

## From Plato to Swift and Orwell, from Utopia to Dystopia

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**Abstract:**

From Plato to Marx and beyond, human kind had a constant preoccupation for bettering the world, strived for its improvement and, ultimately, aimed to create a perfect society, unaffected by change. This article discusses some well-known utopian and dystopian literary writings and aims to highlight the development of some shared major and minor themes common for both forms. The paper forwards the argument that the *utopian* is always interrelated with the *actual*.

**Keywords:** utopian, political organization, dystopian, social construct

Utopian models of society represent a constant preoccupation for mankind; with a history that stretches from Plato to the twentieth century, it seems that utopian works will always have a well determined place in the history of the world.

In this long stretch of time *utopia* became not only a road towards a social construct but also a stable instrument for forging the present and, most of all, for defining the future. It developed its meaning as the society itself developed, becoming a notion not only for naming an abstract possibility but also a tangible future. The meaning of the term is most frequently dated back to Thomas Morus and his chief work *Utopia*, simply meaning “no place”. However, alongside the development and the growing complexity of existing political systems it became a word often translated as “a good place”. Yet, modernity brought along a new term with a totally opposing meaning, *dystopia*, which translates to a ‘bad place’.

All utopian systems are based to a certain extent on the same issues; most important amongst these: the accomplishment of a utopian system implies the eradication of real social constructs and real people.

This fact proposes a challenge since the elimination of ‘real’ aspects of everyday life such as crime, tyranny etc. can be regarded as beneficial whereas the abolition of selfishness, egotism etc. imply that some characteristics of humanity as we understand it, are purged altogether

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from utopias<sup>1</sup>. Simply put, a utopian system proposes a new kind of individual that is disconnected from the regular man who is not fit to inhabit a utopian world.

Along the history of utopian constructs several directions were taken to solve this problem: some utopias were clear in the delimitations they made between real people and inhabitants of utopias, as for example Swift; others have suggested that in order to preserve the human aspect of utopias, man should be transformed by eliminating all those things that make the individual unsuitable for settling a utopian world: class appurtenance, private property and the intrinsic value of money.

The primary utopian system that tried to achieve this was Soviet Communism; Marx describes the environment for the new man: “[...] after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be fully left behind and society inscribe on its banners: *from each according to his ability, to each according his needs*” (Marx, 1838: 78 in Carey, 1999: 265). In other words some utopias transform the world while others the self.

Utopia came to mean a perfect and stable society. In this case perfection excludes change and, in a broader sense, progress. A society that is perfect in each aspect has no need for evolving or changing; it is at the same time self-sufficient and ordered to the extent that nothing can perturb its inner values. In Plato’s *Republic* there were only two categories used for constructing the ideal society: things that are absolute in their essence and thing that are not. The first category is always of higher value than the second exactly because it is not determined or shaped by change. When a society comes to be successfully based on such values, changes appear as a destabilizing element, a turn for the worst. Plato’s work established a tradition in presenting the relationship between utopian systems and change that became impossible to avoid by any western theorist latter on. As John Carey observes “to count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire” (Carey, 1999: xi), thus stating the basic principle of every utopian system to follow.

The tradition was so strong that Thomas Morus in his attempt to describe a utopian society took for granted Plato’s assertions regarding the higher value of consistent principles and subsequently used these as a starting point for his own version. However, in accordance with the

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<sup>1</sup> The examples are, of course, over-exaggerated but they serve the purpose of emphasizing the deference between a rather simplistic *good* and *bad*.

fashion of his times he modernised the political system on which he has based his utopia.

Morus modernised the politics of the space previously associated with utopian systems by constructing a nation state instead of a city state. Where Plato imagined a stratified society governed by philosophers and functioning on class domination, Morus extended and changed the perspective, depicting a society that was basically classless for one reason: the lack of private property was the only way to secure just and equal governing for the members of that society. Nevertheless he preserved the class of slaves, however only for punitive reasons, and also the penalty of death – for a second offence towards the order of the island-

This perspective of an almost classless society is a favourite amongst communist thinkers for it affords the division of goods and power. Morton believes that a utopia is a “land-mark along the road towards scientific socialism” (Morton, 1952: 55), considering the author (*i.e.* Morus) both a humanist and a communist. The main argument is that Morus imagined a society where the abundance of material commodities and the security of its citizens would allow the differentiation between a proper classless society and a misunderstood bourgeois equality where private possession would interfere with the principles of a perfect utopian society. From this perspective Plato is a socialist and Morus a communist.

This is a salient point for all critical approaches towards the issue in discussion, since no utopian writing was voided of critical (political) content. This is especially true for the two aforementioned utopias which were by no means pieces of fiction in the sense a novel is characterized as fictional, but were auto-declared works of political thinking emphasizing the role of reason above everything else and were transparent enough to underline that their main concern was to create a new kind of improved, functional society<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> More to the point, utopias always developed according to the state of the actual society they were assessing because no utopia contains so much imaginative power as to escape the reminiscences of its own times. This is the main reason why utopian writers tried to *re-construct* the world and the individual rather than to *construct* a completely new environment that would not resemble fundamentally anything previous. Also, this fact translates into the impossibility to refuse the development of actual societies (which utopias reflect) with all the consequences this approach imposes. Plato allowed slaves, More magistrates; in other words “utopias tend to stress how they reflect historical developments. The discovery of the New World, the Age of Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the rise of science – all those brought new fashions to utopianism” (Carey, 1999: xx).

Furthermore, the *utopian* ideal was to completely eliminate all kinds of active, legislative politics; the sole role reserved for politics was administrative. Utopias do not need an active legislative power exactly because the order is so well established and functional that nothing can perturb it. The ideal of the utopia can be reduced to three elements: it is a static society; it is uniform and lacks progress. This is understandable because the sole reason for the existence of utopias is their perfection, therefore there is nothing that can or should be changed. Uniformity is explainable because a perfect society should consist only of equal individuals and progress is excluded because there is nothing left to evolve to.

However, new types of utopias were produced by new kind of social conditions. In the seventeen century Swift and Defoe reshaped the century long tradition of presenting utopias. These new utopian lands became fictional works: they had a hero and became similar to novels. The hero itself was a new kind of breed, an individual hero, bourgeois by nature and in tradition with the age, and the utopian settlement created around them was constructed solely as a frame for the narrative.

A.L. Morton considers that “Swift, and Defoe still more, produce novels” (Morton, 1955: 122). John Carey too considers Defoe as an “author of fiction, and particularly of fiction that pretends to be fact, as *Crusoe* does” (Carey, 1999: 5). The protagonists of both novels interact with the utopias they discover, participate as actors in the story and shape the action as a result of their interaction with the environment.

Defoe, born in a middle class family himself, sends his hero Robison Crusoe to explore utopia from a bourgeois world, a world that finds its condition to be “the best state in the world, the most suited to human happiness, not exposed to the miseries and hardships” (Defoe, 2001: 8). According to this belief he constructs not a utopian country but a bourgeois settlement motivating A.L. Morton to write that: “Robinson Crusoe is the pure bourgeois man, the man completely alone, and his utopia is a one man colony” (Morton, 19955: 130).

If we look at *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of a utopian writing we are to face the fact that the novel stands exactly at the opposite end of the spectrum, the entire novel being a reverse utopia. Its main characteristic is that along the twenty years spent on the island, Crusoe recreates the technical and agricultural conditions of his century rather than modifying them.

The reason behind this apparent odd choice is rather simple: Defoe did not intend to create a utopia that modified a state of facts; he wanted to create a political statement that showed his beliefs. Therefore, “the real subject of the novel is of a Caribbean nabob who makes a little

England in remote surroundings” (Rogers, 1974: 390 in Schonhorn, 1991: 141).

If this is the case, a logical question arises: why should a utopia, in the limited and rather unorthodox manner it presents itself, strive to recreate the climate of its ‘origins’? The answer, according to Schonhorn, is that “Daniel Defoe was a strong supporter all his life of England’s constitutional monarchy and her mixed government” (Schonhorn, 1991: 161).

Swift, who came from a traditionally royalist family, allowed more political character to his utopian land, permitting the main character from *Gulliver* to be interwoven with his criticism of the *Whigs*. This was achieved in a distinctive manner from Defoe who completely identifies with his hero, whereas Swift uses Gulliver as a disguise in order to afford his critical (political) appreciations.

In Gulliver’s last travel to the land of the Houyhnhnms, the land of the enlightened and human horses, the author compares these to the image of the brutish Yahoos who stand for all the things that should be eradicated, for Swift’s political views are based on a “deep hatred of war, of colonial exploitation, of the depression of agriculture by the money-lender and stock-jobber [...] he saw (wrongly) in the Tories the Party which opposed them and stood for what he felt to be the older and saner way of life” (Morton, 1952: 118). It has to be noted that in a critical review from 1946 entitled *Politics vs. Literature: An examination of Gulliver’s Travels*, Orwell also finds evidence in novel for the fact that “politically, Swift was one of those people who are driven into a sort of perverse Toryism by the follies of the progressive party of the moment” (S. Orwell, 1984: 243).

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Along with change and the progress of time, the placid image of utopias was replaced by cruel metaphors brought forth by dystopian systems that reacted to their environment of origin in a more severe way. If up to the late nineteenth century the only question was how to implement a more efficient form of utopian system, the situation changed radically afterwards and a new question was forwarded: do utopian systems really represent the ideal place for mankind?

Once closer to present times, populated by “moralists and political reformers, satirists and science fictioneers – all have contributed their quota to the stock of imaginary worlds” (Huxley, 1960: 292), we find Orwell, who foresees a future that “will be a world of terror as much as a world of triumph” (Orwell, 2001: 281).

Modern utopias, which almost invariably turn into dystopias, share common elements regarding the use of power in new kinds of societies, societies that invariably turn into totalitarian systems.

The three principles of the party from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery and Ignorance is Strength” (Orwell, 2001: 6), the principles governing Oceania and the principles of the future imagined by Huxley in *Brave New World* “Community, Identity, Stability” (Huxley, 1994: 1) that govern the Western European region of the World State represent perhaps the best known models of dystopian societies of the twentieth century. The strict, permanent, unavoidable class system and the apparent imperfectness of the society with influence free zones like the proletarian quarters and the savage reservations are features that haunt dystopias.

Other topics like the fact that sexuality must be deprived of its naturalness – in the first case (Orwell) by making a compulsory activity out of it, in the second case (Huxley) by eliminating all the pleasure out of it – represent another similarity between the two novels<sup>2</sup>.

Clothes and architecture are two other themes favoured by utopian writers and are used to summarize the perfect unity that a utopian state should symbolize. As early as Thomas Morus we are told that “People wear the same sort of clothes throughout the island [...] The fashion of clothing never changes” (Morus, 1949: 33), and thus clothing turns into uniform; in *A Modern Utopia*, Wells makes a slight concession to the dressing habits of the inhabitants of his utopia but assures the reader that the slight differences one could notice are “transient flashes in a general flow of harmonious graciousness; dress will have scarcely any of the effect of disorderly conflict, or the self-assertion qualified by fear of ridicule, that is has in the crudely competitive civilizations of earth” (Wells, 1967: 226). Huxley on the other hand depicts “a black and khaki army of labourers” (Huxley, 1994: 55), both colours being codes for specific casts.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the theme of the uniform is changed in order to emphasize belonging to a certain political organization, invariably identified through uniforms. For example the *Spies* have uniforms which consisted of “blue shorts, grey shirts and red

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<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, Orwell’s world, though presenting sexuality as a duty towards the Party, maintains it as an institutional presence, perverted into pornography, through “Pornosec, the sub-section of the Fiction Department which turned out cheap pornography for distribution among the proles” (Orwell, 1991: 137).

neckerchiefs” (Orwell, 2001: 25), and opposed to Wells, discrepancies in clothing articles are punishable by death<sup>3</sup>.

Architecture is another issue that concerned every utopian writer. The reason why a new kind of architecture was needed is obvious: a new kind of inhabitant needed new kinds of locations to inhabit.

For example, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we find parallels to what Richard Stites defined as characteristics of utopian sites consisting of “planned towns and ideal buildings [...] visionary town planning offered visions of a new world” (Stites, 1989: 204). The places that correspond to the aforementioned model are the ministerial institutions: Ministry of Truth, of Peace, of Plenty and of Love. These share the same architecture: “enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete” (Orwell, 2001: 6). These places define the architectural imagery of the novel, leaving no place for escape – though the slums of the peripheries are still present –; they also bring up images of communist communes which are fundamental for the co-working and co-living of its members in order to secure better standards of living. However in Orwell’s novel only half of the communal theory is valid; although people share a working and living space to a certain extent, the only symbiosis in the society is between the party and the individual and the sole role of this symbiosis is to ensure a better way to control and to manipulate.

This paper aimed to discuss, though not in an exhaustive manner, some of the common themes characteristic to the most well-known utopian writings. One can observe that throughout the long history of utopian writings certain themes are always present. We can divide these in two distinct categories: the themes of sexuality, city planning and fashion (these would constitute the minor themes) and major themes such as: political structure, class system and the reshaping of the individual.

Both categories have in common one defining factor; no utopia was able to escape its own present in the sense that the elements they tried to reshape were also the constitutional elements of the utopian systems themselves and hence only a re-imagining of these elements was possible.

However, utopias established themselves as a necessary parallel reality. In an often-quoted passage from *The Soul of Man under*

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<sup>3</sup> There is an episode in the novel where someone is determined to be a spy because “he was wearing funny shoes... never seen anyone wearing shoes like that before” (Orwell, 1991: 60) in a context where almost all descriptions of clothing are focusing on the party uniform.

*Socialism*, Oscar Wilde claims that “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at” (Hasketh, 1950: 246) proving that there is an inseparable bond between reality and utopia.

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