

# THE NATURE OF UTOPIA

by Thomas Comeau Hawkes

*L'auteur examine l'utopie en fonction de trois thèmes. Premièrement, historiquement: comment celle-ci a évolué à travers les âges, et quels ont été les points tournants de cette évolution. Il discute ensuite son aspect métaphysique, et finalement, il traite l'idée contemporaine de l'utopie.*

## Utopia in History

The word "utopia" derives from a concept employing two generic terms, *outopos* and *eutopos*, meaning respectively *not a place* and *a good place*. The inherent tension drawn between visionary descriptions of what should, or could *not* exist, and those states which should, or could exist, marks all utopian literature and thought. The concept of utopia is fundamentally rooted in the rational notion that all societies go through a constant process of change. The respective parameters are: a) that either existing social parameters and ultimately, societal goals, be reformulated or else the worst possible scenario will result, and b), that on the other hand, if change is effected within the fundamentals of the social system, then the most desirable of all possibilities for the common good will result.

Simply put, the twin utopian impulses are the repulsion of, and attraction to, the implications of necessary change taking place within society, as this change affects the welfare of the happiness of the people.

It is clear that a third option can exist: namely, that *no* change take place. This is a rational and dispassionate ideal in its own right. It is a proposition well-served in classical oriental thought no less than in occidental Christian thought. Eastern thought, from Persia to China, evolved a world view which holds that the desire of change is folly and sheer vanity. This cyclical cosmology holds the individual firmly captive to this world, release from which comes only with total submission to one's inherited circumstances until all desire for change is dissipated. Hinduism and Confucism have held sway over individuals and national ambitions of half the world's population for the best part of two millenia. It was the forces of the Greek city states, Athens and Sparta, which determined the historic boundary between the existant eastern and western civilizations by their citizen's resistance to the Persian advances. The Christian west, however, tightly bound by the authority of Holy Scripture, promulgated a universal faith in the imminency of the Kingdom of Heaven, the *immanency* of God, and the eminence of the Church, which we know would brook no greater ambition than its own. The greatest expressions of human desire and all earthly longing

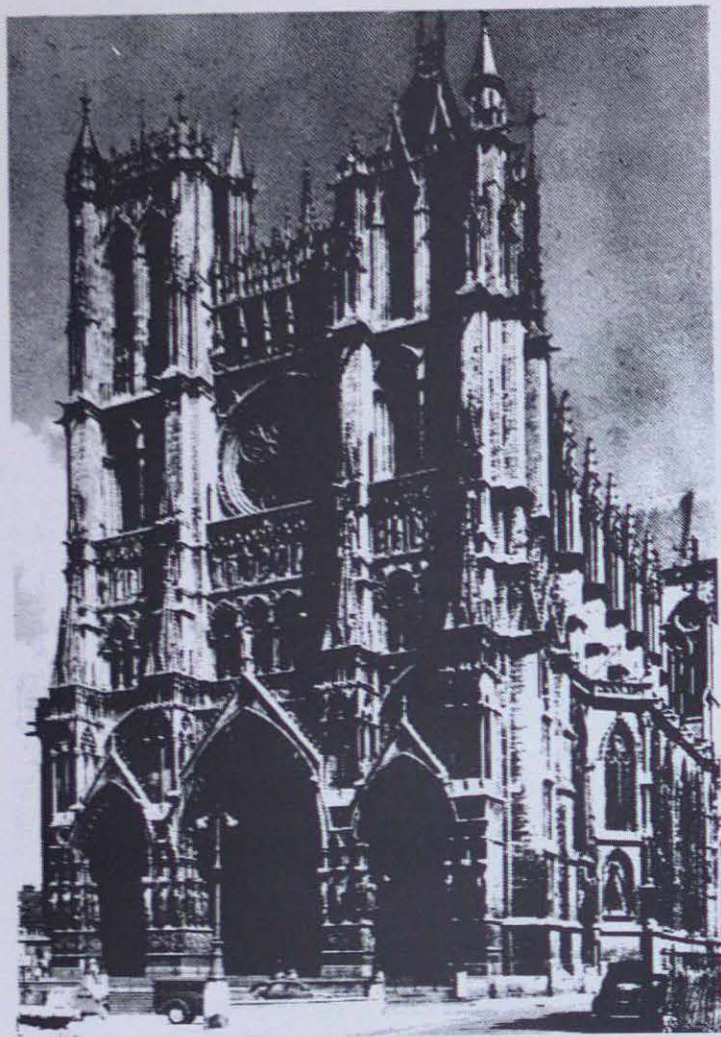
were subsumed to the greater glory of the Divine rule upon earth. All works of literature, art and architecture, and all of society existed to serve the Church and to pay respect to Her teachings. It took rediscovery and redistribution of its expressions of classical thought to shake the authority of the Church. The Renaissance celebrated secular reality and gave impetus to the human spirit. The renewed study of Greek and Roman literature and antiquities spread the concern for a new study of humankind and human affairs. Science, philosophy, literature and the arts cut the apron strings binding their ideas to the service of the Mother Church and its theology of right and wrong. Ecclesiastical authority lost its claim of universality as its doctrines strained to contain the breach of its bulwarks by the force of human reasoning. The trial of Gallileo (1564-1642) marks the last great Punitive act of defiance of the old system. Forced by the Inquisition to abjure in the belief that the earth moved the sun, Gallileo lost the battle, but the spirit of scientific enquiry won the war.

The Renaissance, that age of transition between the 14th and 17th centuries, gave way to humanist ideals most fully when the Baroque released massive forces of change, whose tremors still resound. The centre of the universe, no longer the public lie of Gallileo, was affirmed to lie in the heart and mind of each and every one of us. Freedom to think and to reason became freedom to act and to express. Plato's long-dead citizenry rose to carve out republics beyond the Gates of Hades, out beyond the Mediterranean, to the North Sea, and to the New World, across an ocean named after a perfect society, mysteriously vanished from its surface, called Atlantis. The world was to be repopulated with reasonable human beings capable of applying natural intelligence towards a task of ameliorating their circumstances. Benevolent laws and benevolent politics were reasoned to result in a happier society. Society was harmonious when circumvented by common goals; it was also found to be only as strong as when mobilized through common fear. Cultural and religious nationalities fractured the assumptions of the Holy Empire and replaced the ecclesiastical power and authority with the mercantile might and commonwealth politics. Humanism and natural philosophy replaced doctrine and alchemy.

The ferment of euphoria bubbled quickest amongst the maritime powers of the North Sea triangle, gradually stirring the furthest reaches of Slavic Eastern Orthodoxy whose patriarchs and tsars guarded all the peoples of the Eastern extremities from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, from assimilation and conquest. But the eyes of the Atlantic nations had turned west.

Maritime Flanders barracaded itself among the ports of the North Sea from the Spanish armies of the Holy Church;





A History of Architecture

complete religious and political freedom was enjoyed among its increasingly diverse and energetic citizenry. The breach with Rome was final and complete; what began as a dogmatic protest ended with the "seamless Robe of Christ" getting cut in half, dividing the North Sea Christians from those of the Mediterranean. Institutionalized usury produced a class of mercantile bankers who would have a profound influence on all future expansion: capitalism was to give a cause for an even more radical division between the East and the West. The battleground was to be the No-Man's Land between contrasting visions of the constituents of a perfect society. The will to realize the common wealth of all its members, while a necessarily utopic *outopism* or ideal *eutopism* unleashed radical division within the whole of human society—not because of ultimate goals, but because of the division over the means of wealth's redistribution.

All utopic schemes pose the question: in whose hands should the power of the wealth reside? The Renaissance reactionaries were agreed that the Church must relinquish sovereignty over the exchequer; ecclesiastic authorities—popes, cardinals and bishops—had abused their power of control over the surplus wealth of the Christian lands throughout the Middle Ages, to the glory of vision of the earthly cities of God, and had co-opted all artistic and intellectual expression to the service of its own image. Any museum, cathedral, or national library will reveal the utter extent of the dominance of the singular vision of the ideal society.

Flanders and the Northern German principalities first developed a new class of wealth which was to unleash new creative forces in the service of a new image of man's place in

the universe. The Baroque explosion (from *barro*, Spanish for mud, clay, signifying the origin of all life in nature, as opposed to supernatural origins) was a celebration of the new centre of the universe, now located in the individual and in the human personality. Humanism could now defend its ideals and begin its expansion.

Maimonides, the Moorish-judaic scholar of the 12th century, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, speaks of four categories of perfection that all men seek: the acquisition of wealth (the basest of the four); health and fitness; moral purpose; and, the highest perfection of all for the Maimonides, *intelligence*. These four categories were eventually to be identified as the essential precepts around which all utopic imagination would centre its quest for a better and happier society. Wealth, health, morality and the intellect. Each category in its turn would have its day in the sun, each would be re-ranked to assume a position of dominance in the battle of persuasions set in motion by the tide of humanity liberated since the Renaissance. Wealth was to become the right of every nation and of every individual. Usury was elevated to evolve its own principles of capitalism creating new bonds of common purpose capable of creating and sustaining new empires. The acquisition of wealth was to be universally held as a basic human right. The great schism of modern history is a direct result of the disagreement on the question of wealth's redistribution.

Health and fitness, that category of perfection which seems to dominate current utopic vision quests, is concerned with the survival of the species. A healthy society is one free from war, famine and disease; a fit society is able to overcome all its enemies, both within and without. The seeming supremacy of the scientific method (gift of Aristotle)—governing nearly all of our social institutions, from the military to marriage—is everywhere and quite vociferous in promoting the statistical probabilities which govern our daily quest for a cleaner, safer and more reliable, predictable order of living in the good, or best, of all possible societies.

Healthiness is also passions and sorrow, beauty and love, and tears of joy. Fitness, when bound to the flight of imagination, can produce a Kung-Fu master, a civil war, or loving child-care. Questions of survival of the values of the individual, the society, and the species are paramount to the rational human being who has taken upon his Herculean shoulders the task of thinking for the whole animate and inanimate universe. Nothing is left to chance in the fight with dearth and death. Maimonides would not be amused at the capacity wealth has in the control and manipulation of the utopic imagination. Aristotle, whose works were reintroduced into Western consciousness through Maimonides during the Moorish occupation of Spain, would have appreciated the scientific approach to economics which now regulate all our collective paychecks.

## Utopia as a Metaphysical Concept

There could be no good society without the imperative of morality. What is "good" for the society, the individual or the planet involves the spirit, the soul, as well as the senses. Long under the guardianship of the Church, of religion, and of the Gods, morality gained purpose and behaviour: it also dealt with the distinction that separates right from wrong. Utopic thought is a commitment to worthy goals through worthy actions. Morality is the appeal to the highest authority in which one can have faith, trust and love. Utopism is the act



of projecting visions of goodness and happiness upon the changing tapestry of humanity.

Utopian thought is purely metaphysical in character. Utopic schemes necessarily deal with imaginary worlds. They are feats of the imagination. Yet, imagination should be seen as a special source of knowledge; or, as Sartre sees it, as a means of reconstituting the world. Metaphysical imagination should be understood as the highest form of intuition into the true nature of being and reality.

The true nature of utopian impulse is the reconstitution and extension of the finest goals of mankind in the task of restructuring perception of the world we all share.

Utopia is that which strives to overcome the separation of the Real and the Ideal; utopia as the schema to raise human consciousness towards the means and goals of its own salvation—Unity with Truth.

The nature of utopia—the essence of things of the natural world that makes a claim on the species in the raising and protection of the young in a constantly hostile environment, ever threatening to overcome the best laid schemes of the past as if in some long, slow retreat from newer and stronger enemies, whether technological monstrosities or some silent and invisible microbe found clinging to every atom of life, or, the essence of humanity that makes the species ever ready to band together in search of all that is good, true and beautiful—what is it that is essential to all, at all times, in the quest for the best and the happiest of all possible conditions? For rational beings, the true nature of any utopian scheme must be assessed in the light of the great Jeremiaid question: who is the true or false prophet?

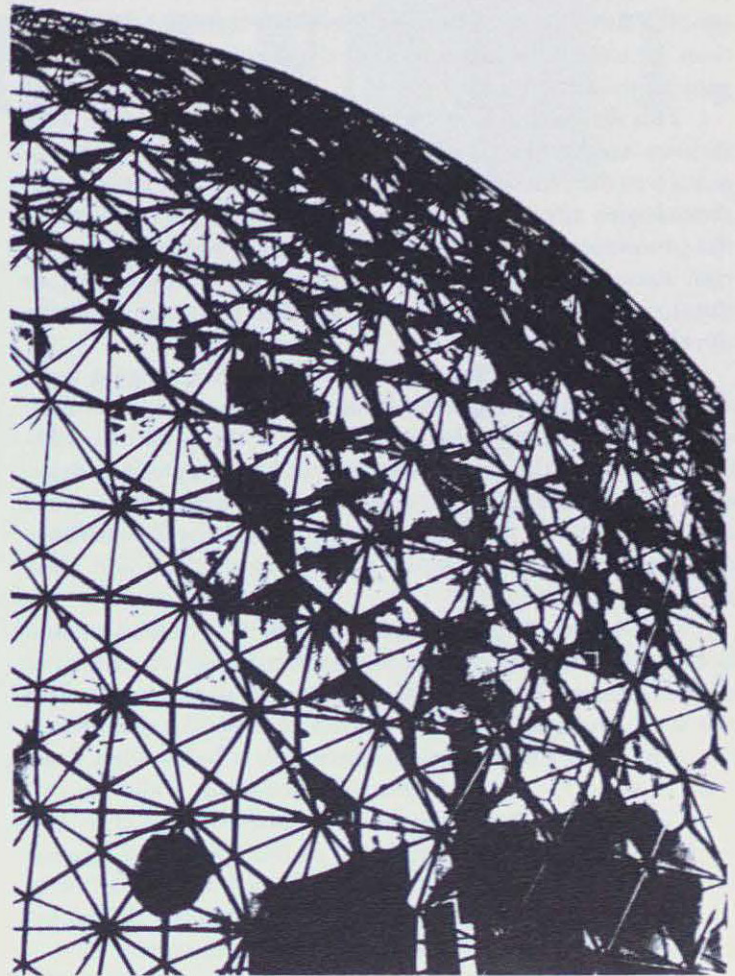
Utopian thought has retained a further ambiguity, serving to posit, at once the *ideal* construct of “the good community” and, its perversion, serving to warn by a projection of the pervading *realities* commonly admissible throughout the community. Sometimes described as anti-utopias or dis-utopias, such schemes are visible in Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Orwell’s *1984*, or Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Configuratively speaking, however, More’s original conceit in the term utopia still preserves the possible meaning of “not a good place”.

This vacillation of utopian thought, between *desire* for an idealized social system and *repugnance* of certain implicit probabilities, has created the climate in which all utopian schemes crave attention. While the most profound historical divisions in human society are teleological in character, concerned with the purpose and goal of social order, the most destructive and ambitious campaigns have been waged over the means and ways of achieving these self, same goals.

Plato and Aristotle, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas, down through their myriad and respective ages, have differed substantially on the nature of humankind, and the purpose and the functioning of creation. Descriptions of *what-will-be* are contingent upon true descriptions of *what-is*. Moral imperatives of *what-should-be* are equally dependant upon a proper perception of the existing systems of justice. Aristotle, Swift, Marx, and even R. Buckminster Fuller, have all argued purposefully for, or against, perceived historical imperatives implicit in the actions of their co-citizenry.

All utopian thought displays a dramatic tension between, on the one hand, a forewarning of human society, usually through the arguably persuasive means of trend analysis (which today, casts doomsday pall) and, on the other, that enthusiastic vision of future-perfect pastures of well-being wherein all the best things happen and joy is well-served.

The same utopic dilemma confronts our own age:



The Artefacts of R. Buckminster Fuller

whether to make the species viable at all costs or whether to place one’s individual or collective faith in the ultimate goodness of a timeless creation.

## Utopia Now

The extraordinarily large number of social factors which must be considered in the defense and the persuasion of any utopic scheme can mean that you may have some strong feelings, or perhaps have not considered it at all, amidst your criteria for the undertaking of any given project. Utopian schemes are just so because they are inherently governed by criteria inimicable to the highest standards of excellence that can be imagined.

When the imagination discerns these standards to be under assail by events, by design, or by chance, utopian reaction is to lament, scorn, or repeal that which is less than what has already been realized. The imagination is repulsed by any vision of the whole which can be defeated in its parts. Reaction can be swift, virulent and protective to ideas of future states wherein standards of excellence threaten decline, or even loss.

Such utopic thought leans to the *outopic*, to some fearful No-Place that is a Wasteland of despair and desolation. The *outopic* is no less real to the imagination than is the *eutopic*. The distinction is one of means and ways: negative-utopias are products of an inductive reasoning process whereby general laws will seem to be inferred because of the dominance of particular cases. Positive-utopias are born of the reverse



process of reasoning whereby particular cases are deduced from a set of generalities. Another expression of these approaches to the reasoning process states that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and the converse, that the parts are greater than their sum.

This distinction is not so moot as at it first appears. Two distinct methodologies have sprung up around each approach to the reasoning process of imagination. Platonic methodologies predominate the earliest Western attempts at the promotion of better and happier future states. St. Augustine carried this deductive methodology into Christian theology, enabling him to evolve an ideal Christian reality as developed in the *City of God*.

Platonic utopias are ideally good places springing from out of the wells of objective reality. They persuade through ontological arguments—that because a thing can be conceived through the imagination, it can be brought into existence. This rational device enabled the imagination to soar and to dare to be innovative. But not until the Renaissance did the thought of humanity turn in upon itself and away from the Divine.

Sir Thomas More emerged at the birth of humanism and became the principle architect of modern utopic thought. At the same time, Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* were rediscovered in the West. Indeed, More first introduced the Platonic renaissance into the English milieu, having first befriended Erasmus at Antwerp (where *Utopia* was conceived) while the two translated Plato's lost texts from the Greek into Latin. The impact of these small events prior to the Dutch and English War (while Henry VIII was on the throne) was reverberate through history and to be realized in the unique document that was to become the Declaration of Independence.

Man has always sought to embody his vision of a better life in the artefacts of his generation, whether in literature, the arts, architecture, religion, politics, mechanics or the sciences. This impulse to realize the imperatives of the "good life" through his handywork, essential to any appreciation of the human condition throughout history, stems from the twin-thrust of revulsion of the sorry scheme of things, and, an inherent need to strive, through resolve, for the ideal and exemplary expression of the essential constituents of the "good life".

Whether the impulse to change-the-way-things-are evolves from a chronic dissatisfaction with the human condition, or from a visionary desire to posit some state of perfection to which humanity must tend, the very attempt to embody these motives through cultural expression has had a profound impact on the evolution of human society. Great ideas have forever changed the way we think about ourselves

and the world around us, but the ultimate schemes—those which seek to change the course of entire societies—become so only with our own collaboration. It is these schemes which are utopian because they seek to change "Man's place in nature". The responsibility of being human beings who can think and act in time and space is the central question of all motivation into an exploration of the human potential. No vision of society is possible, no paint stroke can be applied to canvas, no brick may be laid upon brick without addressing this question, for it is what permits *homo sapiens* to judge themselves by the measure of their own nature.

One side of the utopic impulse cries out: "Watch out! Touch that, and it is the end." The other side states that it is the revealed and eternal verity that all will come to an end—but in God's own good time.

### Armageddon or Apocalypse?

#### UTOPIAN LITERATURE: SEMINAL WORKS

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- Confucius & Lao-Tzu: *Analects of Confucius*.
- Aristophanes: *The Clouds*.
- Anon.: *Upanishads*.
- St. John the Divine: *The Book of Revelations*.
- St. Paul: *Acts of the Apostles*.
- St. Augustine: *City of God*, (426).
- Plutarch: *Life of Lycurgus*, (ca. A.D. 100).
- Anon.: *The Arthurian Legends*, (12th C.).
- Johannes Kepler: *Somnium*.
- Dante: *Divine Comedy*, (1321).
- Sir Thomas More: *Utopia*.
- Johann Andreae: *Christianopolis*, (1619).
- Tommaso Campanella: *City of the Sun*, (1623).
- Francis Bacon: *New Atlantis*, (1627), led to the foundation of the Royal Society of London (1662).
- Robert Wallace: *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature, and Providence* (1761), (first proposed that utopias could function as analytic models useful to social theory).
- Benjamin Franklin (Committee Member): *Declaration of Independence*, (1776).
- Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels*.
- Adam Smith: *Wealth of Nations*, (1776).
- Robert Owen: *The New View of Society*, (1813).
- Karl Marx: *Das Capital*, (1848).
- B.F. Skinner: *Walden II*, (1947), (gave rise to Behaviourist theory).
- George Orwell: *1984*, (1948), (disutopic, and a powerful critique of totalitarianism).
- Aldous Huxley: *Brave New World*, and *Brave New World Revisited*.
- R. Buckminster Fuller: *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity*, (1969).

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