Some observers equate utopia with totalitarianism and violence while others regard it as essential to human freedom and dignity. Professor Sargent examines how this issue has been treated in recent political theory and argues that utopia is beneficial or hazardous, depending on the way we transform our political dreams into reality.

Lyman Tower Sargent, Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, is currently a member of the School of Historical Studies of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. He is author of British and American Utopian Literature 1516–1975 (1979) and numerous articles on aspects of utopianism.

Thomas More's neo-Latin coinage, utopia, can be translated as no-place; it is also a play on the Greek word eutopia, the good place. In the twentieth century it has become dystopia, the bad place, under the pressure of two world wars and the rise of Soviet communism. The wars forced us to recognize how superficial our civilization had been. Soviet communism demonstrated the transformation of eutopia into dystopia.

This paper will examine the crucial relationship between utopia and authority. Most utopias appearing in the twentieth century have been dystopias, and most of them have focused on excessive centralization of power as the primary cause of the troubles of society. Recently there has been a resurgence of eutopian writing, one that seems to be continuing into the 1980's. The examination below is thus essential, for if utopia implies or contains dystopia, the effort to create eutopias is pernicious. If, on the other hand, utopias are among the highest creations

1. In addition to utopia and eutopia, More used nusquama (the Latin equivalent of utopia), and included a prefatory letter by William Bude in which Bude had suggested Udepotia (Never-land) or Hagnopolis (Holy City).
of the human intellect, as some have claimed, we must have more of them.

I shall undertake two tasks. First, after a short statement of the problem, I shall present the arguments both against and in favor of utopianism. Second, I shall attempt to provide a balanced view of the possibilities and problems of utopianism in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and submit that any developed political theory implies a utopia. I shall also argue that utopianism is somewhat dangerous, but that the danger inheres in the processes of transforming visions into political movements, not in utopia itself.

I. The Problem

During the past four decades a controversy has developed around the role of utopianism in literature, social and political thought, and theology. Its roots go as far back as Aristophanes and perhaps farther, but the modern debate is of fairly recent origin. Although many utopias have provoked antiutopian argument, Karl Popper and Ralf Dahrendorf, among others, provide the basis for a more careful and thorough questioning of utopianism. Their thought has dominated the controversy even when their more extreme statements, especially those of Popper, have been deplored.

There are writers on the other side, most notably Ernst Bloch and Frederick L. Polak, but it is generally conceded that the antiutopians have made a compelling case. Even though the dystopia or bad place has dominated the literary production of utopias, eutopias or good places have continued to be produced regularly, and have even increased in number. We find also that people have continued to go off, in larger numbers than ever before, to found communes in which they hope to lead their version of the good life. And, of course, people have continued to dream of a better world and to struggle to produce it.

The highest expression of man's aspiration or a deadening artifact inevitably leading to violence, the Kingdom of God on earth or a heresy, these are utopia. The controversy is important. Utopia is at the root of all radicalism and even much of what we call liberalism. It is the archetype and harbinger of social change—good, bad, and indifferent. Perhaps if we had better utopias, we would be able to produce a better world, say the utopians. The antiutopians answer that if it were not for utopias, we would not have the present mess. Antiutopians are not simply conservatives, and utopians are not all radicals or even liberals. There have been conservative utopias, and much of the attack on u-
pianism comes from liberals, or even radicals, who fear that detailed plans for the future cannot be implemented without resort to force.

Some of the problems stem from definitional controversies or the lack of attention to definition. Also, commentators insufficiently acquainted with the vast scope of utopian writing speak ex cathedra, as if the few utopias they had read were typical of the genre. The fact that there is a very extensive secondary literature on utopia at the same time that the most rudimentary agreement on terms has been lacking, and that until recently the most extensive bibliographies of the genre listed only some ten percent of the works, may explain some of the errors made by both utopians and antiutopians alike. But solutions to the problems of definition and bibliography will not lead to answers to the questions raised regarding the impact of utopianism.2 Conceptual controversies generate some of the definitional difficulties, and while greater familiarity with the literature can dispel some of the more egregious nonsense written on the subject, it is not sufficient to settle the debate.

Part of the problem arises from a definitional disagreement about the relationship between utopia and perfection or, as Popper puts it, between utopia and blueprints. Are utopias intended to be depictions of perfect societies or is the aim somewhat lower and less well defined? Northrop Frye describes utopia as follows:

The popular view of utopia, and the one which in practice is accepted by many if not most utopia-writers, is that a utopia is an ideal or flawless state, not only logically consistent in its structure but permitting as much freedom and happiness for its inhabitants as is possible to human life. Considered as a final or definitive social ideal, the utopia is a static society; and most utopians have built-in safeguards against radical alteration of the structure. This feature gives it a somewhat forbidding quality to a reader not yet committed to it.3


On the other hand, Bertrand de Jouvenal says,

Eutopie, it shall be, if and when brought into being: till then Utopie. A dream: aye but that is a capital point, a dream, while less than reality, is much more than a blueprint. A blueprint does not give you the “feel” of things, as if they existed in fact; a dream does so. If you can endow your “philosophical city” with the semblance of reality, and cause your reader to see it, as if it were actually in operation, this is quite a different achievement from a mere explanation of the principles on which it should rest. This “causing to see” by means of a feigned description is obviously what More aimed at: It is also the essential feature of the utopian genre.\(^4\)

This definitional conflict is over the very nature of the enterprise and will be discussed below. We should ask why the same works elicit such wildly divergent responses. One person’s tentative dream seems to be another’s blueprint.

The basic issue then is whether or not there is a connection between utopianism and totalitarianism or utopianism and human freedom. Since the utopian tradition is complex, generalization must be made carefully. Wherever I make a generalization I try to base it on a dominant tendency within the utopian tradition and wherever I criticize a generalization it is because it fails this test.

II. Utopia and Totalitarianism

The tendency in this century has been to equate utopia with force, violence, and totalitarianism. The argument is complex, with a number of alternative and subsidiary positions, depending on perceived responses by opponents. The basic proposition is definitional. A utopia is a blueprint of what the author believes to be a perfect society, which is to be constructed with no significant departure from the blueprint. It is perfect, and any alteration would lower its quality. But this is all impossible because there is no such thing as a perfect society, and even if there were, it could not be constructed since it would require perfect people, and we know there are no perfect people.

When a convinced utopian tries to build a eutopia, conflict will arise because, failing to achieve eutopia, he or she will use force to achieve it. Force will be necessary either because people question the desirability of the utopia or because there is disharmony between the perfect blue-

\(^4\) “Utopia for Practical Purposes,” in Manuel, ed., *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, pp. 219–220.
print and the imperfect people. Utopians will not, and cannot, give up the vision because it is perfect, and people are perfectible even if not yet perfect. Life in a perfect society is best even for imperfect people because they will accept it as better or law (force) will impose it. The antiutopians conclude that only the last alternative is possible. They believe that a deliberately constructed society of this sort can only be maintained by continual use of force.

Karl R. Popper, the best known exponent of this position, describes the utopian approach as follows:

Any rational action must have a certain aim. It is rational in the same degree as it pursues its aims consciously and consistently, and as it determines its means according to this end. To choose the end is therefore the first thing one has to do if we wish to act rationally; and we must be careful to determine our real or ultimate ends, from which we must distinguish clearly those intermediate or partial ends which are actually only means, or steps on the way, to the ultimate end. . . . These principles, if applied to the realm of political activity, demand that we must determine our ultimate political aim, or the Ideal State, before taking any practical action. Only when . . . we are in possession of something like a blueprint of the society at which we aim, only then can we begin to consider the best ways and means for its realization, and to draw up a plan for practical action.5

Popper goes on to say that the utopian enterprise of creating an ideal state, according to a comprehensive blueprint, cannot go forward without a strong, centralized government of the few, which will likely become a dictatorship.6 This is an argument about belief and the behavior of individuals. As Popper puts it, "the Utopian approach can be saved only by the Platonic belief in one absolute and unchanging ideal, together with two further assumptions, namely (a) that there are rational methods to determine once and for all what this ideal is, and (b) what the best means of its realization are." 7 It is basic to Popper's understanding of the world that (a) and (b) are by their nature impossible.8 This is due in part to our lack of knowledge, and in part to the inevitability of

6. Ibid., I: 159.
7. Ibid., I: 161.
unanticipated effects, the certainty that we cannot perfectly reproduce our blueprint. Moreover, given the unavailability of rational methods, disagreements between utopian planners and engineers will lead to “the use of power instead of reason, i.e. to violence.”

Popper’s argument, whether right or wrong, has little to do with utopianism in most of its guises. There are two reasons for this. First, Popper’s utopia-blueprint identification is almost wholly inaccurate. Very few utopias were written with the intent of implementing them in detail, and the history of political thought does not offer blueprints for building new societies. Constitutions rarely go beyond the basic governmental structure, and seldom has the author of a proposed political system expected that his or her descriptions could be put into practice without modification.

The strong point that Popper makes is not about utopias but about the fact that some people are willing to impose their beliefs on others. But these beliefs, while sometimes deriving from literary utopias or other sources that may reasonably be called utopian, are not necessarily related to utopianism. Popper denounces social reformers who would like to “clean the canvas, as Plato called it, of the social world . . . start afresh and build up again in a brand-new rational world. This idea is nonsense and impossible to realize.” But it is extravagant to suggest that this idea is at all common. When it exists, it is often appropriately labelled utopian, but it is rare and even if it were common, it would not necessarily provide a basis for proscribing all utopias. Moreover, the idea is extremely valuable as I shall soon argue.

While Popper’s argument against utopianism has been the best known, his has not been the only criticism. Ralf Dahrendorf maintains that the influence of utopianism on sociological analysis has been pernicious. He characterizes utopias as changeless. Two points are involved: change to the utopia from current conditions, and change within the utopia once it is established. Utopias, says Dahrendorf, “do not grow out of familiar reality following realistic patterns of development.” This observation reveals his lack of adequate familiarity with the utopian tradition, for while some utopias will support his contention, most of them do explicitly root the development to the utopia in the present reality. Some

10. Ibid., I: 161–162.
utopian writers have been naive about the ease of social change. For example, in *Looking Backward* (1888), the worldwide best seller among utopias, and indeed among all books except the Bible until quite recently, Edward Bellamy had great faith in the ability of men to recognize evil and correct it. But he also connected the fairly rapid evolution of his utopia to the development of the monopoly system within American capitalism.

William Dean Howell's utopia, described in *The Traveller from Altruria* (1894) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), recapitulates the economic and political history of the United States as a basis for the change to the utopia. William Morris, in *News from Nowhere* (1890), is considerably less hopeful about mankind's ability to bring about the desired change rapidly or peacefully, and posits violent revolution as the basis of the change to his utopia, as do some other writers. It is hardly possible in the twentieth century to argue that a violent revolution is not "familiar reality." Dahrendorf is simply wrong about the utopian tradition.

The point about the changeless character of utopias is more difficult. Dahrendorf notes that "all processes going on in utopian countries follow recurrent patterns and occur within, and as a part of, the design of the whole." 14 This ritualized character of utopia has been discussed by Frye.

The procedure of constructing a utopia produces two literary qualities which are typical, almost invariable, in the genre. In the first place, the behavior of a country is described ritually. A ritual is a significant social act, and the utopia-writer is concerned only with the typical actions which are significant of those social elements he is stressing. In utopian stories a frequent device is for someone, generally a first-person narrator to enter the utopia and be shown around it by a sort of Intourist guide. The story is made up largely of a Socratic dialogue between guide and narrator, in which the narrator asks questions or thinks up objections and the guide answers them. One gets a little weary, in reading a series of such stories, of what seems a pervading smugness of tone. As a rule the guide is completely identified with his society and seldom admits to any discrepancy between the reality and the appearance of what he is describing. But we recognize that this is inevitable given the conventions employed. In the second place, rituals are apparently irrational acts which become *rational* when their significance is

14. Ibid., p. 117.
explained. In such utopias the guide explains the structure of the society and thereby the significance of the behavior being observed. Hence, the behavior of society is presented as rationally motivated. It is a common objection to utopias that they present human nature as governed more by reason than it is or can be. But this rational emphasis, again, is the result of literary conventions. The utopian romance does not present society as governed by reason; it presents it as governed by ritual habit, or prescribed social behavior, which is explained rationally.  

There may be a conflict between utopias viewed as social and political theory and utopias viewed as literature. If it is true that literary convention forces the utopian writer to present either a static society or one in which change can only be recurrent, utopia as political theory may be seriously limited. In fact, it is difficult to generalize accurately about a genre of literature marked by considerable diversity. Many utopias do have the character of rituals that Frye ascribes to them. They are best seen not as social theory per se but as projections of the desire for unity and simplicity. But this is not the complete picture.

Dahrendorf writes that “social harmony seems to be one of the factors adduced to account for utopian stability.”  

Rarely does the utopian present a society in which there is basic conflict over social policy. More often, it is a society marked by agreement on basic principles, which tends to give it an authoritarian appearance. This leads Gorman Beauchamp to write that “Utopia can be defined as civilization-only-more so: that is, as a systemic intensification of the restraints upon which all societies rest. All of what we call civilization is predicated on order, regulation, regimentation: limitations that counter man’s material or instinctual drives and result in the phenomenon Freud called repression.”

Many utopias fit Beauchamp’s description, but many others have sought to reduce repression and have, for example, compensated for the intensification of certain restraints with the elimination or relaxation of others. For instance, Ernest Callenbach’s Ecotopia (1975) eliminates most restraints on sexuality and those on the public display of emotion, particularly anger. Restraints on sexual relations are reduced in many utopias, although increased in others. Beauchamp makes the point more clearly than most.

Utopians tend to assume that there is one, and only one, right method of doing everything and consequently that all other alterna-

tives must be rigorously excluded, by whatever methods the society has at its disposal. The result of this logic is, as one historian [Marie Louise Berneri] of the subject puts it, that “Utopian men are uniform creatures with identical wants and reactions and deprived of emotions and passions, for these would be the expressions of individuality. This uniformity is reflected in every aspect of utopian life, from the clothes to the time-table, from moral behavior to intellectual interests.” The intent of utopia is, of course, benevolent, but the techniques are totalitarian.18

For Beauchamp all utopias are dystopias.

This is an interesting point, and elsewhere I have made a similar argument.19 But the argument is too often carelessly made. Many utopias are, from the perspective of individual freedom, dystopias. Some have this appearance because the author wants to emphasize a value seen to be in conflict with freedom. This value is usually equality, order, or security. It is possible to trace a pattern of the dominant values found in utopias. For example, there is virtually no concern with freedom in early utopias, except, sometimes, to deplore its growth. They are concerned with order, established hierarchy, and obedience. Nineteenth-century utopias were primarily concerned with equality, and while many of the authors clearly believed that an egalitarian social system would enhance personal freedom, this was a secondary concern. In the twentieth century most works have been written as dystopias, but the positive utopias written in recent years convey disillusionment with equality as a sufficient guide to the good society; freedom is appearing as a primary value. An interesting case in point is Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974), which is the story of two societies, Urras, the equivalent of Earth today, and Anares, an anarchist society that has allowed freedom to be eroded, in part by equality.

Much of the argument against utopianism can be dismissed as simply tautological or as based on ignorance of the utopian tradition, but an important part of the argument remains, the one relating to the conflict of values in society and the difficulties of achieving social change using models of alternative futures. Whether or not the questions raised should

18. Beauchamp, “Future Words: Language and the Dystopian Novel,” Style 8, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 467. Marie Louise Berneri was an important figure in the British anarchist movement.

lead us to reject utopianism altogether must await a discussion of the arguments in favor of utopianism.

III. Utopia and Freedom

The argument on the other side is not as neat. Some grandiose claims are made, which are not capable of proof or refutation, some questionable definitions are advanced, and some compelling arguments are made. The proponents of utopia do tend to be more familiar with the complexity of the utopian tradition, although they are equally adept at ignoring contrary evidence. Since some of their positions have been left undeveloped, I shall attempt to clarify and extend them to show how they raise and answer some of the fundamental questions of political philosophy.

The basic argument in Frederick L. Polak's work is that the image of the future affects the actual future. "We will view human society and culture as being magnetically pulled, towards a future fulfillment of their own preceding and prevailing, idealistic images of the future, as well as being pushed from behind by their own realistic past." 20 This proposition, while hardly capable of definitive proof, has an a priori plausibility that cannot be gainsaid.

Polak goes on to argue that "if Western man now stops thinking and dreaming the materials of new images of the future and attempts to shut himself up in the present, out of longing for security and for fear of the future, his civilization will come to an end. He has no choice but to dream or to die, condemning the whole of Western society to die with him." 21 Obviously, to argue that the survival of Western civilization depends on the continuance of positive images of the future (eutopias) makes them one of the most important, if not the most important, artifacts devised by the human race. Not much can be said about the claim. Polak presents considerable evidence to enhance its plausibility, but the argument, by its very nature, remains beyond categorical acceptance or refutation.

Polak also says that utopia encourages efforts towards the development of human dignity.22 This is a neat contrast to the Popperian argument that utopia limits human dignity inasmuch as Polak contends that

21. Ibid., I: 53.
22. Ibid., I: 445.
utopia is essential to our ability to achieve dignity. Again, Polak is rather given to assertion, but obviously if one accepts his first proposition, the second follows. For Polak, utopia means choice, freedom, and creativity. It is a constant mirror held up to the present, showing the faults of contemporary society, a distorting mirror in reverse showing how good we look. Utopia rightly upsets people because it constantly suggests that the life we lead, the society we have, is inadequate, incomplete, sick.

Utopia, to its proponents, is not a perfect society, not a blueprint. As George Kateb said, “any serious utopian thinker will be made uncomfortable by the very idea of a blueprint, of detailed recommendations concerning all facets of life.” Utopia is a possibility rather than a certainty. As M. I. Finley said:

The very word Utopia suggests that the ideal society is not actually or wholly attainable. Nevertheless, every significant Utopia is conceived as a goal towards which one may legitimately strive, a goal not in some shadowy state of perfection but with specific institutional criticisms and proposals. Utopia transcends the given social reality; it is not transcendental in a metaphysical sense.

Even when a utopia is designed as a realistic alternative, it is not intended to be achieved in all its detail. It is a vehicle for presenting an alternative to the present. It is a glimpse of a functioning society at a moment in time containing what the author perceives to be better. It is designed to break through the barriers of the present and encourage people to want, and work for, change.

Ernst Bloch, a Marxist theoretician with the rather unusual distinction of being considered an important theologian, was one of the most important writers arguing for utopia. His works, Geist der Utopie (1918), Freiheit und Ordnung; Abriss der Sozial-Utopien (1946), Das Prinzip Hoffnung (1955–59), and Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie (1963), commend utopia as central to both Marxism and Christianity. For him utopia is a standard by which to judge existing practice. Far from being the road to totalitarianism, it is the road away from totalitarianism.

Bloch grounds his utopianism in both Marxism and Christianity.

23. “Utopia and the Good Life,” in Manuel, ed., Utopias and Utopian Thought, p. 239.
“Utopian unconditionally comes from the Bible, and from the idea of the kingdom that remains the apse of each New Moral World.”  

26 He maintains also that ideals as well as utopian goals necessarily belong to Marxism both now and in the future.  

27 He traces some of the roots of Marxism to Joachim of Flora and Thomas Müntzer. “No matter how social utopianism may be secularized and finally, at last, put on its feet, since Joachim it always implies a societas amicoram, something Christ-like that has become society. Happiness, freedom, order, the whole regnum hominis reverberates in it, in utopian use.”  

Freedom means that we are able to perceive alternatives and act to realize preferences. Utopia presents alternatives colored to make them desirable or, in the case of dystopia, undesirable. Utopia caters to our ability to dream, to recognize that things are not quite what they should be, and to assert that improvement is possible. Of course, the dystopian is stating that things could get worse, but most utopias suggest that whether life gets better or worse depends on the choices made by people exercising their freedom. The strongest form of this argument is that freedom is not possible without utopias.

IV. The Contradictory Nature of Utopia

In the previous sections we have discussed two incompatible arguments about utopia. In one, utopia is seen as leading inevitably to force, violence, and totalitarianism. In the other, utopia is seen as an essential ingredient of freedom, civilization, and even of being human. While it may not be possible to reconcile these extremes, I shall argue that there is a basic ambiguity in utopianism that permits the possibility of both positions containing significant truth.

Much of the original basis for the antiutopian position came from anticommunism or antifascism. It was transformed first by the coalescence of these two positions into an antitotalitarian position, and transformed second by the development of dystopia. As Gorman Beauchamp


28. Bloch, Man on His Own, pp. 140–141.

29. Joseph Wood Krutch was a prime example of the anticommunist position. See, for example, his The Modern Temper (1929), and The Measure of Man (1954). The antifascist position derived from R. H. S. Crossman’s Plato Today (1937).
put it: “This conflict—the individual versus the state, freedom versus regimentation, the instinctual versus the utopian—informs the twentieth century dystopian novel, a roman à thèse whose purpose, clearly ideological, is to assert the ultimate value of man’s instinctual freedom over the putatively melioristic repression of utopia.”

By contrast, Crane Brinton sees the development of dystopia as a failure of nerve. While it seems likely that there is considerable truth in Brinton’s position, it is important to know why a loss of confidence developed. Eugen Weber explains it as follows:

The antiutopians have seen the triumph of machinery, of automation, of national development, of the general over the particular. As they see it, Utopia stands for the unreal against the real, for the technique against the man, for the rational against the many-sided human. With all its superficial materialism, its essence... is the substitution of abstract for concrete, the sacrifice of the real for the ideal.

But the clash is between eutopias. In the nineteenth century the machine-based eutopia developed. Whether it be the railroad, the pneumatic tube, or the steam engine, machines were either to take the burden of labor from the worker’s back or to make meaningful labor possible for the first time. These eutopias were inspired both by a horror of the harsh conditions brought about by the introduction of machinery and a faith that machine civilization could be humanized.

Today, after a period in which it was believed that the machine had come close to producing eutopia, we see the development of ecologically based eutopias that either reject the machine altogether or try to incorporate it into a civilization that rejects machine worship. This almost dialectical development of the eutopia is not new. In many past cases, the achievement or near achievement of the eutopia of one age has been found wanting in the next. But, more often, the eutopia found wanting is not completely rejected. It is modified rather than thrown out altogether.

More than any past age the twentieth century appeared to reject hope. There was a complete loss of confidence, but it seemed, and to many still seems, justified. The catalogue of the twentieth century has been

read as nothing but failure—World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the Gulag Archipelago, the rising rate of violent crime, the Cold War, the apparent failure of the welfare state, ecological disaster, and corruption. Not surprisingly this has led to pessimism about the ability of the human race to achieve a better society, and the dystopia, warning that things could get even worse, became the dominant utopian form. Can we make correct choices? Are we condemned to failure? These are the questions raised by the dystopians. Some dystopias are deeply pessimistic and can be seen as a continuation of the idea of original sin. Ejected from the Garden of Eden, unable to return and unable to achieve a securalized version of it, the human race is incapable of utopia. But many dystopias are self-consciously warnings. A warning implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible.

The shock of failing to achieve the eutopia envisioned at the turn of the century, the reality of fascism, and the revelations of World War II led to a deep pessimism about our abilities. George Kateb summarizes antiutopianism as follows:

1. Give up the vision of utopianism, though it may be a worthy vision, because there is no way to go from the real world to utopia; or if there is a way, it could be none other than the way of violence; and that is either too costly or too unreliable.
2. Give up the vision of utopianism, though it may be a worthy vision, because there is no way to insure the maintenance of its ends without an oppressive political regime.
3. Give up the vision of utopianism because the vision consists of ideals (assumed as permanent and universal) that are unacceptable; or though acceptable in the abstract, are, in fact, destructive of other, perhaps more worthy ideals.

The first two of Kateb’s three “imperatives” include the positions of Popper and others who argue that utopias lead inevitably to force, violence, and totalitarianism. The third statement adds a new dimension, the conflict of ideals. One of the most common charges against utopia is that it will level us all down. Antiutopians fear that excessive emphasis on equality will rob us of freedom, individuality, and other

35. Ibid., pp. 220–221.
equally important ideals. This issue, central to arguments about utopia for centuries, is today one of the most basic questions of political theory. Can one have a society both free and equal? Will an egalitarian society destroy individuality? Is a free society necessarily highly stratified?

The position taken by Polak, and to a lesser extent by Bloch, that civilization depends on the continued existence of a positive utopian tradition, may appear extreme but it can be defended. Their essential argument is that our images of the future help to shape our actual future. Put another way, social forms follow expectations or, negatively, forms that are inconceivable are unlikely to arise. The corollary is that if people's expectations are positive, if they believe that they can or will improve their lives, they are more likely to do so than if their expectations are negative. If they believe that life cannot get better, or that it is certain to get worse, they will not seek improvement of their condition, and it is likely that even their dire predictions will be fulfilled. Faith in, or hope for, the future breeds effort. Effort is more likely to produce positive results than no effort. Apathy produces only more apathy.

Although many commentators, including Polak, missed the positive message of the dystopians, there were few positive images of the future available, particularly in the 1950's. The important element for Polak is the image that dominates in a culture, positive or negative, and certainly for much of this century dystopia has dominated in the West.

On a less grand scale, utopia serves as a mirror to contemporary society, pointing to strengths and weaknesses, more often the latter. This is one of its most important functions. The author need not intend that the details of her or his preferred society should be adopted. As an alternative to the present, utopia shows flaws in the present by picturing the more desirable.

People can be strongly motivated by a vision of a better future for themselves and their children. Some vision of where we want to go is probably necessary for any attempt to change social relations, but it is clearly essential for great social movements. The most modest reform implies that something is wrong and needs to be made better. The idea of moving to a better state requires some conception of a different ordering of society, and while the “different ordering” does not entail a complete utopia, it does entail something similar. Every reformer has some notion of how people should live. He or she may believe that reform—or, let us say, a certain amount of tinkering with the social sys-

tem—is all that is needed or possible at the moment. But even tinkering implies that the reformer can identify a fault, that it can be put right or at least mitigated.

The conservative opponent of reform is in the same sense a utopian. In arguing that we cannot or should not attempt to improve on the present, he or she is saying either that we live in the best possible world, or that any change is likely to make our imperfect world even more imperfect. The first position is utopian. The second is basic to the classic antiutopian argument. According to this latter position reform is to be opposed since it is almost certain to produce error. This approach is rather like that in Greek tragedy. In our pride we commit utopia and violate the boundaries of our allotted sphere. Therefore, we must confront nemesis, fail to achieve utopia, and pay for our effrontery through a worsening of our condition. As Finley notes, when reform movements fail, “voices are raised... against the possibility of human progress, against man’s potentiality for good.”

This cycle of hope, failure, despair, and the rejection of hope altogether, followed by the renewal of hope seems to be the basic pattern of attitudes to social change.

Another criticism of the utopian position is that it ignores the practical difficulties of moving from the unsatisfactory present situation to the utopia. One writer observes that much too often, the proposed means of achieving utopia “are described vaguely, or the underlying naivety and optimism amount almost to frivolity.” In one sense this criticism is well taken. Many utopias do not discuss the process of change in any detail. Some assume revolution, others evolution. Some prescribe specific political actions, but many depend on a “great man,” or in a few cases a “great woman,” to bring about the desired result.

So what is a utopia to do? We have seen above that it can have one or more of at least six purposes, which are not necessarily separable. It may be simply a fantasy, a description of a desirable or an undesirable society, an extrapolation, a warning, an alternative to the present, or a model to be achieved. The utopian views mankind and its future with either hope or alarm. In the former case the result is usually a eutopia; in the latter, a dystopia. But basically, if we follow Bloch, utopianism is an optimistic disposition that translates generalized hope into a description of a nonexistent society. Of course, hope may be nothing more than a naive wish-fulfillment as in the Cockaigne or some

fairy tales, except that, on examination, most fairy tales turn out to be dystopias. Still, hope is essential to any attempt to improve society. But this raises the possibility of people attempting to impose their dream of a desirable future on others who reject that dream. Utopians are always faced with this dilemma when they attempt to move their dream to reality: Is the dream compatible with the repression involved in imposing it on dissidents? Can freedom be achieved through unfreedom or equality through inequality?

If we go back to one of the roots of utopia in the golden age, the earthly paradise, the noble savage, and Cockaigne we find themes that undergird all utopian speculation, a desire for simplicity, an escape from drudgery, a desire for wholeness, unity with others, and, in some cases, unity with God. Most utopias in the West tend to be sophisticated rejections of original sin and its alleged consequences.

An important element of utopia, and part of all utopian satire, is Carnival or Saturnalia, the turning over of the world as we know it. The mighty are put down and the lowly are raised. Roles are reversed. In the celebrations of Carnival, Saturnalia and the like, the reversal is temporary; in utopia it is to be permanent.

In all this there is a rejection of time, of history. Utopia admits only of patterned change, recurrent change, and that within set boundaries.


It is related to the millennium, the end of history or the escape from time. Religious considerations aside, one of the major themes in utopias is stability, the desire to avoid change. There is a basic conservatism in utopian radicalism, a desire to live in a known pattern, without uncertainty or fear of the unknown. Utopias often operate like social systems based on the taboo or on an organized system of myths—everyone knows his or her role and how to fulfill it.

Custom or tradition replaces law. In one prime case, The Crystal Button (1891), there is no longer any law, but custom has the force of law. Utopias try to get rid of law, but some are even more law-ridden than we are today. Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers, had no lawyers in his Utopia. There was law, but no arguing about the law, no legal hairs to split, so that one could truly know the law. Again, this is an expression of the need for certainty.

Utopia expresses deep-seated needs, desires, and hopes. For some authors the proposed institutions are important, for others it is the general set of values—unity, simplicity, wholeness, a comfortable fitting of person and life. Utopians do not believe frustration, poverty, and privation to be necessary for creativity. We do not know whether or not they are right.

V. Conclusion

There are two relationships of utopia to authority. In one utopia is a central aspect of totalitarianism; in the other utopia is a central aspect of freedom. I have tried in the last section to point out that there is truth and falsehood in both positions, and that while utopia has important functions, it is also liable to abuse.

Is susceptibility to abuse inherent in utopias, utopian thinking, or the utopian mentality? Is there, as Popper contends, a mode of reasoning peculiar to the utopian that must ultimately defeat his or her vision? The answer must be to some extent "yes." Karl Mannheim defined utopian as any process of thought which receives its impetus not from the direct force of social reality but from concepts, such as symbols, fantasies, dreams, ideas and the like, which in the most comprehensive sense of that term are nonexistent. Viewed from the standpoint of sociology, such mental constructs may in general assume two forms: they are "ideological" if they serve the purpose of glossing over or stabilizing the existing social reality; "utopian" if they
inspire collective activity which aims to change such reality to con-
form with their goals, which transcend reality.42

It is precisely this desire to bring reality into accord with unrealistic
goals that gives utopians a bad name. Even when the goals are not un-
realistic or transcendental, utopia can blind the believer to the problems
of achieving it and to the possibilities of alternative utopias. The “true
believer” in a given utopia is led to impose it if possible. He or she
“knows” the result will be for the best. The true believer is always trou-
blesome. On the other hand, if there is ever to be change, some people
with compelling beliefs are needed.

Another concern relates to the utopian rejection of time. There are
six closely related ways in which time, history or change, is rejected.
First, there are three separate approaches based on the close relation-
ship between utopia and religion—the millennium, heaven, and myth.
The millennium is the end of time and history, and it is often presented
as an eutopia. Heaven in all its forms is beyond time and is closely re-
lated to utopia. Myth, following Mircea Eliade, is concerned with the
overcoming of time,43 and utopia is often a part of the myth. At times,
utopianism urges rejection of the present and a return to what is be-
lieved to have been a purer, more simple, easier life.44

As mentioned earlier, there is the tendency to replace random change
with recurring patterns. Many utopias are based on custom or tradition
which prescribe certain behaviors. Others are patterned over longer
periods and might be called cyclic. Most utopias want to establish sta-
bility, which too encourages the rejection of time, for time implies in-
stability. This is the reason for the ambivalent attitude to law referred
to above. On the one hand, law is seen as an important means of pro-
viding stability. On the other hand, law and particularly lawyers are seen
as agents of instability because of their quibbling over insignificant
points.

Finally, much utopianism is basically quite conservative. It expresses
the desire to return to earlier forms. The idealization of the Noble Sav-
age, the Golden Age, the Earthly Paradise, and the certainties of tribal
life are all ways of rejecting the change which is characteristic of con-
temporary life.

42. “Utopia,” Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (New York: Macmillan,
1958), XV: 201.
44. See Eliade, Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return, trans.
All these forms of the rejection of time are important aspects of the utopian tradition and have been viewed negatively by many commentators. Needless to say, utopians see the point differently. They equate the rejection of time and the resulting release from the intolerable uncertainties of modern life with freedom. Sometimes, particularly in the more authoritarian and hierarchical utopias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, law was to be imposed on a people for their own good. In other utopias, the good life was to grow out of evolution to a higher standard. The utopian laments that this life is intolerable and feels there must be a better way. War, crime, rape cannot be all that we are capable of achieving. We must improve—and some add even if it costs some people some freedom. There cannot be freedom to rape, rob, and kill.

Today we tend to be skeptical of our ability to achieve significant improvement. Some doubt our ability to do anything. Others have hope; utopias are still around.