



Utopia and ideology in cultural dynamics

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Utopia is a culturally constructed vision of an ideal human condition. Although its contents vary cross-culturally, utopian visions exist across cultures and therefore utopian thinking is a widespread human proclivity. When activated, a utopian vision can engage citizens with their on-going societal processes by activating a motivation to criticize and change the status quo, but may also disengage them from their society, enticing them to wallow in their impossible dream. Utopias animate cultural dynamics – the formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture over time – as a critical part of humanity's effort to collectively self-regulate our construction of society.

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Introduction

Long before Thomas More's coinage of the term, *Utopia*, humanity has engaged in utopian thinking. When broadly construed as an imagined ideal way of living, utopianism is discernible in most, if not all, human cultural traditions [e.g. 1–4]. From a psychological perspective, utopia can be understood as a *symbolically constructed representation of an ideal human world*. It is symbolically constructed because it does not currently exist, but is imagined, represented, and communicated in symbolic forms using language, pictures, or other materials. It is about an ideal, or even perfect, world that humans can potentially live in or perhaps construct. As such, utopia is first and foremost a *cultural artefact* — a product of human imagination, a potential driver of human striving, and is therefore a significant subject matter for cultural dynamics [5]: investigations on the formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture over time.

Utopia and ideology

Mannheim's [6] *Ideology and Utopia* is a classic text that contrasts utopianism to ideology. In his view, ideology is a worldview that maintains the status quo, whereas a utopia is meant to change it. He regarded both as more or less coherent depictions about a societal state, which diverge from the actual state of the society as it is. Mannheim arguably takes what Jost *et al.* [7] called a critical approach to ideology. This is because he regards ideology as serving the function of maintaining the existing social system as highlighted in system justification theory [8,9], and he suggests that ideology can function to mask the social reality at times. In contrast, he regards utopia as functioning to challenge and alter it. In this sense, utopian thinking can activate what Johnson and Fujita [10] called system change motivation (also see Refs. [11,12]).

To the extent that a specific worldview diverges from the status quo, whether it is ideological or utopian is difficult to determine *a priori*. Neoliberalism is a case in point. When The Mont Pèlerin Society first promoted a neoliberal agenda of the free market political economy in the 50's and 60's, it significantly diverged from the then status quo of the Keynesian economics and may very well have been called utopian [for a historical account of neoliberalism, see Ref. 13]. However, it may now be regarded as an ideology that maintains the status quo [14]. As Mannheim noted, whether a vision of an ideal society functions as an ideology or a utopia depends on the historical context, and is not a straightforward matter [15].

The behavioural science of utopianism

Utopianism is not just idle wishful thinking. Sociologist, Ruth Levitas [1] suggested that utopian thinking serves at least three different functions: criticism, change, and compensation. In *criticism*, a utopian vision acts as a standard against which the current society is compared and its shortcomings, criticized. In *change*, a utopia acts as a goal and a desired direction towards which people may strive to change the status quo. These functions guide citizens to engage with ongoing societal processes; however, a utopia can also entice them to escape and disengage from them. This possibility is *compensation*, in which a utopia compensates for the troubles and mayhems of worldly affairs in an escapist dream. Thus, utopian thinking can play a significant role in societal engagement, particularly social change, although it also runs a potential risk of wallowing in blissful escapism.

Utopian functions as collective self-regulation

The functions of utopia can be conceptualized as an instance of collective self-regulation – an individual's

regulation of their cognition, emotion, and behaviour on behalf of a collective [e.g. 16] (see Figure 1).

Humans have a capacity for prospection, that is, mentally simulating how their future may pan out [17]. Ordinary people have cross-culturally similar prospections about their future society — increasingly competent, but less warm and benevolent [18,19]. If prospections along the ‘business as usual’ route reveal a probable and troublesome future, they can prompt criticism about the status quo. Nonetheless, a change requires a move from the less satisfying current state to a better alternative state [e.g. 20], and an imagined alternative possibility is likely to be necessary to motivate a change [21]. Indeed, Moscovici *et al.* [22] and Tajfel and Turner [23] both pointed to the significance of an alternative as an instigator of social innovation and change. In this sense, the most fundamental function of utopianism is the provision of an *alternative vision* for society [24*,25]. Once a utopian alternative is available, it can guide striving towards an ideal society. Likewise, dystopia – a utopian vision in disguise – can act as a worst possible societal condition that one is afraid of falling into and therefore strive to avoid its realization. Just as an individual’s ideal and ought selves can guide their thoughts, feelings, and actions [e.g. 26,27], through the change and criticism functions, utopia and dystopia can guide their societal engagement.

Consistent with this theorizing, Fernando *et al.* [28**] showed a facilitative effect of utopian thinking on societal engagement. First, they developed the Utopianism Scale, a measure of individual differences in the inclination for utopian thinking. In three samples (UK and two US), two subscales were identified and replicated. The Utopianism

subscale taps people’s tendency to imagine what an ideal society may look like, whereas the Anti-Utopianism subscale indicates the degree to which people think it is dangerous to think about a utopia. Utopianism is associated with the activation of the criticism, change, and compensation functions. Consistently across three samples, those high on Utopianism were less satisfied with society and also lower on system justification motivation – motivation to maintain the status quo – as measured by a scale that Kay and Jost [29] developed – but more willing to engage in a variety of citizenship behaviours designed to change the current society. Nonetheless, Utopianism also correlated positively with escapism. In contrast, Anti-Utopianism was somewhat less consistent, showing a positive correlation with system justifying tendency in two samples, and a negative correlation with change and escapism.

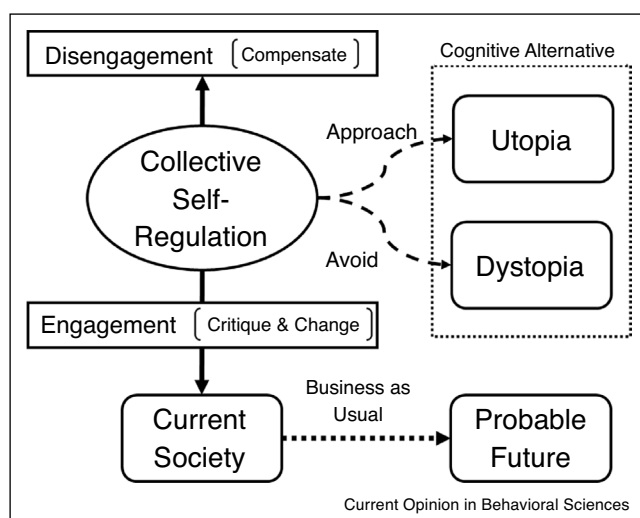
Next, the causal efficacy of utopian thinking on societal engagement was examined by priming. In their Studies 1 and 2, American MTurk workers were asked to write about their ‘ideal or best possible society’, and their satisfaction with society, system justification, social change intentions, and escapism were measured. Relative to the control condition, the utopian priming lowered satisfaction with society and system justification, but increased the intention to engage in social change actions, while it had no effect on escapism. In Study 2, the effect of thinking about utopia first and then contrasting it to the current society was found to be no different to merely thinking about utopia, but both conditions induced significantly greater societal engagement relative to when the order was reversed, that is, thinking about the current society and then utopia. This is in line with *mental contrasting*, a process proposed by Oettingen [30], who theorized that representing a desired goal and contrasting the current self to it enable people to think about steps to achieve the goal and increase the motivation to pursue the goal. This aspect of the theorizing needs to be further tested in future research.

Content of utopia

Not all utopian visions are equally motivating for everyone, however, and there are potentially as many utopias as there are unique individuals and their circumstances. Taking into account a review of English utopian writing from 1516 (More’s *Utopia*) to 1700, historian, J.C. Davis [31] conceptualized utopianism as a solution to a collective problem of satisfying human desires with limited resources, and we surmise that prototypical utopias address two main questions: *resource availability* and *how the resource-desire problem is resolved* (Table 1).

In addressing the resource availability question, one extreme is to imagine a world where material resources are so abundant that even the grossest of human desires are amply met. Davis called it *Cockayne* following a

Figure 1



Utopia, dystopia, and collective self-regulation of societal engagement.

Table 1

Prototypes of utopia			
Resource availability	Maximization	Sufficiency	
How the resource-desire problem is resolved	Cockaygne Supernatural Millennium	Arcadia Institutions Utopia	Moral commonwealth Science and technology Science

medieval poem, *The Land of Cockaygne*, where wines flow and geese fly roasted into the mouth. This represents the principle of abundance or *maximization*, where resources are maximally available for human consumption. There are two other solutions which emphasise a contrary principle. One is *Arcadia*, a Greco-Roman image of the Golden Age, where natural resources may not be limitless as in Cockaygne, but human desires are moderate and in harmony with what is available in nature. The other is *Moral Commonwealth*, in which limited resources are morally extracted, distributed, and used by humans who can ethically self-regulate their desires. They represent the principle of *sufficiency*, where the resources are sufficient for human needs [32**].

There are other utopian prototypes, which stipulate how the resource-desire problem is resolved. One is *Millennium*, where supernatural deities solve the problem for humans as in the ‘second coming’ in Christianity. The other is *Utopia* – Davis called this Utopia with a capital U in honour of Thomas More, who imagined that the resource-desire problem is resolved by better social institutions and governance structures. To Davis’s five utopian prototypes, we add *Science*, where the collective problem is solved by the advances in science and technology [33]. Nonetheless, scientific utopia is not always an *eutopia* (i.e. good place), but is often depicted as a dystopia, where advanced science deprives humanity of their vivacity, spontaneity, and agency, as in Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *Nineteen eighty-four* [e.g. 3,33].

Contemporary utopian visions are often combinations of these utopian prototypes. Prominent among them are scientific and ecological utopias [34]. The epitome of scientific utopias is a *Sci-Fi* utopia [24**,32**,35], which is seen to achieve material abundance by advanced science and technology (e.g. abundant energy, space travel, robots and AI) as in *Star Trek* [36]. In contrast, ecological utopias [37] can be divided into a primitivist ‘return to nature’ orientation and a more modern environmentally friendly outlook, where the former is akin to the traditional *Arcadia*, but the latter may be called a *Green* utopia, a combination of the Arcadian theme with a moderate degree of scientific utopianism [32**].

Interestingly, people’s utopian visions are not necessarily characterized by the *maximization principle*, where all that humans desire is maximally satisfied. Fernando, O’Brien

[24**] examined how people perceive the Sci-Fi and Green utopias. Here, the Sci-Fi utopia was described as ‘prosperous and everyone has access to material wealth’, whereas the Green utopia, as a society in which ‘there is just enough to share so that nobody lives in poverty’. However, American MTurk workers rated the Green utopia as warmer and more socially progressive (i.e. more peaceful, freer, fairer, more democratic, and more equal) than Sci-Fi utopias, suggesting that on average they did not necessarily wish to maximize material wealth in a Cockaynesque utopia.

Hornsey [38*] corroborate this. They asked citizens around the world (9 and 27 countries in Study 1 and 2, respectively) to rate their ideal societies on a scale from 0 (none) to 100 (absolute) in terms of friendliness, morality, equality of opportunity, ambition, crime levels (reverse), freedom in society, creativity, technological advances, and national security. The aggregate score for ideal society was between 61.27 (South Korea) to 84.36 (Mexico), which is clearly below the maximum of 100. This suggests that none of the cultural groups adopted a maximization principle in considering ideal society. Although utopias often have a connotation of abundance and excess, these studies suggest that many ordinary people’s ideal societies are more moderate.

Moderating effect of utopian content on function

Fernando *et al.* [24**] found that the content of utopia can moderate the effect of utopian thinking on social change motivation and behaviour. In a pilot study, they first developed a measure of Levitas’s three functions of utopia (criticism, change, and compensation). The 9-item scale showed the three factors, and its change subscale strongly correlated with intentions to engage in a variety of social change behaviours. In Study 1, American MTurk workers were exposed to and evaluated Green and Sci-Fi utopian visions. Those who evaluated the Green utopia positively reported higher levels of change motivation and were more likely to donate to a relevant charity (Sierra Club), whereas favourable evaluations of Sci-Fi utopia did not correlate with the change function or donation. In Study 2, the effect of Green and Sci-Fi utopia on personal strivings was examined, that is, the extent to which an individual personally strives towards certain goals [39,40], in this instance, three goals of environmental protection, economic growth, and a comfortable lifestyle. Relative to the Sci-Fi utopia, the Green

utopia activated environmental strivings more and this effect was mediated by perceived participative efficacy, beliefs in ordinary people's capacity to make a difference in realizing their utopia [Cf. 41].

In this regard, it is intriguing that a benevolent society appears to be a potential common denominator of engaging utopian visions. Bain *et al.* found that people tend to support policies and collective actions that can produce a more benevolent future society, arguably a society closer to a utopia [42*,43].

Concluding comments: utopianism, collective action, and cultural dynamics

Utopias can drive human striving for a better way of living. Importantly, they can be a *cultural innovation*, where a novel cultural element is constructed and entered into cultural discourse [5]. As such, a utopia is a cultural artefact, which can start even from a single individual, diffuse through social networks using social media or other platforms, and take hold in broader society [44]. It can provide a cognitive alternative and drive collective action *broadly conceived*. Although collective action is often narrowly conceptualized as action undertaken by members of a group to pursue the group's goal [45], especially for a disadvantaged group to improve the conditions of that group, utopian thinking does not necessitate a specific group membership. For utopia-driven action can be undertaken *for* a group, for example, society as a whole, regardless of the actor's group membership or even before the formation of any group or social identity [24**]. Obviously, this does not preclude the possibility for a group to form around a utopian vision, just as in intentional communities, and to instigate a social movement, or collective action narrowly conceived [46].

Indeed, a utopian vision can engage citizens with their society by deactivating system-justification motivation and activating system-change motivation. However, there is a danger of enticing people to disengage from their worldly affairs and escape into their impossible dream. Because of a utopia's potential for societal engagement *and* disengagement, utopianism has both societal benefits and costs. Highlighting the benefits, some have argued for and even encouraged utopian thinking, whereas others like Karl Popper [47] have argued against utopianism, expressing anti-utopian sentiment (also see Ref. [2]). The vernacular notion of utopia often carries the connotation of a useless, idle speculation or dream. Thus, utopias animate cultural and societal dynamics on two planes. Utopias can motivate cultural discourse and societal engagement in what Jost *et al.* [7] called discursive superstructure, but can also activate a meta-discourse about the utility and viability of a utopian vision for betterment of the current human condition [48]. In all, utopias are a critical part of humanity's striving to self-regulate our own cultural dynamics.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Author contribution

YK wrote the main text and JWF annotated and contributed to the writing.

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