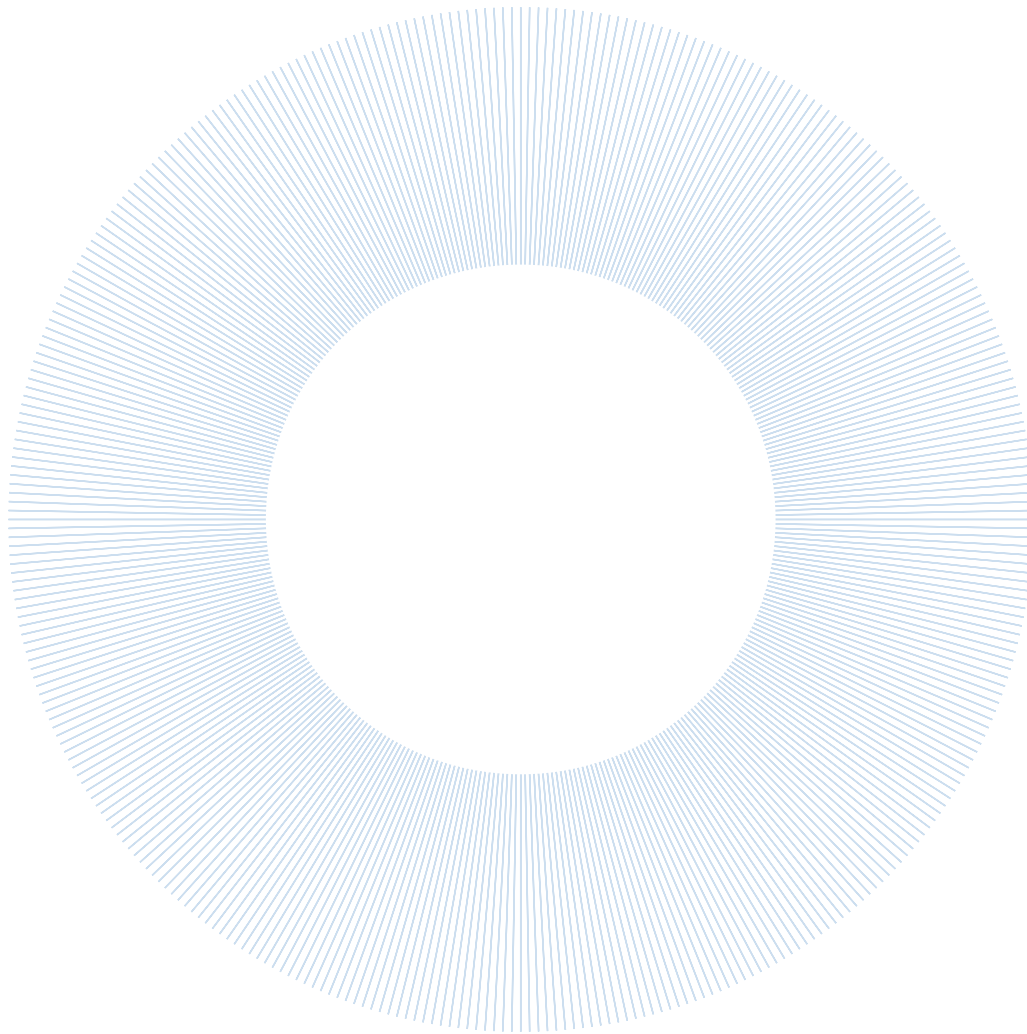


The Future of Utopia?



Russell Jacoby

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THE FUTURE OF UTOPIA?

While academic interest in Utopia persists, perhaps flourishes, the rest of society has decisively turned its back. It is not fortuitous that the neologism 'dystopia,' – and it is dystopian ideas that dominate popular literature and imagination – emerged in the twentieth century. The intellectual foundations for an attack on utopianism came from the work of a coterie of largely Jewish, central European refugee thinkers such as Karl Popper, Jacob L. Talmon and Hannah Arendt. Although they fled Nazism, which was hardly utopian, they presented a convincing argument that utopianism fed totalitarianism. This has become the conventional and scholarly wisdom. To be sure, the contemporary dystopian mindset has other sources than the arguments of Popper and Arendt. Confidence about the future – a precondition for utopian imagination – has dwindled. Perhaps imagination itself can no longer entertain a different future. Imagination itself might have its own history; it is subject to social and economic forces. To the degree that childhood sustains imagination, as childhood changes so might imagination. And childhood has changed. The physical places and spaces that once formed the bedrock of childhood have disappeared. The unstructured open play areas and time have been replaced by organized games and video consoles. With the decline of spontaneous play, imagination too may decline and with it the possibility of utopian thinking.



Does Utopia or the effort to imagine a future marked by leisure, peace and abundance have a future? If academic books and conferences are the measure, the future of Utopia is ensured. Studies and anthologies on Utopia regularly appear. For instance, MIT Press published in 2009 a book titled *Utopia*, edited by Richard Noble, the chair of the Department of Art, Goldsmiths College, University of London. His introduction opened with a quote from Ernst Bloch, and continued 'Utopia is a powerful trope in western culture' (Noble, 2009, p. 12). Academic conferences on Utopia prosper. In 2009 the Utopian Studies Society held its tenth conference with scores of panels and papers – with titles such as 'SimCity and the attainment of Utopia in virtual reality,' 'The lesbian utopian vision of Katharine Burdekin's fiction' and "To kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of a mere being:" toward a hermeneutics of utopianism: Ernst Cassirer, Northrop Frye, Paul Ricoeur and aspects of myth, metaphor, and das unheimlich in the utopian consciousness.¹ Other evidence also can be mustered that suggests utopian thought flourishes, such as the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin or the continued success of books such as Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*.

To characterize the zeitgeist, of course, is not an exact science. Yet academic conferences and individual books may only measure passing trends, not a long-standing temper. The latter is more defined by a series of events stretching over many decades, notably the appearance of Nazism and Stalinism. To this could be added the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan and a succession of happenings in the 1950s: strikes by workers against East Germany's 'socialist' government, Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin, the Soviet invasion of Hungary to put down its revolution. For a largely leftist intelligentsia in the West these events spelled the end of ideology or Utopia, terms which became interchangeable.

It is hardly fortuitous that the sixteenth century gave us the term Utopia, and the twentieth the word dystopia. 'Utopia,' of course derives from Thomas More, but dystopia was coined by two American academics in a 1952 anthology, *The Quest for Utopia*. They were discussing, and excerpting, a seventeenth-century satire, which they stated anticipates Huxley's *Brave New World*. 'It is a dystopia, if it is permissible to coin a word.' They remarked in their collection that the utopian spirit had vanished. 'Contemporary utopists stand forlornly,' they wrote. '[...] Fear rather than hope is the atmosphere, or [...] at least, a lack of confidence in the progress of the future' (Negley and Patrick, 1952, p. 294).

Many writers tackled the end of Utopia in the 1950s from the collection of ex-communists in *The God that Failed* (Koestler et al., 1949) to Judith N. Shklar in *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith*. Radicalism, she wrote, 'has gone totally out of fashion.' It requires a 'minimum of utopian faith' that people can transform their social environment, but today this spirit is lacking. Socialism 'has not been able to recover the lost spirit of utopian idealism and is neither radical nor hopeful today.' She concluded, 'All that need really be stated is that socialism no longer has anything to say' (Shklar, 1957, pp. 219, 256).

Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology* offered the sharpest formulation. The old nineteenth-century ideologies were 'exhausted,' undermined by the horrors of Soviet communism and the success of liberal capitalism. 'Such calamities as the Moscow Trials, the Nazi-Soviet pact, the concentration camps, the suppression of the Hungarian workers, formed one chain [of events]; such social changes as the modification of capitalism, the rise of the Welfare State, another.' At the end of the fifties, Bell stated, 'the old passions are spent' and 'the old politico-economic radicalism [...] has lost its meaning.' The situation seemed clear: 'The end of ideology closes the book, intellectually speaking, on an era.' In the Western world, therefore, there is a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues: the acceptance of a welfare state; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism (Bell, 1965, pp. 402–3).

Yet the real intellectual muscle for anti-utopian thought came from a cohort of thinkers – Karl Popper, Jacob L. Talmon, Hannah Arendt, Norman Cohn and Isaiah Berlin. Their major works, which include Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952), Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) and some essays of Berlin, made a compelling case of the dangers of utopian thought. Popper began with Plato; Cohn with the Middle Ages; Talmon with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment; Arendt with the French Revolution. Not only do these approaches parallel and complement each other, but the authors shared a great deal. First, they roughly belonged to the generation born before or during World War I: Popper (1902–1994); Arendt (1906–1975); Berlin (1909–1997); Cohn (1915–2007); Talmon (1916–1980). Second, they were all Jewish or of Jewish descent. Third, except for Cohn, they fled or left their countries of origin. Fourth, except for Cohn, they came from the left.

To be sure, these features do not automatically produce anti-utopianism. Yet they determined anti-utopian thought in several ways. The facts of the authors' lives bestowed upon anti-utopianism an indisputable gravitas. The criticism of Utopia seemed as considerable as its considerable exponents. The Hannah Arendts and Isaiah Berlins show up in the Anglo-American universe as emissaries from another world; they were veterans, and sometimes refugees, of wars, upheavals and lethal governments. They tapped experiences unavailable to Americans. They spoke English with old world accents.

The experiences of war and flight saturated their writings. They spoke for a generation that had witnessed everything. 'We no longer hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions,' wrote Arendt in the opening to *Origins of Totalitarianism*. 'Two world wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor' means that the 'essential structure of all civilizations is at the breaking point' (Arendt, 1958, p. vii). Their analyses borrowed an aura of profundity from their lives. These sages knew of what they wrote, what Arendt called 'the truly radical nature of Evil.'

By dint of their youth and political inclinations the anti-utopian refugees had been attracted to communism before confronting Nazism. The Russian Revolution, the European revolutionary upheavals after World War I and Marxism in the 1920s stamped their work. Disenchantment with communism marked their lives, but preceded the full threat of fascism of the 1930s. This meant they sought understanding of what happened to Marxism before turning to fascism; the latter was viewed through the lens of the former. Eventually they saw Marxism and fascism as related phenomena, different versions of totalitarianism. Inasmuch as a utopianism informed Marxism (despite the anti-utopian pronouncements of Marx and Engels), the theory of totalitarianism, which they developed, stressed its utopian core. Presented by refugee scholars of great repute and allure, it carried the day. They damned utopianism as the scourge of history.

This trajectory is exemplified by Karl Popper, who was the first and probably the most important figure of this group to elaborate a forceful anti-utopianism. In *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which both date from 1944–45, Popper presented a full-scale criticism of utopian thought that has continued to resonate. He dedicated *The Poverty of Historicism* to the 'memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.' While 'belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny' might seem distant from utopianism, for Popper they defined it.

Popper, who was born in Vienna in 1902, believed Jews were treated reasonably well in pre-war Austria, but anti-Semitism did cause his parents to convert to Lutheranism so that they could 'become assimilated' (Popper, 1976, p. 105). Popper belonged to a network of family and friends dense with gifted artists, musicians and scientists. He was related both to Bruno Walter, the conductor, and Josef Breuer, the doctor who collaborated with Freud.² Intellectually inclined, he gravitated like many of his acquaintances towards politics and psychology. He was 12 when World War I began, 16 when it ended in upheaval and revolution. The Austrian Hungarian Monarchy became, among other things, the Austrian Republic. 'The war years, and their aftermath,' he recalled, 'were in every respect decisive for my intellectual development.' In a 'historical note' to *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper wrote that its thesis 'goes back to the winter of 1919–20.'

For a moment a red revolution flickered and attracted the young Popper, who joined the ranks of the far left. In the Spring of 1919 Popper participated in a demonstration organized by communists to free comrades held in the Vienna central police station. Shooting broke out, and several young workers were killed. 'I was horrified and shocked by the brutality of the police,' Popper recalled, 'but also by myself. For I felt that as a Marxist I bore part of the responsibility for the tragedy – at least in principle.' He questioned whether the 'scientific' Marxist creed promising 'to bring about a better world' was based on real knowledge about society. 'The whole experience [...] produced in me a life-long revulsion of feeling' (Popper, 1976, pp. 13, 33).³

Popper remained emphatically a leftist, however;⁴ and so much in the romantic thrall of the proletariat that for several years he tried turning himself into a manual worker – first a road builder and then a cabinetmaker. He eventually drifted into social work, teaching and philosophy. His ideas on the deficiencies of Marxism continued to develop, but he kept them under wraps for political reasons: he did not want to weaken the Marxists, who formed the backbone of the opposition to fascist authoritarianism. Even before 1933, when the Nazis came to power in Germany, Popper sensed that the days of Austrian democracy were numbered and with it the days of Jews. By the mid 1930s he sought to leave Austria and in 1937 he sailed for New Zealand to accept an offer of lectureship at Canterbury University College – none too soon. With the demise of Austria in 1938, Popper believed he no longer needed to ‘hold back’ his criticism of the socialists. He set out to elaborate his ideas in *The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society and its Enemies*.

The Poverty of Historicism puns on Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy*, itself a spoof of Proudhon’s *The Philosophy of Poverty*. While Popper’s language is frequently idiosyncratic, if not misleading – this was only the second work he wrote in English – his anti-utopian convictions stand out. Popper identifies as overlapping failings historicism, historical prophecy and utopianism. He frequently uses formulations like ‘Utopianism and historicism agree.’ For Popper, historicism posits laws and rhythms of history; it seeks to know the future, and, sometimes, to intervene to control or quicken ‘impending social developments.’ Marxism ‘excellently represents the historicist position,’ a position that spells out the rise and fall of capitalism and calls for the proletariat to speed its demise.

To drive his point home on the dangers of utopianism, Popper argued that non-utopian and ‘historicist’ (and utopian) ideas give rise to two different approaches to social reform. The non-utopian perspective employs what Popper calls ‘piecemeal engineering.’ Factual limitations impress the piecemeal engineer, who like any good scientist focuses on parts, not the whole. He or she believes in ‘small adjustments and re-adjustments’ and proceeds ‘step by step, carefully comparing the results expected with the results achieved.’ The piecemeal reformer ‘tinkers,’ but does not pursue a ‘method of re-designing it [society] as a whole.’ On the other hand, the ‘Utopian engineer’ aims at ‘remodeling the “whole of society” in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint.’ Yet the totality, Popper believes, ‘cannot be made the object of scientific study’ or ‘control or reconstruction.’ This truth eludes the utopians who plan to ‘reconstruct our society “as a whole”’ and thereby succumb to the ‘totalitarian intuition’ (Popper, 1961, pp. 84, 45, 51, 66–7, 78–9).

Popper expanded these ideas in the two volumes of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which is devoted to understanding totalitarianism and the fight against it. He remarked that his book was conceived in March 1938, ‘the day I received the news of the invasion of Austria’ by the Nazis. Yet the book is mainly devoted not to Nazism, but to Marxism and utopianism. Popper observes an elective affinity between democracy and piecemeal engineering, on one side, and totalitarianism and utopian engineering, on the other. The former examines specific institutions and their functions, and asks questions about appropriate means for given ends, such as ‘is this institution well designed and organized to serve’ these goals?

The piecemeal engineer is as committed to social betterment as the utopian, but uses tools that are more practical and less violent. For the engineer, perfection is not attainable. While every generation has a right to happiness, instead of seeking ‘the greatest ultimate good’ the down-to-earth engineer resists the great evils afflicting mankind. For Popper ‘this difference is far from being merely verbal. [...] It is the difference between a reasonable method of improving the lot of man, and a method which [...] may easily lead to an intolerable increase in human suffering.’

Moreover, the existence of specific injustices can be agreed upon, unlike ‘the establishment of some ideal. [...] It is easier to reach a reasonable agreement about existing evils [...] than [...] about an ideal good [...].’

The utopian engineers aim to realize a far-reaching ideal and this leads to a dictatorship. They want to transform society, ‘leaving no stone unturned.’ It is the ‘sweep’ of utopianism – its ‘desire to build a world which is not only a little better and more rational than ours, but which is free from all its ugliness: not a crazy quilt, an old garment badly patched, but an entirely new gown, a really beautiful new world’ – that makes it so dangerous (Popper, 1962, pp. 22–23, 159, 165).

Popper formulated these ideas sharply in a 1947 lecture ‘Utopia and Violence.’ In title and sentiment the talk anticipated Arendt’s ‘Ideology and Terror’ of her (revised) *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Popper called himself a rationalist, but for this Austrian philosopher we can judge an action rationally ‘only relative to some given ends.’ Utopianism, however, comes up with new ends or ‘a more or less clear and detailed description or blueprint of our ideal state.’ We know these ends ‘from the dreams of our poets and prophets.’ They cannot be rationally discussed, but ‘only proclaimed from the housetops.’ Inasmuch as these ends resist proof, the utopian ‘must use violence to bring them about’ (Popper, 1968, pp. 355–63).

The argument of Popper, along with that of Arendt, Berlin and others, carried the day. They convinced the literature public of the dangers of utopian thought. Of course the leftist intelligentsia does not itself have a direct line to the zeitgeist. It is not as if Popper or Berlin are popular or known figures outside the university – and even within the university they are read only in political theory or philosophy classes. But beyond doubt a dystopian spirit marks the popular attitude of the last decades. ‘Blade Runner,’ the 1982 science fiction movie with Harrison Ford, based on the 1968 novel of Philip K. Dick, captures the dominant tone of our era. His novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was set in an almost empty post-nuclear war world in which weather reports indicated the whereabouts of the day’s radioactive fall-out (Dick, 2007). Books and films tumble forth that sketch dark pictures of the future. ‘A visit to a bookstore or multiplex confirms the new strain of morbidity in the air,’ the novelist Benjamin Kunkel has written recently. ‘Every other month seems to bring the publication of at least one new so-called literary novel on dystopian or apocalyptic themes and the release of at least one similarly themed movie displaying some artistic trappings’ (Kunkel, 2008. p. 37).

Why? On one hand the answer is straightforward, and itemizes the disasters of the twentieth century – and highlights their various interpreters. On the other hand, this answer does not go far enough. The younger generations of Western Europe and North America have not directly experienced Nazism or Stalinism. In fact they have grown up in societies of unparalleled prosperity and security. By almost any index – health, education, longevity, consumption – the younger generations have outpaced all earlier generations. They have not been directly or even indirectly affected by concentration camps and Gulags. Yet they view the future with a lack of confidence and imagination.

Paradoxically, utopian thought relies on a certain confidence about the future. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries a belief that the future could be superior inspired utopian thinkers. Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* took place in the year 2000. Thomas More cast his *Utopia* in the form of a report on the New World that opened up future possibilities. Four centuries later the New World has become less a dream than a nightmare. Aldous Huxley titled his dystopia *Brave New World*. This confidence in a new and better world has vanished along with an imagination about it. Thinking about a different future requires a robust imagination.

Imagination probably has its own roots – and its own history. This seems to be an almost untouched topic, the history of imagination. To be more precise, studies of imagination in the history of philosophy, religion or science exist.⁵ These examine the shifting role of imagination in philosophers from Plato to Wittgenstein, for instance, but what has hardly been studied is how imagination has changed as a daily force or presence. Perhaps this could be called the social history of imagination – and differs from the many studies of imagination in children by educational and developmental psychologists spurred by Jean Piaget. The social history seeks to fathom how imagination has changed over time in the lives of people, mainly children, where it finds its roots. To study the social history of the imagination might be to study the animating force behind Utopia and its decline.

Much has been written about the history of children and the ‘invention’ of childhood; and talk about the ‘disappearance’ of childhood, associated with Neil Postman’s 1982 book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, has often been criticized as suffering from nostalgia and romanticism (Postman, 1982). Yet the suggestion that little has changed in the lives of children should be resisted. Already in the 1940s Max Horkheimer wrote, ‘The modern make-up of society sees to it that the utopian dreams of childhood are cut short in earliest youth’ (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 277). It seems possible that something about the envelope of childhood has shifted in the last half century or so – at least in the countries of Western Europe and North America, the wealthy industrialized nations; and these shifts may affect imagination and utopian musings.

In 1957 Robert Paul Smith published a bestseller titled *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing*. The book begins as he turns to a bunch of kids, none of whom ‘seemed to know what to do for the next fifteen minutes.’ ‘I said to them, “How about a game of mumbly-peg?” And can you believe that not one of these little siblings knew spank the baby from Johnny jump the fence?”’ Nor do they play ‘immies.’ Nor stoop ball. When they play baseball it is ‘in something called The Little League and have a covey of overseeing grownups hanging around and bothering them and putting catcher’s masks on them and making it so bloody important’ (Smith, 1957, pp. 12–14.)

Without doubt nostalgia laced Smith’s memoir, yet it may have captured a moment in the history of childhood and imagination. From the 1950s till the present, the onset of vast amounts to advertising and media (television, videos, computers) designed for and consumed by children has changed their lives. In 1955 major toy manufacturers spent a few hundred dollars on advertising to children. Today, the television advertising budget alone directed to children runs into many billions of dollars. American children watch about 40,000 adverts a year. Much evidence suggests that young children are defenseless against them.⁶ In general young people today ‘devote more time to media than to any other single activity with the exception of sleep’ (Roberts and Foehr, 2008, p. 30). Can it be doubted that this has changed the texture and rhythms of childhood?

The full impact of these changes is both obvious and obscure. It can be hazarded that some traditional outside play that required few or no purchases – marbles, jump rope, stick and ball – has declined as children increasingly move indoors to computer and television screens. ‘The principal location of children’s leisure has moved from public spaces (such as the street) to private spaces (the bedroom),’ writes David Buckingham, a professor of education. Playing outside has been ‘steadily displaced by domestic entertainment (particularly via television and computers) and – especially among more affluent classes – by supervised leisure activities such as organized sports, music lessons and so forth’ (Buckingham, 2000, pp. 70–71.)

Can it be doubted that those hours inside and those computer games and advertisements affect children? After all, unlike outside games, these video games are designed by adults for children. They lack a certain spontaneity – to say nothing of the lack of social relations. To be sure, more than the seduction of media drives children indoors. A general paranoia has infected the culture. Parents fear their children will be abducted or abused outside by strangers. Play, if not inside, must be organized and monitored.

A recent memoir of a New York city mother asks, ‘when did play become so much work?’ She recalls when moms would tell their children to go outside – even in NY city – and play in the street. No more. ‘To usher my six- and eight-year-olds into Riverside Park on a sunny Sunday morning requires, let’s just say, more effort. Playmates must be summoned via telephone or text. Drop-off and pick-up times must be coordinated. Parents must be pressed into service as chaperones or chauffeurs or coaches. The games the children finally play under our watchful eyes—soccer or scootering or monkey bars—are safer and more socially acceptable than the games’ of follow the leader in the street. This mom – really a well-known author – notes that unstructured time and place have disappeared for children ‘because they no longer have access to the unmonitored spaces – the blocks, streets, yards, sandlots, fire hydrants, junk heaps, roofs, and sewer grates – where children used to gather, unbidden, for Red Rover or jump rope or hand-ball or other games whose names were not recorded because they were less respectable’ (Shulevitz, 2010).

A number of other researchers have noted, and lamented, the social forces that have stripped outdoor play of its vigor and driven children to prefabricated pastimes. Joe Frost, a long-time observer and advocate of children’s play, summarizes in a new book *A History of Children’s Play and Play Environments*, ‘Cyber-play, paranoid hovering parents, national playground safety standards, the threat of lawsuits, and high stakes testing – have collectively generated a perfect storm, reducing centuries of traditional, free, creative, outdoor play to a mere shadow of its former state [...]’ His book closes:

I live in a neighborhood of several hundred families, close to a beautiful park, natural woodland, and a playground adjacent to a clear stream flowing into a lake, but children do not go there unless accompanied by adults on special occasions [...]. In fact, they do not play outside. When they exit the school bus in mid-afternoon, they go directly into the house [...]. During my twelve-year residence in the community, I have seen as many as three children in the yards or streets only one time (Frost, 2010, pp. 214, 261).

A straight line cannot be drawn, of course, from these shifts in children’s activities to the utopian imagination and its decline. Yet it seems possible that the new configuration of children’s play might affect how these children as young adults envision the future. The question of the decline of Utopia, then, is not simply derived from the obvious political events of the last century; nor is it simply due to the intellectual arguments of those who have presented utopians as responsible for all the past crimes. The weakening of Utopia might also rest on social-psychological grounds that have a historical foundation. Not simply the confidence about the future has weakened. As childhood play has become more organized, commodified and prefabricated, it may have enfeebled the utopian imagination. We face the future with a diminished ability and confidence to imagine alternatives.

Notes

- ¹ For the conference papers, see: <http://web.lettras.up.pt/uss2009/programme.html>
- ² See generally Hacoen, M. H. (2000) *Karl Popper–The Formative Years, 1902–1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- ³ For a close study of Popper’s politics in these years, see the section of the biography ‘Music and Politics: Karl Popper meets Arnold Schönberg and the Eislers and Gives up Communism,’ by his one-time student, William W. Bartley, III, which is part of ‘Karl Popper: A Life’ available at <http://bartleyinstitute.org/shelf/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Rehearsing-a-Revolution.pdf>
- ⁴ See Popper, K. (1971) Die ‘politische’ Biographie. In Marcuse, H. and Popper, K. (Stark, F. (ed.)) *Revolution oder Reform?* Munich: Kösel-Verlag, p. 9.
- ⁵ See for instance, Cocking, J. M. (1991) *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas*. London: Routledge and Egan, K. ‘A Very Short History of Imagination’ at <http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/studying/articles/KE%20-20History%20of%20Imagination.pdf>
- ⁶ See the summary by Strasburger, V. C. (2001) Children and TV advertising: nowhere to run. *Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 22(3) June: 185–7.

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Insights

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