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The Politics of the Millennium

THOMAS FLANAGAN

Politics involves conflict within the community for control over the community; it also involves conflict among communities. In either case, it provokes anxiety to which the vision of a conflict-free millennium is a response. There are three broad types of politics – monism (administration, populism, totalitarianism); dualism (total war, class or race struggle); pluralism (liberal democracy, constitutional regimes). Millenarian movements are monistic in their view of the future but dualistic in their view of the present. If, as most political scientists hold, complex societies are inherently pluralistic, millenarian projects are bound to be infeasible (utopianism) or to eventuate in high levels of force in an effort to transform reality (totalitarianism).

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The vitality of research on millenarian movements has always been its profusion of fascinating case studies, and that tradition continues unabated to the present. Two recent but very different examples are Albert Schrauwers' rediscovery of the Children of Peace in nineteenth-century Toronto, and Michael Barkun's study of the connection between British Israel and the Christian Identity movement in the United States.[1] However, millenarian studies have made less progress in terms of research methods and theoretical paradigms. The main research methods remain historical description and textual analysis, occasionally supplemented by participant observation. Researchers are still working with theoretical concepts developed in the 1950s and 1960s, such as relative deprivation and failure of prophecy.[2] Thus millenarian studies are becoming an increasingly isolated field of research, largely detached from the current interests of the social sciences.[3]

This is particularly true in political science.[4] To be sure, a few political scientists have tried to draw connections with millenarianism, particularly in the case of politico-religious movements such as the Nation of Islam.[5] There have also been attempts to analyze secular ideologies as analogues of religious millenarianism, of which James Rhodes' study of National Socialism is an important example.[6] And a few political scientists (and historians writing political and intellectual history) have developed specific themes, for example, Norman Cohn and J. L. Talmon on the parallels between revolutionary millenarianism and totalitarianism,[7] Michael Barkun on secular millenarianism as a response to societal catastrophe,[8] and

Thomas Flanagan and Martha Lee on the failure-of-prophecy problem faced by radical political parties.[9] And, of course, there is the work of the sociologist Peter Worsley on the transformation of millenarian cults into movements of national liberation.[10] But even after acknowledging the work that has been done, it is still obvious that millenarian studies are on the periphery of contemporary political science.

This study tries to establish some deeper connections between the central concerns of political science and those of millenarian studies. I hope to show that millenarianism is not an isolated fringe phenomenon but one of several types of politics with which political scientists are normally concerned. Because politics is a contest between coalitions *within* the community for control *over* the community, and also involves conflict *among* communities, it creates anxiety over the fate of the society. Millenarianism is one of several possible reactions that affirm the whole community at the expense of the competitive struggle of politics. It is, therefore, part of the repertoire of political behaviour, not just a primitive superstition fated to die away with the progress of rationalism, nor merely an exotic response to catastrophic shocks. The distinctions and parallels drawn here should make it easier for political scientists to see the significance of millenarianism and for specialists in millenarian studies to adopt contemporary theories and methodologies from political science.

This focus on the political side of millenarianism complements Norman Cohn's recent work, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*.[11] In his pioneering book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Cohn treated millenarianism as an irrational, indeed psychopathological, response to famine, plague war, and economic dislocation.[12] More recently, however, he has come to see millenarianism as an essential spiritual aspect of Zoroastrianism, late Judaism, and early Christianity. 'This book', he writes, is concerned with a major turning-point in the history of human consciousness; it tries to describe how the destiny of the world and of human beings came to be imagined in a new way, and how these new expectations began to spread abroad.'[13] Millenarianism may still, in Cohn's view, give rise to 'fantasies, religious or secular';[14] but he now treats the subject as a integral part of mankind's religious evolution, not as a pathological deviation. Similarly, it will be argued here that, once millenarianism has emerged in religious consciousness, it becomes an integral and understandable part of politics.

A Typology of Politics

It is notorious that political scientists do not agree on the definition of politics. Some emphasize the formal institutions of the state,[15] others see

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politics as an informal process present in all aspects of life.[16] Some emphasize the ubiquity of conflict,[17] others the reconciliation of differences.[18] But however significant these differences may be, they are largely matters of emphasis and wording, and can usually be turned out with a little effort. Let us begin with the biologically grounded definition proposed by Roger Masters, which, although ponderous, is insightful:

> One can therefore define politics ... as behaviour that simultaneously partakes of the attributes of bonding, dominance, and submission (which the human primate shares with many other mammals) and those of legal or customary regulation of social life (characteristic of human groups endowed with language). Politics is not merely what ethologists have called agonic or agnostic behaviour; competitive rivalry for dominance exists in sports, on school playgrounds, and in business without thereby deserving the name politics. Nor is all behaviour governed by legal norms automatically political ....
>
> Political behavior, properly so called, comprises actions in which the rivalry for and perpetuation of social dominance impinges on the legal or customary rules governing a group.[19]

Masters' definition makes the crucial point that politics is a contest within the community for control over the community. However, it neglects to mention that, as is also true of other primate species, politics implies conflict among communities. This is what Jane Goodall discovered in her fieldwork on the chimpanzees of Gombe, so that she had to make 'War' the title of a chapter in one of her books.[20] Adult male chimpanzees not only form coalitions to achieve dominance within their little communities, they patrol territorial boundaries and use lethal violence to prevent encroachments by members of other groups. Because of the human capacity for symbolism, our politics is far more complex, and operates on a larger scale, than chimpanzee politics; but it is similarly two-dimensional, involving internal struggles for dominance as well as external conflict with other communities.

Within these two dimensions of conflict are three fundamentally different kinds of politics: monistic, dualistic, and pluralistic. Below I enlarge upon these distinctions and show where millenarianism fits in.

Monism

Monism is a philosophy of oneness. As applied to politics, it refers to belief in a society without significant conflicts of interests – a society without war (external conflict) or class struggle (internal conflict), without hierarchy and oppression, without poverty and inequality. A well-known monistic statement of our era is John Lennon's song 'Imagine'.

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> Imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can.
> No need for greed or hunger, the brotherhood of man.
> Imagine all the people sharing all the world.
>
> You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.
> I hope some day you'll join us,
> And the world will live as one.

There are several kinds of political monism. One is administration – organization in the pursuit of specified ends. In the world of administration, there is not supposed to be fundamental (political) conflict over ends, only technical disagreement over the best means to achieve agreed-upon ends. In public administration, it is commonly asserted that civil servants are non-political experts implementing policies chosen by their 'political masters'. In parliamentary systems, the distinction is symbolized by the different roles of the cabinet minister responsible for the department, and the administrative head of the department (deputy minister in Canada, permanent secretary in Great Britain).

Another example of monistic politics is the phenomenon known as populism, described by Margaret Canovan in these terms:

> The notion that 'the people' are one; that divisions among them are not genuine conflicts of interest but are manufactured by a few men of ill will; that parties are merely self-serving factions; and that the people will be best looked after by a single unpolitical leadership that will put their interest first – these ideas are *anti*political, but they are nevertheless essential elements in a political strategy that has often been used to gain power.[21]

All populist movements, whether of the left, right, or centre, treat 'the people' as an undifferentiated whole animated by a common set of desires. Although William Riker has demonstrated the fallacies of this notion in *Liberalism Against Populism*,[22] populist rhetoric continues to trade heavily upon expressions such as the 'will of the people'. For example, Preston Manning, a self-styled populist and leader of the Reform Party of Canada, which won 52 seats in the 1993 federal election, claims to draw his inspiration from 'the common sense of the common people'.[23] In the socialist tradition, Mao Zedong has been considered a populist because he emphasized the overwhelmingly agricultural character of the whole Chinese people,[24] as did the so-called *narodniki* (*narod* means 'people') in Imperial Russia.

When populist leaders posit enemies, they typically point to small 'elites' or 'special interests' said to be out of touch with the common people.[25] Often these elites are geographically remote (eastern bankers,

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foreign capitalists) or ethnically different (Jews), and thus not really part of 'the people'. Populist political rhetoric emphasizes breaking the domination of the elites and returning power to the hands of the people. In comparison to the scope and intensity of class struggle within the Marxist perspective, populists see it as relatively easy to accomplish their aims because they see the people as so huge and so united, and the elites as so small and remote from the people. The people have only to shrug their giant shoulders, so to speak, to rid themselves of the elites or the special interests. Populists thus conceive politics as intrinsically monistic. Even in the present, there is one undifferentiated people, not divided by fundamental conflicts of interest. The presence of elites or special interests is only an irritating detail; once their power is broken, politics can assume its natural, conflict-free condition.

Totalitarianism is also a monistic form of politics, but in the future tense. Totalitarians see the present society as deeply divided between races (Aryans and Jews, whites and non-whites) or classes (proletariat and bourgeoisie, small peasants and kulaks). Hence the goal of political strategy must be to eliminate the enemy race or class to create a monistic society. The political formulas of totalitarian leaders are redolent of monism. Mussolini created the word *totalarismo* and defined it in these terms: 'Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.'[26] Hitler also used a monistic formula: *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer* (one people, one empire, one leader). Once communism was securely in power in the Soviet Union, the regime changed from the dualistic slogans of Marxist class struggle to monistic, almost populist, slogans such as Khrushchev's 'state of all the people'.[27]

The classic analysis of Friedrich and Brzezinski emphasizes the monistic character of totalitarian regimes. In their 'totalitarian syndrome', there is one 'official ideology', a 'single mass party led typically by one man', a 'system of terroristic police control', a 'monopoly of control' over mass communications, another 'monopoly of control' over weapons, and a 'central control and direction of the entire economy'.[28] Imposing unity of purpose upon the society, with all necessary force, is the pervasive theme of totalitarianism.

Similarly, millenarianism is oriented around a vision of a monistic future society. As Norman Cohn pointed out, there are close analogies between totalitarianism (Communism and National Socialism were his examples) and what he called 'revolutionary millenarianism', exemplified by movements such as the Anabaptist uprising at Münster (1532–35). In his portrait of the Münster regime, Cohn laid great stress upon features that would fit comfortably into Friedrich and Brzezinski's totalitarian syndrome, as shown in the table of correspondences below:

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Friedrich and Brzezinski Totalitarian Syndrome	**Münster Anabaptist Regime**
Official ideology	Theocratic regime; burning of books other than the Bible
Single party, individual leader	Dictatorship of Jan Bockelson
Terrorism	Expulsion, execution of dissenters
Communications monopoly	Control of preaching, printing
Weapons monopoly	Anabaptist militia
Centrally controlled economy	Confiscation of precious metals; new coinage; centralized control over housing, food, wives

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However in spite of the obvious similarities, there is one major difference between totalitarianism and revolutionary millenarianism of the religious type. Totalitarian ideologists interpret the construction of the future monistic society as a purely human project to be carried out under the guidance of the state. Millenarian prophets, in contrast, interpret the Kingdom of God on earth as the work of God, not of men. This usually leads to political passivity, as in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, who wait for the Second Coming of Christ to inaugurate the Kingdom. However, it can also occasionally lead to political activism, as in the case of the Münster Anabaptists, who took up arms against the hosts of Antichrist.

A worthwhile project for comparative research would be a systematic study of the conditions under which religious millenarianism becomes politically activist. Eclectic reading of the literature suggests that a deliberate, calculated resort to arms is exceptional; more common is a dialectic of threat and counterthreat between millenarian believers and the state, which at some point breaks out into violence, perhaps by miscalculation. This is essentially what happened in Louis Riel's Northwest Rebellion of 1885: he declared a provisional government and took some hostages; the local Northwest Mounted Police sent out a column to secure some supplies; a confrontation turned violent; and the Canadian government sent troops to suppress the 'rebellion'.[29] Likewise, the tragic fire-fight in 1993 with the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, seems to have grown out of an unplanned dialectic of confrontation. But systematic research is needed to establish general patterns of activism and passivism.

Millenarianism and totalitarianism also have some kinship with administration. In 'The State and Revolution', Lenin recalled the aphorism of Saint-Simon, that in the communist society of the future, the 'government of men' would be replaced by the 'administration of things'.[30] In Edward

Bellamy's utopian-millenarian novel *Looking Backward*, the President of the United Sates is simply the commander of the 'industrial army'. There is no longer any politics in the usual sense:

> Almost the sole function of the administration now is that of directing the industries of the country. Most of the purposes for which governments formerly existed no longer remain to be subserved. We have ... no military organization ... no taxes or tax collectors ... nothing to make laws about.[31]

End-of-politics themes recur in depictions of the millennium. Occasionally, as in the early writings of Marx and Engels, there are visions of spontaneously benevolent anarchy, but societies of total administration à la Bellamy are more common. In either case, however, the coercive, exploitive character of politics disappears.

There is also a frequent, although not inevitable, affinity between populism and millenarianism. Most of the main populist leaders in Canada have come out of Christian religious traditions in which the millennium figures prominently. William Aberhart, leader of the Social Credit movement, and Preston Manning, leader of the Reform Party, belong to the Protestant fundamentalist tradition; Henry Wise Wood, the philosopher of the United Farmers of Alberta, and J. S. Woodworth, first leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, were nourished on the social gospel, which offers a semisecular reading of the chiliastic message of the New Testament. In the United States, Bellamy and other writers in the social gospel tradition also exercised important influence upon populism, as did fundamentalists like William Jennings Bryan.

In the broadest perspective, administration, populism, totalitarianism, and millenarianism all share one central feature: a dislike of discord, and therefore a rejection of politics. The advocates of administration want to fence off organizations from political conflict over objectives. Populists want to return society to what they believe is its naturally harmonious condition. Religious millenarians and secular totalitarians await the coming of the conflict-free society of the future, though they may have different scenarios for getting there.

An interesting question arises at this point. If, following Masters, we accept that politics is biological in origin (or, following Aristotle, that man is a 'political animal'), why should monistic rejection of politics have such a wide appeal? If diversity, conflict, and politics are inevitable and indeed genetically encoded in the human species, why do so many people want to escape them? Why do prophets, ideologists, and social reformers continue to imagine conflict-free societies? If Masters is right and politics is natural, what is the revolutionary payoff in rejecting politics?

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The answers to these questions lie in the nature of politics. Both as a competitive struggle for dominance within the society and as a conflict with other societies, politics involves threats to the integrity of the society. All forms of monism emphasize the unity of the society, whether in the present or the future. From a systemic perspective, monistic appeals to unity reassure those in the society made uneasy by politics.[32] From the point of view of contestants for power, such appeals are also rhetorically useful because they offer reassurance that the goal of one's coalition is to promote the general interest, not merely to dominate others for the advantage of the winning coalition. Because politics consists of conflictual relationships between the parts of the whole, and among various wholes, monistic reassurance about the status of the whole can become a winning political strategy. The tendency toward monism, including millenarianism, is therefore no less 'sown in the nature of man' than is the Madisonian tendency toward factionalism.[33]

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Dualism

Dualism is a philosophy or worldview which emphasizes the opposition between two forces or ideas. The paradigmatic case in politics is two nations locked in total war. Then, internal differences are suspended in a state of military emergency, and all energies are focused on the destruction of the enemy. Domestic political opponents often come together in a grand governing coalition, or at the very least there is a show of nonpartisanship in prosecuting the war. Under these circumstances, the enemy is bound to be demonized, as shown by the accomplishments of the propaganda machines of all major combatants in both the First and Second World Wars.

Dualism can also be internal, as in the famous words of Marx and Engels: 'Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.'[34] In addition to the class struggle, there can also be an internal racial struggle – for example, the struggle between Aryans and Jews posited by National Socialists, or between blacks (all non-whites) and whites posited in different ways by Christian Identity and the Nation of Islam. And of course, internal dualistic conflict can also be conceived as part of a world-wide struggle involving all societies, as is true of all four movements mentioned above.

Dualism seems like a natural style of politics for great movements. Positing a powerful enemy is a way of raising and focusing energy in the struggle. Although dualism can appear in many situations, it has a special role in totalitarianism and millenarianism. Both types of movements

perceive a radical disjunction between the society of the present and that of the future; and an obvious way to explain the disjunction is as the result of an evil power that holds the present in bondage and must be overthrown to let the future emerge.

The Judaeo-Christian millenarian tradition in particular is replete with dualistic imagery: God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist, Chosen People and Gentiles, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats. In *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, Norman Cohn argues that this is the heritage of Zoroaster. The cosmological myths of creation common in the ancient Middle East all contained stories of combat between the forces of order and the forces of disorder, for example, the Egyptian myth of Seth's murder of Osiris, and the revenge of Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis.[35] Prior to Zoroaster, all ancient peoples understood the struggle between the gods of order and the gods of chaos as an ongoing, never-ending process. The victory of order was never permanent; it had to be renewed each year in the progression of the seasons and in the New Year's festival. Zoroaster's world-historical innovation was to visualize and foretell a permanent victory of the forces of order, led by Ahura Mazda (Ormazd), over the forces of chaos, led by Angra Mainya (Ahriman). 'So in the end Angra Mainyu/Ahriman is annihilated once and for all, along with all his host of demons and all his human allies. In place of repeated but incomplete victories we are promised a final and total one.'[36] With this vision of a final victory of light over darkness, Zoroaster decisively transformed the cyclical worldview of antiquity into a conception of history as linear progress. Zoroastrian dualism was an essential aspect of the creation of modern historical consciousness, as transmitted through late Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic. Millenarianism, therefore, is both monistic and dualistic – dualistic in its view of the present, which it strives to overthrow; and monistic in its view of the future, which it strives to instantiate.

Pluralism

Pluralism is a philosophy accepting the existence of a multiplicity of ideas, forces, or values. Many schools of legal, social, and political thought have been called pluralist. Most familiar to contemporary political scientists is the work of Robert Dahl and his students, who have used the term pluralism to represent a methodological focus on the competitive struggle of organized interests within the legal framework of democratic government.[37] However, in a broader sense most political scientists, even those who are critical of Dahl and his school, are pluralists in the sense that they take for granted several propositions:

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- All societies, except perhaps the very smallest, are divided by cleavages of interest and ideology
- Politics is a competitive struggle for power carried on by building coalitions among various groups
- There is no permanent end to the political process; coalitions form, dissolve, and re-form kaleidoscopically.

At the level of international politics, Hans Morgenthau's philosophy of realism shares the same assumptions. In his words:

> The history of political thought is the story of a contest between two schools that differ fundamentally in their conceptions of the nature of man, society, and politics. One [usually called liberalism or idealism] believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles, can be achieved here and now ....
>
> The other school believes that the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature ... This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but must at best be approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts. This school, then, sees in a system of checks and balances a universal principle for all pluralist societies.[38]

Monism and dualism resemble each other much more than either resembles pluralism; in fact, they are alike in their repudiation of pluralism. They refuse to accept the legitimacy of a world in which the permanent plurality of interests precludes the primacy of a single, absolute principle. In this context, the difference between monism and dualism is actually very slight; it is just a question of timing, because dualists always believe in the ultimate victory of their favoured principle. Moreover, all forms of political monism and dualism are rebellions against the pluralism of the real world. Administration seeks to carve out a sector of the world in which a directed order can reign. Populism asserts that the appearance of pluralism is superficial, that there is a monistic reality underneath. All dualistic visions of class or racial war seek to collapse the manifold variations of a plural world into two great categories, and then urge the victory of one and the annihilation of the other. Millenarianism and totalitarianism, which are dualistic in the present, also paint elaborate pictures of the monistic society of the future, whether they attribute it to human action or divine intervention.

From this perspective, millenarian movements are not exotic fringe phenomena but an intrinsic aspect of politics in complex societies. Because

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the political process of pluralism often seems to mean only the advancement of special interests, there is fertile ground for populist, millenarian, or totalitarian reactions to sprout up. Their attraction is that, in various ways, they stress the interests of the whole and interpret the unedifying conflicts of pluralism as a temporary disorder to be wished away or overcome once and for all. Pluralism is realistic to political scientists, but monism and its dualistic *doppelgänger* are equally rooted in the nature of politics.

If this analysis is correct, it helps to answer the often-posed question about the 'rationality' of millenarianism, as well as of other forms of monism and dualism. They are indeed rational in the sense of being intelligible reactions to the stresses and strains of politics. When conflict from within or without threatens the integrity or even the existence of the political community, it is understandable that people would turn to regenerative visions in which the whole is re-established and its enemies are overcome or defined out of existence. But if pluralism represents the empirical truth about politics, except perhaps in the smallest and most primitive communities, then millenarianism is bound to be irrational in terms of its intellectual content. In seeing a world starkly divided between good and evil, and positing the final victory of good over evil, it simplifies reality to the point of caricature – what J. L. Talmon identified as the theoretical 'pencil sketch'.[39] Reliance on such intellectual fallacies leads either to political failure, which Marx and Engels criticized as 'utopianism', or to coercive imposition of a new order, which, like the Soviet Union, will fail in the long term because it ignores basic human realities.

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