

## utopia

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“Utopia” refers to images of an ideal society; its opposite is “dystopia,” visions of the worst society. Utopian visions make moral principles more concrete in a way that can guide us in creating new and different ways of organizing society and economy. Thus, utopianism represents a radical extension of normative economics.

### Nature of utopias

As Geoffrey Hodgson (1995) argues, utopian visions have been central to the putatively anti-utopian economics of Friedrich Hayek, Karl MARX and Thomas Malthus. Most modern economists adopt a utopian vision based on principles of laissez-faire, a descendant of Adam Smith's conception of the natural liberty of isolated individuals working harmoniously through markets and exchange, with little positive role for government. Though the Arrow-Debreu general equilibrium model indicates that the assumptions necessary to the existence and stability of this ideal are unrealistic, laissez-faire forms the intellectual basis of the dominant school of normative economics and of current neo-liberal ideology. On the other hand, most utopian thinking (with exceptions, such as *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, by Robert Heinlein) is collectivist, emphasizing values of reason, justice and solidarity.

When Thomas More coined the word “utopia,” he merged two Greek words meaning “good place” and “no place.” A typical utopia is thus a morally ideal situation seen as

unobtainable given current political, economic, societal and technological conditions. A serious utopian goes beyond fanciful visions of the “Garden of Eden” variety, pre-utopian images of the “Golden Age” of the past, and satire such as Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and tries to explain how his or her vision would be feasible if these given conditions were to change. The more useful utopias rely not on unreal technology or on radical alterations of human character, but on reorganized societal arrangements which can spawn improved techniques, incentives and personalities. Despite their unreachability, utopian visions have been used as yardsticks for judging actually existing societies, as guides to policy and practice, or as inspirations for changing the world.

What follows is an incomplete survey of some utopian contributions to political economy. As Kumar (1986) points out, almost all developed utopian thinking comes from the “Western” tradition. This may be because utopian dreams are encouraged by the disruption of tradition and the injustices arising from modernization and commercialization, a process that has gone further in the “West.”

### Plato and More's utopias

Plato's *Republic*, the first known utopia, is also the earliest to argue the idea that people can benefit from the DIVISION OF LABOR. However, rather than representing a mode of cooperation amongst atomistic individuals, his division of labor represents internal relations of an organic whole. Plato aimed to make that whole healthy, to embody his ideal of JUSTICE. The social and political structure (involving hierarchy, censorship, and an artificial civic religion, among other things) fostered the development of moral character in its governing guardians. This character insured the reproduction of the system over time. Following Plato, and in stark contrast to neoclassical economics, the endogeneity of human character is a common utopian theme, implying the need for an ideal social organization to foster personal development.

Thomas More's *Utopia*, in 1516, updates the

*Republic*, presenting a more concrete picture of a society that serves all basic needs. Though written as a satire, it was a critique of the society of his time, specifically of the British enclosure movement and the replacement of feudal agrarian society by commercial capitalism. Need and the workday were reduced by more efficient organization, partly via the abolition of unemployment and unproductive work. Goods are produced by all in a collectivist way and distributed freely; scholarly learning is emphasized. This system was organized in a relatively egalitarian and democratic way (for More's time), idealizing traditional village or monastic life. Making it successful was the assumption of a wise Founder and a religion that abolished the sin of pride. Symbolizing More's anti-commercialism, gold is used to make chamber pots.

More's image of a small faraway island ideal has been the dominant image, even as utopians embraced Rousseau's republican ideas, visions of non-capitalist progress and modern technology. For recent examples, see Theodor Hertzka's imperialist but innovative *Freeland* (1890), Charlotte Perkins GILMAN's feminist *Herland* (1915), B.F. Skinner's social-scientific *Walden Two* (1948), or Aldous Huxley's Buddhist and drug-using *Island* (1962).

### Utopian socialists

In the nineteenth century, utopians attempted to put their ideas into practice, mostly in the Americas. First came the agrarian and uniformitarian tradition of religious colonists and the followers of Etienne Cabet. Later, Robert Owen proposed and set up paternalistic and social reforming industrial "Villages of Unity and Mutual Cooperation" based on his success at New Lanark. The followers of Charles Fourier tried to put into practice his ideas of rural phalansteries that promised to liberate human passions, including sexual ones, and to make work a joyful activity. William Lane attempted to set up a rural communist utopia in Paraguay in the 1890s. Though most of these efforts failed, a small number of the utopian colonies survive until the present.

Going beyond small-scale colonization was Edward Bellamy's best-selling *Looking Backward* (1888), which envisioned a "nationalist" utopia for the United States as a whole. Translated into many languages, its technocratic vision (akin to that of Henri de Saint-Simon) provoked a large spate of utopian and dystopian thinking. This book portrays a large-scale planned economy with no money or private property in physical goods, centered on serving each person "from cradle to grave" according to his or her needs. Bellamy suggested practical solutions to class strife in a way that, bolstered by patriotic pride, would motivate workers to labor from each according to their abilities. Products were distributed using a system of central disbursement and debit cards (which had an equal value per year per person). Unlike most utopians, Bellamy suggested that his utopia was not only possible but likely, as an automatic result of the centralization of capital. Because of Karl Marx's refusal to provide utopian "recipes for the cook-shops of the future" and the similarities of many of Bellamy's ideas to those of crude Marxism, Bellamy's undemocratic planned economy may have influenced the Bolsheviks' grasping for ways to organize the Soviet economy. Aspects of Bellamy's utopia influenced the work of Thorstein VEBLEN.

If Bellamy represents the undemocratic "socialism from above" tradition, William Morris's response, *News from Nowhere* (1891), exemplifies the ideal of "socialism from below." It finds its roots in utopian popular uprisings, such as those of the Levelers and Diggers during the English Civil War. Morris posits his utopia as arising from a process of workers' class struggle (violently resisted by the capitalists). Its political system is that of grassroots community democracy, while the Parliament building is used to store dung. Most interesting to economists is the abolition of scarcity: the pleasure inherent in doing craft-type work under one's own control increases the supply of commodities, while the pleasure of working cooperatively with one's friends makes even the drudge work pleasant. Yet more obnoxious tasks would be done with

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automated technology or abolished. On the other hand, the demand for products is lower, since people no longer have to consume to fill psychological voids imposed by alienation, to compensate for their boring and dominated working lives (see CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AND EMULATION). In effect, prices are zero. Finally, Morris's emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of life produces one of the first ecological utopias, preserving not only nature but beautiful old buildings.

### Twentieth-century dystopias and utopias

While the nineteenth century evoked a wave of utopian dreams, most of the twentieth century elicited dystopian nightmares, from Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907), to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), to George Orwell's *1984* (1948). The first predicted the rise of fascism; the second critiques Henry Ford-style capitalism; the third lambastes Stalinism and Bellamy-style socialism. But the New Left of the 1960s sparked utopias concerned with ecology, sexism, racism and authoritarianism. Notable here are Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Ursula LeGuinn's *The Dispossessed*. Though such novels have broadened the concerns of utopians beyond narrow "industrial" issues, they stand on the shoulders of the giants discussed above.

### See also:

anarchism; liberation theology; Mondragón; participatory democracy and self-management; socialism and communism

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