

Utopia - From The Columbia Encyclopedia

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[Greek = no place], title of a book by Sir Thomas More, published in Latin in 1516.

The work pictures an ideal state where all is ordered for the best for humanity as a whole and where the evils of society, such as poverty and misery, have been eliminated. The popularity of the book has given the generic name Utopia to all concepts of ideal states. The description of a utopia enables an author not only to set down criticisms of evils in the contemporary social scene but also to outline vast and revolutionary reforms without the necessity of describing how they will be effected. Thus, the influence of utopian writings has generally been inspirational rather than practical.

The Utopian Ideal over Time

The name utopia is applied retroactively to various ideal states described before More's work, most notably to that of the Republic of Plato. St. Augustine's City of God in the 5th cent. enunciated the theocratic ideal that dominated visionary thinking in the Middle Ages. With the Renaissance the ideal of a utopia became more worldly, but the religious element in utopian thinking is often present thereafter, such as in the politico-religious ideals of 17th-century English social philosophers and political experimenters.

Among the famous pre-19th-century utopian writings are François Rabelais's description of the Abbey of Thélème in Gargantua (1532), The City of the Sun (1623) by Tommaso Campanella, The New Atlantis (1627) of Francis Bacon, and the Oceana (1656) of James Harrington.

In the 18th-century Enlightenment, Jean Jacques Rousseau and others gave impetus to the belief that an ideal society — a Golden Age — had existed in the primitive days of European society before the development of civilization corrupted it. This faith in natural order and the innate goodness of humanity had a strong influence on the growth of visionary or utopian socialism. The end in view of these thinkers was usually an idealistic communism based on economic self-sufficiency or on the interaction of ideal communities. Saint-Simon, Étienne Cabet, Charles Fourier, and Pierre Joseph Proudhon in France and Robert Owen in England are typical examples of this sort of thinker. Actual experiments in utopian social living were tried in Europe and the United States, but for the most part the efforts were neither long-lived nor more than partially successful.

The humanitarian socialists were largely displaced after the middle of the 19th cent. by political and economic theorists, such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who preached the achievement of the ideal state through political and revolutionary action. The utopian romance, however, became an extremely popular literary form. These novels depicted the glowing, and sometimes frightening, prospects of the new industrialism and social change. One of the most important of these works was Looking Backward (1888), by Edward Bellamy, who had a profound influence on economic idealism in America. In England, Erewhon (1872), by Samuel Butler, News from Nowhere (1891), by William Morris, and A Modern Utopia (1905), by H. G. Wells, were notable examples of the genre; in Austria an example was Theodor Hertzka's Freiland (1890). The 20th cent. saw a veritable flood of these literary utopias, most of them "scientific utopias" in which humans enjoy a blissful leisure while all or most of the work is done for them by docile machines.

Connected with the literary fable of a utopia has been the belief in an actual ideal state in some remote and undiscovered corner of the world. The mythical Atlantis, described by Plato, was long sought by Greek and later mariners. Similar to this search were the vain expeditions in search of the Isles of the Blest, or Fortunate Isles, and El Dorado.

Satirical and Other Utopias

The adjective utopian has come into some disrepute and is frequently used contemptuously to mean impractical or impossibly visionary. The device of describing a utopia in satire or for the exercise of wit is almost as old as the serious utopia. The satiric device goes back to such comic utopias as that of Aristophanes in *The Birds*. Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) and Jonathan Swift in parts of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) are in the same tradition.

Pseudo-utopian satire has been extensive in modern times in such novels as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). The rise of the modern totalitarian state has brought forth several works, notably *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), by George Orwell, which describe the unhappy fate of the individual under the control of a supposedly benevolent despotism.

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