

# The debate about utopias from a sociological perspective

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## Introduction

The topics of the three sections of this paper are as follows.

(a) *Sociologists and historians*: A manifesto for the sociological approach to the study of utopias. For this purpose I attempt a critique of the method employed in a standard historical work on the subject, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* by Frank E. and Fritzie P.

Manuel (Manuel & Manuel 1979) in the light of recent English debates about the relationship between sociology and history. A comparison is also made of their historians' account of the historical context of Thomas More's *Utopia* with a sociological sketch of the same writer by Norbert Elias.

(b) *Sociology and utopia*: A brief survey of some important trends in the English and American social-scientific literature on utopias, including para-sociological speculation and social philosophizing, statistical futurology and theories of the catalytic *function* of utopias in societies, which develop problem areas first posited by Karl Mannheim. It focuses on the contributions of Ruth Levitas and Zygmunt Bauman.

(c) *The Marxian utopia: from history to logic*: The centrality of the problem of the *realization* of utopia, informed by a social-scientific theory of society, in the Marxist strand of socialist and communist thinking. Here I concentrate on the structure of assumptions in Marx's theory itself (particularly its philosophical residues) which partly shaped later 'neo-utopian' work in this tradition into the postulation of idealized and unrealizable utopian states of affairs in society. The section concludes with a critique of that prominent theme in the 'critical theory' of Jürgen Habermas; in the Marxist humanism of Zygmunt Bauman; and in the rationalistic 'new apriorism' of Karl-Otto Apel.

The paper does not contain an exhaustive survey of the sociological literature under those three headings, but a selection of important trends, themes and authors for the sake of discussion.

### **(a) Sociologists and historians**

In British sociology at the present time there is considerable debate between historians and sociologists about the relationship between their disciplines. I think it would be fair to say that there has been something approaching a *rapprochement* between the disciplines, to a point where the division between them has become very blurred.<sup>1</sup> Sociologists have conceded that they can learn a great deal from historians' work as well as their craft skill of handling archive materials and the historians have agreed that their work produces the best explanatory results when they approach empirical materials with concepts. Furthermore, in a large number of recent publications, social historians and historians of ideas and of art (for example Quentin Skinner (1969), John Dunn (1968), Peter Burke (1980), Arthur Marwick (1970), Peter Laslett (1968, 1977), and TJ Clark (1973a, 1973b, 1974)) the older tradition of history writing, which dealt with personages and events or traced disembodied ideas or art styles through history as though they had a life of their own, more-or-less unrelated to structured social developments, has been thoroughly discredited. Interdisciplinary co-operation and dialogue has perhaps gone furthest in the history, philosophy and sociology of science (for example, Mendelsohn, Weingart, and Whitley, 1977, Spiegel-Rösing & de Solla Price, 1977). The result of these developments is that many empirical works are being produced by historians which are, methodologically speaking at least, indistinguishable from sociology: for example, Laslett (1977) or Foster (1974). This is also obviously true of a number of Marxist studies of long-term developments in European societies (for example, Anderson 1974a, 1974b). The historian Peter Burke has summed up the present mood:

What some of us would like to see, what we are beginning to see, is a social history, or historical sociology – the distinction should become irrelevant – which would be concerned both with understanding from within and explaining from without; with the general and with the particular; and which would combine the sociologist's acute sense of structure with the historian's equally sharp sense of change (Burke, 1980:30).

In view of the dialogue between the disciplines taking place in British academic circles and its effect on historical scholarship, the compendious work by the historians Frank E. and Fritzie P. Manuel (Manuel & Manuel 1979) appears old-fashioned. I would not gainsay the pleasure one derives from its erudition, thoroughness, elegance and meticulous scholarship, nor its utility as a reference work. But from a sociological point of view it lacks both a sense of social structure and, more precisely, a theoretical framework guiding the selection of historical evidence. The study is avowedly pluralistic, considering utopias in Western history ‘from a number of points of view; geographical, psychological, sociological; as a form of *belle-lettres*; as philosophic-moral treatises; as a new mythology’ (Manuel & Manuel:21). The authors continue: ‘we have tried to avoid the parochialism of exclusive disciplinary discourse by studying the same utopian constellation on many different levels’ (ibid). For the Manuels, a general theory of utopias would of necessity have to be that of a *particular* social science discipline, hence it would constitute a constricting and undesirable form of monism (ibid). They say that in studying a particular utopia the approach of each discipline contains ‘at least a grain of some meaning and truth’ (ibid).

The Manuels do not consider that the separation of aspects of human societies into the subject-matter of disciplines may relate more to their institutionalisation in universities than to the actual structure of societies (see Shils 1970). A general sociological theory can be constructed, however, which incorporates the fact that in observed social life the usually separated psychological, economic, political and cultural levels relation to each other concomitantly in human social relations. This theory would be a sociological one simply because the object of enquiry is human social relations (see Elias (2007 [1987])). (Although it is clear that interdisciplinary co-operation is necessary at this stage simply because institutional and professional specialisation exists.)

The authors’ empirical material is organised around seven ‘major utopian constellations’ or ‘configurations’ (Manuel & Manuel:13) or chronological ‘clusters’ (Manuel & Manuel:19) in Western history which are examined by reference to the writings of exemplars in the different countries. The seven constellations are:

(i) Birth of utopia in the Renaissance and Reformation, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (More, Leonardo, Anabaptists);

- (ii) Seventeenth century (Pansophists, Campanella, Comenius);
- (iii) and (iv) Enlightenment (Rousseau, Turgot, Kant – at least two phases);
- (v) Utopian socialism early nineteenth century (Fourier, Saint-Simon);
- (vi) Marx and counter-Marx (including Engels, Comte); and
- (vii) Modern times (Darwin, Freud, Marcuse).

The authors' data are the works of learned writers about utopias, 'the utopian thought of the literate classes in Western society (Manuel & Manuel:10)'. They specifically eschew trying to find out about the awareness of utopias in the consciousness of other groups. They suggest, however, that there is probably a seepage from the utopias of the educated people into the demands of popular action programmes (Manuel & Manuel:9--10).

Lacking a general theory of society, however, the Manuels can only *marvel* at shifts in the social function of various utopias and in meanings of the term over time, without being able to explain systematically why they occur. For example, they write of the fate of the works of Thomas More, Marx and Comenius:

More's Christian-humanist *declamatio* becomes a revolutionary manifesto; Marx's notebooks ... are read as a dogma a century later; Comenius's massive systematic manuscript *General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human* ... ends up as a mere historical curiosity ... of interest to a limited number of specialists ... The observer of utopia over a period of hundreds of years is constrained to consider each event as having roots in the past and sending out tentacles to the future and to coevals scattered over a broad area. No important utopian event is encapsulated or autonomous, because future history has embraced it (Manuel & Manuel:25).

The questions a sociologist would ask here are why were these utopias taken up in different ways later? By which social groups? For what reasons? As part of what social conflicts? At what stage of social development? For what kinds of orientation? What was it about the social experiences of later generations that made these utopias seem to them appropriate and congruent? Why have some utopias lived on whilst others (like that of Comenius) disappeared? The authors have identified an interesting problem, but as historians they can only indicate the changing ideological functions of utopias in the vague and figurative terms

of ‘tentacles to the future’ which are sometimes ‘embraced’ by ‘future history’. For an explanation of the dynamic of utopian thinking and acting, their theory-less stance inevitably drives them to a form of philosophical anthropology, which in some places borders on mysticism. One casual remark is very significant. They mention in passing the interesting fact of the absence of a sustained, indigenous tradition of utopianism in Spain. There are a couple of exceptions, one of whom is Don Quixote. To him, they suggest incredibly, ‘a free-floating utopian affect may have somehow attached itself (Manuel & Manuel:14)’.

To develop this point, their general explanation for the recurrence of utopias is a postulated pervasive ‘utopian propensity’ which is manifested in the various writers in the constellations the origin of which is, they claim equally incredibly, ‘not knowable’(Manuel & Manuel:13). The recurrence and longevity of certain mythic themes in utopian writing and the perennial fascination of people with utopias over the centuries, may be because utopias evoke ‘associations remote and deeply rooted in Western consciousness (ibid)’. The authors refer in particular to the Judeo-Christian other-worldly belief in paradise and the Hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth, which ‘flowed together in the underthought of Western utopia (Manuel & Manuel:33)’, becoming fused in the age of the Renaissance and continuing after that through the other constellations.<sup>2</sup> When the authors try to bring together in their historical analysis the level of a continuity of belief and the level of the social dynamics of a given society, they can only produce the following loose characterisation:

Historical analysis involves recognition of the persistence of symbolic and residual utopian forms, as well as consciousness of the “hot” motivation, generated by immediate socio-economic, political, or philosophic-religious dissatisfaction and anguish (Manuel & Manuel:13).

As before, the authors have located an important problem, but in an unhelpful terminology. That is, how we can deal in our enquiries with the complex interplay between the social structure of the particular stage of development of the society concerned and the continuum of relatively autonomous forms of consciousness, knowledge and culture available to people at that stage, which are neither completely reducible to the circumstances, nor completely transcendent of them.

Hence, some conceptual clarification is necessary to sort out the levels implied in the Manuels' prose. The term 'underthought' needs to be clarified and differentiated, so that one can more easily determine what exactly is the social process whereby specified basic features in Western thinking have *become* so deeply sedimented, if they have. How can we translate the strange term 'hot motivation' into more precise sociological terminology applicable to actual social relations? Without this kind of careful conceptual work, there is no adequate way to organise the data of the phenomenon of continuity that the authors are tracing. Consequently, there is always the temptation, in the absence of a systematic explanation, to fall back into an arbitrary, quasi-mystical one.

In the following passage we see that the Manuels express (imprecisely) their awareness that people learn mystic symbols; but the authors remain equivocal about whether the 'utopian fantasies' are timeless or historically conditioned. The constantly recurring 'ahistorical' mythic symbols and the particular society in which they occur are, therefore, simply placed side-by-side:

Anyone born into a culture is likely to imbibe a set of utopian fantasies even as he internalises certain prohibitions at an early stage. We do not know whether these utopian elements are part of a collective unconscious. The problem of conformities in the symbols of utopia is not unlike that of dream symbols. They may be ahistorical and acultural, though always found in a specific context, social and psychological (Manuel & Manuel:13--14).

Furthermore, they regard a sociological account as necessarily providing a *static* picture of the structure of the society of a given utopian writer, in itself insufficient, they believe, to capture an inexpressible quality possessed by some utopias. They say, in a passage which mocks sociology, that:

To announce in tones of dramatic revelation that a utopia mirrors the misery of the working classes or the squeeze of the lesser nobility between the peasants and the royal power is to say something, but not enough ...[L]imiting an interpretation to the immediate environment of the utopian, tying him down too closely and mechanically to the precise circumstances and incidents that could have triggered his writing, fails to recognise that he may have something

ahistorical to say about love, aggression, the nature of work, the fulfilment of personality. The truly great utopian is a Janus-like creature, time-bound and free of time, place-bound and free of place. His duality should be respected and appreciated (Manuel & Manuel:24).

And the use of psychological concepts also gets short shrift for the same reason:

An ideal visionary type, the perfect utopian, would probably both hate his father and come from a disinherited class. A bit of schizophrenia, a dose of megalomania, obsessiveness and compulsiveness fit neatly into the stereotype. But the utopian personality that is more than an item of a catalogue must also be gifted and stirred by a creative passion (Manuel & Manuel:27).

In these passages the Manuels are forced to invoke an obscure, ineffable flair possessed by gifted utopians which makes them somehow rise above their place in the historical process and apparently enables them to say something 'ahistorical'. This is because the authors implicitly regard, in the style of Romanticism, a social-scientific account of utopias as being unable to exhaust the spiritual autonomy and creativity of man. They want to cloak utopias with a strange and profound ancient mystery which stretches back into the mists of antiquity and pre-history. They cannot envisage that it might be possible to explain sociologically why it is that at a certain point a particular utopian solution to social problems, written by one person, is congruent with many people's experiences and wishes at that time. And then further explain how the utopia finds fertile soil in later generations because similar social problems and experiences have recurred for reasons that can be delineated.

A dynamic sociological account does not necessarily have to reduce utopias *solely* to their function for particular group at a particular time, *nor* deny the very special talents of the individual utopian writer or artist. The Manuels are caught on the horns of a false dilemma, the solution to which drives them into the arms of mythology. Eschewing a general interdisciplinary theory, they can only point abstractly to the survival value of some utopias, rather than others, by assuming that the genesis of this phenomenon contains an obscure, recurrent level which ultimately defies explanation. Predictably, then, in their explanation they fall back on a vague term of no empirical import derived unreflectively from

existentialist philosophy: the transhistorical validity of a utopia, they write, is the result of its closeness to some aspect of the 'human condition' as such (Manuel & Manuel:20).

In the analysis of Thomas More's *Utopia* of 1516, specifically, the Manuels are aware that this work in particular has survived its context, to be interpreted and reinterpreted in many different ways in the centuries since. They mention how it has been taken up by various socialists, liberals and communists in later years who have read the work in various ways in order to inform their own purposes. But they have regarded it as far more grave, earnest, absolutist, self-righteous, apocalyptic and vehement than it actually was. The temper of the original Christian humanist utopia in More was 'gay, playful, tolerant, sceptical, amusing in various degrees (Manuel & Manuel:149)'. More was enthralled with Hellenic culture (which includes the myth of an ideal city on earth) and the Manuels show how *Utopia* artfully weaves into its structure allusions, motifs and jokes at the expense of Plato's *Republic*. More's *Utopia* picks up the threads of Plato's observations about an ideal city, reproduces the dialogue form and distinguishes between discursive argument and substantial description of a utopia in a skilful way that would have been appreciated in the circle of humanists in More's London who were familiar with Greek writers.

The Manuels describe the monologue by the Portuguese mariner Raphael Hythloday about the sorry state of Henry VIII's England and the description of the life of Utopians, who had arrived at Christian moral and political truths even though they had never heard of the Gospels until Hythloday's coming. This society was not an earthly paradise, but intended more as a representation of the natural desires and authentic needs of humanity. It was, like More's London, an urban one. Like the other humanists of his time, More wants to 'Hellenize' the cities of England with a civic spirit, derived from the Greek *polis*. The book is 'antifeudal' (Manuel & Manuel:134) with the Utopian social order being a patriarchal, 'calm meritocracy' (ibid). Warrior-nobles are the enemies, the monarch is dependent on civilian councillors and the learned are highly valued, which reflected changes going on in the royal service of many European monarchies at this time. The two authors attribute More's un-Platonic advocacy of complete equality of property for all free inhabitants and his intricate hierarchy of pleasures, to his Christian humanism.

Indeed, central to the interpretation of More's *Utopia* for the Manuels is the religious dimension. They insist that *Utopia* must not be stripped of its 'religious dress' (Manuel &

Manuel:126). It is inconceivable without ‘a belief in the immortality of the soul and in rewards and punishments in the next world’ (Manuel & Manuel:125). In *Utopia* the root of evil is the lust for possessions, identified with the Christian sin of pride; the admonishments by Hythloday against hunger, crime, vast possessions, idleness and iniquity are in keeping with Christian and Hellenic censures against wealth and cupidity; and the apparently modern remarks about care for the sick and security in old age and More’s sympathies for propertyless people, stemmed not from a proto-modern concern for equality and social welfare, but from a desire to eradicate the sin of arrogance that had led to the Fall. More also draws biblical lessons from the customs and patterns of behaviour of the Utopians, for example their contempt for gold and the attitudes expressed towards pleasure, baptism and religious toleration. The Manuels devote considerable space to showing how More tries to relate and reconcile Epicurean and Greek notions of permissible gratification, and to locating by whom More was influenced in his particular synthesis of doctrines (his teacher John Colet, Erasmus and Lorenzo Valla).

In the years before the Reformation More, like other Christian humanists, was beset with doubts and conflicts about the religious, moral and political issues of the time. Hence, there is in *Utopia*, the Manuels maintain, little unequivocal political advocacy but rather, through the allusive and distancing medium of its form, More thrives on paradox and suggestive inversions of the values of his time. His favourite trope is to say something, then partially withdraw it, or to take a contemporary idea for social reform to its logical conclusion without totally embracing it. For example, More condemns the enclosure movement of his time through the paradox of saying that the lamb, a symbol of Christian goodness, has become a monster, driving Christian farmers off the land into thieving, to be hunted down and hanged (Manuel & Manuel:130--36).

In contrast, Elias’s sociological sketch (Elias 1981) of the general problem of the function of utopias in societies and of Thomas More’s *Utopia* in particular, is informed by his theory of civilizing processes (2012 [1939]) in which the sociological and social-psychological levels – at best an adjunct for the Manuels – are brought together. Elias says that utopias are ‘directional fantasy-images of possible futures’, indispensable as a means of orientation in human societies. The image shows either what kind of solutions to social problems or type of society its authors desire should come about (wish images) or what solutions or futures they fear (fear images); and they form part of the orientation and planning

of a number of groups, not just communists and socialists, those most frequently associated with utopias. (I will take up later the role of utopias in the Marxist strand of communist and socialist thinking.) By looking at the function of utopias in society as an object of sociological inquiry, Elias hopes to free the concept of utopia from either of its derogatory or laudatory associations, as well as from its associations with political groups.

Elias maintains that for the sharp edge of the concept of utopia to be maintained one has to locate the stage of development of human societies at which the term gained its customary associations. It was a stage at which the secularization of human beliefs had gone a fair way so that people's fantasy-images could be directed more towards social conditions. This stage corresponds to one at which people were able to judge their own communal experiences in comparison with those of other groups and were beginning to be able to develop more synthetic, less 'naively we-centred' (Elias 1981:6) concepts, including that of utopia. This stage of development corresponds also to the stage at which the term state appears in European vocabulary, first in Italy. It was the stage of the rise of the firmly centralized form of rule of the absolutist form of states in Europe, to which correspond the increasing power chances of non-feudal princes, whose early representatives were Francis I, the Borgias and Henry VIII. Both the career of the term state and that of utopia remain incomprehensible, Elias says, without reference to these developments of states and to the experiences people had which were connected with them.

According to Elias, it was at this stage that Thomas More stood, secretly opposed to the rising arbitrary power of princes and risking his life to stand against it. (The Manuels refer to this period as the first of their 'utopian constellations', as against Elias's *stage* in the process of state formation.) Hand-in-hand with the increasing stringency of secular rule went the weakening of religious rule and its corresponding (religious) orientation. The increasingly powerful rulers of states splintered the monopolistic religious organisation into competing organisations, with rulers of states increasingly trying to force their subjects into membership of one of them.

Thomas More, like other learned men of his time, had misgivings about the growing power of the absolutist princes and about the growing fanaticism of the conflicts between the religious organisations. Like other humanists caught up at this stage of these developments, More was opposed to the fanaticism of his co-religionists as well as that of the other non-conforming sectarians. Of course, as we have seen, the Manuels also see More's *Utopia* as

having, centrally, a religious dimension, but they concentrate (as historians of ideas) on More's attempt to reconcile and synthesise various *doctrines* (Christian and Hellenic) in the book, during a period of doubt and religious conflict in the period prior to the Reformation. Whilst Elias's stress would be on keeping in the centre of one's explanation for aspects of the book such as that attempt to synthesise doctrines, the stage of simultaneous processes of increasing central-secular/weakening religious-monopoly rule, at which More stood. This both provided him with a specific society to criticise and enabled him to develop a concept of utopia which presupposed a more detached, less we-centred level of cognitive synthesis, directed more towards social conditions.

Elias also examines More's *Utopia* as a piece of 'literature', that is he shows how More uses his artistic skill to provide a structure for the book which dramatises the points he is making and which enables him obliquely to make radical and forceful social criticism. He uses the then fashionable and respected dialogue form to make social criticism through the mouth of the world-traveller in order to protect himself. In this way More can make guarded attacks against the monarch or broach subjects which could easily offend the two ruling establishments of the time – the church and the state. Elias maintains that the two parts of the book – one a statement of social ills in England and the other concerned with the society of *Utopia* – interlock, since one illuminates the other to produce social criticism in a dramatic way. The 'form' was a literary one traditionally available to More, but it crucially affects what is actually communicated – the 'content'. The Manuels, too, like many others, realise that *Utopia* is a work of veiled social and religious comment, though they believe it lacks the obvious advocacy of any particular party or cause. Their stress, however, is less on the structured social tensions and conflicts of the time in which More was immersed at the highest level, and the relationship of this to the 'form' and message of work, but more on the interweaving of Christian and Hellenic themes, motifs and allusions and the use of inversions in the book itself.

However, I do not think that these two emphases cannot be brought together. For Elias, More presents a wish-image of a utopian society in which the contemporary exploiters, represented as nobles, goldsmiths and usurers, have disappeared and More also tells of the ruthlessness of the land-owners who are enclosing peasant lands and transforming them into sheep pastures. Elias translates More's nobles, goldsmiths and usurers into the characteristic social groups of that particular stage of development: courtiers and land-owners, moneylenders and pawnbrokers, all of whom exploit the poor. Unmentioned by Elias here

are more possible biblical associations in the terms used by More, which ties in with the paradox, located by the Manuels, of the lamb, the Christian symbol of goodness, driving Christian farmers off the land into crime. The point is that these kinds of observations can be employed further to strengthen a sociological account of More at the centre of a developing tension-field of social and religious conflict in his society. But those textual, theological associations and allusions (like the correspondences with Plato's *Republic*) are of limited cognitive value considered completely in isolation from those social developments. They are, of course, also of limited value if they are brought to the fore in analysis with the 'social structure' left statically and loosely formulated as a less important or even secondary 'backdrop' or 'background'.

### **(b) Sociology and utopia**

From the previous section emerged the promise of a sociological theory of the origins and function of utopias in human societies and its fertility was briefly shown in explaining the significance of a particular empirical example, that of Thomas More. It was an explanation which at the same time retained the recognition of the special talent of the author as a real, living person caught up in the tension field of his society. Despite this promise, few sociologists, it seems to me, since Karl Mannheim wrote his *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim 1929) have produced a *theory* of utopias which has advanced his contribution very much.<sup>3</sup>

Occasionally one finds on closer inspection that a writer one always thought of as having a lot to say about the social function of utopias is actually using the idea of a utopia for another purpose altogether. Ralf Dahrendorf, for example, in his well-known essay 'Out of Utopia' (in Dahrendorf 1959) says, quite rightly, that utopias are usually portrayed as suspended out of time and/or spatially isolated, with their inhabitants living perfect, agreeable lives in complete consensus. But his target is, in fact, the then dominant sociological theory of the 'social system' by Talcott Parsons which, Dahrendorf says, sees human societies as conflictless and consensual, i.e. like a utopia. I cannot undertake a comprehensive survey of all the works on utopias by social scientists, but only indicate a few trends and important exemplars in what is a highly heterogeneous literature.

Much of what passes as the sociology of utopias is also often, on close scrutiny, social philosophising, political speculation or a moral indictment of utopianism because of its

putative deleterious social and political consequences. For example, Dumont (1974) speculates about the plight of humanity on a global scale and how a catastrophe can be avoided arising from the irrational distribution of resources between nation-states. His conclusion is summarised in the title of his book, *Utopia or Else*. Melvin J. Lasky's *Utopia and Revolution* (Lasky 1977) is a historical account of the tragic consequences of revolutionaries' utopian commitments to total change and social reconstruction.

Not all the speculators see purely negative consequences of utopias, however; often the presence of utopias in societies is seen as also performing a creative, critical function. For example, Chad Walsh, in his often-quoted *From Utopia to Nightmare* says that the traditional articles of faith underpinning all utopian thinking are that man is good and perfectible and can live in harmony ruled by rulers who will not be corrupted by power (Walsh 1962:70). But the 'dystopian counter-attack' (ibid) has been there from the beginning, and re-surfaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to produce anti-socialist reactions and dire warnings, fuelled by Stalinism, about utopian experiments. A recurrent theme of dystopias such as Eugene Zamiatin's *We* or George Orwell's *1984* is that one of the few ways in which programmed and brainwashed individuals can break out of their subordination is to fall in love, something which runs counter to the usual array of methods employed to dampen discontent and creativity (Walsh 1962:149). Walsh concludes, however, that in the historical utopia/dystopia dialectic the 'utopian is like the artist, the dystopian is the art critic' (Walsh 1962:177).

This theme occurs a great deal in the para-sociological speculative literature on utopias – the idea of the utopian as critic, as the indispensable builder of dreams prior to the arrival of the dystopian who does the secondary job of putting them perspective. The utopian is no realist, but always one with *possible* worlds in mind. This idea is expressed by Armytage (1968) as the recurrence in our present stage 'after utopia' of the generative power of the utopians' concern for the future, which 'prevents experience relapsing into mere existential responses' (Armytage 1968:214); and by Kolakowski (1971b:31ff) as the creative interplay of the 'priest' and the 'jester'. Or again, as Martin G. Plattel puts it:

The essence of the utopia consists in the liberating impetus to transcend the limitations of human existence in the direction of a better future. The utopia fulfils a critical function (Plattel 1972:44).

(I will return to this point later when discussing the Marxists, for whom this basic idea forms a central component in their theory of the function and possible realization of utopias.)

In futurology, the statistically sophisticated social sciences in particular figure prominently in the production of extrapolated ‘scientific’ utopias. For example, the report for the American president called *Global 2000* or the deliberations of the American Academy’s Commission on the Year 2000. The latter discussions provide, through the extrapolation of social trends and through statistical projections (Kahn and Wiener 1967:705ff) or by ‘technological forecasting’ (Schon 1967:759ff), a predicted picture, on certain assumptions, of the future pattern of life in the advanced societies. Daniel Bell (1967:667) calls these patterns ‘hypothetical futures’ and, together with his collaborators, ventures quite specific predictions for the year 2000, such as people landing on Mars, undersea colonies, regional weather control and many more (Kahn and Wiener 1967:711ff). There are many methodological problems involved in these kinds of individual technological predictions and about extrapolating trends in general. The authors have to make a number of assumptions about social relations continuing to reproduce themselves in certain repeated ways in order to produce in the future the statistical trends extrapolated from the present.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from those issues, the function of this work is clear: it provides planners and powerful government élites with scientific utopias upon which they can base present national and international economic, political and strategic policies. These studies are often seen as peddling ‘black utopias’ or as Orwellian visions of inevitably totalitarian, polluted, overcrowded societies, replete with complex surveillance techniques, etc. It must be noted, however, that the forum discussions between Daniel Bell, Fred Ilké, Herman Kahn and Zbigniew Brzezinski (Bell 1967:666ff.) on these issues were marked by a high degree of caution about outcomes, a concern for values and some optimism in the possibilities of this kind of predictive knowledge being used to stave off trends and to alert people and governments to the ‘black’ possibilities. Bell writes of various economic and technological extrapolations and of his own image of the structure of the ‘post industrial society’:

It may well be that the actual future, the year 2000, will in no way look the way we are hypothetically assuming it will. But then we would have a means of ascertaining what intervened to create a decisive change (Bell 1967:667).

An interesting recent sociological theory of the role of utopias in societies has been put forward by Ruth Levitas (1979). For my purposes in this brief survey her theory is worth discussing in detail because in reaching her conclusions she carries out a critique of both Karl Mannheim and of Zygmunt Bauman's influential recent study (Bauman 1975) about the catalytic role of utopias in advanced societies. Her article has, therefore, a useful synoptic character. (I will return to Bauman's work in the next section.) Levitas argues that 'the content, form, location and social role of utopia vary with the material conditions in which people live (Levitas 1979:19)'. These historical variations have been obscured by recent writers defining utopia by its function in catalysing social change in modern times. She also wants to refute the suggestion that there are no utopias in modern societies.

Levitas is rightly not satisfied with Mannheim's philosophical definition of utopia in terms of its function. He said that utopias are those ideas which are incongruous with and transcendent of reality and oriented towards changing society, whereas ideologies, though also transcendent, are oriented towards maintaining it. This definition, says Levitas, is abstract and one which obscures changes of function. Mannheim said that the criterion of whether beliefs are utopias or ideologies is whether they tend to change or preserve the existing order. The truly utopian idea is the one which realises itself, thus 'proving' itself correct and hence ceasing to be utopian. Levitas finds this criterion of 'success' inadequate because (i) it is impossible to tell what is a utopia empirically before practical activity proves one 'right'; (ii) the researcher needs to be able to assess with some certainty the social causes leading to one rather than another utopian idea 'shattering reality' (Mannheim); and (iii) most importantly, that Mannheim contradicted himself by assuming a fixed, determined outcome to history which ultimately realised only *one* utopian idea, that of the rising class, which carried an impending truth. This was an assumption which limited utopias to the one emerging dominant reality, but which would then in that event hardly be utopian at all. Without this (undesirable) determinism, Mannheim's definition of utopia is, Levitas claims, unhelpful because there is no way in which one utopia or Sorelian 'myth' can be regarded as more 'correct' than another (Levitas 1979:21).<sup>5</sup>

Shifting the emphasis from the success criterion to the purpose utopias serve in society, as Bauman has done, Levitas sees as more satisfactory. He says that utopias

today have four functions: to relativise the present; to relativise the future (exploring alternative outcomes of the present); to portray the future as a set of competing projects and to be committed to one of these; and to influence historical events. But the problems with this conceptualization are that Bauman wrongly says that utopias are a modern phenomenon and only have importance after the advent of modernity, thus excluding pre-modern commonwealths, myths, earthly paradises and so on. It also precludes investigating utopias in different variations in different social conditions. Levitas wants to bring to the centre of analysis the fact that English utopias have undergone significant transformation over time, the explanation for which must be related to the 'real conditions confronting people different times (Levitas 1979:23)', something which also must be looked at to explain the apparent dearth of utopias today.

In the case of Britain, Levitas says that the medieval poem 'The Land of Cokaygne' portrays a land of abundance which is a 'wish-fantasy' (Levitas 1979:24), an earthly paradise, a dream set against reality, but it is not a utopia which is to be brought about by human agency: it is not a blue-print for political action. It is fictionally located in *space*. For a utopia to be realizable or to catalyse change, however, on the model of Bauman's analysis, one has to presuppose a different conception of time prevailing in a society. Drawing on the work of Polak (1973) argues that in medieval times society-in-time was conceived of as static and transformable only by divine intervention. The scope for *temporally* located utopias to be created by man was therefore limited. From the seventeenth century onwards, utopias are temporally rather than spatially located and the emergence of the idea of progress in the nineteenth century (resulting from a speeding up of the pace of change discernible within the individual life-span and the development of sciences of nature, which suggested that society too, by extension, was also malleable and amendable to human control) an evolutionary view of society-in-time became possible. This made it possible to envisage two kinds of utopia, related to a linear view of time:

Linear descent would give rise to a different kind of utopia from linear ascent (progress) which places utopia in the future; utopia would be likely to be placed in the past, would not catalyse change, and extrapolations from the present would be anti-utopias, reflecting the fears rather than the desires, of the present (Levitas 1979:26).

Levitas sees Thomas More's *Utopia* as marking a transition between the Cokaygne utopia as a wish-fulfilment and escape and the nineteenth century idea, expressed particularly by socialists, of utopia as an inspiration and catalyst for change. More's utopia was social criticism implying a utopia in space (partly inspired by the voyages of discovery of his time) but, although More had an idea of an alternative society clearly in mind, he did not face the practical problem of realising it (Levitas 1979:27).

In the contemporary period, Levitas continues, we have witnessed the decline of the nineteenth century evolutionary utopia following the Soviet socialist experiment, which has tied the socialist concept of utopia closely to existing social conditions. But Levitas rejects the idea that utopias have decline in modern times only because of the reality-shock of Soviet communism. There are still pastoral utopias, which are anti-industrialism. Moreover, the prevailing despondency in advanced societies about the decline of societies towards disaster, coupled with a decline in the optimistic belief in an evolutionary transition to utopia, has led to a transition to utopia now being conceived of as resulting from a radical *break* with the existing order or as located in the past. Levitas regards this shift as not being away from evolutionary thinking itself, but as a shift in modern times from confidence in the possibility of human control over social processes producing a pervading fatalism. Under these conditions utopias cannot catalyse change but only compensate people for their social deprivations, because the conviction that things can get better has been eroded by modern events and social processes. It is these conditions that determine the kind of utopias prevalent in modern society, as they did in the past. Hence, there has not been a failure and disappearance of the utopian vision, but a change in the nature of the vision: 'The problem is not lack of utopias, but lack of hope; and the cause of this lies not in imagination but in the real conditions of the present (Levitas 1979:31)'. Utopia thus reverts to its earlier role as 'wish-fantasy'.

Suggestive and interesting though this interpretation is, there are a few brief critical points I can make. (a) Levitas does not consider that the conceptualization proposed by Bauman above, which she hails as an advance over Mannheim's philosophical definition, is just as abstract and philosophical. What does it mean, concretely, to say that utopias 'relativise the present' or 'relativise the future'? This picture of utopia as the 'counter-culture of capitalism' (Bauman) simply reproduces the abstract philosophical view of the para-sociological speculators quoted earlier, i.e. that utopias are a critical, future-oriented transcendence of contemporary social conditions. (b) Levitas mentions an important shift in

the development of utopias in British history associated with transformations in the conception of society-in-time which is, rightly, of some importance. But, aside from a loosely Marxist appeal to the ‘material conditions’ of people as explaining those shifts, she does not put forwards a general theory of social development to account for them. (c) Probably because of a latent Marxism, she fails to note that wish-images are also present in the modern socialist utopia, as they are in *all* utopias which describe desirable societies. This so whether its proponents are wanting to realise them (as in socialism) or not (as in the case of ‘Cokaygne’). Though she rightly connects ‘anti-utopias’ with fear-images. (d) In order to avoid the philosophical abstraction mentioned earlier, Levitas needs to consider the problem that *some* utopias (particularly if one sees them on Elias’s model as indispensable ‘directional fantasy-images’ of possible futures) are, at any stage, potentially *more* realisable than others. In order empirically to ascertain this, a more developed and explicit theory of social development is needed than the vague reference to ‘material conditions’ that she puts forward.

### **(c) The Marxian utopia: from history to logic**

The conception of utopia in the Marxist strand of socialist and communist thinking bears the marks of its genesis in the early part of the nineteenth century. Many of the features of modern utopias identified by Ruth Levitas and of utopias in general by Norbert Elias, discussed in the previous sections, are to be found in the writings of Marx and Engels. Their vision of a classless society of planned and socialized production, in which the political authority of the State had ‘withered away’ (Engels) was temporally located. It also presupposed, like many other theories of society of the time, the idea of progress and an evolutionary view of society-in-time. Indeed, Marx said that the developmental sequence of modes of production he claimed to have discovered in the history of mankind (Asiatic, ancient, feudal, bourgeois) are ‘*progressive* epochs in the economic formation of society (Marx 1859:182 my emphasis)’.

Furthermore, Marx’s theory also presupposed a stage of social development at which the secularization of people’s beliefs had developed to a far-reaching point at which they

were able not only to address social conditions as Thomas More had done, but also enthusiastically and optimistically to visualise society as more-or-less totally amenable to planned, rational, human, as opposed to divine, control. Hence, in Marx and Engels the problem of utopia becomes centrally the political problem of its practical *realization*, informed by a social-scientific theory of social development.

As is well-known, Marx and Engels opposed their ‘scientific’ socialism to the abstract, ideal societies of the ‘utopian’ socialists which, they argued, were constructed solely from their imaginations and then imposed on to society. As Engels wrote:

The solution of the social problems, which as yet lay hidden in undeveloped economic conditions, the Utopians attempt to evolve out of the human brain. Society presented nothing but wrongs; to remove these was the task of reason. It was necessary, then, to discover a new and more perfect system of social order and to impose this upon society from without by propaganda and, wherever it was possible, by the example of model experiments. These new social systems were foredoomed as Utopian; the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies (Engels 1880:398).

It is interesting that in this passage Engels identified the utopian socialists’ depiction of a perfect social order, which had eliminated social problems, with ‘phantasy’, of which his own theory, by implication, was devoid. (Though in the pamphlet he agrees that Fourier, Saint-Simon and others nonetheless often analysed and criticised society in highly comprehensive, penetrating and masterly ways.)

However, as Goodwin (1978) has shown in her study of Robert Owen, William Godwin, Charles Fourier, and Henri Saint-Simon, a central theme in all their works was a *scientific* analysis of human nature, from which they hoped to deduce appropriate consequences for social organization. They presented ‘radically environmentalist accounts of human psychology’ (Goodwin 1978:202) from which they concluded that human nature was plastic, perfectible and rational, utopia for them being synonymous with social harmony – a conflict-free society. Goodwin believes, however, that ‘no given human nature logically entails a particular form of society as the utopians hoped’ (ibid:195); their work was disguised social prescription; and most of the utopias fail ‘every major test of scientificity’ (ibid:196). Despite these drawbacks, Goodwin concludes, like so many other writers in this

field, as we saw in the last section, that ‘these utopias deserve credit for their transcendence of the given reality’ (ibid:203) and ‘the articulation of social alternatives is the greatest service which the utopian can perform’ (ibid:204).

To return to Marx and Engels, they were apparently claiming a different *kind* of scientific status for their kind of socialism. For obvious polemical reasons, Engels plays down the scientific aspirations of the utopian socialists by saying, for example, that Fourier’s fine phrases and appeals to Reason and perfectibility were a way of confronting the social conditions of bourgeois society with ‘the rose-coloured phraseology of the bourgeois ideologists of the time (Engels 1880:400)’. Writers such as Fourier were only able to produce such ‘crude’ (ibid) analyses of the social ills of their time because the economic conditions which would enable them to be solved were only at an embryonic stage of development at that time. A truly scientific socialism, however, is the theoretical expression of the developmental tendencies in real economic conditions of society which, by their own internal dynamic, are laying down the more mature conditions whereby it will be possible to realise those abstract utopias in practice. Briefly, these processes are expressed as the incapacity of the bourgeoisie further to manage the socialised productive forces they have unleashed, but which they privately appropriate. The solution of this contradiction lies in the working class, through a revolutionary act, giving the socialised character which the means of production have spontaneously developed under capitalism a truly public character, which abolishes the domination of products over producers characteristic of capitalism. The free utopian society talked about by the utopians is then realised, by a combination of maturing economic tendencies and the coincident revolutionary action of the ‘proletariat’. Engels writes:

The proletariat seizes the public power, and by means of this transforms the socialised means of production, slipping from the hands of the bourgeoisie, into public property. By this act, the proletariat frees the means of production from the character of capital they have thus far borne, and gives their socialised character complete freedom to work itself out. Socialised production upon a predetermined plan becomes henceforth possible. The development of production makes the existence of different classes of society thenceforth an anachronism. In proportion as anarchy in social production vanishes, the political authority of the state dies out. Man, at last the master of his own form of social organization, becomes at the same time the lord over Nature, his own master – free (Engels 1880:428).

I cannot advance the familiar criticisms (teleology, economic determinism, mythology, etc.) of this familiar and somewhat discredited theory of history. My purpose is only to establish what made the socialism of Marx and Engels unique amidst the plethora of socialist, anarchist and communist utopias in the early part of the nineteenth century in Europe, which provided the basis of the theoretical platform of Marxism. Marx alone claimed that what other people merely thought was desirable (the mitigation or ending of social conflicts, social ills, economic distress, etc.) and for which they morally indicted or criticised society, or which they projected into rationalistic models of utopian socialist societies, he could demonstrate, *social-scientifically*, was built into the antagonistic tendencies of capitalism anyway. (And, more generally, into the entire historical development of mankind itself.) The utopian solutions to social problems and social ills that other people merely wished or dreamed would come about, he said he could demonstrate empirically, through the science of political economy, were *necessarily* written into the historical, economic development of societies. Marx yoked together the twin passions of radical intellectuals caught up in the rapid and profound social changes taking place in post-Enlightenment Europe: science as the liberation of humanity from superstition and communism as the hope for the end of social inequality and the complete inauguration of freedom and justice.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kilminster 1979: chs 2 and 18) this impossible balancing act was not without serious problems, which dogged later practitioners of Marx's ideas in their ideologically frozen form as Marxist doctrine. On the one hand, the logic of his secular theory of development suggested a realistic picture of an endless series of further social stages moving into the future as societies intergenerationally continued to reproduce themselves. Marx and Engels's argument against the utopian socialists is essentially that you cannot realistically postulate a perfect utopian society in the abstract when its realization in practice depends on the maturation of specific socio-economic conditions. In Marx's words: 'Mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve (Marx 1959:182)'. That is to say, those tasks will be solved when, in Marx's terms, economic conditions which would enable their solution exist or are in the course of formation. There is no reason to suppose, on this argument, however, that tasks and problems will not perennially continue to arise as human social development proceeds. But, on the other hand, this model stands unreconciled with the utopian promise which is also present in the theory, and without which it would surely lose

its uniqueness and appeal, that communism is the rational, uncontradictory, conflictless *end-state* to the ‘pre-history’ (ibid) of mankind, towards which the historical process can be scientifically shown to have been preparing us.

Few Marxists today, however, in the light of the re-emergence of oppression in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, where the means of production have been largely made public in the hands of the state, now take seriously Marx’s optimistic idea that such changes will inevitably bring about a classless and stateless society. The experiences of putting Marx’s theory into practice in those countries only revealed the inadequacies of the theory. Ralf Dahrendorf has shown how Marx swings backwards and forwards between sociology and philosophy on the question of the social consequences of abolishing private property, by tricks of definition which are unconsciously designed to maintain the integrity of his ‘system’. Dahrendorf (1959:30—31) writes:

[I]f private property disappears (empirical hypothesis), then there are no longer classes (trick of definition)! If there are no longer any classes, there is no alienation (speculative postulate). The realm of liberty is realised on earth (philosophical idea). Had Marx, conversely, defined private property by authority relations, his empirical observations would not have ‘fitted’, and he would have had to drop his philosophy of history. For effective private property may disappear empirically, but authority relations can do so only the magic trick of the system maniac.

Furthermore, on the level of theoretical developments, the concept of the ‘historical necessity’ of socialism (upon which the scientificity of Marx’s theory of history ultimately rested) has been undermined this century by a number of writers. Particularly influential was Max Weber’s decisive argument that the notion of historical necessity was a theological hangover in Marxist theory which endued history with an overall meaning after modern societies had become depleted of inherent religiosity by the ‘process of disenchantment’ of the world (Weber, 1918:139; see also Löwith 1932).

The result of the interplay between those social and theoretical developments has been a shift in the character of the utopian level in Marxist theory. In Marx and in the more deterministic versions of the theory, it is regarded as referring to a kind of society which will

be the *necessary* outcome of historical, economic tendencies in European societies and of capitalism in particular, as the apogee of that development. The trend, however, in some recent Marxist writings of the Critical Theory school (Habermas, Apel) and the Eastern European 'Marxist humanism' (Bauman) has been to regard the utopian, rational society of equality and freedom postulated by the socialist utopians and the classical Marxists, merely as a potentiality, a possibility, an idealized state of affairs, as yet unrealized. This state is tenuously grounded in the present stage of society, not as its more-or-less inevitable outcome, but as a partly realised idealised state which is, moreover, in its entirety, inherently *unrealizable*.

In the following pages I will show how that theoretical outcome was already programmed into the inertia of the Marxist tradition itself, its structure and assumptions, and in particular results from its philosophical residues. Although the later writers were responding to, and were caught up in, social processes and events of modern times (such as Stalinism, the decline of working class radicalism, fascism and the events of 1968) they carried with them, as conceptual baggage, that relatively autonomous Marxist theory, which they then brought to bear on those events. I will attempt to place Marx's theory, which they inherited, further back into its more far-reaching, remote, longer-term structural and historical presuppositions. This will reveal fundamental, but historically produced, patterns of thinking present in the theory which shape in advance the way in which society is grasped and, hence, poses the problem of the realization of utopias and the parameters of its solution in characteristic ways. I hope this exercise will have the additional virtue of perhaps shedding light on the consequences of putting Marx's theories into practice.

My interpretation hinges on how Marx tries, through the category of *practice*, to unite in his social science the epistemological and ethical dimensions of the traditional philosophy he inherited. Marx's attempt to resolve questions of ethics by reference to practice is of some importance for understanding Marxist discussions of the realization of utopias. As Goodwin (1978:4) remarks, 'Utopias are necessarily based on a *concept of the Good Life* ... they focus not on the individual moral being, but on that more complex creature, *man-in-society*, and seek to improve both elements of this compound'. However, since Marx links the kind of utopia possible with the level of economic development, then he was understandably impatient with abstract moralizing about the present state of society in the light of an ahistorical model of the perfect social conditions fitting for man. As we shall see, the problem is, though that Marx's practical resolution of the ethical issue in a society which

no longer in practice requires ethics, lends itself to later bureaucratic social élites legitimating their power by claiming that their society *is* the socialistic fusion of Is and Ought which Marx said would be possible once the means of production had passed into public hands.

From the point of view of epistemology, I think the significance of Marx's use of the category of practice is as follows (drawing on Kilminster 1979 and 1982). At the historical stage at which he stood, Marx inherited the philosophical vocabulary of traditional European epistemology, mediated to via the legacy of Kant and Hegel. Following in the wake of Newtonian science, traditional epistemology had a particular cast in which, polarized into rationalists and empiricists, philosophers from Descartes onwards debated the foundations of knowledge in terms of the two sides of cognition: the individual mind and what it experiences. Debates thus circulated around the issues of how the mind comes to know what it does and what it and the 'external', mechanical world, known to humans through the senses, respectively play in the creation of ideas. Some of the characteristic epistemological dualisms of the tradition include subject/object, thought/reality, reason/experience, intellect/senses, ideal/real and consciousness/being. For Marx, the various positions taken in these debates are epitomised by the polar doctrines of idealism and materialism. Kant and Hegel had both insisted, in different ways, that human consciousness was active in shaping its perception of the world. In the *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx 1845a) Marx mentions that idealists had stressed this side but says that idealism was, however, out of touch with real, sensuous reality. Materialism, on the other hand, stressed that experience was the final arbiter of knowledge and materiality the fundamental stratum of reality. This meant that materialism gave force to the real sensuous world, although materialists tended to regard the mind as passive in the process of cognition.

Utilizing the category of practice, meaning mundane, human, practical, social activity, Marx argues against materialism in an idealist fashion and against idealism in a materialist fashion, their unity constituted practically.<sup>6</sup> For Marx, there is no point in reducing cognition to either of its material and ideal poles because both sides are, and always have been, in an active relation in human practical activity. Objective reality is ineradicably subjectively constituted through practice, since conscious, labouring mankind is part of nature. Hence, nature inevitably has a socially imprinted character *and* an autonomous role in human affairs at the same time. Human beings only encounter, and hence know, the world through their

active contact with it. As Kolakowski (1971a:75) put it, for Marx, ‘Active contact with the resistance of nature creates knowing man and nature as his object at one and the same time.’

So much for Marx’s epistemology: but those ruminations by Marx in the traditional categories of idealism and materialism were not just intended to be about questions of human knowledge. The whole point of Marx’s discussions of materialism and idealism was that various positions defined within that polarity carried with them, *by their very nature*, practical, political implications. The idea that consciousness was cognitively active in real, practical, productive activity, suggested that people could actively move to change the world that their active, practical cognition constituted. This was something which a passive materialist theory could not theorize. Indeed, Marx said, adherence to such a one-sided theory actually justified a kind of political practice by its systematic epistemological exclusions. For example, the kind of materialist theory which stated that ideas were simply a reflection of the circumstances and environment surrounding people, implied politically that if one changed people’s environment then they would correspondingly be changed as well. Such a view lent itself to élitist forms of utopian socialism of the kind mentioned by Engels which I quoted earlier. Similarly, Marx links the inherent epistemological individualism of some forms of materialism with the individualism of bourgeois liberalism: ‘The highest point attained by that materialism which only observes the world ... is the observation of particular individuals and of civil society (Marx 1845a:30)’. (I will mention later how Marx integrates conservatism into his framework.)

In the 1840s when Marx was most concerned to develop a unified theory of society and history which would inform politics, Left Hegelians such as Bruno Bauer were rabidly anti-liberal through *critique*. This Hegelian procedure entailed the critical comparison of some aspect of society with its ideal, or perfect potentiality. They would critically compare, for example, a given particular set of judicial institutions with the pure, universal category of Justice, of which the institutions were held to be only an imperfect embodiment; or, say, a particular constitution with the universal idea of Democracy. Marx sees this procedure as ineffective verbal radicalism and enjoins instead ‘practical-critical activity’ (Marx 1845b:28). That is action which was not just a comparison – on the plane of ethics – of an aspect of social reality with what it ideally could be, or ought to be, but rather real activity which tried to *make* reality accord with what it ought to be, *in practice*. In this situation, the ought-questions raised by philosophy would be transcended (abolished) in practice. This is, I think, the force of Marx’s dictum, ‘You cannot transcend philosophy without realising it ... [and you

cannot] realise philosophy without transcending it'(McLellan 1971:121—122, paraphrased).’ He is, in effect, talking about creating a society which no longer requires ethics.

In a word, Marx tries to unite epistemology and ethics by putting together positions defined within the traditional epistemological doctrines of idealism and materialism with the great ideologies of the nineteenth century – liberalism, conservatism and socialism. The result is a more comprehensive synthesis, epistemologically and ethically, the practical, political implications of which refer not to bourgeois society but to the whole of humanity: ‘the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or social humanity’ (Marx 1845a:30). In Marx’s language, mankind makes its own world, which it constitutes by its practical activity, which therefore means that it can potentially consciously change it various ways. Under the conditions of social class fettered alienation, however, this constituting process has become lost to consciousness, exacerbated by social life under advanced stages of the division and alienation, of labour. The point is that for Marx questions of knowledge and questions of ethics are to be fed into a scientifically informed politics on behalf of the current exploited class, the proletariat. The political task is to hasten the historical process towards the idealized state of socialism, which is in any case already built into its tendency. What others think merely *ought* to be (a socialist utopia) is actually embodied in what *is*, as its *telos*, as Hegel taught. It reaches real, historical maturity whether people have ideas about it or not:

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. (Marx & Engels 1845:48).

Another way of putting these matters which will bring out the issues from a different angle, is to see Marx’s project, following Rotenstreich (1977) as seeking in practical politics the unity of the philosophical realms of theoretical and practical reason. In attempting to reconcile the ‘starry heavens above me and moral law with me’, Kant had separated nature and practical reason (ethics) or, more broadly, science and morality. Both theoretical and practical reason were spontaneous aspects of Reason, the former the domain of categories which limited knowledge and the latter the domain of ethical imperatives, a practical sphere separate and alongside the reality of nature. Hegel, however, claimed, against Kant, that the world is knowable because it is inherently rational. Reason, for Hegel, has complete

spontaneity on the intellectual plane as Kant had said, but this only made reality knowable because the object was the objective embodiment of Reason anyway. The embodiment of Reason in the world meant that it could be demonstrated that history was its gradual teleological unfolding, in various spheres, as determinations of the Idea. But it also meant that practical reason (ethics) could not be consistently maintained as constituting a separate sphere on the Kantian model because, like Reason in general, it must also be embodied in the world as well. So, for Hegel, there was no need to pledge the actualization of Reason in practical life by the creation of a separate Kantian ethical sphere: the level of speculation, or the unity of Reason in his system assured their unity.

For Marx, the Young Hegelians who embraced this position could only put to real people in real societies the ‘moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical ... consciousness (Marx & Engels 1845:30)’. In other words, there was no passage, on the Hegelian view, from the achieved level of speculation to the practical realization of the unity of Reason in the world. For Marx, the Young Hegelians were ‘the staunchest conservatives (ibid)’. In Marx, on the other hand, history is the arena for the practical realization of Reason. This translates into the proposition (expressed by Marx as the development of the forces of production outstripping their necessary relations of production) that in practice people must realise the inherent rational potentiality for social organization, development and progress spontaneously bequeathed to the bourgeois epoch by history. It is this potential (the utopia) which is fettered by archaic social class relations, necessitating revolutionary change. In my view, Marx’s whole theory of history as a series of progressive socio-economic formations is predicated on the assumption that they have been mediated by their necessary *telos* of socialism as the end of the alienated ‘pre-history’ of mankind. Indeed, Marx specifically describes the Hegelian theory of history as a ‘metaphysically travestied (Marx 1845b)’ version of what is a real, scientifically describable, historical process. The forces and relations of production dialectic in Marx parallels Hegel’s categorical unity of content and form, whereby it is the developing *content* (forces of production) which determines changes of *form* (relations of production) towards the self-development of the Idea (socialism). Once Marx has translated the Hegelian conception of history as the embodiment and realization of Reason into the terms of a socio-economic theory of development, then the theory articulating the process *and* a moral indictment of society were, for him, necessarily the same thing.

I will now draw together from that brief survey of Marx's dialogue with the philosophy and politics of his time some important components of his theory which were crucially formed in those historically specific encounters. With hindsight we can see that these elements are no longer serviceable, but they have nonetheless continued to shape the ways in which later Marxists have tried to grasp social dynamics and posed the problem of realizing the socialist utopia in the changed conditions of the twentieth century.

(a) Marx's social science was burdened with the philosophical tradition which he was trying to overcome, since he still refers to his theory of society by the term 'materialism' and his base and superstructure model of society reproduces the being/consciousness polarity of traditional metaphysics in spite of his efforts to overcome the dualism through the category of practice. This characteristic has thus *structured* later inquiries into complex and sophisticated adaptations of the model which try to determine the reciprocal effectivity of 'ideal' and 'material' factors, 'material' having been identified by Marx with economic activity. This feature has also focussed attention overwhelmingly on to productive relations. These theoretical moves, however, still reproduce the basically dualistic structure of the theory and thus remain trapped within its fundamental antinomy. Marx's historically specific synthesis of traditional epistemology and politics established for future generations in the tradition the erroneous idea that philosophical positions about the nature of ideas in terms of sense perception were somehow significantly related to political ideologies.

(b) Marx was only able to incorporate ethics into his theory by paying the price of teleology. It was only later, in the 1920s, that the discrediting in theory of the Marxist notion that history was meaningful and rational in its tendency towards what society 'ought' to be, which partly gave rise to the problem for Marxists of how to *re-incorporate* (without ethical relativism or a return to Kantian ethics associated with reformist social democracy) this ethical level into a social science denuded of the notion of historical necessity. In non-Marxist forms of social enquiry today it is common to find a pre-Hegelian logical separation of matters of fact from questions of value, of Is and Ought, science and morality and factual and normative questions, enshrined in the different disciplines of sociology and social philosophy. These separations are not only regarded as logically or methodologically sound, but also as providing a bulwark against the abuse of the supposed Marxian fusion of Is and Ought by bureaucratic socialist élites who have justified directive and totalitarian practices by claiming that their policies are based on a correct scientific analysis of historical economic development and are thus also, by definition, morally right.

(c) The image of man built into Marx's theory was, on the whole, a rationalistic one, shaped by the philosophy he was grappling with. Human beings should be self-determining, self-conscious and freed from the constraints of social alienation. In Marx's early writings in particular it is an image of people as mainly knowing, choosing and acting, but not also as affective, constrained and interdependent (though the latter theme does occur, interpreted purely economically, in Marx's later writings, in particular in the *Grundrisse*). Later Marxists, however, have striven to realise the one-sided rational, utopian model of man in practice, or it is an image which has implicitly guided their enquiries and politics. They have generally, therefore, failed to notice that social life would be impossible without some social constraints in the broadest sense. Even though he sought to link what one must call today *relative* emancipation from social constraints, with the level of social development of society (in which he considered the economy to be central) in order to avoid abstract utopianizing, the utopian level in Marx's theory still implied that he had in mind a harmonious society because he believed he had correctly predicted the demise of the conditions which produced social conflict. Elias's comment on the flaws of the rationalistic utopia of Thomas More could well apply to Marx:

The ideal state seemed to work like a well-oiled piece of machinery. On the shoulders of all citizens was placed the heavy burden of state regimentation. Everything worked smoothly, there was apparently no room for tensions, disagreements, mischief, excitement or innovation, nor for controlled conflict and strife (Elias 1981:19).

The rationalistic strand has tended, explicitly or implicitly, to dominate Marxist writings, producing a tendency to champion, often for polemical purposes, a state of more-or-less total human freedom and self-determination as a political goal. The more realistic question of how far social constraints can be removed at a given stage is seldom asked, probably because, within Marxist polarities, such questions would smack of 'reform' or conservatism. As Elias says, the paradox of rationalist utopias is that 'while attempting to counter one type of social oppression, they imply another (Elias 1981:19)'.<sup>7</sup> That is, that in conditions of tension and strife utopias reproduce people's wish-dreams of social harmony, when in fact such a society would have less external regulation because of a higher level of individual affect-control and self-regulation, which the utopian writers in their society cannot envisage. Consequently, their rational utopia would imply reinstating further external state

control or constraint at that stage to produce the greater social harmony which their relatively low level of self-regulation would not otherwise permit.

(d) Even though the practical questions asked by the later Marxist practitioners and writers related closely to the circumstances they lived through, the way they interpreted the possibilities for realizing the socialist utopia in their societies was determined by the basic assumptions of their inherited framework. For example, it has induced its adherents into asking questions such as: What is preventing the proletarian revolution from taking place, given that the level of socio-economic development seems apposite? What are the cultural mechanisms whereby working class consciousness is systematically dismantled? Is there a substitute proletariat to be seen? And against the proposition that political activity should be geared towards the goal of the revolutionary victory of the proletariat, which will traditionally usher in the socialist utopia of equality and freedom, all other activity towards, say, minimising social inequality or certain forms of social constraint, can only be described as 'reformism'. Revolution *versus* reform is a Marxist antinomy which flows directly from a theory which assumes that practical activity can hasten the arrival of an idealized society said to be embodied as a utopia in a master economic process of history. Many Marxists have expended a lot of energy moving between the poles of this fallacious antinomy.

The two recent examples of Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas will illustrate the general point I am making about the assumptions of the Marxist tradition. In both cases there is at work a fascinating interplay between the social developments they are responding to and the presuppositions of the theory they are bringing to bear on them – Marxism. Adorno justified his doggedly philosophical stance after the late 1930s because the historical opportunity for the emancipation of mankind by the revolution of the proletariat had been 'missed' (Adorno 1973:3). As a result, he was condemned to maintain the 'negative' critique of society which shows the existing order as perennially capable of becoming something *other* than it is. This philosophizing keeps alive the possibility of human emancipation. But this strategy still assumed, however, that the proletarian revolution *should* have occurred and that *if* it had done so it would have liberated mankind. In other words, Adorno took seriously, as a real possibility, the social consequences predicted by the mythological strand in Marx's thought, that is the practical fusion of Is and Ought in a future world of human association for which history had been preparing us. Once one has made that assumption, then its non-arrival leads to the conviction that the idealized sequence is more important than the empirical reality and is something to which empirical conditions must ultimately adjust

themselves. (This assumption, as I will show later, appears also in the work of Karl-Otto Apel.) But, if it is held that the moment to realise ‘human emancipation’ has been lost, then this position represents a kind of theological picture in which, in the present conditions, mankind is living if not in a fall state, then certainly in purgatory. The result of this position is a tragic pessimism and nihilism.

In the work of Habermas we can see how he operates within the inertia of the Marxist tradition and takes up from Adorno the redefinition of the problem of the realization of the socialist utopia after Stalinism and fascism and in the light of the thesis of the disenchantment of the world elaborated by philosophers in modern times (see Heinemann 1953 and Steiner, 1978: chs II & III). I will concentrate on only one aspect of his work which is most relevant to my topic, the notion of the ideal speech situation (Habermas 1970). Built into all individual speech acts, he says, is the assumption that one can be understood by potential interlocutors who are equal partners in the discourse. This is a transcendental presupposition for all communication. This idealized state of affairs is, however, no mere abstract utopia, for it is *partly* present now, in society, in every individual speech act. It is, therefore, not an arbitrary postulate of a total community of equality, for it is already, as it were, partly realised. The postulate thus provides a critical yardstick (or ‘regulative principle’ in Apel) for objectively evaluating given societies as only providing conditions of ‘distorted communication’ compared with those implied by the idea speech situation, which those instances of distorted communication effectively also *are*.

In this respect, Habermas’s theory constitutes the reappearance of Left Hegelian ‘critique’ in a modern guise. The ideal-speech situation corresponds to Hegel’s *telos* of self-knowing Reason which is embodied as absolute universality in all particularity, but known categorically in the Idea. Habermas has grounded more systematically in a theory of communication Adorno’s Hegelian appeal to the ‘utopian moment of the object’ and his battle against ‘identity thinking’ in order to preserve ‘negative’ criticism of social reality in terms of its ideality (see Rose, 1976). There is also perhaps a distant echo in this aspect of Habermas’s work of the existentialists’ insistence that both inauthenticity and authenticity are distinctive, necessary and *irreducible* modes of existence. Habermas’s theory entails that conditions sustaining some distorted communication must, dialectically speaking, *always* exist for the ideal-speech situation to have its transcendental existence and thus critical power. (I will return to this argument.)

The point about Adorno and Habermas is that it is the Marxist tradition itself, as adapted to twentieth century social conditions and certain theoretical developments, which provides the framework which has posed their problems and the parameters of the theoretical solutions. Their philosophical approach only picks up the philosophical character and residues of this tradition of social science itself. Critical Theory, therefore, reproduces the Marxist socialist theory of utopia without the original agent for its realization, the proletariat (which has deserted its historical mission) and without the original catalyst, the revolutionary socialist party (which has proved itself as having totalitarian implications) and without the concept of historical necessity (theoretically discredited). The result is that the ‘critical’ theory remaining (and this applies also, for different reasons, to the Marxist humanism of East European writers) had to replace the old utopian level in Marxist theory with an idealized state of affairs. This idealization takes the form of either the ideal-speech situation or the idea of the still unachieved socialist utopia. In both cases it is a state of affairs which is regarded as inevitably *unrealizable*.

There are two main reasons for this feature. (a) To repeat, the utopia cannot any longer be justified in any form as the outcome of historical necessity. The critical theorists are ‘modernists’ who, following Max Weber as well as Nietzsche and the existentialists, implicitly accept that since the Middle Ages, European peoples have come increasingly to regard society as depleted of inherent religious meaning. After the ‘death of God’, the Marxist concept of historical necessity only reproduces Christian theology in a secular form, with socialism taking the place of heaven. (And in any case, the moment to realise this outcome has been missed.) Moreover, historical necessity is associated with the ideology of orthodox Soviet Marxism, which was at least, it is argued, a necessary condition for Stalinism, since this form of positivistic Marxism lent itself to central party rule and directive practices. (b) To suggest that there was a *real* possibility of the realization of the idealized state of affairs of the socialist utopia would lend itself to abuse by bureaucratic socialist élites in practice because it would provide them with the theoretical justification for claiming that the society they ruled was its embodiment.

Zygmunt Bauman is acutely aware of the possible outcome mentioned in (b) above. He therefore shifts the emphasis away from characterizing socialism solely in the classical Marxist economic terms as a society in which the means of production have been placed in public hands. This view lends itself to socialism becoming reduced to a description of such a society, rather than a social goal to be achieved: ‘Whatever inspiring power socialism can

justly boast is drawn from its utopian status (Bauman 1976:36)'. He regards socialism as the 'counter-culture of capitalist society ... the fulcrum on which the emancipatory criticism-through-relativization of the current reality rests (ibid)'. This vision of socialism as critique, as aspiration and hope, is heavily influenced by the experience of bureaucratic oppression in socialist societies in Eastern Europe. Bauman's conception of socialism as an 'active utopia' lends itself well to providing a means of criticizing the oppression and inequality present in those societies which, at the same time, profess to be socialist societies. But his model, like all those theories of the catalytic function of utopias (or of their 'regulative' character) which juxtapose the real conditions against a projected or unrealized ideal, or universal criterion of some kind, contains an immanent paradox. It is expressed by Bauman in this passage:

Socialism shares with all other utopias the unpleasant quality of retaining its fertility only in so far as it resides in the realm of the possible. The moment it is proclaimed as accomplished, as empirical reality, it loses its creative power; far from inflaming human imagination, it puts on the agenda in turn an acute demand for a new horizon, distant enough to transcend and relativise its own limitations (Bauman 1976:36).

However, Berki (1981:262) has rightly drawn attention to the contradiction involved in this idea that the critical power of the socialist utopia resides in the realm of the possible. On the one hand, he says, Bauman wants to retain the transcendent, cultural sense of socialism, but then elsewhere in his book [Bauman 1976] appears to advocate that it can feasibly be built or achieved in reality, for which a revision of people's commonsense beliefs is a prerequisite. But in that event, of course the socialist utopia would no perform a critical function.

The same contradiction is present in the rationalistic 'new apriorism' of Karl-Otto Apel, but in this case its consequences are extraordinary. In a similar fashion to that of Habermas, Apel claims that the *real* communication community which has developed socially and historically presupposes an *ideal* communication community in which people are capable of adequately understanding each other's arguments and judging their truth (Apel 1980:282). From this transcendental argument he derives two 'regulative principles' both designed to form a basis for the 'long-term moral strategy of action for every human being (ibid)'. One is for actions ensuring the survival of the real communication community and the other is for 'realizing the *ideal* communication community in the real one (ibid)'. Having established this philosophical position, Apel then succumbs to the same paradoxical

possibility which arises when one enters the discourse which juxtaposes real circumstances against some kind of ideal. Apel cannot resist toying, like Bauman does with the unachieved socialist utopia, with the possibility that the ideal communication community can actually be realised, as a feasible project when, if it was to be achieved, its function as a universal 'regulative principle' would be abolished.

All he claims to have proved is a transcendental philosophical justification for the 'cause of emancipation' (Apel 1980:285). But this conclusion does not entitle him to declare that 'the ideal norms that must be presupposed in order for any argument to have meaning ... are in principle *destined* to be realized in a concrete society'; nor to advocate critically reconstructing real societies 'in the light of the ideal of the unlimited communication community *that is to be realized in society* (Apel 1980:140 my emphasis)' assuming he intends the latter statement to be taken literally. At another point, however, Apel swings the other way, claiming that the contradiction between the real and the ideal communication communities is a matter of the 'hitherto undecided dialectics of history (Apel 1980:281)', a contradiction which, as Hegel taught, we must endure. But then comes the Kantian imperative that 'one must morally postulate the historical resolution of this contradiction (Apel 1980: 282)'.

In conclusion, like Adorno Apel takes seriously the possibility of the abstract, total and undifferentiated 'emancipation' of mankind as a plausible project and a feasible goal, since he tries transcendently to ground this 'cause' on the epistemological and ethical levels. In other words, he implicitly gives credence to the mythological, utopian level of Marx's theory, which he then allows to direct his philosophical effort. Writing in the contemporary world, he unreflectively takes for granted a problem dictated by the inertia of the Marxist tradition. That is to say, how to ground, in a non-arbitrary way, the possibility of a rationalistic socialist utopia of human fraternity when, in modern conditions after Stalinism and fascism, we can no longer assume its inevitability in theory or in practice. Having gone down this road, Apel inevitably reaches the following utopian conclusion: 'the task of realizing the ideal communication community also implies the transcendence of a class society ... or ... the elimination of all socially determined asymmetries of interpersonal dialogue (Apel 1980:283)'. But this statement is a sociologically nonsensical conviction.

Apel could agree, of course that my last point is, realistically speaking, quite correct, but that does not mean that striving for the realization of the ideal communication community

should not form an imperative, a spur for our endeavours. This position would be consistent with his view that one must 'morally postulate' the historical resolution of the contradiction between the ideal and the real communication communities. The idea of such a resolution gives meaning, he says, to the goal of ensuring the survival of the species '*qua real* communication community (Apel 1980: 282)'. But, as we have seen it is very clear that for a number of reasons, both internal to the notion and externally in societies, idealized states of affairs in utopian discourse, by their very nature, *cannot* be realised. But, nonetheless, Apel's theory exhorts us to derive our life's meaning from working towards the realization of something that we *know* is intrinsically unachievable. This is nihilism.<sup>8</sup> The apparently positive and creative overtones of this neo-utopian position are illusory. What follows from it is that like a housewife or a child who can never live up to internalised images of the perfect housewife or child, we are also condemned to frustration, we can never fully give ourselves kudos, we can never feel fully satisfied, because we know that against some perfect, but always unattainable ideal, our efforts will *always* fall short.

Finally, it could be objected that my previous arguments are illegitimate because I have failed to grasp the non-empirical character of transcendental inquiry, which is an autonomous level of reflection looking only for the cognitive or normative conditions of possibility of various empirical aspects of science, social life, history or politics. Hence, I am pointing out the inconsistencies and paradoxes involved in the empirical realization of an idealized state of affairs which, by its nature, exists on a different, non-empirical, transcendental plane in and through real, historical, empirical societies. Therefore, the argument would run, even when striving for some realistic, immediate, empirical, short-term social goal, say the mitigation of specific inequalities or injustices, transcendently presupposed in such activity is an ideal state of equality which non-arbitrarily gives 'emancipatory' meaning to that activity. But even granting, for the sake of argument, the autonomy of this level of inquiry, I remain unconvinced of the cognitive value of the highly abstract transcendental presuppositions elaborated. To repeat the previous example, Apel argues that an ideal 'unlimited community of interpretation (Apel 1980:123)' is a transcendental presupposition of critical discussion and all speech acts. It would be easy to dismiss this finding as a high-flown way of expressing the banality that when people speak to each other they normally assume they will be understood. But, taking transcendental inquiry seriously, it is surely legitimate to ask what is the significance and the cognitive pay-off of the proposition that all empirical speech acts have in common the idea of mutual

understanding? Is this transcendental ‘finding’ not an *empty abstraction*? Is it not just as empty as, say, the statement that the amoeba and man have in common ‘life’?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The coming together of history and sociology mentioned in the text must not be exaggerated, since entrenched professional attitudes on the issue of the divide between the disciplines can still be found. The *rapprochement* is perhaps more pronounced in Marxist historical scholarship particularly, for example, in the journal *History Workshop*. See also Bullock 1977; Burke 1980; and Tilly 1981. Anthony Giddens writes: ‘There simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history ... (1979:230)’.

<sup>2</sup> The *Manuels* concentrate almost exclusively on utopian thinking in Western societies. For a treatment of utopias in India, Japan and Latin America, see Plath (1971).

<sup>3</sup> Horowitz (1961) elaborated a typology of utopias in terms of the kind of social coercion envisaged by the utopians (see endnote 7). Like many other critics of Karl Mannheim, Horowitz argues that Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge left him bereft of truth criteria, though he agrees that utopianism is ‘a special form of social consciousness’ (Horowitz 1961:92). For a defence of Mannheim see Simonds (1978). See also Neusüss (1968).

<sup>4</sup> As Antonio Gramsci (1971:428) wrote: ‘[S]tatistical laws can be employed in the science and art of politics only so long as the great masses of the population remain (or at least are reputed to remain) essentially passive.’

<sup>5</sup> I have addressed at length the complex problem of the Sorelian ‘myth’, whatever its scientific status, potentially inaugurating its own fulfilment through mass action in Kilminster (1979: Part Three, Excursus, ‘Myths and the Masses’).

<sup>6</sup> This formulation follows Schmidt (1971:114).

<sup>7</sup> Horowitz (1961: 98—105) also raises the question about the kind of social coercion envisaged by utopians. He distinguishes the *coercive* utopia (which rests on strong authority securing harmonious social regulation); the *permissive* utopia (a *laissez-faire* rational society of individual auto-regulation); and the *libertarian* utopia (the socialistic model of a society of material abundance in which political coercion becomes unnecessary).

<sup>8</sup> In my book *Praxis and Method* (Kilminster 1979: especially pp 249—269) I have shown how despair and nihilistic consequences tend to flow from the structure of utopian versions of Western Marxism in particular. This is because, in the more millenarian and apocalyptic versions of the theory, against the perfect society of socialism held to be waiting in the future, the present state of society is often depicted as a uniformly degraded replica of the projected society, in which *real* fulfilment and happiness are only held to be possible. One result of this way of thinking is what I called the *overcritique* of present society, through which utopian total criticism one-sidedly loses sight of criteria for judging the positive historical achievements of societies which need to be preserved.

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