

BOOK REVIEW

Utopias of One. Joshua Kotin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. 205.

The concept of a “utopia of one” presents a paradox. If Sartre was right in thinking that “Hell is other people,” it may well be that the only utopia possible can only be composed of one, or perhaps one master/mistress, and servants—for whom it might well be a dystopia. It is in this sense that Daniel Defoe’s fantasy of a one-man empire, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), is sometimes understood as a utopia. But this is an unusual reading of the concept of utopia, which is usually understood as an ideal society, the “best possible commonwealth,” in Thomas More’s phrasing. Utopian societies usually require people engaging on a more equal basis and have often been formulated on republican grounds. They usually demand a greater degree of participation, though not necessarily democracy, and hierarchies based not on property ownership but on age, merit, or some other principle. Yet the problem of definition is magnified by the fact that utopias of many people can also be dystopias for slaves, servants, the conquered, or minorities.

How does Kotin cope with this problem? He does not expend much effort engaging with the secondary literature on utopianism to explore the theoretical difficulties of the central concept. His starting point is Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), which raises all the difficulties indicated above. Kotin is chiefly concerned to trace through eight writers—Thoreau, W. E. B. DuBois, Osip and Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, Anna Akhmatova, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and J. H. Prynne—responses to the “failure of utopias” that assumed the form of a “utopia of one.” These utopias “do not fail. But their success comes at a cost: they cannot serve as models for readers hoping to perfect their own lives or remake their communities,” which Kotin admits amounts to being “no utopia at all” (2). A retreat into solipsism or

Modern Philology, volume 117, number 2. Published online August 22, 2019
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at least a harmonious private life is not of course a novel response to the failure of grand social experiments. But if utopia is an intrinsically social construct, then eliminating other people's contrariness and building one's own isolated fortress, physical or intellectual, does not constitute a utopian enterprise; rather, it represents an assertion of the will, imposing moral and spatial order on an unruly human nature and the natural world besides. Kotin acknowledges that Thoreau's one-man community at Walden "threatens the very idea of utopia" (5), meaning that the idea of a one-person ideal "society" is a contradiction in terms because it is no "society" at all.

The other writers studied here respond to different group failures—Reconstruction, Soviet communism, humanism, global capitalism—with an assertion of independence from the group. Yet with the exception perhaps of Thoreau, such independence is itself illusory: we still require the butcher and baker to satisfy our needs, and we remain dependent in most circumstances. Sovereignty is an illusion, as Kotin points out, and at best we can hope to neutralize our obligations to others by making them as impersonal as possible, namely, by being mediated solely through money and not through personal obligation, and by embracing frugality as a norm, which reduces even monetary dependence. But this equally presumes a disdain for the condition of others, especially those lacking the means of financial independence. This again flies in the face of utopian norms, where mutual interdependence and care for the group are common though not entirely universal. (Some anarchist communities, like Josiah Warren's *Modern Times* on Long Island, tried to square extreme autonomy with communal life, but they are not discussed here.) Sometimes they eventuate in downright egoism, in the utopianism of a Max Stirner or an Ayn Rand, where clearly most lose while a few gain, itself a damning condemnation of the ethos of our own times.

In the end this book is thus a grappling with the intellectual ramifications of collectivist failure rather than a conceptual breakthrough in utopian studies. These retreats are, however, not without interest for students of utopia, for they help illuminate the flaws of the more extreme forms of collectivism, and for some, the profundity of disappointment in utopian projects as such. For the twentieth century, communism on the scale of the nation-state was of course paradigmatic of such reactions, as Arthur Koestler et al.'s *The God That Failed* (1949) revealed so poignantly. Yet a state of utopian disillusionment implies that hope has not been abandoned, but modified and circumscribed. What is not possible for the mass may be for the individual. And the pattern need not be that those who abandon Stalinism or Trotskyism end up as Reaganites or neocons, relinquishing support for the poor for that of the wealthy. These reactions are of course intimately bound up with the history of the Cold War, which often dictated how failure

was to be understood and handled, and the history of the nationalisms of the epoch, which often became the default oppositional position for those who came to reject socialist internationalism and cosmopolitanism. Kotin offers many gripping insights into the psychological tortuousness that such transformations entailed. For those interested in the trajectories that often profound disillusionment took, particularly through the medium of poetry, this is an engaging and provocative study.

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