

Utopias



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Introduction

- Originally, the term *utopia* meant *no place*:
 - Nowadays, *utopia* usually means a *good place* (like heaven)
 - The related term *dystopia* means a *bad place* (like hell)
 - Of course, one person's utopia might be another person's dystopia
- The term *utopia* is sometimes used in a dismissive way
 - The implication is that a utopian vision is unrealistic or impractical
- Many dystopias are explored through science fiction.
Examples: *1984* and *Brave New World*
- Many utopias can be found in ideologies.
Examples: socialism, communism

Introduction (cont')

- If you want to change the world then:
 - You may have a utopian vision
 - Or some people may dismiss your ideas as being hopelessly utopian
- Most attempts to implement utopias fail:
 - Learning *how* and *why* they failed may help you avoid similar problems
 - That is the purpose of this chapter

1. The scalability limit of utopias

The scalability limit of utopias

- Let's assume Fred believes an ideal life involves:
 - Hard physical labour (such as farm work) during the day
 - In the evening, play chess and have group sex
- Can Fred make this utopian ideal a reality?
- Initially, yes:
 - He can probably find 10 or 20 people who share his utopian ideals
 - So he *can* implement a small utopian community
- But then:
 - Fred will probably assume his utopia can work on a larger scale (such as an entire country)
 - But it will not because most of the population does *not* share his utopian ideals

The scalability limit of utopias (cont')

- Many people think:
 - “Communism failed because communism is a *bad* utopia”
 - “A *good* utopian vision could be made to work”
- That common belief is wrong:
 - *Any* utopia will fail if you implement it in a large society
 - Because most of the population will *not* share your utopian ideals
 - The failure will occur *regardless* of how good or bad the utopia is
- This can be discouraging if you have a utopian vision that you wish to share with the world

Options for implementing your utopian vision

- You have two options for implementing your utopian vision
- Option 1:
 - Implement your utopia within a small community of like-minded people
 - Do *not* be tempted to expand the community
- Option 2:
 - Decide to share your utopia with the general population but realize this will probably fail. So...
 - Learn how other utopias failed when exported to a larger community
 - This will help you to understand the frustrations you will encounter
- The rest of this chapter explores option 2

Lessons from attempted utopias

- Important lessons from attempted utopias:
 - People do things for *their* own reasons, not yours
 - Most of your supporters will share only a subset of your utopian vision
 - Often, a “failed” utopia is *partially* successful
- The next few sections examine these lessons

2. People do things for *their* own reasons, not yours

Be cool... Stay in school

Recap from an earlier chapter...

- In 1996, Jason Summey was a 13-year old student in America
- His school had the highest dropout rate in the area:
 - Students who dropped out had a high chance of being poor or criminals
- He gave a speech at his middle school graduation:
 - He challenged his classmates to be the first year in the school's history to all graduate from high school
 - He started a "Be Cool... Stay In School" project

Be cool... Stay in school (cont')

- Several tactics encouraged students to stay in school:
 - Many students joined a “dropout patrol” to mentor struggling students
 - Peer pressure made it less socially acceptable to drop out of school
- Many local businesses offered benefits to students who enrolled in the “dropout patrol” program:
 - Discounts on food, clothes, books, music, ...
 - Low-interest bank loans to parents
- Some students:
 - Did not care about Jason’s altruistic ambitions for the program
 - But joined the “dropout patrol” anyway to get the offered benefits
- Jason learned an important lesson:
 - People do things for *their* own reasons, not yours

People do things for *their* own reasons, not yours

- Mary has a utopian vision. How can she convince others to support her?
- She should:
 - Group people into different categories
 - Find benefits of her utopian vision for each category
 - Communicate those benefits to each category
- Example. Mary's utopian vision is to end anti-X discrimination:
 - Two obvious groups: X and non-X people
 - Benefits of her vision for X people are obvious and easy to communicate
 - Benefits for non-X people are *not* obvious. Mary needs to focus on this if she wants to get widespread support

Another example

- Richard Stallman started the “free software” movement
- There are 3 categories of people relevant to his vision:
 - End users
 - Hobbyist programmers
 - Software vendors
- His utopian vision has:
 - Obvious benefits for end users and hobbyist programmers
 - Obvious drawbacks (and not-so-obvious benefits) for software vendors
- As a result, a splinter group formed:
 - They renamed “free” software as “open-source” software because they felt it was easier to market an open-source vision to software vendors

3. Most of your supporters will share only a subset of your utopian vision

A problem

- Recall:
 - People do things for *their* own reasons, not yours
- This suggests that some of your supporters will share:
 - *All* of your utopian vision
 - *Only a subset* of your utopian vision
 - *None* of your vision, but appreciate some of its anticipated side-effects
- Eventually, the partial sharing of the vision may cause friction:
 - Some supporters may accuse you of being “too extreme” or of being bad for the image of the movement
 - People who you used to trust for their support no longer seem trustworthy

Understanding the problem

- Such friction often leads to:
 - Feelings of betrayal
 - Movements dividing into factions that fight each other instead of working together whenever goals overlap
- Understanding the cause of the friction can help reduce it:
 - The friction probably isn't betrayal; just an incompletely shared vision
 - Different factions can be “friendly neighbours” instead of a “fighting family”, and cooperate whenever goals overlap

4. A failed utopia can be partially successful

A failed utopia can be partially successful

- As stated earlier, utopias suffer from a scalability problem:
 - *Despite* this scalability problem, if many people *partially* buy into a utopian vision then it can cause widespread change
 - So, a “failed” utopia can be partially successful in a way that brings impressive results
- Example: Gandhi wanted to use Satyagraha tactics to end:
 - British rule of India (he succeeded)
 - Tensions between Muslims and Hindus (he failed)
 - Classism in Indian society (he failed)
- Example: The “Be Cool... Stay in School” program:
 - Wanted *no* students to drop out of school
 - In fact, one student dropped out during the first year
 - But previously there were 10 or 20 dropouts per year

All utopias are flawed

- The scalability limit means that *all* utopias are flawed:
 - You may find this hard to admit for your own utopian vision
 - But you can still argue that your utopian vision is *less flawed* than other visions (or the status quo)
- Relevant quote:
 - “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”
— Winston Churchill

5. Further reading and summary

Relevant book

- Book: *The Faber Book of Utopias* by John Carey:
 - The introduction discusses characteristics common to many utopias and dystopias
 - Then each chapter summarizes a particular utopia or dystopia
 - Chapters are ordered from ancient history to modern times
- You are unlikely to be interested in all of the book's 101 utopias and dystopias
- However, the introduction contains a very interesting discussion of utopian characteristics

Summary

- A scalability limit applies to *all* utopias
- People do things for *their* own reasons, not yours
- Most of your supporters will share only a subset of your utopian vision
 - This will probably result in factions appearing within your movement
- Often, a “failed” utopia is *partially* successful
 - The partial success can be very impressive