'things happen all the time; but ... they all help to maintain that precious equilibrium of the whole. Things not only happen, but they function, and so long as that is the case, all is well' (1958: 121). And, while these Utopias do not send those who demur to work camps or kill them, they too see dissent and difference not as a healthy form of human expression but as a pathology: dissent is seen by structural functionalism not as a valid expression of difference or conflict of interest but as 'deviant' (Dahrendorf 1958: 120). Because the Northern societies of the structural, functionalist universe are in no need of significant change, to urge such change is to demonstrate a pathology. There is a clear parallel with left attempts to build Utopia: 'I cannot help feeling that it is only a step from thinking about societies in terms of equilibrated systems to asserting that

every disturber of the equilibrium, every deviant, is a “spy” or an “imperialistic agent”” (Dahrendorf 1958: 121). Dahrendorf argued, therefore, for a ‘conflict-based approach’ which would recognise that social conflict is ubiquitous and unavoidable (1958: 126).

The tendency to see the societies of the global North as ‘already existing’ Utopias is not simply a conceit of a particular branch of sociology. On the contrary, it finds its contemporary parallel in the view, dominant both intellectually and in political practice, that the democracies of Western Europe and North America are the completed prototype to which all other democracies need to aspire. While not all adherents of this view would agree with Francis Fukuyama (1992) that history has ended – in the sense that no further significant challenge to the liberal democratic paradigm and its values is conceivable – they would agree that the liberal democracies of the North have achieved ‘consolidation’ and are thus the ‘finished product’; all other democracies must thus be judged by whether they approximate to their form (O’Donnell 1996; Friedman 2007). Here too to be different is to be deviant: democracies which do not fit the model ‘are seen as stunted, frozen, protractedly unconsolidated, and the like’ (O’Donnell 1996: 37). In practice, this view that democracy has perfected itself in the North is expressed not only by attempts to impose it on societies such as Iraq by force but also by a range of interventions by the older democracies – ‘democracy support programmes’ of various kinds – designed to ‘enable’ the neophytes (who number most of humanity) to become like the older exemplars (Friedman 2007). It is this contemporaneous liberal and conservative Utopianism which has prompted a variety of critiques, sometimes in terms directly relevant to our concerns here because they illustrate the limits of any Utopia based on the assumption that the conflicts which have always been so intrinsic a part of human social life have somehow been abolished. Chantal Mouffe, responding to this strain of thinking, warns that ‘the illusion that we can finally dispense with the notion of



antagonism has become widespread. This belief is fraught with danger, since it leaves us unprepared in the face of unrecognized manifestations of antagonism' (1993: 2).

The Utopia it proclaims is subject to the same criticism as that which Mouffe levels at liberal thinking in general – that it posits 'a pluralism without antagonism' – the failure to recognise the ubiquity of antagonism is 'a dangerous liberal illusion which renders us incapable of grasping the phenomenon of politics' (1993: 127). Similarly, Jacques Ranciere argues that the ideologues of Northern democracy are particularly hostile to democratic practices in their own societies – demands for a deeper and richer democracy are, he suggests, repeatedly stigmatised by them as an expression of precisely the 'deviance' which structural functionalism saw in those who challenged the system half a century ago. Here 'excessive' demands for participation by those outside the economic and social elite are seen not as a deepening and broadening of democracy but as a threat to the social order. Those among the excluded who demand a say are stigmatised (Ranciere 2009: 27) and so democracy becomes identified not with vigorous contest but with consumer choice – of political parties as well as good: 'Democratic life becomes the apolitical life of the indifferent consumer of commodities' (Ranciere 2009: 29) not a site for social contest. Again, this occurs because conflict is stigmatised, not celebrated and accommodated.

The Utopian claims of existing liberal democracies hide the degree to which the form of freedom is eroded by the substance of a highly unequal distribution of power which allows some to decide on behalf of all and which will remain as long as (rule-bound) contention and conflict, the only means by which the excluded can stake a claim to be heard, are not recognised as essential ingredients of the social order. Just as we live in a world marked by deep inequalities of power and privilege, we also live in one in which liberal democracy, in its social democratic

variants probably the nearest humans have come to achieving a viable framework for offering everyone a greater say in the decisions which shape their lives, is in trouble everywhere. In the new democracies of the South, it struggles to establish itself in content rather than form, in the established democracies of the North, low voter turnout (Norris 2002) and surveys showing deep dissatisfaction with the quality of democratic representation (Gallup 2005) indicate that citizens do not believe that they control their government as democratic theory insists they should; this implies that formal democracy may have become in practice rather than theory a new form of oligarchy. And so, as deeply flawed as Utopias which seek a new social order are, the absence of a feasible alternative is not, as Popper would insist, a guarantor of freedom. It is, rather, a serious setback to attempts to build societies which expand human freedom, particularly the liberty of the many varieties of powerless and propertyless people whose voicelessness is illustrated, among many other signs, by the current tendency in development discussion to lump together a range of human groups and experiences in the blanket label 'the poor', thus denying the voice to millions which would enable them to express the diversity of their experience.

The flight from Utopia threatens to shrink our political and social horizons, leaving vast inequalities in access to power and voice as well as wealth unchallenged. If to be Utopian means, as Hoffman suggests, to insist that an alternative is both desirable and feasible – that, to coin a now-tired phrase, another world is indeed possible – then we need to revive the notion of Utopia and seek to encourage enthusiasm for it. We again need social movements organised and mobilised behind the campaign for this new order. But we need also to be wary of the pitfalls created by earlier understandings of Utopia – a new promise of static, closed, perfection is as sure to produce tyranny as its predecessor. And so we need a Utopia which is open-ended, in the sense both that it allows for dissent and difference (and thus recognises that political contest and

conflict will not be abolished in a new society), and that it is open to the prospect of further change, and towards which incremental progress is possible. We can find this Utopia in a notion of democracy which recaptures the radical, emancipatory core, in traditional democratic principles. Before discussing democracy's potential as open-ended Utopia, however, it is necessary to say something more about Utopia itself.

### **The Tyranny of Perfection: Utopias of Domination**

Why have 'traditional' Utopias become weapons for subjugation, not emancipation? One reason is that the 'progressive' Utopias have transformed a critique of the status quo into a political programme. To clarify – it is almost trite to point out that the word Utopia can mean either 'good land' or 'no land' and that it is usually assumed that the first Utopian, Thomas More, used the word because he hoped to signal that his ideal state was not attainable (2008). The earliest communist Utopian, William Morris, titled his account of the perfect Communist society *News from Nowhere*, wrote it as a novel and had his main character discover the ideal social order in a dream (Hoffman 2009: 60 ff.); it requires an extreme literal mindedness to assume that he was describing a social order he expected to become a reality. South Africa's most celebrated Utopian thinker, Rick Turner, was slightly more hopeful but only marginally so: 'a model of an ideal society must remain a relatively distant hope' (1980: 151–2). A perceptive article on Turner's work stresses its value in offering a critique not only of current South African realities but also the contemporary non-left Utopias, such as Fukayama's claim that history has ended, discussed here (Fluxman and Vale 2004). The common thread, of course, is that Utopia is not meant to be the culmination of an achievable political programme – it is, rather, an attempt to provide a measure of the deficiencies of the present.

These Utopias can inspire progress because they invite us to think beyond what is to what might be. But they should not inspire attempts to dominate because they are not meant to be achieved and are therefore not intended to be imposed on society. It was precisely this which prompted Engels to reject Utopia as a fanciful ideal and to insist instead on a 'scientific socialism' which would be an attainable political programme rather than a mere aspiration (1999). But, the 'scientific' approach differed primarily from what had preceded it not by its rejection of perfectionist Utopias but by its insistence that it could find ways to realise them rather than simply to hope for them. While students of Marx and Engels insist that they did not envisage a perfect society, and the corpus of their work is more ambiguous on this question than many commentaries suggest, there are enough passages in their work suggesting that communism would end the turmoil and travail of politics – such as Marx's assertion that 'Communism is the riddle of history solved' (1988) and that it would abolish want and necessity, expressed in the celebrated formulation that, 'In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner' (Marx and Engels 1998) – to convince many Marxists that a perfect society was indeed possible. The notion that the dreams of perfectionist Utopians could be translated into reality if only society was adequately understood and an appropriate political programme was developed proved, of course, an immensely seductive idea. But it was precisely in this expectation that the roots of Utopian destructiveness lay, for the 'scientific' nature of the new socialism promised to turn Utopia from social critique into an achievable state of being. And so 'scientific socialism' sowed the seeds of

authoritarianism by promising to impose on society that which had never been intended for translation into reality.

But, while the 'classical' Utopias cannot be accused of seeking to impose on humanity an outcome they never believed would be achieved, this does not mean that they are appropriate sources of political and social aspiration. For, while they did not have blood on their hands, the perfected worlds they dreamed remained poor and potentially dangerous sources of political action. If Utopia is to become again a potent source of thought and action designed to challenge current reality and to create workable alternatives, then it needs a reconstruction which rescues it from the blind alleys proposed by the traditional Utopias, those with as well as those without scientific pretensions. Following Hoffman, we need to understand what about these Utopias needs urgent revision.

Hoffmann's recent work on Utopia has shown how deeply flawed these Utopias were, primarily because they were 'premised upon static and perfectionist notions of the good society' (2009: 27). He notes that the original Utopia, More's, envisaged a society 'without unfinished business' (2009: 27). The world of classic Utopia has no conflict since the problems which caused humans to engage in social contest have been solved. Hoffmann cites Goodwin and Taylor's view that Utopias are ideas in which there are no differences of opinion and interest, 'and therefore no power struggles'. The consequence, as implied above, is that there is no need for politics, the process by which disputes of interest or value are mediated: the Utopian mode 'is thus one of power without politics' (2009: 70). Explicitly or implicitly, 'classical' Utopia is not a world of difference but of sameness. The consequence, Mouffe points out, is not to end politics but to turn it from an opportunity to a threat: 'To negate the political does not make it disappear,

it only leads to bewilderment in the face of its manifestations and impotence in dealing with them' (1993: 140).

Similarly, these Utopias 'have an aversion to change and history' (Hoffman 2009: 38). Because the perfect state has been achieved, there is no need for further change and society remains static – in Morris's *News from Nowhere* a character proudly reveals that the ideal state of life depicted has been pursued without change for over a century. A further feature is that 'classical' Utopias are more than alternatives to the present – they are founded on its total abolition. Rather than growing out of what was, they are premised on its total destruction. In an observation which throws light both on this feature and traditional Utopia's abolition of difference and conflict, Hoffman observed that 'the first of the modernist residues in Marx's thought' was 'the idea that conflicts of interest require a revolution' (2009: 66).

It is in these assumptions that the flaws noted earlier reside. The core problem with these Utopias is not, as conservative critics repeatedly observe, that they are unattainable, for they were not meant to be achievable. It is that they are undesirable. They appear to offer an alluring emancipation – from strife and discord as well as want. In reality, they offer authoritarianism and domination. Perhaps their key conceptual flaw is that they confuse difference with domination. That human beings differ – in interest and value as well as race, gender and identity – is not in itself a threat to emancipation: it is where difference becomes domination that human freedom is stunted. Equally importantly, to suppress that difference which does not produce domination is an act of oppression, not of emancipation. However lofty the intentions of their founders, the traditional Utopias entrench domination because they deny the right to be different and the need to construct a society in which difference is negotiated, not abolished. Traditional Utopias are also profoundly anti-democratic because they seek to remove from public contention issues which

are assumed to be resolved but which never can be – a democratic Utopia is one in which all questions are always unresolved. Mouffe thus warns against the threat to democracy posed by the desire to wish away difference – the ‘illusion that we can finally dispense with the notion of antagonism’ (1993: 2). The effect is to remove from the agenda of public deliberation a host of issues which cannot be considered because they express difference rather than harmony. And, because these Utopias deny the ubiquity of conflict, they seek to suppress it rather than institutionalise it: ‘Antagonistic forces will never disappear and politics is characterized by conflict and division. Forms of agreement can be reached but they are always partial and provisional since *consensus is of necessity based on acts of exclusion*’ (Mouffe 1993: 69; emphasis added).

Traditional Utopias seek to abolish not only difference but change. Their ‘perfectionism’, the definition of Utopia as a realm in which all problems have been solved, has obvious authoritarian implications. It also lays the groundwork for a society unable to develop because it can no longer change. It is these two features of ‘classical’ Utopias which constitute their ‘closedness’. They do not open human possibilities, they close them off. The key questions which might inform a discussion of the contours of a society in which difference and change are provided for but in a way which precludes domination cannot be asked and so both the shape and institutional form of Utopia is left in the hands of an elite which interprets the requirements of perfection and who, in the absence of mediating institutions, rule by force rather than consent.

It seems appropriate to illustrate this concretely by referring to a noted South African radical scholar, Martin Legassick, who, in a polemic in support of democratic socialism, promises that ‘[w]orking-class power worldwide’ will ‘point the way towards a harmonious, socially owned, democratic, planned economy on an international scale, opening the way to a classless

society of abundance' (Legassick 2007: 576). It would be difficult to find a phrasing more redolent of the sort of thinking which is challenged here; the power of one section of society to the exclusion of all others is, we are promised, certain to abolish conflict and difference – and, of course, to solve the problem of scarcity. While Legassick's personal democratic credentials are impeccable, his vision of the good society is, in reality, a blank cheque for the suppression of all interests and values except those of the working class (or, more likely, those who presume to speak in its name) and the elimination of all differences considered to disturb the harmony of the new order – and therefore of all who differ. It would require no institutions for regulating conflict, since there would be no conflict to regulate, and so none of the checks and balances which restrain arbitrary power would be permitted. Nor would it contain the means of channelling change into productive avenues, for who would want to change 'a classless society of abundance?'

A feature of these Utopias is their radical 'newness': Dahrendorf notes that 'utopias do not grow out of familiar reality following realistic patterns of development. For most authors, utopias have but a nebulous past and no future; they are suddenly there, and there to stay, suspended in mid-time or, rather, somewhere beyond the ordinary notions of time' (1958: 116). By denying the possibility of creating the new out of the order which exists, they compel a path to Utopia which seeks to destroy that which is – and with it all the incremental progress and potential capacity that even deeply imperfect orders may contain. This destroys capacities and possibilities even as it seeks to destroy domination and its fetters. It almost ensures that the new must be built on the rubble of the old and rubble is an implausible ingredient of a society with enough capacity to administer its affairs and produce enough for its needs. Thus, in the early 1990s, Bill Freund, writing on the South African transition, argued that a revolution imposed on an inhospitable



environment could produce only ‘local devastation ... It would at best be a harsh, militantly policed “barracks socialism” ... [which] could organize a society with a high level of equality but a low level of consumption and with few prospects for accumulation and development’ (1992: 85 cited in Saul 1992: 7). Much the same point could be made of all societies in which a revolutionary rupture was meant to impose an entirely new world on an intransigent reality.

The insistence on a total break with the past dooms the future to incapacity and scarcity, which can be remedied only by authoritarianism. And, by denying the possibility of incremental but structural change within the old order, it denies us an essential tool in the creation of workable alternatives, a set of criteria for judging which changes might take us nearer to a sustainable but more egalitarian society and which would not. The total revolution which these theories assume rarely if ever happens – the overthrow of states and their replacement by revolutionary alternatives has occurred far less frequently than ‘scientific socialism’ expected: and even when it has happened, the effect has often been to change far less than the revolution promised. Mao Zedong’s perhaps apocryphal but poignant response to Richard Nixon’s description of him as the man who changed the world – ‘I have only managed to change a few small areas in the vicinity of Beijing’ (cited in Friedman 1985) – makes the point that dramatic political upheaval does not necessarily induce qualitative political or social change. And so most of the change we encounter in the concrete world is not a radical upheaval but an incremental shift in the existing order – which may point the way to deeper changes which might begin to transcend that order. Utopias which, by implication, deny the authenticity of any change which preserves the existing order cannot understand most or all of the change which we actually experience.

Yet, as this paper has argued, these flaws do not diminish the need for Utopias – they demand only, as Hoffman proposes, that they be reconstructed. Of what might that rebuilding consist?

## **Reconstructing Utopia**

Hoffman proposes that we rebuild Utopia by understanding it as what he calls a ‘momentum concept’. He defines this in different ways in different contexts. It is ‘a notion that is infinitely progressive and is never realised at a given point in time’ (2009: 127). It is also ‘an idea that is rooted in history, is sensitive to context and can never actually be realised’ (2009: 193). He argues also that ‘a reconstructed concept of Utopia is rooted in the present’ (2009: 187), which it does not seek to abolish but rather to transcend, a process which requires that key features of the old be retained even as they are refashioned and reworked into something new. This Utopia is as ‘open ended’ as the one we have just criticised is ‘closed’. An identical understanding is that of H.G. Wells: ‘The Modern Utopia must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages’ (Wells 1909 cited in Dahrendorf 1958: 115).

In one respect, this reconstruction returns to the classical wellsprings of Utopia by insisting on its unattainability. And, because it cannot be achieved, coercion in the attempt to achieve it is an absurdity. Utopia becomes again a definition of our ever unattainable aspirations, which remain crucial to action because, while the end goal is never achieved, it is possible to make progress towards it – to remain on a journey which, while never completed, takes us to new and better places. But because the aspirations cannot ever be achieved, they cannot be used to

deny or suppress difference or to close off debate: if we are always searching for improvement, then we will always differ on what improvements are needed and how they are to be achieved. If the present is always imperfect, it is always open to critique. And so the retrieval of part of its original intent enables us to ensure a Utopia which cannot be used to dominate.

Unattainable Utopias also, of course, always challenge us to embrace change – indeed, if we embrace such a Utopia we must regard change as a permanent goal rather than an unpleasant necessity for we are surely obliged always to keep seeking to inch nearer to the ideal and so to make change an abiding imperative. A notion of Utopia founded on unattainability compels us therefore always to envisage a need for institutions which will provide vehicles for dissent and difference and to seek to ensure that our societies are so ordered that change is an abiding possibility.

But we need to go further than to reaffirm, with the earlier Utopians, that the perfect society is never achieved. A static, perfectionist Utopia in which all problems are solved and history's end point is reached may not, even if it is freed from the notion that 'science' can realise it, urge us to seek to impose perfection on our fellow humans. But it may still obstruct progress to greater freedom by inviting us to think of conflict and difference as unpleasant realities which must be borne with fortitude. Why should we aspire to a 'perfection', however unattainable, in which all contention is abolished? Why would a society in which there were no serious differences of interest and value be desirable? Surely an ideal human society is one in which contention could occur without domination, one in which we could aspire, as some theories of deliberative democracy invite us to do (Bohman and Rehg 1999), to a society in which our differences would be expressed in clear conversation between equals rather than as a contest between the powerful and the powerless? To say there would still be differences in Utopia is also,

of course, to say that there would still be change, for there is little point in allowing people to differ if they are unable to persuade others of their point of view and thus to initiate change. Utopia, in this view, is not a state in which our differences are dissolved, but in which we can express them freely and equally, without domination.

Hoffman partly captures this in his discussion of the state. A reconstructed Utopia, he argues, cannot adopt an uncritical view of the State for it is a source of coercion and continued resort to violence and so cannot be Utopian. But, in contrast to Lenin, he does not envisage the abolition of politics: on the contrary, he argues that a viable Utopia would posit the state gradually giving way to a mode of politics which he calls government, a process in which ‘negotiation and common interest replace force and division’ (2009: 47) – in which ‘diplomacy and negotiation must replace force as ways of addressing conflict of interest’ (2009: 113). Hoffman points out that this formulation insists that politics not only remains a key element of Utopia but is, in a sense, one of its defining features because he explicitly advocates politics as an alternative to state coercion: ‘one could well argue that a political solution to a problem is at odds with a statist attitude to conflict’ (2009: 110). And so Utopia is not that state in which our conflicts disappear – it is one in which they can be addressed through politics rather than coercion: it consists in ‘the self-government of humanity’ (2009: 137). The ultimate, unattainable goal is not freedom from politics but the capacity to engage in politics freely.

Another key aspect of Hoffman’s reconstituted Utopia is his insistence that it be ‘rooted in the present’ and ‘sensitive to context’. What he seems to have in mind here is a notion of transcendence which is grounded in the concrete reality of now and is open to – indeed depends on – incremental change. This is a sharp break from traditional Utopias because it insists that the present should be transcended rather than abolished and that this means that progress towards the

ideal is achieved by incremental change to what exists rather than in a revolutionary rupture – Hoffman proposes at one point that a ban on smoking in public places is a step towards Utopia because it forces participants in the market to take into account human needs and is thus a contribution towards ‘a gradual process of making the exchange process more and more concrete so that real people replace the abstract individuals of the market’ (2009: 92). A similar approach is proposed by Boris Kagarlitzky who seeks to transcend the traditional Marxist distinction between ‘revolution’ and ‘reform’. He argues that a fundamental break with what exists can be achieved only by building reforms. These point the way to an alternative even if they strengthen the existing order because they also create ‘elements of the new system within the framework of the old society’ (1990: 8). Thus ‘in contemporary society the road to revolution lies only through reforms’ (1990: 176) The intention remains the creation of something entirely new – but it grows out of the old and is thus not imposed on a resistant reality. Similarly, John Saul argues for an approach to change whose building blocks are ‘structural reforms’ which do not shore up the existing system but challenge its logic (1992: 3). This breaks, of course, with the notion of Utopia as a state entirely distinct from the present: it opens the possibility that viable alternatives may emerge out of the present and through political work within it, rather than in the hope of an Apocalypse which never comes – or appears in a guise which enhances domination but does not, in the final analysis, break decisively with the past. And it opens the possibility of that which traditional Utopias preclude – the development of emancipatory strategies predicated on accurately identifying the incremental changes possible in the present which might make a future closer to the Utopian ideal a reality.

Because the alternative grows out of the current system, the stakes of striving for Utopia are greatly reduced and there is no need to create the new by smashing the old. The destructive

techniques which ensured that the traditional Utopias had such perverse consequences are no longer required since Utopia consists in broadening what exists rather than overthrowing it – transcendence is a process of both preserving and overcoming, not of abolishing. Conspiracy is no longer needed and so the rationales which created ‘vanguard parties’ and excluded most people from the decisions which were meant to emancipate them fall away. Violence is no longer needed – and progress is no longer measured by the creation of a new order whose birth in conflict is certain to ensure a scarcity which dooms it almost from the outset. Marx’s notion that socialism could be born only when capitalism had sufficiently developed the forces of production to make the new order sustainable captures some of this idea albeit not necessarily intentionally – a non-coercive alternative is possible only if the scarcity which makes coercion inevitable is overcome, an outcome which cannot be achieved by a coercive overthrow of what exists.

We might take Hoffman’s point further and suggest that a usable Utopia – one which offered a clear alternative to the present – might not require a change of political system at all; it could be achieved by seeking to realise the potential of an existing system which is only partly emancipatory in its current form but which, if developed in a manner which fully implemented its defining principles, would radically redistribute power and resources. Thus the democratic theorist Robert Dahl – a venerated figure in mainstream American political science but one who has often adopted unorthodox positions – proposes the notion of ‘ideal democracy’, which captures the essence or aspiration of the system – how it would look if it were taken to its logical conclusion. Although the system never will operate entirely in this way, he argues, defining the ideal achieves both analytical and normative purposes. On the first score, it describes ‘the characteristics or operation of that system under a set of perfect (ideal) conditions’ (Dahl 2006: 7) and thus provides an important means by which to characterise empirical reality. On the second, it

offers ‘a desirable goal, one probably not perfectly achievable in practice, but a standard to which we ought to aspire, and against which we can measure the good or value of what ... actually exists’ (Dahl 2006: 8).

As suggested earlier, this is an implied critique of current attempts to proclaim an already achieved liberal democratic Utopia in the global North. And it enables us to consider the prime purpose of this article – the notion of ‘ideal democracy’ as the ‘open ended’ Utopia which holds out the possibility of a new and better world in which conflict is not abolished but in which the spectrum of those who it includes is ever widened. It is a Utopia which is sought not by overthrowing existing democracies but by striving to develop their potential.

### **Conclusion: Democracy as Open-ended Utopia**

In what way is ‘ideal democracy’ a ‘momentum concept’ and how does it promise a clear alternative to the present? While Dahl specifies several features of ‘ideal democracy’, it seems possible to distil these into only one: since the core democratic idea is that each adult individual is entitled to an equal say in the decisions which affect her life, the ideal democracy is one in which everyone participates equally in all decisions, a society which has thus achieved full popular sovereignty (Friedman 2007). This notion of democracy rests on a recognition that ‘the common good’ is always subjective and contested and that it therefore cannot be authoritatively defined by aristocrats, priests or – as it often is now – ‘epistocrats’ who derive the right to decide from their knowledge rather than their birth or status (Estlund 1999: 183). This entails that government must therefore take decisions ‘in which the whole people shares equally, with no distinction between nobles and commoners’ – an understanding which can be traced back to the beginnings of modern

democratic thought and, more particularly, at least to the eighteenth-century French nobleman d'Argenson, the author of the definition proposed here (Dunn 2005: 95). This understanding of democracy as a constant attempt to define a common good on which closure is impossible and in which all must thus be free to participate – and, of course, to contend – ensures that it is always unattainable: 'Because notions of the common good are open to many competing interpretations ... one has to acknowledge that a fully inclusive political community can never be realized' (Mouffe 1993: 85).

This understanding of democracy is radically open-ended for it insists that democracy is unattainable – the society in which each adult enjoys an equal say in decisions has never existed and never will. Indeed, following Mouffe, we can insist that a 'completed democracy' would be a contradiction in terms because it would be a society in which some issues – such as the nature of the political system itself – would be no longer open for debate, a stipulation which would profoundly vitiate the democratic credentials of the system:

Modern democratic politics, linked as it is to declaration of human rights, does indeed imply a reference to universality. But this ... is conceived as a horizon which is never reached. Every pretension to occupy the place of the universal, to fix its final meaning through rationality, must be rejected. The content of the universal must remain indeterminate since it is this indeterminacy that is the condition of existence of democratic politics. (Mouffe 1993: 146–7)

This understanding of democracy as a goal which is desirable as an aspiration but by definition unachievable is in sharp contrast not only to 'classical' Utopias which posit some future state in which all conflicts will be resolved and in which the polity's moral imperfections will be removed but to the contemporary Utopias posited by much of the mainstream literature on



democracy today. It was noted earlier that the notion of ‘democratic consolidation’ posits liberal democracies in the global North as a ‘finished product’. This implies that institutional forms are the subject of consensus and the problem of securing legitimacy has been solved – much as they are in structural functionalism. By contrast, democracy understood as an equal share by all in all decisions is never a ‘finished product’ and so is always marked by what Claude Lefort has called ‘a radical indeterminacy, a society that has become the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure’ (1986: 305). A key feature of the system, he insists, is ‘the dissolution of the markers of certainty’ (Lefort 1988: 19).

This does not, of course, mean that democracy as proposed here is a system without rules or institutions. Indeed, it would be impossible without them. If we understand democracy as a system which rests on access by all to politics ‘understood as collective participation in a public sphere where interests are confronted, conflicts resolved, divisions exposed, confrontations staged and, in that way ... liberty secured’ (Mouffe 1993: 57), then it follows that there must be a set of rules which govern how this activity is conducted. What is rejected, however, is the notion that a set of rules can be achieved which are so self-evidently appropriate for all societies for all time that they end the debate on which rules are best suited to ensuring a say for all. This means both that there is no democracy which can claim to have developed a set of rules self-evidently superior to that of all others and that constant contest over whether the existing rules are appropriate is a defining feature of democracy – provided of course that the contest happens in a way which grants everyone a say. Far from being a validation of current democratic form and practice it acts as a constant critique of the present as long as attempts to impose one form of democracy or to close off debates on appropriate democratic form remain part of the dominant

understanding. It acts, as any Utopia should, as a critique of what is and a vision of what we might move towards in the full knowledge that the journey will never be complete.

The notion of democracy as one in which all have a right to decide – d'Argenson's formulation – is also clearly a critique of what exists because it constantly invites attention to the degree to which that right is denied by existing democracies in practice – and, as Ranciere points out, in theory. It stands as a constant critique both of the 'democratic elitism' which has been 'the hegemonic theory of the postwar period' and which 'assumes a contradiction between political participation and democratic government' (Avritzer 2002: 11) and of the concrete practices which ensure that democracy, proclaimed as the sphere of equal participation for all, in practice offers a voice only to some. It demands a constant critique of the failure of existing democracies to turn the promise of an equal voice for all into a reality.

Democracy understood in this way is 'rooted in the present' and 'sensitive to context' because formal democracy provides the elements – formal democratic rights and institutions – which make it possible for societies to move incrementally towards the always unachieved goal of full popular sovereignty, the state in which everyone decides on everything. 'Existing democracy' moves closer to 'ideal democracy' not when existing democratic forms are destroyed and replaced by more egalitarian alternatives. Progress occurs when existing forms are deepened – so that more people participate in them – and broadened – in the sense that representative democracy is extended 'to more and more areas of social life' (Mouffe 1993: 94). This process is best encapsulated by Norberto Bobbio's notion of progress towards greater democracy and equality as a process in which 'quite traditional forms of democracy, such as representative democracy, are infiltrating new spaces, spaces occupied until now by hierarchic or bureaucratic organisations' (1987: 55). 'Ideal democracy' as understood here is thus a 'momentum concept' in

the sense that progress towards it emerges out of bringing ever closer to fruition the potential of what exists.

But does 'ideal democracy' also point the way to something qualitatively different, which transcends what exists by offering a more egalitarian alternative? This author has argued elsewhere (2007) that the notion of democracy as popular sovereignty, as a system in which everyone enjoys an equal say in decisions, proposes a very different world to that which we currently inhabit, even in (indeed particularly in) the most established democracies. This is why democracy was, at its modern inception, feared by economic and political elites as a radical threat to the existing order. And it is why democracy can again become a profoundly egalitarian project.

The understanding of democracy advocated here would require that election results everywhere be honoured and would thus entail a sharp shift in the foreign policy practices of the major Northern powers in regions such as the Middle East and the Balkans (Chandler 1999; M. Turner 2006). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it would require a profound shift in the distribution of power in all existing formal democracies. If it is acknowledged that the chief obstacle to the participation of all citizens in all decisions is not ignorance or apathy but powerlessness (Gaventa 1982), it follows that an 'ideal democracy' would be one in which the currently powerless would enjoy as much power as the currently powerful, a profoundly revolutionary development. Third, and as an extension of that reality, 'ideal democracy' would inevitably require a dramatic reordering of wealth distribution as those who now lack income and resources use their vote and the collective action which democratic rights make possible to reorient the priorities of governments – as, for example, labour and social democratic parties did in twentieth-century Western Europe (Przeworski 1985) This would, however, be a reordering achieved in the same way as the earlier advance – through collective action within democratic

rules rather than through the abolition of democratic politics. If changes in production processes mean that the heyday of labour-led social democratic politics can never be repeated (Friedman 2002), the implication is not that collective action, coalition building and negotiation of conflict of interest have become irrelevant – merely that the agents and some of the organising methods will change. Democracy makes this far more possible, and far more capable of yielding more egalitarian outcomes, than any other political order.

Democracy is, therefore, not another term for current realities. It is radically subversive of them because it challenges not only the domination of elites, private as well as public, in current formal democracies, but an international order in which democracy is a synonym for continued Northern hegemony: while it is sometimes argued that democracy is a Northern imposition on reluctant Southern polities, the notion of democracy as popular sovereignty means that no polity can impose its preferences on any other for to do so would violate the key democratic principle by violating the principle of popular sovereignty. Democracy is thus a challenge to all forms of imposition whether by states on other societies or by elites on their fellow citizens (Friedman 2005). But it is not a vehicle for another coercive attempt to abolish the progress humanity has made towards self-government and then to establish an order which will impose a new form of minority power in the name of universal emancipation. Movement towards this Utopia requires action to defend and broaden the gains which democracy has brought thus far and to ensure that democracy is not only the description of a particular political order but of a social order too.

But the key feature of this Utopia is precisely its open-endedness. It promises no end to difference or discord, it offers no antidote to the restrictions on humanity imposed by nature. Instead of a world order in which all problems are resolved, it promises the hope of incremental progress towards a world in which the problems which will always beset us are discussed freely

and openly by autonomous beings able to engage one other on equal terms. And, because democracy can edge towards this always unattainable Utopia only by remaining democratic, by deepening and broadening what exists rather than by destroying it, it can be achieved only by democratic means. Another world is indeed possible – but only if we acknowledge that this world can be built only by action which respects the rights of others, recognises the right of all to a say, and relies on politics, and the negotiation which is intrinsic to it, rather than force. The alternative world which democracy promises will never be anywhere near perfect. But it could be immeasurably better than the prevailing order because it could offer us all a greater prospect of exercising more power over more of the decisions which shape our lives.

**Steven Friedman** is Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Rhodes University and the University of Johannesburg. He researched and wrote widely on the South African transition to democracy both before and after the elections of 1994 and has, over the past decade, largely written on the relationship between democracy, on the one hand, and social inequality and economic growth, on the other. His publications include *Building Tomorrow Today* (1987), and *The Long Journey: South Africa's Quest for a Negotiated Settlement* (1993) and *The Small Miracle: South Africa's Negotiated Settlement* (1994, with Doreen Atkinson). He is currently studying the theoretical underpinnings of current understandings of democracy in an attempt to generate new perspectives which are more relevant to current democratic realities.

## **REFERENCES**

Avritzer, L. 2002. *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Bobbio, N. 1987. *The Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bohman, J. and W. Rehg (eds). 1999, *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.
- Chandler, D. 1999. *Faking Democracy after Dayton*. London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press.
- Dahl, R. A. 2006. *On Political Equality*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Dahrendorf, R. 1958. 'Out of Utopia: Towards a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis', *The American Journal of Sociology* 64(2): 115–27.
- Dunn, J. 2005. *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy*. London: Atlantic.
- Engels, F. 1999. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Chippendale, Lahore: Resistance Books.
- Estlund, D. 1999. 'Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority', in Bohman and Rehg (eds), *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press. 173-204
- Fluxman, T. and P. Vale. 2004. 'Re-reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa', *International Relations* 18(2): 173–89.
- Freund, B. 1992. 'Review: Four Books on the Economy', *SA Labour Bulletin* 16(5).
- Friedman, S. 1985. *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970–1984*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- 2002. 'Equity in the Age of Informality: Labour Markets and Redistributive Politics in South Africa'. Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, *Working Paper* 160, July.
- 2005. 'The Forgotten Sovereign: Citizens, States and Foreign Policy in the South', in J. Robertson and M. A. East (eds), *Diplomacy and Developing Nations: Post-Cold War Foreign Policy-making Structures and Processes*. Abingdon: Routledge, 225–52.

- . 2007. *Power in Action: Democracy, Collective Action and Social Justice*. Research Report Submitted to the Institute for Democracy in South Africa and the Ford Foundation.
- Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Gallup International. 2005 *Voice of the People 2005: Trends in Democracy: Global Summary*, 19 September: 1–3. [http://www.voice-of-the-people.net/ContentFiles/files/VoP2005/VOP2005\\_Democracy%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.voice-of-the-people.net/ContentFiles/files/VoP2005/VOP2005_Democracy%20FINAL.pdf)
- Gaventa, J. 1982. *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Hoffman, J. 2009. *John Gray and the Problem of Utopia*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Kagarlitzky, B. 1990. *The Dialectic of Change*. London: Verso.
- Lefort, C. 1986. *The Political Forms of Modern Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1988. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Legassick, M. 2007. *Towards Socialist Democracy*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- MacIntyre, A. 1998. 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good', in K. Knight (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader*. Cambridge: Polity, 235–52.
- Marx, K. 1988. 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', in K. Marx and F. Engels (eds), *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Prometheus. 13-141
- Marx, K. and F. Engels. 1998. 'The German Ideology', in K. Marx and F. Engels (eds), *The German Ideology, including Theses on Feuerbach*. New York: Prometheus. 27-568
- . 2004. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin.
- More, T. 2008. *Utopia*. [www.forgottenbooks.org](http://www.forgottenbooks.org)

- Mouffe, C. 1993. *The Return of the Political*. London and New York: Verso.
- Norris, P. 2002. *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O' Donnell, G. 1996. 'Illusions about Consolidation', *Journal of Democracy* 7(2), April. 34-51
- Polan, A. J. 1984. *Lenin and the End of Politics*. Methuen: London.
- Popper, K. R. 1961. *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Popper, K. R. 1966. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Przeworski, A. 1985. *Capitalism and Social Democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ranciere, J. 2009. *Hatred of Democracy*. London and New York: Verso.
- Saul, J. S. 1992. 'Structural Reform: A Model for the Revolutionary Transformation of South Africa?' *Transformation* 20: 1–16.
- Turner, M. 2006. 'Building Democracy in Palestine: Liberal Peace Theory and the Election of Hamas', *Democratization* 13(5): 739–55.
- Turner, R. 1980. *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Wells, H. G. 1909. *A Modern Utopia*. London: Nelson.