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# How Utopia shaped the world



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.

**By Tom Hodgkinson**  
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An English lawyer, statesman and philosopher, More was progressive in some ways but also held to many archaic customs (he wore a ruff, a large ruffled collar). He was a supporter of the Reformation and is known

as a strange character. Born in 1478, he was a high-ranking official (at a very high level) while also clinging to traditional customs. He was also an enemy of the Protestant Reformation and was eventually beheaded by King Henry VIII.

Today, though, we may know More best for his invention of a word – and for his development of an idea that would be exported around the world. This concept would shape books, philosophies and political movements as varied as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of passive resistance and the founding of the state of Pennsylvania.

The idea, of course, was 'utopia'.

More coined the word to describe an island community with an ideal mode of government. First published in Latin in 1517, the book *Utopia* means "no place" in Greek; some scholars have said that it may also be a pun on "happy place".



*More coined the word to describe an island community with an ideal mode of government*

More's *Utopia* was not the first literary work to play around with policy ideas: dreaming of a better life is an innate part of being human. In 380 BC, Plato wrote his dialogue *The Republic*, in which Socrates describes a communistic, egalitarian city-state ruled by philosopher-kings called guardians, made up of both men and women. Instead of procreating within a family unit, these leaders leave the city once a year for a wild sex orgy. The resulting children, happily ignorant of their real parentage and brought up by the state, become the new generation of guardians.



© Master of the Cité des Dames/British Library

Christine de Pizan, shown here in a 15th-century miniature presenting her book, imagined utopia as a female-only city (Credit: Master of the Cité des Dames/British Library)

Various medieval works also imagined what an ideal society might look like. The great writer Christine de Pizan, who worked for the royal court in France, published *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405. Illustrated by a gorgeous painting of medieval ladies building a city brick by brick, the book defends women's accomplishments over the aeons and sets up a symbolic city populated by a pantheon of "all women who have loved and do love and will love virtue and morality" – a city meant to be a refuge from patriarchy. Written more than 500 years before Germaine Greer's feminist milestone *The Female Eunuch*, it deserves a mention: for most of history, utopian ideas – at least those that made it to publication – have generally been written by men.

A very different idea of utopia, meanwhile, also entered the mainstream by the mid-14th Century. This was the Land of Cockayne, a utopia concocted by medieval peasants and preserved in the *Kildare Poems*, compiled around 1330 in Ireland.

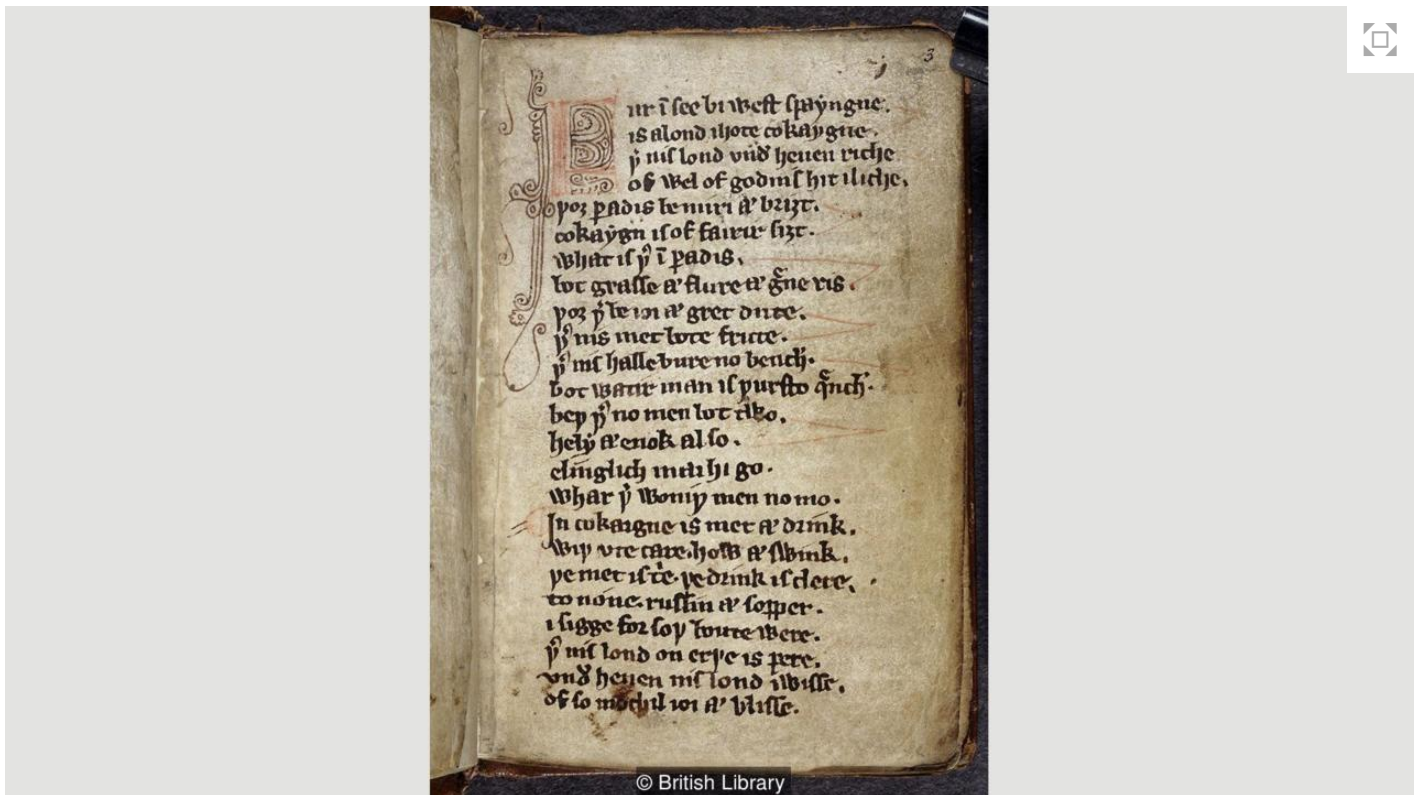


The Land of Cockayne, as imagined by Pieter Bruegel, was a land of fun and equality – and no work

Memorably imagined by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in his 1567 painting, Cockayne was a land of no work, equality between men and women and no authority figures. It shared one or two features with More's Utopia – notably a lack of private property – but was a lot more fun. As the poem goes:

*There are rivers broad and fine  
Of oil, milk, honey and of wine*

*Every man may drink his fill  
And needn't sweat to pay the bill.*



'No place on earth compares to this/For sheer delightfulness and bliss,' goes the poem the Land of Cockayne, here in the 14th-century Kildare Lyrics (Credit: British Library)

A key feature of the Land of Cockayne? Free love. Monks and nuns cavort freely. After prayers, the nuns throw their clothes off and jump into the lake:

*When the young monks see that sport,  
Straightway thither they resort,  
And coming to the nuns anon,  
Each monk taketh to him one,  
And, swiftly bearing forth his prey,  
Carries her to the Abbey grey,  
And teaches her an orison,  
Jigging up and jigging down.*

But though there may always have been fantasies of a communistic Golden Age stretching back through the Middle Ages to antiquity, Thomas More's genius was to give it a name and create a handy philosophical idea.

### **Man with a plan**

In part, Utopia was an attempt to cling to the medieval ideal of the contemplative life – an ideal that the Reformation, which privileged action and change, was 'disrupting', to use the modern coinage. Monkish life itself was under attack from the forces of the Reformation, and was soon to reach a climax with the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536.



The word 'utopia' was coined by Sir Thomas More, depicted here by Hans Holbein the Younger, in his 1517 book

More writes of the Utopians: "They think that the contemplation of nature, and the praise thereof coming, is to God a very acceptable honour." However, like a good modern politician, More also emphasises that Utopia is a land of hard-working families: "idleness they utterly forsake and eschew, thinking felicity after this life to be gotten and obtained by busy labours and good exercise."

More's ideal state is puritanical. His vision of a perfect society was a long way from the sensual self-indulgence dreamt of by the peasants in *Cockagyne*. Forget free love and lying around doing nothing. Instead, in Utopia, there is a class of bosses – called the *Syphograuntes* – who look out for work-shy slackers.

And citizens are constantly being watched. More writes: "You see how it is – wherever you are, you always have to work. There's never any excuse for idleness. There are also no wine-taverns, no ale-houses, no brothels, no opportunities for seduction, no secret meeting-places. Everyone has his eye on you, so you're practically forced to get on with your job, and make proper use of your spare time."



More was influenced by Amerigo Vespucci's tales of non-capitalist communities in the New World, as shown in this 1600 print (Credit: The Elisha Whittelsey Collection)

Utopia has communistic elements too. More had been influenced by the travel literature of the time, particularly Amerigo Vespucci's accounts, which circulated widely. Vespucci had apparently met tribes of natives who lived in decidedly non-capitalist fashion, as the explorer describes in his memoirs: "They neither sell nor buy nor barter, but are content with what nature freely gives out of her abundance. They live in perfect liberty, and have neither king nor lord. They observe no laws. They have their habitations in common, as many as six hundred sharing one building."

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*They live in perfect liberty, and have neither king nor lord. They observe no laws – Amerigo Vespucci*

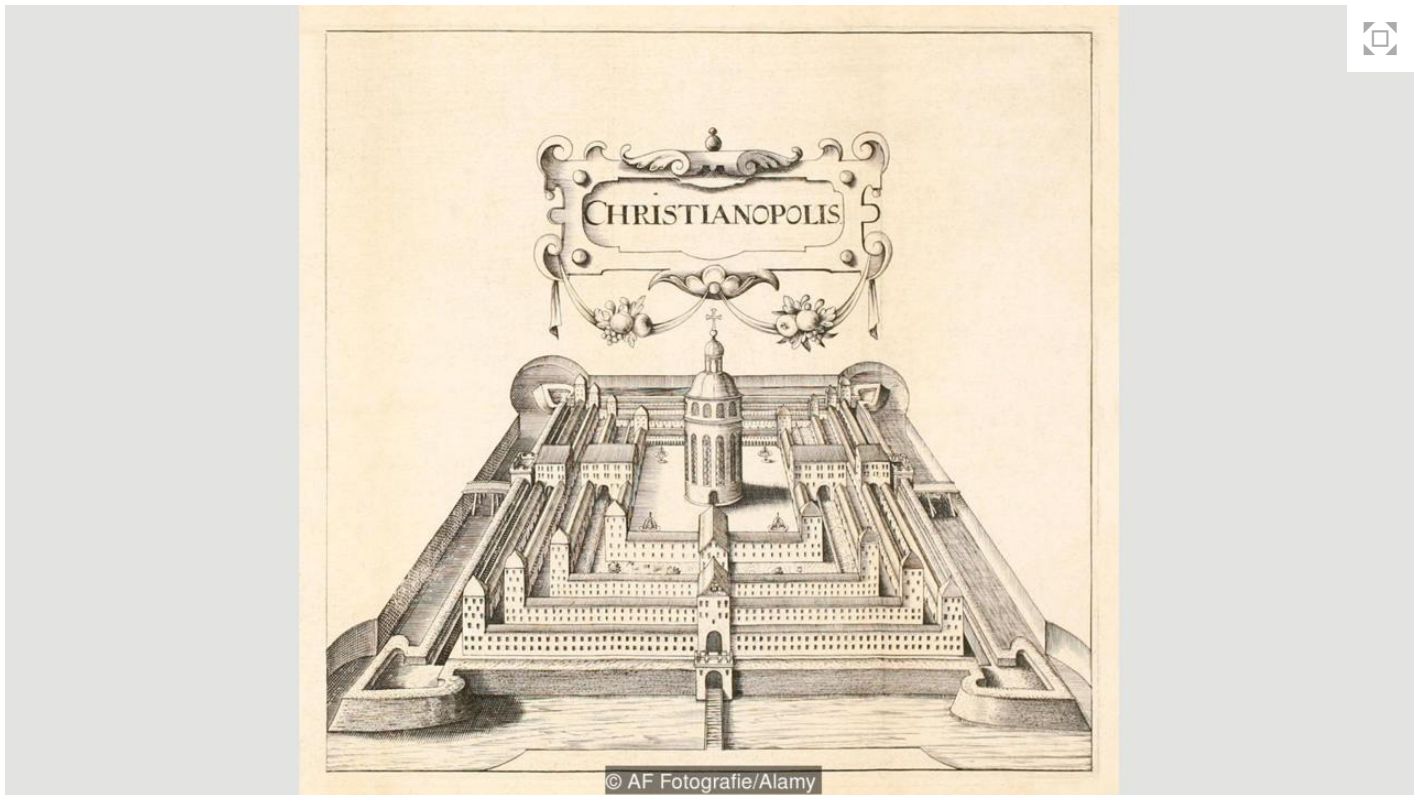
Like Plato's Republic, More's Utopia is the creation of a well-meaning member of the upper classes with a plan, rather than the live-for-the-moment dream of a peasant or worker. In Utopia, private property is abolished. "There is nothing within the houses that is private or any man's own," writes More. Every three months, the people pile up loads of stuff in the market place; anyone can come along and take what they need – like a recycling centre.

Above all, Utopia was the earnest attempt to create a fair society, not one which benefited only the rich. "I can perceive nothing but a certain conspiracy if rich men procuring their own commodities under the name and title of commonwealth," More writes.

### Designs for living

More's fantasy opened the floodgates for a new wave of utopian writing in the 17th Century. Most of these visions looked either backward or forward: they celebrated an old-fashioned ideal of community or envisioned a future paradise where the machines did all the work.

In 1619 came **Christianopolis**, a Christian utopia by German theologian mystic Johann Valentin Andrea; and in 1623, Italian writer and Dominican friar Thomas Campanella published his **City of the Sun**.



Theologian Johann Valentin Andrea's imagining of the walled utopian city Christianopolis (Credit: AF Fotografie/Alamy)

Then in 1627, polymath and Lord Chancellor of England Francis Bacon produced a book called **New Atlantis**, proclaiming science as saviour. Bacon argued that the state should endow a scientific college, which would invent machines to guarantee England's pre-eminence on the world stage. His was a tech-based utopia and featured aeroplanes and submarines. As he wrote: "We imitate also the flights of birds: for we have some degree of flying in the air... we have ships and boats for going under water."

In the 17th Century, some attempted to move beyond theory and create living, breathing alternative societies. This was a turbulent period. In Britain, there was a Puritan revolution, the king was overthrown and Cromwell's Leninist-style Commonwealth endured for 15 years – during which time Christmas, dancing, theatre and maypoles were banned. But rather like later communist governments, the natural tendency of the ordinary people to buy and sell products, celebrate pagan rituals and try to enjoy themselves overcame. Cromwell's experiment came to an end with the Restoration of the popular libertine King Charles II.

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*The Diggers advocated a communistic philosophy: 'The earth ought to be a common treasury to all'*

In the middle of all this ferment, a farmer called Gerrard Winstanley attempted to create an ideal colony. His followers were called Diggers – and they were the Occupy movement of their day. In 1649, they started digging the common land at St George's Hill near Weybridge, Surrey, intending to cultivate it. In Winstanley's pamphlets, he advocated a



communistic philosophy: “The earth ought to be a common treasury to all.”

The Diggers were attacked by both local men and landlords. Undeterred, Winstanley and his 20 or so followers moved to nearby Cobham Manor where they built four wooden houses. State troops pulled the houses down so the Diggers built “some few little hutches like half-cribs” and planted crops. But the local vicar paid a bunch of men – rather like when security guards are paid to remove protestors from road-building projects – to roust them and pull down any more houses or tents they made.

The Diggers gave up that particular battle. But Winstanley went on to write books of utopian schemes and to join another movement with socialist overtones: the Quakers.



© Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy

The Quaker movement emphasised the importance of charity, as shown in this 1862 illustration of a Quaker soup kitchen in Manchester (Credit: Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy)

The charismatic George Fox was the leader of the Quakers. He believed that he and his followers were returning to a pure form of Christianity based on the importance of charity. Unlike some utopian movements, therefore, he did not create a colony of like-minded individuals and escape to it. Instead, Quaker efforts were based around projects to help the poor and to educate people on the arts of self-sufficiency. In 1696, one of the Quakers wrote a pamphlet called *Proposals for Raising a College of Industry of all Useful Trades and Husbandry* – an idea closely related to More’s medieval notion that everyone should have a trade or craft in order to make an honest living.

In fact, handicrafts and small-scale husbandry have been an enduring feature of utopian schemes to this day. (I myself attempted to create a little utopia, too: I lived on a farmhouse in Devon for 12 years and attempted some basic carpentry, kept chickens and pigs and grew vegetables, with varying degrees of success.)

## Romantic feelings

Another charming production of this period was a book called *The Isle of Pines* by republican wit Henry Neville. Published in 1668, it was the *Robinson Crusoe* of its day: the hero is stranded on a beautiful island.

This utopia is more Land of Cockayne than tightly controlled socialist system. As Neville writes: “The country was so very pleasant, being always clothed in green, and full of pleasant fruits, and variety of birds, and ever warm, and never colder than in England in September; so that this place, had it the culture that skilful people might bestow on it, would prove a paradise.”

A few years later, in the early 18th Century, Daniel Defoe wrote **Robinson Crusoe** and Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels*. Both owed much to More's *Utopia* – and both became far better known.



Jonathan Swift sends his protagonist around a series of utopias – not all good – in his book *Gulliver's Travels* (Credit: Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy)

**Gulliver's Travels** is a journey round a series of utopias, some good and some bad. In it Swift, like previous utopists, rails against the injustice of the modern world in quasi-Marxist terms, complaining that: “The rich man enjoyed the Fruit of the poor Man's Labour, and the Latter were a Thousand to One in Proportion to the former. That the bulk of our People was forced to live miserably by labouring every day for small wages to make a few live plentifully.”

The later 1700s saw a marked decline in utopian writings and utopian experiments. But toward the end of the century came both a revolution in France and a Romantic backlash against the Industrial Revolution.

The English Romantic William Blake complained about the “dark satanic mills” where men and women toiled to create enormous wealth for a few. He imagined a utopia called Jerusalem:

*The fields from Islington to Marylebone,  
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,  
Were builded over with pillars of gold,  
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.*

The Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for his part, hatched plans to sail away from England to America and create what he called a Pantisocracy: a place on the banks of the Susquehanna, Pennsylvania where he and his friends would combine buffalo hunting with philosophising. All property would be in common.

The scheme got as far as a flat-share in Bristol and collapsed.



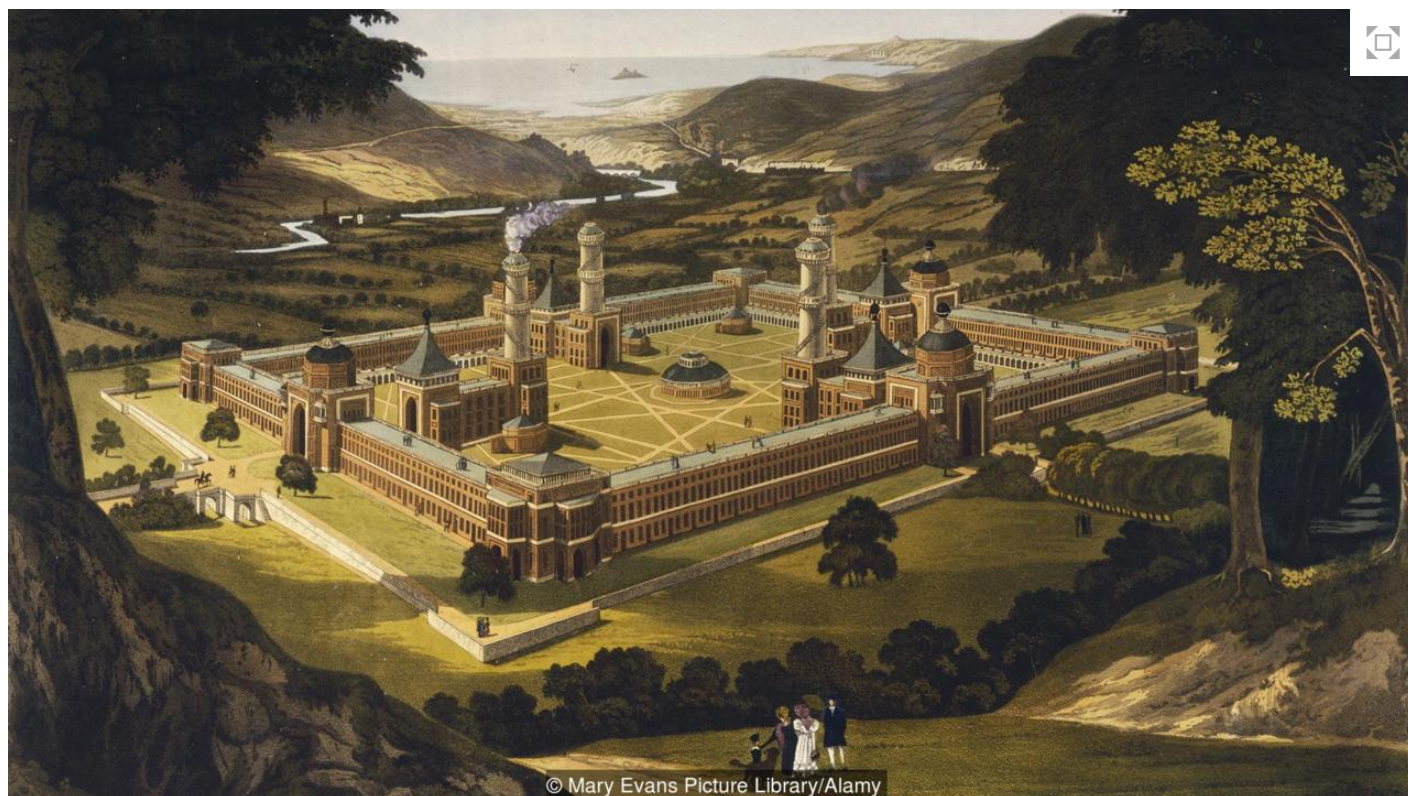
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After Robert Owen's first cooperative village in New Lanark, Scotland opened in 1813, the idea spread throughout Britain (Credit: Clearview/Alamy)

One significant, and more successful, utopian figure of the 19th Century was Robert Owen. A progressive mill-owner from Wales, he improved conditions for workers at his Manchester mill, joining the Manchester Board of Health to improve sanitary conditions and in 1817 introducing an 8-hour day for his workers with the slogan “Eight hours labour. Eight hours recreation. Eight hours rest.”

Owen launched a more ambitious scheme, though, in 1813, buying a school and ballroom with a group of Quakers in New Lanark, Scotland. It was the first of Owen's “cooperative villages” – which spread, along with the idea of socialism, throughout Britain. The Victorian period was filled with earnest discussion among do-gooders and intellectuals on how to alleviate the conditions of the poor. In the

mid-19th Century, dozens of Owenite experiments sprang up: small co-operative farms and communities, so-called 'village colonies' that provided every family with both a piece of land and farming lessons.



Robert Owen set up the cooperative village of New Harmony in Indiana in 1825; the experiment failed within two years (Credit: Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy)

Most of these schemes failed – or at least did not last long. They did, however, give birth to the co-operative movement which is still with us today and to organisations like Britain's National Trust. We can even trace the roots of the trade unions back to Owen's efforts.

Also still with us are the model communities of Bournville near Birmingham and Port Sunlight near Liverpool, the first built with chocolate money by the Cadbury family, the second with soap money by Lord Leverhulme, founder of Sunlight Soap (now owned by Unilever). Both were capitalist attempts to build comfortable environments for workers. I went to visit Port Sunlight in the early '90s and found it to be pretty and well cared for – though residents of the surrounding villages viewed the inhabitants of Port Sunlight as a bit dim and brain-washed.

Less successful was a town called Pullman near Chicago, Illinois. In 1880, railroad entrepreneur George Pullman of Pullman Palace Car fame launched the ambitious model village, named after himself. He aimed for the town to run as a business and return a profit to investors.

The whole town was carefully planned and built according to what were called "scientific principles" – which made for a number of very unappealing features. First off, like More's Utopia, there were no wine-taverns or ale-houses and no booze was allowed – though an exception was made for wealthy visitors staying at the grand Hotel Florence. Second, there were no public gatherings of any size. Third, workers had to buy goods in the over-priced Pullman shops. And fourth, no blacks were allowed.

In short, it was a disastrous mixture of the worst of centrally-controlled socialism and grasping capitalism – with racism thrown in for good measure.



An 1885 engraving of the 'model village' of Pullman, Illinois, which was planned according to 'scientific principles' (Credit: Granger Historical Picture Archive/Alamy)

Following the great market collapse of 1893, Pullman hiked rents. The workers were so squeezed, one man paid \$9 a month in rent and received a wage check for \$9.07.

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*The fundamental problem in creating perfect worlds: people don't like being told what to do*

In 1894, 4,000 Pullman residents, like thousands of workers across the US at that time, went on strike. The situation got violent; troops went in to quell the uprising. The government forced Pullman to sell his town. He died in 1897 so widely loathed, he had to be buried 12 feet underground for fear that his body would be dug up and desecrated by disgruntled employees.

Pullman's capitalist utopia demonstrated the fundamental problem in creating perfect worlds: people don't like being told what to do. Everyone's utopia is different. And since most utopias are inflexible, what happens to your ideal community when market conditions – which are outside your control – change?

### New patterns

At around the same time in England, William Morris was concocting a far gentler version of paradise. The generously bearded Victorian hero wrote one of the great utopian fantasies, **News from Nowhere** – a book full of charm, wit and good ideas. Morris also created the company Morris & Co, which had the

Thomas More-like aim of restoring medieval attitudes, in particular handicrafts, and providing enjoyable work for people.

Morris himself was absurdly energetic, managing to pursue simultaneous careers as a poet, artist, novelist, printer, pamphleteer, painter, designer, typesetter, business man, socialist pioneer and rabble-rouser (he was thrown in jail for attending an anti-war rally). He had little tolerance for the lazy and memorably declared: "If a chap cannot compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry, he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all."



One of the fabrics created by Morris & Co, one of the many careers of the multi-talented William Morris (Credit: V&A Images/Alamy)

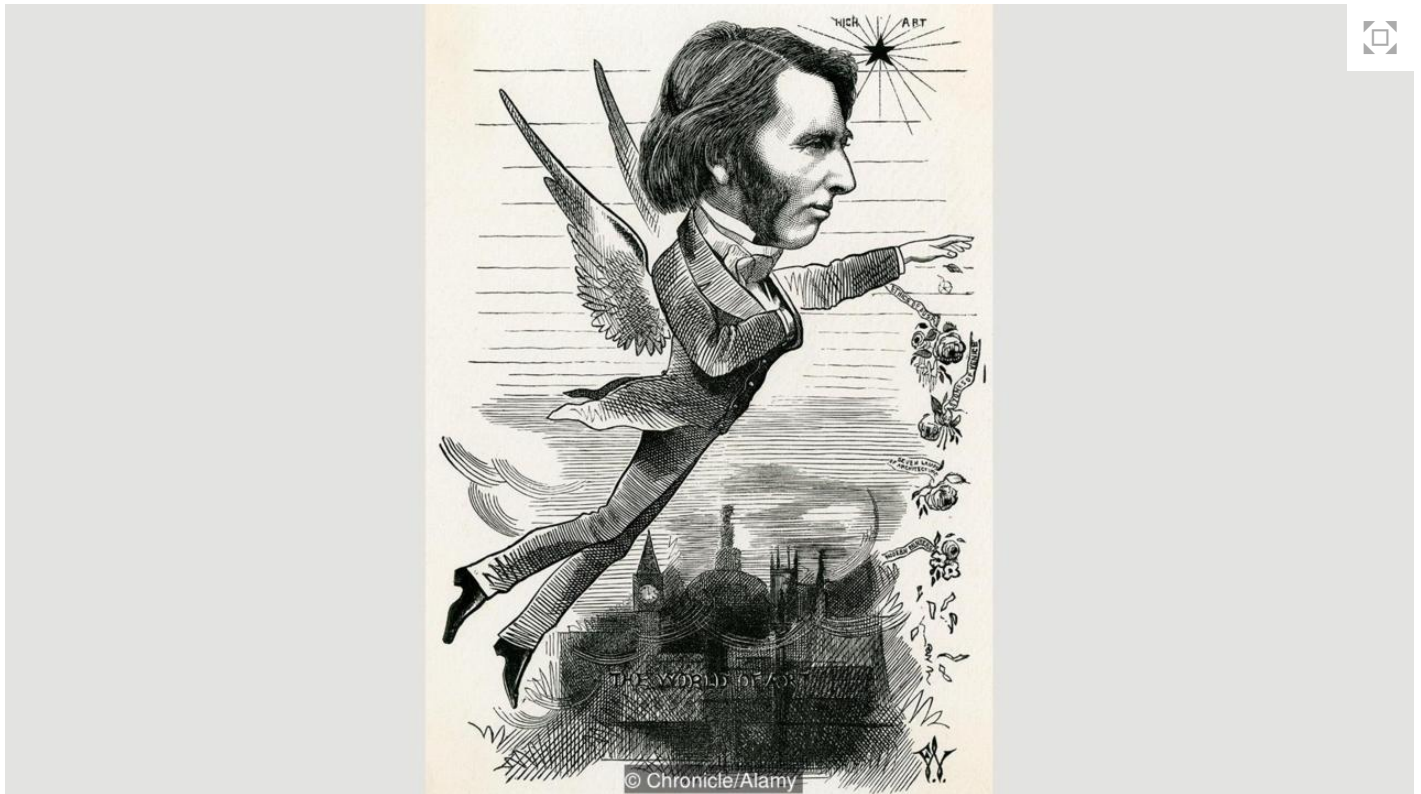
Morris is dearly loved by the British left; the great Marxist historian EP Thompson wrote a long and adoring biography of him which emphasised his socialist principles. Unlike the big-headed Pullman, though, Morris never imposed his utopian visions on anyone else by actually creating a commune or village. He was a romantic who became a revolutionary. As he wrote of himself:

*Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,  
Why should I strive to set the crooked path straight?*

News from Nowhere was published in 1890. It is sub-titled "an utopian romance", giving the reader a clear sign that it's not meant to be interpreted as a blueprint for an ideal community. Really, Morris wanted all people to live what he called a refined life, to have the leisure time to read and play music and think and be poets.

Morris's utopia did not come out of nowhere: there was something of a medievalist fervour at that time. John Ruskin, another medievalist and fan of the guild system, was outlining projects for ideal village

communities, while the Arts and Crafts movement also was inspired by the Middle Ages.



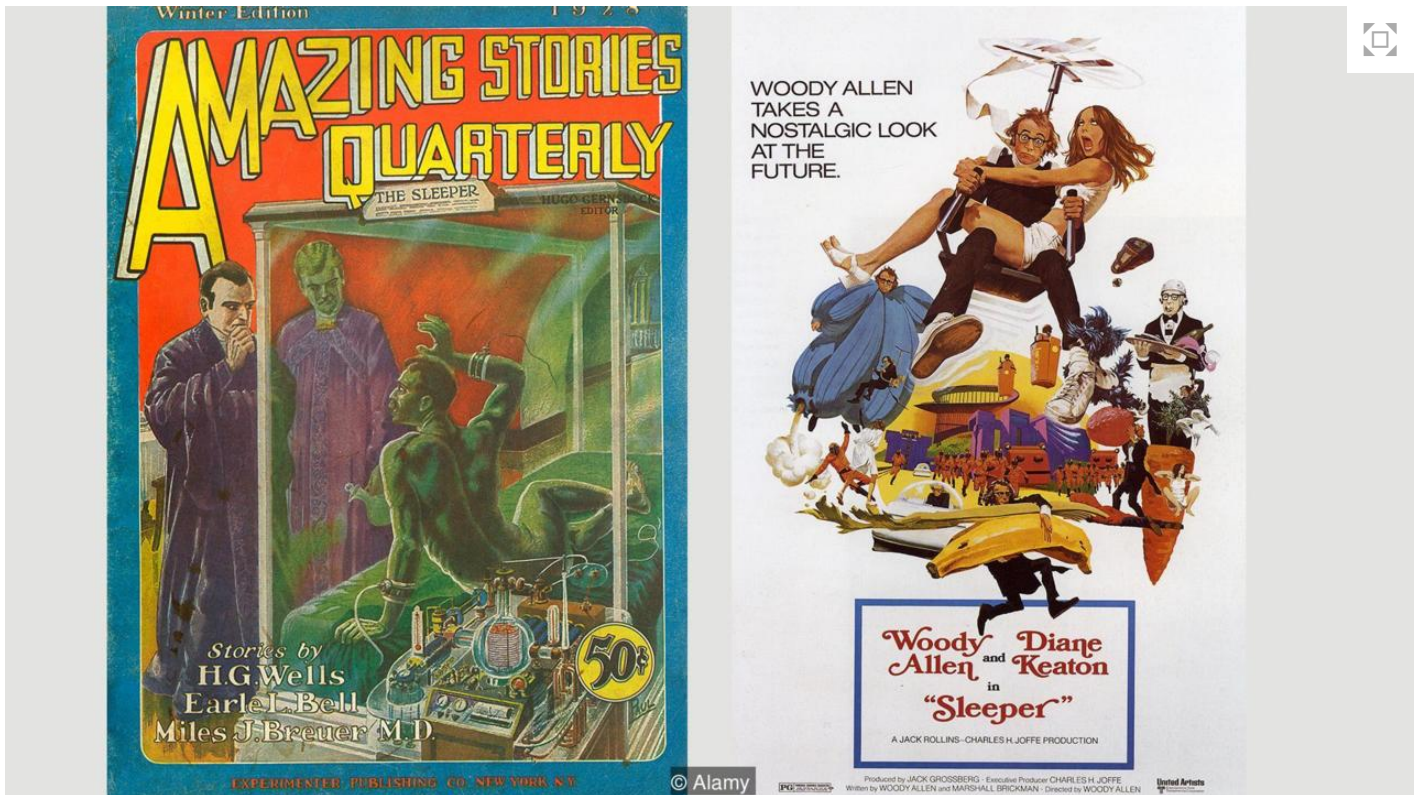
In his lifetime, John Ruskin's desire to live an ideal life – one that soared above reality – was often a subject of satire (Credit: Chronicle/Alamy)

Morris was attacking the sordid utilitarianism which dominated his own age. In his utopia, presented through a dialogue between an elder of the new world and a young man who finds himself transported there, green fields cover London's Piccadilly Circus. Money has been abolished. There is no private property. Women of 40 look 20 and wear simple clothes are not "upholstered like arm-chairs, as most women of our time are". Children get out into nature: when our hero notices that there are camps of feral children living in the woods of Kensington, his guide tells him that "the less they stew in houses the better for them." Above all, the narrator says, the society reminds him of the 14th Century.

Meanwhile, the Houses of Parliament are now used as "a storage place for manure" – quite a satisfying Victorian joke.

In fact, Morris's utopia, refreshingly, has elements of the Land of Cockayne to it. It is not, like More's Utopia, puritanical in nature. The inhabitants have a lot of fun: the narrator, for example, records with pleasure that dinner is served with a bottle of very good Bordeaux.

Immediately following Morris came HG Wells, who wrote a dozen utopian and dystopian novels. They were generally technological in nature: Woody Allen's *Sleeper*, with its giant vegetables, sex machines and robotic butlers, is a satire of Wells's 1899 *The Sleeper Awakes*.



HG Wells's dystopian *The Sleeper Awakes* was satirised by Woody Allen in his 1973 film *Sleeper* (Credit: Alamy)

Perhaps the most surprising reverberation of More's utopia, though, was found in the towering figures of Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi. It's a little-known fact that the Indian nationalist corresponded with the aristocratic Russian novelist. Tolstoy, an anarchist and a Christian, held that the state was responsible for most of the bad stuff: taxes, wars and general irresponsibility. Tolstoy counselled passive resistance and non-violence instead.

Communes based on Tolstoy's version of Christianity sprang up in the UK. The familiar elements were there: a return to handicrafts and small-scale agriculture, partial rejection of the gewgaws of the modern world, communal dining and shared expenditure.

Two of these communes still exist today in the UK. One is the Brotherhood Church of Stapleton, which, according to a recent *New Yorker* piece, is home to four humans, a deaf cat, a few hens and an enormous cow. The other is the Whiteway Colony in the Cotswolds, formed in 1898. More village than commune, Whiteway is a collection of 68 houses loosely bound by a monthly meeting.

In 1909 a young Indian philosopher started to correspond with Tolstoy. He called himself the Count's "humble follower"; the two men discussed Indian home rule, pacifism, passive resistance, freedom from toil and other utopian issues. In 1910, the young man – Gandhi – launched a cooperative colony in South Africa which he named Tolstoy Farm. It was Gandhi's utopian thinking, inspired by Tolstoy, that led to his doctrine of passive resistance and his campaign for Indian home rule.

### Dark visions



One of my favourite 20th-Century utopian societies, however, is the anarchist occupation of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. Here, from 1936 to the start of Franco's reign in 1939, authority and rank were suspended, people called each other 'comrade' and an anarchist system ruled. It is described without sentiment by George Orwell, who fought for the anarchists, in his account **Homage to Catalonia**.



Anarchists tried to set up a version of a 'utopian' society in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, one which suspended authority and rank (Credit: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy)

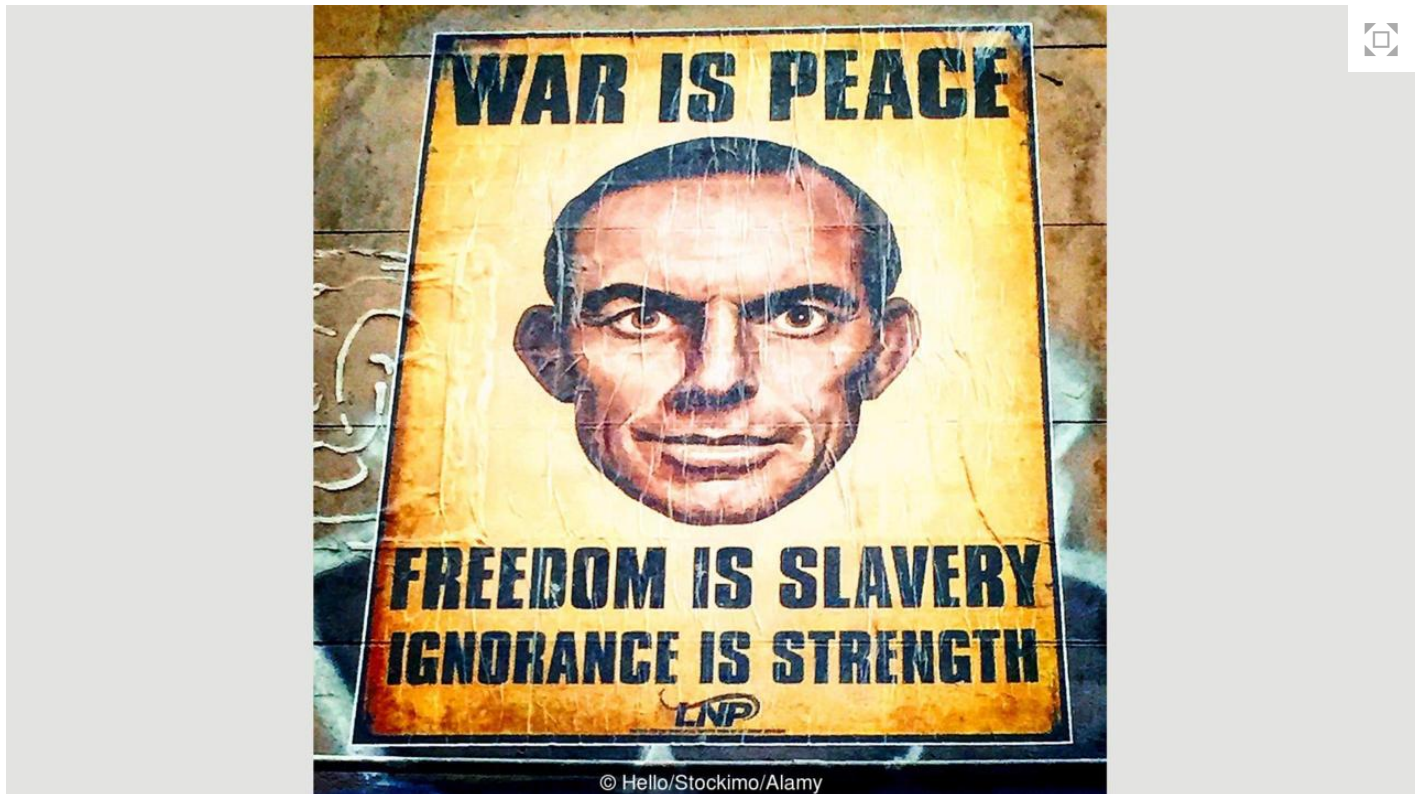
Meanwhile, utopias continued to hatch from the imaginations of novelists. In 1915, American author Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her feminist utopia **Herland**. In this ideal society, there are no men at all, and the women prize education above all else. Women have learned to reproduce via parthenogenesis – no men required. Children are the responsibility of everyone, though during the first two years of life the child is closely attached to her real mother. There is no war or private property.

At the same time, other novelists decided that it would be more fun to write dystopias than utopias – and hence science fiction began. EM Forster added to the swelling genre with his brilliant novel **The Machine Stops**. In this grim fantasy, the people live alone in underground cells, connected to everyone else in the world by screen... sound familiar? The machine is worshipped as source of all knowledge and freedom: "The Machine feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being. The Machine is the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is The Machine."

The genre ultimately gave birth to two of the most famous utopian experiments of the 20th Century, both of them literary.

Aldous Huxley once said that he originally conceived *Brave New World*, published in 1931, as a gentle satire of Wells's endless utopias. Huxley was also worrying about the increasing 'Americanisation' of Europe. And there are many of what you might call 'American' features in his brave new (and dystopian) world: pain, for example, has been destroyed; when life gets overwhelming, the citizens take the drug soma which is a kind of cross between ecstasy and Prozac. To read the book today is startling as so many of its predictions have come true – like the Philistinism of the state, the debasement of sex and the insistence on happiness.

The book was a huge hit. So was George Orwell's later dystopia **1984**, published in 1949. Both books also were loathed by Oxbridge Marxists.



Some of the lines from George Orwell's 1984 have become instantly recognisable (Credit: Hello/Stockimo/Alamy)

One historian called AL Morton, writing in 1952, really believed that a real utopia was being built in Soviet Russia and that Orwell and Huxley's negative views of a totalitarian state were decadent and counter-revolutionary. Huxley's ideas, writes Morton, are "self-evidently false, and in practice they are being shown daily to be false before our eyes, in that third of the world which is now building socialism upon quite different postulates." For good measure, he adds, 1984 "as an intellectual attack on Marxism... is beneath contempt".

Morton then goes on to claim that "the fantasies of Cockayne... are now being translated into facts in the plans that are now beginning to change the face and climate of the USSR and other socialist countries."

Of course, at the time of writing, the USSR's leader was Stalin. But such naive and blinkered optimism was typical of the socialist intellectuals of the 1950s.

The late '60s saw hippies pick up on the now-familiar elements of classical utopias like back-to-the-land ideals, small scale crafts, the end of private property, an undermining of bourgeois marriage restrictions and an attack on consumerism. If we have learned anything from surveying utopian writing and real-life experimentation, it is that the same ideals keep returning.

Such communal living experiments don't tend to survive very long. However – though sometimes invaded by violent drug-dealers and various other problems – the anarchist community of **Freetown Christiania** in Copenhagen has proved decidedly resilient. Founded in 1971 on an old military base, it is today home to 850 citizens and as a thriving bicycle business. Its mission statement reads: “The objective of Christiania is to create a self-governing society whereby each and every individual holds themselves responsible over the wellbeing of the entire community. Our society is to be economically self-sustaining and, as such, our aspiration is to be steadfast in our conviction that psychological and physical destitution can be averted.”



Founded in 1971, Copenhagen's anarchist community of Freetown Christiania has been a particularly long-lasting experiment in communal living (Credit: Juan Jimenez/Alamy)

Christiania is a car-free neighbourhood, and like other hippy-ish communities allows its residents to build their own houses. The result is a very beautiful architectural vernacular: the houses look like wooden Babapapa houses. A famous son of the village is lead singer of international pop band Lukas Graham, behind the mega-hit 7 Years.

### Future perfect

Today, the utopian spirit is far from dead. Like their capitalist forebears in the 19th Century, Silicon Valley capitalists talk about building ideal societies. In a small way their workplaces – like the Google or Facebook campuses – aim to provide workers with a progressive working environment.

More ambitiously, billionaires are planning libertarian colonies. One of the most powerful players in the Californian tech revolution of the last 20 years is Peter Thiel. He was a co-founder of Paypal, which he predicted would be “something big” in a 1999 speech. He also was the first serious investor in Facebook. He invested \$500,000 in the company and later sold his shares for \$1 billion.

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*Like their capitalist forebears in the 19th Century, Silicon Valley capitalists talk about building ideal societies*

Thiel has recently invested over \$1 million in a project called the **Seasteading Institute**. His concept: geeks will set up self-governing cities in the sea free from the interference of government. They look a bit like medieval city-states. The mission statement says that they aim “to establish permanent, autonomous ocean communities to enable experimentation and innovation with diverse social, political, and legal systems”.

The back-to-the-land hippy-ish experiments continue, too. The writer David Bramwell recently published his *Number Nine Bus to Utopia*, his account of a year spent visiting eccentric communities around the world. And Tobias Jones, having written his own account of contemporary utopian experiments, set up one of his own in 2009, a farm-based refuge in Somerset for waifs and strays which he and his wife Fra still run today. His gruelling and frequently comical experiences are brilliantly related in his book *A Place of Refuge: An Experiment in Communal Living*, published in 2015.



The Arcosanti collective in the Arizona desert is planned around concern for both the environment and design (Credit: Jim DeLillo/Alamy)

Another utopian experiment that survives today is the arts centre and open house colony Dial House, founded by artists Penny Rimbaud and Gee Vaucher in 1968. Situated on an acre of land in Essex, the house has given birth to a number of successful projects including most famously the anarchist punk

band Crass, which introduced hundreds of thousands of working-class kids to utopian concepts like vegetarianism, pacifism, the end of wage slavery, feminism and animal rights.

So Utopia isn't dead. But what have we learned from these centuries of ideas, hopes and plans?

It seems practically nothing. The communist ideal remains attractive but elusive. The 1% continue to indulge in warfare, government and money-lending. And the rest of us get along as best we can – with the occasional trip to the Land of Cockayne on Friday nights.

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