

PROBLEMS OF UTOPIAS

When, in the year 1516, Sir Thomas More wrote his book about the ideal state, he located it on the Island of Utopia, which was supposed to have been discovered by Raphael Hythlodæus, a companion of Vespucci on his fourth voyage. At first a fictitious geographical name, the term "utopia" continues to live in the minds of men, although it no longer is relevant to geography or to voyages of discovery and is by no means necessarily connected with the description of ideal states. Today, according to dictionaries and encyclopedias, "utopian" describes any plan which seems impossible to realize; the word is weighted either with resigned regret or with the forbearance of the sensible soul who well knows that the ideal state would in the end prove no better than the existing one.

This stretching of a concept which had already happened when the word "utopia" was accepted in dictionaries¹ is offset by a tendency toward greater precision and limitation which, although it did not modify the meaning of the word in the mind of the general public, did again and again help to determine how it was used in literature and in criticism. For, in the language of writers of the 1920's, "utopia" signifies the ideal, a belief in which is necessary for the salvation of mankind. "To be filled

Translated by Edith Cooper.

1. Since the middle of the nineteenth century. The large dictionaries and encyclopedias of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do not contain it at all.

with the spirit of utopia” means to want to save humanity by the belief in an ideal. The substance of the ideal can vary. The authors are united only in the belief that mankind is in need of an ideal—one, moreover, which is manifestly dependent on man, differing thus from Plato, for whom ideas exist in absolute space, removed from empiricism and history and completely independent of any effect they may have on human beings or even of men’s awareness of them. To be sure, the equating of “ideal” with “utopia” by the writers of the twenties has, through its strongly emphasized sociological reference, come closer again to the concept which we connect with the *Utopia* of More and the *Republic* of his model, Plato; but the word has much stronger ethical implications than it did for More.

One can even go a step farther—both in the direction of the authors of the twenties and in the direction that the word “utopia” has taken in the common consciousness. In the utopias of our time one no longer wants to prove that belief in an ideal will save mankind, nor does one wish to provoke regret or forbearance (which spring, after all, from a longing for things to be as they are pictured). Modern writers describe either the annihilation of those who have lost their faith (in God or in an ideal) before the power of those who have a faith—albeit in something which the authors reject—or they awaken fear and dread by depicting the other side of a plan consistently carried out. Often, then, both intentions merge: the aimlessness of one group makes it a prey to the ideology disseminated and hammered home with subtle force by the other. Thus the word “utopia” is used to designate not only works describing a plan which cannot be realized (such a use would correspond to the general linguistic use characterized earlier) but also works describing something whose realization is to be feared because it is both possible and dreadful.

This would seem to be quite the opposite of utopia as we know it from More. But, in fact, fiction here, too, is only continuing in the same direction by following along lines laid down in the works of Plato and More and their successors—lines we are surprised to see converge with tendencies in our own historical reality. In the age-old literary concepts, these lines were not noticed until they manifested themselves in reality. Sometimes, to be sure, they are overlooked even today, and one may read that the ancient utopists painted “ideal” pictures while modern ones depict “horror.” Such an antithesis overlooks the fact that the ancient utopists, too, described something frightening: the totalitarian state. What really differentiates the ancient from the modern is the intention of the authors.

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Plato, More, and the utopists of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries wanted to show “ideal” constructs and possibly themselves believed that it would be nice if their plans became reality. The modern utopists cannot desire a realization, but they believe one possible, in greater degree since their plans did not spring from their own imagination. But the horrible part of their visions is precisely something which is integral to the ancient utopias: the fact that men lose, or are robbed, of their individuality on principle and are allowed to be nothing more than functionaries of the state.

We need not be surprised if, now that utopias have assumed the form sketched above, critics recognize the same tendencies in the ancient utopias as well, since both grew from the same root. Writer and critic alike have had their sensibilities sharpened by the experiences of the immediate past which both have had to endure. Utopias are now being written in order to explain and to understand political reality. This reality—the totalitarian state—is designated as utopia. Elements of this state are now identified in the ancient utopias: the theoreticians and politicians of totalitarian states recognize the components of the ancient utopias as similar and suitable to their own practice and thus legalize measures of their own, their opponents doing the same in order to condemn totalitarian systems. Of course there have been pointers in that direction in earlier treatises. Robert von Pöhlmann, for example, sees that “too large a sacrifice of freedom and self-determination was demanded” of the guardians of Plato’s republic,² but this insight might be countered with the fact that the guardians, on the contrary, possessed true liberty, which is the freedom to educate one’s self.³ Otto Apelt, in translating Plato, shows the clearest understanding. He points to the historical situation, in which it could not have been Plato’s desire “to want to transform every individual into a truly virtuous person”; rather, he aimed at constructing a state which would allow men, by participating in it, to participate in virtue.⁴ These critics, whose arguments we find in the writings of several others as well, are united by the insight that that which is described in the *Republic* needs an explanation and interpretation if the modern reader is really to consider this state as “ideal.” After 1933, treatises appeared in

2. Robert von Pöhlmann, *Geschichte der sozialen Frage und des Sozialismus in der antiken Welt* (Munich: C. H. Beck, O. Beck, 1912), II, 30.

3. Ulrich v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Platon* (after the 3d ed. published by the author and edited by Bruno Snell) (Frankfurt a.M., 1948), esp. p. 54.

4. Platon, *Der Staat*, ed. Otto Apelt (5th ed.; Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1920), Introduction, p. viii.

Germany which only pretended to argue with Plato; their true intention was to lend weight and justification to the author's own opinions by referring to the Platonic doctrine. Even the reverse is found. Plato is accepted as an ideologically supportable writer because his ideas agree with those of National Socialism! And, indeed, this claim by the partisans of a totalitarian state is not altogether unfounded and, since the end of the second World War, has often been stressed. I shall cite here only the formulation by Bertrand Russell, since it states the fact and also points out the philosophical and literary problem: "Plato possessed the art to dress up illiberal suggestions in such a way that they deceived future ages, which admired the *Republic* without ever becoming aware of what was involved in its proposals."⁵

This implies that for centuries admiration for Plato has stood in the way of a sober view of his suggestions and that Plato has "tricked" these centuries. The latter, however, is true not only for Plato's literary agility in general (the art to "dress up" in such a way); rather this aspect of the deception is carried so far that, cunningly, it is taken over into the construction itself and is, in fact, a conscious deception. For Plato's state has been built, in his own words, on the foundation of "an untruth of that indispensable kind . . . , that is, a single, thoroughly well-intentioned lie" (*Republic* 414-15), namely, the myth that the deity who created man put either gold, silver, or brass into his soul, thus predestining him for his position in the state. Plato intended this myth to be believed by the rulers as well, at least from the second generation on, making it an indispensable, well-intentioned lie—if it is absolutely necessary and of the utmost importance that the state remain in the form once given it and be ruled by the same group of men! If every man has been put in his place by divine providence, it would be not only a political but also a religious transgression to envy someone of higher rank or to go so far as to plot his overthrow. This myth, this "beautiful lie" ("beautiful" because closest to the truth; "lie" for not being truth: for, where one cannot know how things really happened, approximations have to suffice), Plato makes the basis of his republic. "Real lies," however, are not tolerated. Works of fiction are "real lies" inasmuch as they do not extol political or warlike virtues. Those which, on the other hand, do "hew the line," are "beautiful lies," well intentioned and useful, exactly like those which must be used occasionally for the common good by the regent of a city. We can no

5. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), p. 105.

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longer be blind to the fact that the “truth” which these “beautiful lies” approximate and which justifies their existence in the “ideal state” is identical with what is expedient for the state. And that, as we know, is a relative concept of truth.

The various laws, too, which regulate life in the polity, have been passed for the use of the state and at the expense of the individual. The communal life of the guardians, for instance, involves reciprocal control and a control on the part of the public; their lack of possessions (they are supported by the artisans) has been decreed so that they will turn their thoughts toward the good of the state rather than toward making money; the decree that all education is reserved for them speaks for itself; so does the one about “subtly devised lots” to bring together suitable partners for the begetting of children, or the one about the state rearing or killing newborn children as it sees fit. These details make clear how much Plato agrees with modern utopian novels in just the vital point. In the *Republic*, too, nothing counts but the function in the state; the spiritual independence of the individual is annihilated. “Though his ideal state is ruled by philosophers, there is no more freedom in it than if it were ruled by *Gauleiters*. In fact, there is less freedom, because philosophers can crush freedom more effectively, being more able to detect any nonconformist idea. They are prepared to allow a certain latitude in matters of little importance, such as trade, but in matters of art and education, that is to say, in all that relates to intellectual freedom, they are completely ruthless.”⁶

Modern totalitarian states (as well as the novels which deal with them) and the Platonic republic thus agree that all power resides in the state. The intention of the authors, however, is different in the two cases, and this probably explains how it was possible for Plato to “deceive” readers of all times until the present. Plato’s exposition is an “artificial construction,”⁷ a definition: the “best” state is defined, and is, according to Plato’s scheme, that which comes closest to the idea of state: that which is “most statelike,” and, consequently, in which there are no separate destinies for those who support it. Plato does not pretend to describe the state “most pleasant” to men; and we have some reason to doubt that his philosopher-pupils, for all the interest taken in political affairs in antiquity, would strongly have desired life in his republic; they were probably relieved to have Plato’s assurance that this state, like all ideas, was unattainable. But they admitted that his construction was right; it was a matter of course

6. Marie Louise Berneri, *Journey through Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1950), p. 29.

7. *Der Staat*, Introduction, p. ix.

for them to accept his historical and social premises because these were their own. And the rightness of his construction has been fascinatingly proved by the practice of totalitarian states two-and-a-half millennia later.

But Plato's claim that in his state everyone should get what was due him, that he should take the place naturally right for him, was quite another matter. Here Plato demonstrates nothing, except his "art . . . to deceive future ages." For the belief in the natural predestination of each individual is founded on myth; and those who above all belong in this state and are finally to be happy there, the philosopher-guardians, have to be specially treated. Throughout life they are educated to consider the way of life in the republic as the only one possible and therefore the best. The means used by modern authors to achieve the same aim are much cruder, but, after all, they do not have for audience an educated Greek aristocracy to convince of the desirability of their state! Either they let their humans reproduce chemically from the beginning and then according to norms of character and natural gifts or they expose them to constant propaganda. In the first case, that of chemically graded people, no education is necessary at all; in the second case, the state in question has to re-educate each person anew to its ideology—an endless task. The contents of these utopian novels then is just this clash between the individual and the utopia, and in this they hardly differ in part from theoretical treatises. The story ends with the destruction of the individual. "Story" is to be taken here not only in the sense of tale, account, or novel but in a much larger sense: when there is no longer any individual action, we have the virtual end of history. And that, since time immemorial, is the aim of every utopia.

In general, the utopia is an end condition. Raymond Lully in his novel *Blanquerna* (ca. 1284), for example, proceeds systematically to reach it. *Blanquerna* first issues edicts for his monastery, then for his diocese, and finally for all believers and for the whole world. After that he can retire serenely into a hermitage, because (and here is his answer to all pleas to remain in office) the world is now so perfectly organized that its order can no longer be shaken.

And Sir Thomas More's *Island of Utopia*? It was founded—and this has supposedly been historically recorded—1,760 years before the fourth voyage of Vespucci, when it was first reported. But the only historical personality (and the only person named at all) is King Utopus. We are not surprised that there were no artists, but technicians—might they not

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have been recorded in the chronicle? But this document evidently preserves only the passage of time, eternally the same. Of Utopus, too, we know only that he passed laws and that the laws were so good that they were able to continue unchanged and, moreover, to allow the utopia to remain unchanged. These laws, then, which made utopia into the ideal state, at the same time caused its cessation as history: it could have been founded just as well five hundred, or fifty, or five years ago. The later utopias, too, imagine a state which exists after the victory of socialism, marking the last war of humanity. Anatole France having signaled this lack of historicalness,⁸ it has now become the central theme with a number of modern authors: Kastalien, the utopia of Hermann Hesse,⁹ is an enclave next door to history, questionable in its right to an existence, although it does continue to exist despite the fact that the Master of the Revels, Josef Knecht, emerges into "real life," into the historical world. In Franz Werfel's *Stern der Ungeborenen*¹⁰ this state beyond history comes to an end; the war waged by these space-minded humans imposes destinies on them, making them into individuals experiencing history.

The first utopia of world literature, again Plato's *Republic*, is particularly illuminating on the problem of the historicity of the utopia. In this dialogue the "ideal state" is outlined, defined, and described in detail, pointed somewhat in the direction of his contemporary model, Sparta, which is outlined as an aim toward which to strive. But this implies that the *Republic* is an ideal for the future, a utopia after the end of history; then perhaps there will be a state which resembles it, and to it the philosopher is to dedicate his powers. The state is described also as an idea in the world to come, "in Heaven, perhaps, set up as a model," which one can at best approach but never reach; it is outside history, without being influenced by it in any way. This ideal state is also, however, supposed to have existed once before in the past: in the *Timaeus* the participants recall from the "conversation of the day before" that the state of the philosopher-guardians agreed in all its particulars with that state of which the grandfather of Critias had received news through Solon: the *Ur-Athens*, founded by the goddess Athene and destroyed, like everything terrestrial, by one of those catastrophes which, according to the reports of the Egyptian

8. *Sur la pierre blanche* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1905); English trans.: *The White Stone* (London and New York: John Lane, 1910).

9. *Das Glasperlenspiel* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1943); English trans.: *Magister Ludi* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1949).

10. (Stockholm: Berman-Fischer, 1946); English trans.: *Star of the Unborn* (New York: Viking Press, 1946).

priests, occur every nine thousand years and obliterate all records. Here, that which had been thought and expressed in the *Republic* is transmitted to a (fictive) historical reality; at the same time that which had been projected to the farthest future, the end of time, is moved to the most distant past (known only to the Egyptian priests). This exchange or identification of wished-for periods is understandable. For one thing, past and future are equally remote from the poet;¹¹ and for another, there is, as we have seen, simply no place for utopia within history.

But it is remarkable that Plato emphatically distinguishes this past future-ideal from the age of Cronus, in which the earth was paradise and men knew the language of the animals and did not work for their food and clothing but lived, rather, on the fruits of the fields. If the people of that age had used their gifts and their leisure to philosophize about the real nature of the gods, then Plato in all justice would probably have had nothing to object to in their state of affairs. But men did not strive for perfection, as only the philosopher does; they could think of nothing better to do than to write poetry, invent myths—"true lies" which ascribe actions and intentions to the gods, the imitation of which is not to be recommended and which, in fact, are condemned in the ideal state of the philosopher-king. The age of Cronus, then, Plato must repudiate; but this does not prevent it from being the ever recurring dream of humanity. To be sure, what is alluring about it is just what Plato rejects: poetry and love, which flowered in this golden age. About two thousand years passed before Montaigne praised that condition for this very reason—because there was "nulle cognoissance de lettres,"¹² which was then taken up by the encyclopedists in their praise of the "bon sauvage" and viewed by the romantics, weary of civilization.

In the utopias of today poetry and love have been eliminated; the first expressly, the second simply by the fact that no room is left for a private life. And here, again, we meet a distinction between ancient and modern utopias which we have already mentioned by implication. In the early utopias up to the eighteenth and even into the nineteenth centuries, private life is merely curtailed in a naïve sort of way. The authors intend, like

11. We cannot resist quoting a philological parallel and its interpretation here, the German word *einst* ("one day"): "... 'one day' is a word of scope, it has two faces. It looks back, into solemnly twilit distances, and it looks forwards, far, far, forwards, into space, and is not less solemn because it deals with the to-be than that other dealing with the has-been" (Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, Vol. IV: *Joseph the Provider*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter [New York: Alfred Knopf, 1944], Part V, "Tamar Learns the World," p. 310; *Joseph und seine Bruder*, Vol. II [Stockholm: S. Fischer Verlag, 1952], p. 174f).

12. Essay "Des Cannibales."

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Plato, to create an ideal state and to ignore what happens to the individual in this state. Modern authors know that a “myth of the state”¹³ has emerged which, if it became concrete, would leave men no private sphere. Therefore they draw out and reinforce the tendencies already found to be moving toward concreteness and show how the individual is devoured by the machine of state. He might, for all that, be living in a “golden age” in which tedious work is taken over by machines and daily subsistence offers no problems—a “golden age,” indeed, in which it is forbidden to write poetry or to think. Perhaps we had better forego this term and confine ourselves to “utopia,” knowing that it can be terrible and that we would not settle for it even in its best and most pleasant form.¹⁴

13. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1946).

14. We know only two utopias (*not* descriptions of a golden age!) in which human liberty is granted: it is the very theme in Rabelais’ monastery, Thelema; and in Voltaire’s Eldorado (in *Candide*), liberty is included in the principle of tolerance. Despite a baroque or ironical framework, both utopias are true ideals.