

‘Utopias are more concerned with escapism than effecting social change.’ Discuss.

By their very definition Utopias are literally a ‘no-place’ or nowhere. It is only a with a subtle modification of its meaning that people use the word more often to refer to an ideal, perfect, or excellent place. Every Utopia from Plato’s *Republic* to the visions of technological luminaries such as Bill Gates is built around desire: “Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of world we would live in if we could do just that” (Levitas, 1990 p29). While this desire maybe perceived as terribly impractical, it could easily be argued that without the facility for imagination human progress would halt.

When considered as a whole the impracticalities of overcoming “social inequality, economic exploitation, sexual repression and other possible form of domination” (Honderich, 1995, p893) are obvious. Regardless of this the general suggestion in utopias is that the human traits that cause these problems could readily be dispensed with by the “abolition of money or private property” (Carey, 1999, pxiii). The way in which people would be convinced to give up money and private property is often avoided or at best attributed to fanciful schemes such as Well’s comet’s cosmic gases in *In the days of the comet*.

In a frighteningly real bid to create a civilisation of perfect human beings, a utopian society by its aspiration to perfection, Hitler’s Germany can only serve to illustrate the terrible outcome of putting utopian methodology into practice. It is interesting to note that after a period of disgust following World War II, eugenics is now becoming an increasingly regular topic for contemporary debate with new avenues constantly being explored to ‘improve’ the human race.

Every utopian ideal is, by its very nature, dealing with escapism to some extent, as they are all based on the inherent desire to escape from reality, especially an unpleasant one: Utopian thinking “invariably contains criticism of the status quo” (Honderich, p893). Indeed, half of More’s *Utopia* is spent describing the current situation before the second book expounds his utopian ideas with their implicit destruction of his contemporary reality. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is a textbook giving instructions on how to restore his

fragmented country, thereby criticising its previous leaders who allowed wars to fragment it. Through the protagonist's apparent naivety in 2040 Morris's *News from Nowhere* forces the reader to look at the 1800s in a derisory way, thereby embodying his wish to escape from his time.

Emphasising the element of escapism Honderich suggests that the utopian novel must "transcend the boundaries of the so-called realistic and pragmatic consideration" (p893); as with Wells, transcending the practicalities rarely proves a problem for utopian authors. An important thing to note is the setting of the novels: More sets his on an isolated island; Huxley sets *Brave New World* (although referred to as a dystopia the principle is the same) in a restyled, self-contained London, although the title of his later utopian novel – *Island* - shows his understanding of the need for seclusion. While Morris's London includes familiar sites, their uses and the overall landscape have been dramatically changed so that to all intents and purposes he is describing a new place. The physical setting of a utopia has to be separated from reality, or at least transmogrified beyond recognition, in the same way in which the societal ideals are reformed.

The concept of escapism is interesting to consider with regard to Huxley's own life. The drug soma is an early expression of his search for a drug to relieve the monotony of reality. In the 1950s he became renown for his "interest in psychedelic or mind-expanding drugs" (Barron's, 1985), and his biographer, Sybille Bedford, relates that he was "looking for a drug that would allow an escape from the self and that if taken with caution would be physically and socially harmless". His interest in drugs has a clear influence on his writing, indeed his 1954 book *The Doors of Perception* is solely a recollection of his "overwhelming" experiences with mescaline (Carey, p449). If escapism is therefore seen to be an ongoing quest within his life, it is impossible not to accept that his writing might also aim to offer "an escape from the self".

Personal involvement is also applicable to *The Prince*. Machiavelli wrote it while in prison and dedicated it to Lorenzo de' Medici, the man who had imprisoned him. A primary purpose of the text could therefore

literally be seen as escapism – using the book to try and win favour, hopefully leading to a pardon, and therefore an escape from his unpleasant reality in the same way Morris wanted to escape his seventeenth century reality.

Mental escapism, and a manner of setting himself academically apart from some his readers, can be found in More's *Utopia* through the inclusion of puns on names. The name of the protagonist, Hythloday, is a combination of two Latin words and translates literally as 'versed in babble', in the same way the river is Anyder, means waterless, and the King is called Ademus meaning 'without people'. On the surface these suggest a tongue in cheek attitude to the theme of the book which also providing an entertaining book for astute readers which mocks More's age. Carey suggests that the use of these names could be read as a double bluff "simulating jocularly as self-defence in a society where spreading new ideas could be dangerous" (p39).

Although the overarching idea of a utopia has to be seen as impractical, the potential application of their ideas cannot be ignored. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and it shows how their view of utopia, communism, could arise out of a capitalist state. The fact that it is based in reality and shows a natural progression to communism is important to note as an exception in explaining the social change that other utopias just assume. They believed that basing a utopia in reality was critical, and had condemned utopianism's "lack of [a] thorough comprehension and analysis of current society that alone would make concrete political action possible" (Honderich, p893). This suggests that they saw utopias which just portray an ideal society as worthless because people were only told in the broadest sense how to achieve this perfect situation with all of the realistic detail on which they were so keen being omitted.

Bringing about social change can never be a quick and easy task, Lenin criticised utopians for "expecting instant change", and indicated the need for a "transitional phase" (Carey, p265). The omission of a "transitional phase" from utopian literature must minimise the expectations of the writer for genuine

change to come about. At best the suggestions for the running of society which are put forward in utopias can only be seen to be offering another perspective on contemporary debates.

Considering the number of changes that have been brought about as a direct result of utopian writing is hopeless – there are not many. Concepts which have been proposed in utopian novels have materialised: Huxley’s “Hatchery” – today there are test tube babies and in 1997 scientists cloned Dolly the sheep; Orwell’s ‘big brother’ has become a reality in that individuals’ movements and to some extent actions are constantly being recorded even if not closely monitored. This can only be seen to make the majority of utopian works science fiction books. A single writer’s voice will never have the power to bring about the degree of political and social changes that is implied in the utopias, indeed a well supported pan-European communist movement failed to create the utopia dreamed of by so many in the twentieth century.

The contemporary philosophers Bloch and Marcuse have suggested the need to distinguish between abstract and concrete utopias. Abstract utopias are those which are flights of fantasy for the author, while concrete utopias are those “based on insights derived from critical social theory” (Hondrich, p893); the concrete utopias provide an insight which could contribute to social development. Texts which provide all the necessary detail must be classed as concrete, while the fantasies of Morris and More can clearly be categorised as abstract.

In 1997 the New York Times reported a Catholic bishop who had been given the titular see of Partenia, as a sop for having been forced into resigning his post. Rather than simply accepting the desert land associated with the title the bishop created the first online diocese. His cyber-diocese promotes its own views in all of the political and societal arenas that a physical diocese would and there is an online forum for discussion. A little further exploration reveals a plethora of such small communities alive and kicking on the Internet – like-minded individuals from around the world who find happiness and contentment in their virtual community. In the same way as classic utopias try to offer the reader a means of escape, these communities do offer their visitors a means of escape. As with More’s island of Utopia they are islands

divided from reality, and they are quite literally a 'no-place', a virtual fantasy world into which individuals can escape the reality of their life in the same way as authors of utopias have done over the centuries.

Throughout the history of utopias from Plato to Partenia it is impossible not to see them as primarily escapist works, although this does not mean that utopian thinking can be totally dismissed as fantasy. Without looking to the future and seeking for improvements in all areas of life, humankind's development would be stunted and stuck in time, ironically in a way usually only portrayed in utopian societies that believe they have reached the apogee of their development.

(1586 words)

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