The Left and the Reign of God

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To cite this article: Anna L. Peterson (2007) The Left and the Reign of God, Rethinking Marxism, 19:1, 72-91, DOI: 10.1080/08935690601054530

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935690601054530

Published online: 11 Dec 2006.

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Anna L. Peterson

This essay explores the resources that religious Utopianism, especially Christian visions of the reign of God, might offer to the project of reclaiming and revising a politically effective left Utopianism. It looks both at various efforts to revise and reclaim Utopian theory and imagery by left analysts today and at the historical experiences of a particular Utopian movement, the Catholic peasant left in Central America. It also critiques the unacknowledged Utopianism of self-proclaimed “realists” on the right. The article concludes with an affirmation of both the continuing significance of a critical Utopianism for left thinking and activism today, and the distinctive potential of religious Utopianism as a resource for both theory and practice.

Key Words: Catholicism, Christianity, El Salvador, Kingdom of God, Realism, Utopianism

Socialists have spent considerable time in the past decade or so debating the relevance of Utopianism for our thinking and our movements. The discussions rage in scholarly conferences and activist organizations; in left journals like Rethinking Marxism, New Left Review, and Socialist Register; in books by theorists like David Harvey, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Daniel Singer; and in historical reflections on experiences in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. These debates have been prompted both by political events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1990 electoral defeat of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and by intellectual trends such as poststructuralist skepticism toward grand narratives. In all these discussions, perhaps the most important question at stake is whether socialists should reject or reclaim Utopianism and, if the latter, how?

The many positions in these debates can be divided into several broad categories. One consists of those who reject totalizing narratives and seek localized, partial solutions. Some versions of this approach would retain the value of Utopianism, albeit in modified and modest form, while others would reject the notion of Utopianism for its indelible links to oppressive or naive universalisms. Lisa Lowe has proposed that in place of universalist Utopian narratives, progressives should strive to “imagin[e] spaces that permit differently located subjects, of different classes, on different sides of national borders, to work laterally organizing to reduce violence, inhumanity, and exploitation” (2001, 17). Lowe’s arguments echo the claims by new social movement theorists and identity activists that leftists can no longer appeal to the
universals and absolutes that, according to this perspective, are part and parcel of Utopianism (cf. Melucci 1989; Castells 1983). Another approach linked to these arguments is the possibility, proposed by Barbara Epstein (1990), that localized social movements, especially those utilizing nonviolent direct action, can contribute to the creation of a new hegemonic project for the Left.

The second category encompasses those who, while recognizing serious failings in previous versions, still affirm some sort of Utopian vision. A number of influential thinkers on the left have offered up revised forms of Utopianism. David Harvey, for example, argues that the broad rejection of Utopianism over the past two decades should be seen as a collapse of specific Utopian forms rather than as evidence that the very idea of Utopianism is a failure. Because of the potential power of Utopian dreams and desires, Harvey wants the Left to “try to rekindle and reignite utopian passions once more as a means to galvanize socio-ecological change” (2000, 195). This will require a “dialectical” Utopianism to replace “utopias of spatial form.” The task, he summarizes, “is to pull together a spatiotemporal utopianism—a dialectical utopianism—that is rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical developments” (196).

Harvey’s appreciation for the political power of Utopianism is echoed in Daniel Singer’s call for a “realistic utopia.” The new agenda of the Left has to be realistic, he explains, because “it must be rooted in current conflicts and in the potentialities of existing society,” and Utopian because “that is how any attempt to look beyond the confines of capitalism is branded” (Singer 1999, 6–7). Utopianism is necessary, according to Singer, because “in the struggle for human emancipation, all the elements are closely connected and… once combined, they take us inevitably beyond the confines of the existing order” (259).

In another updating of left Utopianism, Immanuel Wallerstein has proposed “utopistics,” a nonuniversalistic Utopianism that focuses on historical realism and acceptance of limits. It entails, as Wallerstein puts it,

> the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgment as to the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems. It is the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human social systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity. Not the face of the perfect (and inevitable) future, but the face of an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future. (1998, 1–2)

And as a final example, Norman Geras proposes the notion of a “minimum utopia,” which aims not for perfection but for sufficiency: “Enough is a goal sufficiently ambitious to be both difficult to achieve and wonderful to contemplate. Just think about it: a society all of whose members, a world all of whose inhabitants, enjoy the basic material necessities and political and civil rights requisite to a tolerably contented existence” (Geras 2002, 5; see also Geras 1999). Geras, in common with most leftists hoping to reclaim Utopianism, retains the socialist emphasis on economics and, at least to some extent, on large-scale structural solutions, in
contrast to the emphases on identity and locality typically stressed by those who remain skeptical about Utopianism.¹

In the discussions about Utopianism, I fall on the side of those who believe both that it still has a vital place in left thought and praxis and that it requires substantial revision. This project of revision might fruitfully begin with E. P. Thompson’s definition of Utopia as “the education of desire,” its role to “teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all, to desire in a different way” (1981, 790–1).² When our desires are thus educated, we no longer take for granted what the dominant culture tells us is possible, necessary, or good. Thompson suggests not only the power of Utopianism to jar us out of the stifling taken-for-grantedness of commonsense, but also the need for this jolt as a precondition of progressive social change. Here Adrienne Rich agrees: “If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment” (1979, 43).

Amidst the catastrophes and disappointments of the present, however, it is no easy matter to imagine Utopian alternatives. How can we learn to desire differently and better? Where are the compelling images of Utopia that can teach us to think past the common sense of the society that engulfs us? While there are many possible answers to these questions, all with varying advantages and drawbacks, I want to explore, in particular, the resources that religious Utopianism, especially Christian images of and reflections about the reign of God, might offer to the socialist left today. While leftists are often suspicious about religion’s role in politics, it is undeniable that religion continues to motivate people to act, for better or worse. In these dark days, activists and intellectuals on the socialist left cannot afford to ignore or dismiss it. Scholarly approaches to religion, particularly those attentive to ethnographic and historical contexts, can help us to make sense of religious movements, including the Utopian ones on which I focus here, and their distinctive potential contribution to progressive social change.

Religious Utopians in Central America

The most Utopian moment I have experienced came on 16 January 1992, when I joined thousands of people in San Salvador’s plaza central to celebrate the signing of the peace accords. On the makeshift stage, some activists led songs praising the guerrillas’ success in forcing the government to negotiate, while others remembered

¹. Several additional approaches to the debates over Utopianism are worth mentioning. Patty Lee Parmalee (1991) has proposed the promising model of “utopian criticism” to seek Utopian content or implications in ostensibly anti-Utopian narratives. Russell Jacoby attacks the anti-Utopianism of much postmodernist theory (1999) and advocates an “iconoclastic utopianism” drawing on humanistic socialism as well as other intellectual sources (2005). Finally, a number of Latin American leftists stubbornly reaffirm a nationalist Utopianism, as in Fernando Cardenal’s claim that Utopia “not only should not die; it has not died” for Latin American activists (Núñez 1993, 3).

². Thompson was building on an idea of Miguel Abensour; both were writing about William Morris.
the tens of thousands killed before peace came. Over the crowd loomed the skeleton of the national cathedral, unfinished since the late 1970s, when Archbishop Oscar Romero halted construction because he believed that the church ought to spend its money helping the victims of violence rather than building monuments. After Romero’s assassination in 1980, his body was placed inside the half-finished church that symbolized his dedication to the poor. All afternoon and evening, young people climbed up the front of the cathedral to hang flags with images of Farabundo Martí, a Salvadoran Communist executed in 1932, and the letters FMLN, acronym of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation, the guerrilla organization bearing his name. Even more than Martí and the armed opposition, however, Romero dominated the celebration. Inside the cathedral, flowers, candles, and handwritten notes of supplication and thanks covered his tomb. Outside in the crowd, his image—pastoral, serene—and his words—agonized, prophetic—appeared everywhere, on flags and bandanas, posters and shirts (Peterson, Vásquez, and Williams 2001, viii–ix).

What was Utopian about this moment was not just the collective joy expressed by the thousands of people crowded into the plaza but, even more, the palpable sense that in the course of years of struggle, Salvadoran revolutionaries had learned with precision and persistence what they wanted—had, in Thompson’s terms, educated their desires. In the face of brutal repression and heart-wrenching loss, they had not only not stopped desiring change but had in fact learned to desire more and better, for themselves and their nation. While the celebrations were an important step on the way toward the social transformation they desired, no one seemed to confuse “winning the peace” with that final transformation. A Utopian horizon still beckoned, not detracting from but rather reinforcing the significance of this marker along the way.

The dominant ideology among the Salvadorans celebrating peace in the plaza was progressive Catholicism, which emerged in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) and the Latin American Bishops’ 1968 conference in Medellín, Colombia. Both events gave impetus to reforms aimed at democratizing church structures, educating and empowering lay leaders, and committing the church to social justice. A major vehicle for these changes consisted of base Christian communities (comunidades de base or CEBs), small groups that met weekly to discuss biblical readings in light of their own experiences. In many parts of Latin America, CEB participants formed or joined popular political organizations. Progressive Catholics had an especially powerful impact on social movements, and especially peasant organizations, in El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s. The “Catholic left” (Kincaid 1987) formed the core of the organizations that supported and ultimately became inextricably tied to the FMLN. Reflecting the influence of progressive Catholic ideology and values, Salvadoran revolutionaries frequently expressed their political aspirations in religious language: to create a “new person,” to begin building a “Christian society,” and to make their communities embody the harmony and justice that characterize the reign of God (Peterson 1997).

Progressive Catholicism represents a uniquely Latin American intertwining of Christian and socialist visions of a better world. To longstanding left goals such as national independence, land redistribution, and provision of basic human services, progressive Catholicism added an emphasis on solidarity. The new society for which
they fought would be politically democratic and free of repression, but even more important, it would be egalitarian, it would protect the most vulnerable, and its members would be unified around their shared values. As one ex-combatant put it, “we were all going to be equal” (todos íbamos a ser iguales) (Rivera 1995, 39).

The human solidarity implicit in this vision, far more than free elections, judicial reform, or new political parties, define the “promised land” for which tens of thousands of Salvadorans fought, the Utopian vision that sustained them through long years of war, exile, and bare survival.

I first encountered this Christian left synthesis in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s, where the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), like the FMLN in El Salvador, was heavily influenced by progressive Catholicism (Lancaster 1988). The Sandinistas’ 1979 victory over Anastasio Somoza created what was widely seen, as one activist puts it, as “the opening of a doorway to the kingdom of God” (Zarcos Mera, Tellería, and Sánchez 1984, 70). While the Sandinistas achieved a great deal, their Utopia was always ambivalent, encompassing huge gains in quality-of-life indicators like literacy and infant mortality and, at the same time, facing accusations of corruption and neglect of minority populations. The Sandinistas’ loss in Nicaragua’s 1990 presidential election led many commentators to declare the death of the Latin American left, or at least of that part of the Left that still harbored dreams of radical change.3

Unlike the Sandinistas, El Salvador’s guerrillas never achieved a definitive military victory. FMLN combatants did not march triumphantly into their capital city to erase the images of past dictatorships and begin building a new society from the ground up. The Salvadoran revolutionary movement led instead to a negotiated settlement that demanded cohabitation and continued negotiation with a corrupt and intransigent national elite. The FMLN’s transition from guerrilla army to electoral party since the war’s end has not been smooth. At the national level, the party has been divided within and challenged from without, unable to pursue the sweeping reforms that the Sandinistas achieved, albeit temporarily. At local levels, decades of organization and struggle are bearing real fruit but no paradises.

In different ways, both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutions suggest that unambiguous Utopias may be hard to come by. Experiences like these, at a minimum, inject a necessary note of caution and critical awareness into movements for social change. Many on the left in Latin America and elsewhere have taken the lesson further to wonder if all Utopian visions are discredited and whether there remains any point in thinking about Utopia.

The Utopian Reign of God

As activists and intellectuals on the left continue thinking about Utopianism, we should take a closer look at religion, the source of some of our most powerful and

3. It is also possible to read that defeat, as Roger Lancaster notes, not as a refutation of Marxism, revolution, or radical politics in general but rather as an indication “that even the class consciousness, political commitment, and national will of a revolution can be undercut by a long enough crisis” (1992, 287).
lasting Utopian (and dystopian) visions. Utopians of both Christian and socialist varieties find perennial inspiration in the community of Jesus’ disciples, where “all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–7). In addition to community of goods, other characteristics often attributed to the early church include peaceableness, egalitarianism, simplicity, and fraternal solidarity. These, interpreters often assert, are the traits that Jesus valued and preached as the best way for humans, and especially believers, to live. Christians ever since the first few centuries CE have pointed to the early church not only as an example of authentic Christian community but also as a foretaste of the Utopian reign of God announced by Jesus.

While the reign of God serves as a potent symbol for most Christians, what it symbolizes and its relationship to life in the world vary considerably. For some Christians, the reign of God is identical to heaven, reached by individual believers after death. For others, it is an otherworldly society, reached after an imminent or remote eschaton. And in some cases it functions merely as a symbol, an image of Christian ideals with no real connection to worldly life. For a small but persistent minority within Christian history, however, the reign of God serves as a detailed guide to life in the world. Solidarity, peaceableness, and the rest are not idle dreams for these believers, but rather, practical goals to be sought, and sometimes achieved, by every real believer. Some Christians, including Anabaptists, believe that only a small minority will be able to achieve these goals. The “true church” will always be a “remnant,” in their terms, but even as such it serves as a crucial witness and reminder to the rest of the world. Other Christians, including progressive Roman Catholics, contend that the Utopian qualities of the reign of God can be achieved on a larger scale. Despite their differences, these two groups share key convictions that distinguish them sharply from the mainstream of both Protestant and Catholic Christianity in the West: Christians must build small, voluntary communities similar to the early church; the ultimate model for human society is the Utopian reign of God; and last, and most important, a direct relationship links their small communities to the reign of God. They live, in other words, according to what Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (1984) calls “the kingdom as social ethic.” This is an explicitly Utopian vision whose advocates acknowledge the futility of their aims. However, this need not lead to despair, because the social and political ethics of these Christians are deliberately nonteleological. Their hopes are not sustained by calculations of likely outcomes, and their valuation of their actions does not depend on how likely they are to achieve certain goals. This is a vital contribution of religious Utopianism to socialist thinking and action today.

Anti-Utopianism

If this sort of explicit Utopianism remains a minority stream within Christianity, it represents an even smaller stream within Western society as a whole. Presently a wide range of commentators agrees that Utopianism is dead or at best moribund. The end of the Soviet Union struck many as the symbolic as well as literal end of modern
Utopianism. For the Left, Fredric Jameson writes, Utopianism has been a code word for socialism or communism, while for the Right, it serves as a synonym for totalitarianism or Stalinism. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Utopianism survives only “as a symbolic token over which essentially political struggles still help us to differentiate left and right” (Jameson 2004, 35). People still talk about Utopianism, in other words, but it is a symbol lacking a real-world referent, a currency without a standard.

For many progressives, the breakup of the Soviet Union dealt a final blow not just to socialism but to “the very notion of an overall alternative to the status quo,” as Jorge Castañeda (1994), 240–41) puts it in his Utopia Unarmed, about the Latin American left. Castañeda’s point is echoed by conservative commentator Francis Fukuyama, who agrees that the end of “really existing socialism” marked the symbolic death of Utopian hopes.

In our grandparents’ time, many reasonable people could foresee a radiant socialist future in which private property and capitalism had been abolished … Today, by contrast, we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist. Within that framework, of course, many things could be improved … But we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one, and at the same time better. (Fukuyama 1993, 46)

More concisely, Margaret Thatcher famously announced that “There is no alternative” to neoliberal capitalism (Singer 1999, 1).

While Castañeda mixes his criticism with some nostalgia for the Utopian left, Thatcher and Fukuyama celebrate its apparent demise. Perhaps ironically, neoliberals can find fuel for their critiques of Utopianism in the suspicion of all “grand narratives,” which Jean-François Lyotard proposed as the motto of postmodernism (1984, xxiv). In the place of universalizing narratives and efforts to create cities on a hill, postmodernism proposes diversity, fluidity, and fragmentation. Overarching visions of an ideal society, postmodernists suspect, inevitably ignore cultural diversity and silence dissenting voices. Worse yet, perhaps a slippery and direct slope leads from Utopian aspirations to the Gulag. This underlines Jameson’s claim about the association of Utopianism with “really-existing socialism” in Eastern Europe. This identification enables conservatives to use “Utopianism” as a shorthand way to contend “that a politics which wishes to change the system radically will be designated as utopian—with the right-wing undertone that the system (now grasped as the free market) is part of human nature; that any attempt to change it will be accompanied by violence; and that efforts to maintain the changes (against human nature) will require dictatorship” (Jameson 2004, 35).

This logic undergirds the political use of utopianism by partisans of various ideologies “as an insulting slur on their enemies” (36). Exemplifying this tactic, Jean Bethke Elshtain writes, “There is a nihilistic edge to terrorism: It aims to destroy, most often in the service of wild and utopian goals that make no sense at all in usual political ways” (Elshtain 2002, 19). The contrast between Utopianism and politics as usual is telling, for it points to Elshtain’s larger complaint: not only
“Islamists” and other “extremists” committing acts of terror are “utopian,” but so are Christian pacifists and virtually every other group critical of U.S. policy. She characterizes these critics as sharing “a tendency to traffic in utopianism and sentimentality concerning politics” (113; cf. 109, 126).

Elshtain argues that her position is “realistic,” injecting a note of hard-headed pragmatism into a discussion that misapprehends the way the world works. In May 2003, as the U.S. war on Iraq began, she lamented the frequency with which pastors and priests used the word “peace.” Still, she added,

This is, perhaps, unsurprising. Christians are taught that the Kingdom of God is a peaceable one in which the lion lies down with the lamb. But there is a problem. We do not live in that peaceable kingdom. We can discern intimations of it. We can pray for it. We can strive to embody moments of it in the earthly city. But we must take heed. We live in a fallen world, something Christians too often seem to forget. We live in a world that knows sin. (Elshtain 2003, 1)

Elshtain builds on a longstanding anti-Utopian current in Western Christianity, rooted in Augustine’s divide between the “heavenly city,” in which Christian peaceableness and love prevail, and the “earthly city,” in which human sinfulness makes true peace impossible. Writing amidst the chaos of the disintegrating Roman Empire, Augustine asserted in *City of God* that Christians and the church must remain “pilgrims,” in but not of the world. Christians’ greatest hope and greatest joy would come not on earth but rather in the “heavenly city” that awaited them after death. While in the world, Christians must obey the emperor and expect only secondary and contingent goods, such as civic order.

Augustine’s dualism between the two realms and his cynicism about what Christians might hope for and expect in the “earthly city” have influenced a series of important Christian thinkers since his time. Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk prior to his excommunication, revised the image of the two cities into a distinction between two kingdoms, a worldly one in which all humans had to abide for a time and a heavenly one to which all true Christians eternally belonged. Luther’s two kingdoms, like Augustine’s two cities, were governed by permanently incompatible values and ends. Christians should strive to obey the divergent demands of both, without losing sight of where their ultimate loyalty lay.

In the early twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Christian realism” built on Luther’s distinction between what we can hope for in the “real world” and ultimate Christian ideals (and laid the groundwork for contemporary interpreters like Elshtain). Even though individuals might behave in Christian fashion in their personal lives, Niebuhr believed, in society even the best-intentioned persons could not live by these high ideals. Niebuhr thus discounted any hope of remaking the world according to Christian principles. Still, he appreciated the capacity of religious Utopianism to inspire activism, to “generate a sublime madness in the soul,” that might encourage people to confront evil and achieve at least incremental changes (Niebuhr 1932, 277). In the end, Niebuhr relegates Utopianism if not to the dustbin of history, then at least to an obscure corner, whence it attracts well-intentioned but ultimately ineffectual dreamers. Elshtain pushes the Utopian reign of God even further from the everyday
lives of believers: it becomes a beautiful but blurry image to which Christians might nod on occasion, but having no real relevance for life in this world.

Elshtain’s anti-Utopian alternative of choice is Christian just war doctrine, according to which “legitimate authorities” can use war to pursue “good” ends. Humans are not and cannot be peaceful, and realistic people do not let themselves believe otherwise. This parallels neoliberal assertions that “human nature” is made for competitive, individualistic economic systems like the free market and that alternative systems can survive only by force, as Jameson contends. These “realists” base their moral and political claims on often unspoken, almost always unsupported assumptions about human nature, inclinations, and possibilities. Challenging their conclusions (and their influence on public discourse and policy) requires showing the logical as well as ethical weaknesses in their arguments, demonstrating their failure to abide by their own standards of argumentation and logic.

To this end, John Howard Yoder has argued that militarism is Utopian as well as pacifism. Warmakers are Utopian in believing that they can achieve a peaceful world order through violent means. However, history has proved again and again how unrealistic this hope is, Yoder points out. He dismantles both the ideological and the historical supports claimed by just war advocates, including their assertions both that “justified” wars have achieved the “just cause” at which they aimed (jus ad bellum) and that it is possible to abide by the rules of war to which they adhere (jus in bello). Even apparently Utopian forms of pacifism, Yoder contends, trust less to irrational leaps of faith than militarism. Pacifism also, not incidentally, boasts a much less damaging historical record (Yoder 1992, 76).

Similarly, the “realistic” arguments of neoliberals ultimately rest upon a naive faith that the invisible hand of the market will magically make things right. This conviction flies in the face of capitalism’s historical failures (e.g., the well-documented fact that peace, democracy, and material abundance do not automatically follow “free” markets any more than they do state-controlled economies). To insist, in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, that an unhindered market will solve all social problems, that a rising tide will lift even the leakiest boats—these beliefs smack of a faith as ungrounded and fantastical as any millenarian dream.4

Neoliberal and pro-war “realists” might more accurately be described as implicit, or perhaps stealth, Utopians. The difference between them and radical Utopians, including the pacifist, Anabaptist, and socialist varieties, may be less the feasibility of their ultimate aims than the honesty (or accuracy) with which they evaluate their prospects. In other words, many conservatives who seek to dismiss socialism as “Utopian” and therefore both irrelevant and wrong, themselves harbor Utopian hopes. This echoes Jameson’s claim that master narratives have not disappeared with postmodernism but rather have gone underground (1984, xii).

Perhaps an even more telling difference between the crypto-Utopian “realists” and self-conscious “Utopians” lies in the ways they link goals and values. Here the

4. Barbara Ehrenreich and Frances Fox Piven (2002) make this point in regards to welfare reform. While progressives were told that it was “impractical,” even “utopian” to fight for the restoration of welfare (instead of simply adding jobs-related benefits), they write, “In fact, the only ‘utopianism’ lay in the fantasy of a perpetually expanding economy.”
distinction between teleological and nonteleological ethical models comes to the fore. To simplify, in teleological models ethical values and actions depend upon outcomes. An action is good because its intended (and expected) consequence is good. Nonteleological models, on the other hand, do not tie what is good to what is possible, or, as Yoder puts it, reasons for ethical action are not "closely correlated to manageable projections of effect" (1984, 97). A nonteleological political ethic thus rejects not only "consequentialist" ethical models like utilitarianism, with its aim of maximizing the good for the greatest possible number, but also deontological (rule-based) approaches, such as Kant's, which insist that "ought implies can." Attention to the nonteleological dynamics of religious Utopianism thus prompts an exploration of alternative models not only of ethical thinking but also of political action.

**Critical Utopianism**

Socialists today can hardly afford to let "manageable projections of effect" define our dreams and values. However, neither can we ignore the fact that in the debates between the dreamers who believe a new world is coming and the "realists" who declare the end of history, the latter seem to have the weight of evidence on their side. Activists today face an increasingly dystopian world, distinctly short on plausible alternatives. Hunger, economic inequities, lack of social services, political and criminal violence, environmental destruction, and wars reduce the quality of life for people in both First and Third Worlds. Social ethicist Sharon Welch summarizes the challenge: "What does it mean to work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and evil? How can we sustain energy, hope, and commitment in the face of an unrelenting succession of social and political crises?" (1990, 1). In answer to this question, she calls for "politics without utopia, ethics without virtue, and spirituality without God" (Welch 1999, xix). Progressives ought to reject Utopianism, she explains, because "dreams of unending progress, absolute justice, and beneficent power and creativity" lead to domination and repression (61). In the United States, for example, conviction about the rightness of a particular vision of progress created "an America without doubts" that has sought and still seeks to impose its model far and wide (xvii–xviii). Welch's point is that Utopianism is bad for people with political, cultural, and economic power. This is a powerful critique, more nuanced than many postmodernist celebrations of fragmentation for its own sake and also than neoconservative declarations that history has ended. However, Welch does not explore the question of whether Utopianism has the same meaning and consequences for people without power. She leaves open the necessity of examining the social and political functions, as well as the ethical dimensions, of Utopian dreams in different settings.

Reynaldo Ileto has done precisely this in his study of religiously based peasant movements in the Philippines, whose struggles continued for decades despite numerous failures and harsh repression. Like Anabaptists and progressive Latin American Catholics, the Philippine movements draw on collective identity rooted in the past and on deeply Christian understandings of sacrifice. Ileto concludes that
Utopian hopes play an irreplaceable role in efforts for social change. Social movements are unlikely to succeed unless they build upon “the masses’ conceptions of the future as well as social and economic conditions.” This is true because “what determines human behavior must include not only real and present factors but also a certain object, a certain future, that is to be actualized.” This future vision enables people “to go beyond their situation, to determine what its meaning would be instead of merely being determined by it” (1979, 256). Utopias, as Paul Tillich summarizes, enable people “to transform the given” (1971, 169).

The Catholic peasant organizations in El Salvador, like the Philippine movements that Ileto describes, bear witness to this possibility. A biblically grounded vision of a “promised land” of abundance and equality provided the Catholic left with an enduring dream of a qualitatively different world. This world would be characterized, like Geras’s “minimum utopia,” by general access to “the basic material necessities and political and civil rights requisite to a contented existence” (Geras 2002, 5). Because God created humans in the divine image, Salvadoran Catholic activists asserted, the foundation of any decent human society must be the fulfillment of all members’ material needs. The Catholic left Utopia also entailed some features beyond the “minimum” that Geras proposes, including universal opportunity to participate in decisionmaking and contribute to the common good and, perhaps most important, unselfish solidarity and fraternal love.

Catholic left Utopianism anchored a movement capable of surviving blow after blow across decades of struggle. The movement began with cooperatives in the 1960s, created militant peasant unions in the 1970s, and endured exile and a brutal civil war in the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, while the war still raged, Salvadorans who had fled to refugee camps, mostly in Honduras, began returning to (“repopulating”) the war zones that they had abandoned years earlier. While the repopulated communities share the poverty and political violence that permeates much of rural Latin America, they are unique in that they are starting anew, returning to lands that have been abandoned, as already constituted communities committed to a particular vision of their own, and their nation’s, future. The repopulators did not aim to return to eke out a living as before, but rather, to build a new society from the ground up. The motto of Ciudad Segundo Montes, a repopulation in eastern El Salvador, reflects this sensibility: “a hope that is born in the east for all of El Salvador” (una esperanza que nace en el Oriente para todo El Salvador).

Not all their hopes have been fulfilled, and new challenges keep arising, but the repopulations have achieved astonishing progress toward the goals that drove their movement throughout the war years and since the war ended with a negotiated settlement in 1992. The most important aim was always social justice, and especially land redistribution and social services. The land transfer program created by the peace accords has, despite significant problems, distributed land to many previously landless families. This is a major, though imperfect, victory of more than two decades of struggle. Perhaps even more impressive are the communities’ own efforts to guarantee all residents the basic goods, especially food, housing, and medical care, necessary for a “dignified” life. The greatest achievements may be in education: all the villages now have primary schools, most continuing through eighth grade, and several villages have high schools or vocational training programs. Teachers are now
certified and partially compensated by the ministry of education. Similar success has met efforts to provide universal, high-quality health care, with most villages boasting clinics providing preventive care, paid for by a locally run, low-cost health insurance plan. Almost no one dies of the primary causes of death before the war: malnutrition, childhood diseases, and childbirth.

To help institutionalize their values, the repopulations have created new political structures and processes. Each village has an elected town council (directiva) of four to eight members. Further, different social sectors meet regularly, in addition to regular general assemblies open to the whole community. A foreign volunteer who lived in the village of San Antonio Los Ranchos in the late 1980s described the discussions and planning that took place in the assemblies as “nearly miraculous” (O’Driscoll 1990, 2). These governing structures reflect a definition of democracy that gives priority to participation and the ability to meet regularly with leaders. Despite occasional conflicts both within local political structures and between local groups and national bodies, overall the repopulations have maintained both substantive democratization and relative political autonomy.

One of the most important new political developments in rural areas has been the growth of environmental concern, sparked by concerns about agricultural subsistence and human health. Some of the most significant environmental changes have been in farming methods, including an end to most field burning, significant reduction in use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and community decisions to set some land apart from intensive human use, usually for reforestation and watershed protection. New forms of environmental activism have also taken root throughout the communities, often working together with national and international organizations. Local ecological committees have provided fruit and shade trees to families in many villages, so that today a green canopy covers villages where before was only dust.

The challenge of economic survival affects the communities’ efforts to meet their social, political, and environmental goals. Especially as international aid has declined since the war’s end, the villages cannot fulfill residents’ needs and realize their vision of sustainable and just development without participating successfully in larger markets. Jobs remain scarce, and the communities must achieve long-term economic viability in order to retain their populations, especially young people, and to continue providing a model for the rest of the country. As a partial solution, most villages run various microenterprises, which provide goods and services while also training residents. These community-owned and -run projects reflect the collective model that dominated the economy in the early repopulations and which has diminished since the war’s end. Still, the rural communal movement remains committed to a mixed economy whose primary objective is meeting human needs. Most repopulated villages set aside collectively owned land, worked by community members, to provide basic crops for especially needy households, and workshops and stores are collectively owned and their profits distributed throughout the community. Their workers are employees of the community, as are health care workers and schoolteachers. These projects reflect the persistence of the Catholic left Utopianism born in the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.
Necessary Utopias?

The notion that Utopian hopes are necessary in order to conceive of even moderate changes to the status quo challenges Steven Cullenberg’s advocacy of a “thin” socialism based on collective appropriation of surplus labor. Cullenberg argues that “socialism has failed not because it did not enjoy successes, but rather because too much was asked of it.” Even though socialist countries enjoyed success according to indicators such as income distribution, economic growth, and health care, he points out,

in its mind’s eye the Left has held an image of socialism as a utopia, one that often puts excessive demands on criteria for its success. Certainly, many argued, there were (and are) numerous blemishes in actually existing socialism, but they could be explained by the fact that socialism had not yet fully arrived. The day that socialism takes center stage, however, will also be the day that poverty will be eradicated, consumer goods will be plentiful, racism and sexism will cease to exist, environmental degradation will evaporate, and authoritarian work structures dismantled, it was often argued. (Cullenberg 1992, 64–5)

I find much of value in Cullenberg’s argument if it is read as suggesting that socialism’s woes stem, at least in part, from a failure to make its Utopianism explicit. In other words, socialism has been implicitly Utopian while presenting itself (to others and to itself) as realist. A tension, not always productive, has existed between the unacknowledged Utopianism of socialism’s political and cultural vision, on the one hand, and its claims to be realistic and practical, on the other.⁵ I propose that rather than eliminate Utopianism altogether, we bring it out into the open, make it explicit and unashamed, if not overconfident.⁶ Instead of rosy dreams of a vague future paradise, we need Utopian visions capable of changing in response to events and circumstances along the way. We need the kind of Utopianism that, as E. P. Thompson put it, can open the way “to an uninterrupted interrogation of our values and also to its own self-interrogation” (1981, 790–1).

A self-interrogating and self-conscious Utopianism must be grounded in knowledge of the constraints of its particular social situation, the history that has led to this situation, and the plausibility of different alternatives. From such an assessment might emerge new Utopian visions and projects, grounded in actual conditions as well as the past history and future possibilities of contemporary society (Wallerstein 1998, 1; Singer 1999, 6–7). This is not Jean Elshtain’s realism, which discounts far too many possibilities in its smug reading of the signs of the times. By allowing so few possible responses to the status quo, this approach ultimately sanctifies the present situation as the best of all possible worlds. This danger also lurked in earlier forms of

⁵. Thomas Kamber notes this paradox in Marx’s own writings: “the conflict between the staggering optimism of his utopian vision and his frigidly skeptical analysis of historical and contemporary relations among humans” (1996/7, 103).

⁶. As Terry Eagleton points out, “If we need images of our desire, we also need to prevent these images from mesmerizing us and so standing in the way of it” (1999, 40).
Christian realism, although Niebuhr tempered his skepticism about Utopianism with an even greater skepticism regarding ruling elites and class politics. In the end, however, Niebuhr too quickly dismissed the possibility of substantive change and the extent to which the “realistic” and the “Utopian” are defined by those in power. As Welch notes, some limits are truly impossible to overcome, while others touted as such may in fact be socially imposed and far from inevitable. Thus liberationist theologies derided as “Utopian,” Welch argues, may propose “not the naive denial of any genuine limits but a sophisticated questioning of what a social system has set as ‘genuine limits’” (1990, 110).

While not all limits are “genuine,” some do indeed lie beyond our ability to change or surpass. Better societies will not emerge simply from “the movement of history.” This illusion has at times made the Utopianism of the socialist left counterproductive and even dangerous. Utopianism becomes counterproductive if people hoping for an inevitable (and prompt) transformation become disillusioned when they realize that a perfect society is not around the next bend; the collapse of an unrealistic Utopianism effectively dampens efforts for any social improvement. Utopianism becomes dangerous when activists develop a fanatical confidence in the correctness of their own vision and a corresponding intolerance for other perspectives and goals, ignoring the fact that even the most elevated visions of a good society have roots in particular cultures. This strikes many rationalists and secularists, perhaps especially on the left, as a particular danger of religious Utopias.

All these critiques are valid, yet blanket condemnations of Utopianism (and of religion) forget that dreams of a “splendid city” have inspired not only failed revolutions and totalitarian reactions but also a host of movements, many nonviolent, which have achieved real victories. These victories, never total and never gained without sacrifice, have made concrete improvements in people’s lives. For all their flaws and disappointments, the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutions make that clear: because of these movements, there are children and women who have not died prematurely, campesinos who can read and write, villages that have schools, and many more accomplishments that are worth celebrating, preserving, and replicating.

Socialists cannot see Utopia as either a blueprint that must be followed precisely or as the result of mechanistic cause-and-effect processes. Utopianism is most useful as a resource that teaches us to desire better: to understand what is wrong about the status quo and to envision and work for better alternatives. This entails believing that there are always alternatives, that better worlds are always possible, conceiving of that better world in substantive terms that leave history open, and, especially, acknowledging that any historical embodiment of Utopian hopes will fall short of the finality and purity for which the movement aimed. The sin of Utopianism is not naiveté but complacency: the conviction that we have achieved the best of all possible worlds, that there is nothing new under the sun, that history has ended and there is no alternative. Thus Tillich proposes, “It is the spirit of utopia that conquers utopia” (1971, 180). Utopianism can generate, at the same time, our most searching self-critique and our most powerful motivation for continued struggle.
Utopia, Agency, and Hope

The problem is how to sustain this spirit amidst the economic, political, environmental, and human dystopias of the present. Here I think socialists can learn something from religious images of the reign of God. The classic Christian description of the reign of God as “already/not yet” neatly encapsulates a tension that secular activists need. The reign of God is already among us insofar as we embody its values here and now; and it is always beyond us insofar as we always have farther to go. The complex relationship between what is here and now and what is to come is suggested in parables such as Matthew 13:31–2, in which Jesus tells the disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” A Nicaraguan activist’s response to the parable reflects both the power of its imagery and the ambiguity of its message.

I don’t know about the mustard seed, but I do know about the guásimá seed, which is tiny. I’m looking at that guásimá tree over there. It’s very large, and the birds come to it too. I say to myself: that’s what we are, this little community, a guásimá seed. It doesn’t seem there’s any connection between a thing that round and tiny, like a pebble, and that great big tree. It doesn’t seem either that there’s any connection between some poor campesinos and a just and well-developed society, where there is abundance and everything is shared. And we are the seed of that society. When the tree will develop we don’t know. But we know that we are a seed and not a pebble. (Cardenal 1976, 54)

There is a connection, but what it is and how it will play out, “we don’t know.” There is no preordained path to a better world; progress toward the reign of God is partial, fallible, and far from inevitable. At the same time, some Utopian Christians have understood their work in light of a larger salvific history, a religious framework in which actions gain meaning from divine power, and human agency is not all that moves history. This leads to a very different view of means and ends than that common in most ideas of Utopian social change, and indeed in most social ethics, which are, in one form or another, consequentialist.

Thus I return to the value of a nonteleological utopianism that can read worldly failure as neither a sign that one is not on the side of God (and good) nor evidence that progress is impossible. This sort of Utopian ethic cultivates, instead, what Yoder calls “an alternative consciousness,” according to which feasibility and results do not drive definitions of value and which, in the face of some of the ‘apparent’ lessons of ‘realism,’” keeps alive “another view of what the world is like” (1984, 94). Embodying Yoder’s point, a Salvadoran Catholic activist explained that the deaths of loved ones are “precisely what has giving meaning to my task [quehacer] as a Christian and in popular organizations…The example of the closest people is encouragement. To stop would mean that their blood had been shed in vain. We have to continue as long as God lets us live.” She echoes Yoder’s antiteleological logic when she argues that apparent failure, the deaths of activists, actually signifies that
the movement is on the right track and must continue. “Martyrs leave a commitment for the CEBs. The community meets around their memory. . . . Seeing how valuable people have fallen gives us motivation to continue our faith and our hope. . . . to be an authentic Christian follower of Jesus, there’s no option. You must go as far as possible” (interview by author, 9 April 1990).

The response to this might be to ask, as John Beverley does, “Who are the Christians today? That is, who in the world today, within Empire but not of it, carries the possibility of a logic that is opposed to Empire and that will bring about its eventual downfall or transformation?” (Beverley 2004, 7). This possibility might be found in communities that nurture narratives of previous martyrdoms and defeats, signs of hope to those who know how to read them, who are immersed in the past and present that they bridge. By rejecting consequentialist ethics and cause and effect calculation, their readings guard against the temptations to give up the battle or burn out, as Yoder writes (1984, 97).

This insight is confirmed in the histories of minority Christians, including Anabaptists and Central American Catholics, who have endured many more defeats than victories. How might other movements cultivate this disregard for historical outcome, if it is indeed required for endurance over the long haul of an unequal struggle? Perhaps what is necessary is in some sense religious, as Yoder suggests: a “conviction that one’s morality and social style are expressive of a transcendent commitment and not just of consequential calculation” (97). Terry Eagleton has suggested a secularized version of this faith: activists might focus less on achieving aims than on “the powers” that a struggle or event incarnates. Spurning the instrumental in this way is “a utopian gesture which might. . . . bear fruit for the living” (1999, 40). This notion recalls the claim of a Philippine activist quoted by Ileto: “No uprising fails. Each one is a step in the right direction” (Ileto 1979, 5).

I take this to mean not just that every movement learns from its predecessors but also that knowledge, commitments, relationships, capacities, and “powers” all build slowly and can lead to unexpected results. There is no unilinear accumulation of forces, since every movement is subject to countless frustrations and losses. No particular end is inevitable or even likely. However, the mere fact of historical failure, according to instrumental criteria, should not condemn a group or its goals. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri make a similar argument: “Far from being defeated, the revolutions of the twentieth century have each pushed forward and transformed the terms of class conflict, posing the conditions of a new political subjectivity, an insurgent multitude against imperial power” (2000, 394).

The distinctive contribution of religion, and especially Christianity, to the socialist left today may be a willingness to be explicit about Utopianism. At its best, religion—and religious Utopianism in particular—includes a dimension of “surplus,” or of transcendence, that can, paradoxically, generate appreciation for small, everyday victories without sacralizing a particular desired end or suggesting that there is closure (or that humans can attain a God’s-eye view of that closure). More precisely: because the reign of God is always already and not yet, believers can anticipate only partial (at best) success in reaching this goal. At the same time, they are called to appreciate that which is “in our midst.” As Cullenberg points out, socialists and others have often underestimated the actual achievements of our
movements. Sharon Welch argues that an “ethic of control” has blinded liberals to smaller achievements since total victory is the only one that counts. This failing has not afflicted movements such as the civil rights struggle, in part because their religious grounding has encouraged a different vision of what counts as success, of time scale, and of the significance and limitations of human efforts in a world not finally controlled by humans. This awareness of limits can be helpful for environmentalists also—and any of us, religious or not, who view humans as one species among many, with great power to do good and bad but without final control over everything.7

If it is true that “no uprising fails,” then every movement for social change, every attempt to steer history in a new direction, demonstrates the possibility of a different world. That knowledge, often saved and transmitted by small groups at the margins of societies, can be redemptive when dystopian agendas dominate and when political repression prevents the open expression of alternatives. Memories of slave rebellions in the southern United States, of indigenous struggles in Latin America, and of other “failed” uprisings resurface generations later, having kept both anger and Utopian hope alive until a time when they could be expressed in a politically efficacious way. Such narratives provide emotional, moral, and material support that enables members to continue practicing their values and thus to keep alternative values alive. The collective context is crucial, for, as Yoder puts it, dissenters have a “combined power of resistance [that] is far more than the sum of the resistance potential of each member taken separately.” No single individual can carry social memories and aspirations alone. A community spreads the burden not only across a group but also across generations: “When the powers of evil are for a time so successful that all resistance seems to be crushed, it is from the ranks of that community, just now bludgeoned into quiescence, that will come another generation’s prophets, in their time” (Yoder 1984, 91–2).

For clues to this capacity to survive martyrdoms and defeats, the Australian environmental philosopher Arran Garé, like Hardt and Negri, turns to Augustine and the Christians of Rome. These early Christians, Garé writes, were “strangers in the societies in which they must live their everyday lives.” Such groups cannot simply withdraw into monasteries to wait for a new world, but must “begin to build this new civilization while the old civilization, despite its nihilism and the fragmentation of its culture, is still vigorous and powerful; more powerful than any civilization which has ever existed” (1995, 144). This is what some Utopian religious communities, such as the Salvadoran repopulations, strive to do. At their best, they criticize the status quo and also embody, in embryonic form, a more desirable ideal. They straddle the boundaries between the real and the Utopian, embodying the productive tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the reign of God. While the longed-for Utopia may well always remain not yet on earth, it is already among us

7. It might be worth adding, in this regard, that the ecological conviction that “Mother Earth bats last” is as double-sided as many forms of left Utopianism: valuable insofar as it reinforces a human sense of limits, fallibility, and humility, but dangerous if it is read as promising an ecological eschaton in which environmental destruction will be transcended.
in these small and vulnerable communities, seeds and promissory notes for the future.

These communities do not lack problems and strains, but neither are they castles in the air. They represent hope of learning, first, that it is possible not only to conceive of a different world but also to create one, to live and make a living by different rules. Second, these small communities help us see how they are possible: what they might require of us, what they might promise. Their very existence holds out hope, even while this hope staggers under the combined weight of the empire to which the communities refuse allegiance and of their own human frailties. They are far from perfect, their survival is far from assured, and their visions may never be realized beyond their own borders. Still, their lesson could not be more important: human beings can live better; injustice, destruction, and cruelty are not inevitable; another world is possible.

Acknowledgments

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Marxist Reading Group conference “Catastrophe Now,” University of Florida, Gainesville, 27 March 2004. Thanks to the participants in those discussions and also to Eray Düzenli, Carla Ingrando, and Manuel Vásquez for helpful comments.

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