

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

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**Russell Jacoby.** *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in the Age of Apathy.* New York: Basic Books, 1999. xiii + 236 pp. Notes and index. \$26.00 (cloth); \$14.00 (paper).

Russell Jacoby's *The End of Utopia* is an impassioned plea for political utopia. We have lost, Jacoby argues, the ability to dream a radically different future. Jacoby decries the left's current failure to imagine an alternative form of life. Widespread apathy about our political life, he claims, is one byproduct of this failure of imagination. Only a revival of utopianism will help us beyond this impasse.

*The End of Utopia* explores in depth what a number of people have recently claimed—now that the Cold War is over we appear to be living in a post-ideological age. Jacoby knows that we have heard this before. In the late fifties and early sixties there was much chatter about the “end of ideology.” Yet the political explosions of the sixties quickly made that talk ludicrous. Distrust of politics now seems deeper, according to Jacoby, more troubling. History is repeating itself, but *pace* Marx, first as farce and then as tragedy.

Jacoby only briefly mentions conservatives. He admits that people like Newt Gingrich in the early nineties expressed ideas that had a utopian ring to them. They are quickly dismissed, however, as not worth considering. Jacoby's real targets are elsewhere. *The End of Utopia* is an extended critique of what the author considers timid, tired liberalism and the faux radicalism of posturing academics.

Each chapter of the book takes on a central theme of contemporary progressive thinking. Multiculturalism, mass culture, the decline of utopian thinking among left intellectuals, and the fetishism of culture in contemporary intellectual work all come under review. With each, Jacoby moves briskly through the contemporary intellectual landscape.

Jacoby's arguments about multiculturalism provide a window into his perspective. He readily concedes that there are very real benefits to developing more diverse institutions and sensibilities. “The literature on multiculturalism,” he writes, “includes much that is reasonable and necessary” (p. 47). Yet Jacoby also believes that there are excesses. First, contempo-

rary multicultural thinking tends to grossly overstate how different each cultural group is. More assimilation is going on than is acknowledged, and even liberals in this debate are often fuzzy-minded about how different we all are. Second, current multiculturalism often assumes a static and permanent outsider status to everyone on the margins. There is no hope for large historical transformation. Third, the relentless culturalism of the debate excludes more hard-nosed economic analysis. And finally, on campuses, the debate is, at times, manipulated into a battle for more resources. Discussions of marginalization "often evince rank bad faith," Jacoby asserts (p. 63). "Once upon a time revolutionaries tried, or pretended to try, to make a revolution; they harbored a vision of different world or society. Now dubbed radical multiculturalists, they apply for bigger offices" (p. 64).

Jacoby on multiculturalism captures much of the whole book: distrust of purely cultural analysis; despair that the market is not more frontally assaulted; dismissal of tired and worn-out liberals; disdain for parochial academic radicals; disgust with the meagerness of the movement's goals. The same themes turn up whether Jacoby is attacking multiculturalism, contemporary understandings of mass culture, the liberal cultural analysis inspired by Clifford Geertz, or the more radical cultural studies now prominent in the humanities.

Jacoby wants something grander, something utopian. Certainly he wants hostility to the market to be very prominent in this utopia. But he also thinks that other intellectual resources are needed. Contemporary culturalism, either liberal or radical, has abandoned universalism, which would allow us to leap beyond discrete cultures. It has discarded any sense of totality, which would help us think of the whole instead of the parts. And it simply lacks imagination, which could help dream a different future. It should be no surprise that Jacoby several times praises 1960s student radicals. It should also be no surprise that Jacoby praises the work of Herbert Marcuse. *The End of Utopia* might be read as a call for the revival of Western Marxism.

There is much in the book to agree with. The contemporary market system certainly needs more critical scrutiny. The widespread assumption that the only valid thinking is cultural is cant. Academics who confuse the politics of the Modern Language Association with the politics of the modern world deserve whatever lampooning they get. Yet despite this, *The End of Utopia* is not a good book. Jacoby hammers lots of different people—communitarians, multiculturalists, poststructuralists, rationalists like John Rawls, relativists like Clifford Geertz, liberal public-policy people like Robert Kuttner, the radical cultural studies crowd, quasi-Habermasian feminists like Nancy Fraser. Jacoby is out for practically everybody who lives anyplace to the left of center and produces prose! Yet he also wants to write a readable, breezy book.

It is not a good combination. *The End of Utopia* suffers greatly from superficiality. Jacoby covers too much ground, too quickly. I couldn't find an argument in this book that would be new to anyone already familiar with the debates. Nothing is given a distinctive or unique twist. *The End of Utopia* is a compendium of polemical topoi for Frankfurt School radicals. If you aren't a beginner, you won't find anything here you don't already know. And if you aren't in the club, this book won't convince you to join.

Jacoby introduces, judges, condemns, and moves on. Yet his shoot-from-the-hip style is especially annoying given that he constantly criticizes *others* for being hazy or glib. The language of political philosopher Michael Sandel turns "soapy" at certain points, Jacoby claims. His liberalism might be "uplifting" but it is also "vague" (pp. 16-17). The philosopher Charles Taylor "glides" from one idea to the next (p. 57). In the midst of a discussion of the feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser, he writes: "Despite its theoretical pretense, radical thought dishes out hackneyed cliché" (p. 66).

One might think that such complaints would nudge an author to avoid the problem himself. But no, Jacoby "glides" his way through countless ideas. He is routinely superficial, often unfair, and occasionally just wrong. It is hard to take seriously his criticisms of people like Sandel, Taylor, or Fraser, given how quickly he announces them and moves on. He makes the ritual anti-Foucault noises, but only cites Foucault from the mid-1970s. The range and thoughtfulness of Foucault, particularly after 1976, is ignored in the midst of Jacoby's "soapy" condemnation. In his haste to attack the political theorist Wendy Brown, Jacoby apparently doesn't understand that certain of *her* criticisms of some poststructural posturing actually match his own. He misses her residual good feelings for Marxist theory as well. Jacoby has boldly written a polemical, glib book that attacks everyone else for being polemical and glib!

Jacoby is just as breezy with his own conceptual arsenal. *The End of Utopia* consistently underscores the importance of imagination to utopian thinking. Jacoby does not, however, interrogate the concept; instead he relies on quotes from Herbert Marcuse and Ralph Waldo Emerson to make his case. He seems to assume its meaning is self-evident. Yet the term has a complicated history. Plato devised a utopia that condemned imagination. Aquinas denied the imagination's autonomy, believing it to be "a storehouse of forms received through the senses." Jacoby's imagination, basically referring to human inventiveness, is simply the romantic idea taken as truth.<sup>1</sup> Jacoby misses an opportunity to more substantively evaluate poststructuralism by ignoring Jean-Francois Lyotard or Jacques Lacan on imagination. Lyotard, as numerous commentators have observed, was not the pure Nietzschean he is occasionally portrayed as. Such sympathies were offset by his qualified respect for Kant as in Lyotard's *Just Gaming* (1979), where the notion of the

imagination is used to explicate the means by which we learn to judge. Lacan's psychoanalytic writings on the imaginary, being produced about the same time Marcuse was writing *Eros and Civilization*, have a very different take on the concept. Jacoby, however, writes nothing on this.

I do not expect that Jacoby would have any other response save contempt for Lyotard and Lacan. (I myself confess to a fair amount of contempt for the latter.) My point is not that they are right and he is wrong. It is that Jacoby has written a superficial book. He avoids any effort to come to terms serious thought. He prefers to lash out via the wickedly witty bon mot. He prefers that to thinking.

Oddly enough, despite all this, Jacoby's book might in a perverse way actually confirm his own argument about the end of ideology. This is a book on the importance of utopian thinking with absolutely no utopian vision of its own. It is a soulful cry for more daring and imagination but is utterly devoid of the very qualities it prizes. It calls for fundamental anti-market thinking (making light along the way of proposed liberal reforms like the Tobin Tax), but provides not one clue of what this alternative system might look like.

The one thinker he cites a number of times with a positive valence is Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse knew that imagination mattered. Yet Jacoby, true to form, does not go into any depth about Marcuse's utopianism. What does he expect us to take from Marcuse in his 1969 defense of third-world revolutionary socialism? Or Marcuse's 1965 attack on free speech? Or his 1955 defense of polymorphous perversity? Nothing seems to be a particularly attractive way to go, at least without careful rethinking, given the balance sheet of guerrilla movements and the appearance of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

"The world stripped of anticipation turns cold and gray," Jacoby darkly concludes (p. 181). The sentence hints at his lingering faith in the mass culture critique. It is also dead wrong. Jacoby has not looked closely at his own time. The world may be many bad things today—kooky, grotesquely unequal, overly sexualized, wantonly cruel. It is not, however, "cold and gray." That is just a horrible summation of a cultural landscape that offers up Britney Spears, Snoop Doggy Dog, Dick Armey, Internet pornography, Jackie Chan, Susan Faludi, Benny Hinn, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Dalai Lama, Bruce Willis flicks, Hillary and Bill, Bill and Monica, Kenneth Starr, *South Park*, and *Touched By an Angel*. Reciting the old bromides of the Frankfurt School, Jacoby has not done the hard work of thinking through his own time.

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1. On the intellectual history of imagination, see Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (1994). The Aquinas quote is from p. 129.
2. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (1969); Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (1965); Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955).