On Books

The Reality of Impossible Dreams: A Review of McCord's *Voyages to Utopia: From Monastery to Commune—The Search for the Perfect Society in Modern Times* (New York, Norton, 1989)

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Occasionally, an academic book excites not only the reader's intellect but also his or her imagination. William McCord's (1989) *Voyages to Utopia: From Monastery to Commune—The Search for the Perfect Society in Modern Times* is such a book, for two reasons. First, McCord travels the world over to experience diverse communities through first hand observation and interaction. That is a stimulating, enriching, and of course, tax-deductible way to earn a living. Second, and more substantially, McCord embeds his observations and reactions within a deep and sophisticated, yet readable, scholarly context. Thus, he integrates information and data from numerous disciplines to place his personal material within a firm historical, religious, cultural, economic, social, and political foundation. In this regard, his scanty inclusion of psychological variables—though he apparently is familiar with various schools of thought—stands out as the book's greatest shortcoming, one that might be keenly felt by readers from disciplines other than psychology.

The word *utopia* has come to mean a place of ideal perfection and hence an impractical blueprint for social regeneration (Webster's New Collegiate Dictio-

nary). It was first used in this context by Sir Thomas More in 1516, who described a fictional society located on a great island near the New World. There, King Utopus established a revolutionary, purely communist society—democratic, egalitarian, communitarian, benevolent, and humane. Over the ensuing centuries, More's utopia has been criticized for its perceived shortcomings—monotony, conformity, and lack of creativity—yet it also has inspired hundreds of visionaries to offer their own proposals for the ideal society.

This search for the ideal society is intriguing. As McCord points out, with slight changes in spelling, utopia in Greek can mean either "nowhere" or "a good place." Perhaps this was More's way of saying that a utopia cannot exist within the constraints of human nature. But also of interest is how "a perfect place" has become the ideal rather than "a good place." Obviously, a good place is much more achievable than a perfect place. But McCord has not failed to make this distinction; he harbors no illusions that perfection is possible. Instead, his search is for a utopia that is good—one that certainly is better than the existing social order.

McCord is a humanist in the classical rather than romantic sense. His ideals stem from the Renaissance—a belief in equality, benevolence, and very importantly, rationality and science. But his empiricism is not the type that reduces human behavioral and cultural complexity to laboratory study and mathematical predictions, an approach of his sociolog-

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ical colleagues that he openly disdains. Rather, it is a humble, tentative, and pragmatic science that recognizes that the solutions to society's ills are elusive and ambiguous. His thoughtful dissent from prevailing social and academic norms earlier in his life resulted in others labeling him a communist or an anarchist. In fact, he is an empirical humanist, a secular liberal.

McCord's exhaustive search for the better society has spanned three decades. He extensively visited every "utopia" he analyzes. These sojourns exposed him to those disenchanted with the reality as well as to those vociferously supportive of the vision. He met with workers and peasants as well as with academic, political, and social leaders. Although it is extremely difficult to determine the extent to which his unsystematic observations are characteristic of the range of possibilities, McCord appears to have assembled a broad and reasonably representative sample. His experiences invariably uncover both strengths and weaknesses of the society under scrutiny, and he painstakingly analyzes both.

McCord selected utopias that met the criteria of (1) durability (existence for at least 25 years), (2) successful recruitment of volunteers, (3) at least partial economic viability, (4) cultivating a vision for the betterment of the human condition that extends beyond those currently involved in the movement, and (5) engendering a broad-based idealistic or hedonistic appeal.

These potential utopias are grouped into four categories. First, McCord surveys quests for the simple life, including the island "paradise" of Tahiti, Zionist Israeli kibbutzim, California communes of the 1960s "flower children," and the French anarchist "Commune St. Emilion." Second, McCord reviews quests for religious heavens on earth, such as those envisioned by the Franciscans, Muslim Brothers, and Ghandhians. Third, he scrutinizes Marxist experiments in Yugoslavia, Hungary, and the People's Republic of China. And finally, he assesses the capitalist societies of Confucian Sin-

gapore, isolated La Jolla, California, and Denmark.¹

Each of these four sections begins with an introductory chapter that provides an overview of the general goals and philosophies of adherents and concludes with an integrative and critical analysis of the target utopias, with utopias not visited also considered for comparative purposes. Within each section, his discussion of a particular utopia begins with a summary of the founders' specific idealized dream and then moves to a narrative of his visit there, interspersed with abundant scholarly references that buttress the validity of, and go well beyond, his observations. His analyses of each community or society are strikingly nonjudgmental, a perspective that nevertheless becomes increasingly difficult to maintain through his critical assessments of the shortcomings that balance or even undermine the particular utopia's admitted accomplishments. McCord concludes the book with a long chapter that speculates on the ingredients necessary for building a successful utopia in the postmodern industrialized world. Here he considers human nature and the differing social realities of the first, second, and third worlds. He concludes by offering his general prescription for building a better society.

McCord's journey through social experimentation is well worth the time and effort required to accompany him. Despite several hundred footnotes, a lively and engaging presentation makes *Voyages to Utopia* a remarkably "easy read." But what is most exceptional and gratifying is the extraordinary amount of information to which the reader is intro-

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¹ The societies included for study do not uniformly adhere to the criteria articulated by McCord. Most notably, the Marxist and capitalist societies have not demonstrated "successful recruitment of volunteers," a criterion more appropriate to isolated communities or specific social movements that rely on an external infusion of people to maintain viability. Additionally, as one reviewer of this manuscript noted, La Jolla, CA, does not meet the criterion of "cultivating a vision for the betterment of the human condition."

duced. To place each utopian experiment in context, McCord must discuss the history and philosophy of the ideal. Thus, a succinct but functional familiarity with diverse topics is conveyed to the reader. In terms of precepts, McCord considers tribalism, Zionism, anarchism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Marxism, and capitalism and the teachings of St. Francis and Gandhi. And he includes much social history about Tahiti, Israel, America in the 1960s, England, Egypt, India, Eastern Europe, China, Singapore, California, and Scandinavia. Then add in what appears to be an exhaustive inclusion of the popular and scholarly literature directly concerned with real and fictional utopias, and the reader learns a great deal about the possibilities for dramatic social change in the world today.

For behaviorists suffused with the Skinnerian heritage of environmental determinism, and more specifically of social change through alteration of environmental circumstances, and even more specifically of the fictional utopia of *Walden Two* and its real life descendants, McCord's quest will strike a resonant chord. Behaviorists understand that progressive social change only will occur when destructive societal conditions are altered. People are not bad and people don't need to be changed; environments need to be changed. However, a commitment to behavior analysis will be most fruitful when accompanied by the humble recognition that behavior analysis alone is woefully inadequate for the task of social change. To be sure, behavior analysis is the right analytic *tool* to promote change: its ability to elucidate functional relationships provides the means to identify constructive alternative goals and suggest potent interventions to achieve those targets. But a functional analysis relies on—indeed, is only as good as—the data that form the content of the phenomenon under scrutiny. When the phenomenon possesses the complex dimensions of a society, a large community, or a social movement, the direct observation of a static, cross-sectional subsample of the phenomenon cannot be

expected to identify fully the controlling variables. In this sense, then, behavior analysis does not provide the data upon which change is to be engineered. That information is located in other disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, literature, religion, economics, political science, and the arts (cf. Rakos, 1983). Certainly, these disciplines frequently advance hypotheses, inferences, and philosophical assumptions that are incompatible with behavioral tenets. But pronouncements of limited utility can be discarded in favor of the observations (of behaviors, traditions, value judgements) and descriptions (of earlier interventions and outcomes) that prompted the non-behavioral analyses. From this perspective, McCord provides behaviorists with a wealth of information upon which to formulate hypotheses for behavior analytic intervention.

It is for this reason that McCord's omission of behavioral utopias is not unsettling. He is clearly aware of Skinner, behavioral principles, and *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948). In fact, he considers *Walden Two* to be an example of the pursuit for the simple life, though distinguished from other similar quests by a belief in humans as infinitely malleable rather than as inherently good. And he is aware of the oldest real-life *Walden Two* experiment, Twin Oaks (cf. Kin-kade, 1973), which he considers to be a merger of "psychological conditioning with anarchist social forms" (p. 88). However, McCord recognizes that Twin Oaks' defining attribute is its reliance on "positive psychological conditioning" to develop a cooperative social system, and he recognizes that it is not a true anarchist experiment because it utilizes a small cadre of planners and managers for its governance.

On the other hand, McCord's failure to employ behavior analysis as a rational diagnostic tool is unfortunate, though hardly surprising. His discussions of incentives, self-sufficiency, countercontrol, autonomy, and the like could be much more incisive if presented behaviorally.

Overall, what does McCord find? Not

surprisingly, the ideal or perfect social arrangement has yet to be actualized. In fact, he judges most utopias to be outright failures or, at best, limited successes. The simple societies overestimate human capacities and socialization's potency; they denigrate technology, modernity, and frequently, rationality; and they have failed to reconcile individualism with communitarianism. The religious movements are handicapped by ideological inflexibility, antirationalism, and either rigid and often repressive hierarchical structures or egalitarian ideals proffered without recognition of the realities of modernity. The Marxist states have relied on the violent imposition of the presumed "laws" of history while ignoring social demands for behavioral freedom and economic efficiency. Capitalist ventures frequently value freedom and selfish interest over equality and concern for the commonweal.

The qualified successes that have been achieved, and even more so, the evident failures, form the basis for McCord's attempt to distill general principles that might serve as useful guides for future utopian experimentation. He suggests that human nature is highly but not infinitely malleable, arguing that instances in which greed, aggression, and selfishness virtually have been eliminated all share important limiting characteristics: careful selection of members, extensive socialization, and aversive control strategies. He contends that social planners must recognize that among the vast array of human potentialities there are four that must be met: "the urge for adventure, metaphysical longings, a desire for autonomy, and an insatiable curiosity" (p. 330). These are understood well by behaviorists in terms of reinforcers, behavioral repertoires, and countercontrol. McCord further suggests that crime, drug addiction, and other social ills are not inevitable; individual incentives and private ownership of the means of production are not incompatible with the provision of social needs (and conversely, the achievement of economic equality need not automatically debilitate the potency of individual incentives); and eco-

nomie and social planning does not have to compromise, nor will it automatically produce, political freedom. Finally, durable change is most likely to occur when change agents employ nonviolent strategies, use rather than resist technology and science, correct unanticipated but undesired consequences of a plan, incorporate the realities of the immediate social, economic, and political environment in which they operate, recognize the constraints exacted by historical circumstances, and view their principles as flexible rather than immutable.

Thus, McCord balances a pessimism that ideology contains the solutions with a conviction that empirical pragmatism offers a more hopeful alternative. Rather than assume that principles are universally applicable, that there is a solution, and that the right social conditions can produce the perfect human being, McCord opts for analyzing the particular circumstances and differing needs of developing countries, socialist states, and capitalist nations.

In fact, though McCord's political views are clearly left-of-center, he implies that the solutions to social problems require the abandonment of traditional conservative-liberal and capitalist-socialist distinctions. His vision of a better society incorporates elements of both political poles. Thus, McCord is equally comfortable citing right-leaning commentators such as Friedrich Hayek and William Safire as he is citing leftists such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Jurgen Habermas.² At times, this gives rise to a suspicion that he is willing

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² McCord's view of Marxism—and society in general—appears to be influenced strongly by the Frankfurt School's philosophy, particularly the position advanced by its critical theory. The scope of critical theory is ambitious (cf. Jay, 1973), but at its core it rejects logical positivism and the concept of absolute truth, asserting instead that reality and truth can be identified through reasoning grounded in historical and social analysis. According to one historian of the Frankfurt School, "(W)hat is true is whatever fosters social change in the direction of a rational society. . . . Truth was not outside the society, but contained in its own claims" (Jay, 1973, p. 63).

to sleep academically with anyone who supports his thesis while ignoring inconsistent or even contradictory interpretations. In actuality, however, McCord's frequent inclusion of conflicting viewpoints is an attempt to achieve synthetic and meaningful conclusions. Thus, his considerations of the various utopias are reasoned and balanced, though ultimately unfavorable in most cases.

McCord is most impressed with the Quakers, and on a large scale, with the Scandinavian states, which he considers to exemplify social welfare capitalism. In Scandinavia, he finds an encouraging balance of individual incentives and productivity with planned allocation of resources necessary to provide for a wide range of social needs. But even these states are not perfect. High suicide rates and a distinct lack of artistic and cultural creativity are readily observed. The pervasive welfare and social support system has strained economic resources, prompted widespread tax evasion, and induced many young people to rely on state support while they search inward for the meaning of life and wait years for the "perfect job." With generally high salaries but twenty-five percent of employment in social services rather than in directly productive activities, there exists a significant buying power that demands imported goods, thereby exacerbating a growing balance-of-payments problem. The annual interest on the public debt is huge and growing, a situation that soon will result in more money being transferred from the poor to the rich than will be shifted from the rich to the poor! Thus, it is not surprising that a prominent Swedish journalist sees his country as one in which "the great monopolies have concentrated more wealth in their hands than anywhere else except Switzerland" (Lindgren, 1991, p. 16).

Despite these problems and the fact that the Nordic successes in welfare capitalism that clearly do exist may be partly a function of cultural homogeneity, McCord believes Scandinavia nevertheless provides valuable lessons for the more pluralistic United States. Most centrally, according to McCord, the U.S.

must increase economic and political self-government. These changes can best be accomplished through a dual approach: first, the provision of solid education in the classical subjects but also in the political sphere, and second, the achievement of an economic stake in the system for all citizens. These must be implemented within a context that provides meaning to life: spiritual satisfaction and community support from family, friends, and neighborhoods. It is with these existential concerns, by the way, that McCord appears to be most conflicted. As a firm believer in rationality, technology, and science, McCord is hard-pressed to reconcile what seem to him to be traditional values.

McCord's prescriptions can be debated; indeed, he recognizes the tentativeness of his suggestions and the elusiveness of his goal. McCord literally had dreams as a young boy that he would reach a mountaintop where a perfect village existed. He understands, after half a lifetime of traveling the world to find it, that it does not exist. But he has seen dramatic social change in his time, as a participant in civil rights and antiwar campaigns and as an observer of world events. Thus, McCord is a firm believer in the possibility of creating "good places" and "imperfect but better republics." His book provides tremendous stimulation for those who agree with him. Failures in science should not be cause for discouragement; rather their feedback should be prompts for further refined action. But, as McCord stresses, utopian experimentation frequently imposes human "costs that are typically borne by those who neither conceived nor requested the utopian project" (Berger, 1986, p. 222). Therefore, he argues that utopians must be cautious in implementing their visions of the better world. Many behaviorists would contend further that the prudent search for the improved society can benefit from increased contributions by mature, skilled behavior analysts. But if sophistication is to triumph over naivete, behavior analysts must approach this task with a profound appreciation for the type of information and data McCord

assembled in the course of his voyages to reality.

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