

Comments on the Revisions to the Utopia Paper

The first draft of this essay turned out pretty fluid, so I focused on mechanics rather than the main ideas. This was sparked by our discussion of the aspect of clarity in the discussion of the claim. My original claim was this wordy bumble:

The story of More's Utopia is limited to fiction by the fact that it was created as a thought experiment useful only in solving a specific set of societal evils from the perspective of a the specific contemporary setting, and was not designed to self-correct or adapt in the case of disruptive internal or external stimuli.

There are a lot of unnecessarily wordy ("by the fact that it was created as ...") or redundant parts ("specific ... specific," "internal or external") in this sentence, so I reduced it down to the following neater sentence, which also got more specific to the overall claim of the paper (about rigidity):

More's Utopian nation is limited to fiction by the rigidity in its goal of solving a specific set of contemporary social evils, a goal which overlooks the necessity and ability to adapt to disruptive stimuli.

Most of the (few) revisions continued in this manner. Another example is the final sentence, which I felt didn't do the conclusion justice.

Looking back at this essay, I noticed how little was actually original thought. Sure, this essay flowed well, but it was really just some of the dogmas of Marx, More, and the American Dream thrown in from a modern-biased view, and I'm afraid that limited how useful or interesting this paper turned out to be. (I.e., It feels like I'm arguing *their* views, not *my own*.) I didn't actively revise based on this, but I think the significance and originality is definitely something that'll be important to focus on when crafting future papers. And if you see any of this on future papers, please point them out to me. Thanks!

Jonathan Lam

p.s. I found it interesting and fitting to keep the contemporary (relevant?) 16C form "innumeros." Neither has the meaning changed in the modern equivalent nor has it become unrecognizable.

Jonathan Lam
Professor Germano
HSS2-K
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A Past Ideal: The Modern Irrelevance of More's Utopia
A Practical Social Consideration

When discussing the coming summer, my friend and I discovered a mutual dislike for each other's plans. For he was interested in doing independent research, and I a corporate internship. His argument was that he "[didn't] want to become a cog in a machine." Research, on the other hand, would be more fulfilling because it would be easier to make a recognizable impact on his own. My answer was, yes, you lose some independence working in a company, but there's a greater movement towards a greater goal; in the end, the amount of individual impact is comparable. Plus, companies (large technology businesses) tend to have a particular youthful culture that makes the work much more welcoming.

We agreed to disagree. What we had in common, however, was the ambition to find challenging work and make an impact on the world. Is that a bad thing? No— it's a movement towards innovation, and forging a vocational identity and economic stability for ourselves. But the second effect of that statement (the collection of wealth) is in disagreement with the nation of Utopia in Thomas More's novel of the same name. The idea of private ownership is intentionally made entirely foreign to the Utopians: people can contribute to (and receive their fair part from) the greater good without greed. Citizens work fewer hours, are healthy and strong from adequate nutrition and exercise, and never have the mental burden of worrying about personal or societal peril, whether financially or politically. The case of my friend and I wouldn't exist in Utopia— we wouldn't need to worry about finding summer opportunities because a secure future working at a utilitarian craft is guaranteed.

What's the catch? Utopia isn't real. It was never real, and it never will be, at least not at the scale of the fictional nation set in More's novel. Perhaps denying its existence due to lack of historical pretext or personal experience falls into the logical fallacy More is accused of by Hythloday (More 48), but there are a number of factors that deny its plausibility and usefulness in a real world. Utopia acts as a model

society to those around it, yet avoids complexities such as internal factions or foreign interaction, solidifying the society's place in fairytales, propaganda, and thought experiments. And Utopia's ability to impose societal goals on its citizens in the form of individual laws is the last nail in the coffin, stripping away any personal willpower and individuality. This is the outline of a society outwardly righteous and prosperous, but lacking in the flexibility to respond to attacks to its ideology. More's Utopian nation is limited to fiction by the rigidity in its goal of solving a specific set of contemporary social evils, a goal which overlooks the necessity and ability to adapt to disruptive stimuli.

Before any discussion of the Utopian society, Hythloday entertains More's character with stories of his travels in (and general disgust with) European societies in Book 1 of Utopia, namely:

1. A societal, political, and religious model where flattery towards authority and acting weasalous was considered a legitimate way of rising up the ranks.
2. Wealthy people were known to monopolize the farmland by means of "enclosure," buying the rights to land for exclusive use and destroying the land with herds of voracious sheep.
3. The poorly-designed penal system, especially with regard to the death penalty for theft. (He argues that this would make would-be thieves murderers, because the penalty of murder is equal to that of theft and a witness is destroyed in the process.)

Hythloday presents a logical argument of cause and effect, especially between the evils of enclosure and the theft that results from the idleness of innumerable farmers who lose their jobs. These problems can be condensed into the observation that "one herdsman or shepherd is sufficient to graze livestock on ground that would require many hands to cultivate and grow crops" (23). The great problem is that land that can be shared—and profited from—by *many* farmers can be bought and destroyed by *one* wealthy person, which in turn is a consequence of a society ruled by the wealthy.

This is followed by Book 2, which is a description of a society in which none of these problems occur. Their solutions are not addressed as straightforwardly as the problems themselves, but several aspects of Utopian rules discourage these misconducts. More's tone is superficially neutral and

informative, but the story is told with a blatant lack of fault in any part of the Utopian society. Everything in the Utopian system is, to Hythloday and More, a logical consequence of some Utopian rule; and this supposedly sound logic never loses battles, never allows for economic collapse, and never causes discontent among the people over a continuous two millennia. This bias reinforces the impossibility of Utopian society, and therefore care should be taken to not foolishly accept every apparently logical conclusion drawn by the Utopians without critical consideration.

If Utopian principles are considered only from the context of the problems in Europe they aim to solve, it seems that the system is highly successful. The Utopians do away with personal wealth and possessions, and allow households the security of being able to take what they need from the warehouses, so there is no incentive for thievery. Besides a small hierarchy of elected officials, the general populace of Utopia live in equity, without wealth and with equal job opportunity, no one having power over another nor able to sabotage another's finances. Of course, bribery fails without money or possessions of value, and the decentralized religion eliminates the possibility of citizens exploiting a religion for power.

This naturally fits into communism, defined by the OED as "a theory that advocates the abolition of private ownership, all property being vested in the community, and the organization of labour for the common benefit of all members; a system of social organization in which this theory is put into practice." Many of the proposed benefits of a communist system are discussed, such as the anticipated growth of productivity and selflessness of the people, but the opposite effects are observed when the theory is implemented on the scale of nations (as observed in soviet Russia and communist China in the 20th century). The fact is that humans, like any animals, respond optimistically to positive feedback; when the economic return of a person's work is not representative of the labor invested (as is the case in a pure communist society), people naturally work subproductively. Of course, having written the book three centuries before the publication of the Communist Manifesto and implementation of communist societies, More understandably had no knowledge of the implications of a real implementation.

But suppose that communism could work, as communist-like practices have been implemented well on a smaller scale. A modern metaphor is a medical practice, a small group of doctors in the same specialty, in which the revenue is split evenly among the doctors. In a small and educated society, the members can all fully understand and agree to the advantages of equally-distributed payout. Utopia is tiny compared to real communist nations such as China or Russia, where size limited its efficacy; suppose that its citizens could all be thoroughly educated in the benefits of their system. Even then, there are still some glaring aspects of Utopian society that would make it non-ideal.

The greatest mistake of the Utopian system is its rigidity. One component of this is the very fact that many of its residents believe so strongly in the perfection of the system. If a system is ideal, why would there ever need to be any change? (Modern engineers may disagree, but the relative difficulty of sixteenth-century life disallowed much of the creative freedom that modern people take for granted.) And even if there is a need or want for improvement, the system of equity somewhat dampens an intellectual's ability to innovate. Lack of a meritocracy forces all scholars into an equal standing, rather than in the natural managerial hierarchy based on experience in the field. While it might be useful to mix professionals and junior workers in many trades for training purposes, high-tech advancements require carefully-organized teams of the brightest people willing to devote many hours each day into it. In Utopian society, there is an interesting "work law" that explicitly lays out over two-thirds of the time of the day, not including meal times and periods of preparation or transition:

"Dividing the day and night into twenty-four equal hours, they devote only six to work, ... After lunch they take two hours of rest in the afternoon... Sleep takes up eight hours. ... After dinner they devote one hour to recreation" (61-62).

The logic behind the work law is the observation that work in Europe is very unevenly distributed. More cites the idleness given by several significant groups, such as the nonworking spouse, the religious leaders, the noblemen, and the beggars; if all had been put to work, then "it takes far fewer than you thought to produce everything that mortals use" (63). This may be a blessing to workers who

want to end work early by putting a minimum work requirement, but it also limits workaholics by setting an upper limit on their work time. Even more harmful about this work law is that it measures time, rather than merit; even with the supervision of the syphogrants, there will always be a large proportion of idle people with the facade of engagement. For, why should a person work harder if his output is measured only in an easily collectible unit of “hours” rather than some physical quantity? If the syphogrant asks why the yield is so low, it is simple to claim disability and still receive equal benefits (here again lies the reality of communism). More also suggests when using the phrase “produce everything that mortals use” that adequate production of goods is the end goal of people’s work; complacency arises because striving to invent or innovate is considered overwork that would hurt citizens. Utopia’s geniuses and leaders under high-pressure situations may never be realized. The struggle that my friend and I are feeling to compete with millions of other youth to find a decent job is absent in Utopian society. No Utopian will know what it means for a homeless, single-parent to work three jobs, almost twenty hours a day, to barely survive. Therefore no Utopian will never know a certain hardship: the lifelong fight for a better life.

Utopia also has one fundamentally static construct that makes innovation difficult: farming. Farming is Utopia’s greatest defense against idleness, because it productively employs a large number of its citizens. Any innovation that greatly improves the efficiency of farming (e.g., modern tractors and crop dusters) would corrupt Utopian society; rephrasing the aforementioned synopsis of Hythloday’s strife, *one machine operator is sufficient to harvest many crops that would require many hands to cultivate and grow crops*. Technology reintroduces idleness just as wealthy land enclosure does, resembling the personal-versus-shared land disparity. This is still problematic in the modern US: machinery and cheap labor in other nations are, in the minds of some economic philosophies, stealing jobs from domestic workers. The problem would be more dire in Utopia because of the less-diversified economy and because of how important it is for everyone to have a job. The ideal of constantly-occupied citizens clashes with technological change that threatens jobs— they cannot coexist.

Natural disasters, clashing internal factions, an arms race, disease or blight, the rise of a globalized economy. More's portrayal of Utopia is an ancient society that has been scarred by none of these factors, cunning or the general health and spirit of the people to the rescue. The Utopians are bred to subsist using farming techniques that have not changed for millennia, and have never had to bring themselves to extremes for survival. In an emergency, the Utopians could not be depended on to think or fight or innovate like their lives depended on it, simply because there was never any need for any of them to try to think or fight or innovate so extraordinarily when it would not garner any more benefits than any subpar man.

Fast-forward half a millennium to consider the United States' modern solutions to the original problems. The punishment for theft has been reduced from a death penalty to jail time and occasionally community service (the latter reminiscent of Utopia); a republican system gives political leaders power through a fair election; and a capitalistic meritocracy with some semblance of equality replaces Utopia's communism. The difference between US equality and Utopian equity is subtle but significant: while equity keeps everyone at the same level of wealth and status, equality puts nobody at an initial advantage, and people's reputations are allowed to grow by merit of their achievements. The latter ideology has allowed the US to survive many human rights conflicts, natural disasters, political and legal disagreements, and world wars, and continues to do so as the world changes at an exponential rate.

Credit must be given where it is due: More's society addresses problematic contemporary systems, with a simple, logically-operated hypothesis that would be revolutionary centuries later. But the specific set of rules in Utopia binds its citizens too closely to this model of mediocre non-idleness, and the result is a society that generally restricts innovation and would react poorly to worldly change. More chooses the idea of an ideal society as one that solves social problems and presents a rigid ideal. But real world problems evolve, and genuinely ideal societies cannot stay ideal without parallel progress.

Works Cited

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More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Translated by Clarence H. Miller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

IGNORE THIS BRAINSTORM / OUTLINE

The society imposes societal goals on the individual, and (necessary) individual needs are suppressed
 From the outside, it seems like a model society, but only b/c insiders are barely subsisting
 (also they are willing to eliminate things for their bad uses even when they can be sometimes useful — taking things to extremes)

Before any discussion about Utopia, Hythloday begins about current problems in Europe

- Theft and punitive system
- People trying to flatter authority: all want to gain power
- Animal capitalism: rich dominate the industry

Utopia seems to be a society built around solving these

Like American society @ its inception: for freedom, no taxes; ideal in theory but then complexities: some founding principles wrong

ADAPTATION

As opposed to Utopia, which seems to have the opposite of change

Why is this a problem? Society is stable after all

- But society is only stable w/w/ no external or internal stimuli — cannot handle any change

More on CHANGE

- No want to change: no meritocracy
- No want to change: things are ideal already
- No ability to change: rules are limiting it (and some of the guiding factors of life are based around the fact that low-tech actions are typically honest and necessary)
- I.e., stagnation is a part of their life

Stable and “ideal”, but only in stable circumstances

- I.e., also holding back from foreign intervention unless where necessary

Inflexibility may hurt individuals and society alike

- No pleasures — less creativity
- No money (gold, diamond) ⇒ no physical use of those
- Honesty is a character trait they want society to emanate, but they are also forcing it on their citizens; honesty is not something you tell something to do, nor is something honest if you are told to do it
- Turn mental guidelines into hard and fast rules

People don't know how to fight/work for their lives, because everything is taken for granted — brittle

Conclusion

Bad QM — only built for a specific use case, not flexible enough to self-correct or adapt in other solutions

Good at what it was meant for in ideal conditions but that's about it

PROMPT

HSS2 K&L Professor Germano

Paper #1 Utopia

Thomas More's Utopia presents a strangely neutral vision of a strangely perfect society.

As we look closely at this social vision, it becomes more and more difficult to explain its contradictions. How are we meant to read its weirdly unfamiliar details?

In a five-page paper, use your close reading skills to make a claim about idealized social vision and its limits.

To do this, you'll want to focus on two or three episodes or passages and use them to think about how Utopia combines prescription (or at least a thought experiment) and critique of European sociopolitics.

If you want, you can bring in material and references beyond Utopia, but your paper has to demonstrate your close reading of passages from More.

Five numbered pages, double spaced, stapled (not clipped or crunched), printed on one side of the sheet only.

Name, date, section HSS2K or HSS2L on page 1.

Due in class Monday February 4.

Theft (& other punishment): no death policy, people are put to work (a system sometimes put into practice today)

War: still use mercenaries to fight war, also use bribery -- not very different from regular war

Idea of gems and currency --- make it seem like these things can be abandoned (76), but they are actually very valuable (e.g., gold as anticorrosive conductor and diamond as abrasive agent)

No overall societal purpose, and also problems with scaling up human guidelines on how to be to be hard societal rules

—

IGNORE THIS DRAFT 1

When discussing our plans for the coming summer, my friend and I discovered that we find a mutual disagreement for the other's thoughts. For he was interested in doing independent research (or teaching), and I a corporate internship.

His argument was that he "[didn't] want to become a cog in a machine." Research, on the other hand, would be much more fulfilling, because it would be easier to make an impact on his own. My answer to that was that, sure, you lose some independence working in a company, but there's a greater movement towards a greater goal; in the end, the amount of individual impact (the societal impact of a larger product per employee) would be similar. Plus, (technology) companies tend to have a particular youthful culture that makes the work much more welcoming.

We agreed to disagree. What we had in common, however, was the ambition to make an impact on the world. Is that a bad thing? No— it's a movement towards innovation, and for making a living for ourselves. Better that than a mediocre life of keeping the status quo and receiving a mediocre income. But the second effect of that statement (the collection of wealth) is in disagreement with the nation of Utopia in Thomas More's novel of the same name. The idea of harboring personal wealth or possessions is a completely foreign idea to the Utopians, but to the great benefit of society: people can contribute to (and receive their part from) the greater good— communism at its best. Likewise, personal pleasures and the military are regulated so that they are most efficiently put to the benefit of society. People work fewer hours, are healthy and strong from adequate nutrition and farming, and never have the mental burden of worrying about personal or societal peril, either financially or politically. Unlike my friend and I, things are already the best they can be, and people are afraid to change the system.

What is wrong about this model? For one, it doesn't exist, nor has it ever; but to use this argument is abusing the power of history. Rather, the society fails because it imposes societal goals on individuals and individual goals on society, which is completely inappropriate to ask of either. Perhaps in the smaller, un-globalized European societies of More's time, a Utopia-like nation could exist and function close to his description, but the larger the difference in scale between the individual and the society (i.e., the larger the target community), the more the society is doomed to fail.

The Utopian nation is described as having existed for almost two millennia, and their technology has barely changed since its conception. Farming is still understood as an honest and necessary task, so any able person is expected to partake in it. The houses are arranged as they were for thousands of years, in orderly rows, with minimal improvements (only in repair and maintenance, hardly in rebuilding) since the mud huts of ancient times. It is a society so stable that it seems to defy change.

What, then is the goal of Utopia? The citizens go about their lives in the same clothing material as they have for so many centuries, no more or less comfortable. Their magistrates are sent around the world to establish justice, and their armies are sent to establish peace for allies. It is a world where many western nations are led by corrupt governments, such as those Raphael Hythloday describe, and Utopia is just one out of the ordinary. But for such a remarkable nation, there is also remarkable exclusion. Even More (his character in the novel), a worldly person, is completely unaware of the nation in the world, so presumably it is completely unheard of among the general populace. They are known to trade so that they can acquire gold (for military expenses) and iron, but have little other interaction with the world. Their interactions with others are minimal. It is an isolated bubble of content and comfortable wealth and respect amongst all its citizens, a place where everyone is equal and contributes fairly. The nation seems to exist only to set a good example to others— not to play any part in global politics or economics. Perhaps their goal is to subsist, and set a good example of humble, ungreedy survival— like a rock in a turbulent stream.

While Hythloday claims there to be few laws, there is a lively set of standards— they guide society a little differently than rules or laws— that the Utopians follow. There are guidelines on what citizens should be doing at any given time.

Talk about gold

Works Cited
... Utopia