

The Mirage of Utopia (Or Being Free to Be Ourselves)



by Theodore Dalrymple

Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad—or fools. The most dangerous and destructive kind of foolishness is that of intelligent and educated people. There is nothing so absurd, said Cicero, but that some philosopher has not said it: And worse still, there is no philosophy so absurd that it has not found followers among the upper echelons of society who want to impose it on everyone else.

The desire for change and novelty at any price is part of human psychology. The truth limps and bores; fantasy runs and leaps and fascinates. People desire sensation for its own sake. Moreover, the prospect of a perfect society without unhappiness scintillates like a mirage in the desert: It's never reached, but people believe that it's there nonetheless.

Returning recently to Paris, picking up the left-wing

newspaper *Libération* (the idiocy of such publications acts as a tonic to a brain fatigued by a long journey), I alighted on an article with the following sentence in large red lettering:

“In a post-gender world, we will no longer be constrained to conform our bodies, our thought, to gendered roles, we shall be free to be ourselves.”

This is an old and not very clever thought, akin to what Marx wrote in a famous passage in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”

This manages to combine cliché and the suggestion of something clearly false, namely that true freedom means freedom from circumstances.

No such state can or does exist. Of course, men are born into particular circumstances that are not of their choosing: It's inscribed in the nature of things that this must be so. I didn't choose English as my native language, among a thousand other circumstances that I didn't choose. But the fact that I was born to speak English didn't determine what I was to say in it. Freedom isn't freedom from circumstances.

Marx goes further: “The tradition of all the dead generations,” he says, “weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”

Well, it's certainly true that the past can exert a baleful effect on the present, no one could deny it. But can it be true that all we inherit from the past is the weight of nightmares on our brains? This is a view of history that is favored by those who seek absolute power, claiming to save humanity from its total misery.

Only a few seconds of reflection should be sufficient to show that this view of history is absurd. Everything we do, everything we enjoy, is the fruit of the past efforts of humanity. There's no need to labor the point: We didn't invent the alphabet, the wheel, the electric light, even the boiling of an egg, for ourselves. If we were born into a place with no human history whatsoever, we should not survive long enough even to be miserable.

The phrase in the newspaper, "free to be ourselves," is also significant. It takes us back to the 1960s, and the psychological doctrine of the "real me."

The real me is quite independent of what one might call the apparent me. The apparent me is the me that other people observe: what I say, what I do, how I behave, etc. This is the very superficial me, not the real me, which is an indestructible essence with no physical manifestations, but which is nevertheless known, a priori, to exist.

The real me, of course, is a beautiful, perfect personage or being. In conversations with criminals who have done the most terrible things, I discovered that there often persisted in their minds the idea that their deeds had nothing to do with the real them, and thus they were able to think well of themselves because the real them wouldn't have acted as their merely apparent them had acted. Why did everyone, then, keep going on about what they had done, failing to appreciate at its true value the beautiful, real being within?

In a world desired by the writer of the article I have quoted, a radical feminist, in which people lived in no circumstances that they themselves didn't choose (for example, their sex), and in which they were free to be themselves, that is to say, in which only the beautiful real them acted, a perfect world would result, because people who were only their real selves couldn't come into conflict or behave badly, seek power, be cruel, dishonest, lazy, exploitative, envious, disloyal,

selfish, greedy, backbiting, violent, and so forth—all vices that belong to the apparent me and not to the real me.

Again, I'm reminded of the 1960s' concept of relations between the sexes. Starting from the premise that unhappy marriages are hell, which is certainly true as much European and American literature attests, the convenient conclusion was reached that only the state of the emotions of the present moment should determine whether people should part or stay together. This was an extremely crude view of how human emotions work, because among other things they are influenced by social circumstances: For example, it's easier to control your temper if there are severe consequences for not doing so, and if you control your temper as a matter of habit you don't even feel it any longer.

Be that as it may, a world in which human relations were freed of all considerations other than the feelings of the moment—duty, social approbation and disapprobation, long-term consequences for others, especially children, contract, economic outcome, and so forth—has turned out, for those who live in such a world, not to be so very happy, but on the contrary, one in which emotions such as jealousy and acts of violence flourish, possibly as never before. The underlying error was to suppose that human relations could be perfected if purged of everything that prevented people from “being free to be ourselves,” as the newspaper put it.

There's no sense here of the tragic, of the radical imperfectability of our existence. It isn't all history that weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living, but the search for utopia.

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