

Utopia: Plausible or Impossible?

you'll get called
on for using sexist
language by some
professors w/
writing like this

For centuries, the idea of a perfect world has been on the minds of man. As problems arise in society, people desire perfection and wish for a place with no problems. Authors and filmmakers use their media platforms to express their views on the topic. The first depiction of a utopian society was Plato's Socratic dialogue called *The Republic* written around 380 BC.¹ It outlined how the perfect society should be run and had qualities of socialism and communism. This perfect world was not called a utopia, however. The term utopia was first used in 1516 in Sir Thomas More's book titled *Utopia*. Since then, the term has been used to describe perfect societies in books and film. Although utopia is easy to invent on paper, it seems to be much harder to place into action in real life. Authors are still writing books on utopian ideas today after over 2000 years, meaning that man has yet to find the perfect society. This poses the question, are these books literal blueprints for a perfect world or just strong social criticism? As people refine their ideas and develop new ones, is it possible an absolute utopia will be present on Earth in the future? Or is the idea of Utopia just a tool to express ideas about current society? Analyzing utopian societies in depth will help determine whether they seem plausible or not.

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Although the word utopia is originally made up of the Greek roots *ou* and *topos* meaning "no place," the word also carries the definition of a "perfect world."² Many people have attempted to outline what a perfect world would look like. In many instances, utopia is a place that is hard to reach, hidden or secluded, and only mentioned in myth-like storytelling. Socialism (or characteristics of it) is also a common theme in many utopian societies. Thomas More's version of utopia was described through the voice of a traveler who had recently returned from the land called Utopia. This society existed on an island where everyone worked towards the betterment of society. Utopians had no form of money and used trade with other nations. Utopia also conveniently had a large supply of gold that they could use for trade. Housing was shared and people moved every ten years

¹ "The Republic (Plato)." October 5, 2009.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_\(Plato\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_(Plato)) (accessed October 8, 2009).

² More, Thomas. *Utopia*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992.

to avoid attachment to belongings. Based on More's idea of a perfect world, utopia is a place that is isolated geographically from the rest of the world. Politically and economically, Utopia resembles that of communism in which everyone is equal and shares equal forms of wealth. By equalizing everyone and encouraging as little attachment to material objects as possible, the government ultimately lessens conflict in society, which is seen as positive. Appointed officials govern the people of Utopia and these officials are chosen because of their intellectual capabilities. Nobody seems to have a problem with the way his or her government is run and everyone lives in harmony knowing his or her role in society.

Another utopian society, similar to that of More's *Utopia*, is the land of Shangri-La from the movie *Lost Horizon*. This society is also hidden and hard to reach. Set in the mountains, it has natural barriers from the harsh weather and life there is perfect. Everyone has a job that helps the rest of the society. Shangri-La also has no monetary system and also has a convenient gold supply near by to use for trade. Their government appears to be similar to a theocracy in which a god-like figure called the High Lama rules over the land.³ This movie is the first utopia that displays signs of weakness in a utopian society. Not everyone can live completely satisfied in the land of Shangri-La. Two characters in the movie wanted to get out of the so-called perfect world because instead of a utopia, they saw Shangri-La as more of a dystopia. This proves the point that utopias are impossible to create with large numbers of people because everyone has his or her own idea of a perfect world. Using these two utopias, it is pretty easy to develop an outline of what a utopia usually looks like geographically, economically, socially, and politically. However these are not the only examples of utopian societies.

Utopia has been a topic of discussion since the beginning of time. Authors and filmmakers have used the idea to write books and make movies about the best of all possible worlds. One such example is the book *Lost Horizon*, written by James Hilton in 1933. It was later adapted into a movie of the same title directed by Frank Capra in 1937. In the movie, several travelers who are escaping a war that breaks out in Baskul end up

³ Wallechinsky, David. "Utopia Theory in History Shangri-la." 1981. <http://www.trivia-library.com/a/utopia-theory-in-history-shangri-la.htm> (accessed October 8, 2009).

deserted in the mountains after their plane runs out of fuel. After meeting some foreign mountain people, they are led to their home called Shangri-La. This place is a utopia and seems to be perfect. Other utopias include Thomas More's *Utopia* set on an island where people are all equal and work together to benefit the society, Plato's *Republic*, and Ernest Callenbach's book *Ecotopia* set in (the former) northwestern United States. All of these books aim to outline a perfect society and many have very similar qualities.

Why are there so many books and movies on the topic of utopia? Does everyone long to live in a perfect world? People may have the desire to live in a utopian society, but the true utility of the idea of utopia is not entertainment but rather ^{of} social criticism. All of the utopian books and movies were created during a time when things in real-life society were going poorly. This may prove that the books were written as a response to society and act more like a social criticism. Authors and filmmakers use the idea of utopia to focus on areas in society that are bad and ways that they can be bettered. It can also be used as a satire to make fun of the idea itself as seen in Thomas More's *Utopia*. As a response to people wanting equality and a perfect world, More wrote *Utopia* to show how life in Utopia isn't exactly utopic. Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* is a social criticism that presents an extreme result of what could happen to the United States if it continues to hurt the environment. His extreme version of utopia proves to be a little naïve, however it seemed to be several decades ahead of its time. Many of the issues that were solved by creating *Ecotopia* are occurring right now. His prediction may be the most relatable and by using his book as both a criticism and perhaps a warning, people in society today can use it to their benefit.

After briefly delving into different utopian societies, it appears that a utopia is impossible. Although many of the utopias have similar themes and ideas, they are ultimately very different. This observation itself ^{suggests} ~~proves~~ that a utopia could not exist. Everyone has very different views of how utopia should look and how it should be carried out. Every person has his or her own idea of what would make life perfect making it impossible for every person to be completely satisfied in any society. Instead of using these utopias as blueprints to create perfect societies, they should be used as warnings to help open the eyes of the public. Many people don't know the issues going on in the world and

Some things that need

these novels and films show what ~~needs~~ to be changed. Utopia is a myth and an impossibility but it is a great tool to better society.

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