
WHEELWRIGHT LECTURE 2016

**UTOPIA AND THE CRITIQUE OF
POLITICAL ECONOMY**

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These remarks concern the nature and role of utopia in the aftermath of the global financial crash of 2007-08, at a time when capitalism is being called into question and more and more people are imagining and inventing alternatives—when activists and academics are, as Frank Stillwell put it, ‘pushing for political economy to have a central place in economic discourse’. My focus is on our contemporary situation, in line with the general goal of the Wheelwright lecture series: ‘to promote public discussion in Australia about contemporary political economic issues’. But I want to start my investigation further back in time, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when—in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere around the globe—during the Age of Capital (to borrow Eric Hobsbawm’s apt characterization), a new kind of utopia was being imagined and enacted.

Utopian experiments in Philadelphia and Victoria

In 1845, the Philadelphia Industrial Association established a Fourierist Phalanx on a farm in the northwestern corner of what is now South Bend (the city where I teach), in the U.S. state of Indiana. The Association became an officially recognized society consisting of 50 members, and described as a joint-stock company, on 13 January 1845. Its first official

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act was on 3 April of that year, when William McCartney sold 230 acres of land to the association for \$5,000. The association seems to have had no relationship to the city of Philadelphia but took its name from the same roots of ‘brotherly love’. Already in the second year of its operation, the Philadelphia Industrial Association fell on hard times, apparently as the result of a dispute between the president and other members of the society. Undeterred, the Association then proceeded to purchase another plot of land. But even then, it was not able to survive—and all the land was sold toward the end of 1846, thus ending the short life of the Philadelphia Industrial Association.

We don’t know much more about the Association than that. But we are informed that, more than a decade after its demise, a Workingmen’s Institute was formed in the area, part of a group of 114 public libraries established in Indiana.

I’ll admit I’m interested in the short-lived Philadelphia Industrial Association because I’ve worked in the same area for over 30 years now. Even more, when I teach my Notre Dame students about capitalism and alternatives to capitalism, I enjoy pointing out that, not only has the United States over the course of its history featured hundreds of communist societies, at least one of them (the Shakers) having endured much longer than the Soviet Union—and some of them existed in Indiana, a state where they spend four years and yet is the last place in the world where they expect to find a history of living, breathing, practicing communists.

Around the same time (in 1853), Johann Frederick Krumnow and his Moravian followers—farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, saddlers, masons and other craftspeople—purchased 1600 acres of Crown Land between Penshurst and Hamilton in Western Victoria and proceeded to establish Herrnhut, Australia’s first commune. (The name of the commune is the same as the town in Saxony Germany, where the Moravians established a commune for refugees in the early eighteenth century.)

Apparently, in the wider community, the people at Herrnhut were often referred to as ‘The Peculiar People’ because of their strange beliefs. Not only were members not allowed to seek medical help (medical problems could only be treated with prayer), but—perhaps even stranger at the time—all money and property belonged to the collective.

Various bluestone buildings were constructed over the years (the ruins of which can still be visited). These included a house for Krumnow, a

church, a communal kitchen and dining room, and a dormitory. Other works included a dairy complex, various dams and wells, a mill, quarries, an orchard and vineyard. The commune was intended to be self-sufficient, with all excess produce sold to nonmembers. Over the years, the commune was very successful, although markets for its wool, wheat, and other produce were limited and distant. The communards also put their religious principles to practical purpose to support others—including local Aborigines, women in distress, and homeless or destitute men. People were taken in, housed, and fed but they were required to work and pray together with the communards.

By the 1870s, Herrnhut was increasingly in debt and Krummnow was losing his absolute hold over the commune. The crisis was averted when Herrnhut absorbed the 60 members of another utopian commune established by Maria Heller at Pine Hills in northern Victoria. But Heller eventually defected to the nearby community of Tabor and, by the late 1870s, Herrnhut was in grave financial difficulty. Nine years after the death of Krummnow, the communards agreed to its dissolution. In 1897 the land was subdivided into smaller farms and sold. Even so, Herrnhut remains the longest running commune in Australia's history.

Before we leave this distant history, let me also point out that, a world away, at roughly the same time, a distinct but related movement was beginning to take shape. In February 1844, one of the Young Hegelians published an article in the first and only issue to appear of the *German-French Annals*. It was in the form of a letter to Arnold Ruge. I am referring, of course, to the text we now know as "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing."

In that article, Karl Marx announced that he was not in favor of 'raising a dogmatic banner'—such as the 'actually existing communism as taught by Cabet, Dézamy, Weitling, etc.' So, he declared,

if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to *ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.

What this means is that we have, at roughly the same time, the establishment of utopian communities in both the United States and Australia and Marx's announcement of a project of 'ruthless criticism' in

Germany, before he left for Paris, which is where Marx first embraced communism and developed (beginning in the summer of 1844) his lifelong partnership with Friedrich Engels.

The relationship between Marxism and utopia

Understanding the relationship between Marxism and utopia has tremendous implications. It certainly has had important consequences over the course of the history of Marxism—during the Second International, in the Soviet Union, in the labor movements in the United States and Australia, and so on. And it takes on particular relevance now, in the midst of the so-called recovery from what I have come to call the Second Great Depression, when so much misery has been imposed on workers and their families—through mass unemployment, stagnant wages, obscene levels of inequality, an increase in poverty and precariousness, and even elevated rates of suicide.

The powers-that-be claim that there has been a successful recovery, but consider the conditions and consequences of that so-called recovery in the United States:

- massive unemployment (reaching 10 percent in October 2009, even higher if we include discouraged and underemployed workers);
- attempts to dismantle Social Security (which would cut into the benefits society as a whole owes to retired American workers);
- and a return to the grotesque levels of inequality that preceded the Great Crash (when the share of income captured by the top 1 percent reached over 20 percent).

Similar features are evident here in Australia.

The irony, of course, is that, since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the communist utopia has been declared a failure. Why, we might ask, given the economic and social devastation of the past eight years, during the worst economic crisis since the First Great Depression of the 1930s, are we not willing to openly and publicly declare that it is capitalism that has failed?

Then, of course, there is the task of imagining and creating a radically different set of economic policies and institutions. The problem is that

any such proposal is labeled utopian—naïve and unworkable—and then set aside. Even the relatively modest global wealth tax proposed by Thomas Piketty in his best-selling recent book. Piketty is given credit for documenting the spectacular rise of income inequality from the mid-1970s onward, and then showing how wealth is even more unevenly distributed, which creates the spectre of new inherited wealth dynasties, what he calls ‘patrimonial capitalism’. Yet his proposal for a reasonable and moderate global wealth tax is considered a utopian dream and never seriously considered. That’s how much the level of our discourse—in the discipline of economics and in public debate—has fallen. Even more reason, then, to talk about the utopian dimensions of Marxian theory.

My view, to put my cards on the table, is that *all* economic theories have a utopian element. Not just the Marxian critique of political economy but mainstream, neoclassical economics, too. Let me make my argument even stronger: there simply can’t be a modern economic discourse—a theory of how goods and services are produced, exchanged, distributed, and consumed, of how prices are formed, of how incomes are generated, and so on—without some utopian element.

Consider, for example, that most scientific of economic theories, the one that was born in the 1870s and 1880s and, after many skirmishes, is arguably the hegemonic theory within the discipline of economics today. According to neoclassical economists, in a society based on private property and markets, individual choices can, at least in principle, lead to Pareto efficiency—a situation where no one can be made better off without making someone worse off. That general equilibrium, the perfect balance of limited means and unlimited desires, represents the utopian horizon—in both theory and policy—of neoclassical economics.

Let me make the point even sharper: the possibility of Pareto efficiency serves as the basis of neoclassical theory’s *utopianism*. With devastating consequences. You see, the possibility of that perfect balance serves to justify any and all manner of attempts to create the conditions leading to such a utopia. If there are markets, they need to be free of any and all interventions. (Think, for example, of the labor market, which must be shorn of any regulation, such as a minimum wage.) And if there aren’t markets (for example, for financial derivatives), then they need to be created (and kept unregulated) in order to achieve an efficient allocation of resources.

And we know the results of that particular utopianism. Naomi Klein has collected many of the examples—from Pinochet’s Chile to post-Katrina New Orleans—in her *Shock Doctrine*. And, of course, we’re still living through the devastation of the crash of September 2008. In all those cases, and many more, neoclassical economists and the powers-that-be outside the discipline of economics have taken as their goal, and sought by whatever means to create the conditions to achieve, the utopia of Pareto efficiency.

Marxism, as I read it, is not based on the kind of utopianism that characterizes neoclassical economics. It does, however, have a utopian moment. So, in what follows, I want to distinguish between, on one hand, *utopianism* (which I associate with neoclassical economics) and, on the other hand, a utopian impulse, dimension, or *moment* (which pertains to Marxism).

The utopian dimension

The relationship between utopia and Marxism is a contested, much-discussed and long-debated, aspect of the Marxian tradition. There are, in my view, two common views concerning that relationship. One is that Marx (and Engels and other leading figures in the history of Marxism) presented a clear vision of an alternative, post-capitalist or communist society. On this score, it is enough to retrieve the elements of that vision from Marx’s writings—akin to the utopias that have been described by countless authors, from Thomas More to Ursula Le Guin—and to chart a path or transition from the capitalist present to the clearly articulated communist future. (There are, of course, different interpretations of what that communism should look like, from state ownership to worker control. But there is general agreement, on this view, that Marx, Engels, and latter-day Marxists were inspired by and provided a detailed plan for a postcapitalist economic and social order.)

The other view is that Marxism represents a scientific, materialist analysis of capitalism—of the world as it is, without any need for a utopian vision. It is enough, from this perspective, to identify and analyze capitalism’s ‘laws of motion’, including the accumulation of mounting contradictions that will ultimately (more or less inevitably) lead to its final crisis. Speculating about utopia can only distort and

divert what is often referred to, borrowing Engels's phrase, as 'scientific socialism'.

My reading of Marx and of the Marxian tradition is, as you might imagine, quite a bit different. In a nutshell, I reject both of those views. The first view—that Marx left a well-specified conception of communism—is questionable because nowhere in his writings is there even an outline, let alone a complete specification, of what an alternative to capitalism might or should look like. It simply isn't there. Not in the early texts (such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*), not in the *Communist Manifesto* or *Capital* (contrary to what my students and others expect when they first encounter them), and not even in the later writings (such as the *Critique of the Gotha Program*).

All readers encounter across the length and breadth of Marx's *oeuvre* are some general, albeit powerful, allusions and phrases: 'abolition of private property'; a society that permits one 'to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner'; 'production by freely associated men'; 'direct social appropriation'; and, of course, most famously 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!'

The only conclusion one can reasonably draw is that Marx (and Engels and others) left us some general, suggestive concepts and formulations (some of them earnest, others ironic and even sarcastic) but certainly no detailed or worked-out conception of the economic and social institutions that might serve as the basis of a communist society.

By the same token, we also have to recognize that *all* of Marx's major texts include such evocative phrases. That is, as against the second vision of a purely scientific, analytical Marxism, there *is* a utopian element in Marx's writings—a persistent idea that economic and social life can be different from (and certainly better than) what it is. That's true across the range of texts—from the more philosophical (such as the *1844 Manuscripts*) to the economic (such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*), from the political (such as the *Manifesto*) to current events (such as the *Civil War in France*). In every single one of those texts one finds evidence that Marx was not only analyzing what is, but also suggesting what can and should be—informed by and pointing in a utopian direction.

So, my answer to the question, of whether Marxism has a utopian dimension, is: both no and yes. That's why I want to maintain the distinction between utopianism and utopian moment. Marxism, as I see

it, is *not* a utopianism—with a clear vision or blueprint of the kind of society that should be created—but it *does* have a utopian moment—a sense that existing forms of capitalism can be and should be criticized and that measures should be taken to move in a radically different direction, which is often referred to as communism.

Utopian socialism

What about Marx and Engels's actual writings about utopian socialism, such as the ideas that inspired the Philadelphia Industrial Association—and, in Australia, both a vibrant utopian literature, beginning with Catherine Helen Spence's *A Week in the Future*, and utopian communities, such as the Alice River Cooperative Settlement—in the mid- to late-nineteenth century?

As it turns out, this was my biggest surprise in preparing this lecture. I'll confess that I've long held the view that 'utopian socialism' merely served as a foil for Marx and Engels, and that throughout their writings, especially in such texts as the *Manifesto* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, they mostly disparaged and set themselves apart from anything related to the utopian socialists. Well, I couldn't have been more wrong. What I discovered, instead, was as an appreciative, almost embarrassingly fulsome, commentary on the work of the utopian socialists, such as Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen.

We should remember (or, as in my case, learn for the first time) that Engels, of scientific socialism renown, wrote a series of articles on the development of radical social movements on the continent, between 1842 and 1844 in, of all places, Owen's periodical *The New Moral World*. They include this paragraph on Fourier:

Nearly at the same time with Saint-Simon, another man directed the activity of his mighty intellect to the social state of mankind — *Fourier*...It was Fourier, who, for the first time, established the great axiom of social philosophy, that every individual having an inclination or predilection for some particular kind of work, the sum of all these inclinations of all individuals must be, upon the whole, an adequate power for providing for the wants of all. From this principle, it follows, that if every individual is left to his own inclination, to do and to leave what he pleases, the wants of all will be provided for, without the forcible means used by the present system of society.

That's certainly a more positive set of comments than we might expect, even if they're followed by a clear criticism—that Fourier's project was not utopian enough!

There is one inconsistency, however, in Fourierism, and a very important one too, and that is, his non-abolition of private property. In his *Phalanstères* or associative establishments, there are rich and poor, capitalists and working men... Thus, after all the beautiful theories of association and free labour; after a good deal of indignant declamation against commerce, selfishness, and competition, we have in practice the old competitive system upon an improved plan, a poor-law bastille on more liberal principles!

Are these just the overly enthusiastic but ultimately misguided thoughts of a young Engels—before he entered into his collaboration with Marx? Let us consider a somewhat later text, which is often taken to represent a ruthless criticism of utopian socialism: the *Communist Manifesto*. There, of course, we find the familiar attacks on both 'reactionary' and 'conservative, or bourgeois' socialism (including, 'economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organisers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, hole-and-corner reformers of every imaginable kind'). However, the outlook of 'critical-utopian socialism' presented by Marx and Engels is quite different:

these Socialist and Communist publications contain...a critical element. They attack every principle of existing society. Hence, they are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class. The practical measures proposed in them — such as the abolition of the distinction between town and country, of the family, of the carrying on of industries for the account of private individuals, and of the wage system, the proclamation of social harmony, the conversion of the function of the state into a more superintendence of production — all these proposals point solely to the disappearance of class antagonisms which were, at that time, only just cropping up, and which, in these publications, are recognised in their earliest indistinct and undefined forms only.

To be fair, the same section includes the familiar references to 'castles in the air' and what Marx and Engels interpreted as the utopian socialists' opposition to 'all political action on the part of the working class'.

We should also take into account a much later text, the three chapters of Engels's 1878 *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, which were published two years later as the famous pamphlet, 'Socialism: Utopian

and Scientific'. There, Engels explains the appearance of utopian socialism in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries by the disappointment with the social and political institutions created by the 'triumph of reason' of the French Revolution:

All that was wanting was the men to formulate this disappointment, and they came with the turn of the century. In 1802, Saint-Simon's Geneva letters appeared; in 1808 appeared Fourier's first work, although the groundwork of his theory dated from 1799; on January 1, 1800, Robert Owen undertook the direction of New Lanark.

What follows is what can only be considered effusive praise for the ideals and ideas of Saint-Simon, Fourier and especially, as in the following paragraphs, Owen:

At this juncture, there came forward as a reformer a manufacturer 29-years-old – a man of almost sublime, childlike simplicity of character, and at the same time one of the few born leaders of men. Robert Owen...In the industrial revolution most of his class saw only chaos and confusion, and the opportunity of fishing in these troubled waters and making large fortunes quickly. He saw in it the opportunity of putting into practice his favorite theory, and so of bringing order out of chaos. . .Whilst his competitors worked their people 13 or 14 hours a day, in New Lanark the working-day was only 10 and a half hours. When a crisis in cotton stopped work for four months, his workers received their full wages all the time...

In spite of all this, Owen was not content. The existence which he secured for his workers was, in his eyes, still far from being worthy of human beings...

His advance in the direction of Communism was the turning-point in Owen's life. As long as he was simply a philanthropist, he was rewarded with nothing but wealth, applause, honor, and glory. He was the most popular man in Europe...But when he came out with his Communist theories that was quite another thing. Three great obstacles seemed to him especially to block the path to social reform: private property, religion, the present form of marriage.

He knew what confronted him if he attacked these – outlawry, excommunication from official society, the loss of his whole social position. But nothing of this prevented him from attacking them without fear of consequences, and what he had foreseen happened...Every social movement, every real advance in England on behalf of the workers links itself on to the name of Robert Owen.

Clearly, Engels admired both Owen and his utopian socialist proposals and projects.

But we do know that Marx and Engels did in fact reject “utopian socialism” for their own time, in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the formation and development of the First International. On what basis? As I see it, their rejection of utopian socialism (and their defense of so-called scientific socialism) rested on two main pillars: the role of the working-class and the project of critique.

There’s no doubt that Marx and Engels envisioned the movement beyond capitalism not in terms of realizing some ideal scheme, no matter how well inspired and worked-out, but as the task of the growing industrial working-class. In other words, the idea was that capitalism produces its own grave-diggers. The growth of capitalism—the widening and deepening of capital, in Britain and around the world—was accompanied by the growth of a class that had both the interest and the means to overturn the rule of capital. A class that could challenge the pretensions of capital to become a universal class, by posing its own universal aspirations—not for everyone to become a laborer but to abolish the wages system itself and lay the basis for a different, non-capitalist way of organizing economic and social life.

Theoretically, Marx and Engels proceeded by making familiar things appear strange and pointing in the direction of an alternative. And their manner of accomplishing that is what I consider to be the second pillar of their rejection of ‘utopian socialism’ for their time: *the method of critique*. This method, which is first announced by Marx in the letter to Ruge, continues throughout their work.

My view is that notion of critique—a ‘ruthless criticism of everything existing’—not ‘the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time’, is the utopian moment of Marxian theory. To put it differently, in terms of the literary tradition so thoroughly explored by Fredric Jameson, the Marxian approach to critique is aligned with the first, but not the second, part of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (which celebrates its 500th anniversary this year). What I’m referring to is the critique but not the details of an alternative. It is utopian because, as in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, it involves not only interpreting, but changing the world.

It’s that project of ruthless criticism that is so lacking today, in the disappointing—uneven and unequalizing—recovery from the Second Great Depression.

The critique of political economy

The critique of political economy, we sometimes forget, is the subtitle of *Capital*. Furthermore, it's a two-fold critique: a critique of both mainstream economic theory and of capitalism, the economic and social system celebrated by mainstream economists. In Marx's day, it was thus a critique of classical political economy (the theory developed by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and others). In our own times, it's a critique of neoclassical and Keynesian economics, which define the limits of the discussion within contemporary mainstream economics. In both cases, Marx's method is not to start with some abstract principles of dialectical or historical materialism and then to develop his own particular—Marxist—analysis of capitalism (which of course leads to the kind of Talmudic disputations that Dick Bryan and I both abjure). Instead, Marx starts from contemporary social reality and existing economic theory—in particular, where the classical left off, with the wealth of nations, an 'immense collection of commodities'—in order to make familiar things strange, to denaturalize or defamiliarize them, in order to point in a different direction. It is to understand the critique of political economy as necessarily overcoming, in Adam Morton's words, 'the essential separation of philosophy, economics, and politics'. That utopian critique of political economy can be boiled down to three key elements:

First, it's a critique of humanism, that is the idea that capitalism corresponds to a given (transcultural and transhistorical) human nature. The best example, from *Capital*, is the section on commodity fetishism, where Marx makes two key arguments: against the classical political economists, that there's nothing natural about *homo economicus*, and against Feuerbach, that commodity fetishism is somehow a distorted or false consciousness of commodity exchange. The utopian moment stems, therefore, from the idea that there have been and can be many different economic subjectivities (including within a commodity-exchanging society) and that, in order to move beyond commodity consciousness—commodity fetishism—it is necessary to eliminate commodity exchange as the regulating principle of society. What we often refer to as neoliberalism, which is a powerful but partial and incomplete project for remaking society.

Second, it's a critique of the presumed stability of capitalism—the idea, enshrined in mainstream economics, that we refer to as Say's Law. You may be more familiar with it as 'supply creates its own demand'. The

presumption is that capitalist markets achieve a stable, general equilibrium of full employment. Marx's argument, long before John Maynard Keynes wrote his *General Theory*, is that the only world in which Say's Law holds is non-monetary or barter exchange. Once money is introduced, all bets are off. There is no guarantee, in monetary or generalized commodity exchange, that purchases will equal sales, which creates the possibility (although not the necessity, much less the predictability) of a crisis. And, notice, we're not even talking about capitalism here—just the existence of commodity exchange.

But the third element certainly does refer to a specifically capitalist economy: it's the Marxian critique of exploitation. I'm referring, of course, to surplus-value—which Marx famously explains in terms of capital that 'vampire-like...only lives by sucking living labor' and Engels, later, as what the utopian socialists—notwithstanding their denunciation of the 'exploitations of the working-class'—could not clearly show, either in terms of what it consisted or how it arose.

We should remember that all three pillars of the critique of political economy—the critique of commodity fetishism, capitalist stability, and exploitation—assume 'perfect' conditions, that is, the strongest possible case for mainstream economics. In other words, Marx started by presuming 'freedom, equality, property, and Bentham'—what we refer to today as free markets, perfect information, well-defined property rights, and so on. And still he ended up with commodity fetishism, market instability, and capitalist exploitation. In this sense, the Marxian critique reveals what mainstream economists and other supporters of capitalism try ever so hard, then as now, *not* to say.

That's why the critique of political economy—the ruthless criticism of mainstream economic theory and of capitalism—points in a different direction, opening a space for actually moving toward the kinds of practices and institutions first imagined by the utopian socialists.

The current situation

What then of utopia and the critique of political economy today? While it is useful to recall the alternative economic and social arrangements painstakingly devised by the utopian socialists and the scattered remarks Marx and Engels made about communism in their writing, what is more important for *our times* is the utopian dimension of the critique of

political economy. That is, our task is to intervene in contemporary debates from the standpoint of a ruthless criticism. We, too, need to engage in a practice of ‘self-clarification...by the present time of its struggles and desires’ in order to participate in the process of ‘awakening it out of its dream about itself’. Each time society faces the question of how to solve the economic and social problems it creates, the goal of the critique of political economy is to pose reasonable demands, which serve to demonstrate just how unreasonable the current common sense is.

I’ll provide a few quick examples of what I mean by returning to the problems I introduced at the beginning.

First, the massive unemployment endured in recent years. This is an enormous waste of human potential, now and for the future. But we also need to see the industrial reserve army as another way in which labor as a whole—whether unemployed, underemployed or fully employed—is disciplined and punished so that it continues to be forced to have the ‘freedom’ to sell its ability to work to a tiny group of employers. And the alternative? Have the government capture and use a portion of the enormous surplus available in society to directly hire unemployed workers or, alternatively, create the conditions for workers themselves to join together—in cooperatives, worked-owned enterprises, and the like—to provide jobs for themselves and for their fellow workers.

A second example is Social Security. The average household in the United States has managed to accumulate very little in the way of retirement savings (roughly US\$25,000 on average). There simply isn’t enough left over after paying their bills and helping their children get a start in life. That’s why Social Security is so important for them. So, we have a system according to which the generations currently working support the generations that have retired. The schemes to cut future benefits (by lowering the amount paid out or raising the retirement age), or to privatize the entire system, threaten to sever that community relation in favor of reduced benefits and individual investment accounts. We should be *expanding* benefits—by increasing payments and lowering the retirement age—and all we need to do is raise the earnings limit or increase the percentage corporations pay to make the Social Security system financially solvent forever.

My third example is economic inequality. There is much talk these days about inequality—a discussion that has been galvanized by Piketty’s data and book. The problem, as I see it, is the debate remains confined within

narrow limits: between unequal outcomes that are harmless and in the end justified (the view held by Harvard's Gregory Mankiw) and inequalities that are supposedly invisible and whose major consequence is not economic but political (for the most part, Paul Krugman's outlook). In the end, it's a debate about unequal receipts (of income) and unequal ownership (of wealth)—not about the way the surplus is created, appropriated, and distributed. That, from the perspective of the Marxian critique of political economy, is the root of the problem.

The utopian moment of that critique is to risk an alternative solution—as in 1845 in northwest Indiana, in the collective life of the Philadelphia Industrial Association, or in 1853 in Herrnhut in Western Victoria. Bill Metcalf, the preeminent scholar of utopian experiments in this part of the world, decries the 'deafening silence about Australian Utopianism', including on the Left, arguing that: 'All the so called "labour (and Labor) histories", in which one would perhaps expect to read of these Utopian experiments, provide details *ad nauseam* of the shearers' strikes, the tramways strike et cetera, but rarely a word about that *other* labour response—Utopian communalism'.

As I see it, we need to recover that history of 'real utopias'. And we need today to imagine a different way for the working-class to demand solutions to the problems of unemployment, Social Security, inequality, and much else—without a predetermined path or ideal scheme. We need a way of opening up other possibilities by challenging and disrupting the existing unreasonable reason. Right now, in the midst of the failed recovery from the Second Great Depression, we need that utopian critique more than ever.

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