Unintended Consequences: 19th Century Socialism and 21st Century Transhumanism

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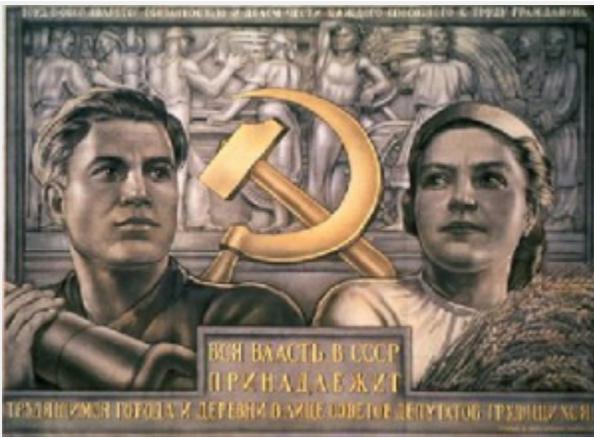
You tell me that it's evolution

Well, you know

We all want to change the world

Bright young activists have great plans for the future. They say that science and technology, not religion, will be humanity's salvation. An era of universal prosperity is coming. Humanity will throw off the shackles of the old; a new world is arising. This utopia is almost guaranteed, but first: The threat of world-rending disaster looms.

That's not early-twenty-first-century transhumanism, it's late-nineteenth century socialism. Socialism's name has been tarred by the murders of around 100 million, and the enslavement and impoverishment of many more. But at the fin de siècle, socialism was widespread among the intellectual elite. Most of its followers truly believed that they were making the world better; they had no plans for a dictatorship of the masses or mass murder.

Like transhumanists, they sought to improve humanity in mind and body. They wanted to make a "New Socialist Man.". They wanted total, radical change for humanity's good.

At every step, they were sure that the purest logic dictated their course as they "rationalized" society to maximize the common good. And now, in our twenty-first century, the [Singularity Instutute for Artificial Intelligence](#) devotes as much effort to [rationality](#) as to Friendly AI. The socialists were wrong; are the transhumanists just as wrong?

Socialists believed in central social control, like some singularitarians today, who think that the way to save the world from technological destruction, and to serve human utility, is through centralized control by a "[singleton…, a world order in which there is a single decision-making agency](#) " — a superintelligent machine or a world government.

According to Marx's principles of dialectical materialism, humanity is fated to move through stages of development, starting at primitive socialism, and progressing through slave society, feudalism, and capitalism, before finally reaching perfect communism. This predetermined course of history is, generally, an upwards spiral. Today, transhumanist Ray Kurzweil is the best-known proponent of a deterministic history propelled by inexorable underlying principles, lifting humanity ever upwards towards a utopian destiny.

In dialectical materialism, there's an exception to the upwards trend: The first, primitive stage is not the lowest, but the highest. It was a utopia, to which the ultimate communism will return. Some transhumanists see the most advanced parts of human civilization [moving towards a hunter-gatherer ethic](#). Already, some complement their technophilia with [elements of the Neolithic lifestyle](#) for which evolution sculpted our bodies. Our future, say transhumanists and socialists, may look a lot like the better parts of our distant past.

Marx envisaged yet another deviation to the upward trend, a final world war between the proletariat and the capitalist classes, as a necessary precursor to the utopian end of days. Transhumanists also fear world destruction, but with a difference: They see a threat, though not a certainty, of final human extinction, rather than mere devastation as a preliminary to utopia; and they fear accidental technological calamity more than war. (But exceptionally, artificial-brain scientist Hugo de Garis warns of apocalyptic war between supporters and opponents of superintelligence in machines.)

For all the good intentions, socialism resulted in incomparable horror. [Eliezer Yudkowsky](#) draws from this the conclusion that AI programmers should not attempt to implant a specific political ideology in their soon-to-be-superintelligent creations. James Hughes [draws the conclusion](#) that transhumanists should be guided by democratic decision-making and other liberal principles. But the risks transcend political ideology; the main risk is that mistaken principles of design result in technology will destroy any possibility of a positive human future. Most transhumanists are well aware of the dangers of technology; a few are aware that they themselves, in their most positive efforts to create beneficial artificial general intelligence, nanotech, and genetically improved humans, may be the agents of destruction.

So far, we've compared the beliefs of socialism and transhumanism, without looking for a historical links between the two. But the similarities are not accidental. Socialism and transhumanism are [products of the Enlightment](#), from which they both get their leanings towards

rationality, a shared faith in science and technology as humanity's saviors, an idealization of primitive man, and their view of history as an upwards spiral rather than a recurring cycle.

Transhumanism as we know it began in the late twentieth century, but there were [precursors](). These proto-transhumanist thinkers covered the political map. Some, like Nietszche and the Russian Cosmist Nikolay Fedorovich Fedorov, had ideologies that diverged strongly from Enlightenment values. Others were advocates of Enlightenment-derived views. H.G. Wells, for example, was a socialist. But liberals, as well, sought progress through technology and capitalism, like Theodor Herzl with his utopian, technophilic, bourgeois-liberal vision for modern Zionism.

So, other Enlightenment-influenced philosophies, which equally touched on transhumanist values, did not degenerate into evil like socialism.

Transhumanism today primarily works to change the world through technology, not politics. The movement leans towards libertarianism, the heir of nineteenth-century liberalism—with Max More as the best-known libertarian transhumanist thinker. But there is also a Techno-Progressive direction, a gentler heir of nineteenth-century socialism, as advocated by James Hughes. These are no more than slightly different weightings of competing [human values](): freedom in the former case and sharing in the latter.

Socialism is not transhumanism, and transhumanism is not socialism.

But the similarities are real, and the fate of starry-eyed fin de siècle idealism serves as a warning. Those who pursue a utopian, secular, rational faith in salvation by technology and science may be fooling themselves; and they might get us all killed.