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Russell Jacoby, ?????? ??? ?????? (?????)

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Claryn says

I very much am not in agreement with many of the conclusions Jacoby arrived at in this book, and he does have a propensity for snark when it comes to views he doesn't like or understand. He is, however, clearly erudite in areas that interest me (centering--unsurprisingly--largely around Frankfurt School theorists), and though this book was published in 1999, most of these essays remain lucid, thoughtful and insightful, leaving me both riled up and eager to dig into the thinkers he cites.

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Safae says

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Yaser Maadat says

Jonathan says

Over a decade and a half old, but still highly relevant, Russell Jacoby's "The End of Utopia" is an incisive criticism of the retreat from radical envisionings of a different world after 1989. Compelling in its argument, "The End of Utopia" is also a joy to read because of Jacoby's trenchant wit, at peak form in his takedowns of the often grammatically criminal prose commonly found in academia.

The following paragraphs capture Jacoby's core argument:

"Today socialists and leftists do not dream of a future qualitatively different from the present. To put it differently, radicalism no longer believes in itself. Once upon a time leftists acted as if they could fundamentally reorganize society. Intellectually, the belief fed off a utopian vision of a different society;

psychologically, it rested on a self-confidence about one's place in history; politically, it depended on the real prospects.

"Today the vision has faltered, the self-confidence drained away, the possibilities dimmed. Almost everywhere the left contracts, not simply politically but, perhaps more decisively, intellectually. To avoid contemplating the defeat and its implications, the left now largely speaks the language of liberalism--the idiom of pluralism and rights. At the same time, liberals, divested of a left wing, suffer from waning determination and imagination.

"At best radicals and leftists envision a modified society with bigger pieces of pie for more customers. They turn utilitarian, liberal and celebratory...."

The left, post-Cold War, Jacoby argues, has become overly "pragmatic," acting as though the apotheosis of human aspiration were a modestly better functioning welfare state. And liberals, without a left to push them beyond rhetoric, end up with self-satisfaction and often hollow, abstract preaching about "civic virtue" and "engaged citizenship" (although this citizenship is always to tend, never to recreate).

After laying out this argument in his first chapter ("The End of the End of the End of Ideology"), he traces facets or implications of it in the subsequent five chapters.

In "The Myth of Multiculturalism," he argues that although that multiculturalism is "obviously better than monoculturalism," it is not a sufficient substitute for politics, as it can often become. At its best, it is the anodyne mantra of 'respect other people'; at its worst, it is "mindless relativism," with no fixed notion of what a "culture" even is (and thus the ability for everything to be one). He criticizes the tendency to reify cultural differences and to attribute a subversiveness to cultural pluralism that it does not contain.

In "Mass Culture and Anarchy," he attempts to rediscover a "democratic critique of democratic culture" through a reading of Matthew Arnold. He criticizes the celebration of mass culture by many left-wing cultural theorists today and recalls the origins of the field of cultural studies in the effort to foster a specific culture of the working-class (through things like the adult education movement and the Workers' Educational Association). The need to take popular culture seriously, Jacoby admits, is inarguable, but too much contemporary writing in cultural studies is so drenched in theory and jargon that it has little in the way of meaning left.

In "Intellectuals: From Utopia to Myopia," he laments the decline of the independent intellectual, with intellectuals now "consummated insiders" feigning outsider status. As he explains, it, "once intellectuals were outsiders who wanted to be insiders. Now they are insiders who pretend to be outsiders--a claim that can be sustained only by turning marginality into a pose."

In "Thick Aestheticism and Thin Nativism," he criticizes the turn toward aestheticism in cultural studies, with the attendant adoption of a literary mode that seeks only to paint pictures of events and practices rather than probe their deeper meanings. He denounces simplistic conceptualizations of power (and its endless rediscovery): "Traditionally, political thinking began, not ended, with the recognition of power. Now the fact of power appears as a dazzling insight." And he criticizes the expansion of relativism into various outlets that, through its disregard for universals, weakens political thinking (and ends up, in its abandonment of universalisms, can engage in troubling forms of essentialism). Jacoby explains, "Although music or poetry may be culturally specific, this is less true for scientific axioms and philosophic principles. Are human rights invalid because they are violated or ignored--or unknown? If they are not recognized, does this make them

false?"

In his final chapter “Retail Sanity and Wholesale Madness,” he acknowledges utopianism’s detractors (those who deem it inherently violent, impractical, or irrelevant) and then expounds on the dangerously constraining nature of utilitarianism (bringing up the very fitting story of John Stuart Mill’s own well-earlier-than-mid-life crisis that resulted from a cold utilitarian upbringing that condemned emotions and reduced relations to calculations). Without the encouragement to reflect on ultimate principles that utopian thinking provides, we are locked into the conformity of immediate possibilities (or, to be more apt, only those that we see).

I found this book to be well-argued and timely, particularly in light of the recent resurgence of left-wing thought and politics throughout the West. Although the visions of a better world offered may often resemble the current one but “more equitable and sustainable,” the desire to believe that the world could be radically different and the will to make that happen are nonetheless essential. The font of utopianism can help these alternate visions bloom.

Pete Davis says

A solid account of the state of utopian thinking at the end of the 20th century. Makes the case that utopian thinking has got a bad rap and that its decline might be dangerous for us.

Ala'a says

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Huda Yahya says

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Hazem Shaker says

Muntaser Ibrahim says