

Can a Utopian Future Be Truly Imagined?

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David Corish

It would be remiss to tackle the question of a utopian future without first agreeing upon a definition of 'utopia'. The term was coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 book *Utopia*. The book depicts a fictional island in which all inhabitants live in peace and prosperity, free of disagreement and the like. The word itself comes from Ancient Greek and translates to 'no-place', implying a flawless future could never exist, a pessimistic view. Indeed, we all aspire to create an ideal world. For the time being, we will define utopia as just that, the perfect society. Given the power to craft the world anew, it would not be fanciful to dream of how this society may look nor would its implementation be difficult.

Late eighteenth-century thinker, Thomas Paine, believes this is a power that humankind already possesses, were the species to unite as one. Jendrysik writes, "Paine is Utopian because he shares a key tenet of Utopian writing, a faith in the ability of human beings to shape their world" (141). Paine's rival, Edmund Burke, rejects the use of this revolutionary power as he does not envision the world in such a different light. This is where the issue with utopia arises: when humans must agree upon the definition of the word. We will never agree upon a perfect society nor will we ever define human perfectibility, and once we have arrived at the definition, we will not agree on how to get there. Burke and Paine had many fundamental disagreements on this matter.

Let us temporarily define utopia as a frog in boiling water. Burke would favour placing the frog in cool water, heating over a stove, and slowly bringing it to boil; lest the frog jump out in fear of sudden change. Paine would either use a modern kettle or simply throw out the cool water and replace it with water already boiling. Neither men agree upon the temperature at which water boils. These two opposing approaches are a metaphor for the left/right political divide which has defined today's politics. (Although modern conservatism may be more likely to throw said

frog through a nearby window.) Any utopian future will need each side to reconcile their (irreconcilable) differences. For a multitude of reasons, this will never happen.

On the topic of revolution, Burke was sceptical. Society already works well enough and thus any changes made must be cautious and slow. He was a staunch believer in tradition and maintaining social norms that had been developed over the years. Burke argued we could learn much from those who came before. “People who never look back to their ancestors will not look forward to posterity” (Burke, 18).

Tradition exists for a reason and Burke believed people had a duty to respect and maintain it, a contract between the living and dead. People benefit from the work of generations before and should respect their efforts by maintaining their institutions. Of course, depending on your religious views, the opinion of the dead may mean very little to you.

Suitably, Burke opposed the French revolution. Tearing society down and building it anew ran contrary to his ideals of maintenance. He reasoned that the revolution had little excuse as society was already quite good. Gottschark remarks, “[Burke] was afraid that only a small evil would be removed and only at a great cost, and so he doubted that the French Revolution would justify itself.” (421). Whilst Burke did acknowledge problems with government, there was no need to tear society apart to fix these issues. The problems were minor and could be resolved over time.

Freeman notes that “although [Burke] did recognise the defects in the old regime, he underestimated the pressures for social and political change” (292). This is where Burke’s analysis failed. Society was *not* working well enough for a considerable amount of people. As a believer in inherited privilege, Burke was not sympathetic to the peasantry’s growing resentment of the crown. His definition of utopia did not match that of the wider population. In ways, he viewed present society as already utopian (or close). The core ideas of French society were solid and did not necessitate radical change, any flaws could be ironed out with small adjustments. Paine, in contrast, supported the French Revolution and its aims.

Paine disagreed with Burke’s verdicts on revolution. He believed in the revolution’s utopian ideals and advocated for the reformation of society. He placed little value upon tradition and decried Burke’s deference to the past. Paine writes, “Those who

have quitted the world, and those who have not yet arrived at it, are as remote from each other as the utmost stretch of mortal imagination can conceive” (13). The concept of a contract between the living and dead is absurd to Paine. If we have issues with laws written by now-dead legislators, we have no obligation to preserve them. If society’s institutions are failing, tear them down.

Paine was a sharp critic of both the monarchy and government. He remarks that “government is governed by no principle whatever; that it can make evil good, or good evil, just as it pleases. In short, government is arbitrary power” (Paine, 108). The government had no justification behind its power over others and the minority which composed it did not represent the majority. This ran in sharp contrast to Burke’s views of hereditary government and social class. Burke argued that power must be transferred from generation to generation and kept in the hands of a predestined elite. Paine believed that “hereditary rights to govern cannot compose a government because wisdom to govern cannot be inherited” (Browne, 21). The idea of hereditary rights is ludicrous; power should instead rest with the people and their collective wisdom. This is the utopian society which Paine envisioned, one radically changed from the current. To achieve this would involve the displacing of nigh-all institutions and structures; mere improvement would not suffice to excise the present rot. Jendrysik argues “Paine is Utopian because he moves thought beyond the edge of the known world. He presents a vision of a possible future that is within the reach of humanity” (140). Paine aspired to create a better world and backs up his harsh criticisms of society by presenting an alternative: his utopia.

In part 2 of *Rights of Man*, Paine sets out his vision. He describes a representative government coupled with a highly progressive tax system. All citizens are born equal and each has a large set of inalienable rights. The government subsidise education and people live together in peace. Lamb writes, “Such a commitment to universal-ism is grounded in [Paine’s] ultimate and axiomatic belief in human moral equality” (639). Equality is central to Paine’s vision, a direct response to the injustices of France. A radical social welfare system furthers this equality, tending to the needs of the poor and elderly. Resources previously devoted to war are redistributed to the people. Hierarchy is abolished and a focus instead placed upon individual liberty. Burke sees such aspiration to utopia as idealistic, if not

nonsensical. He asks “What is the use of discussing a man’s abstract right to food or medicine? The question concerns how to procure and administer them” (34). It is easy to proclaim that nobody shall go hungry, the devil is in the details; an area in which (according to Burke) the French Revolution was lacking. Burke also disagreed with Paine’s ideas of universal rights and equality, believing the wealthy deserved to stay wealthy. “By having a right to everything, men want everything” (Burke 34). Burke argues it is unrealistic to strive for perfection; it is instead safer to devote efforts to the ‘least-worst’ option. If Paine can be described as ‘utopian’, then Burke is an anti-utopian, a realist, believing the closest we can get to utopia is conserving the one granted to us by our forefathers.

A utopian future will never be imagined as we will never settle on the definition of the word. There is no way to place a limit upon human perfectibility without first defining it. Humanity will agree on neither. Neither Edmund Burke nor Thomas Paine will set aside their differences. Sargent notes that “utopias have been written from every conceivable position ... socialist, capitalist, monarchical, democratic, anarchist ...” (21). Burke and Paine are two viewpoints in an ocean of opinions, two sides of a debate which has lasted centuries. In terms of pursuing a utopia, the left is more optimistic in this regard; better to strive for perfection and fall short than to settle for mediocrity. Indeed, many of Paine’s ideas of equality and welfare are prominent in today’s left. Conservatism, however, has long since torn out its pragmatic roots. Burke, although often cited by conservatives today, would be horrified by the present state of his ideology. The left, to its credit, has remained consistent in its demand for revolution and radical reform. These two sides could not be more opposed. Unfortunately, any utopian future will require the consent of both.

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David Corish · david@corish.dev

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