

Preface

As a child, I was dissatisfied with my environment – the home I grew up in, the parents I had, and the lonely isolation of being an only child. I escaped this reality – as children often do – through make-believe. Yet, while many find comfort in books, I was never satisfied by aimlessly observing fantastic societies unfold automatically on each page, nor the finitude suggested by a book's two covers. What I was after was an infinite parallel universe, into which I could slip whenever reality threatened to shatter my happiness, and which I could shape to meet my own imaginings.

Over the years, I have developed into quite a wallflower – an observer, a reader of books, a watcher of movies – but I was not always this way. I used to be a creator, a manipulator, an inventor, a designer, an architect of my own little world. I made things so often that it became my second nature – I did not need to second-guess my impulses. While in reality I was scolded for my impulses, in my room I could escape all this. As a means of coping with my dissatisfaction with one world, I could enter into another. I could pull bins out from beneath my bed, pop off the lids, clutch various plastic forms, and organize them into perfect worlds millennia apart from the world that stifled me, that dangerous world just beyond the safety of my bedroom door. I was Queen of this other world. I had total control, and found comfort in this control not only by means of the fulfillment of having things go my way, but by the fact that my control was a harmless one that manipulated inanimate plastic toys, which could not voice objection to the societal policies I made up.

When I was older, and I traded in this control for things that the reality beyond my bedroom door told me were more suited to my age, I became the observer I am today. I became overly self-conscious in every setting, and worst of all, I fell into bad habits of seeking out control in ways that harmed myself and others. By putting away my toys in the garage attic a few years ago, I am convinced that I have made no progress. I am still dissatisfied with reality and how it has constrained my mind to matters that are supposedly more practical, such as college, a job, time, money, and appearance. I am exhausted of seeking to control the future, which is entirely out of my hands; I would rather just simply do the best that I can and let fate take its course.

I often wonder what it might feel like if I were to return to the outlet of playing—to create my own utopian space, and to detract a personal satisfaction, inner harmony, and spiritual utopia in the act of creating it.

Introduction

Being 17 years old, I feel pretty voiceless in American politics. I am too young to vote, yet I know that even if I were able, I honestly would not feel much more represented in society. Moreover, my political views are very unpopular, as I am what you might call a “socialist libertarian.” Beyond what this label entails, my political views reflect my wish that I lived in a society where peoples' choices could be trusted as being genuinely altruistic and based off of good morals. As we live under the premise of promoting oneself towards achieving the American dream, competition, greedy morals, and class division are predominant sources of oppression in this nation that supposedly promises “equality and justice for all.” As a result – and contrary to my fundamentally libertarian beliefs – I believe some aspect of authoritarian guidance is necessary in order

to instill the ideal society I envision. Since this world we live in is crawling with horrors from rapists to corporate fat cats, I find that it is naïve to assume that all people are fundamentally good on their own. However, people might be able to be taught or raised to be kind – and such a re-organization of human conduct would require an assertion of control to facilitate that change in human behavior. In regards to governing politics in a utopia, what I wonder is how authoritarian control may or may not help to establish and uphold a utopian society’s desired conditions; and then, if what I am describing as “ideal” is no better than a loathsome dictatorship.

On a personal level, I am curious about the stereotype that says that a 17 year-old is “too old” to be concerned with such unimportant things as playing. *I* have found that I am not too old, nor is anyone, and that playing is, in fact, very important. In regards to control, playing with plastic toys is a harmless outlet for asserting power. Unlike controlling eating habits, emotions, or relationships – each of which I have attempted in the past – manipulating inanimate objects like toys or art materials is neither detrimental to my own wellbeing, nor those of others. I am taking this opportunity to see if playing fulfills whatever control-seeking tendencies I had as a child; and then, if I can still utilize this creative process as an effective outlet.

More important, constructing a model of a utopian society allows me to test out my own political and economic ideas without potentially damaging society. Unlike the innumerable Communist and counter-Communist uprisings, or any other type of political or economic revolution, I can seamlessly revolutionize a micro-society without putting any real people at risk. Working with these inorganic materials, I can build a society from scratch to be as radical as I want, be in total control of it, and not have to wait around for democratic processes in order to approve it. No, I cannot make any perfect predictions of how my political ideas will play out in the real world based on how they do in a toy land. However, looking back at our world’s tumultuous history, I wonder whether any radical and/or infamous leaders might have taken back their beliefs had they been able to test them out on a small model before tackling the real world. Furthermore, I wonder if perhaps some of the most radical and irrational might have found the personal fulfillment they were after should they have been able to manipulate totally submissive little figurines instead of real, breathing people.

Through studying both the elements of utopias and the elements of play, I am examining the practicalities of utopia as well as the role authority plays in establishing one.

Part I: Social Utopia

The Theory

Utopia is a nice thought – but has it ever truly existed in society? By definition, a utopia is “a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). I, being cynical of the prospect of perfection, am wary to believe that utopia can exist within reality. Not only this, but, looking back in history, utopias have only existed on paper, or for very short periods of time – and their doctrines have sounded rather cultish.

The English scholar Sir Thomas More first coined the word “utopia” in 1516, with the publication of his work of political philosophy of the same name. In it, More

rebels against the common perception of the times – that Europe was the ideal society – by describing a fictional island where conditions are indisputably much better. Since he himself was dissatisfied by England’s feudal society, subsequent class distinction and social inequality, he designed his island to have no class distinction, no privatization of ownership, and less distinction between women and men than was usual. All citizens of Utopia’s 54 cities must spend two years learning the trade of agricultural food production, for More emphasizes that agriculture is the most important trade in any society. All able-bodied citizens must also work, thus making the amount of work done by each individual much less (*Utopia*, Sparknotes). Still, despite these initial pros, More describes facets that are distasteful from a 21st century lens – such as enslavement and severe punishment for premarital sex, adultery, or lack of traveler documentation. However, More is credited with imagining such innovations as social welfare and religious toleration, which have been upheld as utopian ideals in societies ever since.

More’s work has inspired radicals, who attempt to revolutionize whole nations towards utopian conditions, as well as moderates, who work on a small-scale and customarily rely on the consent of participants. In the 19th century, economic philosophers began to rationalize utopian principles, by implementing them in reality. Most noteworthy is Karl Marx, who instigated the philosophy – “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (Marx 27) – in opposition to the capitalist “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” (Marx 570). Like More, Marx asserted that class division was one of society’s many ills, which could be remedied if each individual contributed to society equally and shared their wealth. Marx’s writings went on to influence the infamous Communist revolutions throughout the world – most notably in Russia, China, Vietnam, and North Korea – as well as the less-radical socialist parties, which exist popularly in many nations today – namely, Great Britain, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries. While fundamentally, Marxism and its contemporary philosophies imagines an idyllic society without class division, in reality, it must often manifest itself in violent forms, with hypocritically authoritarian leaders at the helm.

At roughly the same time as Marx, the English economist Robert Owen applied these same utopian values to a much smaller scale. Alarmed by the unpleasant conditions faced by working-class families during the Industrial Revolution, Owen became an opponent of the factory-system, which he argued could only truly benefit the industrialist middle class. Alternatively, he believed the putting-out system – a system in which work is distributed to various outlying individuals – could empower the working class to a fulfilling state of self-sufficiency. Instead of attempting to change society through political action, Owen created a series of small, intentional communities where individuals could become self-governing by means of willful cooperation. Accordingly, he proposed the formation of “villages of cooperation,” wherein “souls would work together on farm and in factory to form a self-sustaining unit...” (Heilbroner 111). Hoping to provide a viable alternative to life in poverty, in 1814 he famously established a town called New Harmony in the United States. While many of Owen’s social experiments fell swiftly into economic failure, his ideological contributions are cornerstones of modern cooperative movements.

By the 20th century, proponents of utopias mostly fell into the category of small-scale activism. As political action has largely resulted in an infamous reputation for most socialist-based parties, little has been achieved that fulfills these parties’ fundamental goals. Following Owen’s line of thought, social philosopher B.F. Skinner theorized that the most effective method of attaining a socialist utopia avoids revolution all together.

Instead, he asserts that individuals desiring a change in society need not “a new kind of government but further knowledge on human behavior and new ways of applying that knowledge to the design of cultural practices” (Skinner 1976). Focusing on sustainability and self-sufficiency as key aspects of utopia, Skinner goes on to say, “if the world is to save any part of its resources for the future, it must reduce not only consumption but the number of consumers” (Skinner 1976). In his work entitled *Walden Two*, he depicts a utopian society of 1000 citizens, which thereby implies that it is only through the communication inherent in a small population that every individual’s needs can be met. The society he describes does not even have a government, so that the citizens may all enjoy direct representation during community policy-making discussions.

Skinner’s title is a reference to the work *Walden*, by Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, in which the author describes his self-sufficient lifestyle while living on Walden Pond. Throughout his novella, Skinner pays homage to the larger Transcendentalist school of thought – a philosophy that emphasizes that only through a collective group of self-reliant individuals can a self-reliant community be achieved. While this standpoint appears obvious, it has scarcely ever been put to practice thanks to developments in technology that overrule an individual’s need to be self-sufficient; the individual has been evermore separated from the source of the goods he acquires in order to survive by such inventions as the super-market, the department store, and efficient, computerized production. However, the factorial production system of these goods has been put into place in order to meet the demands of a whole nation’s population; in a country like the United States – with over 300 million citizens – that demand is high. Because Americans live in a capitalist nation, not everyone needs to pull their own weight; some – both wealthy and poor – thrive off of others’ toils, despite that they are able-bodied enough to work to fulfill their own needs. What’s more, the competition that comes inherently with capitalism has tainted the individual’s ability to discern between wants and needs. As Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau noticed of 19th century society, “men are needlessly poor all their lives because they think they must have [a house] as their neighbors have” (Thoreau 29). Therefore, the individual becomes corrupted from having an egalitarian view of the world through the predominance of competition; he becomes forced to favor himself constantly, and thus constantly perceives himself as not having enough. In a sense, competition allows possessions to become a sort of drug that has a high that becomes less satisfactory as one gains more belongings

In his “Allegory of the Cave,” Plato instigates the notion that people have an immense proclivity towards feeling dissatisfaction with their own circumstances. Furthermore, a person often feels this dissatisfaction by means of comparing himself to his peers; in general, when an individual peers over his own fence and sees something better in his neighbor’s yard, he becomes obsessed with the prospect of having that better thing, and utterly convinced that his own life will fall flat without it. In line with the Transcendentalist school of thought, it follows that we may only be content with less if we are willing to acknowledge the counterintuitive as sooth – that less is, in fact, much more. However, it is only without competition and ownership that an individual will be able to truly put this thought into practice.

The Uncompetitive Economy

Practically speaking, the economics in such a utopia must focus less on profits, for if consumers consume less, producers produce less, and the profiteers make less profit. Thus, the entire capitalist system would deteriorate, and with it the threat of economic competition. Contrary to the idea that consumption is key to a successful society, economist E.F. Schumacher ordained “consumption [should be] merely a means to human well-being, [and its] aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption” (Small is Beautiful). With the implication that consumption is not an altruistic enterprise, Schumacher acknowledges that this consumption is the source of the class divisions and competition that distort the possibility of altruism in American society. Furthermore, throughout history, corporations have tended to be more concerned with churning a profit than with promoting egalitarian wellbeing. His ideas reiterate the effectiveness of a small-scale society, and that, in order for utopian, noncompetitive, equal conditions to prevail, consumerism must not be induced on behalf of individuals desiring to make a profit. Instead, consumerism may only exist on egalitarian terms if population is kept to a size in which all citizens are able to share common goals.

Perhaps afraid to speak out about the problems of corrupt economics during the Cold War, only more recently have groups organized in complaint of political and economic corruption on behalf of socio-economic equality in the United States; the Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party movements are two examples of this. What’s more, there have even been bills presented to the House of Representatives that propose curtailing this corporate corruption – for example, the American Anti-Corruption Act. If corporations economically take advantage of individuals, why do those individuals not take political action against their perpetrators? Look again to B.F. Skinner for the simple answer: “Great cultural revolutions have not started with politics” (Skinner 1976). To prove his point, very few of these protectionist bills have actually passed in the House of Representatives. Alternatively, what Skinner proposes is that “great changes must be made in the American way of life” (Skinner 1976) – that is, from the bottom up.

In short, we cannot meet everyone’s needs in a society that is too big for its own good. In a large society, government becomes necessary as a means to probe communication and collaboration between the magnitudes of citizens. However, in cutting back on the size of a society, it becomes possible to bypass governmental corruption through direct representation of the populace, and to resurge the citizen’s support for founding ideals as well as their cultural pride. Again, as Schumacher emphasizes, small really is the most beautiful.

The Intentional Community

In keeping with the ideas of the thinkers mentioned in the section above, it is concurrent that the key to a socialist utopia is as much the consenting will of its citizens as its small size and limited emphasis on economic competition. In review, in order for each contributor’s needs to be met as Marx idealized, the supporting conditions must develop on a small scale; furthermore, the small society must gain support through recognition and respect, rather than by authoritarian force or revolutionary action, so that the citizens are not resentful of the government. Still, ideally, utopian conditions allow for communication among all citizens to replace the need for governmental

representation and politics of the like. Beyond that a successful utopia must be small and uncompetitive, it must also function on the grounds of the consent of its citizens. This brings up the concept of the intentional community.

As philosopher John Locke theorized, people have a social contract with their community through which they have consented to give up some of their personal liberties in order to respect certain moral codes and governing laws. In a utopia, it is vital that this selflessness on behalf a community is genuine – intentional. Beyond this individual devotion, an intentional community also emphasizes a collaborative relationship as crucial to the progress of both social justice and technology in that society. Lastly, the members of an intentional community must not go about upholding their societal vision haphazardly – they must be consciously thinking of how to benefit the society with their every action.

Many urban planners have addressed the notion of the intentional community through elaborate structures to house such a society. Still, intentional communities struggle to uphold their ideological values; they often have a reputation for being cult-like, or failing completely after a short period in time. During the 1960s and 1970s, communes emerged in reaction to the conservative predominance of earlier decades, as well as to the American government's support of aggression against humanity during the Vietnam War. In the craze of this sudden liberal spike, a drug culture also developed in this generation. While many communes initially developed on grounds of upholding utopian ideals in the American society which had become less than satisfactory, many plummeted as a result of anarchist members, of cult-like conditions and subsequent opposition from both outside and within, and of the confusion induced by the extensive drug use of some members. Black Bear Ranch, founded in 1968 in northern California, is a commune that happened to suffer from all of these encumbrances (Berman). An unavoidable and unpredictable element of the small-scale utopia is that it *is* built of individuals, and because of its small size, any particularly powerful person has a better chance of influencing that society to meet his own vision, which is in all cases the fundamental cause of an intentional community's dissipation.

The Leader

The leader is perhaps the determining factor of a utopia's success or failure. If the leader has sweeping authority, his ideals may be upheld in that society. However, given that a society is comprised of individuals – each with their own intentions in life – it is unlikely that every individual can unite under a single ideology.

As is the case with any society that does not have a democratic government in place as a means of curbing dictatorial authority, egotism can get the better of even the most benevolent of leaders. This is why Schumacher proposes the small size; the utopia must be established in a community of citizens with perfectly equal authority, which is dependent on close communication. Still, in again looking at the many trials and errors of intentional communities, this may not even be feasible. I return to my essential question – at what point does what was intended to become a utopia tumble into the no-good status of a dictatorship? Ultimately, my answer is that there is too great a flaw in human nature – that is, the tendency to act according to self-interest – for a utopia to exist on a societal scale.

Part II: Isolationist Utopia

While I am cynical that perfection is achievable, allow me to add that it is *societal* perfection of which I am doubtful; it is within ones' self that a sort of spiritual utopia becomes attainable. Furthermore, in reflecting upon my place in the world, I realize that it is when I am isolated that I feel the most inner harmony.

Looking back on the conditions of my upbringing, it only makes sense that I am most comfortable being alone. Without siblings, I had no peers to compare myself to or learn from until I went to elementary school. Not only that, but the school I attended was deeply progressive – which only prolonged my oblivion to competition. The first time I ran a track meet in 7th grade, I was amazed that I was going to run in a race – I only ever saw something like that in movies. In high school, I was shocked to suddenly be in a strict, academic, all-girls environment, with peers who had come from more traditional backgrounds filled with gold stars and demerits. These girls lived and breathed competition, as they compared grades after every test and tried out for plays and sports teams. I found such a competitive existence on social and academic terms to be distasteful, and such a society to be utterly dystopian.

Now, as I near the end of high school, I realize that much of the world's economy thrives on capitalist competition and free markets. It terrifies me to think that I have to present myself as better than other people in order to survive in such a place. While I know I must seek out and experience such conditions before I can make any judgments (and that I am perhaps brooding more than is necessary), I am set in the strong opinions against competition that I developed during high school. For this reason, I can say with some certainty that I will not have a typical 9-to-5 job – one of those jobs everyone has to fight for in order to get; I just wouldn't do well given all the competitive pressure. I know I thrive best in a niche, and rather than join the systematic flow of the world, I would rather float off on my own. That is the only way I will be able to function in order to contribute positively to society at large.

Susan Cain, author of the non-fiction book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, theorizes that American culture favors extroverts, and that introverts are underappreciated. Furthermore, given that American culture favors extroverts, it follows then that it also favors a highly social existence – in regards to everything from recreation, to school, and to politics. About the individual, Cain asserts, “solitude is a catalyst for innovation” (Cain). When I am on my own, I find answers to questions I have been pondering – I am not distracted by other people and their ideas, so I am able to come to a conclusion that is exclusively my own. In some cases, such as in math, when there is typically one correct answer, it is best for me to seek out someone's help. But when I seek out a solution to a problem that arises in my own artwork, or in the larger topic of philosophy, I find that solution by being alone, writing down my thoughts, and re-reading and commenting on my own thoughts as though they are the ideas of another that I encounter in conversation; because they are my own thoughts, I need not worry about offending anyone in my critique, and I therefore reach a heightened conclusion. Even beyond social settings, in artistic and academic settings I tend to favor isolation as well.

Some thinkers have gone so far as to achieve total utopia through their retreat from society. At age 18, Dolly Freed wrote *Possum Living: How to Live Well Without a Job and with (Almost) No Money*, in which she describes her and her father's atypical lifestyle off the grid of American normalcy. The pair was able to be successful in their

venture because in acknowledging that their lifestyle was incompatible with much of American culture (and many laws), they developed their own system through which they could live self-sufficiently. They raised and slaughtered their own meat, grew their own vegetables, and did their own home maintenance, to the point that they had no need for money beyond paying for certain taxes (without jobs or income, they were actually exempt from many such taxes) (Freed). Furthermore, they spent much of their off-time engaged in activities they enjoyed – such as bird-watching, hunting, and reading – rather than sitting in front of the TV, exhausted at the end of a day at work. Through their economic solitude, they were able to reach an equilibrium in their lifestyle that afforded them true happiness.

However, Dolly Freed was hardly the first to experiment with such benefits of isolation. Looking again at the theories of 19th century Transcendentalist thinkers, it is clear that they were aware of the benefits of introversion and solitude. In his chapter aptly entitled “Solitude,” Henry David Thoreau argues that isolation provides him with a universal existence: “I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself” (Thoreau 107). He points out that in solitude, one is able to have total autonomy over the universe that is encapsulated within the ozone of his skin, to act on impulse, without the worry of having to coexist with others. Thoreau continues to discuss the benefits of self-sufficiency and governance as he suggests that in isolation, “Next to us is not the workman we have hired...but the workman whose work we are” (Thoreau 110). Thus, when he governs himself, he is able to correct problems as they arise, without needing to rely on the help of another in order to address them. Both Freed’s and Thoreau’s ideas about the benefits of autonomy have convinced me that the only path to utopia is through the liberties offered to an individual through solitude.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I realize that I may only find utopia through isolation. In isolation, I can be autonomous: I do not need to involve others in considering my choices, I do not need to keep with a schedule, but I can do things as I like without worry about how I present myself to the world. Most important, in governing myself, I do not risk the potential for a lack of communication between authority and subject: we are one in the same; there is no risk of suffering under a cruel dictatorship because I would be the receiver of my own ill policies. Thus, I believe that the blissful existence I am after can only be found in very personal relationships or in total isolation. When I was a child, I had similar self-governance when I retreated from the world into my bedroom. Playing in isolation was something more wonderful than playing at school, because I did not need to worry about sharing or hurting anyone’s feelings; I articulated the rules, and changed them on a whim if I did not feel like following them.

Now that I am older, I have struggled to find the confidence to retreat from society, especially in a world that favors constant social connection. My discomfort swelters when I am one of the very few in my grade who does not go to prom or winter formal, who does not go to sports events, who works in the darkroom rather than eat lunch with my peers, who repeatedly turns down invitations to parties. However, when I stop and think about my embarrassment at preferring isolation, I find it almost laughable – for is it not counterintuitive to feel more awkward about being alone and independent? When you are on your own, you don’t need to worry about engaging a crowd with your

presence, or about fitting in, because you are your own audience. You are your truest self, and that is the most effective form of utopia.

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