

# UTOPIAN DREAMS

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Oscar Wilde believed that 'a map of the world which does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at'. Despite Wilde's enthusiasm, utopian thought is frequently dismissed as unimportant on the grounds that utopias are impractical dreams unrelated to problems and situations encountered in the real political world. Why study political fictions when one might usefully study political fact?

Even if utopias were wholly impractical, it would still make good sense to study them. Political fact is saturated with political fiction. Political ideologies – even the most prosaic of them – may turn out to derive from emancipatory visions or redemptive dreams. Fantasy is no less real in politics than in sex. Political fantasies, like erotic fantasies, can project both the darkest violence and the highest saving bliss.

Freud described sexual fantasy as a mental 'wildlife reservation' set apart from the demands of tamed and civilised psychic life. Similarly, utopian fiction clears a space for anarchy and experiment in a political world characterised by the drab and disciplinary requirements of what Marx termed 'bourgeois prose'.

Not all utopian dreams are impractical, however. When Wilde urged that maps of the world should include Utopia, he gave as his reason that Utopia is 'the one country at which humanity is always landing'. Some utopias are all-too-realizable. Ironically, it is their least attractive aspects which have been carried into practical effect. Seventeenth-century utopians dreamt of (amongst other things) an architecture uniform to the point of monotony, a populace controlled, disciplined and regimented beyond anything that previous history has seen, and a science eager to subordinate society rather than willing to become answerable to social need. One commentator (George Kateb) describes utopia as displaying a 'rage for order' and another (J.C. Davis) sees early modern utopias as prefiguring 'the growth of the centralised, bureaucratic sovereign state'. The plans of utopian ideal cities bear an uncanny resemblance to those of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century prisons.

It seems that, so far, European society has confined itself to realising only the least appealing features of the utopian design.

This said, the realm of utopia contains much that is neither regimented nor oppressive. In the medieval folk-poem describing the Land of Cokaygne, an exploited peasantry envisaged a society emancipated from the curse of work. Christianity's numerous apocalyptic heresies prophesied a radical social change which would usher in a thousand years (at least) of peace, freedom and the abolition of all authoritarian constraints. From the notion of apocalyptic crisis, our modern understanding of revolutionary change is born.

Can we redeem utopia's promise and actualise, in practice, not its dreams of discipline and order but its vision of emancipatory social change? When humanity lands in Utopia, said Wilde, 'it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.' This might also be expressed by saying that utopia's final challenge is to throw the question of what counts as 'practical politics' radically up for grabs.