



# A Probe into the Main Manifestations of the Utopia Paradox

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**Abstract:** As one of the most predominant spiritual phenomena of mankind, Utopian Metanarrative is a major theoretical and practical postulation involving a wide range of fields, and it is also a major social and academic problem that triggers fierce social and academic debates. Disagreement is just a fundamental break-even between negation and affirmation. It is an important academic liability to promote strengths and avoid weaknesses, to get out of the paradox and predicament of the duality of utopia. In this sense, the duality of utopia has logically and historically become the starting point of utopian research.

This article aims at understanding and grasping the duality of utopia dialectically as much as possible, to get out of the dilemma, to realize the paradoxical transcendence, and examines utopia as a paradoxical existence, with duality or even multi-layer duality, mainly manifested in the basic semantics and original text, nature content and constituent elements, Duality of actualization, historicization and Functional role, etc.

**Keywords:** utopia, duality, place, ideal, paradox.

Postmodernism has always been the antithesis of utopian Metanarrative. Nicol explains Metanarrative as:

a form of ideology that functions violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of ‘totality’ and ‘universality’ on a set of disparate things, actions, and events. A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected, which legitimates political positions and courses of action. (11)

In this era of de-ideology, it appears that nothing is more offensive than the desire to make ideology concrete in a utopian vision. As Gary M. Douglas noted, “Each person has one to seven utopian concepts that are the source for the way they create their life... If you start down a trail and you seem to fade away, you’re on the way to a utopian ideal” (22).

Utopian metanarrative, as one of the most celebrated phenomena of mankind, is a major theoretical and practical concept involving a wide range of fields. Utopia and its spirit, rooted in the nature of human beings, is unique and is one of the foremost driving forces for human progress. In a certain sense, without the pursuit of a perfect utopia, there would be no human progress. As a “Grand-narrative”, it runs through almost the entire history of the human world and constitutes a special corner of human imagination and real life; but utopia is also a major social and academic issue that triggers intense social and academic debates. There are serious disagreements and even fundamental opposition between its cognition and value evaluation.

Celebrating its coherent flaws, especially the repeated losses and severe difficulties in practice, the negation faction, waving the hats of totalitarianism, put forward various theories on the decline, exhaustion, farewell, and death of utopias while advocating the rejection of utopias thousands of miles away, and then quickly on the contrary; the affirmation faction put forward utopian revival, recall, reconstruction theory with its various positive factors and effects, hoping to revive and reconstruct the mistaken scenario.

However, it can be objectively enounced that there is a clear heterogeneity between fire and water. So, why does there exist such a huge difference and disagreement in the understanding and evaluation of the same thing? Is this a problem of utopia itself, or a problem of society, theory, practice, or promotion on which utopia depends?

Some scholars think that utopia itself has no problem; it is people's utopia; While others think that the concept of utopia itself has duality, and it is its duality that leads to the duality of people's understanding. Of course, the most important thing is the duality of utopia itself, therefore, it is an important academic liability to dialectically understand and grasp the nature and laws of utopia, to maximize our strengths and avoid weaknesses, and to break out of the vicious circle of pseudo-concepts as far as possible.

Utopia is a paradoxical concept, with duality or even multi-layer duality, which is specifically manifested in contemplation of utopia itself and the factors inseparable from it. The main manifestations of the utopian paradox, with its duality or multi-layered duality, can be roughly summarized into the following aspects.

The duality in basic semantics and original text:

The duality of the basic semantics of Utopia refers to the duality, contradiction, and opposition in the basic meanings of keywords or core words related to “Utopia” from the perspective of etymology. Regarding the semantic duality of Utopia, books such as “Utopian Thought in the Western World” by the Manuel Brothers (Frank E. Manuel & Fritzie P. Manuel), Krishan Kumar's “Utopia and anti-utopia in modern times”, Lewis Mumford's “The Story of Utopias” and so on are celebrated. The most representative one, in the western academic circle, is “The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature” (2010). While the book explores the semantics of utopia, defining its concepts, it points out that:

The study of the definition of utopia cannot be reduced extremely to the history, related to the name of an island propounded by Sir Thomas More in 1516. Nevertheless, it is carefully sorted out. The environment in which the word was produced, helps to understand the meaning that More gave to the word and the meaning developed later. What needs to be remembered is that in 1516, the word was new. It was based on the Greek adverb 'ou' (not) + noun 'topos' (place), meaning 'a non-existent place'. This new word was used to name a new abstract concept. (Claeys 4-6)

The study of new words provides a dynamic image of a specific society. For a better understanding, we can categorize new words into three types: synthesizing new words (lexical new words); existing words used in a new cultural context (semantic new words); variants of other words (derivative new words). 'Utopia', as a new word, is an interesting example: it was originally a lexical word, but after centuries of re-creation, the meaning has changed into a derivative new word, which is used by writers and researchers in different research fields, and thus, with the different history of interests, conflicting goals can be seen as better integration of complex semantics. The word 'Utopia' is still used as the root word of the formation of derivative new words, like eutopia (Utopia), dystopia (anti-utopia), hyper-utopia (supertopia), Zootopia (peaceful coexistence of predators and prey), etc.

With the creation of each new related word, Utopia has a more detailed and precise meaning, which plays an important role in distinguishing the original meaning given by T. More from the different meanings identified by different periods and followed in several ideological trends. The problem is that the original meaning of utopia is not very obvious. T. More used it to name the unknown island described to him by the Portuguese explorer Raphael Hythlodoy and used it as his book title, which gave rise to the complex concept of utopia. As J.M. Parrish explained,

In a letter to Erasmus dated 3 September 1516, Thomas More wrote: I am sending you my "Nowhere", which is nowhere well written. More's use of the Latin word 'nusquam' in this sentence (not 'Utopia', as one might have expected) made explicit what would have been apparent to any reader of the book with the knowledge of Greek: that the island of Utopia which the character Raphael Hythlodoy describes is 'nowhere'. The non-existence of Utopia operates throughout the work as a joke with at least two dimensions. On one level, the story Hythlodoy tells is ostensibly presented as fact. But additionally, Hythlodoy's comment that communal living does work in Utopia is ironically undercut by the fact that utopia is nowhere at all. (493-98)

If More uses the word 'Utopia' as the title of the book and calls the imaginary island 'nusquam' (i.e. nowhere), he is deliberately rejecting the possibility of such a place; but what More wanted to convey was a new thought and feeling to express the new thoughts emerging in Europe. More's utopian ideal is a product of the Renaissance. At that time, the classical world (Greece, Rome) was regarded as the pinnacle of human wisdom and became a model for Europeans; and it was also the result of humanistic logic. The discovery of this, the construction of the future with reason, stems from the collapse of

the medieval social order, and the emergence of humanistic logic contained belief in human abilities; the ability not to reach perfection, but the ability to organize different worlds to ensure peace.

The expansion of the realm of thinking is affected by the unprecedented expansion of geographic boundaries. The geographical expansion means the discovery of another new continent. More used the awareness of “another place” to justify the creation of new places, where there are different kinds of people and different forms of organizational structure. This was a new world that required a new word and to create that new word, More used two Greek words-Greek adverbs ‘ou’ (not) + noun ‘topos’ (place), he added the suffix ‘ia’ which in Greek especially used in forming abstract nouns. Etymologically, Utopia means “an imaginary non-existing place”, and it also contains the dual paradox of affirmation and negation.

“In T. More’s ‘Utopia’, a poem ‘short meter of Utopia’ written by Anemolius, poet laureate, and nephew to Hythloday, was included as front matter in all four of the original (1516–18) editions of Utopia, which More had a hand in publishing” (Open / *Utopia*). The poet laureate in these following lines called his island ‘Eutopia’.

*Wherefore not Utopia, but rather rightly,*

*My name is Eutopia: a place of felicity.<sup>1</sup>*

‘Eu’ in Greek means ‘good’ ‘well’ ‘beautiful’, ‘happy’ etc. This new word is derived from the first in composition. By creating these two words that are identical in composition and meaning, lexical neologism (utopia) and derivative neologism (eutopia) constructed a foundation of contradiction, a long history, and continuity of utopian meaning; a place representing both utopia and eutopia. Utopia is pronounced the same as eutopia, but its meanings are antithetical. Therefore, a logically accurate definition for Utopia should be: “Utopia refers to a beautiful happy place that does not exist”. The poem in the book emphasizes this contradiction, and this contradiction remains unremitting.

Under the superficial narrative of the so-called ideal society, what ‘Utopia’ really explains is a profound paradox: the inevitable contradictions in the process of the human pursuit of the ideal state of mind. According to Gary M. Douglas “Socialism is a utopia, capitalism is a utopia, communism is a utopia, democracy is a utopia, autocracy is a utopia and dictatorship is a utopia. Hitler’s point of view was a utopian ideal. Mussolini’s vision was a utopian ideal. None of them are true, none of them are real and none of them work” (11). The term 'Utopia' is the concentrated expression of this paradox. Judging from the superficial explanation of etymology, the inherent contradiction of the concept of 'Utopia' is already obvious. Between the two conflicting worlds of ‘non-existent’ and ‘ideal’, lies the paradoxical essence of this concept. In Utopia, More stated:

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Open Utopia*, (Minor Compositions, 2012) sec 4:9, 75.

When Raphael had thus made an end of speaking, though many things occurred to me, both concerning the manners and laws of that people, that seemed very absurd, ... yet since I perceived that Raphael was weary, and was not sure whether he could easily bear contradiction, I told him I would find out some other time for examining this subject more particularly, and for discoursing more copiously upon it. And, indeed, I shall be glad to embrace an opportunity of doing it. In the meanwhile, though it must be confessed that he is both a very learned man and a person who has obtained a great knowledge of the world, I cannot perfectly agree with everything he has related. (148)

In this way, More's playful parable maintains the contradictory conception of utopia.

Did More think that Britain or some other country will become a utopia? Is utopia a kind of social reform? In More's time, does utopia have a practical significance? Or is utopia referring not to a plan, but a spiritual home, a humanistic pamphlet of academic friends such as Erasmus and Peter Giles? None of this is known. At the end of 'Utopia', he wrote: "However, there are many things in the commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments". (148) This makes Utopia a dream. As Lyman Tower Sargent has quoted "the dream of a better life that drove so many were utopian" (68).

So, no matter how comprehensive, Utopia embodies two opposing impulses from the beginning. It is not just a social and political pamphlet aimed at reform. It always transcends reality. It is not just a dream, but also a foot into reality.

The duality of nature, content, and constituent elements

The duality of utopia is also manifested in its nature, content, and constituent elements. This duality is an extension of the basic semantics of Utopia and the duality of the original text. The duality of the original text is essentially the duality of nature, content, and constituent elements. It is only discussed separately because of its particularly important initial foundational status. The vision of Utopia includes bipolar oppositions like reality and ideals (dreams), is and must, totality and individuality (society and individual), norms and freedom, theory and practice, experience and transcendence, facts and values, and so on. Almost all aspects have duality problems.

When discussing the relationship between utopian ideals (theories) and actual practice, Lyman Tower Sargent has pointed out that "Over the centuries, many individuals and groups have attempted to put their visions into practice ... Those utopians who gained political power often created dystopias rather than utopias, with, in the 20th century, countries like Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Cambodia/Kampuchea under Pol Pot (1928–98) being noteworthy examples" (52).

Utopia also has boundaries. It has a unique history and characteristics. To have a history means to be a changed entity. But such changes are not random. Utopia may be a place that doesn't exist, but historically and conceptually, it is not just a place. Although the starting point of the concept of utopia is the 'Utopia' published by Thomas More in 1516, the field of

utopian literature is now broader, including anything from Platonism, classical mythology, the golden age, the ideals of the lost world, fantasy journeys, inhabited moon, and planets, imagined socio-political experiments, kingdoms, empires, and ideal republics, a large number of novels and science fiction works, a large number of cross-world communities, to the dystopias or anti-topias to which all utopias are attributed to totalitarianism due to the pessimistic and desperate trend triggered by the fear of social darkness.

Whether it is related to an intellectual history of the “ideal republic”, a type of literature, a reflection of religious consciousness, or a reflection of a psychological desire; the affirmation of the concept of progress in modern life is balanced with the sobriety, based on the results of ‘development’ and ‘growth’. We have already seen the collapse of utopian ideals. The belief in suspicion towards science gave rise to scientific dystopia, totalitarianism in political engineering gave rise to modern political dystopia, and the collapse of modern utopian political ideals, like Marxism, gave rise to communist dystopia. To make matters worse, environmental destruction is looming around us, new dystopias are threatening us, the anxiety of later modernity, genocide, nuclear war, and imbalance of resources is yet another talk on the utopian duality.

The constituent elements of utopia also amplify this duality. These elements themselves are coordinated, but each element also contains contradictory relations. Such as the so-called ‘Paradise’, along with the “golden age” of Greek poet Hesiod or “George Ellis's description in “Specimens of Early English Poets of the Land of Cockaigne” in which “houses were made of barley sugar and cakes, the streets were paved with pastry...”, is a luxurious and splendid place, subjected to corruption, sins, and overindulgence in the eyes of poets and priests who strictly adhere to simplicity and spirit. Hence, elements may seem in harmony but are entangled in an inborn timely paradox.

Throughout the history of utopian thought or literature, whether in the West or the rest, the ideological and theoretical form of utopia and its image expression form include two opposite values of looking forward and backward in the time dimension. Of course, relatively speaking, it seems that the West is more focused on ‘foresight’, while the East is more focused on ‘looking back.

#### Duality of actualization, historicization, and Functional role

The duality of utopia's function refers to the contradiction in utopia's functional value. In an analysis of the positive effects of utopia, the first should be its authenticity. It expresses the nature and existence of human beings. This kind of understanding of utopia applies to both human existence and human social existence, and it is impossible to understand the other without understanding one of them. If social utopia does not realize the individual at the same time, then it loses its truthfulness. Similarly, if the personal utopia cannot bring realization to society at the same time, it also loses its authenticity. The tragedy of our situation is largely due to the personal realm and the social realm where Utopias of Utopia are divided, and they are not regarded as a unity.

Utopia also represents the core dilemma of the complex modern society. It reflects certain contradictions which it should overcome. This is part of the value of utopia, and one of its heuristics uses is an idealism that tries to solve the dilemma of modern society and dramatizes it, in a vivid and efficient form. Utopia not only produces competitive utopias, as in the case of Edward Bellamy<sup>2</sup> and William Morris<sup>3</sup> but also stimulates the emergence of serious dystopias, which is a great challenge for utopias to reconcile, as its dialectical counterpart.

Utopian actualization and historicization are the practical embodiment of the duality of utopian function. Looking back on the history of utopia, we can see that in modern times or from classical utopia to modern utopia, an extremely obvious change is the shift from static space to dynamic time; the historicization of utopia, that is, from abstraction to history and from contemplation to action. This direct change to reality gave birth to and promoted the surging social revolution since the 19th century. Here, there are both successful experiences in the revolution and even more painful lessons.

It seems that utopia cannot be realized and historicized. Once it is realized and practiced, it is bound to go to the opposite side. 'Utopianism' is the product of utopia's transformation from a concept to action. Although utopianism arises from dissatisfaction with the reality of life and the desire for reform, it has brought serious disasters in practice. The residuals of the paradox make an innuendo to reject the direct realization of utopia. But this does not necessarily lead to the denial of utopia, the existence of utopia has its reasons. The key to the problem is to properly handle the borders of utopia so that utopia stays in the realm of imagination and criticism, rather than transforming it into a form of fierce intervention in real politics.

Some scholars pointed out that from the 18th century to the 19th century, utopian thought received more respect and participation, but in the 20th and 21st centuries, due to the emergence of fascism, militarism, Stalinist rule, and other forms of totalitarianism, people began to hate 'Utopianism' and perhaps the 'Dystopian' phenomenon established from it. In particular, the political utopian design that monopolizes the vision of the future and uses state power to forcibly promote it is deeply hated by people.

Furthermore, we must also discuss in detail whether utopian thought itself carries dangerous goods based on different historical cases. A political practice of utopianism is very dangerous to trade; nevertheless, it leads to a question, should utopian ideas be kept more in the fields of literature, philosophical research, and our spiritual realm, rather than as a kind of offering for a directly applied system of ideas or a political design. But it is a reasonable belief that it is not wise to stop eating because of the probability of choking, where, to stop eating is not a choice. The key is how to realize the problem. Therefore, we should distinguish between multiple realizations of utopia, such as instant realization and gradual realization,

<sup>2</sup> Edward Bellamy, "Looking Backward: 2000–1887" is a utopian novel outlines Bellamy's thought about improving the future.

<sup>3</sup> William Morris, "News from Nowhere" (1890) is a classic work combining utopian socialism and soft science fiction.

overall realization and partial realization, forced realization and natural realization or regular realization, etc., and treat them as appropriate.

The relationship between thought and practice we are involved in is always very literal and narrow. Thus, we always look for a direct connection between the social expression of literary imagination and the actual phenomenon of society. But the relationship between thought and reality is not that simple. In terms of origin and function, social thought or theory has its form and logic. The social practice of a theory more or less belongs to the scope of human thought or fantasy itself. The theory also affects practice, and practice has its scope.

All ideas run through practical factors. However, there is no non-theoretical practice. Every practice is dominated by a certain theoretical understanding. Thought and practice are not antagonistic, but an abstraction of the unified activities of mankind. This is the case between utopian theory and practice. They need to be treated differently. Their goals are different, and their success must be measured by their respective goals, rather than assuming the unity of effort.

Yona Friedman, in *Utopies réalisables*, affirms the strong contrast between utopian theory and practice. He quotes “To believe in a Utopia and be at the same time a realist is not a contradiction. A Utopia is par excellence realizable”. He believed that utopia is written for realization. Similarly, Marc Augé quoted “Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed ... But non-places are the real measure of our time”. (Augé 79) These have become the criteria for judging the possibility of utopia.

Others, such as Barbara Goodwin in “The politics of Utopia”, adopt an eclectic attitude, believing that utopia has the possibility of being partially realized, and that utopia is realized in a “principle or spirit” way, rather than in details or in full. Way, the key part of utopia will be reflected in practice. Like, Catholic utopias are embodied in institutional ways, such as churches and monasteries; communist utopias are realized by the planning and welfare systems of most contemporary Western countries (although it failed in Eastern European socialist countries). Many European and North American communes look for inspiration and practical guidance from C. Fourier and R. Owen's<sup>4</sup> utopian plans.

Certain practices can be regarded as extreme predictions of the future, marking new products of “social space that did not exist before”. Such practical utopias are the formal literary utopia models of theorists. For example, “Under the sponsorship of King Frederic II of Denmark (1534–1588), Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) built his observatory, called ‘Uraniborg’, dedicated to Urania, the Muse of Astronomy (Wolfschmidt 2002a) on the Danish island of Hven (today Ven, Swedish). It was the first time in the world that a building was erected in Europe especially for astronomical observations” (*UNESCO Astronomy and World Heritage*). It was the first case in the world and caused a great response in Europe. It was material, practical

<sup>4</sup> The utopian socialists Robert Owen (1771–1858) and Charles Fourier (1772–1837) both place human nature at the core of their educational views, and both see education as central to their wider objective of social and political transformation.

inspiration for the utopias of Tommaso Campanella (The City of the Sun), Johann Valentin Andreae (Christianopolis), and Bacon (New Atlantis), and many more.

These examples illustrate the limitations and possibilities of establishing the decisive link between utopian thought and utopian practice, which is vague and common. It is difficult to argue against the fact, that practice often deviates from theory and even becomes a mockery of it. The inability of a socialist society to match the hopes of a socialist utopia has aroused condemnation and desperate literature.

Once again, we have to admit that utopian thought and practice are different, and they cannot be judged by the consistency of assumptions. They share perfect ideals and follow different principles in different aspects of human activities. Utopias are not realized only by writing or contemplation, not in a direct, literal sense. Practical utopias also strive to achieve something that most of their critics regard as impossible, stupid, or whimsical. Their success lies not in how close they are towards theoretical ideals, but in how many possibilities of life they can present; even very short-lived experiments portrayed the magnificent aspect of life.

“Thought experiment” of utopian invention and imagination is one thing, “life experiment” of utopian practice in small communities or the whole society is another thing. Both have their functions, but what they bring to us will be their differences. This analysis of the relationship between utopia and practice, especially the generalization of the specific ways of the realization of utopia, is for us to understand the interrelation between utopia and reality. Whether it can be realized or not is of reference significance.

## Conclusion

The duality of the premise, the duality of nature, the duality of function, and the duality of the practice of utopia are quite enlightening. Utopian thought is aimed at the restless elements in culture. To provide direction for our actions based on values, we have always brought this kind of utopian thought to life. Crying out various ideas, wishes, hopes, and fears for a new entity is beyond the limits of any established thing. But what values guide us to break through the simple reconstruction of the existing living environment and open up for new situations?

Utopia as the ‘restless spirit’ in culture has a dual meaning: on the one hand, restlessness causes turmoil and anxiety; on the other hand, it is also an Impulse, through which kinetic energy and productive forces are generated. If we succeed in conceiving such a utopian component as a culturally oriented approach, by avoiding it from penetrating the power, creating danger, then as a constant force, these utopian ideas will inspire our actions, temper our critical views on the situation and development prospects of this world, and strengthen our beliefs as the elixir of life.

In summary, Utopia is a complex existence and cannot be simplified to the extreme. The duality of utopia enlightens us even more. It can neither be denied nor can be blindly affirmed. Instead, we should comprehensively and dialectically understand and grasp the nature and laws of utopia, to maximize its positive aspects and minimize its containment and weakening. There is no better way to resolve its negative aspects, to maximize the strengths and avoid weaknesses, to get out of the paradox and predicament of utopian duality, and to achieve the transcendence of the paradox. There may be many effective ways to achieve this goal, but “All roads lead to Rome”.

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