UTOPIa
Americana:
AMBIVaLence
TOWarD UTOPIanIsm
In THE UnITED STaTes

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We dream. We are always imagining a better life, an improved
social order, a paradise. Every form of literature is used to
present these imaginings and to convert, influence, or simply
entertain the reader. At the same time, we constantly attempt to
develop a better place; again, every device at our command is
used to do so: the political party, the reform movement, the
communitarian experiment, etc. Having been often
disillusioned, we are cynical, reject the proposals without
thought, and argue that we cannot, by our very nature, perfect,
or even significantly better, our society or ourselves. If it
appears that perfection or improvement might be possible, we
point out that it could cost us our humanity.

From the time of the earliest European settlements,
America has been a place of dreams, and its previous
inhabitants had built a wide variety of successful societies, all of
which were destroyed when the new settlers decided to
implement their dreams. This shows that dreams can conflict
and that in colonial situations, the eutopias of the new settlers
often create dystopias for the colonized.

The United States appears to have produced more utopian
novels and more communitarian experiments than any other
country in the world. At the same time, there has been a regular
stream of anti-utopianism, which has peaked (thus far) in the
period from 1920 to 1960 and, perhaps, today. Thus, Americans
have been deeply concerned with utopia from the earliest

settlers, many of whom saw themselves as founding a better (not ideal, not perfect) theological or social order in the American wilderness, to the twentieth century dystopians warning that striving for a better (perhaps ideal or perfect) society is ultimately anti-human.

Here I explore this love-hate relationship Americans have with utopia in an attempt to elucidate a neglected stream in American thought. At the same time, I hope to demonstrate two points about that stream. First, I attempt to show that utopianism and its counterpart anti-utopianism are important to an understanding of American history. In fact, I suggest American history cannot be adequately understood without them. Second, I suggest that as important as anti-utopianism has been and is today, utopianism has been more important and arguably still is.

I shall be suggestive rather than definitive, both because I am still trying to understand this complex subject, and, because utopias change as people change, a definitive study of utopia can never be written. Utopia seems to always lie around the next corner rather than the one just passed. As Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) put it, "[a] map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias" (Wilde, 1910: 27). Many Americans move each year, searching for a better life, and apparently believing that it is possible to find one. On the other hand, the US is a nation of skeptics. Everyone is from Missouri (whose motto is the "Show-Me State") and has to be shown. Everyone dreams, believes, and rejects all at the same time. "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence", and while the aphorism is skeptical, most people act as if it is true. There is an ambivalent attitude toward dreams. The good cannot be true but is still sought. The rock of our dreams is pushed up the hill but, like Sisyphus's rock, never reaches the top —

perhaps because a lack of belief always overcomes us in the end.

Throughout its history, America has been both eutopia or good place and dystopia or bad place, often simultaneously, to both its inhabitants and others throughout the world. Today the understanding of the US as both eutopia and dystopia by non-Americans is obvious; thousands want to immigrate to the eutopia; other thousands see the US as the ultimate contemporary dystopia, the fount of all evil. It is less obvious that many Americans also see their country in these same stark terms. Since *both* positions are common, the actual picture is far from simple; it is complex and ambiguous, but I think it helps illuminate the US and its people.[1]

America as Utopia

Here I argue through illustrations from both explicitly utopian sources and other American writers and thinkers both that Americans have always dreamed of a better life and that they have also disparaged such dreamers. This duality began as early as the American Puritans, who came to America, in the words of John Winthrop (1588-1649), the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, to build a "city upon a hill", which has generally been interpreted as a utopian statement. Winthrop was actually warning his people that "the eyes of all people are upon us" so that if they fail they will be a laughing stock (1864-67: 2.19). But, even though this famous metaphor is normally misread, the Puritans were coming to America to build a society in which it would be possible to live the life they believed God meant them to live, a life that could not be lived in Europe. In this, they were clearly utopians.

The Puritans could not avoid being conflicted.[2] H. Richard Niebuhr described their dilemma very well, saying, seventeenth-century Protestants "... were for the most part thoroughly convinced that mankind had somehow been

corrupted; they knew that the order of glory had not yet been established; they were pilgrims all who did not expect to be satisfied in the time of their pilgrimage" (1937: 49).

Obviously, there is some difference among commentators as to precisely what all this meant. David W. Noble wrote, "Human history, in the Puritan outlook, was marked by ceaseless rise and decline of social groups because sinful man was not capable of building a truly good society. Now God had given this New World nation the chance to escape the rhythm that had marked all previous nations" (1965: 6). Hence, the history of the area that becomes the United States begins with a fundamental ambivalence regarding what it was that was to take place there.[3] It is worth noting that one of the most popular sermons in New England was the Jeremiad, in which the preacher roundly condemned the people for their failures and detailed the horrors the future holds for them if they don't change their ways, ending with at least a brief statement of the glories in store for them if they do (see Bercovitch, 1978).

And one should not forget the many Americans, from the beginning to the present, who believe America is to be the location of the Second Coming of Christ. As Cotton Mather (1663-1728) wrote in 1710, "there are many Arguments to persuade us, That our Glorious Lord, will have an Holy City in America; A City, the Streets whereof will be Pure Gold" (1710: 42). Mircea Eliade described this belief, saying, "... the most popular religious doctrine in the Colonies was that America had been chosen among all the nations of the earth as the place of the Second Coming of Christ, and the millennium, though essentially of a spiritual nature, would be accompanied by a paradisiacal transformation of the earth, as an outer sign of perfection" (1973: 264; on the general subject, see Tuveson, 1968). This position is still held by many American Protestants.[4]

While a sub-set of Americans still expects to find their better place through the Second Coming of Christ, most

Americans are like the majority of settlers and hope that a better place can be created through their actions. This is particularly true of immigrants. Settlers are pushed from the mother country by poverty, hunger, disease, and political and religious oppression, but they are also pulled by a vision of a better life. I have begun to try to explore this imagery as it relates to various countries, and one of the best ways I have found of doing so is through immigrant songs. I will just give a couple of brief examples to show what I mean.

This is from an Irish song.

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> If you labour in America,
>   In riches you will roll,
> There's neither tithes nor taxes there
>   Nor rent to press you down;
> It's a glorious free country,
>   To welcome every man,
> So sail off to America,
>   As soon as e'er you can. (Wright, 1975: 491)

And this is from a Danish one:

> America, that noble land,
> Always waits with open arms,
> In wealth it surely has no peer –
> Don't wait, don't wait until next year!
> (Wright and Wright, 1983: 47)

But things did not always work out. This is from "The Danish Girl":

> Oh Denmark, oh Denmark, I'm coming back to
>   you,
> Here I have no joy, nor do I have a friend.
> (Wright and Wright, 1983: 207)

and this is from "The Irish Emigrant's Lament":

They say I'm now in freedom's land,
    Where all men masters be:
    But were I in my winding-sheet
    There's none to care for me. (Wright, 1975: 505)

These examples suggest that there is a very interesting and virtually untouched area of research on immigrant utopianism. And with the exception of Native American Indians, all Americans originated as immigrants, which may be why the US has been such a center of utopian speculation and, given the negative side of the immigrant experience, such a center of opposition to utopianism.5

Now let me turn to the traditional materials of utopianism: utopian literature and intentional communities. The earliest American utopia currently in my bibliography was published in 1641, only twenty-one years after the first permanent settlement; the most recent one was published in 2002. The earliest American intentional community of which we have knowledge, leaving the colonies themselves aside, was founded in 1659; the most recent one is currently being created.

Utopias have been published and intentional communities have been established regularly throughout all of American history. There have been peaks in the establishment of communities, such as the early nineteenth century and the 1960s (in the US that generally refers to the period 1965 to 1975), but it is important to know that there are more intentional communities in the United States today than at any time other than the Sixties, and many of those founded in the Sixties still exist and are 25-30-35 years old. Given the growth of publishing, it is harder to point to peaks in utopian literature, but it is generally thought that there was one from 1888, when Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 1887-2000* was published, into the early years of the twentieth century and another beginning in the 1960s and continuing for about twenty years or so.6

What any of this means is harder to say. Founding or joining an intentional community can be an act of optimism or

pessimism. It can be saying, "yes it is possible to live the good life here and now", or it can be saying "yes but not within the parameters of US society as they exist; to live the good life it is necessary to withdraw from that society". In 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) wrote to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), "[w]e are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new Community in his waistcoat pocket. I am gently mad myself, and am resolved to live cleanly" (*Correspondence*, 1883: 308-09). These two sentences suggest the existence of great optimism regarding the possibility of improving society while holding that optimism up to mild ridicule. In the '60s, those who went off to found communes were called "drop-outs" by those who stayed to be involved in the struggle for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam. Those who joined communities were often explicitly saying that a good life could not be lived in the US of the day, but they were optimistic that a good life could be created. While many left for Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, many others believed that it could be created within, albeit somewhat outside, the framework of American society. Interestingly, those radicals who stayed to fight for change were the real optimists; they believed that if Americans could just be brought to recognize what was being done in their name, everything could be changed.

Utopian literature can also be read in many ways. It is quite clear, for example, that when Edward Bellamy wrote *Looking Backward*, he did not initially see the book as a significant tool for social reform. But as soon as others recognized it as such, Bellamy re-wrote his intentions and became active in the reform movement.[7] *Looking Backward* inspired a substantial number of utopias presented as alternatives to Bellamy's vision and quite a few that elaborated on Bellamy's vision, filling in gaps or presenting more detail. And *Looking Backward* became the impetus for a major reform movement that lasted well beyond Bellamy's short life (1850-98).[8] The influence of the book was

international, with movements based on it in many countries (see Bowman, 1962).

But *Looking Backward* also produced a large number of explicitly anti-utopian utopias directed against its ideas. For example, in *Looking Further Forward; An Answer to Looking Backward by Edward Bellamy* (1890), Richard Michaelis (1839-1909) shows Julian West, the hero of *Looking Backward*, starting his teaching job and being confronted by the Professor he replaced, who is now a janitor because he did not follow the party line. The "real" future Boston is corrupt, class-ridden, and authoritarian. A supporter of Bellamy, Ludwig A. Geissler, responded with *Looking Beyond. A Sequel to "Looking Backward", by Edward Bellamy, and An Answer To "Looking Further Forward", by Richard Michaelis* (1891), which follows on from Michaelis showing how the demoted Professor deserved demotion and that all is fine in Bellamy's future Boston.

Utopian literature has also been closely connected with other social movements in the United States. Feminist utopias were, and to a lesser extent, still are, a recognized part of the process of equalization between the genders that became an issue early in the twentieth century and that has been taking place in the US since the '60s.[9] Particularly in the second development of both feminism and feminist utopias, one of the most important stages in this feminist movement was the recognition of the need for "consciousness raising" or becoming aware both of your own oppression and the fact that you were not alone, thus providing the strength to change yourself, your relationships, and, ultimately, American society. Feminist utopias were a regular part of the discussions among women on what was wrong, what was needed to bring about positive change, and what that change might mean. There were not the same number of anti-utopias written against feminist utopias as there were against Bellamy, but there were many dystopias extrapolating that bad society that would result from gender equality.

There is another way, harder to pin down, in which utopias seem to be ambiguous. In a number of cases, we have multiple utopias written by the same person over a number of years. Today, most of these are by professional writers making a living and perhaps trying out ideas.[10] But in a few cases today and more in the past, there have been people who seem to write their first utopia because no one is listening to them, and they continue to write more for the same reason, with their frustration growing.[11] In a few cases, it is possible to trace the pattern up to a mental breakdown. Today the Internet and the World Wide Web make it possible to easily publish your utopia and find an audience that will respond. But it is also easy to see the frustration felt by those who believe they have answers to real problems but cannot make anything happen.

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America against Utopia

The anti-utopian argument is that there is a fatal flaw in the makeup of the human being, a failure of nerve perhaps, or too much nerve. According to this argument, utopians behave as follows: first, they develop a plan, a blueprint for the future. Second, they attempt to put the plan into operation and find it does not work, either because other people are unwilling to accept it, because it is too rational for human nature, or because in one of many possible ways the plan is not in touch with current realities. Third, knowing they are right, the utopians do not reject the plan, but reject reality. They attempt to adapt people to the plan rather than the plan to people. Fourth, such action inevitably leads to violence, to the movement from an attempt to encourage people to adapt the plan to forcing them to change to fit the plan. Fifth, in the end, the plan or utopia fails and a new one is tried. Utopia is the ultimate tragedy of human existence, constantly holding out the hope of a good life and repeatedly failing to achieve it.[12]

The best-known proponent of this position was the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper (1902-94), but a number of American thinkers have taken similar positions. Thomas Molnar (1921-), the Hungarian-born American philosopher, published *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* in 1967 to argue from a Roman Catholic point-of-view that utopian thinking is necessarily heretical and deeply dangerous. And the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) argued for an explicitly anti-utopian position throughout his life, most notably in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (2 vols. 1941, 1943).

The single most common form of anti-utopianism found in America is the rejection of socialism. The word "socialism" was so unacceptable in the United States that Bellamy used "Nationalism" as the label for his system, which would otherwise have been called state socialism. An example of an anti-socialist utopia from the same year Bellamy published *Looking Backward* is *The Republic of the Future; or, Socialism A Reality* (1887) by Anna Bowman Dodd (1858-1929), which presents a socialist utopia as inevitably dull, boring, and extremely limited.

Self-perception

Authors like Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land* (1950), R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam* (1955), Charles L. Sanford in *The Quest for Paradise* (1961), and Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) have greatly illuminated our understanding of the self-perception of Americans as the chosen people destined to lead the world but torn about where to go. As David W. Noble put it, "[u]p from savagery would develop, in orderly succession, a series of cultural advances that would culminate in an American civilization unsurpassed in this world, a civilization that would be the light of the world, this beacon of

progress for all mankind" (1965: vii). Again Noble characterizes the confusion,

> ... Americans looked forward to the technical progress and complex civilization flourishing in the environment of the American heartland, they also defined the great valley as the Garden of the World where corrupt Europeans might regain an innocence and virtue and become American democrats. The return to savagery, not the growth of civilization, was the true definition of progress. (*ibidem*)

Or, as Sanford, aptly put it, "[i]ncreasingly in Western civilization during modern times the lost state of innocence to be regained is associated with or integrated as a paradise of material bliss. This assumption underlies the modern vogue of Utopia which, beginning in the Renaissance, has encouraged the enjoyment of creature comforts on a large scale without awakening a correspondingly uncomfortable sense of guilt" (1961: 11). As Sanford states the ambivalence, "[t]he stream of utopian thought has made it possible for modern man to retain his vision of the primitive moral paradise while living in the midst of smoking factories, grinding gears, and honking motorcars. He has identified moral and spiritual 'advance' with material progress" (*ibidem*). This tension is found throughout the history of both the novels and the communities. Communes shift back and forth between industry and agriculture; there are utopian novels with titles like *A Cityless and Countryless World* (1893); and the very idea of utopia is either sharply criticized as fraud and illusion or supported as possible salvation.

Conclusion

When I was a child, my mother told me a story that seems to me to sum up the ambivalence regarding utopia. She told me of two children who saw in the distance a house with golden

windows. They developed a fantasy around this house and finally set off to find their utopia. When they got to the house the windows were plain glass, and, looking back at their own house, they saw that it now had golden windows reflected in the sun. Thus, the potential for utopia can lead one astray.

Thomas Merton, the famous American Trappist monk, probably put the mixed message of American utopianism best:

> Whatever the ambiguities and complexities of the American mystique today, let us recall the original American vocation to be a New World of almost infinite hope, a paradise of refuge, security, peace, growth, and productivity opening its arms to welcome the oppressed, the downtrodden of the 'old world'. Here especially the religious reformer and the idealist could find a way of realizing hitherto unrealizable hopes. Here utopias could be brought into being and here the Kingdom of God could become an earthly reality. Here the happy citizen, cultivating the rich soil, could live in an innocence and honest joy never to be troubled by intrigues and by the threat of police tyranny, as in the decadent monarchies of Europe. Here were no religious inquisitions. The American was a new being who had nothing to do with the world of European complexity and inequity. He had only to retain his innocence and keep his 'baptismal' robe unsmirched by the dark concerns of Europe, the unredeemed. (1966: xii)

But of course the innocence and simplicity never really existed and the continued search for it meant that American utopianism at times became smug and parochial and a parody of itself. Utopia in America is dangerous or rejected just because utopia was/is supposed to become reality in America.

At the same time, Merton reminds us that America has been eutopia for many. We know that that eutopia is deeply flawed, but the image is still there. America may not be eutopia; it may even be dystopia. But its dystopian self is often recognized through disappointment with its eutopian aspirations or with the smugness of eutopias' protagonists. Golden windows may really just be glass reflected in the sun, but

the search to find a location for our dreams must continue. Phrases like "the Great Satan" used by the Ayatollah Khomeini (1900-89) to describe the United States and "the Ugly American" used as a book title reflect the widespread view today that the United States is seen as a dystopia.[14] But immigrants still queue up to move to the United States in search of a much better life; from their perspective, this dystopia is still a eutopia. Immigrants today may not expect the streets paved with gold that an earlier generation looked forward to finding, but they do expect to find a country that exists only in their collective imagination.

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Such dreams are essential. No dream can be fulfilled that has not been dreamed first. While the American dream has been a failure for some, and many of us believe that an essentially valuable dream has been perverted and turned into its opposite, we must always remember that the world would be an even worse place without dreamers. <<

NOTES

[1] I do not want to spend time here on definition, but "utopia" is one of those words that produce contradictory images in our heads, and I use specific terms. First, the word utopia is quite simple. It was invented by Thomas More (1478-1535) in 1516 and means "no place" ("u" or "ou" = "no" or "not"; "topos" = "place"). But More played with his coinage suggesting "eutopia" or "good place" as an alternative and the word "utopia" has come down to us as meaning a non-existent good place. Personally, I wish that we could keep the distinction between no place and good place, but it was probably too late to do that a few years after More published his book. Since good does not exhaust the possibility of non-existent places, others have coined the term "dystopia" or "bad place". Many other terms have been proposed, some of which are quite useful, but for most purposes "utopia", "eutopia", and "dystopia" are all we require. The only other terms that I use regularly are "utopianism", which I have defined as "social dreaming" to characterize what it is we are doing when we create or think about utopias, and anti-utopia to characterize the explicit rejection of utopianism or some specific utopia. All the definitions I use include the following from Sargent, 1994:

Utopianism – social dreaming.

Utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage *utopia* is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for *eutopia* (below).

Eutopia or **positive utopia** – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

Dystopia or **negative utopia** – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived [the first use of this word is usually ascribed to Negley and Patrick's "Introduction" to their anthology, but see Köster for an eighteenth century origin].

Utopian satire – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.

Anti-utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

Critical utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre (Sargent, 1994: 9).

Intentional community – a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose (*idem*, 14-15).

[2] J. C. Davis's definition of utopia, which I have argued is too restricting, precisely captures the nature of utopia for a Protestant in the seventeenth century. For Davis,

utopia reflects "... the collective problem: the reconciliation of limited satisfactions and unlimited human desires within a social context" (1981: 36).

[3] Elsewhere I have discussed utopianism in the American colonies in greater detail. Although now somewhat dated, this article still gives a useful overview (see Sargent, 1983).

[4] A current publishing phenomenon in the US is the "Left Behind" series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which describes those left on earth after the rapture (the instantaneous removal of the saved from Earth). In 2002, the series consisted of ten novels, with more scheduled for publication in 2003 and 2004; a volume of non-fiction; twenty-four books for children, with ten more scheduled for publication; and five graphic novels.

[5] So far the research on this subject is very limited with no depth in any country. For examples, see Aínsa [Amigues] 1982; Carneiro, 1997; Naranjo Orovio, 1992; Ross, 1988; and Sargent 2001. For an analysis of some of the songs, see Blegen, 1960. While he does not mention utopianism, the essay is largely about the utopian and anti-utopian elements in the songs.

[6] For an attempt to track these shifts, see Simmons, 1983 and 1998.

[7] Bellamy wrote two different versions of how *Looking Backward* came about, one in 1894 that stressed his commitment to social change, and an earlier one in 1889 that did not. They have been reprinted together; see Bellamy, 1981.

[8] For a study of the movement in the United States, see MacNair, 1957.

[9] The best known early feminist utopian writer was Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), whose "Herland" (1915), "Moving the Mountain" (1911), and numerous utopian stories (see Kessler, 1995) were read by many women at the time and then forgotten until they were revived in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Among the most influential feminist utopias of the latter period were *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy (1936-) and *The Female Man* (1975) by Joanna Russ (1937-).

[10] The most obvious case was Mack [Dallas McCord] Reynolds (1917-83), who accounts for 47 entries in my bibliography.

[11] See, for example, Calvin Blanchard (1808-68) and Frank Rosewater (1856-?). Today such people are mostly found on the World Wide Web.

[12] The best general discussion is in Kateb, 1963.

[13] For discussions of the relationship between the US and socialism, see Egbert and Persons, 1952; Lipset and Marks, 2000; and Sombart, 1976.

[14] William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1958. The "ugly American" of the title was actually the good American hero, who just happened to be unattractive, but the title became popular as an anti-American slogan.

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