

Introduction

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Utopianism

Dreams are the fire in us.

(Marge Piercy)

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias.

(Oscar Wilde)

The last thing we really need is more utopian visions.

(Immanuel Wallerstein)

So this is utopia,
Is it? Well -
I beg your pardon;
I thought it was Hell

(Max Beerholm)

An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia. The smallest actual good is better than the most magnificent promises of impossibilities.

(Thomas Babington Macaulay)

Les utopies ne sont souvent que des vérités prématurées.
[Utopias are often only premature truths.]

(Alphonse Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine)

The word 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More (1478–1535) as the name of the imaginary country he described in his short 1516 book written in Latin and published as *Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo rei publicae statu, deque] noua Insula Utopia (Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook No Less Beneficial Than Entertaining)*, and now known as *Utopia*. The word is based on the Greek *topos* meaning place or where, and 'u' from the prefix 'ou' meaning no or not. But in 'Six Lines on the Island of Utopia', More gives the reader a poem that calls Utopia 'Eutopia' (Happy Land, or good place). As a result, the word 'utopia', which simply means no place or nowhere, has come to refer to a non-existent good place.

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While most educated people in the 16th century read Greek and Latin, the word 'utopia' quickly entered other European languages, with the book being published in German in 1524, Italian in 1548, and French in 1550. Because More opposed translation into English, the book was not available in English until 1551, when it was translated by his son-in-law.

In *Utopia*, More depicted a ship discovering an unknown island, which has established a society based on far-reaching equality but under the authority of wise, elderly men. It is hierarchical and patriarchal; it has very strict laws with harsh punishments; and it provides a much better life for its citizens than was available to the



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1. Thomas More (1478–1535) was an English lawyer, politician, and author remembered as a prominent Renaissance humanist and an opponent of the Protestant Reformation. He was knighted by Henry VIII for his services to the crown, and executed for refusing to give his oath supporting Henry VIII as head of the church in England. He was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 1935. His most famous book was his *Utopia* (1516). This famous portrait of More was painted by Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1498–1543) in 1527

citizens of England at the time. These are the characteristics of a utopia. They tell stories about good (and later bad) places, representing them as if they were real. Thus they show people going about their everyday lives and depict marriage and the family, education, meals, work, and the like, as well as the political and economic systems. It is this showing of everyday life transformed that characterizes a utopia, and utopianism is about just that transformation of the everyday.

While the word 'utopia' was coined by More, the idea already had a long and complex history. Utopias have been discovered that were written well before More invented the word, and new words have been added to describe different types of utopias, such as 'dystopia' meaning bad place, which, as far as we know, was first used in 1747 by Henry Lewis Younger (b. 1694) in his *Utopia: or, Apollo's Golden Days* and has become standard usage. And to call something 'utopian' has, from very early on, been a way of dismissing it as unrealistic.

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People have always been dissatisfied with the conditions of their lives and have created visions of a better and longer life and hoped for a continued and improved existence after death. And at some point, some worried about the possibility of a worse existence after death, thinking that however bad this life was, it could be worse. Thus, the first great division in utopianism, between the better and the worse, emerged very early on.

We can never know when someone first dreamed of a better life but must rely on when different individuals in different cultures first wrote down a version that has survived, and such visions occur in the earliest written records we have, such as a Sumerian clay tablet from 2000 BCE. The earliest utopias were very like dreams, completely out of human control, something that would come about naturally or because some god willed it.

All utopias ask questions. They ask whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that it could. Most utopias compare life in the present and life in the utopia and point out what is wrong with the way we now live, thus suggesting what needs to be done to improve things.

As with most topics, there are definitional disagreements. One issue that regularly confuses people stems from the failure to make the distinction between utopianism as a general category and the utopia as a literary genre. Thus, utopianism refers to the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society from the one in which the dreamers live. And utopianism, unlike much social theory, focuses on everyday life as well as matters concerned with economic, political, and social questions.

The range of the word can be seen in the description by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009) of the process by which a word that

emerged as an artificially concocted proper name has acquired, in the last two centuries, a sense so extended that it refers not only to a literary genre but to a way of thinking, to a mentality, to a philosophical attitude, and is being employed in depicting cultural phenomena going back into antiquity.

Here Kolakowski demonstrates the complexity of utopianism as it has evolved. I have called utopianism 'social dreaming'. The sociologist Ruth Levitas (b. 1949) calls it 'the desire for a better way of being, with the utopia as an aspect of the 'education of desire'. Within these broad categories are what I call 'the three faces of utopianism' - the literary utopia, utopian practice, and utopian social theory. And, as the quotations at the head of the chapter make clear, the word has come to mean different things to different people.

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Scholars today generally use one of two quite similar definitions for the literary utopia: the first is the literary theorist Darko Suvin's (b. 1930), the second mine:

The verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organised according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis.

A non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia or a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

Since writers of utopias keep inventing new forms for the presentation of their ideas, any definition must have somewhat porous boundaries, and contemporary utopias do not all look like what we previously called a utopia. In particular, they are more complex, less certain of their proposals, and intended for flawed humanity.

Utopian practice includes what are now most often called intentional communities, or communes, but were once called by many other things, including utopian communities, utopian experiments, and practical utopias. Here, there is no agreed-upon definition, but many scholars use mine, often with minor variations, which states that

an intentional community is a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose.

At one time, utopian practice was generally limited to such communities, but because the word 'utopia' is now used as a label for many types of social and political activity intended to bring about a better society and, in some cases, personal transformation, it is a broader category than it used to be. And all utopian practice is about the actual rather than the fictional transformation of the everyday. People joining intentional communities choose to experiment with their own lives, as do, in different ways, those who participate in other forms of utopian practice.

Utopian social theory includes: utopia as a method of analysis; the relationship between utopia and ideology first outlined by the social theorist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) in 1929 and used by others in various ways since then; the ways in which utopianism has been used to explain social change by thinkers like the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) and the Dutch sociologist Frederick L. Polak (1907-85); the role of utopianism in religion, particularly in Christian theology, in which it has been seen as variously heretical and essential; the role of utopianism in colonialism and postcolonialism; and the debates between globalizers and anti-globalizers. All of these approaches are considered in this book.

Utopianism and intentional communities are complex phenomena with long histories occurring in many different settings. As a result, they differ radically from time to time and place to place. Definition at a level of generalization that would capture everything may be a useful starting point but would tell us little about the actual phenomena as they occur. Thus we need to characterize the various sub-categories appropriately so that we both capture the connections and recognize the differences. And in particular, any discussion of intentional communities must be aware that every community has its own life cycle beginning with visions and pre-planning to birth, growth, maturation, and, often, death, with death possible at any point in a community's life.

And there can be fundamental disagreements over what constitutes a good place. The classic 20th-century case is psychologist B. F. Skinner's (1904–90) *Walden Two* (1948), a novel describing a small community that had been established by a behavioural psychologist, which many saw as clearly a good place and even a guide to the ideal intentional community. Some communities were founded on this model and some of those still exist. Others read the novel as a picture of a totalitarian society. And communities are perceived differently by those observing them from the outside and those living in them, and such perceptions change as the communities and the people change. For example, intentional communities are often seen as wonderful places to be a child and terrible places to be a teenager.

Utopianism

Literary utopias have at least six purposes, although they are not necessarily separable. A utopia can be simply a fantasy, it can be a description of a desirable or an undesirable society, an extrapolation, a warning, an alternative to the present, or a model to be achieved. And the intentional community as utopia adds a seventh purpose, to demonstrate that living a better life is possible in the here and now. The utopian views humanity and its future with either hope or alarm. If viewed with hope, the result is usually a utopia. If viewed with alarm, the result is usually a dystopia. But basically, utopianism is a philosophy of hope, and it is characterized by the transformation of generalized hope into a description of a non-existent society. Of course, hope can often be nothing more than a rather naive wish-fulfilment, such as in some fairy tales (albeit most fairy tales turn into dystopias if carefully analysed). On the other hand, hope is essential to any attempt to change society for the better. But this raises the possibility of someone attempting to impose their idea of what constitutes a desirable future on others who reject it. Utopians are always faced with this dilemma when they attempt to move their dream to reality – is their dream compatible with the imposition of their dream; can freedom be achieved through unfreedom, or equality through inequality?

There are good reasons for both the negative and the positive evaluations of utopianism reflected in the quotations at the beginning of this introduction, and those reasons are explored throughout the book. In the 20th century, negative evaluations were strong as a result of attempts to impose a specific version of the good life, particularly Communism in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere, but also including National Socialism in Germany and the Taliban version of Islamism in Afghanistan. Others have seen utopianism positively as the primary means of countering such attempts.

While aiming at a comprehensive and balanced presentation, I make an argument here. In its broadest outline, that argument is that utopianism is essential for the improvement of the human condition, and in this sense opponents of utopianism are both wrong and potentially dangerous. But I also argue that if used wrongly, and it has been, utopianism is itself dangerous, and in this sense supporters of utopianism are both wrong and potentially dangerous. Therefore, the conclusion both explores and attempts to rectify the contradictory nature of utopianism.

Introduction

Chapter 1

Good places and bad places

The two traditions: utopia before *Utopia*

Peace, first of all, was as readily available as washing-water. The earth didn't produce fear or diseases. Instead, what they needed appeared spontaneously, because every torrent-gully flowed with wine, and barley-cakes fought with loaves of bread around people's mouths, begging them to gulp down the whitest ones, if they would be so kind.

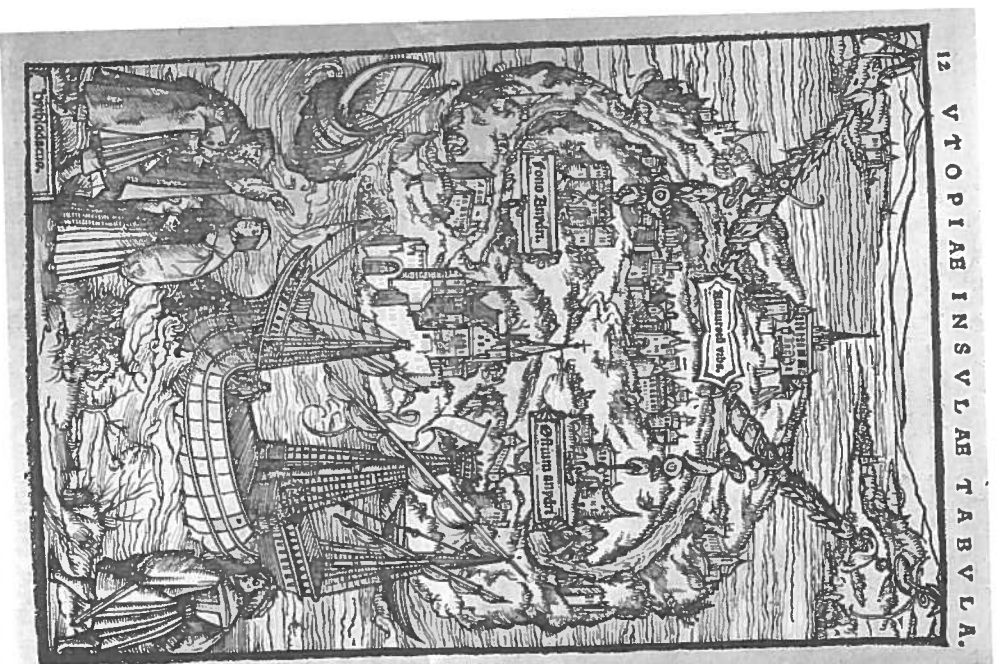
(Teleclides, *Amphictyonics*)

They did not marry wives, but had their women in common: the children so born were brought up in common and treated with equal affection by all. While they were infants the women who suckled them often exchanged their charges, so that even the mothers could not recognise their own children: consequently there was no jealousy among them, and they always lived without any quarrels, counting concord the chief of all blessings.

(Lambulus, *Helipolis*)

While the word 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More in 1516 and a genre of literature developed from his book, the idea of utopia is much older. The two quotations above and Illustrations 2 and 3 reflect two very different versions of the good life. One focuses on

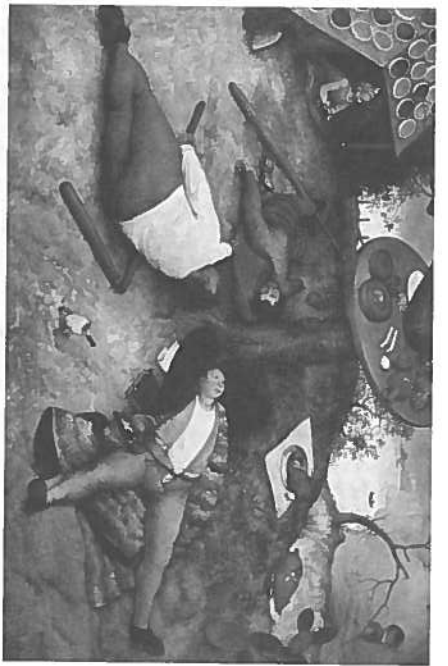
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Good places and bad places

2. The frontispiece to the 1518 edition of Thomas More's *Utopia* is a woodcut by Ambrosius Holbien (c. 1494–c. 1519) and depicts the country of Utopia

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3. Pieter Breughel the Elder's (c. 1525-69) painting of the *Land of Cockaigne* (1567) depicts the excess of drink and food that would be possible in Cockaigne, a land of plenty that many tales say can only be reached by the poor

pleasure, and bodily pleasure in particular, with plenty of food and drink at its centre, with, in some versions, lots of readily available sex. The other focuses on social organization. The first is fantasy and is brought into being by Nature, God, or the gods; the second is presented realistically and is brought about by human beings using their intelligence. Both versions are ancient and both continue today. For some, only the second qualifies as a utopia, but others see the first as an important current in the river that is utopia.

The first has been called 'the utopia of escape' and 'the body utopia', and there is no culture without such utopias. In the traditions that make up its history in the West, it is found in the biblical Eden, Greek and Roman stories of the earthly paradise and the idea of a golden race or age in the past, and the Irish 'Vision of MacConglinne'. It moves into the 'world turned upside down' tradition with Saturnalia, the Feast of Fools, Cockaigne, and early versions of Carnival, all of which temporarily place the poor and oppressed in positions of power and their supposed superiors

under them for a day or a week. It tends to be created anew and re-emerge in suppressed groups and in times of economic hardship.

The classic myths

While there were differences among these myths, they had much in common. Some parts were stated positively: humans and the gods were close and the earth spontaneously produced an abundance of food and whatever else people needed. But most were stated negatively and were concerned with solving the problems of the present: there was no fear of wild animals; there was no human conflict; there was no need to work; there was no commerce or government because they were not needed. Both the beginning and ending of life were easy: women gave birth without pain or there was no birth; there was no death, hence no need for birth, or an easy death. Some of them also explained how we got from the good life to the hardships of the present. For example, disobedience to God in Eden led to fear, toil, death, and pain in giving birth.

The most influential of these early myths are creation myths like the golden age and earthly paradise and myths of the afterlife like the Islands of the Blest, where heroes go after death, and Hades. Such myths from ancient Greece and Rome, Sumer, and early Judaism were central to the development of Western utopianism, and similar myths, such as the Chinese 'Peach Blossom Spring', are found in most early civilizations. The classic Western statement of the golden age is that of the Greek poet Hesiod (late 8th century BCE), who wrote:

Golden was the race of speech-endowed human beings which the immortals, who have their mansions on Olympus, made first of all. They lived at the time of Cronus, when he was king in the sky; just like gods they spent their lives, with a spirit free from care, entirely apart from toil and distress. Worthless old age did not oppress them, but they were always the same in feet and hands, and delighted in festivities, lacking in all evils; and they died as if overpowered by sleep. They had all good things: the

grain-giving field bore crops of its own accord, much and unstinting, and they themselves, willing, mild-mannered, shared out the fruits of the labour together with many good things, wealthy in sheep, dear to the blessed gods.

But the version of the golden age that passed down into the Middle Ages was that of the Roman author Ovid (43 BCE to 17/18 CE). While Hesiod stressed abundance shared equally, a joyful life, and an easy death, Ovid, responding to current issues, added freedom from law courts, a local community, and no war, saying:

In the beginning was the Golden Age, when men of their own accord, without threat of punishment, without laws, maintained good faith and did what was right. There were no penalties to be afraid of, no bronze tablets were erected, carrying threats of legal action, no crowd of wrong-doers, anxious for mercy, trembled before the face of their judge: indeed, there were no judges, men lived securely without them. Never yet had any pine tree, cut down from its home on the mountains been launched on ocean's waves, to visit foreign lands: men knew only their own shores. Their cities were not yet surrounded by sheer moats, they had no straight brass trumpets, no coiling brass helmets and no swords. The peoples of the world, untroubled by any fears, enjoyed a leisurely and peaceful existence, and had no use for soldiers.

The changes Ovid made show how these stories reflected current issues even as they appear to be out of time altogether.

The quotation from Teleclides at the beginning of this chapter is another example of life in the age of Cronus, and the Roman poet Lucian of Samosato (c. 125 to after 180) has Cronus say:

during my week the serious is barred; no business allowed.
Drinking and being drunk, noise and games and dice, appointing
of kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping of
tremulous hands, an occasional ducking of corked faces in icy
water, – such are the functions over which I preside.

The Roman festival of Saturn, known as the Saturnalia, was an actual festival in which the golden age was to return briefly, where masters waited on servants and the rich fed the poor and, in some versions, forgave debts. For all, there was gluttony and a degree of sexual freedom. And, without the gluttony and sexual freedom, the idea of a period in which debts are forgiven, thus giving the debtor a fresh start, is enshrined in the Old Testament, 'every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it to his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed' (Deuteronomy 15:2).

In the Middle Ages, descendants of Saturnalia, such as Carnival, when the poor ruled for a time, and the Feast of Fools, in which the Church hierarchy was briefly reversed and which was particularly popular in France, caused serious problems. From time to time, Carnival got out of hand, at least from the point of view of those in power, because the powerless thought that the reversal should last longer than a few days. And the Feast of Fools was vigorously suppressed by the Church. Carnival still exists in some places such as New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro, but it is no longer considered a threat.

In the Middle Ages, the Greek and Roman gods were dropped and a similar story known as the Cockaigne, or Cokayne, which has been called 'the poor man's paradise', developed in a number of European countries. One medieval version of the Cockaigne says:

There are rivers broad and fine
Of oil, milk, honey and of wine;
Water serveth there no thing
But for sight and for washing.
Many fruits grow in that place
For all delight and sweet solace.

This imagery occurs again and again under different names throughout history. When everything seems hopeless, fantasy can be particularly powerful.

The Roman writer Virgil (70-19 BCE) made significant changes to the myths. First, and most importantly, in his famous Fourth Eclogue, also known as the messianic Eclogue, he moved the past golden age to the future. Second, the better world became based on human activity rather than simply being a gift from the gods: people work, primarily in agriculture, and this continues as the myth of the happy peasant or farmer, a more realistic – if still idealized – vision. This myth has never died and exists today as a substantial part of modern utopianism.

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Virgil's images of the simple life in Arcadia are something of a transition between the fantasy of the first tradition and the human-created utopia of the second. And it is the human-created societies depicted by Greek and Roman writers that are most similar to More's *Utopia* and the works that followed it. This branch of the utopian tradition gives people hope because it is more realistic and because it focuses on humans solving human problems, such as adequate food, housing, and clothing and security, rather than relying on Nature or the gods.

In the West, the formal utopia appears to have originated in classical Greece, with descriptions of the Greek city-state Sparta being the most influential. The Greek writer Plutarch (46-120 CE) described the motivation of Lycurgus, the supposed founder of Sparta, and the description could well fit others, saying,

He was convinced that a partial change of the laws would be of no avail whatsoever, but that he must proceed as a physician would with a patient who was debilitated and full of all sorts of diseases; he must reduce and alter the existing temperament by means of drugs and purges, and introduce a new and different regimen.

The society Lycurgus may have instituted at Sparta was based on the most rigorous equality among citizens, but only among citizens (there were slaves, and women were not citizens). Sparta was a

military regime, and in Lycurgus's Sparta every person was to completely dedicate themselves to the country. They were to lose themselves in the whole; 'he trained his fellow-citizens to have neither the wish nor the ability to live for themselves'.

Many commentators connect Sparta with the *Republic*, the best-known utopia of the Greek philosopher Plato (428/27-348/47 BCE), which is treated as the fount of Western utopianism. The *Republic* is primarily concerned with developing an understanding of justice. It is a typical Platonic dialogue of the early to middle period in which a question is set by Socrates (469-399 BCE) and a process of question and answer takes place until a number of positions have been presented, all of which are rejected by Socrates. He then provides his own answer, gradually dominating the discussion, turning it into a monologue with only the most perfunctory interjections from the others.

The society Plato describes in the *Republic* is the closest possible approximation to the ideal society. It has three classes, corresponding to the three fundamental elements of the soul or psyche. These classes are the philosopher-kings (or reason), the auxiliaries (or the spirited element), and the artisans (who represent temperance or moderation). Most of the *Republic* is concerned with the first two classes, known collectively as the guardians, and Plato tells us little about the vast majority of the population, except to imply that in this well-regulated city-state, or *polis*, each individual will be fitted into the vocation that best suits him or her. As a result, everyone will be happy.

However, any society created by humans can only be a poor reflection of the ideal, and it must fail. Plato explores the process of failure at considerable length; in doing so, he develops a theory of corruption and applies it to both individuals and societies. The important thing here is not the theory but the underlying point that there cannot be a perfect society or human being on this earth. The best we can achieve is an approximation, which will inevitably collapse.

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While the essential ingredients (harmony, knowledge, the good life of the good person) of the *Laws*, Plato's other major utopia, are identical to those of the *Republic*, the way these are achieved is different. There is the obvious difference that the *polis* of the *Laws* is based on law whereas the *polis* of the *Republic* is based on human wisdom as personified in philosopher-kings. It seems that Plato, despairing of finding or creating the conditions for developing philosopher-kings, was determined to provide the next best thing: the law code philosopher-kings would lay down for a *polis* unable to reach the level of the *polis* of the *Republic*. He even provided a substitute for the philosopher-kings in a nocturnal council which could overturn the laws if it chose.

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Greek utopians, including Plato, had as a basic assumption what we call the small or face-to-face community. It was inconceivable to them that a good society could be a large one in which citizens could not all regularly meet and converse. The idea that something bigger might be possible surfaced only as Greece declined and Rome grew.

The first great anti-utopian, the Greek writer of comedies Aristophanes (448-380 BCE), wrote at the same time and discussed many of the same themes as the utopian writers. From the utopian perspective, the most important of his plays was *Ecclesiazusae*, or *Women in Parliament*, in which a group of women succeeded in taking over the legislative assembly and enacting a form of communism. Their legislation failed not because it was bad but because the human race was not capable of the required altruism. This is a standard reason given for rejecting utopias. A similar point was made by Aristophanes in *Plutus*, in which the blind god of wealth is given sight, whereupon he redistributes wealth to the deserving, and then human greed rapidly redistributes it again inequitably.

Since the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) rejected Plato's utopia and poured scorn on the other ideal states which he

discussed, he is not usually considered a utopian, but in Book VII of the *Politics*, Aristotle provided the basic characteristics of an ideal state in some detail.

Aristotle believed the best state to be one as close to self-sufficiency as possible within the limits imposed by a small population and territory, and his utopia was based on the possibility of citizens knowing each other. Also, Aristotle's utopia provided the best life for its citizens: the life of the mind, or the contemplative life, which is not a withdrawn, solitary life but the life of intellectual intercourse. Aristotle believed that this would require that there be non-citizens to do the demeaning labour, thereby freeing the citizens to lead the full life. At other places, he discussed, in more general terms, the characteristics of what might be called the best possible state.

Myths and literature after More

After More wrote *Utopia*, most of the myths gradually lost their power, but their essence continued in cockaigne-like African-American tales that are found in parallel with the spirituals that gave a foretaste of the glories of the afterlife, and songs of the 1930s depression in the United States such as 'The Sweet Potato Mountains' and 'The Big Rock Candy Mountains'.

One slave story tells of being convinced

that in Arkansas the hogs just laying around already baked with the knives and forks sticking in them ready for to be et, and that there was fritter ponds everywhere with the fritters a-frying in them ponds of grease, and there was money trees where all you had to do was to pick the money often 'em like picking cotton often the stalk...

And 'The Sweet Potato Mountains' contains the refrain

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Oh, cigarette vines and ham 'n' egg trees, And bread sprouts from the ground, Where white-line springs squirt booze to your knees, And there's plenty to go 'round'.

A variant of the traditional myth can be seen in the novel and film *Lost Horizon* (1933, film directed by Frank Capra 1937) loosely based on the myth of Shambhala, a Tibetan Buddhist legend of a mythical kingdom hidden somewhere in inner Asia where some of the Bodhisattvas, the most enlightened Buddhists, live. In the novel, this becomes Shangri-la, a lost community in Tibet in which people live extremely long lives.

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This is not the place for a history of utopian literature, but it is necessary to say something about it and how it was used. Post-More utopias have often been characterized as focusing on the city. The historian and architectural critic Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) in particular argued that the city and the utopia were closely linked, and the following quotations from utopias from the late 19th and mid-20th centuries illustrate views of utopian architecture.

At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller enclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side.

(Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*)

She saw... a river, little no account buildings, strange structures like long-legged birds with sails that turned in the wind, a few large terracotta and yellow buildings and one blue dome, irregular buildings, none bigger than a supermarket in her day, an ordinary supermarket in any shopping plaza. The bird objects were the

tallest things around and they were scarcely higher than some of the pine trees she could see. A few lumpy free-form structures with green vines.

(Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*)

Contrary to much commentary, which tends to see utopia up to the middle of the 20th century as representing some form of common ownership, utopias have been written from every conceivable position. There are socialist, capitalist, monarchical, democratic, anarchist, ecological, feminist, patriarchal, egalitarian, hierarchical, racist, left-wing, right-wing, reformist, free love, nuclear family, extended family, gay, lesbian, and many more utopias, and all these types were published between 1516 and the middle of the 20th century, before diversity really took hold. And, because there is a strong anti-utopian tradition, the number could be doubled by simply putting 'anti-' in front of any of these words, and after the early 20th century there have been dystopias written reflecting all these positions.

All these different works were responding to issues that their authors thought were important to bringing about a better society. Most of the issues are perennial, such as law and order, religious belief and practice, economic relations, governance, and child-rearing and education. But the importance of the issues changes depending on the time in which the utopias were written. Utopias are reflections of the issues that were important to the period in which their authors lived.

The solutions proposed are more limited in type, if not in detail, than the issues – a reformed religion that is actually practised by believers, new laws or law codes that are enforced fairly, better economic systems, improved political systems, better education, and intelligent use of science and technology are among the most common solutions. Many utopias are nostalgic in that they look back to an idealized past which is then moved into the future, with

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the utopia found in living the cleaned-up version rather than the way people had actually lived. Other standard themes include a simpler life and getting a better balance between the city and country. But all of these have also been presented as being done poorly or to advantage particular individuals or groups (economic, gender, power, and so forth) and producing dystopias. For the utopian, human intelligence and ingenuity know no bounds; for the dystopian, human greed and stupidity know no bounds. And both appear to be right.

As with any genre of literature, there have been certain well-known texts or writers that appear to define the genre. While less-known texts may actually be more typical of their period, it is the best-known works that drive the literature on.

More's *Utopia*

More's *Utopia* is a complicated little book and interpreters have claimed it for radically different positions, from traditional Roman Catholicism to British imperialism to Marxism, sometimes by simply ignoring the complexity of the book and at other times making it even more complex. One set of problems stems from the fact that *Utopia* appears on the surface to be straightforward while it is quite playful and satirical. And generations of translators have misled their readers by ignoring the wordplay that would have been obvious to those reading the original Latin. There is not a lot of it, but when you discover that Anydrus, the name of the main river, means 'no water' and the surname of the person describing Utopia, Hythlodæus, means 'speaker of nonsense', you must begin to wonder. But Raphael, Hythlodæus's first name, means 'healer from God', so you cannot draw a clear conclusion. In a letter to Peter Giles, published in the 1517 edition of *Utopia*, More satirically commented on the play on words. Discussing a critic who could not tell whether *Utopia* was truth or fiction, More commented that if it had been fiction he would have indicated it. He wrote:

Thus, if I had done nothing else than impose names on ruler, river, city, and island such as might suggest to the more learned that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the ruler without a people, it would have been much wittier than what I actually did. Unless the faithfulness of an historian had been binding on me, I am not so stupid as to have preferred to use those barbarous and meaningless names, Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus.

But Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus do mean the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the ruler without a people.

Another problem is that *Utopia* includes institutions presented positively that either were against Roman Catholic Church teachings, like voluntary euthanasia, or that More rejected later in life, like religious toleration. For some interpreters, a means must be found that excludes these institutions; St Thomas More, who died for his beliefs, must never have thought differently than his interpreters believed he should or, like his close friend the Dutch humanist and theologian Erasmus (1466/69–1536), playfully tried out ideas that he later came to reject.

In modern eyes, the society described in *Utopia* is not very attractive; it is authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal, and practises slavery for relatively minor offences. But through the eyes of an early 16th-century reader, these things were the norm, and slavery in Utopia was a more humane punishment than many that would have been imposed at the time, when some minor offences were punished by death. And, most importantly, no one in Utopia was poor or rich, achieved by reducing demand, everyone working, sharing equally, and living simply. Thus, to many in the 16th century, Utopia would have seemed like paradise.

Satire

The satire running throughout More's *Utopia* is fundamental to both utopian traditions because one of the functions of most utopias is to hold the present up to ridicule and, in doing so, many utopias use a typical tool of satire, exaggeration. And in some, like the English novelist Samuel Butler's (1835–1902) *Erewhon or Over the Range* (1872), it is impossible to be certain what, if any, positive position is being advocated. In *Erewhon*, for example, criminals are treated as sick and sent to doctors, but the sick are thrown in jail. A small sub-genre that can be called 'Erewhonian' has developed from this book.

More typical is the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift's (1667–1745) *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* (1726), now known as *Gulliver's Travels*. The fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* is the good place in the book, but its dominant inhabitants are horses not humans. The humans, Yahoos, are animalistic and the horses, Houyhnhnms, are rational, so what is Swift saying about humans and about reason? *Gulliver's Travels* gave rise to a large sub-genre known as Gulliveriana, little of which is as subtle as the original, with much of the literature simply endowing some animal with human characteristic. Recently, much has been written about Gulliver's wife, whom he regularly abandoned.

Around the same time that Swift was writing, the English writer Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) published *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* (1719), now known as *Robinson Crusoe*, which was based on a real incident in which a man, the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk (1676–1721), was shipwrecked alone on an isolated island for four years. Since Crusoe is alone and not particularly content for most of the novel, it is hard to see it as positive or negative, and that does not change when Crusoe is joined by Friday, a native of a nearby island whom Crusoe rescues from cannibals. But *Robinson Crusoe* gave rise to a large sub-genre, the Robinsonade, that is often utopian and usually includes a group of people being shipwrecked,

the best known being *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812–13) by the Swiss writer Johann David Wyss (1743–1818), which was made into a popular film.

The Bellamy effect

The great utopians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were the American Edward Bellamy (1850–98) and the English writers William Morris (1834–96) and H. G. Wells (1866–1946). Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887 A.D.* (1888) sold very well around the world and produced a substantial upsurge in the production of utopias that lasted until World War I. Bellamy's utopia was set in a future Boston, Massachusetts, that had evolved into a society where the antagonism between capitalism and labour had been overcome. As corporations became bigger and bigger and became monopolies controlling most of the economy, they were nationalized or simply taken over by the state, with workers becoming employees of the state. Hours of work varied based on the unpleasantness and danger of the work, and everyone retired at 45.

William Morris wrote a review of *Looking Backward* in which he deplored Bellamy's 'machine-life' with its emphasis on making work tolerable by reducing the amount of work rather than reducing 'the pain of labour to a minimum'. Morris then wrote *News from Nowhere, or, An Epoch of Rest* (1890) to depict a society that stressed craftsmanship and the local community. Whereas Bellamy has an elaborate political system, Morris uses the Houses of Parliament to store manure and says 'we have no longer anything which you would call politics'. Bellamy wrote a generally favourable review of *News from Nowhere*, although he said it needed more detail.

But the most prolific writer of utopias was H. G. Wells, who wrote both positive utopias and dystopias. While they vary widely, there are central themes. One is the conflict between capital and labour, what might happen if it is not solved, and how to solve it. Another is the desirability of world government.

Wells is best described as a pessimistic utopian, a man who believed that it was possible to radically improve human life but doubted that the willpower to do so would be found. He never gave up hope, but he never stopped doubting either. *The Time Machine* (1895), one of Wells's earliest and most successful novels, is set far in the future with the descendants of capital and labour still in conflict. Most of his other utopias and dystopias are set in nearer futures and some, particularly the dystopias, can be read as stages towards the future depicted in *The Time Machine*, with the division between the capital and labour becoming more and more extreme. The utopias and much of Wells's non-utopian political writings suggest ways that the negative futures can be avoided. Wells believed that intelligence, particularly scientific intelligence, applied to social problems was the answer. In *A Modern Utopia* (1905), he depicts an association of men and women, called the Samurais, who, living according to a strict code of behaviour and dedicated to service, had created and maintained the much better society Wells believed possible.

He called for the creation of such a group, which he most frequently called 'the Open Conspiracy', in many works, and he advocated many reforms, from birth control to a world encyclopedia, as small steps in the right direction. Wells was clearly frustrated that his ideas were not adopted more often, and he worked hard to sell his ideas and to improve education, particularly scientific education, in the hope that a better-educated population would be more receptive to his proposals. But Wells is best known for his non-utopian science fiction, his dystopias, and some of his comic novels, rather than for his utopias and his political writing.

The growth of the dystopia

And with World Wars I and II, the flu epidemic, the Depression, the Korean War, the war in Vietnam, and other events of the 20th century, dystopias became the dominant form of utopian literature. While the word 'dystopia' was first used in the middle of

the 18th century, and the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) used it in a speech in Parliament in 1868, the literary form and the use of the word to describe it did not become common until well into the 20th century.

In 1883, Francis Galton (1822–1911) coined the term 'eugenic' referring to the ability to produce superior offspring, with specific reference to humans rather than animals. A movement developed with the idea of improving the human stock through selective breeding for certain characteristics (positive eugenics) or selective breeding to avoid certain characteristics (negative eugenics). Many utopias were written, including two unpublished ones by Galton ('Kantsaywhere' and 'The Donoghues of Dunno Weir'), reflecting this movement. Many of the utopias, including Galton's, believing that selective breeding alone would not be enough to produce the desired result, were as concerned with the social conditions into which children were born and how they were raised as they were with the physical and moral characteristics of the parents. Other works were primarily concerned with selective breeding, focusing on the elimination of undesirable characteristics by prohibiting people who exhibited them from having children or by requiring people with the desired characteristics to have children with each other. Both approaches produced dystopias, either by virtue of disagreements over the traits chosen or worries about the potential for misuse of the power to make the choices.

Proposals to select on racial and ethnic grounds were common and, where the power to do so existed, put into practice. The best-known programme was that of Germany under the National Socialists, when people with characteristics designated for elimination were not merely prevented from having children but were killed. Less well known, Germany also practised positive eugenics, breeding people with desired traits. Utopias were published in Germany and other countries depicting the better society to be produced by such programmes.

There were a number of Nazi utopias published, such as Ernst Bergmann's *Deutschland, das Bildungsland der neuen Menschen (Germany, the Cultural Land of the New Man; 1933)*, but there were also a large number of anti-German and anti-Nazi dystopias, with *Swastika Night (1937)* by Katherine Burdick (1896-1963), writing as Murray Constantine, among the most powerful.

The same period that produced many anti-German and anti-Soviet dystopias also saw the publication of three outstanding works: the Russian Evgeny Zamiatin's (1884-1937) *We* (written in Russian in 1920, but first published in English in 1924), and the English writers Aldous Huxley's (1894-1963) *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's (born Eric Blair, 1903-50) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); Orwell insisted that the title be spelled out). While all three target the misuse of power, each is a many-faceted, complex work with multiple concerns, and they all attack capitalism as much as they attack communism. All three depict partially failed attempts to control the power of sexual desire. *We* licenses sexual behaviour in a way that is meant to meet individual needs; *Brave New World* insists on promiscuity; and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* severely restricts sex. And all three imply that this may be an area that even a totalitarian regime would not be able to control.

Huxley wrote in *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) that he had simply projected into the future things that he had observed at the time of writing and that had worried him, and that 25 years later, the future of *Brave New World* seemed to be coming much faster than he had expected in the 1930s. He had also written that if he were to rewrite *Brave New World*, he would have provided a more positive alternative, and he did just that in his utopia *Island* (1962), which depicts a good society in which promiscuity is transformed into free love, with the emphasis on love; the drug Soma, used in *Brave New World* to escape from problems, is replaced with Moksha Medicine (akin to peyote or LSD), which leads to enlightenment; and the other negatives of *Brave New World* become positives, at least partially through the power of

religion. But at the end, the utopia is crushed by the outside world because it has oil.

Huxley's projection or extrapolation into the future of trends he saw around him became the norm for dystopias. While dystopias tend to differ from utopias in not being described by an outside visitor but from within, they are clearly connected to the present in which they are written. In that connection, they provide an explicitly positive message to go with the negative one. They say, as H. G. Wells constantly said, that this is what will happen if we fail to act, but if we do act, this future can still be avoided. Most writers of dystopias left it at that, as a warning, but Wells put much effort into spelling out just what he thought needed to be done and how to do it.

While the dystopia became the dominant literary form of the 20th century, the utopia was not displaced, and at the same time that the great dystopias of the first half of the 20th century were being published, there were many utopias published, and utopian movements flourished particularly during the 1930s depression. In the USA, the novelist Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) combined the two, writing a number of utopias such as *We, People of America and How We Ended Poverty* (1935) and running to be governor of California with a programme called EPIC, or End Poverty in California. Also, the technocracy movement that proposed replacing politicians with engineers and scientists produced a number of utopias, notably *Life in a Technocracy* (1933) by Harold Loeb (1891-1974). Other similar movements emerged in most countries faced with the economic and social problems of the time. But as the possibility of war became of greater and greater concern, the dystopia dominated the scene until after World War II.

In Britain, both during the war and in the immediate aftermath, works such as J. B. Priestley's (1894-1984) 'They Came to a City' (1944) and C. E. M. Joad's (1891-1953) *The Adventures of the Young Soldier in Search of the Better World* (1943) speculated

about the better society that could be created after victory was achieved. After the Labour Party won the 1945 election, books like James Hanley's (1901–85) *What Farrar Saw* (1946) and Somerset De Chair's (1911–95) *The Teetotalitarian State* (1947) satirized Labour Party policy.

The 'Sixties'

While utopias were published throughout the period that the dystopia dominated, they went unnoticed until the upsurge in utopianism in the so-called 'Sixties' (the actual dates varied from country to country). Much of the utopian impulse in this period led to the streets, to, for example, the 1968 uprising in Czechoslovakia, the 1968 rebellion in Paris with its explicitly utopian message '*Le réalisme qui demande l'impossible*' ('Be realistic, demand the impossible'), and the civil rights movement in the United States. In addition, many intentional communities, then universally known as communes, were founded, many of which still exist over 40 years later. And utopian literature flourished, but it was a literature with a difference, a chastened literature that knew that achieving a better society would not be easy. Its societies were populated with men and women with real human strengths and weaknesses, and even the much better societies still have problems, even serious ones. Ursula K. Le Guin's (b. 1929) *The Dispossessed* (1974) had the subtitle *An Ambiguous Utopia*, and that subtitle fits many of the other works published at the time. The literary scholar Tom Moylan (b. 1943) called these works 'critical utopias', the political theorist Lucy Sargisson (b. 1964), focusing on feminist utopianism, called them 'transgressive utopias', and I have called some of them 'flawed utopias' to illustrate the way in which some authors, like Ursula K. Le Guin in her *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (1973), present what appears to be a utopia but may in fact be a dystopia.

The feminist utopia was the most important of the streams coming out of Sixties utopianism and produced most of the novels

of the period that are still read. In 1972, Joanna Russ (b. 1937) published an essay entitled 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write', arguing that contemporary societies were so sexist that only by inventing new worlds was it possible for women to create fully rounded female characters. And feminist utopianism was a significant part of the feminist movement. The best-known feminist utopias were Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's (b. 1936) *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and a number of short stories by Alice Bradley Sheldon (1915–87) writing as James Tiptree, Jr, such as 'Houston Houston, Do You Read?' (1976).

Utopia today

Aspects of the utopianism of the Sixties were part of long-term changes in Western societies, but there was a backlash against these changes, and, while utopias continued to be published, utopian literature mostly returned to the dystopia. Except for lesbian utopias, feminist utopias almost disappeared in the 1990s, although there has been a resurgence since 2000. The great exception to the return to the dystopia has been in the environmental utopia. Certainly, many dystopias have depicted the horrors of a future environmental collapse, but Kim Stanley Robinson (b. 1952) and others have published important environmental utopias. Robinson has published two trilogies with environmental themes, the Mars trilogy (1992, 1993, 1996) and a climate change/global warming trilogy whose first volume, *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), depicts the dystopia brought about by the failure of politicians to deal with global warming and the two other volumes, *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005) and *Sixty Days and Counting* (2007), deal with a change in policy and its ultimately positive results. And the whole subgenre of the ecotopia, named after Ernest Callenbach's (b. 1928) 1975 novel of that name is today the strongest utopian current, and many ecotopias are also feminist, so that the two strongest currents of the last 50 years are now often combined. For example, novels by Sally Miller Gearhart (b. 1931) such as

The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women (1978) and *The Magister* (2003) combine both feminist and ecological perspectives.

Utopian literature is constantly changing, adding new forms. Today, most is complex or ambiguous, presenting better but flawed societies, or worse societies with something still good about them. A recent change is the migration of utopias to the internet and publish-on-demand publishers (it regularly appeared in pod's previous incarnation, 'vanity' presses). Works posted on the web and pod publications are more likely to read like some of the older utopias, with simple, one-size-fits-all answers to complex questions, but some, like Merritt Abrash's (b. 1930) *Mindful of Utopia* (2002), are as complex as other contemporary works. Such forms of publication have added to the contemporary growth of utopian literature, but, as with many past utopias, much of it goes unread, to the frustration of its authors.

Utopianism

Chapter 2

Utopian practice

Over the centuries, many individuals and groups have attempted to put their visions into practice. Some tried to gain political power to do so (few succeeded) and others created social movements (with greater success). Those utopians who gained political power often created dystopias rather than utopias, with, in the 20th century, countries like Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Cambodia/Kampuchea under Pol Pot (1928–98) being noteworthy examples.

But the most common form of putting a specific vision into practice has been to create a small community either to withdraw from the larger society to practise the beliefs of its members without interference or to demonstrate to the larger society that their utopia could be put into practice. Although he denied the utopian connection, the historian Arthur Eugene Bestor, Jr (1908–94) called the latter 'patent-office models of the good society', a label that actually makes the utopian connection.

In addition, small, temporary actions are now being seen as utopian because they generally employ a utopian image against the dystopia that, as their proponents see it, they oppose. These actions take place in many different ways, from performance to protest.