
January 2021

The Failure of Imagination: A Theoretical and Pragmatic Analysis of Utopianism as an Orientation for Human Life

Maverick Edwards
Liberty University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp>



Part of the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Public Law and Legal Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Maverick (2021) "The Failure of Imagination: A Theoretical and Pragmatic Analysis of Utopianism as an Orientation for Human Life," *Liberty University Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp/vol1/iss2/2>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Liberty University Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

The Failure of Imagination: A Theoretical and Pragmatic Analysis of Utopianism as an Orientation for Human Life

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Mary Prentice for her continued support and encouragement in this project. Her deep knowledge in legal theory and political philosophy has been instrumental and inspiring. I offer my sincerest gratitude to her contribution and insight.

Question and Hypothesis

The allure of utopia has captivated the minds of philosophers and political theorists from ancient Greece to contemporary Western thought. Utopian theorists have provided several frameworks for human living, and occasionally act upon those frameworks. Although righteous in cause, ambition alone will not sustain communities. Observers will find the desolate remains of separatist colonies, immorality in the design and deployment of utopian projects, and the unfortunate intersection between utopian imagination and human nature. Through the examination of utopian projects and frameworks, the following questions will be addressed: Are utopian communities outlined by legal, economic, and philosophical theorists successful, and what dangers do utopian philosophies present?

Given the self-interested nature of humanity, there is a high probability that utopian frameworks either are (1) taken advantage of or (2) opposed and ignored.

The question will be addressed by examining human nature and its relationship to society-building, and by parsing through the projects of utopian theorists. This examination will scrutinize the applicability and desirability of utopias, relying heavily on empirical examples. Lastly, the paper will reflect upon the interrelated nature of communism and utopianism, and the danger of trying to build perfect societies.

Human Nature and Utopia

The fallibility of humans can be traced to biological presets. Several features of human nature must be addressed including self-centeredness, dehumanization of minority groups, and a belief in karma.

While the nature of human altruism and selfishness is not fully documented, subtle nuances have been observed. In a 2017 study, researchers found that participants were “egoistically biased [altruists].”¹ Most participants were willing to give up a monetary reward to spare another individual from physical pain but were not willing to receive physical pain, even if moderate, to give another individual a monetary reward. This observation matters as the process of utopia would entail sacrifice. For example, many communes demand economic equality. To achieve this vision, wealthy individuals would have to experience a painful financial loss. Human nature suggests many would opt out or even resist the process of wealth distribution.

Dehumanization begins in the early stages of human development. A study conducted by Niamh McLoughlin, Steven P. Tipper, and Harriet Over found that children perceived lower degrees of ‘humanness’ to outgroups, especially in the case of gender outgroups.² This dehumanization extends beyond youth. Using neuroimaging Lasana T. Harris and Susan T. Fiske concluded that individuals experiencing homelessness and drug addiction were stigmatized and viewed with ‘disgust’ by members in higher economic classes.³ Further, the study showed participants’ brains responding favorably to members of their class, being able to relate with

¹ Lukas J. Volz, Locke Welborn, Matthias S. Gobel, Michael S. Gazzaniga, and Scott T. Grafton, “Harm to self outweighs benefit to others in moral decision making,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)*, July 25, 2017. <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/30/7963>.

² Niamh McLoughlin, Steven P. Tipper, and Harriet Over, “Young children perceive less humanness in outgroup faces,” *Dev Sci.* 2018; 21:e12539. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1111/desc.12539>.

³ Lasana T Harris, and Susan T Fiske, “Dehumanizing the Lowest of the Low: Neuroimaging Responses to Extreme out-Groups,” *Psychological Science* 17, no. 10 (October 2006): 847–53. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mnh&AN=17100784&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

their image. Dehumanization complicates the utopian vision for two reasons. First, the process of establishing utopia may be mired with class conflict. Members of the middle and upper economic classes may feel unsympathetic towards the utopian vision, viewing it as a distribution of wealth to the dehumanized poor. Second, even if the utopia is formed, the innate tendency to dehumanize others risks human suffering. The dehumanization of women in several separatist colonies demonstrates this concern. Auroville, an Indian commune claiming to be government-free, has been experiencing higher levels of sexual harassment and rape cases.⁴ The leader of Friedrich's Hoff Commune, Otto Muehl, was jailed for sexual mistreatment of minors. A leader of a utopian community in Holland removed the age of consent to sleep with his daughters. These are not isolated cases. Many 'free love' communes from the late 20th century became male dominated, with women being unable to freely choose sexual partners.⁵

Most people believe that doing good things will bring rewards, while doing bad things will illicit punishment. One study found that children as young as four "...expect that life events are not purely random occurrences, but instead that they happen for an intended reason...."⁶ This belief in justice undermines the relationship between the downtrodden and well-to-do of societies. If someone comes across some bad luck, society will likely view his or her circumstance as deserved or just. This upsets the utopian vision because we are more likely to blame the impoverished, sick, and homeless for their fate.⁷ If people are unwilling to sympathize with the worst-off in society, there may be little to no motivation for action. The Bible reminds us to "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy"— Proverbs 31:8-9. The Bible also says "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow"— Isaiah 1:17. The Bible teaches us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

It is important to understand that selfishness and a belief in justice can be overcome in limited settings, such as the planned communities of Auroville and Findhorn. However, these conditions are difficult to resolve in large-scale communities because it requires convincing greater swaths of the population to give up their wealth and remove bias against outgroup populations. Dehumanization, on the other hand, has been documented in both large and small-scale communities, and greatly complicate the utopian vision.

State-Centric Utopia

Plato's *The Laws* illustrates the fictional city of Magnesia. The goal of this paradise is to produce a virtuous citizenry through education and the arts.⁸ It was Plato's belief that educated

⁴ Maddy Crowell, "Trouble in Utopia," *Slate*, July 24, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2015/07/auroville_india_s_famed_utopian_community_struggles_with_crime_and_corruption.html.

⁵ Ewan Morrison, "Why Utopian Communities Fail," *Areo*, March 8, 2018, <https://areomagazine.com/2018/03/08/why-utopian-communities-fail/>.

⁶ Christian Jarrett, "Children as young as four believe in karma – good things happen to those who do good," *Research Digest*, September 11, 2017, <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2017/09/11/children-as-young-as-four-believe-in-karma-good-things-happen-to-those-who-do-good/>.

⁷ Christian Jarrett, "What Are We Like? 10 Psychology Findings That Reveal The Worst Of Human Nature," *Research Digest*, October 12, 2018, <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2018/10/12/what-are-we-like-10-psychology-findings-that-reveal-the-worst-of-human-nature/>.

⁸ "Plato on utopia." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2002. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-utopia/#laws>.

men would use reason in place of emotions to solve problems and establish harmony with their peers. He understood the ideal education as involving “the direction of a child’s pleasures, desires, and love towards his adult occupation...”⁹ Simply, educational institutions should teach children to enjoy the working life. Another important attribute of education was the arts and gymnastics. These formed the basis of Magnesia’s education. Singing, playing instruments, and dancing were life-long projects, not halted by the working life.

The governing institutions of Magnesia are divided into four main components: the Assembly, made up of all citizens in Magnesia; the Council, consisting of 360 members chosen by the four property classes and being granted administrative powers; the magistrates, yielding wide oversight and judicial powers; and the Nocturnal Council.¹⁰ The latter institution is unique. Meeting from dawn until sunrise, this governing body is tasked with developing education for the city. This task grants the Nocturnal Council incredible power because, as previously discussed, education is the central tenet of developing a virtuous citizenry.

Breaking from Plato’s education-centered approach, Thomas More identified a series of laws and regulations he believed instrumental in producing utopia and the ideal citizen. Perhaps his most radical suggestion was the elimination of private property. He argued that private property incentivized competition. As with all systems of competition, an upper class of wealthy individuals will emerge. Thomas More’s *Utopia* declares these men to be “greedy, unscrupulous and useless”.¹¹ He critiqued the well-to-do in society as taking advantage of the vulnerable and stacking political advantage high in their favor. Another attribute of *Utopia* was the six-hour working day. Under this model, citizens would have more time to “[cultivate]...the mind”.¹² However, More neglects to fully articulate how citizens should cultivate the mind, or what the desired result is to be.

Tommaso Campanella’s utopia, named the *City of the Sun*, took a rational approach to law. Citizens were to follow a strict diet of herbs, fruits, and vegetables, along with also being required to exercise.¹³ Of notable interest is the class division between the common citizen and the “*uffiziali*,” the governing body for the city. The *uffiziali* reserved the best foods and could choose to share or withhold at their discretion. Science was a premier concern of Campanella’s utopia, as he believed scientific advancement was necessary for human progress.¹⁴ Citizens adept in philosophy, the sciences, or math would be rewarded, most often with food, for their skills.

Pragmatic and Theoretical Objections to State-Centric Utopian Projects

A common theme in each theoretical utopia was the development of rules and guidelines for human life. These procedures for life were static. Each writer believed his version was the premier framework, insofar as the vision best promoted his worldview and desired outcome. This

⁹ “Plato on utopia.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, “Utopias, past and present: why Thomas More remains astonishingly radical,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/16/utopias-past-present-thomas-more-terry-eagleton>.

¹² “Thomas More,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, March 19, 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-more/#Uto>.

¹³ Silvia Passini, “A utopian world: power and well-being in the City of the Sun,” December 2, 2014, <http://www.expo2015.org/magazine/en/culture/a-utopian-world--power-and-well-being-in-the-city-of-the-sun.html>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

sheds light on the subjective nature of state-centric utopias. Several real-life deployments of utopian civilizations demonstrate this reality.

For guidance, the following examples of utopian projects are not meant to directly reflect Plato, More, or Campanella's utopias. Comparisons will be noted; however, these examples are meant to reflect the failure of imposing rules and restrictions on idealized cities.

The factory-city, Fordlandia, was established in the late 1920s in the Amazon rainforest by Henry Ford. He approached the project with similar gusto to Campanella's *City of the Sun*. By restricting the workers' diet, applying strict prohibition on alcohol, and compelling the locals to learn western dances such as the waltz, Ford attempted to maximize production and profit. These rules were not well received by locals. Backlash eventually turned into "riots, knife fights, and rebellion".¹⁵ It is important to understand that while Ford's central goal was to turn a profit, he spared no expense to create the ideal society. He built a golf course, movie theater, provided housing and education, paid remarkably high wages, and continued the project despite financial losses.¹⁶ The workers and inhabitants chose to participate, yet the city still collapsed.

Another "utopia" in action was the city of Fiume on the Adriatic Coast. Led by the World War I fighter pilot turned poet, Gabriele D'Annunzio, the dictatorship held few discernable values outside of partying and lavish lifestyles. D'Annunzio was a character in and of himself. He would begin his mornings by reading poetry to the citizenry before returning to his many lovers.¹⁷ The weaknesses, including the absence of law enforcement and formal government agencies, of Fiume's institutions left the city-state vulnerable to thieves and libertines, who quickly overran the city.

It would be remiss to exclude the hippie communes of the 60s and 70s. Reflecting on the work of Packer Corner, co-founder Marty Jezer explained that many young people who joined the commune were impractical and only motivated by having a good time.¹⁸ They were unwilling to put in the hard work necessary for an economically viable arrangement. The problems faced by Packer Corner were not unique. Johnson's Pastures went up in flames following a night of drugs and alcohol; those who recall the event blame the community's excess as responsible for the destruction (the true culprit was a tipped candle).¹⁹ Most communes did not collapse with such drama. Robert Houriet, member of the J.P. commune, expressed that "many communes dissolved with a whimper as people just drifted away."²⁰

New Lanark, while controversially labelled a "failure," demonstrated that, even when all the parts align, utopia is still unachievable. The Scottish cottage-village, established in 1785 by David Dale and later run by utopian idealist Robert Owen, survived until 1968.²¹ Becoming a world leader in cotton production by the early 1800s, the society also employed an education model to promote a skilled and well-behaved citizenry (similar to Plato's *Laws*). Under Owen,

¹⁵ Oscar Rickett, "Failed 'Utopias' Throughout History," *VICE*, April 9, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ne973k/failed-utopias-throughout-history-v25n1.

¹⁶ Drew Reed, "Lost cities #10: Fordlandia – the failure of Henry Ford's utopian city in the Amazon," *The Guardian*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/19/lost-cities-10-fordlandia-failure-henry-ford-amazon>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Sally Johnson, "Excesses Blamed for Demise of the Commune Movement," *The New York Times*, August 3, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/03/us/excesses-blamed-for-demise-of-the-commune-movement.html>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, "New Lanark," *UNESCO*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/429/>.

New Lanark prospered. However, subsequent leaders failed to invest in new, innovative means of production.²² As a result, the village slowly lost profits, eventually falling to ruin. Another flaw of New Lanark was the political repression faced by the workers. Robert Owen, believing the working class unfit to govern or carry out full responsibilities, made the colony fully dependent on a “state or a philanthropist” to create organizational change.²³ Citizens often struggled to illicit reform from governing powers, leading to the social unrest and discouragement.

Not all of Robert Owen’s projects saw the longevity and success of New Lanark. Dozens of planned communities arose and fell, most lasting little more than a year.²⁴ New Harmony, located by the Wabash River in Harmony, Indiana, was particularly disastrous. While attempting to recreate the vitality of New Lanark in the United States, Owen underestimated the power of human greed and selfishness. The colony had several quality features including “...good buildings, cultivated lands and orchards, and a fair amount of livestock...”.²⁵ Further, Robert Owen’s experienced leadership should have helped carry the colony out of infancy and into a powerhouse of production and human flourishing. Unfortunately, upon the distribution of wealth and resources, the inhabitants of New Harmony quickly became apathetic and idle, ignoring their chores and jobs.

Utopian idealists have several theoretical challengers, including George Orwell and Isaiah Berlin. These writers relied less on empirical examples of utopian failure, instead choosing to attack the idea of utopia in the abstract. *1984*, by Orwell, is a critique of establishing the “ideal” and regulated society. In the state-centric world of *1984*, dissent is resolved by secret police, individuality is replaced with collectivism, and the state regulates all aspects of life. The net result is suffering at the hands of totalitarian regimes. Isaiah Berlin takes a similar and hawkish approach. In *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* he argues that “The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable — that is a truism — but conceptually incoherent”.²⁶ This argument relies on a conservative view of human nature; Man is driven by passions and desires, making hedonism, greed, or anarchical behaviors more likely.²⁷ Even in utopia, there will be some individuals that try to outpace their neighbors, resulting in inequality of outcome (an unacceptable quality in most utopias). Of even greater consequence is the process of establishing utopia. Berlin says “For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for-ever — what

²² Michael Caines, “Utopia: Nine of the most miserable attempts to create idealized societies.” *Independent*, February 21, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/utopia-nine-of-the-most-miserable-attempts-to-create-idealised-societies-a6887316.html>.

²³ Mario Garcia, “Why Owenite communities were destined to fail.” *Academia*, March 31, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/23860668/Why_Owenite_communities_were_destined_to_fail.

²⁴ Tom Hodgkinson, “In the nearly-500 years since its publication, Thomas More’s Utopia has influenced everything from the thinking of Gandhi to the tech giants of Silicon Valley, writes Tom Hodgkinson.” *BBC*, October 6, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160920-how-utopia-shaped-the-world>.

²⁵ Melvin D. Barger, “Robert Owen: The Woolly-Minded Cotton Spinner,” *Foundation for Economic Education*, February 1, 1976. <https://fee.org/articles/robert-owen-the-woolly-minded-cotton-spinner/>.

²⁶ Isiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* First American Edition. (New York: Knoph, 1991), 12-16.

²⁷ Richard Dagger, “Conservatism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conservatism/General-characteristics>.

could be too high a price to pay for that?”²⁸ Every totalitarian regime, from Mao to Stalin, has used the concept of perfection to commit heinous crimes like genocide and political repression.

Readers do not have to look far to find incredible flaws in utopian imagination. Plato’s city, Magnesia, relied upon slavery for commerce. He argued that this aspect of society was inevitable and desirable in order to ensure the upper classes would not be overworked with remedial tasks.²⁹ Even Thomas More, a Christian lawyer and philosopher, believed slavery was necessary in developing utopia so citizens would have time to “cultivate” the mind.³⁰ This demonstrates a bleak reality: utopias are not good for everyone. Similar to aristocratic society, utopias create a clear division in class with high-minded intellectuals mistreating the common worker and taking advantage of their services.

Anarcho-Capitalist Utopias

Anarcho-capitalism is a political, social, and economic theory that places markets as the central “governing body.” The premier anarcho-capitalist writer, Murray Newton Rothbard, argued such a society reduced all forms of contradiction by ensuring individuals’ full autonomy over their actions.³¹ No longer would government “grant” rights to its citizenry; anarcho-capitalism assumes humans are free individuals that could not be legally bound by artificially constructed institutions in the first place.

Rothbard’s model allows for the free flow of goods and services to resolve disputes. No government would control a monopoly on social services, the military, fire departments, and other “necessities”; these would instead be provided by companies. The radicalism in this society is most clearly observed in how conflict is resolved. Without “law” or the police, very little stands between individuals and those committing crimes. One solution proposed by Rothbard is a system of escalating fines that must be paid to remediate the offense. While this solution may work in limited contexts, scaling up the anarcho-capitalist vision would require a solution to the question of armies, nuclear warheads, and other weapons of mass destruction. Absent concrete plans of action, the process of establishing the global anarcho-capitalist vision would be undermined by the diffusion of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and armed forces.

For clarification, Rothbard is not the only anarcho-capitalist theorist; however, his work is considered foundational for the field of study and provides a clear explanation of anarcho-capitalist utopias.

Pragmatic and Theoretical Objections to Anarcho-Capitalism

There are very few examples of anarcho-capitalist utopias in action, and the parameters of such a community are unclear. For example, the Free Territory, established in Ukraine by Nestor Makhno in 1918, is considered “anarchist” even though it contained governing committees and a presidential leader.³² This contradiction is reflected in several other

²⁸ Dagger, “Conservatism.”

²⁹ “Plato on utopia,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2002.

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, “Utopias, past and present,” October 16, 2015.

³¹ David Gordon, “Murray Newton Rothbard (1926-1995),” *Mises Institute*, 2020, <https://mises.org/profile/murray-n-rothbard>.

³² Eamon McKeever, “10 Instances Of Anarchist Societies That Actually Worked,” *Listverse*, June 29, 2016, <https://listverse.com/2016/06/29/10-instances-of-anarchist-societies-that-actually-worked/>.

communities, such as the Korean Anarchist Communist Federation which adopted councils to govern individual villages.³³

Freetown Christiania, one of the closest anarcho-capitalist examples, has been threatened by local government regulation, rising costs, and tourism. Much to the disdain of Christiania's residents, Copenhagen's municipal government has required that residents receive permits for home renovations and has directed the police to monitor the citizens three times a day.³⁴ Further, rent prices have risen dramatically on the back of gentrification, causing some residents to leave Christiania altogether. Together, along with the desire among many inhabitants to raise their children outside of the commune, Christiania's fate remains unclear.³⁵

The process to develop an anarcho-capitalist utopia is unclear. One cannot easily imagine states voluntarily relinquishing its sovereign powers to corporations and business. This may even be true of local and state governments, as demonstrated by Copenhagen's treatment of Christiania. Further, the process of transferring public goods and services to private sector control would be mired in controversy. However, even if the transition was smooth, the net result may be disastrous. Without governing bodies, "law" becomes a question of financial resources. The wealthy would have their hands on the levers of power in a way never previously imagined, with murder and theft being only a question of expense and resources. Additionally, without regulation, there would be no oversight in assuring goods and services are consumable to the citizenry. Insider deals could create artificial monopolies, with no remediation process to resolve disputes.

Even if none of this is true, government is a vital component of capitalism. Harry Binswanger argues that "Governments are necessary—because we need to be secure from force initiated by criminals, terrorists, and foreign invaders".³⁶ It is difficult to imagine anarchist societies mounting an effective defense against jihadist terrorists following 9/11 or protecting national borders from foreign invasion. Even Ayn Rand, one of the most radical capitalist authors in the 20th century, argued there are a few services, such as national defense and international treaty-making, governing institutions must provide.³⁷ When evaluating human nature, the role of government becomes even clearer. To protect against discrimination of minority groups, laws must exist to prevent the refusal of goods and services based on socio-economic status. Further, governments prevent individuals from exercising abusive self-interest through regulation of product quality and laws that prevent price gouging.

The Dangers of Utopia

To fully demonstrate the threat of utopia it may be useful to consider the "perfect" scenario. Imagine a utopian society where every individual on the planet agrees to follow a set of norms and rules, those norms and rules have no adverse impact on the citizenry, and the path to this society was peaceful. Should we consider this world "ideal" or even good? Not necessarily. This idealized state eliminates both individuality and creativity. When rules and norms are

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Justin Calderon, "What happened to Christiania's dream of becoming Denmark's hippie paradise?" *CNN*, August 10, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/christiania-copenhagen-denmark/index.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Harry Binswanger, "Sorry Libertarian Anarchists, Capitalism Requires Government," *Forbes*, January 27, 2014, www.forbes.com/sites/harrybinswanger/2014/01/24/sorry-libertarian-anarchists-capitalism-requires-government-2/#5b7846ee7d89.

³⁷ Ibid.

adopted, the individual has agreed to forgo his or her right to act in accordance with his or her nature or desires. The binding accord of utopia forces individuals to sacrifice their time, energy, and ability towards supporting the greater good of society. While this may seem desirable in comparison to cutthroat competition, readers must consider the emotional toll of living a micromanaged life. Absent the right to excel, prosper, and break the mold of tradition, individuals will find themselves unhappy as a result of unnecessary restraints on exercising their talents and pursuing ambitions.³⁸ Individualism and freedom are vital pillars of true communities.

The previous comment ushers in the discussion of creativity. When the framework of a “perfect” utopia is adopted, it should be assumed the founders would restrict changes to that framework, as any adjustment may threaten the system. These restrictions to change, in whatever form they take, limit the scope of human imagination and force the citizenry into a limited box of ideas. New ideas are carefully regulated, and innovation is discouraged in favor of utopian proposed traditions and rules. Not only do these hurt individuals with unique talents and abilities, this also hurts the public who no longer benefit from these brilliant minds.

Of course, the chance of a “perfect” scenario is vanishingly slim both in terms of adoption and final product. To address the adoption of utopia, we need only consider the plurality of worldviews, religions, military alliances, and political opinions that dominate the globe. Why would the United States and China, with radically opposing views of government structure, the free market, and human rights ever agree to adopt the same version of utopia? Even if countries agreed, who would lead the revolution, how would religious doctrine be reconciled with utopian idealism, and who would act as the “police” or enforcers of this society? Even the simplest question of adoption becomes daunting against the backdrop of a hundred voices and perspectives.

The most troubling aspect of utopia is found in the final product. Many prominent utopian philosophers advocated for malicious practices and largescale injustice. Thomas More’s *Utopia* saw wars fought entirely by mercenaries, Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* sees arranged marriages between “fat” and “thin” individuals to “avoid extremes in their offspring,” and H.G Wells’ *New Republic* advocates the eradication and sterilization of the “vicious helpless and pauper masses.”³⁹ This form of eugenics and mass killing is reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s attempt to produce a perfect, Aryan race through the genocide of Jewish citizens, homosexuals, and the disabled.⁴⁰

Some may argue the above comparisons are unfair given the changing times since More and Plato. Suppose we consider this argument to be true and believe the theories of Miguel Abensour, Richard Saage, and Francisco Fernández Buey are guided by sound moral reasoning: Would they create a better world? In most cases, no, as these thinkers fail to see the unintended consequences of their framework. Consider the organic lifestyle used in separatist utopias such as Findhorn and Auroville. These colonies, founded in the 1960s and located in Scotland and India respectively, were established with the intention of being self-sustaining communities.⁴¹ While a few hundred people may survive on organic, homegrown crops, organic farming

³⁸ Edward Younkens, “Individualism and Freedom: Vital Pillars of True Communities,” *Foundation for Economic Education*, January 1, 1998, <https://fee.org/articles/individualism-and-freedom-vital-pillars-of-true-communities/>.

³⁹ Morrison, “Why Utopian Communities Fail,” March 8, 2018.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

practices would not be able to feed the world⁴². In fact, for such farming practices to be adopted it would require United States cropland to increase by forty-three percent, nearly the size of Spain. This would inevitably lead to deforestation and the displacement of other wild plants and animals⁴³, an unacceptable condition for many utopian theorists.

Even if utopian proponents can explain away every objection, they are still faced with a harsh reality: the children of utopia will not carry on their legacy. Children raised in utopian colonies are selfish, play competitive sports, lie, and act just as devilishly as children raised outside of the colony.⁴⁴ Many parents, believing the community is more important than their children, neglect giving proper care and affection to their offspring. The result is a fractured community with little to no staying power⁴⁵.

Communism and the Modern Utopia

It would be an error to ignore Communism's immutable ties to utopianism. Karl Marx and his disciples have dedicated tremendous amounts of time and intellectual energy towards theorizing a perfect society whereby individualism is removed in favor of collectivism. Surprisingly, Marx's view of human nature seemed to imply individualism was a preordained condition of the human psyche. Christopher Byron, adjunct professor of philosophy and religious studies at the University of North Florida, explains that humans derived satisfaction through the creation and manufacture of products that appeased their needs and wants⁴⁶. While it is clarified that individual satisfaction is intrinsically tied to the satisfaction of the other, Marx's own writings suggests that wants were not so clearly related to the collective's satisfaction. Specifically, he writes that "Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase."⁴⁷ The innate drive for wants seemed to derail practical applications of communism, and may have been a driving force behind some of the twentieth century's worst atrocities.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a reformed theologian and ethicist, recognized this reality, arguing that Communists had two goals: "purge the world of evil" and "establish a society in which no coercive power [would] be necessary."⁴⁸ By identifying themselves as "innocent of any evil", Communist leaders were shielded from criticism and regarded as high-minded intellectuals and

⁴² James McWilliams, "Organic Crops Alone Can't Feed the World," *Slate*, March 10, 2011, <https://slate.com/technology/2011/03/study-most-organic-crops-less-productive-than-conventionally-farmed-crops.html>.

⁴³ Mark Lynas, "Organic farming can feed the world — until you read the small print," *Alliance for Science*, November 22, 2017, <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2017/11/organic-farming-can-feed-the-world-until-you-read-the-small-print/>

⁴⁴ Morrison, "Why Utopian Communities Fail," March 8, 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Christopher Byron, "Marx's View of Human Nature." *Socialistworker.org*. October 9, 2012. <https://socialistworker.org/2012/10/09/marxs-view-of-human-nature#:~:text=Marx%20held%20a%20consistent%20view,to%20social%20and%20individual%20satisfaction.>

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Joshua Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism: Political Ethics and Ethos in Reinhold Niebuhr's Thought", Vol. 78, No. 1, *Cambridge University Press*, 2016, 71.

advocates of an improved humanity.⁴⁹ In turn, Stalin's genocidal tactics were portrayed as necessary steps towards achieving perfection. Stalin authorized the execution of nearly one million Russian citizens, and millions more died due to famine, massacres, and deportations (in which deportees were often forced to survive with no resources).⁵⁰ These atrocities were felt by the kulaks (higher-income farmers) for whom Stalin's contempt guided policy. Calling these farmers "enemies of the people," "swine," and "dogs," he had thirty thousand kulaks directly murdered, and two million more deported. As a result, Ukraine experienced a devastating famine, leading to the death of three to five million peasants.⁵¹ For Stalin, this was an acceptable cost to maintain power and spread the seed of Communism.

Stalin's first Five Year Plan underscores the failure of nationalized industry and collectivism. Beginning in 1928, Stalin announced that the nation would increase coal, iron, and electric power production by more than double (in the case of the latter more than four times).⁵² Many industries could not meet these lofty goals. To incentivize hard work, factories displayed measurements of output. Soviet society turned its back on the unskilled laborer; the pressure and humiliation experienced by many workers contributed to rising absenteeism.⁵³ During the same period Stalin implemented unequal pay between skilled and unskilled workers. In an apparent betrayal of the working class, Stalin received political and social backlash. At the same time, Stalin retailored concentrations camps to be worksites to further the goals of the Five Year Plan. These camps often housed "...members of outlawed political parties, nationalists and priests."⁵⁴ The Gulag became integral to the Soviet Union's economy.

Communist China is guilty of similar crimes. In fact, Mao Zedong was the architect of the largest mass murder in history. In only four short years, his Great Leap Forward policy led to the death of forty-five million people. This ambitious plan saw tens of millions of villagers losing their property, home, and lifestyle, and being relocated to mass communes.⁵⁵ In theory, these communes were designed to produce a collective and cooperative society whereby the individual sacrifices their labor for the community. In practice, Communist party leaders brutalized the farmers, using violence to coerce famished workers into building poorly planned irrigation systems while ignoring the crop fields. Tens of millions died of starvation as food shortages swept the nation, but an estimated two to three million were killed directly by the Communist party's methods of torture and abuse.⁵⁶

Readers should not be tricked into believing this behavior has left the Chinese Communist Party. The Uighurs, a Muslim minority group in Xinjiang, China, has been tormented by the Chinese government for their religious views. At least one million Uighurs have been placed in detention centers since 2017. Inhabitants have described harsh interrogation

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cynthia Haven, "Stalin killed millions: A Stanford historian answers the question, was it genocide?," *Stanford*, September 23, 2010. <https://news.stanford.edu/2010/09/23/naimark-stalin-genocide-092310/>.

⁵¹ Haven, "Stalin killed millions," 2010.

⁵² John Simkin, "Stalin's Five Year Plan," *Spartacus Educational*, September 1997, <https://spartacus-educational.com/RUSfive.htm>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ilya Somin, "Remembering the biggest mass murder in the history of the world," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2016/08/03/giving-historys-greatest-mass-murderer-his-due/>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

tactics and frequent beatings.⁵⁷ The abuse does not end there. Reports show that nearly eighty thousand Uighurs have been forced to relocate to factories throughout China for work.⁵⁸ Tibetans under Chinese rule have faced similar persecution. A former captive of a “re-education center” said the following of his abuse: “Those who the officials didn’t like would be captured and tortured...When they become unconscious, [the torturers] would splash water on their faces until their victims regained their consciousness...The bruised bodies of the prisoners turned blue and black, and people become half-dead.”⁵⁹ While at the camp, Tibetans were forced to purchase and wear military uniforms, they learned the Chinese national anthem, and nuns were routinely tortured and raped. This pattern of brainwashing, torture, and forced labor is emblematic of tactics used by communist regimes.

None of the violence produced by Marxist collectivism should be surprising. On numerous occasions, Marx and Engels explain that a necessary step is violent revolution by the proletariat. Two quotations are particularly revealing. Writing to a newspaper in 1848, Karl Marx states that “...there is only one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society...can be shortened...and that way is revolutionary terror.”⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, Friedrich Engels wrote that “The next world war will result in the disappearance from the face of the earth not only of reactionary classes and dynasties, but also of entire reactionary peoples. And that, too, is a step forward.”⁶¹ Even if communism could be ushered in by peaceful transition, human nature makes the ideology impractical. Should individuals be innately selfish and conniving, the bourgeoisie and middle class would not easily give up their status and wealth. William Chamberlin summarizes the relationship between Marxist collectivism and utopian thinking. He argues that utopian thinkers of the 1930s were enamored by socialism, believing that domestic and international woes could be resolved through a peaceful transition whereby inequality of nations would vanish.⁶² This view, when tested against a conservative human nature, results in problematic outcomes. As aforementioned, even Marx believed violence was inescapable because members of the bourgeoisie would try to preserve their wealth and power.⁶³ Chamberlin explained that the collectivist state was omnipotent; it was the arbiter of law and truth for the citizens. A system of checks and balances were non-existent in the Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler’s nations. Erasure of the individual in favor of collective dictatorship seemed an inescapable norm for fascist and communist states.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Bryan Wood, “What is happening with the Uighurs in China?,” *PBS NEWS HOUR*, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/features/uighurs/>.

⁵⁸ Ewelina Ochab, “The Fate Of Uighur Muslims In China: From Re-education Camps to Forced Labor,” *Forbes*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/04/04/the-fate-of-uighur-muslims-in-china-from-re-education-camps-to-forced-labor/amp/>.

⁵⁹ Yeshe Dorje, “Tibetan Re-Education Camp Journal Tells of China’s Tactics Now Used on Uighurs,” *VOA*, May 25, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/tibetan-re-education-camp-journal-tells-chinas-tactics-now-used-uighurs>.

⁶⁰ Stephen Hicks, “Marx’s philosophy and the *necessity* of violent politics,” February 18, 2013, <http://www.stephenhicks.org/2013/02/18/marxs-philosophy-and-the-necessity-of-violent-politics/>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² William Chamberlin, “Collectivism, A False Utopia,” *The Macmillan Company*, 1937, https://cdn.mises.org/Collectivism%20A%20False%20Utopia_2.pdf

⁶³ Hicks, “Marx’s philosophy,” February 18, 2013.

⁶⁴ Chamberlin, “Collectivism, A False Utopia,” 1937.

Conclusion

The obsession to create a perfect utopia must be viewed through the lens of human nature. No individual possesses perfect knowledge about the world, human emotion, and governmentality, yet utopian visionaries must implicitly suggest they possess that knowledge; otherwise, they could not reliably claim to have discovered a perfect framework for human living.⁶⁵ John East argues that “Men become as gods; they seek to create their own “new reality.” Moreover, they become anguished and embittered at a world that refuses to conform to their personal visions of utopia, and as a result nihilism...[lies] close at hand.”⁶⁶ St. Augustine reflects on the issue of sin and evil. He argues that sin and evil are derived from pride, while virtue begins from humility. This principle corroborates the critique of communist visionaries. Even if the intentions of Mao and Stalin were to create a “utopia” on earth as they saw it, their hubris and arrogance towards crafting the “perfect” civilization nullified rational thought and self-reflection. The promise of a prosperous future was replaced with famine, political repression, and mass executions. On a global scale, utopian visions of an effective world government provide only disappointment and false hope, intensifying international conflict and geopolitical rivalry.⁶⁷

No vision of “Utopia” may be considered pragmatically or theoretically viable. Theorists put the cart before the horse; they work from a belief that perfection is an attainable reality that political, legal philosophers are tasked with discovering. This narrow view, while implicitly acknowledging the flawed human condition, underestimates the degree to which self-interest and implicit bias undermine the proposed framework. Writers on the subject have yet to find a success story. Even New Lanark, by far the longest operating “utopia” was not equipped with a framework to withstand the tests of time.

Utopian writers will argue their model is the premier framework. However, many visionaries present conditions that lead to incredible human suffering: both Plato and More advocated for slavery, Campanella sought intentional class division, Rothbard’s anarchy threatens the poor, and the communist-utopian approach of Mao and Stalin caused tens of millions of deaths. In each case study, the subjective nature of the architects’ imagination etched its failure into stone. Humans will not easily take orders from others because they yearn for freedom and liberty. Even when they agree to adopt norms created by the theorist, many communities fall because of the inhabitants’ idleness, selfishness, and laziness in response to distributed wealth and pooled resources.

⁶⁵ John P. East, “The Political Relevance of St. Augustine,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 24, 2016. <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/07/the-political-relevance-of-st-augustine-timeless.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Bibliography

- Barger D., Melvin. "Robert Owen: The Woolly-Minded Cotton Spinner." *Foundation for Economic Education*, February 1, 1976. <https://fee.org/articles/robert-owen-the-woolly-minded-cotton-spinner/>.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. First American Edition. New York: Knoph, 1991.
- Binswanger, Harry. "Sorry Libertarian Anarchists, Capitalism Requires Government." *Forbes*, January 27, 2014. www.forbes.com/sites/harrybinswanger/2014/01/24/sorry-libertarian-anarchists-capitalism-requires-government-2/#5b7846ee7d89.
- Byron, Christopher. "Marx's View of Human Nature." *Socialistworker.org*. October 9, 2012. <https://socialistworker.org/2012/10/09/marxs-view-of-human-nature#:~:text=Marx%20held%20a%20consistent%20view,to%20social%20and%20individual%20satisfaction>.
- Caines, Michael. "Utopia: Nine of the most miserable attempts to create idealized societies." *Independent*, February 21, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/utopia-nine-of-the-most-miserable-attempts-to-create-idealised-societies-a6887316.html>.
- Calderon, Justin. "What happened to Christiania's dream of becoming Denmark's hippie paradise?" *CNN*, August 10, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/christiania-copenhagen-denmark/index.html>.
- Chamberlin, William. "Collectivism, A False Utopia." *The Macmillan Company*, 1937. https://cdn.mises.org/Collectivism%20A%20False%20Utopia_2.pdf
- Cherniss, Joshua. *A Tempered Liberalism: Political Ethics and Ethos in Reinhold Niebuhr's Thought*. Vol. 78, No. 1. *Cambridge University Press*. 2016. Pg. 71.
- Crowell, Maddy. "Trouble in Utopia." *Slate*, July 24, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2015/07/auroville_india_s_famed_utoopian_community_struggles_with_crime_and_corruption.html
- Dorje, Yeshi. "Tibetan Re-Education Camp Journal Tells of China's Tactics Now Used on Uighurs." *VOA*, May 25, 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/tibetan-re-education-camp-journal-tells-chinas-tactics-now-used-uighurs>.
- Eagleton, Terry. "Utopias, past and present: why Thomas More remains astonishingly radical." *The Guardian*, October 16, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/16/utopias-past-present-thomas-more-terry-eagleton>.
- East, John P. "The Political Relevance of St. Augustine." *The Imaginative Conservative*, July

24, 2016. <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/07/the-political-relevance-of-st-augustine-timeless.html>.

Garcia, Mario. "Why Owenite communities were destined to fail." *Academia*, March 31, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/23860668/Why_Owenite_communities_were_destined_to_fail.

Gordon David. "Murray Newton Rothbard (1926-1995)." *Mises Institute*, <https://mises.org/profile/murray-n-rothbard>.

Harris, Lasana T., and Susan T Fiske. "Dehumanizing the Lowest of the Low: Neuroimaging Responses to Extreme out-Groups." *Psychological Science* 17, no. 10 (October 2006): 847–53. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mnh&AN=17100784&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Haven, Cynthia. "Stalin killed millions A Stanford historian answers the question, was it genocide?" *Stanford*, September 23, 2010. <https://news.stanford.edu/2010/09/23/naimark-stalin-genocide-092310/>.

Hicks, Stephen. "Marx's philosophy and the *necessity* of violent politics." February 18, 2013. <http://www.stephenhicks.org/2013/02/18/marxs-philosophy-and-the-necessity-of-violent-politics/>.

Hodgkinson, Tom. "In the nearly-500 years since its publication, Thomas More's Utopia has influenced everything from the thinking of Gandhi to the tech giants of Silicon Valley, writes Tom Hodgkinson." *BBC*, October 6, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160920-how-utopia-shaped-the-world>.

Jarrett, Christian. "Children as young as four believe in karma – good things happen to those who do good." *Research Digest*, September 11, 2017. <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2017/09/11/children-as-young-as-four-believe-in-karma-good-things-happen-to-those-who-do-good/>.

_____. "What Are We Like? 10 Psychology Findings That Reveal The Worst Of Human Nature." *Research Digest*, October 12, 2018. <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2018/10/12/what-are-we-like-10-psychology-findings-that-reveal-the-worst-of-human-nature/>.

Johnson, Sally. "Excesses Blamed for Demise of the Commune Movement." *The New York Times*, August 3, 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/03/us/excesses-blamed-for-demise-of-the-commune-movement.html>

Lynas, Mark. "Organic farming can feed the world — until you read the small print," *Alliance*

for Science, November 22, 2017.

<https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2017/11/organic-farming-can-feed-the-world-until-you-read-the-small-print/>

McKeever, Eamon. "10 Instances Of Anarchist Societies That Actually Worked." *Listverse*, June 29, 2016. <https://listverse.com/2016/06/29/10-instances-of-anarchist-societies-that-actually-worked/>.

McLoughlin, Niamh, Steven P. Tipper, and Harriet Over. "Young children perceive less humanness

in outgroup faces." *Dev Sci*. 2018; 21:e12539. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1111/desc.12539>.

McWilliams, James. "Organic Crops Alone Can't Feed the World." *Slate*, March 10, 2011. <https://slate.com/technology/2011/03/study-most-organic-crops-less-productive-than-conventionally-farmed-crops.html>.

Morrison, Ewan. "Why Utopian Communities Fail." *Areo*. March 8, 2018. <https://areomagazine.com/2018/03/08/why-utopian-communities-fail/>.

Ochab, Ewelina. "The Fate Of Uighur Muslims In China: From Re-education Camps to Forced Labor." *Forbes*. April 4, 2020.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/04/04/the-fate-of-uighur-muslims-in-china-from-re-education-camp-to-forced-labor/amp/>.

Passini, Silvia. "A utopian world: power and well-being in the City of the Sun." December 2, 2014. <http://www.expo2015.org/magazine/en/culture/a-utopian-world--power-and-well-being-in-the-city-of-the-sun.html>.

"Plato on utopia." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2002. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-utopia/#laws>.

Reed, Drew. "Lost cities #10: Fordlandia – the failure of Henry Ford's utopian city in the Amazon." *The Guardian*, August 19, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/19/lost-cities-10-fordlandia-failure-henry-ford-amazon>

Rickett, Oscar. "Failed 'Utopias' Throughout History." *VICE*, April 9, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ne973k/failed-utopias-throughout-history-v25n1.

Simkin, John. "Stalin's Five Year Plan." *Spartacus Educational*, September 1997. <https://spartacus-educational.com/RUSfive.htm>

Somin, Ilya. "Remembering the biggest mass murder in the history of the world." *Washington Post*, August 3, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2016/08/03/giving-historys-greatest-mass-murderer-his-due/>.

“Thomas More.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, March 19, 2014.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-more/#Uto>.

Volz, Lukas J., Locke Welborn, Matthias S. Gobel, Michael S. Gazzaniga, and Scott T. Grafton.
“Harm to self outweighs benefit to others in moral decision making.” *PNAS*, July 25,
2017. <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/30/7963>.

Wood, Bryan. “What is happening with the Uighurs in China?” *PBS NEWS HOUR*.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/features/uighurs/>.

Younkins, Edward. “Individualism and Freedom: Vital Pillars of True Communities.”
Foundation for Economic Education, January 1, 1998.
<https://fee.org/articles/individualism-and-freedom-vital-pillars-of-true-communities/>.