
The Conception of a Utopia

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The term “utopia” was coined by English philosopher Sir Thomas Moore in 1516 in his book *Utopia*. In short, it is an imaginary place where everything, including human nature, is perfect. This concept has a lengthy history, tracing back to the early days of human society. To think about utopia is a “prime political act,” meaning that it is one of the most natural and prioritized political topics. As populations increased and societies expanded from villages to intercontinental empires, humankind has refused to be bounded by the present. There has always been the need to look forward into the future, thinking about and devising more effective governance systems along the way. This essay will evaluate the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato’s *The Republic*, the Chinese philosophers Lao Tzu, Tao Yuanming, the French Enlightenment thinker Jacques Rousseau, and the German theorist Karl Marx. Consequently, two main conclusions emerge: a utopia is difficult to achieve, and a utopia is valuable even if civilization cannot realize it.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato was one of the first to systematically write about his beliefs of a utopian state in his book *The Republic*. Plato effectively argued for an “aristocracy of merit,” rule by the best or wisest. To define the best or wisest, Plato claimed that philosopher kings should rule his utopia, laid out primarily in his famous “allegory of the cave.” The philosophers are the ones who walk out of the caves and see the world outside. But they should return to the cave to lead those attracted by the shadows on the wall to leave it. Alongside this core structure, Plato also innovatively pointed out that well-rounded education should be equal between men and women and, in a rather extreme fashion, that there should be no private property. For the Greek philosopher, the justice of a perfect state lies in the implementation of these arguments and the wisdom of citizens to carry out their respective duties within the state.

In ancient China, the Chinese Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu during the Spring and Autumn Period came up with the concept of a “small country with few inhabitants,” writing: “Given a small country with few inhabitants, [...] there might still be weapons of war but no one would drill with them. He could bring it about that the people should have no use for any form of writing save knotted ropes, should be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their homes, should take pleasure in their rustic tasks. The next place might be so near at hand that one could hear the cocks crowing in it, the dogs barking; but the people would grow old and die without ever having been there.” His description of a utopia is somewhat regressive, valuing virtues over affluence and order of law. Moreover, there is no clear sense of a functioning central government, suggesting that Lao Tzu might be a partial advocate for anarchism. His utopia has

only lived in a world of literature and philosophy and is rarely brought under the circumstances of reality.

The Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, living several hundred years after Lao Tzu, proposed his version of a utopia in the poem *The Peach Blossom Spring*. Tao was disappointed in his political career, deciding to become a hermit who returned to the farmland. In the preface of that poem, Tao depicted an idyllically minuscule utopia for readers, where the inhabitants took no contact with the outside world. They lived in harmony with nature and were inaccessible from the outside. Like Lao Tzu's utopia, Tao's version is similarly anarchic, poetic, and regressive. Unlike Lao Tzu's utopia, Tao's argument was more based on his thoughts on reality since his inspiration was his political failure.

The European Enlightenment that occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the creation and development of political ideas. This blossom of ideas can be primarily attributed to this tumultuous period when clashes between politics and religious ideologies were common. One of the most prominent thinkers of this age on utopia is French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He laid out the framework of his utopia in his masterpiece, *The Social Contract*. In Rousseau's state, citizens voluntarily a social contract and submit some of their rights to the "general will," a collectively held will that "aims at the common good or interest." The state would protect each individual's freedom, rights, and well-being. This system resembles what English philosopher John Locke proposed and is a more direct proposition for establishing direct democracy.

However, Rousseau's thoughts possess some inherent dangers. First, although the social contract is ostensibly voluntary, anyone who refuses to sign it or disagrees must flee the state and cannot participate in any state affairs. This rule casts doubt on the nature of Rousseau's democracy and the flexibility of his model to coexist with dissent. Second, more importantly, Rousseau's utopia could indirectly push the governing body into an autocracy under the guise of preserving the rights of the public. One has to submit almost everything to the state and is subordinate to the general will. More specifically, if there is no restriction to the general will, then the government might as well coat every decision to grab power in the interest of the entire state. The democracy under Rousseau's vision can turn into a deceptive and horrific form of authoritarian rule in this way. Such a kind of state reminds people of the one described in the dystopian fiction *The Giver*, where the governing body claims to make every decision for the benefit of everyone at the sacrifice of personal freedom and memory.

The German economist and writer Karl Marx is most renowned today for his doctrines of communism. While some doubt his views on the failure of the Soviet Union to implement communism, his opinions of a utopia are worth investigating. The fundamental proposition of



Marx is to abolish the boundary between state and civil society and to create a classless society. He partially based this proposition of popular self-rule on his negative observations of 19th-century capitalism. Marx claimed that communism would give real personal freedom. Capitalism bereaves people of their deserved freedom, or “species-being” – the innate human nature to transform the world freely and consciously to meet needs and carry out activities that give fulfillment.

This criticism of capitalism is furthered by his concept of “alienation,” explained in one economic transcript written in 1844. In a capitalist economy back then, workers are “alienated from other human beings,” “their products of labor,” and the “act of labor itself.” These three types of alienation would cause the “activity of working, which is potentially the source of human self-definition and human freedom, [to...degrade] to a necessity of staying alive”. Marx was rather materialistic and teleological in conceptualizing history. To tie his ideas with history, he argued that eventually, communism would prevail over capitalism.

His utopia is not flawless. His view of history as if it would almost end at some spot is untrue. One system could flourish for an extended period, but it would usually get uprooted by another one. There is no apparent reason to believe any political system would be the solution to this historical cycle.

Additionally, his idea of popular self-rule is disturbing. A government without restricting force within is inherently a breeding ground for totalitarianism. Marx’s state would find it difficult to contain political conflict and the creation of a weak state. History shows that even coalition governments do not sometimes work, as in the case of Weimar Germany, because there is no powerful center to direct political work, and factions can mobilize a large number of civilians in ways of confrontation. It is, therefore, difficult to believe that Marx’s self-rule would play out in the long term.

Based on the case studies above, it is safe to say that a utopia is difficult to achieve. Though people have longed to realize a utopia, the concept of a built utopia is disturbing. Most importantly, social progress occurs thanks to the natural imperfection of human nature. Although wrong decisions historically cost the human race a lot, they were eventually the driving force behind social structure and international relations improvement. For example, without the outbreak of the disastrous World War II, it could be difficult to devise a scheme that would have been capable of holding peace for the past 70 years. It would be virtually impossible to realize any significant social change in a utopic, perfect state. The stagnancy of society is unnerving. There would be no more history, a major innovation, or even memory. It is a world of black and white.



If utopias cannot be met in the near term and the concept of reaching a utopia is discomfoting, why have people still produced systems of thought on this topic? A utopia is a mirror that one can use to reflect the vital problems present in real polities and societies. For instance, *The Republic* can show some of the inherent fragilities within the various Greek states. The democratic utopia Rousseau created can readily reflect the high levels of social stress between the different hierarchies of French societies during the 18th century. Today, leaders can still find the thinking of utopia useful to diagnose the symptoms of political structures and social patterns. The utopic visions of a clean planet, peaceful international relations, and the concept of an “Earth village” reflect real issues and guide real action. They can still be the cornerstones of social progress.