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Conclusion

Lyman Tower Sargent

In everyone's life there will be times when one is hopeful that one's personal life or the world in which we live is getting better or will get better. There will also be times of despair and times of resignation. In the hopeful times everything is just a bit brighter; we are aware of possibilities of personal and social betterment that elude us at other times, and those possibilities seem to be within reach. These moments have a history in that some people have chosen to write down the possibilities they see in those moments, and when the texts are primarily about social hope, we can call them utopian moments.

Such moments are immensely important because both individuals and societies need hope, need the sense that things do not have to be the way that they are, that things can be better. There are consistent elements in what we hope for, such as a full stomach, decent clothing and housing, and personal security, but beyond these elements what is included depends on time and place.

This book is about the social dreams or the utopian moments of a set of writers from Western Europe and the United States with seven British authors, seven French authors, two from the United States, and one each from Germany, Italy and Spain. The authors range from Thomas More who coined the word 'utopia' in 1516 to Ursula K. Le Guin, who, although the text chosen is from 1974, is still publishing utopias in the second decade of the twenty-first century. All the works highlighted are positive utopias presenting distinctly better places, although some could have used Le Guin's subtitle, *An Ambiguous Utopia*, and *The Isles of Pines* is more ambiguous than most of the utopias of its time period. Although all are important works within utopian literature and many are important in the history of political thought or intellectual or literary history, few are read today except by scholars and university students required to do so on their courses. This is unfortunate because they all have important, albeit very different, messages for their readers.

One is struck, but not really surprised, by just how different the better societies presented in these texts are. All utopias are written within multiple contexts, including the personal, the national, the cultural and the intellectual, and most are directed at debates that were current at the time they were written, and all those contexts are important for thoroughly understanding the utopias. Thus, the title of this collection, *Utopian Moments*, implies that each work was produced at a particular moment in time.

Given the specificity, therefore, can something be said about utopianism? To what extent are these works, individually and collectively, contributions to

something bigger? That is what I attempt here. In 1961, the Dutch sociologist F.L. Polak published his *Images of the Future* in which he argued that utopias or 'positive images of the future', as he called them, are essential for the continuation of civilization. In 1969, R. Buckminster Fuller published a book entitled *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* and in 2005 the University of Porto published a book entitled *Utopia Matters* and in 2012 will publish a book entitled *Dystopia Matters*. Fuller and Polak were making strong statements about the importance of utopias and *Utopia Matters* included a number of short essays by a variety of scholars (myself included) saying why they think utopias are important.

At the same time, and particularly throughout much of the twentieth century, there have been consistent dire warnings about the dangers of utopia. While much of the anti-utopian literature was directed at the utopia of communism, which became a dystopia in practice, there have been similar attacks on the utopia of the free market as also producing a dystopia in practice. The twentieth century has been called the dystopian century and so far the twenty-first century seems to be following in its footsteps. But, even though the dystopia has been the dominant form in the literature, and there are only two twentieth-century positive utopias discussed in the book (Wells and Le Guin), positive utopias were published throughout the century and continue to be published in the twenty-first. Thus, an insistence on the importance of a positive view of utopianism and recognition of that view continues in both public debate and literature.

Why should something as seemingly harmless as imagining a better society be so threatening? Part of the answer can be seen in the distinction that Karl Mannheim drew between ideology and utopia. Simply put, Mannheim said that ideology is a system of beliefs that keeps those in power from seeing the weakness of their position and utopia is a system of beliefs held by those out of power that allows them to see themselves as overturning the existing order. For Mannheim, both ideology and utopia falsify the real positions, and he also says: 'The representatives of a given order will label as utopian all conceptions of existence which *from their point of view* can in principle never be realized. According to this usage, the contemporary connotation of the term 'utopian' is predominantly that of an idea which is in principle unrealizable.'¹

Although there are exceptions, it is hard to see most utopias, including most of those discussed in this book, as threatening anybody. One partial exception is Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which produced movements in many countries with the goal of implementing Bellamy's ideas, or at least parts of them, and a number of the other authors were perceived by those in power to be threats, even though in most cases they probably were not. Still, specific examples aside, the whole idea of imagining a significantly better society is regularly thought of as bad because *significantly better* means different, probably different in major ways, and that frightens many people, both in and out of power.

One problem that leads people to see utopias as threatening when they are not is misunderstanding what utopias do. This misunderstanding, which I expect is at times not a misunderstanding but a deliberate misrepresentation, is to contend that utopias present pictures of societies that their authors believe to be perfect. Very, very few do, and none of the authors included in this book, who are exemplars of the mainstream of utopian writing, thought of their creations as representing perfection. The word 'perfect' implies fixed, permanent and unending and that contradicts our understanding of how people behave. But most utopias are like the one in H.G. Wells's *Men Like Gods* (1923), in which Wells says that the protagonist:

had always thought of Utopia as a tranquillity with everything settled for good. Even to-day it seemed tranquil under that level haze, but he knew that this quiet was the steadiness of a mill race, which seems almost motionless in its quiet onrush until a bubble or a fleck of foam or some stick or leaf shoots along and reveals its velocity.²

For many the issue is just the changes, slow or rapid, that Wells refers to. A significantly better society will be a significantly different society, and many people, including those expected to benefit from the changes, worry about their position in an unknown situation. The familiar, even a familiar in which one is not very secure, can be more comfortable than the unknown. And, of course, those who are secure in the present are even more likely to be nervous about the unknown. But for others, and obviously that includes those writing utopias, the possibility of improvement, bettering lives, is what counts.

One way to consider the larger question of utopianism is to return to the specificity of the texts in their contexts and to see if, given their radical differences, there are commonalities. The first thing that any reader of a utopia is likely to notice is that the author is addressing problems in the period in which they are living. But, although there are differences in degree, the central problem of all utopias is that there are people living miserable lives through no fault of their own; and thus the fundamental utopia of adequate food, clothing, housing and personal security. The first question for the utopia writer is what causes the human misery and how to overcome it. Obviously, the causes will be seen differently by different people, as will the means of bringing about change. And a solution that seems utopian at one time or to one author may appear dystopian at another time or to another author.

When someone chooses to write a utopia a question that must be faced is whether to change institutions in the hope that better institutions will produce better people or change people who will then create the institutions that are right for them. The second choice leads anti-utopians to say 'you can't change human nature'. Perhaps for that reason, the second approach is rarely chosen except where religious conversion is the mechanism of change, and it is not the approach taken by any of the authors discussed in this book. Of course the

choice is not as stark as I have put it here; the relationship between institutions and people is essentially dialectical with any change in one producing changes in the other.

But, given that one has chosen to change institutions, where does one start? The two most common answers are law and education, with law the most common choice from More's *Utopia* through the eighteenth century, and most of the works discussed here are based on law. At the same time, it is striking that a standard refrain found in utopias, including More's *Utopia*, is that there will be no lawyers. This relates to another standard refrain, that the laws should be few, simple and easy to understand, which means that there should be no need for lawyers to argue about how to interpret them.

While some reform utopias only change a few laws, the more common approach is widespread or wholesale change, often through a new constitution. The first written constitutions were in the American colonies, with The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut adopted in 1639 most commonly described as the first. It and many of the constitutions adopted by other American colonies and then in the United States from the Articles of Confederation, which was in use from 1771 but not ratified until 1781, the Constitution of 1789 and the first amendments to it known as the Bill of Rights (ratified 1791), can be read as parallel to the constitutions found in explicitly utopian texts like Thomas Northmore's *Memoirs of Planetes, Or a Sketch of the Laws and Manners of Makar* (1795) in that they are designed not just to codify procedure but to change behaviour. And it is interesting that there are late twentieth and early twenty-first century US utopias that propose revising or replacing the US Constitution in order to change both procedures and behaviour.

All law that is not simply procedural is a statement about what is acceptable behaviour and what is unacceptable. In the Anglo-American tradition, the emphasis is on what is unacceptable with the assumption that what is not prohibited is permitted. An alternative approach of specifying what is acceptable with the understanding that what is not permitted is prohibited is at least implied in some, mostly religious, utopias.

However, law is about something, so it is not just the fact that law is used to produce a better society that is important. The content of the law is crucial, and the content is embedded in the culture of the times so that a work that presents a clear improvement for its time will appear considerably less positive at another time. For example, More's *Utopia* and Bacon's *New Atlantis* are hierarchical, paternalistic and patriarchal while providing a better life for their inhabitants than was available to all but a few at the time. And More's *Utopia*, for all its inequality, is, in fact, quite egalitarian on some dimensions.

One thing that characterizes most law-based utopias, and reinforces my point that perfection is not the goal, is that even in utopia some people will break the law. As a result, there are procedures in place for determining that a law has actually been broken and punishments for those who are determined

to have done so. Most utopias are designed to reduce law-breaking, but they recognize that some will still be broken, and in the early utopias punishment is harsh but generally less harsh than the actuality of the time when death was the punishment for many crimes.

Over time utopian punishment became less harsh and more educative and law-breaking is often treated as a curable illness, although in the twentieth-century USSR we saw how that approach can be perverted. In his *Erewhon; Or, Over the Range* (1872), Samuel Butler satirized the whole process by depicting a society in which criminals are treated by 'Straighteners' and illness is severely punished.

As suggested by the evolution of punishment in law-based utopias, education became more and more important as the basis for utopias. Robert Owen made this argument very strongly, writing: '*Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are to a great extent at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men.*'³ Furthermore, he said that children 'can be trained to *acquire any language, sentiments, belief, or any bodily habits and manners, not contrary to human nature*'.⁴

Utopians were at the forefront of the expansion of education. In the New Harmony community established by Robert Owen in the United States, education was intended to be for both males and females and to begin with kindergarten and extend through university. These plans were not fulfilled, but people who came from Europe to join the community stayed in the United States and helped establish a number of U.S. public universities and Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, was elected to the U.S. Senate and wrote the legislation that established the Smithsonian Institution.

There are three issues that face utopias based on education: who to teach; what to teach; and how to teach. These issues can be combined, such as different classes and genders being taught different subjects depending on what is considered appropriate to their position in life. In the earliest utopias the lower classes and women were simply excluded.

A fourth issue was added in the nineteenth century: who pays. This was included because it began to be proposed that education needed to reach more people and that to do so required public funding. Initially even public funding provided education for a limited number of people; the idea of mass public education came later as an educated population was seen to be an essential condition for modern societies.

Although its importance waxed and waned and varies from country to country, utopia emerged as a literary genre embedded in religion, and, although it is much less important elsewhere in the West, religion continues to be central to much US utopianism. Most religious utopias are concerned with changing people, either through mass religious conversion or, more commonly, although

the cause varies, through people coming to actually practice the precepts of Christianity. As a result, good people then create good institutions. Of course, both institutions and people change in all utopias, it is simply that in all but the religious utopias, institutions change first.

While there are simple, even simplistic utopias, the best ones, and most of those discussed here, recognize the complexity of human relations and are themselves complex works. In a number of instances, most notably in the case of More's *Utopia*, there are serious disagreements, after 500 years, over how to read them. While few of the other texts discussed here produce quite the same level of disagreement, none of them is simple, and that is one of the reasons they should still be read. They provide messages not just for their own time and place but ones that are relevant for our time and place. They still say it is important to hope that the conditions in which we live can be improved and, while the specific proposals may be dated, each work suggests that a better life is possible and provides ideas about how to bring about such a better life.