

Utopian Economics

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13.1 THE GENRE

Utopian economics is a distinctive genre of writings, a group of fictional accounts that can take two forms. A *utopia* is a good place that is, as yet, no place. A *dystopia* can be a bad place that is, as yet, no place; or it can be a pejorative interpretation of the author's status quo and its perceived trends. These writings, typically novels or novelettes, are fictional accounts that purport to describe and explain a particular community or state. The author usually stresses some principle of organization and control that serves as the basis of social, political, and/or economic structure or culture. The principle may express a particular authorial concern or theme and is often embodied in a distinctive set of arrangements, such as the equality of the sexes, reform of marriage, the brotherhood of mankind, toleration, reform of the institution of property, emphasis on education, advocacy and practice of eugenics, the hatred of tyranny, and so on.

In general, each utopian or dystopian community tends to be derivative of the author's status quo. It is an extension of the author's own country, on which it thereby serves as a commentary. The utopian community reflects that society or, more precisely, the problems, conflicts, and trends of the times, as perceived, evaluated, and projected by the author. The community is an extrapolation either to idealize and eulogize or to satirize and criticize certain aspects of the author's experience. The work is an exploration into the human condition and both the follies and prospects of mankind.

Utopias tend to be systems of consent, either volitional or induced; they also have solved, escaped, or transcended contemporary problems. Dystopias tend to be systems of regimented, authoritarian and totalitarian control; they also exhibit instability and other problems, often of an inhumane character.

A substantial historical, interpretive, and critical literature has developed with the utopian/dystopian literature as its subject of study (e.g., Hertzler, 1923; Russell, 1932; Buber, 1949; Popper, 1949; Berneri, 1950; Mumford, 1962; Negley and Patrick, 1962; Manuel, 1966, 1971; Eurich, 1967; Hillegas, 1967; Kateb, 1971, 1972; Negley,

1977; I. F. Clark, 1978; Manuel and Manuel, 1979; Aldridge, 1984; Kumar, 1987; Sargent, 1988; Booker, 1994a,b; Haschak, 1994; Hetherington, 1997; Mannheim, n.d.; see also an issue of *Daedalus*, 1965). Needless to say, interpretations vary, not least of Sir Thomas More's seminal work (e.g., Sullivan, 1983). Other literature is devoted to communities inspired by the utopian literature and impulse (e.g., McKinney, 1972; Moe, 1980; Guarneri, 1991). Centers and/or specialized collections for the study of utopian literature are found at Green Mountain College and Duke, Ohio, and Pennsylvania State Universities. Specialists may join the Society for Utopian Studies and the Associazione Internazionale per gli Studi sulle Utopie. Numerous sites (of various usefulness) are to be found on the web.

13.2 A LARGER CONCEPTION

A Platonic idealist element seems to pervade the exercise of the human intellect. One source is positivist and another is normative. The positivist source consists of efforts to distill the transcendent fundamental elements underlying the diverse and kaleidoscopic phenomena of experience in order to best describe what social "reality" is really all about. One version of this is Max Weber's notion of an "ideal type." The normative source is grounded in efforts to transform the imperfections of actual life into a perfect, ideal system. The latter is clearly a form of social constructivism; it embodies a philosophy of reform or of potential reform. The former may not be constructivist in motivation; but, in providing a particular definition of reality, it willy-nilly becomes the basis of policy and is, at least to that extent, constructivist with regard to the future. Social constructivism commences with the provision of a particular definition of reality and extends to the provision of a basis of policy.

Utopianism may be one form of Platonism in practice. Each utopist writing is a product, in part, of a belief, conscious or not, in the use of reason to critique and to re-create.

A feature, perhaps a problem, of idealist thought is that a given experience – that is, a given social situation, such as England in the sixteenth century or the United States in the nineteenth century or the 1930s – may give rise to a variety of idealizations. This is because not only does an actual situation not define itself but its fundamental elements may be perceived and identified differently by different people with different standpoints, who then proceed to construct both different definitions of reality and different pictures of its idealized form. The constructions are a function of both the particular multifaceted situation and the diverse imaginations, including values, of those who construct them.

One can interpret the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Ecclesiastes as, respectively, a utopian and a dystopian account of the human condition; the Book of Revelation projects a New Jerusalem. One can envision the writings that express Henry David Thoreau's return to nature as a utopian enterprise. One can perceive the agenda of the Enlightenment as utopian in the nonpejorative sense used here.

Science fiction, which is normally considered a literary genre unto itself, can also embody the utopian/dystopian dichotomy. While much science fiction

portrays conflicts and other aspects of life hitherto explored in terrestrial terms – for example, cowboys versus Indians or ranchers versus farmers, but now in galactic or intergalactic terms – some portrays utopian and other dystopian arrangements. Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* (1951), for example, explores a utopia engendered by advanced mathematical social science – and profoundly influenced at least one economist, Roger B. Myerson (1998, p. 228).

Satire is another literary genre that can overlap (especially) the dystopian domain. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* readily comes to mind. So, too, can irony, which can incorporate and project a utopian basis of judgment.

The motion picture industry has often been portrayed as presenting idealized, utopian characterizations of life; for example, "veritable machines of escapism and emotion that promotes images of a utopia in which everyone wants to live, if only for an instant, by proxy" (Attali, 2000, p. 84). Escapism, however, is not necessarily utopianism.

Utopianism is also known to the worlds of art and culture studies. In 2000 the Museum of Modern Art in New York City had an exhibition entitled "The Dream of Utopia/Utopia of the Dream." In the words of its promotional literature, the exhibition considered "the sharp opposition between the radical visions set for by Surrealism, on the one hand, and by the utopian abstraction of artists such as Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, on the other." And during the period October 14, 2000 to January 27, 2001, the New York Public Library had an exhibition entitled "Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World." Associated with it was a book of the same title (Schaer, Claeys, and Sargent, 2000; both the exhibit and the book are reviewed in Grafton, 2000).

Of a different nature are *The Good Society* by Walter Lippman (n.d.) and *The Economics of the Good Society* by Joseph Berliner (1999), each of which explores the nature of a better economic system. Geoffrey M. Hodgson's *Economics and Utopia* (1999) offers not a conventional utopian blueprint but a mode of utopian thinking. Hodgson critiques socialism and market individualism as two utopian visions and illusions. His approach stresses the incompleteness of the concepts of socialism and individualism, of private and public, and of the notion of a pure market. He stresses the importance of debate about the values to be institutionalized in actual markets and the role of social reform of market structures.

It is quite possible to think of the major schools of economic thought as Platonic idealizations, even though the disciples of several think of them as scientific. Thus, mercantilism, physiocracy, classical economics, Marxian and non-Marxian socialism, neoclassical economics, institutional economics, Keynesian economics, general equilibrium theory, Austrian economics, and such forms of economic theory as rational expectations economics, game theory, public choice theory, monetarism, and so on – indeed, all economic theory – can be comprehended as so many idealized representations of a much more complex, and messy, reality. Each of them is a particular specification of a utopia, with both affirmative and negative features. The same could be said of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1880), the backward-looking utopias of early-nineteenth-century economic German and English Romanticism in economics, and the doctrines of libertarian economics (Tilman, 2001).

Neoclassical theories of price and market can be Weberian ideal types, methodologically limited formulations, and/or utopian idealist, ideological constructions. Neoclassical welfare maximization can be seen as an example of utopianism, however marked by its conventional omission of detailed institutions and however much neoclassical economists denigrate utopianism (Davis, 1988, p. 13). Through its emphasis on incremental change, benefit–cost calculations as a mode of decision-making, and on seeing the best as the enemy of the better, neoclassicism can be seen as affirming rationalistic, deliberative control of utopian exuberance.

Characterization may be subjective. The general social theory of Friedrich von Hayek – for example, his theory of spontaneous order – can be seen as (1) anti-utopian, (2) utopian in its anti-utopianism, and (c) the expression of a particular utopia.

(The foregoing may seem to equate economics, science, fiction, and utopia/dystopia, but is intended to do so only in part. All have at least one foot in the “real world,” but, given multiplicity of interpretation of the “real world,” the identity of that foot seems always to be an issue.)

Propos of conservatism in general, three views are possible. First, conservatism is a temperament that values stability and continuity, with no unique conservative utopia, preferring to “use and enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is the present rather than what was or what may be” (Michael Oakeshott, quoted in Zakaria, 2000, p. 94). This would relegate utopianism to the “subjective imagination” of those who dream of “a radically different world” and “fantasise about a radically different future,” writers “with vivid imaginations of the best of all possible worlds (or in a few cases, their dystopian opposite)” (Jay, 2000, p. 23). Secondly, insofar as a utopia reflects and/or is derived from a particular status quo whose idealization it represents, at least in part, in that respect, if in no other, it is conservative. Thirdly, particular conservative ideologies project their own specific idealized – that is, utopian – version of its status quo.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the liberal-left publisher, Verso, has a series entitled “The Real Utopias Project,” edited by Erik Olin Wright. One blurb for the series that says it embraces the tension between dreams and practice, radical solutions to problems, and the pragmatically possible. Among the book topics are democracy, equal shares/egalitarianism, and universal basic income.

To the objection that the foregoing (the materials identified in the preceding five paragraphs) are not fictional accounts, one can respond that, while they certainly are not novels, each is fictional in the sense that it tells a particular story not about actual economies but of an abstracted rational reconstruction. Indeed, all science is fictional in pursuing abstraction and idealization – general models bearing no necessary relation to actual phenomena and experience. Much modern economic theory is justified in precisely these terms (for further criticism, see Negley and Patrick, 1962, p. 3).

Friedrich Engels pejoratively called all versions of socialism other than his and Marx’s “utopian socialism.” He was referring to such authors as Abbé Morelly, Saint Simon, Charles Fourier, Etienne Cabet, and Louis Blanc, rather than to all

utopists. But in the present context, Marxism is a dystopian representation of capitalism combined with a utopian portrayal of an economic system in which workers are no longer subjected to traditional property rights and a successor system in which they have rights over their own labor power. The writings of Josiah Warren portray the utopia in which each person is a property owner. The economics of Henry George includes a dystopia in which low wages and unemployment derive from the acquisition by private individuals of the unearned increment in the value of land, combined with the vision and promise of a utopia in which that problem is obviated by his "single tax" on land. Neoclassical economics is an idealization and thereby rationalization of the workings of a competitive, profit-oriented, materialist, private-property directed market economy. Given the statement that "Utopia is fiction in the classic sense of 'as if'; utopia is a world of *as if*" (Negley and Patrick, 1962, p. 4), then those who contemplate a market economy led *as if* by an invisible hand (not Adam Smith) are utopists. C. Wright Mills has been called "An American Utopian" (Horowitz, 1983); in his utopia forms of authoritarianism would be absent – as would be the case with a Hayekian system. An interesting and suggestive deconstruction of Marx and Hayek's respective critiques of utopianism is Sciabarra (1995).

In sum, religious and secular utopias (and fear of dystopia) pervade idealizations found in public discourse in many fields. Some are reactionary (ideological in Karl Mannheim's system); others are radical visions of the future (utopia in Mannheim's system). The emphasis is always on some definition of reality and some possibility for change – definitions and possibilities that are not always, indeed rarely, unequivocal and/or realistic.

13.3 THE LITERATURE AND ITS CHARACTER

Several thousand writings of the conventional genre exist, quite apart from science fiction. The best known – indeed, classic – literature includes Plato's *Republic* (360 B.C.), Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) (from which the genre acquires its name), Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1637), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), Gerrard Winstanley's *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652), James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Robert Owen's *A New View of Society* (1813–14) and *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821), Etienne Cabet's *Voyage to Icaria* (1840), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), Theodor Hertzka's *Freeland* (1891), and H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *New Worlds for Old* (1908). Less well known are Denis Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* (1796), and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1891).

This literature – both the conventional genre and the extended group – can be understood as a part of the social valuational process, often but neither necessarily nor only, with regard to justice. Each piece provides a selective critique (in the sense of literary criticism) of a particular status quo either as received or as developing. This literature is an important vehicle for the expression of and quest

for values. Each piece contributes in its own way to the exploration, identification, application, and critique of values. This literature is an important means by which authors can produce and express views for or against socio-politico-economic change.

This literature also can be understood not only as a quest for values but as a parallel and not unrelated quest for meaning. Each utopia or dystopia is an allegorical expression of a culture or civilization as individuals seek to divine its meaning; seeking, in part, a comprehension of its powers and its possibilities.

Latent within the members of every society are visions of the ideal and the just (and other values) and accounts of meaning. Some visions rise to the level of consciousness and become ensconced in the conscious, or self-conscious, utopias (dystopias) of a Godwin, a Saint-Simon or a Fourier; these visions are dreams, dreams of different futures, whose significance does not depend on their being directly acted upon (T. J. Clark, 2000, p. 9). They form a not inconsequential part of human intellectual baggage.

Accordingly, one can say, speaking quite broadly, that the main concern of this literature is the pursuit and achievement of human dignity (including "justice") in a well-ordered society. However, the meanings of both "human dignity" and "well-ordered society" are ambiguous and permit a great variety of specification. The problem is always one of stipulating the structure and system of freedom and control, with freedom both correlative to and derivative of control. This is no less true of the utopian/dystopian literature than of the literature of philosophy and social science.

While each piece of utopian/dystopian literature is a product of its times, a particular status quo can engender quite different utopias/dystopias. This is the case for at least two reasons: (1) each society or social status quo is heterogeneous and thus permits divergent perceptions and emphases; and (2) individual authors approach, interpret, and evaluate their society from different standpoints or perspectives. Thus, while conservative authors use the device to support established ideas, institutions, and ways of life, and radical authors employ the device to advocate change, each author is selective as to particular details and thereby contributes to both continuity and change.

Each author constructs their utopia or dystopia on the basis of some particular principle of organization, albeit typically supplemented by other ideas or themes. Among the principal historic types of principle are: religion, natural science, military organization, asceticism, political principle, and economic organization. The twentieth century – not without precursors, such as *Looking Backward* – saw a new type of principle, psychological or behavioral conditioning, found in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). These tend to be dystopias, as are Matt Cohen's *The Colors of War* (1977), Hugh MacLennan's *Voices in Time* (1980), and William Gibson's *Count Zero* (1986). Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), which combined utopian and dystopian features, has influenced some, perhaps many, young economic thinkers.

Some writings are speculative and constructive (Plato, Bellamy); others are satirical and critical (Huxley, Orwell). Some are futuristic and progressive; others

are retrogressive or reactionary, looking to reinstate a former condition of society, usually a nostalgic, idealized version (Negley and Patrick, 1962, pp. 5–6).

13.4 THE LITERATURE AND ITS EVOLUTION

Negley and Patrick (1962, pp. 6–8; cf., Hertzler, 1923; Kumar, 1987) distinguish between those utopias in which power is centralized and those in which power is decentralized. Progressive utopias tend to emphasize centralization and retrogressive, decentralization. The matter is subtle. Power is conspicuous when used to produce change and in articulating a new system. A revered old power structure is easily obfuscated by taking it for granted as part of the natural order of things. In either case, power may involve either an idealized new and different power structure or an idealized version of an old power structure.

It is difficult to generate a conclusive classification: each utopia is a product of a creative imagination applied in reaction to a complex set of experiences and phenomena. Nonetheless, Negley and Patrick distinguish between utopias written before and after roughly 1850 (their analysis is more elaborate than is presented here).

Utopias written during the period 1500–1850 tend to be characterized by decentralization of power, opposition to industrialization, and emphasis on the individual and ideal interpersonal relationships. Institutions are often denigrated and proper or ideal interpersonal relationships are put forth as the *sine qua non* of the good society. Although it is possible to argue that their “main theme . . . was advocacy, explicit or implicit, of the fullest possible, efficient utilization of the available resources of men and materials in a given society” (Negley and Patrick, 1962, pp. 290–1), economic considerations – scarcity, economic organization, and control – while not absent, are largely neglected, certainly in comparison with later utopias. Generally, the earlier utopias posited the “idea of a self-sufficient community of simple and uncomplicated economic structure, happy in the enjoyment of simple values of artisanship, family, and natural piety” – a vision that later became “the vehicle of satire or nostalgia” (Negley and Patrick, 1962, p. 13).

After roughly 1850, utopias are characterized by centralization of power, primacy of attention given to economic organization and control, the acceptance of industrialization and urbanization, emphasis on proper institutions as the basis of the good society and the full development of the individual, and anticipation of the welfare state.

As already noted, differentiation by period cannot be absolute; every characterization has its exceptions. Utopias always have been diverse in content, as well as sometimes dystopias. The increased importance of the economy in generating an organizing principle reflects the increased importance and differentiation of the economy and economic institutions – which means that both utopists and economists learned from and gave effect to modern economies. Increased centralization of power may actually reflect the arguable increased centralization in modern economic life. Since about 1850 the general problem has been that of

promoting individualist values in a society with the institutional arrangements suitable to the conditions of mass production and mass consumption; that is, the problem of working out the meaning of individualism in modern bourgeois or nonbourgeois terms.

It seems that no utopias were written during the medieval period. If true, this may be due to the theological or mythopoetic mode of expression. Theology or supernaturalism is not only an alternative outlet for utopist strivings, but is the ultimate utopian literature. Another cause may be the medieval ideal of a static divinely sanctioned order, an ideal elevating continuity over change – notwithstanding the widespread actual changes then taking place, such that reification and idealization was of a changing reality. With the coming of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – the actual history is more complicated than this – rationalism, humanism, naturalism, secularism, and individualism nurtured a revival of utilitarianism–pragmatism–instrumentalism and deliberative constructivism, aiming at progress, elevating change over continuity. Ruling classes had always been pragmatic and constructivist; with a growing consciousness that institutional arrangements were artifacts and were subject to change, the utopian urge was given freer, or at least wider, rein [although the emphasis on human social construction, over against divine origin, is found in More's *Utopia* – a point stressed by Grafton (2000, p. 4) – if not also in Plato's *Republic*].

Steven Weinberg (2000) has suggested that five nonsocialist types or styles of utopia seem to be emerging in public debate: the free-market utopia, the best-and-brightest utopia, the religious utopia, the Green utopia, and the technological utopia – and he offers his own “civilized egalitarian capitalist utopia.”

13.5 ECONOMICS IN THE UTOPIAN LITERATURE

Utopist authors are more like social than economic theorists, and what economists of all schools would recognize as coming within their purview will vary, in part because of their diverse interests and perceptions, in part because of the heterogeneity of the ideas presented in the literature of utopia and dystopia, and in part because the central orientation and arguments, as it were, differ between utopias and dystopias. It is really impossible to generalize without exceptions. In general, however, economic ideas *per se* are much less important and salient than broadly political, social, and psychological ideas; ideas of political economy (as distinct from economics) are present, though typically largely implicit.

One pervasive theme is the importance of organization and structure. These authors do not project a pure conceptual a-institutional picture. Their overwhelming emphasis, often down to, if not centering upon, particular organizational details, is on structure.

Readers will find individualist and collectivist, or liberalist and socialist, features and themes. Among the individualist themes are enthusiasms for individual initiative, self-reliance, and self-development; economic (as well as political) criticisms of the state; and notions of spontaneous social order and harmony, once the proper set of institutions has been put in place. Among the

collectivist themes are a hatred of the institution of private property and notions of class exploitation and domination. Still, whereas many criticize private property, others, such as Josiah Warren, propose a widespread distribution of property. Problems of class and inequality are frequent foundations for authorial motivation and design.

Nonetheless, for all the individualism and humanism to be found in this literature, appropriate social control is the core of the messages propounded by the utopist authors. The frequent anarchistic strains relate in part to psychological antipathy toward authority, especially its abuses, and in part to political antagonism toward concentrated political and economic power. Yet each utopian design has its own system of social control.

Frequently found ideas include various versions of the labor theory of value, but also – albeit to a lesser extent – an implicit reliance on properly structured markets. Also found are exploitation theories of property, state, religion, wealth and income distribution; beliefs in the destructive character of competition, unless properly institutionalized, and materialism. Some form of an ethical maldistribution theory is frequently encountered. Given the emphasis on the proper organization and control system, absent such system income and wealth may be distributed in such a manner and with such a result as to be unethical and unjust. Institutionally produced inequality is unjust, and poverty is inherently wrong and morally offensive in the face of great wealth. Often this inequality is attributed to ruling-elite control of the organs of social control.

Another idea, found, for example, in the work of Charles Fourier, is that the proper organization of life would promote abundance.

In various ways, therefore, utopist writers parallel political, economic, and social theorists (each a very diverse group) in the topics of their concern.

13.6 INTERPRETATION AND CRITIQUE

Utopist authors seem, individually and collectively, to have understood and posed certain basic questions: the status of the status quo, the distribution of power as a central problem, the quality of life, the quality of human beings as a product of the system, the process of leadership selection (including education for leadership), the dangers of extreme division of labor, the artifact nature of social institutions and their susceptibility to deliberative human modification, and the social valuation process. These authors, each in their own way, helped provide checks on their respective status-quo societies and articulations of values and of the possibilities of social change.

The conventional criticism of utopianism, and thereby the source of the pejorative use of the term, is that the utopist author is unrealistic as to how much social change is possible. This may well be true, though it may also be said that the authors so much appreciated the difficulties that they felt that their writing would help foment change. Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, in particular, sold millions of copies and apparently had enormous influence in providing the mental or ideological foundations for social reform.

The more interesting and more important criticism is that the typical utopia makes no provision for serious conflict and/or change once its system is put in place. It is a static once-and-for-all-time reconstruction. In this respect, it is equivalent to a libertarian *laissez-faire* in which the only function of officials is to see that the laws are kept, not to introduce social change. If change signifies change through law, as it often does in actuality and in instituting the projected utopia, then afterward there is nothing left for change through law to accomplish. It has been said that life in a utopia would be dull, for there would be no problems to solve (Harris, 1977, p. 74), and that "All the utopias are tame, just because vitality has been sacrificed to reduce risk" (Hartshorne, 1949, p. 448). It is not too much to think that some of the impetus behind the construction of a utopia is its author's effort at escapism from conflict and the ongoing necessity of choice in working things out.

The fundamental "utopian" character of this literature, in the pejorative sense, lies in its general neglect of the problem of change within the respective systems. The critical problem with this literature is not how difficult it is to generate change but that, typically, no further change is contemplated once the proposed system is put in place. This is often manifest in the human desire to establish *the* proper system or framework and then let it operate on its own accord, allowing individuals to act within it, with the confidence that the system will generate harmony, correct behavior, and the right goals.

This is too simplistic and disengaging a view of the complexity of real-world problems, the dynamics of change, and the need for collective decisions. Or, as Hertzler argued, social perfection is an illusion; there can only be social progress; "Utopia is not a social state, it is a state of mind" (Hertzler, 1923, p. 314).

Still, some utopists have considered the problem of change within their utopia. H. G. Wells is one author who did. Another (emphasized by J. C. Davis in Schaer, Chaey, and Sargent, 2000), was More, who adopted a model of cumulative causation in which institutions helped to transform human nature and this in turn led to changes in institutions. And, inasmuch as many utopias have actual and/or potential contradictory elements, change within utopia is a logical possibility.

Per contra, one could argue that one function of utopist writing is to point out contradictions and faults in the author's society. Identifying a possible solution and contemplating it without change, under what amounts to a rule of "as is" or *ceteris paribus*, is a deft and heuristically useful mode of analysis – in literature and in science.

A correlative problem is that the posited utopia may not work out as intended, and for this if for no other reason may require institutional adjustments.

Perhaps second only to the problem of the neglect of change within the utopian system, and not unrelated thereto, is the temptation to hold that only one answer or solution is either possible or warranted for all problems, that only one utopia is possible. This begs the question of the possibility of diversity both within and between utopian societies. However, the neglect of both change and diversity can be attributed to the nature of the genre. Fiction can go only so far, presumably, in articulating alternatives; and literary license in such matters is

neither unexpected nor to be condemned. Still, the utopian mentality may derive not only from a belief that one has found *the* solution to social problems but also from a desire to escape the burden of choice.

Another aspect of the complex dynamics of social change relevant to utopias is that social change toward an idealized image is often not perceived as change. The more successful a utopist, therefore, in altering a people's idealized image, the less the utopist's role will be recognized.

Although post-1850 utopias seem to have focused more on economic organization, overall one can say that the utopian literature has generally neglected problems of economic organization and control. Yet, most writers seem to have appreciated the need to organize production (though for some production is unimportant). As for the importance of distribution and incentives, two views are possible, often varying between writings: such considerations can appear to have been neglected; they may also be held to be a function of both institutions and the goals of the particular utopist author.

Correlative to the conventional criticism, one can say that the utopist authors failed to anticipate the opposition by the vested interests that their schemes threatened. Here, too, two views are possible: that they did fail to anticipate opposition, and that they considered their writings a device with which to challenge and weaken opposition (in some cases, with hoped-for immunity from persecution).

Another criticism is that the authors oversimplified the nature of human nature and exaggerated the possible impacts of changes in social institutions. Again, two views are possible: that the writers were naively over-optimistic, and that they were underscoring and enhancing the possibilities, however limited they might be – and/or that they sought to provide a check on the institutions that affected how human nature works out.

It should also be pointed out that utopist authors typically have complex notions of the nature of human nature – certainly in comparison with the conventional model deployed by most economists.

A powerful criticism, itself the basis for many dystopias, is that serious change may require concentrated power, a corollary of which is that any concentrated power (public ownership and mandatory central planning) is likely to engender abuse. This criticism is not unique to utopias, of course; it is a general social pathology. The totalitarian or authoritarian temptation, however, is not limited to utopian movements. The history of the genre is laden with ironies. For example, although Thomas Robert Malthus wrote his *Essay on Population* (1798) in criticism of William Godwin's emphasis in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) on the moral improvement of man, in subsequent editions Malthus emphasized the preventive checks, including moral restraint. An irony of a different type is that for all their attention to specific arrangements, their overall import is not their blueprints but their "hazy recognition of the concrete potentialities and capacities immanent in what we already have" (Merrifield, 2000, p. 45). Thus, Hannah Arendt argued, in the words of one commentator, that "utopianism is grounded in the kind of political thinking that relies on the model of man in the singular as *homo faber*, who can fabricate his world, rather than men in the plural

as political actors who can only contest it from a partial point of view" (Jay, 2000, p. 24). The opposite position, of course, is that the utopists are merely contributing their input to the process of working things out, in part by bringing out into the open and treating deliberatively what would otherwise be only latent and monopolized by established interests.

The significance, therefore, of the utopian literature resides in the following. It articulated values and possibilities; it has been idealism in literary practice. It has given vent for the imagination to develop possibilities for change. The utopian literature has emphasized the proposition that institutions matter. It has increasingly focused on the importance of psychology and the problems of identification and alienation in regard to the particulars of any status quo. It has focused on the problem of individualism within any given institutional structure. It has thereby raised the problems of power structure and the division of power. It has raised the question of the concentration of power both within a given utopia and in the process of creating an actual utopist society – including issues of utopian ends and of conflict resolution.

The utopian literature has, in effect, sought to provide answers to the problem posed by Jeremy Bentham's greatest happiness principle; namely, whether happiness is to be maximized by increasing the happiness of those made most happy or of the number of people made happy – that is, along the intensive or the extensive margins. In this respect, for all the greater centralization of power in modern utopias, many if not most authors have nonetheless sought to maximize the number of people made happy; that is, political and economic pluralism. But, again, the literature is so diverse that one must be wary of overemphasizing any single generalization.

A final principal problem is that the utopias promulgated by the various utopists are many and varied, indeed highly heterogeneous. This is, again, because of the heterogeneity of every status quo, the variety of authorial interpretive perspectives, and the fecundity of the human mind. Utopianism is idealism in practice and the enormous burden of idealism is the choice among apparent possible proposals for change. Utopist authors have helped promote the possibility of change, but have thereby compelled us to choose among quite different possibilities.

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