What Is a Utopia?

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Utopianism: social dreaming.
Utopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia (below).

Eutopia or positive utopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

Dystopia or negative utopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.

One would think that, in the almost five hundred years since Thomas More coined the word utopia, there would be agreement on its meaning, but there still remain some fundamental disagreements, including both old and relatively new problems. Over the years, I have written extensively on definitional questions, and here I shall focus on what I see as continuing issues in the scholarship that I believe to be particularly important. There are, I think, a number of reasons for the continuing issues, and in this essay I want to glance at some of those reasons and the problems they raise. In doing so, I shall comment on the shifting boundaries of the definition of utopia and argue that while some definitions are simply wrong, we should not expect that a single definition will fit all times and places.

More’s use of the word he invented gave rise to problems because it was itself playful. In “Six Lines on the Island of Utopia”, he wrote, “The ancients called me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in man and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or Happy Land” (More, Utopia, 21). This play on words provides the earliest source for problems of meaning.

Second, the word “utopia” became the label for a genre of literature, and authors who wrote within that genre pushed at the boundaries they found and radically expanded the scope of the genre and thus the word. For example, in 1872 Samuel Butler published Erewhon, which clearly belongs in the genre but which also looks very different from More’s Utopia. As a result, the word “erewhonian” was invented to describe this sub-genre, and other sub-genres like Gulliveriana and Robinsonaden developed even earlier. Thus, authors doing what they do best, being creative, have made the original complex term infinitely more complex. A recent example of a new form is Abaza: A Modern Encyclopedia (2001) by Louis Nowra, which is an encyclopedia describing a dystopia.

Third, More’s word came to describe not just a literary genre but also a way of thinking, which I call utopianism, and utopia and utopianism are often conflated. This is important because it leads to works that do not look at all like More’s Utopia being called utopias because at some point they involve thinking about different ways of living. For example, descriptions of ideal cities and what might be called architectural utopias have long been appropriately considered as part of utopianism, but often they have not been part of the literary genre. In addition, there are paintings like the various works entitled “Peaceable Kingdom” by Edward Hicks (1780-1849). Finally, intentional communities, which were once called utopian experiments, are also
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appropriately included (See Sargent, "The Intersection of Utopianism and Communitarianism").

Fourth, scholarship in the field is often based on very limited reading within the genre, which means that simple descriptions are given of a complex phenomenon. In other cases, definitions that are appropriate for the particular time and place on which the author focuses do not comfortably fit other times and places. For example, one of the best studies of early utopianism, J.C. Davis’s *Utopia and the Ideal Society* (1981) defines utopia as one of five subcategories of ideal society thinking (cockaygne, arcadia, perfect moral commonwealth, millennium, and utopia). The distinctions that Davis makes work for the period he covers (1516–1700), but I have found them much harder to apply to later utopianism, particularly the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The most basic aspect of the topic is what I call utopianism or social dreaming. Every country, every culture, will have some way of social dreaming, dreaming about a better way of life, whether it be in the past, the future, after death, or whatever. This indicates that we must be ready to accept that utopias will not all look alike. For example, there are different versions of life after death; the Native American Indian’s version is radically different from that of most Christian versions, and the Christian version of Dante’s time is very different from the dominant Christian version of today. Paradise for one people or time is not Paradise for another people or time.

It is instructive to look at two definitions from early scholars. Joyce Oramel Hertzler defines utopias by identifying a “distinctive characteristic” of More’s Utopia, saying “. . . More depicted a perfect, and perhaps unrealizable, society, located in nowhere, purged of the shortcomings, the wastes, and the confusion of our own time and living in perfect adjustment, full of happiness and contentment”. J. Max Patrick also based his definition on More, saying:

... a utopia conforms to certain basic features of More’s Libellus, which gave the genre its name. A utopia should describe in a variety of aspects and with some consistency an imaginary state or society which is regarded as better, in some respects at least, than the one in which its author lives. He does not ordinarily claim that the fictitious society and its people are perfect in all respects and that he is propounding a total ideal or model to strive toward or imitate; most utopias are presented not as models of unrealistic perfection but as alternatives to the familiar, as norms by which to judge existing societies, as exercises in extrapolation to discover the social and other implications of realizing certain theories, principles and projects.

But these definitions, on the surface the same, differ in one very important way; Hertzler’s utopias are perfect and Patrick’s are not.

*Candid Suggestions in Eight Letters to Soame Jenkins, Esq.* (London, 1782), 169-72. John Stuart Mill used “dystopian” in the House of Commons. Hansard (12 March 1868, page 1517, column 1) reports him saying “I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dystopians, or cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable, but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.” According to the OED, Cacotopia was first used by Jeremy Bentham in his *Plan of Parliamentary Reform, in the Form of a Catechism* (1818).

Utopian satire: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.

Anti-utopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

Critical utopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre.

Critical dystopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than
contemporary society but that normally includes at least one utopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia.

Flawed utopia: works that present what appears to be a good society until the reader learns of some flaw that raises questions about the basis for its claim to be a good society, or even turns it into a dystopia. The flawed utopia tends to invade territory already occupied by the dystopia, the anti-utopia, and the critical utopia and dystopia. The flawed utopia is a sub-type that can exist within any of these sub-genres.

Intentional community: a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose. The term appears to have been first used in the 1940s. With the exception of “critical dystopia”, these definitions are from my “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”. Although I have used my own definition, “critical dystopia” is based on Moylan’s Scraps of the Untainted Sky and Baccolini’s “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler.” “Flawed utopia” comes from my “The Problem of the ‘Flawed Utopia’”. Other definitional articles include Levitas, Poggioli, Quarta, Sawada, and Suvin.

Starting at the logical starting point, we are faced with a dispute over the nature of utopia. And the difference is important because the equation has been used by Karl Popper and others to dismiss utopianism as the equivalent of totalitarianism.

Patrick is right, and Hertzler is quite simply wrong. More’s own work does not describe a perfect society by any definition of perfect that I can find. In English “perfect” refers to something finished, complete, unchanging, and Utopia certainly does not fit that definition. I also believe that More, as a good Christian, could not imagine a “perfect” society; the sinful nature of the human race would preclude that. And there are very few utopias in the corpus that can reasonably be described as “perfect,” and most of those are in some version of heaven.

If we look more closely at the issue, we can see that there are two possible versions of perfection, perfect people and a perfect society. In both cases, the dominant tendency within utopianism is against these types of perfection.

The flaw in the presumably perfect has deep roots in utopianism. Aristophanes (448?-380? BCE), the first great anti-utopian, presents this argument in his Ecclesiazusae or Women in Parliament (393 BCE) where a group of women take over the legislative assembly and enact a form of communism. Their legislation fails not because it is bad but because the human race is not capable of the required altruism. Aristophanes made a similar point in Platus (388 BCE) where the blind god of wealth is given sight, whereupon he redistributes wealth to the deserving. Human greed rapidly redistributes it again inequitably.

Given the importance of Christianity in the Western utopian tradition, it is hardly surprising that attempts to achieve perfection in this life are sometimes presented as failures. Medieval Christianity generally reflected the position of St. Augustine (354-430) that life in this world was conditioned by the Fall and sin. As a result, the possibility of significant social improvement was limited at best, and much medieval utopianism was explicitly heretical (On heresy and utopianism, see, for example, Molnar). No Christian can believe that perfection on this Earth or in this life is possible before the Second Coming or the Millennium. This did not stop thinkers from developing utopian imagery, but it had to be displaced in some way, such as in the rediscovered Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of Prester John, St. Brandon’s Isle, or the like.

For the Christian, apparent perfection must be flawed or even a delusion foisted upon unsuspecting people by Satan or the Antichrist. For example, this is the explicit theme of James Blish’s (1921-75) A Case of Conscience (1958), where the planet is destroyed because its apparent perfection must be the work of Satan.

The earliest modern example of a flawed utopia is Samuel
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Johnson's (1709-84) *The Prince of Abissinia* (1759), better known as *Rasselas*, a title first used in 1787. The eutopia, Happy Valley, intended to provide a perfect life for the children of an emperor, seems dull to Rasselas, and he chooses to explore the world. While after many adventures he concludes that the Happy Valley compares favorably to the world, Johnson was one of the first to raise the issue of the potential boredom faced by the inhabitants of a eutopia.

In contemporary science fiction, perfect people are usually brought about through eugenics or, more recently, genetic manipulation. The point is generally quite simple and harks back to the Christian critique of utopianism. The “perfect people” fail because they inevitably bring with them the taint of the past, an ineradicable “human nature” (See Sargent 1975 and 1977), no longer called “sin” but that is implied, and it ensures that human beings cannot be perfect. An example is Robert Lieberman’s (1941-) *Perfect People* (1986).

The other category, the imperfect society, occurs primarily in the twentieth century because the imperfect perfection is most often brought about by technology. H.G. Wells is an early twentieth-century example of someone deeply ambivalent about the ability of science and technology to bring about a better society (See Sargent 1984), and it is a common theme in science fiction (See Sargent 1981). One example is Michael Frayn’s (1933-) *A Very Private Life* (1968), which presents a highly developed technology that is intended to produce a eutopia but results in a dystopia of complete personal isolation.

Another issue that should now be settled is whether utopias are a Western phenomenon or if there are nonwestern utopian traditions that developed separately from the Western tradition. It is clear that there are such traditions. Even if we include the Islamic tradition in the West, there are such traditions in China and India. In fact, every culture that has been examined with care by scholars has been shown to have a utopian tradition to some degree.

But this brings us back to definitional questions and the tendency to conflate utopia and utopianism. To what extent does something have to resemble More’s Utopia to be considered a utopia? Would we recognize a utopia produced in a radically different culture as a utopia? This forces us to ask, What is the essence of a utopia? To me, there are two central aspects of a utopia, both of which must be there. First, the society described must not exist; second, the author must in some way evaluate that society.

But authors sometimes challenge even these most basic characteristics. Most utopias are located in time and space to provide verisimilitude, to make our suspension of disbelief more willing. For example, More's *Utopia* and most early post-More utopias were located
in relatively unexplored areas of earth. Later, utopias were placed in the future but with a defined past that led to that future. With the development of science fiction as a genre within which utopias were published, the direct connection to the past often became more tenuous, but throughout the history of the utopian genre, most utopias have been non-existent but closely connected to some reality.

And given the importance of satire within the utopian genre, the fact that most utopias are evaluative turns out to be not as simple a point as might first appear (On satire, see Elliott). Again, More led the way. What are we to make of a country called No Place with a major river called No Water? And scholars still disagree fundamentally over what institutions of Utopia, if any, More meant to be taken seriously. Did Saint Thomas More really believe in euthanasia? Also, one person’s eutopia may well be another’s dystopia. For example, B.F. Skinner’s (1904-90) Walden Two (1948) clearly describes what Skinner and many others saw to be a eutopia but which many critics saw as a dystopia.

What then can we conclude regarding the question asked in my title? It seems to me that the reality of actual utopias and utopianism force us to accept that one term does not fit all, that scholarship must be much more careful about the terms used than has been the case in the past. In particular, scholars need to stop using the words “perfect” and “perfection” in connection with utopias.

There is a utopian literary genre, but it has many parts, and authors continue to push at whatever porous boundaries scholars want to put around the genre. There is also a phenomenon that can be called utopianism that appears to be universal and again has many parts, many ways it is expressed.

Thus, scholars must be very careful to be explicit about what they are studying, what aspects of utopianism interest them, what part of the utopian literary genre the works that interests them belongs to. Thomas More provided us with a complex text that still defies agreement. We should honor More by recognizing the complex, many-faceted legacy that has grown from his original play on words.
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The title was Problems but the editor changed it without consulting me. He also held it for three years before publishing it.


