Sebastien Leroy
Departement of Philosophy
3/10/2024

# DO WE STILL NEED UTOPIAS?

This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria, and Supervised by Dr. Audrey Yap.

University of Victoria

## What Do They Have In Common?

The concept of utopia we have today is deeply connected to both historic depictions of heaven and enlightenment notions of human progress. The very word utopia was coined by an English Renaissance Humanist named Thomas More in a 1516 political satire of the same name. More wrote the piece to critique the society of his times, hence why the title is a Greek pun meaning 'good-place or 'no-place' (see figure 2). While in More's time it was obvious that Utopia was an impossible place, as times changed and ideas of progress and enlightenment became more popular, the notion of a utopia as an actually achievable ideal (or at least something we could progress towards) came into the public consciousness.

Fig 1

Looking back from the 21rst century, we can see that Ideas of progress and a perfect society have more often than not served as the ideological justifications for imperialism and barbarism. Some of the most horrific examples of 20th century "utopias" can be seen in the Nazi architect Albert Speer's architectural plans for a post war Berlin (see figure 1).

Because of the violence incurred by utopian ideologies, in the 21rst century there appears to be a general skepticism towards utopias, our media reflects this with its emphasis on gritty realism and post apocalyptic fiction. Amidst all this we are left to wonder if we can separate the valuable aspects of utopian thinking from the dangerous ones; in other words how to not risk repeating the horrors committed in the name of progress without losing our ability to imagine and work towards a better world. Before I critique and examine the value and role of utopias in contemporary society however, I believe it will be useful to try and characterize what they exactly they are.

Fig 2

## Notable Features of Early Utopias

- Grounded in the Divine: A vision of a perfect society often draws from imagery of the divine

- Stable: Utopias are perfect, so they don't change

- Vision of human nature and the "Good Life": A picture of the perfect life involves a view of what kind of beings humans are and what a good life for them looks like.

## Who Gets Left Out?

As noted above, utopias posit an image of human nature and of stability. We can see these aspects appear in interesting ways in Marxism. One one hand, Marxists imagine communism as the stable utopian end point reached after the culmination of humanities long history of class antagonism. One the other, Marxists tend to avoid positing a definite vision of human nature and the good life, given that they remain vague about the actual underlying institution and social practices of a communist society, defining it merely as a negation of class based society. Perhaps one of the reasons for Marxism's wide reaching global influence in the 20th century was that, unlike the utopian socialist movements which preceded it, Marxism left itself open for multiple different visions of communism.

That being said, even open ended utopian theories are still prone to including and excluding certain people. Merely based on the abstract features of utopia: the fact that they are ultimately stable, there are reasons to think certain people will be excluded.

Queer theorists like Lee Eldman have argued that utopias conceptually alienate queer people because of their futurity, they argue this because conceptions of a utopic future are always laden with norms of the present. The moment that a Marxist movement collapses the open ended imagined classless society into a determinate vision of a socialist utopia, it will necessarily reproduce existing power hierarchies into that vision. The same goes for any other utopian movement which uses utopias as a blueprint rather than an intangible guide.

Eldman provides an example of this kind of othering political futurity with the example of appeals to the 'children of the future'. Since the safety and wellbeing of is children to the reproduction of society, appeals to the fate and safety of children are seen as un challengeable. However the reality is that underneath these appeals there is an implicit endorsement of the status quo, and the sexual, reproductive, labor institutions which enable the birthing and raising of children. Furthermore, such appeals often put the needs of future citizens over those of existing citizens, and especially so those who are deemed as marginal or even non-essential to the replication of society.

Edman's point by saying that "the future is kid stuff" is that arguments about the future often have foundational and normative assumptions about the necessary institutions to ensure progress and stability. His point isn't that we should try and imagine a path towards progress, or even that we cant imagine queer utopias, its merely that queerness is incompatible with singular utopias.

(οὐ/ εὖ - τόπος)

## How Should We Use Utopias

- Not a blueprint, but a guide. They tell us what we hope for, even if we don't have a clear image.

- Utopias are not for everyone, we cant tell others what their utopias are. -> they are about inspiration, spreading hope and imagination.

- Political fiction which provoke critical though

But these conclusions raise an interesting question: Could we still call a text which had all these properties as opposed to the earlier ones a utopia?

Ursula K. Le Guin Captures these features in he short story Those Who Walk Away From Omelas, which rhetorically shows that the value of utopias rests in their ability to guided us to our own utopian thinking. As she changes Omelas from a utopia to a dystopia, she shows us how we should reject the utopias (and the realism) pushed on us by others, and search for our own imagined future. Omelas challenges us, it provides us with everything we wanted out of a utopia and gives us a price. By doing so she sets our emancipatory intent free from its rigid belief in utopias.

## Who Are 'The People' Anyways

In their book Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto LaClau argue that progressive thinkers who interrogate the nature of a "better future for the people" often fail to ask who the people are. These two take seriously this question, who are the revolutionary masses in the socialist picture. They argue that it is essential that we understand the identity of the masses is a nothing more than the sum of their individual identities. The labels and movements of the many merely a shorthand for the identities and desires of the individuals.

Mouffe and Laclau argue that the phenomena of cultural hegemony and false consciousness do not justify the manipulation of the masses; the revolution must be their revolution, and indeed must be done by them for themselves. Just as the revolutionary cannot foresee the character of the post-revolutionary society, so too can they not foresee the identity of the people who perform that revolution, their identity will be discovered in their overcoming of false consciousness. Of course the rallying flag of freedom and equality will be useful, but the socialist ought not to forget that those rallying calls are merely stand-ins for the specific plights of the people who have grouped together under those banners.

Freedom of Choice (in the reproductive sphere)
+
Freedom of Choice (in the sphere of marriage)
=
"Freedom of Choice"

Overdetermined by

Fig 3

## Key Points:

1. The identiy of the group is a product of the pluraity of member groups, many of which may not share any essential features in common. In the same way that groups abc, bcd, cde, and edf are members of the same group but do not share any features in common.

2. In figure 3, overdetermination is meant both in the sense that "Freedom of choicie" is what both other states have in common, but also in the sense that the meaning of "Freedom of Choice" when used by the compound movement is dependent on the previous two meanings. When used without them, wether intentionally or unintentionally it becomes an empty signifier.

3. "The People" are the compound group off all movements of all oppresed peoples. The identiy of the people is nothing above and beyond the totalities by their specific identities. The people cannot be refered to determinately because their total identity cannot be known. When it appears as thought it is being used determinatly, the word is in fact merely being used as an empty signifier.

## Political Critique with Emancipatory Intent

To return to the guiding question of this Poster: One way of answering it is by asking if we ever have needed utopias. ? There are countless examples of poltical progress which did not rely on a concrete vision of a better society? The text from which the concept gets its name was never intended to be a political ideal, but merely to critque.

However, utopias have historically played an important role in de-naturalizing power strucutres. By enabling us to image alternative social formations, they have empower us to question the systems under which we currently live.

By this reasoning, utopias are useful insofar as they allow people to question the system they live under, and dare to imagine better. Perhaps the danger of utopias then is not only a function of people misreading them as blueprints, but also a by product of their powerful ability to stir the human desire for a better life. Historically they have stirred the imaginations of many powerful and dangerous men, but they have also motivated countless revlutions and political movements. Let us hope they continue to do so.

### A note on Genealogy:

More's text ought not to serve as the meterstick to which all utopias must be weighed, but rather a point of reference as to where certain aspects of our specific iteration of the concept originated. It should be emphasized that the concept of a perfect city re-appears all throughout history.

## What About Dystopias?

One interesting feature of dystopias is that they do not always necessarily posses an opposite utopia. Certainly, some dystopias like 1984 for example seem to by their criticism of the distopian state paint an outline of at least some aspects of an oppostie utopian society: language and ideas go uncontrolled, people have complete privacy, mobility, etc.

That being said, many Dystopias have been created less as a means of political critique, and more so as a sort of "what if". Unlike Omelas, a utopia turned dystopia, these settings initially seem like a dystopia, but are often revealed to be utopic in some way, as if the end of the world was necessary for a new society to be created out of its ashes.

I believe these two kinds of thinking can be understood as reactions to the utopian thinking of the 20th century. One which uses the form of utopia to make us critically engage with our ideals, and the other which seeks to find a vision of a good society even after the end of the world. Both reflect a dissatisfaction with the status quo.

### What's The Use of A Utopia That Only Happens Once We Are All Long Gone and Dead?

Fig 4

Edelman, Lee. No future: Queer theory and the death drive. Duke University Press, 2020.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics. Vol. 8. Verso Books, 2014.

Le Guin, Ursula K. The ones who walk away from Omelas. Harper Perennial, 2017.

Figure 1: Ernest Descals. GERMANIA-BERLIN-CUPULA-ALBERT SPEER-PROYECTOS-ARQUITECTURA-ARTE-PINTURA-PINTOR-ERNEST DESCALS. Taken on December 14, 2010. flickr.com. https://www.flickr.com/photos/ernest_descals/5263312010/in/photolist-926RhN-6UkCSt-4RhfCg-q1Fdrh-8ZZjUr-7C6rYb-26o1HaQ-2pdMN1u-2pdU4bv-2pdU4kN-2pdTvhP-2fc6v36-nCJgM5-9K1wBf-2ba18Uk-rzjSMj-2o9cAit-SGafBs-qec6ca-9HWNSP-ZJRtuF-zGkwua-5MVBWP-7HCbdA-oXRPwQ-yuHGum-yGdV7s-xMvJwS-xME65i-yL2Xhn-xQiADJ-xMvJEh-yrVwYS-6myyDL-8ZZp2Z-84kLpk-2m4q7j-5QRRjd-de16yh-6i6-V6e-aiN5ZU-2hjfE2M-2jhEWow-qDExed-aiKh5T-9qDi9o-N8YYJL-aiKh16-aiN5RL-aiN6hu

Figure 2: "[Thomas More Utopia November 1518 Vtopiae Insvla (The Folger Shakespeare Library)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=87433802)" by The Folger Shakespeare Library is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse).

Figure 4: electric_kitty. Overgrown. Taken on June 1, 2010. flickr.com. https://www.flickr.com/photos/electr1c_k1tty/5803446004/in/photolist-9QQbiS-2oTtSbP-2kkqXBu-2m2tgZv-vuCbxa-2iiY8HE-KRxp4A-UPsZPb-27uLkom-qiLran-dzLLaS-pLN6xU-MKm9W5-K5e4zT-2m6RSFD-S8bQJ-2mMDjt3-Ka2888-2nrj31S-5uMarw-MDdkgr-24PMKaN-2hZF2db-2o6ytGS-8DgIAo-2ou4v1d-e1ckqv-qWmh9V-2nVVTQG-2jkxaUi-FAdfQ-29yBj6K-2oC5tHW-axPTqb-27bdy6m-2ooVKYQ-P1skNX-2iM5rx3-zH9hAw-2ocDGxk-bEzAh1-9wKw3c-2jBhArr-aLMRiZ-2JALwKP-4ju6Ka-2jkxaXE-5oYtir-BRNZt3-2o6muQe