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Should we seek a perfect world?

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The anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall reminds us how destructive utopian philosophies can become. Does this mean we should never strive for utopia?

ICH bin ein Berliner. Earlier this week we were all Berliners once again, as Germans celebrated the 20th anniversary of the wall coming down. That symbol of the Cold War was indeed a concrete reminder of the short distance between utopian promise and dystopian reality.

But there is a second sense in which we might like to boast we are all Berliners. I am referring here to Isaiah Berlin, the Oxford philosopher who explained the perils of embracing utopianism as political ideology.

Like most of us, Berlin understood it is an unalterable part of human nature to believe we should aim for a more perfect society. No reasonable person would argue against seeking a social order free of injustice and bigotry, misery and exploitation, conflict and strife.

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In this form, utopian thought has been around as long as we have been able to dream and philosophise. It is no accident that Plato's foundational text of Western philosophy, The Republic, imagined philosopher-kings and guardians who would guard the constitution of a just city. It is perhaps no accident, too, that Plato's ideal city embodied the totalitarian principle that power should be vested solely in the hands of those who know what is best in life.

It is Berlin's theory of liberty that allows us to appreciate how utopian fantasy can slide into repressive coercion.

There are, Berlin explained, two concepts of liberty: negative and positive. Negative liberty refers to the freedom one has from interference by others.

Positive liberty involves "freedom to": the ability to achieve some willed goals such as autonomy or self-determination.

According to this view, the totalitarian ideologies of communism and fascism had at their heart a positive conception of freedom.

Communists believed in liberating the proletariat so they could be free to realise the laws of history. Fascists believed in ensuring their nations could be free to fulfil their destinies of glorious conquest.

In either case, individual freedom could be subordinated to some grander ideal.

Positive liberty made it possible for states to subject their citizens and others to violence and control. This was the sacrifice required to bring a "true" or "real" collective self into being.

Such confusion must always be regarded as a threat to civilised humanity. History shows us that conducting politics according to some supreme or revealed truth inevitably ends in suffering.

Yet we need not renounce the impulse to strive for a better world. Rather, we should distinguish between utopia in the realm of political ideology and utopia in the realm of hope.

While dangerous as political ideology, utopia has an important place in social criticism.

The abstract notion of a perfect existence, however unrealisable, permits us to step away from our condition and to question whether we can do better.

The lessons of totalitarian horror do not teach us, therefore, to do away with utopias altogether.

There is nothing wrong with imagining new horizons and embracing the aspirations of an age; it is just that we must never allow our ideals to be taken hostage by hubris.

Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address: philosophercolumn@gmail.com

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