

Utopia - from Encyclopedia Britannica

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An ideal commonwealth whose inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions. Hence "utopian" and "utopianism" are words used to denote visionary reform that tends to be impossibly idealistic.

The word first occurred in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in Latin as *Libellus . . . de optimo reipublicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia* ("Concerning the highest state of the republic and the new island Utopia"; 1516); it was compounded by More from the Greek words for "not" (*ou*) and "place" (*topos*) and thus meant "nowhere." During his embassy to Flanders in 1515, More wrote Book II of *Utopia*, describing a pagan and communist city-state in which the institutions and policies were entirely governed by reason. The order and dignity of such a state was intended to provide a notable contrast with the unreasonable polity of Christian Europe, divided by self-interest and greed for power and riches, which More then described in Book I, written in England in 1516. The description of Utopia is put in the mouth of a mysterious traveller, Raphael Hythloday, in support of his argument that communism is the only cure against egoism in private and public life. More, in the dialogue, speaks in favour of mitigation of evil rather than cure, human nature being fallible. The reader is thus left guessing as to which parts of the brilliant *jeu d'esprit* are seriously intended and which are mere paradox.

Written utopias may be practical or satirical, as well as speculative. Utopias are far older than their name. Plato's 'Republic' was the model of many, from More to H.G. Wells. A utopian island occurs in the 'Sacred History of Euhemerus' (flourished 300 BC), and Plutarch's life of Lycurgus describes a utopian Sparta. The legend of Atlantis inspired many utopian myths; but explorations in the 15th century permitted more realistic settings, and Sir Thomas More associated Utopia with Amerigo Vespucci. Other utopias that were similar to More's in Humanist themes were the 'I mondi' (1552) of Antonio Francesco Doni and *La città felice* (1553) of Francesco Patrizi. An early practical utopia was the comprehensive *La città del sole* (written c. 1602) of Tommaso Campanella (q.v.). Francis Bacon's 'New Atlantis' (published 1627) was practical in its scientific program but speculative concerning philosophy and religion. Christian utopian commonwealths were described in *Antangil* (1616) by "I.D.M.," 'Christianopolis' (1619) by Johann Valentin Andreae, and 'Novae Solymae libri sex' (1648) by Samuel Gott. Puritanism produced many literary utopias, both religious and secular, notably, 'The Law of Freedom' . . . (1652), in which Gerrard Winstanley advocated the principles of the Diggers. The *Common-Wealth of Oceana* (1656) by James Harrington argued for the distribution of land as the condition of popular independence.

In France such works as Gabriel de Foigny's 'Terre australe connue' (1676) preached liberty. François Fénelon's 'Télémaque' (1699) contained utopian episodes extolling the simple life. *L'An 2440* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1770; Eng. trans., 1772) anticipated Revolutionary doctrines. G.A. Ellis' 'New Britain' (1820) and Étienne Cabet's 'Voyage en Icarie' (1840) were related to experimental communities in the United States that revealed the limitations of purely economic planning. Consequently, Bulwer-Lytton, in 'The Coming Race' (1871), invented an essence that eliminated economics altogether, and William Morris demonstrated his contempt for economics in 'News from Nowhere' (1890). Two influential utopias, however, had an economic basis: 'Looking Backward', 2000–1887 (1888) by Edward Bellamy (q.v.) and *Freiland* (1890; 'A Visit to Freiland' . . . , 1894) by Theodor Herzka. H.G. Wells, in 'A Modern Utopia' (1905), returned to speculation.

Many utopias are satires that ridicule existent conditions rather than offering practical solutions for them. In this class are Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels' (1726) and Samuel Butler's 'Erewhon' (1872). In the 20th century, when the possibility of a planned society became too imminent, a number of bitterly anti-utopian, or dystopian, novels appeared. Among these are 'The Iron Heel' (1907) by Jack London, 'My' (1924; 'We', 1925) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, 'Brave New World' (1932) by Aldous Huxley, and 'Nineteen Eighty-four' (1949) by George Orwell. 'The Story of Utopias' (1922) by Lewis Mumford is an excellent survey.

Concurrent with the literature, there have also been many attempts by religious groups and political reformers to establish utopian communities, especially in the Americas. In the two centuries between 1663 (when some Dutch Mennonites established the first such communitarian colony in what is now Lewes, Del.) and 1858, some 138 settlements were begun in North America. The first to outlast the lifetime of its founder was the Ephrata Community established in Pennsylvania in 1732 by some German Pietists. Other German Pietist settlements were founded by George Rapp (Harmony in Pennsylvania, Harmony [or Harmonie] in Indiana, and Economy in Pennsylvania), by the Amana group (in Iowa), and by the Shakers (18 villages in eight states). Some of them pursued celibacy. Other communal religious sects still flourish; among the largest are the Hutterites, chiefly in the United States and Canada but having colonies also in Paraguay and England.

One of the first secular communities was New Harmony, founded in 1825 when the British manufacturer Robert Owen purchased Harmony, Ind., from the Rappites. It was a cooperative rather than communist society. Although it foundered, it sponsored the first kindergarten, the first trade school, the first free library, and the first community-supported public school in the United States.

The ideas of the French social reformer Charles Fourier had a strong influence upon American reformers in the 1840s, particularly upon the leaders of Brook Farm in Massachusetts. Between 1841 and 1859, about 28 Fourierist colonies were established in the United States. The Icarians, followers of Cabet, established ill-fated communities in Illinois (Nauvoo, formerly settled by Mormons), Missouri, Iowa, and California.

A unique venture was the Oneida Community founded in Putney, Vt., by John Humphrey Noyes in 1841 and moved to Oneida, N.Y., in 1848. The group practiced "complex marriage," in which all husbands and wives were shared. Noyes said that Oneida was the continuation of Brook Farm without its mistakes. He was convinced that socialism was impossible without religion, and that the "extended" family system would dissolve selfishness and demonstrate the practicality of this way of life. Children remained with their mothers until they could walk but were then placed in a common nursery.

After the American Civil War the enthusiasm for secular utopian experiments waned. There were some new settlements in the 1890s, following the publication of such Utopian tracts as Laurence Gronlund's 'The Coöperative Commonwealth' (1884) and Bellamy's 'Looking Backward', but the impulse had run its course and these latter movements were soon gathered into the fold of political socialism. The creation of utopian religious communities continued into the 20th century, but they too were usually short-lived. The religious colonies, in almost all instances, were established and maintained by a single powerful personality who was believed by his disciples to have a singular gift of prophecy or wisdom. Most of these colonies flourished during the lifetime of the original leader and then declined slowly after his death.