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SHEILA ROWBOTHAM

Women and Utopia

I have a wonderful postcard of a speaker at Hyde Park Corner in London with a placard round his neck declaring 'UTOPIA COULD BE THE ANSWER TO SOME OF YOUR PROBLEMS. LET ME EXPLAIN.' It is easy to be wry about utopias and one of its most common usages is derisory: to be utopian is to be ludicrous and unpractical. The contempt is tinged with a sense of danger; utopian dreamers take us up dead ends or worse towards trouble. In pronouncing on utopia I have several little Jiminy Crickets on my shoulder. On the left there is Engels muttering about strategy and scientific socialism, along with the British radical William Hazlitt reminding me how Robert Owen's schemes were 'tolerated because they are remote, visionary, inapplicable'.[1] On the right I have Edmund Burke reflecting furiously and a liberal John Maynard Keynes insisting, 'We can never know enough to make the chance worth taking'.[2] Utopians, of course, by definition have considered, for various reasons that the chance is worth taking.

Keeping all these sceptical whispers in mind, I propose to focus not on the utopianism of answers but on the more exploratory approach towards utopianism outlined by E.P. Thompson in the Postcript he did to his biography on William Morris. He argues that Morris' utopianism challenged habitual conceptions of the everyday by presenting 'a vocabulary of desire'[3] – a recognition largely muted in both marxism and social democracy. Utopianism in this sense is about navigating the journey into what might be and becoming aware that the answers are not fixed but an ongoing search, rather as Ursula le Guin does in her science fantasy. Utopianism then need not be schematic and prescriptive, it can also propose other ways of imagining, conceiving and thinking about the world. Not only is such an approach less easy for the Jiminy Crickets to dismiss, it is a vital element in any project of social transformation.

A most pressing dilemma which recurs in efforts to transform social existence is the question of what to do with the here and now. Those utopians who seek an absolute break with the old immoral world gain a freedom of movement but can easily tumble into the dangers of isolation or intolerable autocracy. At the other extreme those who pin their hopes on existing human qualities can end up in romantic idealism and conservative nostalgia for an imagined state of lost innocence. In a recent article on George Orwell Terry Eagleton compared him to Raymond Williams and E.P.Thompson as seeking an alternative 'immanent in the present'.[4] I want to stretch Eagleton's phrase to include forms of political practice as well as

social thought which have carried this dynamic sense of utopianism in the quest and in the doing. I see these movements as containing vital understandings about the complexity of utopianism as it works its way through the actuality of history.

My starting point here is my own experience in the movement which helped to shape my political and intellectual outlook, women's liberation. During the 1970s Herbert Marcuse stated in a television interview that the women's liberation movement was utopian – by which he meant that it was imagining what might be within the process of taking action. I remember being surprised at the time; I had spent so long arguing we were intensely practical in opposition to marxists who sneered at sharing child care. The utopianism in the early years was implicit, taken-for-granted, so immanent it was not theorised. Subsequently women's liberation movements in many countries would confront the utopian dilemmas of what to do about conflicting desires and that painful puzzle of break and connection. I remember a question in the London women's liberation workshop newsletter in the mid 1970s: 'Are we a movement of liberated women or a movement for the liberation of all women?' The question of course was never resolved.

Utopianism in ideas and movements can be read both as a search for opposing vocabularies and as a means of signalling through images and stories knots which appear in these vocabularies of transformation. It is a means of thinking which can supplement theorising, yet it is also a mode which can be considered theoretically.

Two models for imagining new relations between men and women have been remarkably persistent. One is Aristophanes' 'Lysistrata' in 414 BC in which roles are reversed and women use an alternative source of power; the other is the creation of Christine de Pisan's fifteenth century 'cloisters of defence'[5] – the separate space geographically and metaphorically. In Britain and the US – the two countries I am going to focus on – utopian thinking has drawn on a common heritage; millenarian religious aspirations, the secular ideals of the enlightenment and Romanticism's sense of loss and faith in infinite human possibility. The demarcations are not watertight. The enlightenment contained not only the faith in reason as a basis for social living but the dream of a state of nature; the idea of a woman redeemer shifts from the heretical fringes of Christianity into the early nineteenth century socialist movement Engels labelled as 'utopian'.

While the traditions are shared, the rigid constraints on upper and middle class women's freedom in daily life, fostered among a minority, what Mary Wollstonecraft described as 'a wild wish'[6] which carried them off into the unknown. Even before she articulated her alternative in terms of reason and rights, women intellectuals were imagining other ways of being. The blue stocking Mrs Scott who lived with a friend, Lady Barbara Montagu and ran a school for poor children produced 'Millenium Hall' in

1762. The novel describes how two gentlemen discover a delightful mansion which constitutes a refuge for intelligent gentlewomen. Interestingly the utopian gentlewomen admit other outcasts;orphans, the aged, people with disabilities. At Millenium Hall animals are never harmed, free furnished rooms are provided for young couples and the ladies never marry. The utopia it described was sufficiently real for two Irish upper class women, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby to elope together in 1778. They settled in rural Wales where they were known as 'the Ladies of Llangollen'.[7]

The new world of the United States with its hopes of perfectionism were particularly conducive to utopian groupings and utopian writing. The best known is Edward Bellamy, author of 'Looking Backward' (1888). Bellamy's statist, technological vision famously led Morris to write 'News from Nowhere', just as his political hopes for a libertarian socialism were imploding in internal sectarian acrimony. Both utopias were influential in the socialist movements which followed. In the same period, and especially in the US, women too were writing utopian novels. Sharing many of the preoccupations of the male utopian writers, some of these novels dwell on the particular problems women faced. In 'Daring to Dream', Carol Farley Kessler summarises fifty two American Utopian novels written by women between 1870 and 1920.[8] They range from Associationist and Populist studies of communitarian societies in which gender relations remain conventional, to shocking free love novels prescient of Greenwich Village bohemianism. Some are set in idyllic rural settings which return readers to the simple life of a pioneer past and others endorse the technological fix. This divide is common to all utopian writing in this period and reveals a real difference in desire which has resurfaced in our own time in relation to Green politics. But the dichotomy of nature versus reason, science and technology plays out in a particular tension among women utopians around domestic life, sex and motherhood. Is what is defined as 'nature' to be rejected or celebrated? Is it part of female subjection or a source of female power?

More specifically the fictional utopias echo historical assumptions and movements. American middle class women were particularly resourceful in devising alternative schemes for domestic labour. These included proposals for altering the social context of housekeeping through cooperative housekeeping and faith in the application of domestic science and technology. Mary E. Bradley's 'Mizora' (1890) tells of an all-female society nestling in a mysterious hollow near the North Pole. The visitor from outside, a Russian aristocrat, Vera Zarovitch, crosses a barrier of mist and light to reach Mizora – which at the time really was an unknown territory, the North Pole was not reached by an explorer until 1909. Mizora is a technologically advanced utopia in its domestic arrangements and these are described in

great detail by the female author. For example Zarovitch sees on 'scrubbing day .. a little machine, with brushes and sponges attached, going over the floor at a swift rate scouring and sponging as it went. Two vessels, one containing soap suds and the other clear water were connected by small feed pipes with the brushes. As soon as the drying sponge became saturated, it was lifted by an ingenious yet simple contrivance into a vessel and pressed dry, and was again dropped to the floor... Carpeted floors were swept by a similar contrivance.' [9] The ladies of Mizora all had , as a result, very pretty hands.

Bradley's vision expresses faith not only in technology but in the new Social Science. When Zarovitch exclaims 'Will the time come when my own country will see this and rise to a social, if not intellectual equality?' [10] , the preceptress of the women's college replies,

'Educate them, Educate them, and enlightenment will solve for them every problem in Sociology'.[11]

Late nineteenth century women's utopian writing carries, like men's, the impulse of the Populist movement. By the 1890s this is narrowing into the concern among both male and female middle class reformers about both class conflict and the immigrants arriving in the mushrooming cities. However the numbers of women in higher education created a large contingent of 'new women' who rejected their customary destinies and were prepared to take their chance with convention. Their personal situation called for a break and for the creation of new ways of living. For those who did not want to move outside the bounds of propriety, the Social Settlements which pioneered the investigation of social problems, enabled respectable middle class women to enjoy an acceptable individual freedom while fulfilling an extended role of womanly service.

On the radical margin was the less respectable 'free love' radicalism propounded in journals such as 'Lucifer: the Light Bearer'. In the late 1890s the columns of 'Lucifer' were buzzing with contesting views on heterosexuality. One current of opinion favoured 'Dianism'- spiritual loving. The veteran freethinker, Elmina D. Slenker maintained that this was the way women could be what she called 'self-poised'. She considered that 'over much sexing' was the cause of women's oppression – a view fiercely rejected by younger women correspondents in the paper.[12] One strand of the free love tradition advocated control, another Romanticism's infinite self-expression.

Rosa Graul's free love utopia, 'Hilda's Home' was serialised in 'Lucifer' in 1897. The heroine Hilda, backed by a male investor, establishes a free love co-operative home where marriage is abolished. Men and women fall in and out of love, motherhood is voluntary and all babies cared for collectively. The inhabitants seem rather young and exceedingly good-looking. A broad shouldered twenty-year-old happily chases a 'rosy-hued' young woman of fifteen through mazes to meet in joyful union. In Graul's utopia 'life will be constant wooing'. [13] In this imaginary state of 'nature' jealousy and shame are eradicated.

'And if a woman desires to repeat the experience of motherhood, why should it be wrong when she selects another to be the father of her child, instead of the one who has once performed this office for her? Why should the act be less pure when she bestows a second love, when the object of this second love is just as true, just as noble, just as pure-minded as was the first one? Why should an act be considered a crime with one partner which had been fully justified with another'. [14]

In the 1890s such ideas were startling indeed and the subject of controversy not only in society at large but within free love and anarchist circles. This iconoclastic minority of the 1890s , however, were prescient of ideas about sexual self-expression which gained ground in the mainstream by the 1920s when a new generation of 'modern women' claimed the right to love as they pleased, upsetting, among others , Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the best known woman utopian writer from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Gilman herself had defied convention by breaking away from an unhappy marriage, leaving her daughter with the father, living an independent life as a woman of letters, marrying again later in life. Influenced by the Nationalist movement which grew up after Bellamy's 'Looking Backward' appeared and co-existing with the burgeoning suffrage movement, Progressive reform, settlements and the rise of socialism, Gilman's utopian thought straddles the categories. She is equally interested in changing gender relations and changing society and regards the two as integrally connected. Both her non-fiction and her fiction tackle the domestic sphere and employment and the economy. Gilman's focus on domesticity does not exclude the public world; it leads outwards to it. Rooted in what is, she takes us towards what might be.

Gilman's work has been of particular interest to contemporary feminists because, despite its shortcomings on race, class and ethnicity, it makes interconnections between aspects of women's experience which have usually been looked at in isolation and envisages transformation at several levels of social existence, including the contested realms defined as natural and personal. [15] Gilman takes the familiar intimacy of mothering and draws from it a critical social potential. Unlike the strand of social motherhood thinkers who exerted considerable influence in the US and to a lesser extent in Britain before and during World War One, Gilman is not idealising motherhood as it is but as it might be. Hers is a gendered utopia immanent in the present.

In 'The Home:its Work and Influence' (1903) Gilman states,'Our houses are thread like beads on a string'.[16] What seems to be private is actually social, each home is interconnected through access to water and light.

Women's confinement in the home is not simply an individual matter of complaint, it deprives society of the resources 'necessary for human development'. [17]

Utopian fiction enabled Gilman to explore the reorganisation of domestic life, work and mothering and to contest both private and co-operative housekeeping. She deplored the latter as a waste of professional women's time. Diantha in 'What Diantha Did' (1910) goes into business providing efficient, professional services for the home.

'The separate home may be served by a common water company, by a common milkman, by a common baker, by a common cooking and a common cleaning establishment. We are rapidly approaching an improved system of living in which the private home will no more want a cookshop on the premises than a blacksmith's shop or soap-factory. The necessary work of the kitchenless home will be done by the hour, with skilled labor, and we shall order our food cooked instead of raw.'[18]

Gilman's proposals conflicted with a contrasting utopia of a socialist housewifery and motherhood which would flourish if capitalism was removed. However they resonated with another wing in the socialist movement which, following August Bebel, imagined that the home would continue to be divested of domestic labour, though, unlike Gilman they saw these as being socialised rather than private services. It must be said that Diantha, Gilman and the socialists would have all been appalled by the triumph of low paid private services. According to Gilman, 'Domestic service' was meant to turn into a 'respectable, well paid profession'. Utopia here underestimated the ingenuity of the market.

In 'Herland' (1915) Gilman also imagines a transformation in mothering. Serialised in her magazine,'The Forerunner', it uses the well-tried device of the community of women discovered by three men, a rich sexist explorer, a poet and botanist, the prototypical new man, and a sociologist, who tries simply to document and understand. He is the narrative voice in 'Herland' and records a society which has discovered (technology again) how to reproduce without sperm and is completely geared around mothering. Reproduction has become a social activity.

'We are used to seeing what we call a "mother" completely wrapped up in her own pink bundle of fascinating babyhood, and taking but the faintest theoretic interest in anybody else's bundle, to say nothing of the common needs of all the bundles. But these women were working together at the grandest of tasks – they were Making People – and they made them well'. [19]

Gilman's utopianism is not simply about new social arrangements but about the birth of new social values and habits. She was influenced by Edward Carpenter the British socialist who stressed consciousness and desire as a key element in change; she also admired the American sociologist Lester Frank Ward who rejected Darwin's emphasis on the external factors in evolution. However Gilman's originality was to take off from the home and domestic experience into a redefined vision of social and economic change.

She exerted a profound influence on women reformers, suffragists, socialists and labour women in the US [20] and in Britain too she had an influence in the early twentieth century on women socialists and labour movement women. Among Gilman's admirers was a former factory worker from the Northern English town of Crewe, called Ada Nield Chew.[21] Chew, a socialist, a trade union and suffrage organiser, wrote on work, motherhood, child care and the vote in articles and stories rooted in everyday immediacy. From the 1890s, a convergence of trade unionism, socialism, suffrage and labour women's organisations was to bring thousands of working class women like Chew into labour politics in Britain. They seemed so level headed, campaigning for the vote as a means of securing better pay and social provision and pestering their local coops and municipal councils to provide housing, laundries, bakeries, wash houses. The gendered sense of class consciousness they expressed was influenced by a socialist politics in which utopia was indeed immanent in the present.[22]

This political current was battered, but not destroyed by World War One. When the American socialist Mary Heaton Vorse crossed the Atlantic just after the war she found a ferment of hope among British labour women. Homemakers, factory women, working women she says were talking of far flung issues, for, during the war 'New social forms had grown up . New kinds of service had been evolved.'[23] A few years later in 1923, the American socialist feminist, Crystal Eastman , at a large labour women's conference in Britain noted, 'a women's emphasis – an emphasis on the supreme importance of human well-being, especially the well-being of children.'[24] Vorse and Eastman were too optimistic in seeing this as the basis for a new politics, but like Marcuse they spotted in existing political practice a resource for imagining.

And a utopianism did lurk in this politics of the everyday. It is there in the visual symbolism of the Women's Cooperative Guild, a mass movement between the wars. The woman in an apron stands looking out towards the distant hills crossed by a rainbow. Like Gilman, she is searching for an alternative way of imagining what might be. Being a practical person she is intensely interested too in how she is going to get from where she stands to those hills far away.

The fictional utopias and utopian movements of the past provide clues rather than answers to an ongoing quest which reappears in radical social movements. Utopia is there in what we know, but it is also dangles provocatively over the edge of what we do not know – the wild wish again. Each new wave of chancers wonder how they can get from where they are to that rainbow. Now you see it; now you don't.

Notes

[1] William Hazlitt, 'Political Essays with Sketches of Public Characters', 1819 in Harold Silver, 'The Concept of Popular Education: A Study of Ideas and Social Movements in the Early Nineteenth Century', Macgibbon and Kee, London, 1965, p.240.

[2] John Maynard Keynes quoted in Robert Skidelsky, 'John Maynard Keynes 1883-1946: Economist, Philosopher, Statesman'. Macmillan, London, 2003, p.97.

[3] E.P. Thompson, Postscript:1976, in E.P. Thompson, ' William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary', Merlin Press, London, 1977, p.792.

[4] Terry Eagleton,' Reach-Me-Down Romantic' London Review of Books, 19 June, 2003.

[5] Christine de Pisan, quoted in Joan Kelly, 'Women, History and Theory', University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p.71.

[6] Mary Wollstonecraft, quoted in Barbara Taylor, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

[7] Elizabeth Mavor, 'The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship', Penguin, London, 2001, p.p 84 -85, p.44.

[8] Carol Farley Kessler,'Daring to Dream;Utopian Stories by United States Women 1836-1919', Pandora Press, Boston, pp.239-249.

[9] Mary E. Bradley Lane, 'Mizora: A World of Women', University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1999, (Originally published as 'Mizora:A Prophecy' New York,1890) p.44.

[10] Ibid.p.46.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Elmina D. Slenker,'Lucifer: The Light Bearer', April 14, 1897. I am grateful to the Emma Goldman Papers Project, University of California, for drawing my attention to this material.

[13] Rosa Graul, 'Hilda's Home' (1897) in Kessler, 'Daring to Dream', p.203.

[14] Ibid.

[15] See Mary A. Hill,'Charlotte Perkins Gilman:The Making of a Radical Feminist 1860-1896,' Temple University Press, Philadelphia,1980; Polly Wynn Allen, 'Building Domestic Liberty Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism,' University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988; Dolores Hayden,' The Grand Domestic Revolution', MIT, Cambridge, Mass. 1981; Ann J. Lane, Introduction to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Herland', Pantheon Books, New York, 1979; Ann J. Lane, 'The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman', Pantheon, New York, 1990.

[16] Charlotte Perkins Gilman,'The Home: Its Work and Influence' (1903) Reprinted University of Illinois, Urbana, 1972, p.330.

[17] Ibid.p.261.

[18] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'What Diantha Did' (1910),in ed. Carol Farley Kessler, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia with Selected Writings', Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 1995, p.143.

[19] Gilman, 'Herland', p.69.

[20] See Hayden, 'The Grand Domestic Revolution', p.183 and Maurine Weiner Greenwald, 'Working Class Feminism and the Family Wage Ideal: The Seattle Debate on Married Women's Right to Work 1914-1920', Journal of American History , (1) June 1989, pp130-135.

[21] Ed. Doris Nield Chew, 'Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman', Virago, London, 1982, p.42.

[22] See Alistair Thomson,' Domestic Drudgery will be a Thing of the Past': Co-operative Women and the Reform of Housework' in ed. Stephen Yeo,'New Views of Co-operation', Routledge, London, 1988; Gillian Scott, 'Basket Power and market forces: The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883-1920 in eds. Barbara Einhorn and Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Women and Market Societies: Crisis and Opportunity', Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1995.

[23] Mary Heaton Vorse, 'A Footnote to Folly: Reminiscenses' (1935) Reprinted Arno Press, New York, 1980, pp 169-170.

[24] Ed. Blanche Wiesen Cook, 'Crystal Eastman : On Women and Revolution', Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978,p. 139.