CHAPTER 5

The Future Is Now

Utopian Demands and the Temporalities of Hope

Be realistic, demand the impossible.
GRAFFITI

Only thinking directed towards changing the world and informing the desire to change it does not confront the future (the unclosed space for new development in front of us) as embarrassment and the past as spell.
ERNST BLOCH, THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE

In the current political climate, the demands for basic income and shorter hours could of course be dismissed as “merely utopian.” Rather than waste time on impractical and untimely demands, so the argument goes, feminists and others should conserve their meager energies and set their sights on more politically feasible goals. This familiar logic makes it easy to write such demands off as unrealistic, and therefore as potentially dangerous distractions from the necessarily modest and small-scale parameters of political reform. That is, the supposed utopianism of these demands is often considered a fatal flaw. One could perhaps contest the claim that these demands are aptly designated utopian in this time and place; and certainly I have tried to point out their practicality in relation to current economic trends. But there is another way to respond to the critique. What if the utopianism of these demands is not a liability but an asset? What if we were to respond to the charge of utopianism not with embarrassment or defensive denial but with recognition and affirmation? And what might such a utopianism without apology look like?
Rather than deny the applicability of the appellation “utopian” to escape its pejorative connotations, in this chapter I want to accept the label, reconsider utopianism as a distinctive mode of thought and practice, and explore what a utopian demand is and what it can do.

Of course, part of what is in dispute here is the status of the term. The definition of “utopia” in this chapter is broadly conceived, including not just the more traditional list of literary and philosophical blueprints of the good society, but also, as I will describe, a variety of partial glimpses of and incitements toward the imagination and construction of alternatives. One of these more fractional forms, the “utopian demand”—as I use the phrase—is a political demand that takes the form not of a narrowly pragmatic reform but of a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations; it is a demand that raises eyebrows, one for which we would probably not expect immediate success. These are demands that would be difficult—though not impossible—to realize in the present institutional and ideological context; to be considered feasible, a number of shifts in the terrain of political discourse must be effected. In this sense, a utopian demand prefigures—again in fragmentary form—a different world, a world in which the program or policy that the demand promotes would be considered as a matter of course both practical and reasonable. It is not, however, just the status of the program or policy that is at stake; as the proponents of wages for housework recognized, the political practice of demanding is of crucial importance as well.

Since my claim is that the power of these demands can be better grasped once their utopian dimensions are more fully understood, I will begin with a more general exploration of the territory of utopianism. In preparation for this analysis of the utopian demand, I divide the chapter into three sections. The first reviews the case against utopia. The analysis in this section is historical, focusing on how utopianism came to be marginalized in the period after the Second World War, and on what grounds it has most often been discredited since. By drawing on a few examples from the Right and Left, we can collect many of the most significant obstacles and objections to utopian thinking and activism. In response to these critiques, the second section presents a philosophical defense drawn primarily from the work of Ernst Bloch. The discussion centers on the ontology and epistemology of utopian speculation and finishes with an exploration of the concept of hope and the cognitive and affective challenges it poses to those who would take it on as a project. In the third section, the analysis shifts registers yet again, moving from the historical focus of the first section and the philosophical territory of the second to the formal terrain of the utopian archive. The brief exploration of the forms and functions of utopian expression considers the possibilities and limitations of a range of genres, from the traditional literary and philosophical utopia, to the manifesto, and, finally, to the utopian demand. My supposition is that setting the utopian demand in relation to these other, more familiar artifacts can bring into sharper focus both its general qualifications and its specific merits as a utopian form.

UTOPIA’S CRITICS

In this section, I want to gather some of the standard objections to utopian thought and practice. We can begin with what might be called an anti-utopianism of the Right—to match the genealogy of Left anti-utopianism that follows—but it is really drawn from a tradition of liberal discourse, and the specific examples I consider have been prominently represented in mainstream political discourse. We might think of this, then, as an official anti-utopianism. Although Marxism harbors its own anti-utopian tendencies, a point I will touch upon below, liberalism has long been home to some of utopianism’s most vociferous and—particularly in the Anglophone context—inafluential critics. Disowning its own utopian origins and impulses once it attained the comfortable status of a dominant ideology dedicated to the conservation of existing regimes, liberalism endorses piecemeal reformism as the only acceptable political course. Socialism, broadly conceived, is liberal anti-utopianism’s most enduring target; thus anti-utopianism was, for a substantial part of the twentieth century in the United States, intimately linked to anticommunism. Consequently, the specific contents of liberal anti-utopianism in the United States shifted significantly with the fall of state socialism at the end of the Cold War. To understand the current case against utopianism, it is useful to review briefly its evolution in relation to some of these various instantiations, including liberal, neoliberal, and neoconservative versions, as they continue to provide a repertoire for official anti-utopianism.

To trace the lineages of contemporary anti-utopian discourse in the United States, I want to focus on two key texts produced at very different
moments in the evolution of official US anti-utopianism, each of which was celebrated for both its persuasiveness and its prescience. The first of these, Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, first published in 1945, anticipated the Cold War threat to liberalism’s ideological ascendance and confidence; the second, Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 “The End of History?,” declared the end of that threat. Each text announces the dawn of a new political era and marks a specific moment of anti-utopian revival, when liberalism’s general distrust of utopianism reasserts itself in reaction to new events. Fascism was one of these threats, but the two authors agree that at least by 1950 the more pressing challenge was posed by communism (Fukuyama 1989, 9; Popper 1950, vii). As bookends to the Cold War, one mode of anti-utopianism expresses the anxieties of liberalism under siege while the other emerges from the confidence in liberalism’s triumph.

Popper’s book, together with an article that amplifies some of its central themes, offers an unusually clear and forceful example of a nonetheless rather typical brand of Cold War anti-utopianism. The struggle between reason and passion is the stage upon which this critique is staged. We must understand, Popper argues, that proposals for radical change threaten reason and hence civilization. He distinguishes rationalists like himself—whose ideals are discovered by and propagated through reasoned argument and held with what he describes as “the rational attitude of the impartial judge” (1947–48, 115)—from “Utopians” whose ideals are spread by appeal to the emotions and adhered to with passionate attachment. The former evinces a “sane attitude towards our own existence and its limitations,” while the latter interjects a “hysterical” element (116). Whereas reason is linked in his account with the promise of human community and harmony, utopianism—with its “irrational” appeals to inherently divisive affects and emotions—leads ineluctably, according to this Hobbesian logic, to violence (1950, 419). Such dreams of a substantially different and better world are dangerous; they threaten to “intoxicate” and then seduce us, upsetting the apparently hard-won and always tenuous rule of reason. Rejecting the approach to political activism and reform he labels “Utopian engineering” in favor of “piecemeal engineering,” Popper strives to convince us that small-scale alterations of the existing system—“searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its ultimate greatest good” (155)—is the only rational course of political action. There is, according to this analysis, no reasonable alternative to liberalism.

Fukuyama agrees with Popper that the small-scale reform of liberal democracies is the only reasonable approach to social change, but for rather different reasons. Whereas Popper wrote on the eve of the Cold War, Fukuyama wrote when the two major challengers to liberalism targeted by Popper’s critique—fascism and communism—had been declared defeated. Trying to come to terms with the sense that “something very fundamental has happened in world history” (1989, 3), Fukuyama advances the thesis that what the end of the Cold War signals is something less than “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (4). It is not just that the Cold War is over, history itself has come to an end. This “triumph of the West,” together with the “total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism,” obviates ideological pretensions to and struggles for a different and higher form of human society (3, 13). Fukuyama’s brand of liberal anti-utopianism is thus no longer presented as prescriptive but as descriptive: It purports to explain a political reality that we need to acknowledge, rather than to advance an ideal we should strive to achieve and rally to defend. The mighty and subversive passions that loom so large in Popper’s account are cut down to size in Fukuyama’s, reduced to no more than the easily resisted and relatively mundane lures of nostalgic longing. For better or worse, utopian dreams have been drained of their affective charge. To the utopian belief that a new and better world is possible, an earlier generation of anti-utopians responded with the argument that there should be no alternative. These anti-utopians declare—in this new ideological moment in Anglo-American liberalism, a moment that marks the ascendancy of neoliberalism—that there is no alternative. What Popper defends in the name of rationalism is now proclaimed under the banner of realism. Utopia is no longer dangerous, just irrelevant.

What Popper advocates, the unrivaled ascendance of liberal ideology, Fukuyama declares achieved. Yet both authors admit to some regrets, as if in these moments of political transition—posed, as each felt himself to be, on the brink of a new political era—they are close enough to the epochs now supplanted to contemplate some remorse. Although Popper defends pragmatism and empiricism against irrational dreams of a different society, he acknowledges as indeed all “too attractive” the pull
of utopianism (1947–48, 112), gesturing in this way to the boredom of sobriety, the tedium of always standing on the side of reason against the passions and the tiresome vigilance required to resist their appeal.4 Fukuyama’s regret—perhaps because it assumes the form of a relatively harmless nostalgia for that which has been decisively defeated—is more pronounced, more explicitly thematicized. In contrast to Popper’s Hobbesian mode of argument, which incites the passions in order to convince us of the threat they can pose, Fukuyama exhibits something closer to a Weberian resignation to a disenchanted world, a perspective inflected by a profound ambivalence about what has been sacrificed on the altar of progress. Confronted with such loss, Fukuyama pines for earlier eras not yet devoid of daring and creativity, before political innovation, courage, and idealism gave way to instrumental reason, cost-benefit analysis, technocratic problem solving, and shopping (1989, 118).5 It is no wonder that their two brands of anti-utopianism breed remorse: what the accounts disavow—Popper’s enemy and Fukuyama’s casualty of war—is the very possibility of political imagination and aspiration, nothing less than hope itself.

Fukuyama declares liberalism the winner, but not with the kind of confidence that accompanied declarations in the 1990s of liberalism’s unrivaled and world-historic ascendency. In the transition from the Cold War era of superpower competition to the emergence of triumphant neoliberalism in the age of empire, Fukuyama’s then rather speculative claims (the title of the essay was a question: “The End of History?”) ossify into official common sense. The end of the Cold War and the threat to liberal politics that Popper so feared cleared the way for the rise of neoliberalism in its fundamentalist mode, a discourse that in many ways dominated the 1990s. Centered on the strident insistence that, in Margaret Thatcher’s famous formulation, there is no alternative, the neoliberal anti-utopianism of the 1990s seemed to be achieved by Popper’s regrets and relieved of Fukuyama’s nostalgia. This acquiescence cast as realism was compounded by what Pierre Bourdieu characterizes as a new kind of economic fatalism “that wants us to believe the world cannot be any different from the way it is” (1998, 128). Neoliberalism’s renewed “romance of the capitalist market” as the site of freedom’s security is coupled with a revived romance of the privatized family as the necessary locus of social reproduction and a haven in a heartless world (Brenner 2000, 137). The parameters of what is accepted as reality and representations of it that are deemed realistic narrow to coincide with whatever is judged to be consistent with the exigencies of global capital accumulation.

This late 1990s consensus was at least interrupted, if not thrown into crisis, in the early years of the next decade. Fukuyama’s prediction of a boring harmony, as Samuel Huntington notes, soon revealed itself to be an “illusion” (1996, 31). Financial crises, global rebellions against neoliberalism, and terrorism and the ongoing war on terror posed challenges to older Cold War and post–Cold War mappings of the world order, giving rise to a political climate in some ways even less hospitable to ideas that challenged the legitimacy of the status quo and political demands or cultural practices that attempted to weaken attachments to what Huntington calls our “civilizational identity.” There are, according to this neoconservative discourse, new threats to liberal reason that demand our sacrifice and vigilance, the defeat of which will require the affirmation of shared assumptions and values. Thus the United States in the era of George W. Bush was cast back into an environment more conducive to Popper’s anti-utopianism of crisis than to Fukuyama’s anti-utopianism of triumph.

What I am calling official anti-utopianism alternates between these basic options, an anti-utopianism fueled by a sense of liberalism under threat and one born of a sense of its dominance. While liberalism continues to mutate into new forms, its case against utopia continues to revolve around a fairly stable set of indictments—between something akin to Popper’s approach and Fukuyama’s diagnosis, between the rationalist and realist rebukes, between the claim that there should be no alternative and the assurance that there is no alternative. Liberalism continues to consider small-scale reformism the only rational and realistic political option. Speculation about alternative futures is, from the perspective of this classic anti-utopian ontology and epistemology, at best naïve and at worst dangerous.

Echoes of these two modes of critique, summarized in the insistence that there should be no alternative and the conclusion that there is no alternative, can also be found in Left brands of anti-utopianism. But there are further objections to consider as well. A brief exploration of the decline of and retreat from utopianism within second-wave feminism
might illustrate the logics and styles of some of the recent anti- or post-utopianisms of the Left and provide an opportunity to add to the list of rejections of and resistances to utopian expressions and commitments.

Feminism is an interesting representative case because feminist projects have long been linked with utopianism. If political realism tends to be associated with a mode of hard-nosed, hard-ball politics, utopianism can be understood—building on this traditional gender logic—as both softhearted and softheaded, or, more precisely, softheaded because softhearted. This traditional feminization of utopianism is reinforced by its link to feminism's historical investment in denaturalization as a mode of theoretical practice and political intervention. When social relations are stabilized by recourse to claims about their natural basis, analyses that question their value and propose alternatives can easily be dismissed as unrealistic. One of Anglo-American feminism's early architects, Mary Wollstonecraft, was thus forced to acknowledge—as a way to inoculate herself from the penalties of the charge—that even her relatively moderate visions of gender equality could, despite her own conviction of their reasonableness, "be termed Utopian dreams" (1996, 35).

Feminists themselves have, at different times and to different degrees, embraced and actively pursued utopian thinking or sought to distance themselves from it. The 1970s witnessed a resurgence of Left utopian projects in the United States, and perhaps nowhere were they pursued with more energy and creativity than within feminism. Radical and socialist feminists in particular cultivated utopian themes with their insistence that everyday life could and should be wholly transformed. This was the period in which Shulamith Firestone's infamous call to seize control over the means of reproduction (1970, 11) was received with no little interest; in which radical feminist groups like the Feminists audaciously demanded not just equal treatment but the elimination of the institutions of heterosexual sex, love, marriage, and the family (1973, 370); in which alternative communities were founded and abandoned in a flurry of experimentation; and in which the feminist literary utopia flourished, imagining a dizzying variety of worlds in which existing gender formations were variously destroyed, reversed, or revolutionized.²

However, this interest in feminist utopian thought and activism soon waned. The early 1980s witnessed a decline of feminist utopian literature, matched by a comparable retreat from the utopian in feminist theory (Fitting 1990; Benhabib 1991, 146–47; Goodwin 1990, 3–4). This diminution of utopian energies in US feminism in the 1980s and 1990s must be understood in the context of the same processes of economic and political restructuring that were linked to the resurgence of official brands of anti-utopianism. Economic developments that eroded the traditional bases of working-class power and rendered workers increasingly vulnerable to employers and welfare reform that sought to make mothers more dependent on either waged work or marriage were hardly conducive to utopian hopes about alternatives to work and family. The pressures of getting by in hard times tend not, as Robin Kelley notes, to be generative of the political imagination; instead, "we are constantly putting out fires, responding to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present" (2002, 11). Consumed by the here and now, the possibilities of alternatives to the ever more reified structures of late capitalism come to seem more distant in such periods. "The leaner and meaner world of the 1980s and 1990s was," as Tom Moylan describes it, "marked by anti-utopian deprivation rather than utopian achievement" (2000, 103).

These same developments fueled an assault on many of the bases of political movements in the 1960s and 1970s, including feminism. The 1980s backlash against the more robust and radical forms of identity-based politics, including feminism, and the 1990s restoration of some of their elements within tamer affirmations of diversity or multicultural difference raised new questions about the viability of the more utopian elements of these theoretical projects and political movements. In such a context, utopian forms of speculation and activism were often conceived as inadequate to the realities of a hostile political environment and the skepticism of less sympathetic imagined publics. In this new climate, utopian forms of thinking and demanding were understood to be not only naive, but—insofar as they threatened to compromise feminism's already shrinking credibility with more mainstream audiences—even dangerous. The message taken to heart by many feminists in the 1980s was that, as Sarah Goodwin laments, "we must, apparently, become skeptical, practical, and realistic, and outgrow utopia" (1990, 4).

In response to these challenges, some feminists scaled back the scope of their political demands, their commitment to revolutionary change giving way to an absorption in struggles to hold the ground already won. As one socialist feminist complained in the mid-1980s, "in the face of the right, we have to pedal hard to stay in the same place, or fight for
demands initiated by mainstream feminists” (English et al. 1985, 101). Feminists had once entertained the possibilities of a future beyond gender, family, and work, but in this new environment, political horizons seemed to narrow. Thus, the aspiration to move beyond gender as we know it was supplanted by efforts to secure the recognition and equal treatment of a wider variety of the genders we now inhabit; the project of “smashing the family” and seeking alternatives was largely abandoned in favor of achieving a more inclusive version of the still privatized model; postwork militancy was eclipsed by the defense of the equal right to work balanced with family; and anticapitalist agendas were overshadowed by the urgency of rear-guard actions and more purely defensive efforts to mitigate the impact of structural adjustment policies, including feminist efforts to design less odious approaches to welfare reform.

That there should be no alternative was not only a consequence of neoliberal triumph and Left retreat. It was also a result of the increasing dominance of a model of academic critique that disavowed the element of proposition. Whereas the 1980s witnessed a retreat from feminist utopianism, feminist critique continued to flourish. Indeed, although the prescriptive dimensions and radical political imaginaries of feminist theory may have been eclipsed, they were replaced by a reinvigorated concentration on and tremendous achievements in more purely diagnostic work. Abandoning a more explicit normative project was one way to avoid those forms of critique—totalizing, foundationalist, moralizing, and essentialist—that poststructuralism in the 1980s and 1990s in particular taught us to recognize and interrogate. Although feminists in this period often decried the passive subjects of overly determinist analyses and routinely affirmed the possibility of political agency, there was a tendency to stop short of imagining alternative futures or mapping out paths toward which feminists might commit their collective energies, presumably because they did not wish to risk having such claims about better worlds and prescriptions for change exclude, marginalize, or render invisible those who would nourish different dreams and pursue alternative programs. Thus the disavowal of the project of normative theory was a way to refuse one’s implication in the normative claim’s impositions and exclusions. There should be no alternative not because this world is the best possible but because, to cite an oft-quoted passage from Foucault, “to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system” (1977, 230). Wendy Brown paraphrases the logic of this feminist Left in these terms: “If there is always a governing political truth, at least let us not be the fundamentalists; if every regime is an occupation, at least let us not be the occupying force” (2005, 101). Jane Bennett’s description of Foucault’s general strategy—to leave his own normative commitments tacit in order to minimize their moralizing effects (2002, 19)—is what emerged within feminism as perhaps the dominant approach to critique. Rather than develop ways, as Bennett describes an alternative approach, to “render one’s affirmative theory more invitational than insistent” (20), affirmation was, and in many ways still is, more often rejected as an integral component of critique and abandoned as a way to avoid the risks of political proposition.

In at least some quarters of the Left, the investment in critique became bound up as well with a set of affective states, including both ressentiment and melancholy, that are more attached to the past and its present than to the possibility of and desire for different futures. Brown has charted some of this territory with analyses of both certain modes of politicized identity constituted by wounded attachments and the specter of what she names Left melancholy. As Brown describes it, identity politics fueled by ressentiment “becomes deeply invested in its own impotence, even while it seeks to assuage the pain of its powerlessness through its vengeful moralizing, through its wide distribution of suffering, through its re-proach to power as such” (1995, 70). In this way critique can be misdirected and visions of change limited by the preoccupation with the preservation and vindication of existing identities. As for Left melancholy, in one iteration of this analysis, the Left mourns its own (often idealized) past, its now-superseded forms of organizing and modes of political experience. In some accounts, this mourning can turn into melancholy. As Brown describes the melancholic mode of Left affect, a description that pertains to ressentiment as well, it is characterized by a structure of desire that is more backward-looking than anticipatory; melancholic subjects are more attached to their marginalized Left critique than to the continuing possibility of social change (1999, 26, 21), while the subject of ressentiment becomes more attentive to and invested in his or her injury than in the possibility of its overcoming (1995, 74). These modes of political being, characterized by the affects of loss and sometimes despair, and by a preoccupation with the past and the injuries left in its wake, can harbor their own mode of anti-utopianism. Certain kinds of preoccupations with and attachments to history can overwhelm
capacities for creating different futures. Whereas the tactical retreat from radical demands and the embrace of a model of critique shorn of its affirmative dimensions echoes, albeit for very different reasons, Popper's warnings about the dangers of utopianism in a hostile world and insistence that there should be no alternative, these brands of Left resentment and melancholy resonate with Fukuyama's insistence that, whether we like it or not, there simply is no alternative.

We have by this point collected a number of principled objections, historical obstacles, and affective resistances to utopian thought and practice. Utopia has been criticized in the name of the real and its correlates, reason and realism; it has been disavowed by a model of critique that conceives the normative claim only as a target and not also one of its elements; and it has been overshadowed by a host of temporally inflected affects, from Popper's fear and Fukuyama's nostalgia to modes of Left resentment and melancholy that tend, in some instances at least, to deflate desires for different and better futures. Yet, despite the oft-cited declarations of its demise, political utopianism survives, a persistence that suggests there are other arguments to consider about its attractions and effects. To find some responses to the challenges posed by its critics, I will revert to a strategy that I have followed in previous chapters and return to one of the lesser-known alternatives within the Marxist tradition—in this case, the work of Ernst Bloch—for insight and inspiration.

With Bloch, we will revisit the practice of utopianism and briefly reconsider its ontological and epistemological warrants. Then drawing on both Bloch and Nietzsche, I will explore hope as a mode of temporality, a cognitive and affective relation to time and a way to approach the relationships among historicity, presentism, and futurity. What follows is thus a philosophic interlude of sorts, one that begins and ends with Bloch and learns from Nietzsche in the meantime.

IN DEFENSE OF UTOPIA: ERNST BLOCH'S ONTOLOGY OF THE NOT YET

Once again Marxism is both an obvious and an unlikely resource—in this case, for a defense of utopianism: obvious because it has so often served as the target of the anti-utopians, including Popper and Fukuyama; unlikely because historically Marxists have so often repudiated the label. Indeed, there is no little irony in the charge of utopianism being leveled at Marxism given that tradition's general hostility to the category.

The pejorative use of the term "utopia," already present in the writings of Marx and Engels, was given further sanction by those tendencies invested in establishing Marxism's scientific credentials. But just as there are countertraditions within Marxism that refuse the productivist glorification of work, there are also Marxisms that embrace rather than disavow utopian desire, speculation, and demands. Ernst Bloch is certainly the most notable example, with his sustained effort to, as he describes it, "bring philosophy to hope" (1995, 1: 6).

Bloch's very distinctive style seeks to provoke the political and philosophical imagination as much as the faculty of critical judgment, and the arguments are conducted in the register of affect as much as that of analysis. At its best, his writing is philosophically rich, conceptually innovative, and heuristically evocative. At its worst, it can be frustratingly obscure and self-indulgent. But there are reasons for reading Bloch critically and selectively that extend beyond the vagaries of style: he is at once one of the most inventive of Marxists and a staunch proponent of the Soviet regime, and the contradiction between his affirmation of the creative imagination and his tendencies toward orthodoxy significantly limits the force of many of his claims. Thus, on the one hand, Bloch conceives the world as "unenclosed" (1: 246) and the future as open; on the other hand, he sometimes sets aside his principled objections to teleological guarantees and determinist narratives because of his certainty that Marx has successfully charted our course.

Approached critically and employed selectively, however, Bloch's major work in three volumes, The Principle of Hope, can serve as a rich resource for an alternative conception and assessment of utopian thought and practice—one that is dedicated to the assertion that it is both reasonable and realistic, not to mention an everyday occurrence, to act as if another world were possible. In response to the narrowness of reason, reality, and realism as these categories are deployed in anti-utopian thought, in each case as the measures of utopia's failure, Bloch fashions an alternative ontology and epistemology. If reality encompasses not only what has come to be but also its potential to become other, then utopian thinking, a mode of thought in which reason is allied with the imagination, can count as a particular brand of realism. To draw out the most relevant elements of his thought, I will focus on his categories of the "not-yet-become," the "not-yet-conscious," and, finally, the central category of his opus, "hope." But first, a brief account of Bloch's notion