

## Chapter 1

# The Nature of Utopias

### *Utopias Defined*

“Utopia” means the allegedly perfect society. Coined by Thomas More (1478–1535), Lord Chancellor of England, the term is epitomized in his *Utopia* (1516), which was published first in Latin and then translated into French, German, and Italian before it was translated into English in 1551. More had opposed its translation into his native tongue during his lifetime.

“Utopia” refers to the ideal visions themselves. “Utopianism” refers to the movements that bring them about. The particular components of utopia can vary enormously, and one person’s or one society’s utopia may be another’s anti-utopia or “dystopia.” In coining the term More was making a pun meaning both “good place” and “nowhere.” Nevertheless, we can define “genuine” utopias by comparing them with “false” utopias in three ways.

First, in a genuine utopia, perfection usually entails a radical improvement of physical, social, economic, and psychological conditions. Utopia is—or should be—*qualitatively* different from pre-utopia and non-utopia. Except when pre-utopia is seen as moving toward utopia—as was long assumed by many to be the case with the United States—radical change is critical to the achievement of utopia. Even here, however, considerable improvements are still believed to be necessary. These improvements are to be achieved through the transformation of institu-

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tions, values, norms, and activities. Perfection does not come automatically, and the inhabitants of most utopias remain flawed by nature, except when their flaws might someday be overcome by preliminary versions of genetic engineering. Otherwise, utopian society must maximize virtues and strengths and minimize vices and weaknesses. In evaluating a utopia, the specific objectives and the means devised to reach these objectives define the variety of perfection that is sought. “Perfection,” like “beauty,” is an empty word unless it is given specific content.<sup>1</sup>

Second, not only their precise contents but also their comprehensiveness further characterize genuine utopias, which seek changes in most, if not all, areas of society. By contrast, false utopias seek changes in only one or two components, such as schools, prisons, diet, or dress. This is because the proponents of utopias are generally more dissatisfied with the basic structure and direction of their own, non-utopian, society than are the proponents of milder changes. Historian of technology Robert Friedel’s monumental 2007 study, *A Culture of Improvement: Technology and the Western Millennium*, richly details progress of this more modest degree, a view of the world beginning in the late Middle Ages. He provides myriad examples of persons laboring on farms and in workshops with, in most cases, only limited notions of what they wanted to do, whether they were ultimately successful or not. Yet he does offer repeated examples of what he terms the sustained “capture” of improvement through such means as guilds, professional engineering organizations and engineering schools, and corporate and governmental research and development enterprises. Understandably (if regrettably), Friedel does not discuss technological progress that was largely unintentional and accidental, “un-utopian” instances of “improvement” without an overarching vision. Take, for example, calendar reform, which, according to historian Frank Manuel, would not, in and of itself, qualify as utopian, “but calendar reform that pretended to effect a basic transformation in the human condition might be.”<sup>2</sup>

A third and final characteristic of genuine utopias is their seriousness of purpose. Whatever their particular form and content, all genuine utopias share the ethos described by political theorist George Kateb:

When we speak of a utopia, we generally mean an ideal society which is not an efflorescence of a diseased or playful or satirical imagination, nor a private or special dream-world, but rather one in which the welfare of all its inhabitants is the central concern, and in which the level of welfare is strikingly higher, and assumed to be more long-lasting, than that of the real world.<sup>3</sup>

Genuine utopias frequently seek not to escape from the real world but to make the real world better. This objective does not, of course, necessarily translate into practicality or effective action. Compare, for example, fantasies of trips to the moon imagined by Jules Verne and other writers with the Apollo project of NASA that fulfilled its primary objective in 1969 of landing Americans on the moon and returning them safely to earth and that was hailed at the time as an instrument of greater world peace. For years, NASA has identified many pragmatic spin-offs of its Apollo and later space programs that have benefited ordinary Americans and others. NASA missions are indirectly responsible for inventions from MRIs and lasers to more mundane objects such as smoke detectors and dustbusters. In fact, NASA touts the practical implications of its programs on the NASA Spinoff website (<http://www.sti.nasa.gov/tto>) and on Twitter (@NASA\_Spinoff).

One further central characteristic of genuine utopias has been well expressed by Ruth Levitas: “the desire for a different, better way of being” is neither innate nor universal. To suggest otherwise is to indulge in fantasies that may be satisfying to those with utopian desires but that lack any historical basis. Countless examples of non-utopian or outright anti-utopian individuals, groups, cultures, and societies can readily be cited. Utopias are perhaps the foremost “socially constructed response to an *equally* socially constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it.” This social construction in no way diminishes the significance of genuine utopian visions, past or present. The attempted bridging of that gap, in any number of ways, is what utopias are finally all about.<sup>4</sup>

## *Utopias Differ from both Millenarian Movements and Science Fiction*

Depending on human beings rather than on God to transform the world distinguishes utopias from millenarian movements. In millenarian movements, should God enlist humans, much still depends on God. For instance, the ultra-Orthodox Jews who opposed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 did so on the grounds that it was up to God to establish Israel, according to their reading of the Old Testament. Only with God's approval would they eventually impose Jewish laws, customs, and institutions upon the blessed new state. By contrast, secular Zionists for decades sought to establish a Jewish state by themselves and, of course, finally succeeded.

Similarly, Christian pre-Millennialists, who believe that Jesus will return without human intervention, do not try to improve the world. If anything, they want conditions to deteriorate precisely to quicken Jesus' return. This was the case with James Watt, the controversial Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan, regarding the fate of so much of the American environment under his control. By comparison, post-Millennialists believe that Jesus will return only after humans improve their world and themselves, though they do not believe in the perfectibility of either, given original sin.

Utopias differ from science fiction in their basic concern for changing rather than abandoning or ignoring non-utopian communities and societies. Science fiction, on the other hand, consists primarily of escapist fantasies about exploration to distant lands, to depths below the earth, or to outer space. Coinage of the term "science fiction" is credited to Forrest J. Ackerman (1916–2008), but it was applied by him and others to works published before his time.<sup>5</sup> Verne's works such as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1866), and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) provide classic examples of science fiction. However imaginative they may be, any impact upon the society left behind is quite secondary. As historian Rosalind Williams contends, Verne's various escape routes from his own society's "science-driven globalization" represent far more than a desire to entertain children and adults. Yet, she concedes, his imagined

inventions were intended to free his characters from the “entanglements of the modern, industrializing, globalizing world.” They were not primarily designed to alter it.<sup>6</sup>

The case of the fairly obscure American writer David Lasser is no less revealing. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Lasser edited pulp fiction with the legendary Hugo Gernsback. But Gernsback fired Lasser for becoming too concerned with the social and economic crises of the contemporary Great Depression. Lasser then looked to space travel to transcend these and other actual problems, such as nationalism and racism. The first president of the American Interplanetary Society in 1930, Lasser represents the progressive side of science fiction often silenced by technically obsessed persons such as Gernsback but associated in Europe with H. G. Wells above all. During the Cold War, Lasser argued for a world peace that would prevent the extension of tensions between capitalism and communism into space. This distinguished Lasser from better-known post-World War II space scientists and popularizers of space exploration—such as Wernher von Braun, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, and Willy Ley, who favored extending traditional American imperialism into space. Von Braun made a remarkably successful transition from Nazi war criminal to charismatic leader of the American space program. Ben Bova and Gerard O’Neill, later advocates of space exploration, were not, however, the same kind of conservative Cold War warriors.<sup>7</sup>

In recent decades, science fiction has become ever more engaged with the “real world” it would supposedly either transform or escape from. Rejecting the white male technocratic elitism of their predecessors, such contemporary writers as Vonda N. McIntyre, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Allen Steele envision space communities as models of racial and gender diversity. Meanwhile, established writers such as Doris Lessing, Ursula LeGuin, and Margaret Atwood continued with this trend when they moved into science fiction.<sup>8</sup>

### *Utopias’ Spiritual Qualities are Akin to those of Formal Religions*

Krishan Kumar argues that there is “a fundamental contradiction between religion and utopia”<sup>9</sup> because of the distinctions

drawn above regarding changes to be brought about by human beings versus changes to be brought about by God, or regarding concerns for this world versus those for the next world. But that common stance is simplistic and ignores the fact that most secular utopias that achieve some longevity still have a spiritual dimension. This might be a faith in science and/or technology as panaceas, often as saviors—a focal point of this book—but it does provide a non-material dimension that cannot be ignored. No less importantly, utopias that envision a far longer, happier, more fulfilling life in this world as compared with salvation in another world or reincarnation in this world usually envision a future in which the very poverty, disease, stagnation, and hopelessness that make salvation and/or reincarnation so appealing are eliminated.

Some European and American utopian writings and many communities have had religion in more conventional forms as their principal theme and cause. If, not surprisingly, Christianity has been the commonest faith, Mormonism and Judaism, for example, have also been represented, as have obscure, sometimes mystical creeds. Overall, religion-based communities have lasted longer than those based on secular beliefs such as socialism. Notable exceptions to this generalization have been communities that fell apart after the loss of founding charismatic leaders. For example, the Oneida community established by John Humphrey Noyes in New York State in 1848 could not continue after Noyes fled to Canada in 1879 before he could be arrested for immoral behavior, as elaborated in Chapter 2. There have also been interesting mixtures: for instance, one of the most intriguing sequels to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) was the work *Young West* (1894), written by a Reform Rabbi, Solomon Schindler, who tried to enlist other American Jews in Bellamy's Nationalist political crusade.<sup>10</sup>

More broadly, the general notion of America as utopia has gradually become part of America's so-called civil religion, whereby a supposedly secular nation repeatedly invokes God at public ceremonies and in the formulation of public policy. The United States became, in these terms, a *de facto* utopia, unique among the world's nations and yet a model for them all.

Americans, including many policy-makers, have argued both that the country's uniqueness makes it morally superior to all other countries and that the United States could somehow still lift up all other, inferior nations to attempt to approach its high standards. To be sure, the apparent paradox of this position—of simultaneous tendencies toward isolationism and toward foreign aggression—is often lost on its policy proponents and on ordinary citizens alike. Moreover, Americans' use of "Manifest Destiny" to rationalize both westward and overseas expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries exemplifies the utopian dimension of mainstream American history. Most recently, the "neo-conservative" planners behind the Iraq War that began in 2003 had illusions similar to those of their predecessors more than a century ago. The George W. Bush Administration naïvely thought not only that American democracy could readily be exported to a land devoid of democratic traditions and values but also that American troops would be enthusiastically welcomed as democratic liberators from the tyranny of longtime dictator Saddam Hussein.<sup>11</sup>

The connections between the rise and fall of religious belief in the twenty-first century and secular substitutes that, at their most optimistic, become utopian are complex and varied. For example, according to both the editor of the highly respected weekly *The Economist* and his Washington bureau chief, religion is supposedly returning to public life and to intellectuals around the world—and is doing so as a matter of individual voluntary choice and commitment. In *God Is Back*, they argue that the resurgence of belief is another facet of the innovation economy and society that most nations profess to seek. Belief in the prospect of a better world obviously need not lead to any utopian embrace, but neither does it preclude that. So-called "megachurches" throughout the world are but one example of this growth.<sup>12</sup>

Still, there is countervailing evidence of declining traditional religious beliefs in the United States and elsewhere. The search for secular alternatives again may include utopianism of different forms. The comprehensive 2008 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life showed a complex picture of the more than 35,000 Americans who participated. There was some decline

in the percentage of absolute believers and a growing number of believers who nevertheless maintain some doubts. Equally interesting was the lack of firm commitment the survey observed, remarking that the United States “is a nation of religious drifters, with about half of adults switching faith affiliation at least once during their lives.”<sup>13</sup> Lisa Miller’s *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (2010) complements these conclusions in its finding that roughly eighty percent of Americans claim belief in an afterlife but remarkably few can provide any specifics about what they mean by an afterlife.

### *Utopias’ Real Goal: Not Prediction of the Future but Improvement of the Present*

Utopias are frequently misunderstood as scientific prophecies whose importance should be determined by the accuracy of their specific predictions. In this respect, the notion that utopias can provide “realistic alternatives” to existing society can be misleading. If anything, this view has grown increasingly popular in recent decades, given our unprecedented electronic access to and processing of information and the consequent growth of forecasting as a serious and profitable industry. If, as the late economist John Kenneth Galbraith wittily observed, economists make predictions not because they know but because they’re asked, how much more so does that apply to “professional” social forecasters—and how much more superficial and specious are their predictions? This growth of professional forecasting will be discussed in Chapter 6. The intriguing question (also discussed in that chapter) is why thousands of otherwise intelligent people take social forecasting so seriously—and why many of them later hold up those forecasts as scorecards.

Few such true believers in social forecasting, like their counterparts regarding economic forecasting, would ever categorize themselves as utopians. Neither would tens of thousands, maybe millions, of devotees of contemporary social media and of cyberspace communities—discussed in Chapter 7. It is important not to enlarge the pool of utopians in the name of identifying the utopian



rhetoric embraced by so many. Yet the critical point is the seriousness with which such persons treat whatever makes them interested in the future.

Instead, as noted, utopias' principal value is their illumination of alleged problems and solutions back in the "real world" from which they sprang. Utopias should therefore be played back upon the real world rather than be held up as crystal balls.

### *How and When Utopias are Expected to be Established*

It is crucial to keep in mind that not all utopias are intended to be established in the first place. The classic example of such a utopia as an intellectual construct is Plato's *Republic* (360 BCE). Since Plato did not believe in that prospect, *The Republic* is the quintessential "Platonic Form."

The starting point for utopias that *could* be established is More's *Utopia* (1516). For centuries thereafter, and continuing at least as late as James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933), utopia was usually discovered by Western travelers who came upon it by accident, for example through erroneous maps, storms at sea, airplane crashes, or, as in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, through falling asleep and awakening in utopia. Conditions that eventually brought utopia about included wars, post-war peacetime negotiations, natural disasters, and clashes between continents, nations, classes, races, and, yes, sexes. These utopias were usually placed in the contemporary time of their authors. But, as more of the world became explored and known, it became increasingly necessary to place utopia in unexplored, exotic places in order to claim some originality—for example, under the sea, inside the earth, or in outer space. However, as these sites themselves became explored and relatively familiar, it became necessary to project utopia into the future. At first, European visionaries (discussed in Chapter 3) harbored vague expectations of utopian fulfillment in the distant future, but usually without particular dates. Eventually, though, there arose visions that it was forecast would come about in a specified time within reach of the next generation or two—as with *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888)—and later,

within one's own lifetime—as with the date of 1960 in the landmark World of Tomorrow exhibit at the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair or, of course, George Orwell's nightmare *1984* (1949). With Buckminster Fuller's *Utopia or Oblivion* (1969) came the elimination of any delay: the future was now.

## Notes

- 1 On the complexity of depictions of human nature by Plato, More, and other utopians, see Gorman Beauchamp, "Imperfect Men in Perfect Societies: Human Nature in Utopia," *Philosophy and Literature*, 31 (October 2007), 280–293.
- 2 Frank E. Manuel, "Toward a Psychological History of Utopias," in *Utopias and Utopian Thought: A Timely Appraisal*, ed. Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 70.
- 3 George Kateb, *Utopia and its Enemies* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 6 n. 6.
- 4 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 181–182. This book is the best general introduction to utopianism as an intellectual and historical phenomenon. But Levitas says little about utopian communities and nothing about non-Western utopias. Also useful is Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- 5 See the obituary of Forrest J. Ackerman by Bruce Weber, *New York Times*, December 6, 2008, B10.
- 6 See Peter Dizikes, "Reporter's Notebook: Jules Verne, Desperado? MIT Historian of Science Rosalind Williams On the Overlooked Legacy of Jules Verne, Anti-Globalization Visionary," *MIT News*, December 10, 2009, [web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/williams-verne-1210.html](http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/williams-verne-1210.html).
- 7 These developments are made clear by De Witt Douglas Kilgore's *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). By "Astrofuturism" Kilgore means the "tradition of speculative fiction and science writing inaugurated by scientists and science popularizers during the space race of the 1950s" (p. 2).
- 8 If Kilgore identifies himself as an African American, he goes far beyond lamenting the general absence of African Americans in the literature he analyzes. As he readily concedes, his lifelong fascination with space—despite the absence of "role models"—connects him to

- thousands of other Americans, white and non-white alike. See also Marleen S. Barr, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1993); Robin Roberts, *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Ellen Susan Peel, *Politics, Persuasion, and Pragmatism: A Rhetoric of Feminist Utopian Fiction* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2002); and Vanessa E. Jones, "Race, the Final Frontier," *Boston Globe*, July 31, 2007, E1, E2.
- 9 Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 10.
  - 10 See Howard P. Segal, "Young West: The Psyche of Technological Utopianism," *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 19 (December 1977), 50–58; and Justin Nordstrom, "Unlikely Utopians: Solomon Schindler, Henry Mendes, and American Judaism in the 1890s," *Utopian Studies*, 20 (2009), 275–297.
  - 11 Susan M. Matarese, *American Foreign Policy and the Utopian Imagination* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) is a pioneering study of the connections between the two that examines the several dimensions of "national image."
  - 12 John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009) and the critical review by Michiko Kakutani, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, March 31, 2009, C1, C6.
  - 13 See Eric Gorski, Associated Press, "Survey: Americans Switch Faiths Early, Often," *Bangor Daily News*, April 28, 2009, C8. See also Peter Steinfels, "Beliefs: Uncertainties About the Contemporary Role of Doubt in Religion," *New York Times*, July 19, 2008, B10; and Josie Huang, "Survey Finds Religious Identification Declining," script of Maine Public Radio story, March 20, 2009.