

THE IDEA OF UTOPIA

Thomas More, who achieved fame in his own time as an English politician and saint, is probably most remembered today for inventing a word: *Utopia*. In his book of the same title, More coined the term to describe the ideal society—an island with the “perfect” form of government. In his book a sailor who had visited this faraway land told the details of its people, its government, and its culture. No one knows how serious More was about the ideas he put into *Utopia*. The name *Utopia* is a joke of sorts. *Utopia* is a Greek pun on *ou topos* (“no place”) and *eu topos* (“good place”), perhaps indicating that the perfect society is just an illusion. In spite of this, the name stuck, so in modern times when we discuss the ideal society, *utopia* is the word we use.



Turns out More’s *Utopia*, published in 1516, wasn’t the first literary work to invent an ideal society—not by a long shot. In 380 BC, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote his dialogue *The Republic*, in which he describes an “ideal” city-state ruled by philosopher-kings called guardians, made up of both men and women. Yet as is so often the pitfall of utopias, Plato’s concept is less-than-ideal for some. In Plato’s city-state, instead of procreating within a family unit, the guardian-leaders leave the city once a year for a wild sexual escapade. The resulting children, happily ignorant of their real parentage, are brought up by the government and become the new generation of guardians. Creepy, huh? He also advised inventing a “noble lie” to tell to the citizens that kept certain groups from thinking they were equal to others. Not ideal, Plato.

Although many utopias are imagined as residing somewhere out in the future, there’s also the concept of the lost utopia—the perfect society of the past. Just like the Garden of Eden, which was perfection on earth, almost all ancient cultures have a story about humankind beginning in a near-perfect state and then falling from grace. These stories also tended to stress that instead of becoming better, humanity seems to become worse and worse as the centuries go on. But this leads to the nagging question: Could things ever go back to the way they were?

It’s an essential part of being human to dream of a better life. One author put it this way: “Human beings possess both hindsight and foresight: the ability to remember the past and to anticipate the future. As a result, none of us lives solely in the present....Our recollections, accurate or inaccurate, mingle with our thoughts of the present and our presentiments of what is to come” (“Utopian Literature” 5). In other words our memories of yesterday fuel our hopes for tomorrow.

Utopias aren’t the only way to picture the future though; there is the opposite of a utopia: a *dystopia* or deeply flawed society. Interestingly, Plato might have also mentioned the first

dystopia in his writings as well. In one of his dialogues Plato speaks of Atlantis, an island-kingdom (probably in the midst of the Atlantic) that used its great power to dominate the other nations of the mainland—that is, until the power of Atlantis became too great, and the Atlantians angered the gods. According to Plato, earthquakes caused the island-kingdom to be covered by water. Plato used this society to teach a lesson about power. Apparently, you can learn as much from a dystopia as a utopia. Although Plato was using Atlantis as a negative example (their power literally sunk them), modern readers sometimes reimagine it as a utopian society whose technological advancements were lost when the city sank beneath the ocean.

As we humans imagine the perfect society, we also dream of the perfect leader. What kind of person would it take to govern a utopia? After all, leaders shape the societies they rule. Thinkers remember the great leaders of the past and imagine if their abilities could be reborn in a new vessel. As an example of a timeless leader, the British have King Arthur, a legendary king who ruled Britain justly from his court at Camelot. His rule was a golden age for his people. Too bad it never really existed. Legends still persist that King Arthur isn't really dead—just locked in a magical sleep—and will return someday when Britain needs him most. For this reason he is often called the Once and Future King.

Even if the perfect leader did emerge, could an effective leader actually create a real utopia? Many have tried. In recent centuries emboldened by a successful revolution, newly freed people have decided to experiment with the very fabric of society. In America the Founding Fathers instituted a “Grand Experiment” with the United States of America. Could a nation “for the people and by the people” long endure? So far, it has. Yet the Soviet Union, which was begun with similar lofty goals, ended in totalitarianism and misery. Utopias become dystopias more often than not.

Just because there have been failures in the quest for utopia does not mean the goal is flawed. The idea of utopia continues to stimulate our imagination as we hope for a better future.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it possible for a true utopia to exist in real life? Explain.
2. What society in history has come the closest to perfection? Explain.
3. Is it beneficial to dream of the perfect society? Explain.
4. Can you think of a book or a film that features a utopia or a dystopia?
5. What is *your* idea of the perfect society?