

The Great Utopias Have a Nightmarish History.
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From the time that human beings had the leisure to think, there have always been those who did not like how their cultures were organized. One of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam (the Rubaiyyat) as translated by Edward Fitzgerald, expresses it best:

\342\200\234Ah Love! Could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits----and then
Re-mould it neared to the Heart's Desire!\342\200\235

He expresses in this verse what others have felt from antiquity, that the world should be organized much better. Some who felt this way imagined paradises, fantasies, satires, and even today, imaginary brave new worlds (Avatar). But one Athenian genius, Plato, tried \342\200\234to grasp this sorry scheme of things entire, \342\200\235 and the key here is entire. He was the first to attempt to analyze what makes a republic function and how to design a better one. His fictional Republic has gone on to live and influence the world in an astonishing way, including creating some societies that are not ideal utopias, but are nightmares.

There are two kinds of literary utopias: fantasy or construct. The fantasies and satires make fun of existing society and create an imaginary alternate universe. The construct utopias seriously attempt to imagine a perfect state, one that explores all aspects of a human society. Plato's Republic, written 2500 years ago in ancient Greece, was the first to seriously explore what it would take to create a perfect society.

Thomas More, one of England's greatest Renaissance intellectuals, redesigned Plato's Republic for his own time. His Utopia reflected the European fascination with the entirely novel civilizations discovered in the New World. One can better understand one's own culture through comparison to that of another.

A perfect state, they both said, would have enough land to feed itself, access to the sea or waterways for trade, every citizen working at what each did best, the best brains educated for unselfish leadership, absolute equality of all goods (to prevent corruption of the leaders), women freed from domestic duties to participate in all work in which they were qualified, all meals eaten together with cooking chores shared, and strict birth control (having no more children than can be fed). The children were to have community education so that they would all be citizens with a common culture.

Utopias leaped from the pages of literature with the birth of the United States. Our Founding Fathers knew the works of Plato and More, which is reflected in the totality of their vision for our country. But other readers in the 19th and 20th centuries were thinking about these ideas too. The French Revolution gave rise to the Anarchists, who were convinced that only by destroying all existing states could a perfect utopia arise.

Jonathan Swift in the 18th century wrote Gulliver's Travels. He was the first to take a very sour look at utopias and the first to recognize the dark underbelly of utopias (dystopias). Alas, his was a voice in the wilderness.

Marx, Lenin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot translated Plato's and More's small nation-state idea into nightmare empires. All of them (except for Hitler) embraced the communist idea of totally sharing all property (at least in theory). They all liked putting women to work, demolishing the notion of the biological family. They all had a ruling class, indoctrinated for that job, and an unthinking culture of obedience and loyalty to the state. Hitler was more in line with the anarchists who believed in a brave new world that only would come in the future after everything else was destroyed.

Today we have seen that dystopias are more real than utopias. In addition to nightmare empires, we have home-grown pseudo-religious cults, run almost exactly like Plato's and More's states, except that the leaders are nuts. The newest dystopians among us are Al Qaeda and its imitators, imagining a brave new world under a caliphate. This is, of course, just one more fantasy utopia. The anarchists are their real model.

677 words

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