

Jacoby's evasive and unappealing utopian vision



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American society is rarely content with its present state. Rather, it constantly seeks ways to improve and enhance the current standard of living. Ideally, these changes should be paving the path to a better future, one in which hostility and conflict become practically obsolete and in which humanity can reside with greater unity and peace. Often, such platonic, futuristic societies are labeled "utopian," which Lyman Sargent, in his essay "Utopian Traditions: Themes and Variations," delineates as "generally oppositional, reflecting, at the minimum, frustration with things as they are and the desire for a better life" (1).

However, according to Russell Jacoby in his book *The End of Utopia*, society has succumbed to more conservative views and strayed far from its founding utopian ideals. He harshly condemns intellectuals on the basis that they have lost grasp of the vigor and innovation that once characterized their objectives. Furthermore, he dubs concepts such as multiculturalism trivial and meaningless in the context of today's society. Although Jacoby does offer limited insight into how the hope and desire for utopia can serve as a robust motor for society's progress, his vision of life brought about through the radical restructuring of society entails more than he anticipates—that is, he neglects to consider if humanity and its disposition would ever be compatible with a society so tightly structured. Instead, his vision is concocted upon the foundation of his basic, bold assumption that "all Americans...have more or less the same desires for success" (Jacoby, 48). In contrast, Isaiah Berlin, in his essay "The Pursuit of the Ideal," affords a much more sensible and pragmatic perspective. Berlin lucidly demonstrates that conflicts, primarily those that are social and political, will always arise. He

argues that instead of focusing on pursuing a society brought about through radical changes, which Jacoby so emphatically promotes, society should focus on maintaining its peaceful and composed aspects. In essence, Berlin's essay lucidly allows one to see that Jacoby's vision of a utopian society is very unappealing, inconceivable, and incompatible with the natural state of humanity, as it dodges such critical issues as warfare and politics, multiculturalism, and rational thought.

A major weakness in Jacoby's argument for radical changes is his naive assumption that society, under a utopian structure, would no longer have to deal with today's pressing issues of weapon production, political scandals, and discrimination. He condemns modern utopians for incorporating such uprisings and major conflicts when formulating their views on the structure of utopia: " Thomas More dreamed of a utopia without war, money, violence or inequality. Five centuries later the most imaginative futurists foresee a utopia with war, money, violence and inequality" (Jacoby 161). Jacoby fails, however, to provide any concrete evidence for why he believes that society would simply be able to dodge another bloodshed or major economic crisis while living in such a utopian lifestyle. Instead, Jacoby has the static mindset of the pure utopian, whose ideas now lack the feasibility that they once might have possessed. Near the end of his book, Jacoby not only seems to imply that this vision of utopia is feasible, but also that it will materialize in the near future: " That day is more distant than ever. Or is it? History outwits even its most diligent students. No one foresaw the rapid demise of the Soviet Union in 1989" (181).

On the other hand, Berlin contends, "the search for perfection does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed" (Berlin 18). Thus, Berlin does not obstinately shield his eyes from the past century, which has been inundated by uprisings and horrifying, bloody conflicts, often precipitated by countries attempting to implement major changes, such as in the Russian Revolution. The basic reasoning that major changes will always be met with some type of resistance is not a concept that society has recently adopted, as Jacoby seems to imply. Even one of the most influential philosophers of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant, utilized reasoning analogous to that of the utopian thinkers and intellectuals of today who Jacoby so ruthlessly condemns: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made" (Berlin 19). Thus, Jacoby's concept of this world-in which political policies stop stirring up controversy, economic markets defy their natural cycles, and mankind's innate predisposition toward segregation by interests has dissolved-begins to falter when faced with more realistic logic and intuition.

Although affording sufficient responses to other matters of certain utopias, such as increased work, materialism, a false freedom through technology, and the true nature of learning, Jacoby is very inattentive to the heart of the matter-that is, he neglects to contemplate the compatibility of human nature under a utopian structure (Jacoby 160-165). Berlin, however, points to the natural disposition of humanity to demonstrate why utopia would need to be mapped out in more consideration than the simple implementation of radical changes: "Spontaneity, a marvelous human quality, is not compatible with capacity for organized planning, for the nice calculation of what and how much and where-on which the welfare of society may largely depend" (Berlin

13). In other words, human behavior is not completely predictable. Thus, for humans to live in a society of such high structure and planning, behavior would in essence need to be foreseeable, which would engender direct conflict with the natural demeanor of humanity. Even Bellamy admits to the pervasiveness of this totalitarianism and authoritarianism, to which most utopias succumb. In a rather feeble manner, however, Jacoby attempts to discredit this notion by bringing up other matters, such as the "failure to think boldly," throughout his book, which again shows his underlying evasiveness (Jacoby 169-170).

Berlin, in contrast, by referring to mankind's innate characteristics, formulates the convincing argument that utopia would not be a natural but rather artificial and contrived way of living, were certain provisions not made. Therefore, can anyone honestly say that society's thoughts and convictions can be foretold to the point where new policies and changes would appease everyone's desires and needs? Is there one politician that could truly represent all of humanity, or one economic restructuring plan from which everyone would equally benefit? When placed in this light, Jacoby's vision of utopia quickly loses its desirability, due to the fact that it does not accommodate or attend to differing views.

Another front upon which Jacoby's vision of utopia fails miserably is the issue of multiculturalism-that is, his vision lacks any. Jacoby abandons the chance to possibly circumvent many of the inevitable clashes that will surface with the radical changes he proposes. Moreover, not only does he remain silent on this issue of multiculturalism, but he censures society for even bothering with such concepts when he says "no vision drives multiculturalism" (Jacoby <https://assignbuster.com/jacobys-evasive-and-unappealing-utopian-vision/>

33). Jacoby places a large emphasis on economics when analyzing cultural differences: "If the economic skeleton of culture were put on the table, patter about diversity might cease; it would be clear that the diverse cultures rest on the same infrastructures" (39). Although economic systems play crucial roles in defining cultures, there exist many other defining aspects of culture that Jacoby conveniently ignores, such as moral values. This issue of moral values is elucidated through Austin Sarat's essay entitled "The Micropolitics of Identity/Difference: Recognition and Accommodation in Everyday Life." In his essay, he delineates the story of a how Tina Isa was murdered by her Palestinian parents for neglecting cultural rules such as not visiting friends on the weekends. Does Jacoby's statement "that the world and the United States are relentlessly becoming more culturally uniform, not diverse" still hold the same credibility in light of such gruesome incidents (Jacoby 47)? Are such aspects of life as religion and moral issues trivial enough to simply be dubbed "uniform" as Jacoby so eloquently puts it? Sarat is keen to acknowledge the extremity of this situation, and points to more common day occurrences to show how cultural differences still remain pressing matters. For example, he reveals the story of how a play at a local school was cancelled due to the controversy it had sparked among the Puerto Rican community, which "took on the dimensions of a People magazine event" (Sarat 154). Obviously, cultural differences do hold a powerful position in American society, which Jacoby seems to dismiss. Therefore, if society is confronted with these types of problems under a relatively loose and open structure, what does Jacoby expect to occur under a stricter and tighter formed utopian society? The evasiveness on Jacoby's

part toward such concerns is another agent that dissolves the appeal of his vision. Part of Jacoby's aversion towards multiculturalism stems from the idea that, in order for his vision of utopia to hold substance, it would need for all cultures and people to hold the same basic ideals and convictions.

However, multiculturalism plays the antithetical role-that is, it advocates each culture to hold on to its beliefs and differing views in order to maintain its identity, which would prove rather problematic for a utopian society without conflicts. Jacoby thus downplays the significance of multiculturalism to ease the tension that his utopian vision faces.

Berlin, in contrast, addresses the issue of pluralism. He realizes that humanity living under a society that only seems to hold when there exists a homogeneity of ideas would not only be implausible but also foreign and inconceivable. He further explains that a society where all conflicts due to differences in views are resolved is something unthinkable (Berlin 13).

Therefore, society cannot ignore these conflicts and debates that arise due to humanity's congenital differences simply because they contradict some conceived idealistic, romantic way of living, as Jacoby does. Jacoby's vision of utopia, which seems to ignore the possibility of large disparities between basic ideals arising, seems to be only feasible when there exists a blanket of homogeneity, which may lead to a society where intellectual stimulation is deficient and boredom is pervasive, thus lacking much appeal.

Ultimately, therefore, Jacoby's vision of utopia proves to be one that is tenuous and implausible. Jacoby criticizes intellectuals and modern utopians for lacking the innovation that they once possessed, yet he himself fails to discern that his vision of utopia is one that is too evasive and unappealing,

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due to the fact that he prevaricates such issues as multiculturalism and warfare. Berlin's views and convictions, on the other hand, are much more plausible and pragmatic. His logic draws on the natural disposition of humanity. Although the question of whether the surfacing of an actual utopia might occur in the distant future remains vague and ambiguous, it does remain certain that if society's lifestyle were to parallel one similar to what Jacoby's vision proposes, we should in fact pursue the end of utopia-which, ironically, serves as the title of Jacoby's book.