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Essay: The Great Literary Utopias Have a Nightmarish History

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Literary utopias, a seemingly modest form of fiction intended for amusement and contemplation, have had a surprising history. They have been a source of conscious civilizational design that has been taken seriously by some very powerful leaders, more often than not with dire consequences.

Plato's *Republic*, written 2500 years ago in ancient Greece, was the first to explore seriously what it would take to create a perfect society. Thomas More, one of England's greatest Renaissance intellectuals, redesigned Plato's *Republic* for his own time a thousand years later. His *Utopia* reflected the European fascination with the entirely novel civilizations discovered in the New World. One can better understand one's own culture through comparison with that of another.

Both Plato and More contemplated the conditions needed to support a perfect state. They considered geography, economy, and the ethical nature of leadership required to produce such a state. Most essential were social equality, even of the sexes; careful population control; rigorous education for commonality of values, and rule by only the most mentally fit.

Utopias leaped from the pages of literature with the birth of the United States. Our Founding Fathers, familiar with the works of Plato and Thomas More, reflected their vision for our country. But other readers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were thinking about these ideas, too; among these were Marx, Lenin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot.

Today we have seen that dystopias are more real than utopias. The newest dystopias among us are Al Qaeda and its imitators, imagining a brave new world under a caliphate. This is, of course, just one more fantasy utopia. The anarchists are their real model.

Types of Utopian Fiction

From the time that human beings had the leisure to think, there have always been those who did not like how their cultures were organized. One of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam (the *Rubaiyyat*), as translated by Edward Fitzgerald, expresses it best:

“Ah Love! Could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits----and then
Re-mould it neared to the Heart's Desire!”

He expresses in this verse what others have felt from antiquity, that the world should be organized much better. Some who felt this way imagined paradises, fantasies, satires, and even today, imaginary brave new worlds (such as the cinema version in *Avatar*). But one Athenian genius, Plato, tried “to grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,” and the key here is *entire*. He was the first to attempt to analyze what makes a republic function and how to design a better one. His fictional *Republic* has gone on to live and to influence the world in an astonishing way, including creating some societies that are not ideal utopias, but are nightmares.

According to that master of Utopian analysis, Lewis Mumford (*The Story of Utopias*, 1922), there are two kinds of literary utopias: fantasy and reconstruction. The fantasies and satires make fun of existing society and create an imaginary alternate universe, or are elaborate imaginings of either life after death or “brave new worlds.” The construct utopias seriously attempt to imagine a perfect state, one that explores all aspects of a human society. Plato's *Republic*, written 2500 years ago in ancient Greece, was the first to seriously explore what it would take to create a perfect society.

Thomas More, one of England's greatest Renaissance intellectuals, redesigned Plato's *Republic* for his own time. His *Utopia* reflected the European fascination with the entirely novel civilizations discovered in the New World. One can better understand one's own culture through comparison with that of another.

A perfect state, they both said, would have enough land to feed itself, access to the sea or waterways for trade, every citizen working at what each did best, the best brains educated for unselfish leadership, absolute equality of all goods (to prevent corruption of the leaders), women freed from domestic duties to participate in all work for which they were qualified, all meals eaten together with cooking chores shared, and strict birth control (having no more children than could be fed). The children were to have community education so that they would all be citizens with a common culture.

Utopias leaped from the pages of literature with the birth of the United States. Our Founding Fathers knew the works of Plato and More, which is reflected in the totality of their vision for our country. But other readers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were considering these ideas, too. The French Revolution also gave rise to the Anarchists, who were convinced that only by destroying all existing states could a perfect utopia arise.

Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century wrote *Gulliver's Travels*. He was the first to take a very sour look at utopias and the first to recognize the dark underbelly of utopias (dystopias). Alas, his was a voice in the wilderness.

Marx, Lenin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot translated Plato's and More's small nation-state idea into nightmare empires. All of them (except for Hitler) embraced the communist idea of totally sharing all property (at least in theory). They all liked putting women to

work, demolishing the notion of the biological family. They all had a ruling class, indoctrinated for that job, and an unthinking culture of obedience and loyalty to the state. Hitler was more in line with the anarchists who believed in a brave new world that only would come in the future after everything else was destroyed.

Today we have seen that dystopias are more real than utopias. In addition to nightmare empires, we have home-grown pseudo-religious cults, run almost exactly like Plato's and More's states, except that the leaders are insane. The newest dystopians among us are Al Qaeda and its imitators, imagining a brave new world under a caliphate. This is, of course, just one more fantasy utopia. The anarchists are their real model.

Plato's *Republic*

Four hundred years before the Christian era, the Greek Philosopher Plato wrote *The Republic*, part of a series of dialogues that were held with the brightest of Athens' thinkers, all friends of Socrates, the mentor whose ideas Plato brought to the world. We know Socrates through his protégé's writing, thoughts that have had enormous effect on the world and continue to do so today.

The Greek culture of that time differed from any others in that all sorts of new ways of organizing society were tried and critiqued. It was a period of social disintegration too, the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, in which it was clear that many mistakes had been made by citizens and their leaders.

This was not a civilization that could be ruled by a single autocrat (as was the Persia of that time). It was a world in which experimentation was possible, and with few exceptions, thinkers could challenge all accepted wisdom without penalty. The exception, unfortunately, was Socrates himself; he finally ran afoul of the powers that be over concerns that his free-wheeling ideas were corrupting the youth.

The period during which Greek thinkers could examine, speculate, and criticize their own societies was, alas, brief; the Greek city-states fell to a variety of autocrats and empires: Alexander the Great (a student of Aristotle), the Romans, Byzantine Christianity, and ultimately the Ottoman Turks.

However, thanks to Plato, we do have what must have been the first attempt to construct mentally the perfect society, a republic, from the ground up. He charted what Socrates and his companions devised as requirements for the perfect society:

- **Geography.** The favored geography of utopias is islands or sea coasts, finite places surrounded by the sea---both as protection and open for trade. For both Plato and More, these were the geographies of ancient Greece and England. As

part of that geography was climate: recognition that only temperate climates could provide enough food and relative physical comfort for a good society.

- **Size.** The Greeks of Plato's time already had the concept of a commonwealth, a larger society that shared language, gods, and for the most part, similar institutions. But for his imaginary republic, he envisioned it being able to be seen from a hilltop; he expected those who lived within these limits to share common gods to worship, common theaters and gymnasias, and a multitude of common interests that could be satisfied only by their working together, playing together, thinking together. The ideal commonwealth, Mumford tells us, would be a city region—a city that was surrounded by enough land to supply the greater part of the food needed by the inhabitants and convenient to the sea. [Mumford, 33.]
- **Agriculture.** The terrain was mountainous, providing different soils and climate zones for a variety of agricultural and industrial uses. There would be evergreen trees at the summit for the woodcutter, going down the slope to the herdsman and their goats, further down for the cultivator and his crops, and finally culminating where the river (valleys usually have rivers) meets the sea. It was essential in his republic that there be enough food for the population, and if there was not, the population was to reduce itself, either by moving pioneers to found a new colony elsewhere or exerting population control.
- **Economy.** Plato makes the point that the economy should be modest, that people should be happy with sufficient corn (grain) and wine, have clothes and shoes, and build houses for themselves. People would work hard, benefitting from outdoor labor with healthy bodies. There must be a common standard of living (no very rich or very poor). Plato wanted a lifestyle neither impoverished nor luxurious, something between the styles of Athens and the military dictatorship of Sparta. When asked should we moderate our wants or should we increase our production (today's big question), he opted for moderating our wants.
- **Ideal Population Size.** For Plato, the ideal size was to be a community where a speaker could be heard by everybody; 5,040 was his selected number of citizens. This may still be so in New England's Town Hall meetings and for many town planners. This population was to share certain institutions and ways of life with similarly educated people. Without this basis, such communities would be doomed to break apart, a phenomenon we are seeing today even in nation-states.
- **Work.** A diversity of work and professions is needed by the healthy commonwealth, a good thing when we consider the variety of human talents and capabilities. Systems such as India's caste system do not allow for the variability of children born into a family with an inherited trade. While Plato recognizes that heredity and apprenticeships are good for providing skilled professionals, he

recognizes that each individual should be able to find a calling that suits him more in another trade. Plato's Republic has class differences (workers and craftsmen have different educations than the leadership class or those devoted to the state's defense or military). Yet he allows for talent (and merit) to rise to the top. This is the beginning of the notion of a meritocracy.

- **Values.** Plato identified four human virtues to each category (class) of people: wisdom, valor, temperance, and justice. Wisdom is appropriate for the rulers, the Guardians. Valor is for the defenders, the auxiliaries. Temperance (agreement) belongs to all classes. And Justice is the ultimate cause and condition of all of them. Justice (the perception of fairness) is essential for the health of a society.
- **Property.** Plato worried about the corrupting effect of too much luxury on a society. He wanted his people healthy, industrious, and satisfied with simplicity. The craftsmen and farmers should have such property as might be needed for their occupations and simple and pleasurable property for their homes. But the warriors were to have their own culture, and that included only the equipment they needed for service. All other property was to be held in common. Also original in Plato's concept was that the warrior class women were permitted an equal place in the life of the camp, gymnasiums, and military academy.

The Guardians, the ruling class, was to be the most controlled to prevent any abuse of the great power they were given. They had to be not only mentally fit for this class, but also the most just, avoiding any corrupting influence of money or property. He also worried about anything smacking of hereditary power. Plato proposed a system of common marriage. "The wives of these guardians are to be in common, and their children are also common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent." He managed the incest problem by having all children born in the same year to be barred from breeding among each other; they were to be siblings.

This is not easy to do, and has been attempted only by one dystopian modern dictator, Hitler, with the program of Aryan genetic manipulation, called the "*Lebensborn*," with all the women and children the common property of the SS breeders.

The problem of family power has dogged all societies from the beginning of civilization. How does one keep a family from monopolizing privileges? For Plato, and only for the Guardian Class, it was to eliminate marriage and family life altogether. For the rest of the society, children with talent were to be recognized and those without it, even when born among the Guardians, were either to find their own lower level or, if handicapped, to be abandoned at birth.

- **Education of Guardians.** Unlike the rest of the society, which was free to enjoy normal family life and simple pleasures, the Guardians were to be a very disciplined lot. Every part of their lives and education was for the purpose of keeping the Guardians disinterested (to avoid abuse of power and corruption). They lived in common barracks, none had his own home or storehouse; they were on the public payroll, which supported them because of their superiority of brains and integrity (not a large number in any society). These Guardians first served in the military class (auxiliaries), where military preparation (not constant warfare) shaped their valor. There they increasingly practiced leadership (much like today's military). After the age of 50, those who were qualified devoted themselves to philosophy and rule. The business of the Guardian was to manufacture liberty. They had nothing to do with marketing, industry, graft, bribery, theft, rules established by the ordinary people themselves. They are responsible for the basic constitution of how good people can flourish in a good society.

More's *Utopia*

While Plato is the first to deliberately imagine what it would require to produce a perfect republic, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, written as a lark over a long weekend of leisure in the company of some of Europe's greatest intellectuals (including Erasmus), was based on the newly popular Plato's *Republic*, but with changes reflecting a Christian, rather than pagan world, and technological changes of his own time, sixteenth century England.

- **Geography.** Like Plato's, his utopia is small and finite, and, like Britain, surrounded by water. It is the first of the island utopias. It is made up of city-states and their rural areas.
- **Economy.** Agriculture is the economic base. Some people live on their farms year round, but everybody, even from the cities, take time to work on farms (perhaps at planting or harvesting times) so that they can be competent farmers when needed. City magistrates draw up lists of those who will help with the harvests as required. (China and the USSR both adopted this idea.)
- **Technologies.** Agricultural technologies are designed to provide enough to feed the state and a surplus for trade. More describes the world's first incubators, designed to provide great surpluses of poultry and eggs.
- **Social Mobility.** As did Plato, More avoids creating caste systems in his society. Although most families follow their own special occupation, a boy whose genius lies another way may be adopted into a family plying that trade.

- **Work Loads and Labor Rules.** More, like Plato, has a horror of idleness, but in his Utopia, everyone (including women) is expected to be industrious, including princes, rich men, and healthy beggars (all notoriously idle). With everybody working, work could be done in less time than it was in More's age. He included public works among the tasks that could be dispatched in little time if everyone were working. The only people exempt from hard labor were the magistrates and students, who, if they were doing their work properly, were industrious enough.
- **Distribution of Goods.** Monthly festivals provided for exchanges of urban and agricultural goods, overseen by the Magistrates to make certain they were fair. The family was the unit of distribution; there were no private entrepreneurs. Each city was divided into four equal parts, surrounding a central marketplace. The goods were taken to a storehouse and each family head selected what his family needed. No money was exchanged. (To each according to his needs...?) More justifies this system for eliminating fear of want; a productive society produces plenty.
- **Diet.** Renaissance England produced far more good food than did Plato's Greece. Plato wanted his people to have a simple palate: bread, wine, olives, green herbs, and fish: nothing imported. He also stressed that if the Republic wanted meat, they would require more land than needed for their simple diet--and that might require taking land from somebody else, one of the origins of warfare. More, however, allowed for herbs, fruits, and bread, but also fish, fowl, and cattle for meat and cheese. In addition to the monthly apportionment of goods in each town, he provided for an annual distribution in the entire country, equalizing the goods among all the various regions.
- **Gold and Luxuries.** Gold was only to be used to make chamber pots; it was not a medium of exchange nor was it used for adornment. Conspicuous display was absolutely forbidden. It is interesting to consider how this sat with the conspicuously displayed nobility of England.
- **Town Design.** In his Utopia, all of the towns were designed alike. They were usually on the side of a hill; almost square, two miles per side, facing a river. There was a high, thick wall; the streets designed for carriages and sheltered from the wind; and the houses were connected and built in a row, much as we can see in Bath today. (This did become an eighteenth century model.) The streets were broad, and in back of the houses were gardens, which everyone had to keep up. There was competition among homeowners to have excellent gardens. This, thinks More, is a useful kind of competition.
- **Community Dining.** In Plato, the common dining hall was only for the military and Guardians. In More, it was obviously a means for producing community

solidarity and an opportunity to socialize the children. The work of shopping, cooking, and serving was shared, a much better use of women's time than if each had to spend the day providing for a family. The dining hall even had a common nursery and chapel, a great benefit to women with small children. The midday meal was simple and without ceremony (so that people could get back to work). However, the evening meal was designed to give pleasure. More was not as suspicious as Plato of the arts, music, delicious food, conversation, and merriment. More recognized that man is a sensual being and that we should not ignore this aspect.

- **Government.** More's Utopia, unlike Plato's, was not exactly a republic, but did have participatory governance of sorts. Each group of thirty families chose a magistrate (Philarch) yearly, and those 200 Philarchs serve as a senate tasked to choose the Prince out of a list of four candidates, named by the families (not clear how chosen). The Prince was elected for life, unless impeached for attempting to enslave the people. The government's duties were to regulate commerce, travel, crime, and war.
- **Slavery.** Even today, unfortunately, work that is obnoxious to human beings is done involuntarily, as can be seen throughout South Asia, Africa, and in the global trafficking of women and children. We have not yet eliminated slavery.

In Plato's time, slaves were captured in warfare but never constituted a permanent caste, except for women. The same holds true for More, but warfare is no longer the major means of acquiring slaves for those occupations no one else wants, such as butchering beef for food. Warfare would be infrequent, and the Utopians used strategy, propaganda, and corruption to undermine an enemy rather than always resorting to force. But when using force, they made sure that the soldiers were not their best people. This is a way to weed out undesirables. More did not think much of a military establishment.

Slaves were acquired through the law courts: people who had committed venial crimes, such as violating the limited permission to travel (being a runaway); unchastity and adultery were crimes punished by slavery. Divorce was accepted when a couple agreed that they were incompatible; but there was a novel attempt to avoid such incompatibility: young couples were introduced before marriage naked; no surprises here and no forced marriages. I suspect this was More's little joke. (There was a *Star Trek* episode showing such a marriage custom in one of the other planets.)

- **More's Ultimate Values.** Summarized by Louis Mumford [78]: "To cultivate the soil rather than simply to get on with a job; to take food and drink rather to earn money; to think and dream and invent, rather than increase one's reputation;

in short, to grasp the living reality and spurn the shadow--this is the substance of the Utopian way of life....In this Utopia of the World every man has the opportunity to be a man because no one else has the opportunity to be a monster. Here, too, the chief end of man is that he should grow to the fullest stature of his species." This is a highly admirable vision indeed, and extraordinary in his time and place of birth.

Dystopia Arrives

Jonathan Swift, an eighteenth century Anglo-Irish satirist, wrote the brilliant *Gulliver's Travels*, a book that should be rescued from children's literature and should be part of literary utopias. Swift was not enamored of utopias, nor was he dazzled by the spate of travel books fascinating readers in his time. Marco Polo's travels across Asia and the many adventurers in awe of the New World's strange civilizations were popular in Swift's day. He refused to be enchanted.

Gulliver's Travels gives us a hero named Gulliver, hinting broadly at "gullible." This imaginary traveler has four adventures, of which only the first two are still popular, which is a shame. Book One covers Gulliver shipwrecked upon an island of very small human beings (we are talking in inches here), the Lilliputians. It is like looking at human beings through the wrong end of a telescope. They are tiny, perfect-looking little beings who are, at first acquaintance, utterly charming. However, he finds out how much they are like the most frivolous and nastiest beings of his own civilization, much to his distaste.

His second adventure is to flee to another island, this time peopled by giants. To them, he looks just like the Lilliputians had looked to him. He is the pet and darling of a young girl. These giant human beings are as if seen through the right end of a telescope with every flaw apparent. He sees giant pores and is overwhelmed by their smell. But they too have a society not really different from his native civilization. He is not enchanted.

The third adventure (and my favorite) is to an island dominated by another island, actually a flying saucer that threatens the natives with destruction if they do not obey them and provide them with food. The men living on the flying saucer are mad scientists engaged in all sorts of ridiculous scientific projects financed by government grants. Their wives are normal women with appetites unsatisfied by these absent-minded professors. Wives frequently run away with their coachmen, tolerating abusive lovers rather than remaining married to the scientists.

The final adventure is to an island in which the horses rule and humans fill their zoos. They have a truly wise civilization and the caged animals, monkey-like humans, are disgusting and wild. To get wisdom directly from the "horse's mouth" is wonderful indeed.

At the end of the work, Gulliver returns home, completely disgusted and embarrassed by his human condition. He takes refuge in the stables, talking to the horses.

This work is not, of course, a utopian blueprint as were those of Plato and More, but rather a cautionary tale warning people about human nature, which he did not admire.

Aldous Huxley, a twentieth century British-American writer, wrote the next great dystopian novel after Swift. In the time between them, only imaginative technological utopias were written, of little use to us pursuing utopian policies. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were also periods of experimentation, with many small groups attempting to live out utopian ideals. The United States is still a home of utopian experiments, such as those of the Mormons and the Mennonites, both of which have survived; and the Shakers, Jonestown, and the Davidians in Waco, all failed, the last two disastrously.

Huxley wrote during the early and late parts of his life two of the most important contemporary explorations of utopian fiction. In the 1920s, he wrote *Brave New World*, taking the title from the line in Shakespeare's final work, *The Tempest*. In this play, the naïve Miranda sees the first human beings other than her father, with whom she has lived alone since babyhood. She is dazzled by a "brave new world that has such people in it." The line, of course, is very funny considering how terrible some of these people actually were.

Huxley used the framework of most utopias since More: a traveler arriving from a very different world, introduced to the utopia. He also leaned heavily on the technological utopias of the past and had a tongue-in-cheek assessment of Henry Ford, the deviser of assembly-line technologies. In this case, the technologies were devoted to eliminating the family (including the mother) by incubating and using science to shape the outcomes of these children. "Our Ford" has replaced "Our Lord" by way of religion, and for the first time ever, "mother" was a nasty pornographic notion.

Brave New World was a warning against unquestioned trust in science, and it posited that if a society really wants great elites in its leadership, it cannot program everything in the test tube. The best human minds are very difficult for a society to control. Even as tight a utopia as this one risks rebellions and even revolutions. We can never have total control over human complexity.

Huxley's last work before he died was *Island*, where he, like the greats before him, tried his hand at designing a perfect society on an island, a society characterized by intelligence, simplicity of wants, and a spirituality not poisoned by organized religion. His people were modern, educated, and were bonded by the use of a drug, soma, that kept them civil. (Huxley had just discovered LSD, and was an enthusiast.)

Like the other utopias, a stranger comes to the island and the utopia is explained to him. It certainly appears to be a lovely society but it has one problem: it has no way of defending itself from a not-as-lovely neighboring island. The mid-twentieth century distaste for war biased Huxley against dealing with defense issues. His utopian island was invaded and enslaved.

Utopias in the Modern World

The twentieth century has witnessed three major attempts at designing a civilization and three smaller attempts. The largest designed societies were the USSR, from the end of the Russian Revolution to its collapse in 1979; the Nazi experiment, which owed more to ancient Sparta than to the intellectuals Plato and More, which ran from 1933 until its disgrace and collapse in 1945; and the Chinese Communist State, which ran from 1954 to its much more relaxed state today. At the height of their utopian runs, each became more classic dystopias, nightmare worlds, than anything like their literary utopia models. However, their debt to these precursors is evident, particularly in certain institutions that they adopted.

One small but horrible utopian experiment was carried out in Cambodia, the vision of a western-educated Cambodian communist, Pol Pot. Pot took seriously the Marxian attack on class privilege and set about exterminating the entire middle class of his country, resulting in the death of one-third of his population. He deported people from cities, considering cities dens of corruption, and worked the urban population to death in the countryside. Wearing eyeglasses was enough to get a person sent to a work camp to die. This was one of the worst cases of putting an imaginary utopia to the test, making it the ultimate nightmare world.

Israel was founded as a utopian ideal, a small modern state with a commonality of values and room to experiment with a variety of model villages. There was never any of the coercion and totalitarian force found in the dystopias described above. In Israel, these utopias were tiny, voluntary, and experimental. Some have survived as a variety of designed small societies, the Kibbutz movement, today.

The other utopia is the only nation-state-designed society in the world today, Singapore. Singapore began as an unlikely candidate for utopianism, being a breakaway city-state that removed itself from Muslim Malaya. Singapore was an unpromising and fly-bitten Chinese ethnic backwater. It is today one of the most prosperous, and from all accounts, happiest of nation states thanks to that rarest of leaders, Lee Kuan Yew, who modeled himself after Plato's dream leader, a Philosopher King. He was not a king, but he certainly was the unquestioned genius who created an exceedingly unusual city-state. Singapore's example would be almost impossible to replicate elsewhere.

Dystopians

The Russian Revolution emerged out of the collapse of the Russian Empire, a 500-year old backward, authoritarian, but slowly modernizing society. The revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks, based their notions of governance on Karl Marx's mid-nineteenth century critique of Capitalism. They enforced values already present among the Russian peasant farmers: equality among themselves--a village value. But they expropriated the land of the former aristocratic landowners and, instead of distributing it among the peasants, took it into state coffers. Thus the peasants had new feudal masters, the Soviet Government itself. The state also expropriated all industries, an industrialization process not yet modernized. Instead of having companies run by industrialists and stockholders, the State assumed this power.

- **Agriculture and industry**, the two most important elements of the Soviet economy, were thus abandoned to state functionaries with no vested interest in success. The country continued to suffer from unsatisfactory harvests, disinterested agricultural workers with no reason for diligence, and the same thing happened in the industrial sector. To this day, Russian agriculture is inadequate and Russian manufacture produces nothing that anyone outside of the country seems to want to buy.

However, the Soviets diligently enforced collectives in both agriculture and industry, which was utopian, but in practice discouraged ambition and excellence and ultimately created economic disaster.

- **Commonality of Culture**, essential to both More's and Plato's utopias, is a difficult thing to have in a country of (then) 11 time zones, with myriad ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures. The Soviets attempted to get this commonality by force, planting Russian-speakers throughout, assuring there could be no upward mobility without a Russian education, and severely punishing anybody who dared complain about it. Resistant ethnic groups were uprooted from their native turf and replanted in the vastness of Siberia, among hostile neighbors. The consequences of this policy eat at Russia today, with a resurgence of terrorism and guerilla warfare.
- **Cultural Practices**. Whereas both Plato and More emphasized moderation in foods and luxuries, avoiding their corrupting influences on leaders, the Soviet system only moderated the food, clothing, and housing of the majority of subjects. The leadership itself quickly became very much corrupted by access to goods and services not available to their subjects. Simultaneously, their intrusive secret services kept terror as a weapon to use against any incipient complaints from the masses.

Another cultural practice not found in either Plato's or More's utopian visions was the all-pervading nostrum that has dogged all classes of Russians from their inception, alcohol. Alcohol became a substitute for food or warmth for many, and for the leadership class, it fueled dangerous behavior.

- **Current Prognosis.** The Soviet Union has collapsed, followed by two decades of chaos and close anarchy. Today, a leader from the former Soviet establishment, Vladimir Putin, rules in a parody of democracy. His visions are not utopian; he is far more pragmatically trying to restore Russia's influence over Russia's former subject states. There is nothing utopian in his vision and without the temporary flow of funds from the energy sector (Russian luck, not excellence), they may well sink into the backwater from which they rose.

The Nazi German Empire

It is strange to think that out of one of Europe's most dazzling countries, home of extraordinary geniuses in music, art, philosophy, and literature, and even one genius in state-building, Prime Minister Otto Von Bismarck, could become a dystopia that nearly destroyed Europe. Under the utopian imagination of Hitler, his totalitarian Germany set about creating a "brave new world" with nothing but the Aryan Race (an imaginary concept) to run it. He imagined a "thousand-year" reign of Nazi rule in which his utopia could be played out. Instead, he was stopped 12 years after he began, almost completely destroying Germany.

In his notion of commonality of culture, one of the hallmarks of utopias, he ordered the murder of all of his and his conquered countries' Jews (Europe's treasure of intellectuals and artists); he did the same with the small population of European Gypsies; and then decided that all Slavic peoples should be a permanent class of slaves.

He dabbled in an experiment to produce an entire class of Aryan citizens who would only owe their allegiance to him, eliminating any concept of family. He kept specially selected young women in what can only be called brothels to be impregnated by his elite Aryan special services to produce perfect Aryan babies throughout his realm. This was, of course, based on Plato's description of Sparta.

The People's Republic of China

It is amazing to think that a country as large as China, as diverse in the ethnicities it contains, and with such a long history of centralized authority and relatively well-run governance, could fall into a utopian fantasy under the control of a very small group of totalitarian utopians. But out of the chaos of the Chinese Revolution rose a new empire designed as a laboratory for utopian ideals.

- **From Each According to His Abilities, To Each According to his Needs.** This theory eliminated the whole concept of enlightened self-interest. It imagined that people would work hard, indifferent to reward for such work, and unselfishly share the fruits of their labor with those who needed it. Incentive vanished in the blink of an eye. The sharp end of this theory was force, not voluntary unselfishness.
- **Community was to replace Family.** Most utopias do not like family life. They replace it with the commune, the common dining hall, the common rearing and indoctrination of children, and group labor for projects ordered by the State. China picked up More's notion of urban populations annually assisting the farmers with their labor. For More, this was to make everyone competent at food cultivation; in China, it was used to punish, or to keep in line, middle class intellectuals. Cambodia used it to exterminate its middle class.
- **Status of Women.** Modern utopias supposedly emancipate women from being the property of a husband. Many also pick up Plato's suggestion that among the guardian classes, sexuality be liberated from marriage to something once called "free love." This was tried, but never became popular. Marriage survived the assault. But again, as in More's Utopia, modern utopian movements recognized that there would be need for female labor, which was wasted in the individuality of family life.
- **Commonality of Values.** Every utopia is designed to foment common values among the participants. In a way, this is the idea of the consent of the governed. China has always had a commonality of basic values from its inception. A difference is that under the Marxist utopia, new values would be taught, strengthened with propaganda, and enforced. It was a simultaneous action of denigrating the old values and propping up the new ones.
- **Economic Transformation.** Although China has a long history of autocracy, in reality, it was governed by the rules of the Mandarins, civil servants culled through layers of examinations for their positions. In this case, China has always had a system that resembled that of Plato's Guardians. But China has also had a long history of entrepreneurship and the rewards earned from it. The Marxist utopian system had no room for that, believing that there should be a classless civilization in which everyone was equal.

China's headlong plunge into this utopian structure was only sustained by reigns of terror and ruthless compulsion. Their desire to reform agriculture resulted in famines; the attempt to multiply their manufacturing capacity resulted in the stupid system of establishing furnaces in each village, an enormous waste of labor and the death of incompetent workers.

Their single success was in communizing the nation's health system. Village women were trained to provide basic health instruction and care throughout China. Although not a sophisticated system of modern medicine, it greatly improved national health through new sanitary practices and better water supplies.

With the death of utopian Mao Zedong, whose last years were dogged by insanity, China had the good luck (and intelligent governance) to open to the West and climb out of the utopian straightjacket. It is now thriving economically, socially (with a burgeoning modern middle class), and materially in almost every way. Even Chinese entrepreneurialism has returned, and with it the emergence of a class of ultra-rich and powerful.

The Current Dystopians

Utopian visions die hard. Although there are no longer any nation-states trying to enforce a single vision of society on its population, cults, usually wrapped in the mystique of religion, are still trying to mirror Plato and More. Cults such as Jonestown and the Branch Davidians both came to bad ends, largely because their respective leaders were not philosopher kings; they were thugs drunk with total power.

The best example of dystopian nightmare is North Korea, whose family dynasty of leaders has not been philosopher kings; they have been monsters. Albania, until the fall of the Soviet Union, was an outlier of dystopian misery. It is no longer so, and North Korea is not destined for longevity either.

Other dystopias still with us are not the descendants of Plato or More; they are the products of another ideology, the fantasy of the perfect and just realms mirroring an imagined perfect world of early Islam. The nation-state of Saudi Arabia is the only country totally governed by the imagined utopia of the time of the Prophet Mohammad. It continues to function because of its petrochemical wealth, authoritarian governance, and an almost closed-off society. It is teetering on the brink of destruction from within. It cannot seal itself off from the currents of the modern world much longer.

Some militant Muslim cults have taken up arms to retake lands once ruled by Islam. Although their efforts are more addressed to areas already Muslim, they are attempting to establish imagined utopian purist Muslim governance, undoing all the trappings of modern global values. They oppose education, western dress, modernization for women, and any of the arts and cultures of the global society. Their notions of a utopia do not sit well with their conquered populations. They too are in failure mode.

Anarchists are still with us. They fall into the category of imagined, not constructed utopias. Their mode is destruction, and they begin with no organized governance, which quickly melts in the light of reality. The Bolsheviks imagined a utopia in the future as all

governments melt away. Their anarchism was quickly replaced by totalitarianism and big sticks. The Nazis also envisioned a thousand year empire peopled by only Aryans. Their vision paralleled that of ancient Sparta, a military elite presiding over a world of non-person slaves.

Conclusions

Literary utopias, inconsequential among the greatest works of literature, have had an unexpected influence since the Renaissance. They have inspired designed societies not only in Europe and America, but in Russia and China, with a number of satellite countries of the big powers.

Almost all of these utopian experiments have morphed into dystopias, resulting in the deaths of millions of people and global war. None have remained, with the exception of North Korea. All the rest have morphed into more ordinary political and social arrangements. But we must never overlook the seductiveness of utopian dreams and nightmares.

Recommended Readings

- Huxley, Aldous: *Brave New World*, 1932.
- Huxley, Aldous: *Island: A Novel*, 1962.
- Marx, Karl: *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.
- More, Thomas: *Utopia*, published 1516 in Latin
- Mumford, Lewis: *The Story of Utopias*, Viking Press, 1922.
- Plato: *The Republic*, written about 380 BC.
- Swift, Jonathan: *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726.