
The project of designing an ideal society and identifying the conditions necessary for its realization has for centuries been a noteworthy feature of political theory, exercising the imaginations and energies of some of its most revered and influential students, and animating a number of what are commonly considered canonical works in the discipline. George Klosko’s *Jacobins and Utopians: The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reform,* the 2001 Frank M. Covey, Jr., Loyola Lectures in Political Analysis, offers a brief survey of some of the central ideas expressed by a number of the principal contributors to this genre of research, typically labeled “utopianism.”

Prior to beginning his analysis of the ideas of particular theorists, Klosko notes that, whereas most surveys of utopian theorizing have focused on the content of the proposals under examination, his study is concerned with the “strategies for [their] realization and … [the] impediments that must be overcome”—the means rather than the ends (p. 1). This distinction also provides the basis for the differentiation between his title characters. *Utopians* are (generally) content to restrict their efforts to the development of conceptual models of ideal societies, without considering the difficulties associated with the concrete realization of their proposals. By contrast, *Jacobins* not only propose ideal societies but also actively and significantly engage the question of how their proposals might be brought into being; they *realistically* “confront the political obstacles” that are likely to impede the realization of their visions (p. 5).

Foremost among such obstacles is securing the type of citizenry essential for the effective functioning and preservation of ideal societies. Inevitably, the societies in question require citizens whose character significantly differs from that of the majority of individuals who have inhabited actual societies. Consequently, if one is to produce the type of citizens needed, an extensive program of fundamental moral reform will be necessary. Klosko has labeled this argument “educational realism,” and suggests that the required program of reform can be successfully instituted and maintained only through the concerted use of coercive state power. Accordingly, for Klosko, “discussion of fundamental moral reform leads inexorably to questions of political power” (p. 2).

Having outlined the fundamental distinctions and concepts that underlie his arguments, Klosko turns his attention to a review of several Utopians, some of whom “depart from pure utopianism in being seriously interested in realizing their ideals” (p. 5). He begins his examination with an analysis of the reforms instituted by Lycurgus and Solon, exemplars of the concept of the ancient “lawgiver.”

Relying largely upon information presented in the writings of Plutarch, Klosko argues that, for different reasons, neither Lycurgus nor Solon was able to realize what could correctly be considered a utopian society. Though Lycurgus is credited with securing radical reforms which made Sparta a “model” polis, Klosko notes that the society (supposedly) produced by these reforms was, by all accounts, quite harsh, ruthless and oppressive, and, thus, less than ideal. Concomitantly, though Solon secured “sweeping reforms,” they were essentially restricted to legal/constitutional matters. His
unwillingness to employ force to secure change prevented him from attempting to reform the social and educational systems of Athens, and thus his is not an example of “radical” reform, in that it fails to effect the type of drastic change characteristic of utopian projects. Nevertheless, an analysis of these two cases helps to identify essential elements of fundamental reform: namely, such reform must be political and social in nature; and securing the necessary reform will require an extensive moral (re)education program, which can be successfully achieved only via the concerted use of coercive state power.

Klosko next reviews some of the central themes in Plato’s political theory, as expressed in the Republic and other early and middle Platonic dialogues. Klosko contends that a careful examination of these texts reveals Plato’s appreciation for the dependent relationship between political power and moral reform. In particular, they clearly express his rejection of the idea, which he attributes to the historical Socrates, that radical reform can be secured through persuasion alone. Importantly, they also demonstrate that, contrary to popular opinion, Plato was not a “pure” utopian, but rather “was quite serious about establishing the ideal city of the Republic—or some simulacrum,” exploring how one could do so (p. 49), and in the process identifying “principles essential to any adequate theory of moral reform” (p. 38). Yet, Plato remains in the utopian camp because he failed to offer suggestions as to how one might realistically secure the power needed to effect reform successfully.

Klosko observes that the themes animating his discussions of Lycurgus, Solon, Socrates and Plato, are also present in the arguments of Thomas More, Machiavelli, and Rousseau, “all of whom confronted the question of power in relation to their desired reforms” (p. 69) and directly or indirectly conceded its importance for securing radical reform. Though their theories exhibit more Jacobin-like qualities than those of many of their predecessors, all three remain utopian insofar as they fail to offer realistic suggestions as to how one might effectively overcome the political impediments to radical reform, especially the obstacle of securing the requisite power.

In the latter half of the book, Klosko shifts his focus to a number of “revolutionary reformers” who move the discussion “from the realm of pure theory to practice” (p. 91), away from utopianism toward pure Jacobinism. He engages the arguments of (principally) Robespierre, Saint-Just, Marx, and Lenin, individuals who sought “to realize utopia in theory and practice” (p. 91). Of these reformers, only Lenin is accorded the status of “full-fledged” Jacobin (pp. 147, 169). In essence, Lenin ultimately recognizes and overcomes the “disconnect” between means and ends that characterizes and undermines the theories of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Marx. It is, however, Lenin’s (eventual) utter lack of “faith in the ability of the masses to achieve revolutionary consciousness” (p. 170) that is the critical distinction between him, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Marx. Only after Lenin develops this complete skepticism does he become a “full-fledged” Jacobin.

What is conspicuous by its absence is any analysis of contemporary utopian theorizing. Arguably, good examples of such theorizing do exist. John Rawls, one of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century, engaged in what many consider to be utopian theorizing. Indeed, Rawls himself labeled his conception of a “Society of Peoples” a “realistic utopia” (The Law of Peoples, 1999, p. 4). Of course, Klosko might debate whether Rawls’s efforts represent “genuine” utopian theorizing.
according to the criteria that Klosko has identified. Notwithstanding such an objection (and the possible counterargument), an analysis of Rawls’s work—or that of Habermas, to note another potential candidate—would have added an interesting contemporary context to Klosko’s study.

In the final analysis, Klosko’s failure to provide a contemporary example, though unfortunate, neither undermines his argument nor significantly detracts from the attractiveness of his study. Jacobins and Utopians offers an extremely interesting and thought-provoking analysis of the relationship between political power and fundamental political and moral reform. Klosko’s central argument that would-be reformers must necessarily possess overwhelming political power in order to undertake the type of public education program necessary to secure fundamental reform is well reasoned and extremely persuasive. With this study, Klosko not only advances the existing discourse, he also reminds us of the extreme and coercive actions that must accompany any attempt to bring to life an ideal society, and, subsequently, the inherent danger associated with such a project.

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