

Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age

By Russell Jacoby

Columbia University Press, 2005,
240pp
US\$24.95, ISBN 0231128940

Russell Jacoby is a UCLA-based historian with a strong interest in the Frankfurt School. He is erudite, and writes very well on a whole range of interesting themes. This small book is a follow-up to his *The End of Utopia* (1999, a brilliant critical engagement with the grim state of the 'cultural Left'). Jacoby is there an entertaining and, at times, scathing guide to 'the end of ideology', to overblown claims for multiculturalism, to postmodernism's uncritical love affair with mass culture, to intellectuals, and to aestheticism in postmodern thought. The concluding discussion of utopianism leads into *Picture Imperfect*.

The new book is well-written, and full of fascinating material—from a contrast between the tolerant pluralism of Thomas Moore's *Utopia* and his actual conduct once in power, to the impact of television on traditional children's games. Jacoby's main theme, however, is a distinctive defence of political utopianism. He initially argues that it has not been utopians who have been the advocates or promulgators of political violence. He also reminds us that George Orwell was and remained a democratic socialist, and that Aldous Huxley's utopian *Island* came after his *Brave New World*. Jacoby argues that their anti-utopias were less hostile depictions of then-current utopias than critical extrapolations of themes in their own societies.

Jacoby also discusses some critics of utopianism. He claims that Isaiah Berlin never took on any live advocate of ideas that he disagreed

with, and that there are unresolved tensions between Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and her argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. He also criticises Karl Popper, arguing that his linking of totalitarianism and utopianism relates only to Marxism—something that Jacoby himself does not wish to defend. Jacoby is not really correct about Popper. Popper engaged with the Marxists of his own day by discussing the views of Karl Marx. His treatment of Plato was, similarly, a way of engaging with themes that he discerned in the anti-democratic conservatives of his own day and even (in a strange way) in Hitler.

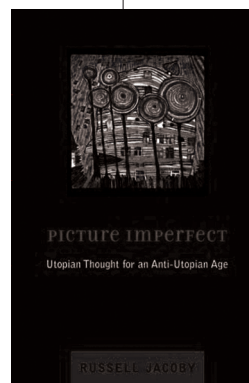
What, however, of Jacoby's 'negative' case for utopianism? His negative view is made by way of a parallel with strands in Jewish theology (in a brilliant discussion, he links the theme of 'You must make no image of God' to Horkheimer and Adorno, Wittgenstein and Leo Strauss, and the ideas of the Frankfurt School to the Jewish theme that 'To depict the future is sacrilegious, but it can be heard and longed for.'). Jacoby's position comes over as attractive and modest, and he strongly differentiates his view from those who offer positive blueprints for society.

However, one important strand in Marxism was its condemnation of what Engels called 'utopian socialism'—that is, of the proffering of utopias which while (perhaps) attractive, are not realisable. Marx responded to this by inventing a social force, the proletariat, that—equipped with his ideas—was supposed to realise them. But he ducked the crucial issue of showing that his ideas were realisable, by instead pointing to social tendencies that were allegedly leading us in their direction. He thus

eschewed the task of explaining what was supposed to be realised, and that it was possible, disparaging this as 'writing recipes...for the cook-shops of the future'.

But it is essential to show that what one favours is, indeed, possible. Jacoby is right in poking gentle fun at the proclivity of some utopians for telling us how people's days will be organised, and how they will be dressed. His criticism, however, seems to me incorrect if it is taken to suggest that the utopian—of *any* stripe—does not have to address key structural issues concerning how the society they favour will work. The Frankfurt 'negativist' tradition seems to me pernicious precisely because it avoids this task, while at the same time invoking ideas that only make sense if something like the Marxist vision were tenable. It uses the result as a stick with which to beat current society, while in fact distancing itself from the substantive content of Marxism.

A crucial problem here—and it is striking that Jacoby does not discuss it at all—was highlighted in Hayek's 'Inaugural Address' at the London School of Economics. Hayek argued that Mises had raised a key issue: that what had been assumed by the socialist tradition—that the benefits of modern economies would be available in a future society without markets—was false. Hayek's own subsequent work was in many ways concerned with highlighting some of the ways in which how we currently do things, or how we might do things better, bring with them constraints as to what else we can do. The specific claims of Mises and of Hayek are, of course, open to argument. But Hayek's general point, I think, is not. In part, it is



that our current situation—and, say, the number of people that it currently sustains—imposes significant constraints over what else we can do. In part, it is that we have to do things in a systematic manner, and that any system that we use will bring with it constraints as to what else it is also possible for us to do, or for how we can accomplish other things which we value.

What seems to me badly wrong with Jacoby's account—and with the tradition that lies behind it—is that it is utopian in the sense of simply ignoring these issues. The result is that those who follow Jacoby may find that they are led to discontent with, and possibly even to try to throw off, 'chains' which are, in fact, the other side of the very things that are needed to make desirable features of our society operate. Of course, any such specific claim is fallible; and there is a lot of room for argument about how things function—or might function better than they do—and about what constraints they impose. (This, of course, is an argument that must be made not only in respect of human social institutions, but also in ecological terms.) It seems to me that, in the end, it is upon this crucial debate that Jacoby is inviting us to turn our backs. While his book is a first-rate read, his views seem to me attractive but dangerous—not least because of just how powerful his presentation of his case is.

Where does this leave us? I do not see that we are stuck with just how things are currently. But what is needed if we are to explore ideas about a better society, is indeed to take a realistic view of how things currently work, and to take seriously the constraints that existing social mechanisms impose upon us. We need then to explore what the options are to make things actually function in new ways. The claims of Hayek and Mises about markets

seem to me telling. But if they are right, we are not condemned to stagnation and, socially, just to more of the same. Rather, the classical liberal tradition opens up the possibility of making use of competition as a discovery procedure, and for diverse forms of private social experimentation—provided that we can remove governmental controls that currently limit us to what bureaucrats and the less imaginative of our fellow-citizens think is 'sound'.

Reviewed by Jeremy Shearmur

Please Just F Off: It's Our Turn Now—Holding Baby Boomers to Account*

By Ryan Heath

Pluto Press

228pp, 2006

\$25.95 ISBN: 1-86403-328-2

'There are better things to do than validate other people's marketing labels by talking up generational conflict,' writes Ryan Heath, a 25 year old expatriate living in the UK. It's a refreshing start to his book, simply because most criticism directed at Heath has argued he is doing precisely that. But that's the trouble with penning a book about generational warfare isn't it? You leave yourself open to accusations of lapsing into style at the expense of substance.

To an extent it's true: Heath stringently avoids turning his work into an 'academic treatise', pointedly using words such as 'inefficient, unfair and dumb'. Think cute, fashionable language with plenty of expletives thrown in.

Similar in gist to Tony Blair's Fabian pamphlet *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century*, this book urges us to harness capitalism to achieve socially just goals. Where the difference arises however, is in its focus. Detailed discussion on why, and how, Baby Boomers should be 'held to account'—and pushed aside—forms the core of Heath's analysis.

The result of Heath's foray into the genre is that he spends much of *Please Just F* Off: It's Our Turn Now* attempting to abide by the unwritten rules of generational warfare, with memorable lines like 'War is not 24/7—there's lots of dead time—but you have to be ready

