Utopianism May Be Hazardous to Your Health

Beware those who claim to have a detailed blueprint for the ideal society. If such a person thinks you stand in the way, you may get run over. That's how it is with utopians. They want everything just so, and woe betide those who disagree.

The repeated attempts at creating ideal societies haven't gone so well. To name just a few, see France 1789, Russia 1917, Italy 1922, Germany 1933, Eastern Europe 1945, China 1949, Cambodia 1976, Venezuela 1999.

The problem is that the architects of utopia have little tolerance for those who aren't wholeheartedly with the program. Any departure from the plan is a move away from the ideal. Dissenters must be dealt with.

In *The Road to Serfdom*, which still belongs on everyone's reading list, F. A. Hayek pointed out that a big problem with socialist or fascist central planning — which is another way of saying *utopianism* — is that regular people will assuredly upset the plan just by attending to their own lives — so they cannot be left free to do so.

Hayek also noted that even if everyone agreed in principle that some kind of top-down social plan was desirable, they certainly would not agree on its details. In a world of scarcity, that would be a problem because everyone's preferences couldn't be accommodated. Moreover, Hayek went on, the endless debates over the plan could well give rise to a dictator who promised to stop the idle chatter and act decisively. So much for the promise of democratic planning.

Not everyone aspires to design their whole society. But some want to do something similar on a smaller scale. They seek to shape their local social environment (including their social-media environment) by expecting and insisting that everyone with whom they come into contact affirm their view of themselves and of how the world should be. One way to do this is to demonize and marginalize dissenters. While such micro-planning may seem largely harmless, it could have its risks as it gains momentum. Politics professor Eric Kaufmann, the author of *Whiteshift*, writes that the "principal threat to liberalism today is an *emergent authoritarianism*, not a top-down form of the kind we find in China or Turkey."

Intolerance toward dissenters can manifest itself in demands that we use language in novel and loaded ways favored by an interest group. This is often part of a utopian strategy to change government policy in oppressive ways. These days people can lose their jobs or access to online communities for using words (or having done so years before) in a newly forbidden manner.

But controlling language, which really means language users, is like herding cats.

Language is a decentralized institution under no one's control. The meanings of words can change in their own time, but meanings are not determined by diktat. Most people will continue to speak as they are accustomed to speaking regardless of the activists' strident demands that we not only *say*, to use Orwell's example in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that 2+2=5 but also *believe* it.

Today's equivalents of 2+2=5 include: "The signs of a climate disaster are all around us and beyond debate"; "Sex is changeable or nonbinary or a social construct"; "Straight-white-cis-male supremacy explains all you'll ever need to know about Western civilization and contemporary American society"; and "Those who disagree with [name a group] are deplorable."

People should be free to believe those things if they want to, but they should also be free to disbelieve them and say so without fear of harassment, physical threats, or legal penalties. Those who know that 2+2=4 should inform the utopians that *they* have the burden of proving why anyone should pretend otherwise. "Gaslighting" needs cooperative victims.

A society, like a language, can't really be centrally planned, although the attempt will be lethal. The contrary idea gets encouragement from a misapplication of enlightenment principles. That the hard sciences can furnish the means to control natural forces, i.e., inanimate things, for the betterment of all is no reason for thinking that the social sciences can or should furnish the means to control *social* forces, i.e., people. Hayek called this misguided conviction *scientism*. No one has put the point better than Adam Smith in his other book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> The man of system [i.e., the central planner] … is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess–board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess–board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess–board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it.

The alternative to utopianism, then, is Smith's "system of natural liberty" with its emergent, undesigned, and bottom-up order. Or in other words: individual sovereignty, free association, cooperation, competition, and contract.

So, people, believe what you want and recognize everyone else's right to the same freedom. Replace your divots! Don't be fragile — be antifragile; in order for someone to *give* offense it is necessary that someone else *take* it. Don't be that someone. Don't look for your identity or life's meaning in what you take offense at.

Finally, let's each of us agree *not* to turn to the state to support "my tribe."