

The Legacy of Michael Harrington: An Exchange

David A. Guberman: A Reply to Joshua Muravchik

Proclaiming the virtues of ‘empiricism,’ Joshua Muravchik depicts the late Michael Harrington as laying the basis for ‘a logically sound utilitarian argument for killing some people in order to get there,’ that is, to a ‘new, higher, happier level of human existence.’ (‘The Neoconservative Persuasion and Foreign Policy: An Interview with Joshua Muravchik,’ *Demokratiya 11*).

Sadly, Michael Harrington is not with us to defend himself from Muravchik’s gross misrepresentation of his views. But that does not mean Muravchik should go unanswered.

With Harrington in mind, Muravchik says that ‘the socialist thinks that through politics you can transform human life itself. Michael Harrington . . . once wrote that socialism would create ‘an utterly new society in which some of the fundamental limitations of human existence have been transcended.’ But Muravchik has completely distorted Harrington’s views by chopping a quotation out of context.

Muravchik is quoting (out of context) a phrase from the concluding chapter of Harrington’s 1972 work, *Socialism* (p. 344 of the original hardcover edition). I’ll return to the quotation in its context. But let’s begin at the beginning. In the first chapter of *Socialism*, Harrington announces a recurrent theme: ‘It is important to root out every bit of messianism from the socialist vision, to reject the notion of a secular redemption that, like the incarnation of Christ, claims to make all things new. Every time men have acted upon that kind of chiliastic definition, the result has been totalitarian.’ Accordingly, Harrington called on socialists to ‘learn a chastened empiricism.’ (p. 5).

With this as background, let’s put the phrase Muravchik quotes in context. Writing of ‘the vision of socialism itself,’ Harrington says that it ‘is not an immediate program, or even the projection of a middle distance in which structural changes might take place. It is the idea of an utterly new society in which *some* of the fundamental limitations of human existence have been transcended.’ (Emphasis added.) What is it that will have been transcended? Harrington’s very next sentence explains: ‘Its

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most basic premise is that man's battle with nature has been completely won and there is therefore more than enough of material goods for everyone.' (p. 344).

It should be clear that Harrington is not attempting a utilitarian, or any other kind of argument for killing people in the name of some higher good. Just to be on the safe side, however, Harrington goes on to 'insist upon the limitations of socialism as a prelude to describing how it seeks to break through so many of our present limits. It proposes a solution not to all human ills, but only to those based on the economic, social and political conditions of life.' Indeed, Harrington writes that 'I want to avoid that absolutist view of socialism that makes it so transcendent that true believers are driven to a totalitarian rage in the effort to create a perfect order; on the other hand, I want to suggest the truly unprecedented possibilities for human change that exist today.' (p. 345).

Muravchik may no longer hold to the vision of a socialist – which for Harrington necessarily meant democratic – society. But that is no reason for misrepresenting Harrington. And his cavalier mistreatment of Harrington does not inspire confidence in Muravchik's other judgments.

Joshua Muravchik: A Rejoinder to David A. Guberman

Contrary to David Guberman's aspersion, I have taken nothing out of context. I did not say that Harrington was a Communist or supporter of totalitarianism. What I said was that totalitarianism flowed from the absurd utopian promises of socialism. Yes, Harrington criticized 'messianism' and chiliaris[m], but that does not prove he did not indulge in these. (It is common, by analogy, for people who disparage blacks or Jews to say that racism or anti-Semitism are bad things.) Mr. Guberman's proof – that Harrington said that only *some*, and not *all* of the 'fundamental limitations of human existence [will be] transcended' under socialism – is risible. True, Harrington did not promise that socialism would spell an end to disease or death, but 'only' an end to 'those [human ills] based on the economic, social and political conditions of life.'

Mr. Guberman claims that when I quote Harrington's words about 'an utterly new society' in which fundamental limits are transcended I take him out of context. To substantiate his accusation, Mr. Guberman offers Harrington's 'very next sentence' which he believes attenuates Harrington's utopianism. But why stop with one sentence? Let us look at the rest of Harrington's paragraph to see whether it is me

or Mr. Guberman who is taking Harrington out of context. Here is the remainder in full:

As a result of this unprecedented change in the environment, a psychic mutation takes place: invidious competition is no longer programmed into life by the necessity of a struggle for scarce resources; cooperation, fraternity and equality become natural. In such a world man's social productivity will reach such heights that compulsory work will no longer be necessary. And as more and more things are provided free, money, that universal equivalent by means of which necessities are rationed, will disappear.

If this weren't enough to establish Harrington as a utopian, later in the chapter he continues: 'in the more distant future it is not only possible but necessary for society to enter the Kingdom of Freedom ... The sentence decreed in the Garden of Eden will have been served.' That sentence, of course, had three components – for Adam, Eve and the snake. It is easy to see how – in Harrington's vision – the curse upon man would be lifted. Work will no longer be necessary. But how will this pardon work for women? Will childbirth cease to be painful under socialism? Harrington is not explicit, but he does point out that 'the human body has been changing under capitalism,' that 'height is increasing ... biological prowess ha[s] been dramatically extended. A higher living standard ... can make people more beautiful.' Then he continues:

It is certain that we are on the eve of psychic mutations, that our unprecedented man-made environments are going to produce new kinds of people. The question is not whether this will happen, but how it will take place: under commercial priorities ... ; under totalitarian control ... : or consciously chosen and shaped by a free political and social movement.

I am not sure what exactly this hocus pocus means, but perhaps it includes obstetric relief.

As for the snake, I can find nothing in Harrington's vision of socialism to offer the poor beast any hope, and Harrington's references to 'man's battle with nature' suggest that he had yet to take environmentalism fully on board.

Is it possible to drink as deeply of utopianism as Harrington did without crossing the line to violent revolution and totalitarianism? Yes. My point was

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not that utopianism leads ineluctably to mass murder, only that it paves the way. Harrington's enchanting vision of socialism is a pipedream. At some point, people are likely to give up the dream or to try to leap to it by heroic – and lethal – action. Although proclaiming 'democratic socialism' forcefully throughout his career, even Harrington began to slip away from democratic criteria when he dedicated one of his later books to Tanzania's Julius Nyerere. Harrington gave the man a pass on being a dictator because he was building socialism in Tanzania. According to some World Bank statistics, in twenty years of Nyerere's rule, Tanzania progress from a GDP per capital of \$250 to one of \$200. So he more or less fulfilled Harrington's vision: there was no work and no money.

David A. Guberman and Joshua Muravchik were both members of the US democratic socialist movement in the 1970's.