What Can We Learn from Utopians of the Past?

Four nineteenth-century authors offered blueprints for a better world—but their progressive visions had a dark side.

By Adam Gopnik (*The New Yorker*, July 23, 2018, pp. 58-62.)

Michael Robertson's "The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and Their Legacy" (Princeton) is instructive and touching, if sometimes inadvertently funny. The instructive parts rise from Robertson's evocation and analysis of a series of authors who aren't likely to be well known to American readers, even those of a radical turn of mind. All four wrote books and imagined ideal societies with far more of an effect on their time than we now remember. The touching parts flow from the quixotic and earnest imaginations of his heroes and heroine: the pundit Edward Bellamy, the designer William Morris, the pioneering gay writer Edward Carpenter, and the feminist social reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. His utopians showed enormous courage in imagining and, to one degree or another, trying to create new worlds against the grain of the one they had inherited. They made blueprints of a better place, detailed right down to the wallpaper, and a pleasing aura of pious intent rises from these pages.

The comedy, which is inadvertent, springs from Robertson's absence of common sense about these utopian projects, pious intent being very different from pragmatic achievement. Hugely sympathetic to his subjects, he discovers again and again as he inspects their projects that, for all the commendable bits that anticipate exactly the kinds of thing we like now, there are disagreeable bits right alongside, of exactly the kinds that we *don't* like now. The utopian feminists are also eugenicists and anti-Semites; the men who dream of a perfect world where same-sex attraction is privileged also unconsciously mimic the hierarchy of patriarchy, putting effeminate or cross-dressing "Uranians" at the bottom of their ladder. The socialists are also sexists, and the far-seeing anarchists are also muddle-headed, mixed-up mystics.

The sensible lesson one might draw from this is that the human condition is one in which the distribution of bad and good is forever in flux, and so any blueprint of perfection is doomed to failure. Instead, Robertson assumes that if we can just add to the utopian visions of 1918 the progressive pieties of 2018—if we reform their gender essentialism and their implicit hierarchism and several other nasty isms—then we will at last arrive at the right utopia. This gives his book something of the exhausted cheerfulness of a father on a nine-hour car trip. "We're almost there!" he keeps saying, as the kids in the back seat fret, and peer at license plates.

As every student was once taught, the idea of utopia, or at least the name for it, originated with Thomas More, the man for all seasons, who wrote the first one down in 1516. "Utopia" means "no place" in Greek, and so a sly element of rueful self-acknowledgment resides within the idea, with the auto-negation of a Magritte drawing. More's original Utopia is, like many that followed it, a charming mixture of intelligent social criticism and bizarre sexual aspiration, none of it meant, one feels, to be taken altogether seriously. In More, the two ironies that govern nineteenth-century utopian thinking are already present: artisanal craft is rated over mental work by an intellectual author, and sexual egalitarianism is proposed by an imagination not entirely at ease with it. In More's island society, everyone has to weave or sew or do carpentry, and partner-switching through divorce is permitted. There's no private property and no locks on the houses, but there are slaves—kept in gold chains, to teach children to despise the substance. Women have to confess their sins to their husbands, but the husbands must obey their wives. Though his motives in writing the book are still puzzling to scholars (was More mocking Catholic rules or merely toying with them?), he created a template for later utopias, which were always marked by those two tenacious ironies: thinking people are told by a thinking person to stop thinking, and changing the world is imagined to depend on changing who we sleep with and how. (By contrast, the French tradition, as in the ideal worlds of Fourier and Comte, has an edge of instruction; they *really mean it*, in a way that More and the writers Robertson inspects don't quite.)

Edward Bellamy is the first of Robertson's nineteenth-century utopians. When his blandly written book "Looking Backward" appeared, in 1888, it created a now puzzling craze both in his native America and in England. Bellamy's hero falls asleep in 1887—bizarrely, he's been entombed in a specially built cell designed to help cure his insomnia—and wakes up in 2000. Instead of immediately rushing off to see "Mission: Impossible 2," though, he enters a world of communistic order. As Robertson rightly sees, Bellamy offers a nightmarish vision of a hyper-regimented society in which everyone works for the government and retires at forty-five, and where the most fun you can have is to go shopping by picking out goods from a catalogue, ordering them from big depots via pneumatic tube, and then having them delivered at home. Where Wells's "The Time Machine," which came out not long after, gave us pale Eloi and proletarian Morlocks, Bellamy was chiefly prescient about Amazon Prime.

What in the world made "Looking Backward" appealing not only to men of letters like William Dean Howells and Mark Twain but to so many farmers and workers that Bellamy was eventually made a delegate of a populist party? Part of the appeal, Robertson persuasively argues, had something to do with post-Civil War nostalgia for the purity of wartime regimentation. In a time of confused plutocracy, everyone wanted a variant of what William James later called "the moral equivalent of war."

But pursuing the moral equivalent of war always gives you the warrior's idea of morality. As Bellamy's book progresses, power, brutality, and the capacity to dominate become all that matters. Rules are made and harshly enforced. Robertson chides Bellamy for being inconsistently feminist, which is true, but what is chilling in Bellamy is how much of the totalitarian imagination is already in place in his work, and how alluring it can seem. It's the same phenomenon that we find in the Athenian intellectual's idealization of Sparta: intellectuals always dream of a closed society even though they themselves can exist only in an open one.

Bellamy's book, hard to read now, had a falling-domino effect on Robertson's next and more interesting utopian, William Morris; "Looking Backward" helped inspire Morris's "News from Nowhere," from 1890. Though written as a kind of corrective to Bellamy, as the Gospel of Matthew is a Jewish corrective to the Gentile-welcoming Gospel of Mark, "News from Nowhere" signals a more radical break with nineteenth-century orthodoxy than Bellamy could achieve. Heroes and heroines of the time are always falling asleep and waking up in some illustrative elsewhere—the pattern holds true for everyone from Alice to Twain's Connecticut Yankee—and Morris's hero wakes up in a perfect socialist-agrarian England, restored to a pastoral purity that somehow doesn't include dawn-to-dusk labor in the fields or the constant threat of famine.

Yet the improbability of the vision shouldn't diminish the originality of the take. Marxist accounts are concerned with the distribution of the goods that work makes; the utopian remonstrance is concerned with the nature of work itself. For Morris, industrial, agricultural, and even clerical work amount to forms of regimentation no different from slavery, a series of insults to the human spirit. The evil is industrialized labor itself—an entire existence spent like a galley slave pulling an oar. Owning your own oar doesn't change the inhumanity of a life given over to rowing in the dark.

Morris's novel became the central literary testament of the Arts and Crafts movement, which had sprung out of the more narrowly easel-bound Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But then, Morris's desire to reject all things Victorian and be "intensely medieval" is what makes him so quintessentially Victorian. His famously hand-wrought houses, Kelmscott Manor and the Red House, depended on the broader fabric of Victorian prosperity to support their own secession from it. Authoritarians come in many kinds—theistic and military and bully-worshipping—but Morris was an unusual and modern thing, an *aesthetic* authoritarian. He believed that ugliness was as much of an enemy to the human spirit as poverty. Typically, the aesthetic authoritarian likes spartan design: Doric columns and militarized courtyards. But Morris had "feminine" taste; he wanted social justice in the form of flowered wallpaper.

The narrative originality in “News from Nowhere” lies in Morris’s inserting a love story into the moralizing time traveller’s romance: the hero has a virtuous socialist-feminist heroine, Ellen, to pursue. Yet Morris drains the love story of all vitality. The novel priggishly assures us that storms in love are all the result of private-property relations. “I know that there used to be such lunatic affairs as divorce courts,” an informant from the future society tells our narrator. “But just consider; all the cases that came into them were matters of property quarrels: and I think, dear guest . . . that though you do come from another planet, you can see from the mere outside look of our world that quarrels about private property could not go on amongst us in our days.”

In fact, Morris’s own love life suggests that breakups actually have a lot to do with emotion. Rather against the run of his own idealizing, he admits that sexual jealousy and erotic rage will still rule in utopia: two adultery-related murders take place in the book. It’s as if Morris couldn’t credibly imagine a world without passion. So we come back to the actual story that inspired it—the story of Morris’s love for the working-class beauty Jane Burden and her eventual troubled affair with his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti—to find ourselves in a recognizably human world where new desire and old allegiance and frustrated appetite and lovers’ empathy devolve into their usual muddle.

The last two of Robertson’s four utopians are chosen, one feels, not because of their historical impact but because of their alignment with contemporary preoccupations. Edward Carpenter was a wealthy British homosexual who either did or did not have sex with Walt Whitman after making a pilgrimage to meet him in Philadelphia in 1877. Either way, he was inspired by the encounter to write a long utopian poem called “Towards Democracy.” A sub-Whitman rhapsody of no particular poetic merit, the work had a smallish effect in its time. It’s essentially a catalogue of utopian attitudes, including, yes, the overevaluation of craft and the not very well defined longings for sexual freedom: “Lovers of all handicrafts and of labors in the open air, confessed passionate lovers of your own sex / Arise! / Heroes of the enfranchisement of the body (latest and best gift long concealed from men), Arise!” The poem’s habitual conjunction of the carefully qualifying parentheses with the martial invocation is, to say the least, bathetic. But Carpenter did have a distinctive contribution: to imagine same-sex desire as the essential building block of a perfected world

Robertson worries about how much we ought to read Carpenter's book as a prescient work of gay liberation—indulging the idea that, until we can give a specific singular name to a thing, we have no concept of it. "Homosexuals were nonexistent in British discourse until the 1890's," he writes. But mental categories are not enclosed by a single word, or even by any words at all. People took sexual pleasure from inflicting pain before Sade sacrificed his name to sadism, and others loved enduring it before there was a Sacher-Masoch. "Homosexual" may have given a new pseudoscientific taxonomic category to the language, but it didn't alter the condition of desire. English memoirs before 1890 are filled with men who were attracted to other men and who knew it. In any case, the continuity of desire, across discontinuities of labels, is clear enough. Robertson tells us pleasingly that "Alan Ginsberg constructed a gay lineage connecting himself to Whitman: Ginsberg had slept with Neal Cassady, who had slept with Gavin Arthur, who had slept with Edward Carpenter, who had slept with Walt Whitman."

Carpenter's work did help popularize the term he favored for the homoerotic: "Uranian." (Oscar Wilde, among others, adopted the term and evangelized for it.) Carpenter lived in a country house with his working-class lover, and it became a kind of same-sex Kelmscott, a refuge for members of the Uranian tribe. Oddly, his emphasis throughout—influenced, it seems, by ascetic Eastern religious ideas to which he was exposed—was on the idea that Uranians were *less* sensual than "mulierasts," or straight men, and that their lack of erotic appetite made them historically responsible for the advance of civilization. A utopia filled with Uranians would have less sex and more art. With no obligation to people the world, they could turn to higher things. Robertson rightly calls this theorizing "courageous and peculiar" and then comes down hard on Carpenter for having constructed a sexual hierarchy in which masculine Uranians were elevated over effeminate ones. (Around the same time, Proust, despite his own orientation, used exactly the same concepts, insisting that self-evident homosexuals, like his characters Jupien the tailor and Charlus, were merely perverse "men-women.")

Robertson pays his final visit to the idealistic imaginings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American whose vast writings on ideal societies were the catalyst for the feminist utopia "Herland" (1915), which, like Morris's "News from Nowhere," was written under the direct influence of "Looking Backward." In "Herland," three young American men (in a scenario later adapted by "Wonder Woman") fly a biplane to an Amazonian world. Here all males died out two millennia before, and women have managed to reproduce through a not very well explained process of parthenogenesis. The biplane boys come courting, and eventually each marries a local woman, though their American heteronormative patterns can't help but show. (One sexually assaults his new wife, and the others plead that this is only to be expected.) Although women are on top, the social laws dictate strict eugenic breeding, with sexual pleasure coming second to improving the race. Gilman's matriarchy perpetuates its fair share of inequity and iniquity: blacks are taken to be an inferior race, treated with paternalism. Robertson sighs at having such a good feminist embrace such bad ideas.

Gilman is one of those thinkers whose thoughts are more appealing in their original mixed-up, spontaneous forms than in the more settled forms in which they appear in books. Her letters to her cousin (and, eventually, husband) Houghton, with whom she had an epistolary romance, are hugely charming, contradictory, and more inviting than her finished prose; they reveal her as a kind of early Katharine Hepburn character, tough-minded but touched by self-doubt and its literary indicator, self-deprecating humor. In them, Gilman offers a theory of marriage that anticipates much "sex-positive" postmodern writing on the subject. In her view, we are natural sexual socialists, and marriage betrays this instinct. If we all had sex with the person we loved, instead of the person to whom we are bound by mortgages, the world would improve. By allowing economic relations to pollute sexual relations, we make people miserable: marriage is a social machine designed to turn pleasure into property. Although Gilman's eugenic ideas are dated and unpleasant, this spontaneously erotic side of her imagination still seems prescient, and all the more touching for being hard-earned: she was not a natural sybarite.

Two genuine deficits touch Robertson's account. One is the too facile identification of utopianism with "progressive" causes. Even in a final chapter that brings the history of utopia up to date, only left-wing utopias are recognized. Yet surely at least as many laissez-faire utopias have been imagined as socialist ones. Ayn Rand's is the most famous; Robert Heinlein's is perhaps the most widely read. The reactionary imagination is, if anything, especially inclined to the backward-looking creation of ideal societies. Morris's medieval ideal could readily be turned in a right-leaning direction; G. K. Chesterton's "The Napoleon of Notting Hill," in which a future London returns to fiefdoms from an imaginary Middle Ages, is only the sunniest and most poetic of these reactionary idealizations.

Robertson implicitly assumes, too, that left-wing utopianism is the guiding, pure, or dream form of liberalism. No doubt progressive causes depend on a vision of a better world ("Imagine there's no heaven . . ."), and he quotes Wilde's remark that "all progress is the realization of Utopias." But what distinguishes the radically realistic liberal tradition from the self-frustrating leftist tradition is its disabused attitude toward perfect worlds. Aptly enough, the word "dystopia" was coined by that greatest of all liberals, John Stuart Mill, in an 1868 speech to Parliament during his short career as an M.P. Mill invented the term, in the context of a now obscure debate on Irish tenant rights, to indicate how utopianism turns back on itself. Though Mill used the new word only in passing, it was not separable from the main point of his speech, which was intended to show the perils of any kind of abstract solution to Ireland's problems:

> So far from being a set of maxims and rules to be applied without regard to times, places, and circumstances, the function of political economy is to enable us to find the rules which ought to govern any state of circumstances with which we have to deal—circumstances which are never the same in any two cases. I do not know in political economy more than I know in any other art or science, a single practical rule that must be applicable to all cases, and I am sure that no one is at all capable of determining what is the right political economy for any country until he knows its circumstances.

Mill's insistence that no single rule could be "applicable to all cases" is the tart death sentence liberalism offers utopianism. Liberalism is a perpetual program of reform, intended to alleviate the cruelty we see around us. The result will be not a utopia but merely another society, with its own unanticipated defects to correct, though with some of the worst injustices—tearing the limbs from people or keeping them as perpetual chattel or depriving half the population of the right to speak to their own future—gone, we hope for good. That is as close as liberalism gets to a utopia: a future society that is flawed, like our own, but less cruel as time goes on.

W. H. Auden, in a once famous essay, divided all imaginative people into Utopians and Arcadians—makers of the New Jerusalem we want, or seekers of the lost Eden we've been expelled from. A utopia, in his view, was dangerously shaped by a false idea of common good, which meant pretending that everyone wanted the same thing; an Eden was a personal paradise, made to our own mark. The totalitarian temptation was to force a singular Eden upon the masses, and to turn an Eden into a New Jerusalem. Hitler's Eden was a world without Jews, but the only way to turn it into a utopian one was to kill them all.

The sign of a free society, Auden thought, was that it leaves us each alone, to imagine and, to the limited extent we can, to make our own Eden. Certainly, each of Robertson's utopians inhabited a personal dream world, a fabric of eccentric desire, more incoherent but also more endearing than the mostly boring perfect societies they imagine. If it seems callous to suggest that making more beautiful rooms can make for a better world, it's immensely moving to see how powerful that idea was for the utopian thinkers of the late nineteenth century. It's the heart of Oscar Wilde's idea of socialism—the idea that ugliness itself is a significant offense against the human spirit, and that the squalor of industrial capitalism is as much of a sin as its inequality. It was a remarkably generative idea that produced revolutions in taste as significant as those in political temperament. For, without some desire for a more beautiful world, it's hard to have a cogent idea of a better world.

That's the heart of Voltaire's Enlightenment vision of cultivating one's garden: that this is not a way of escaping from the world; rather, each garden seeds the one next door. No garden is an island. We can go to Morris's Kelmscott Manor in the Cotswolds today, and be turned to his vision by his wallpapers in ways we can't when we read his books. Although we wish for better worlds, and dream of perfect ones, we end by leaving behind things *made* more often than things wished for.

The familiar imperative is that we must get out and past the wallpaper to actually change the world. But the most striking thing about Robertson's utopians is how their wallpaper survives more than anything else—literally so with Morris, but true, too, of the pleasures defined by Carpenter in his rustic gay house. Charlotte Gilman, who used yellow wallpaper to register encroaching insanity in a famous story about postpartum depression, was always vulnerable to interiors. Her letters are filled with ecstatic apprehensions even of a hotel dining room. ("Space: entrancing, exciting, wildly tempting space! And Curves—great cool restful many times repeated curves!") We remake interior lives to make exterior improvements, because the real current of social change lies inside minds and therefore inside people's actual existence. We always want to get past the room we're in in order to break out and change the universe. The lesson that life tends to teach is that change begins at home, and that we can't escape rooms on our way to worlds. The world is made of rooms. ♦

Published in the print edition of the July 30, 2018, issue, with the headline "Just Perfect."