

IN UTOPIA

SIX KINDS OF EDEN AND THE SEARCH
FOR A BETTER PARADISE

J. C. HALLMAN



The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

Contents

Title Page
Copyright Notice
Acknowledgments

A Joke
A Wilderness
A Community
A Ship
A Meal
A City
A Gun
A Home

Image Credits
Also by J. C. Hallman
Copyright

Acknowledgments

Far too many people to list here proved invaluable in the production of this book. A few deserve special recognition.

George Witte spotted the potential of the project, and Michael Homler lent it wisdom, a keen eye, and a firm pen.

Rob Spillman, Heidi Julavits, and Peter Manseau offered excellent advice on excerpts that appeared in *Tin House*, *The Believer*, and *Search*, respectively.

I'm quite lucky to have an agent, Devin McIntyre, willing to put out one fire for each fire I start. He has also taught me a thing or two about writing, which is as high a compliment as I know how to pay.

Last, this book would not have happened at all without Lynn Laufenberg.

I'm indebted to each of you, and to many more besides. If Utopia ever arrives, I'll invite you all to my home there.

A JOKE

Only in us does this light still burn, and we are beginning a fantastic journey toward it, a journey toward the interpretation of our waking dream, toward the implementation of the central concept of utopia. To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears—incipit vita nova.

—ERNST BLOCH, *The Spirit of Utopia*

1

Utopia is in a bad way.

2

Utopian thought can be broadly defined as any exuberant plan or philosophy intended to perfect life lived collectively.

As Ernst Bloch suggested, the historical drive toward utopia is best understood as a kind of light, or fire. Utopian thought sparked in antiquity with descriptions of fancifully perfect countries in Plato and Aristotle, smoldered like a coal mine fire through the Middle Ages with early monasticism and portraits of Eden and Heaven, burst into eponymous conflagration with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516, caught and spread across Europe with religious fervor for 150 years, tacked for a century and turned secular, flared anew with the American Revolution and the French Revolution, burned like wildfire through the nineteenth century, and forged at last the ideologies that squared off in the twentieth century for what Thomas Mann called "a worldwide festival of death, this ugly rutting fever that enflames the rainy evening sky all round." Utopian thought bears its share of responsibility for that scorching of the face of the earth. As a word, it had already acquired a pejorative connotation, but after World War II "utopia" was no longer just a synonym for naïveté. It was dangerous. Now, decades further on, in a new century and a new millennium, earnest utopian thought and earnest utopians are a glowing ember at best, and utopia's legion failures seem to suggest that the best course of action would be to crush it—to snuff it for good.

By any rational measure, I should suggest this myself. But I won't.

3

This is a photo of my brother, Peter, and me in the backyard of our home in a master-planned southern California community in 1972. For six years we lived on a street called Utopia Road.



I'm there on the left, looking a bit too proud of those pants. The hopefulness of Utopia Road is apparent in the staked landscaping, but the dirt on the ground reveals the place isn't even finished yet. I like it that the bike's wheels sit right on the edge of the photograph. I'm perched on the rim of the picture's contained little world.

As a rule, utopias slip. They slip in the transition from conception to implementation; they slip as a result of financial expedience or frail psychology. Utopia Road had slipped from the ambitions of the likes of Frederick Law Olmsted and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City movement. By the time it filtered down to us the promise of a better life through better suburbs was hogwash. Considering for a moment only its internal effects, the vast shelter of Utopia Road, its informal biosphere, left its children safe but stunted, pure but uncertain. We were innocent, but in for a fall. Utopia Road housed us, but did not raise us.

There are a number of dichotomies in the image of my brother and me. The contrasts of our hair and our shirts, for example. I don't want to foist an agenda on a simple effort at documentation (the angle of the shot suggests the photographer was my sister, Amy, age ten), but various features of the picture's subjects do appear to offer commentary on their context. Peter's erect stance and his hands lodged firm in his pockets suggest the certitude and resolve of a homesteader, whereas my looser pose and my foot ready to crank down on the bike's pedal fairly screams out for abandoning a utopia already turned dystopian. The fashions of the image—the fifties fins on my Schwin, our sixties hair and seventies clothes—straddle a cultural revolution characterized by a rekindled, albeit narrowly focused, utopian spirit (i.e., free-love communes). Finally, my brother's annoyed squint and my goofy grin offer

contrasting critiques: Peter intends to stick it through the hard times to make utopia work, while I'm ready to zip out of the frame even with training wheels and an untied shoe.

Like the picture, the history of utopian thought and literature refracts a broad range of dichotomies: rich versus poor, rural versus urban, past versus future, war versus peace, wilderness versus civilization, high-tech versus low-tech.¹ Even the name is half a duality. In the preface to *Utopia*, More explained that *utopia*, Greek for “no place,” would become *eutopia*, or “good place,” whenever some earnest visionary proved able to realize its dream.

There was no earnest visionary responsible for Utopia Road. It wasn't ever meant as a good place; it was a scheme to make a buck. The name Utopia Road was some real estate developer's idea of a joke.

4

The idea of a joke is central to the history of utopia—or at least to my version of it.

More borrowed from a broad range of classical and contemporary sources in the creation of *Utopia*, striking them together as flint stones to ignite the utopian blaze. But just how seriously he meant the exercise to be taken has long been a matter of conjecture. The influence of *Utopia* is undeniable. No quixotic adventure, no bureaucratic catch-22, no charming Casanova, nor even any odyssey home is as universally recognized as the name of the perfect world we forever chase, the bittersweet flavor of hope. Among words that have leaped from fiction to reality, advanced from noun to adjective, it stands alone. But what did More mean by it? Theories characterize the age in which they are professed better than they characterize More or the book. Yet it's not going out on a limb to suggest that the history of the world since 1516 is a protracted history of not getting the joke of *Utopia*.

An inability to tell whether he was just kidding describes Thomas More's personal life as readily as it describes his book. Famous for his wit, More's friends were quick to note that a taciturn air made perceiving his humor no simple task. He apparently enjoyed this. More's arid nature is palpable today. Does the poker-faced expression of Hans Holbein's famous portrait of More disguise a nut flush or a lowly pair? Does More have you beat, or is he bluffing?



Holbein had been recommended to More by the famous humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus described More's humor as prodigious. As a boy, Erasmus wrote, More was so delighted with puns he seemed "born for them alone." Erasmus served as More's confidant during the writing of *Utopia*; the two were lifetime friends. The inspiration for Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1509)—a play on More's name, *morus* means "fool" in Latin²—arrived while Erasmus was on horseback on his way to visit his friend. The book, a joking treatise on the stoicism of the age, was written in seven days once he was installed in More's home.

Utopia borrows from *In Praise of Folly* as surely as it borrows from Plato. Like the entire genre of literature that would follow in its footsteps, *Utopia* is episodic and didactic, shifting freely between discourse and description. The book's structure is itself a dichotomy. Part one is treatise in the form of Platonic dialogue. Part two is travelogue in the spirit of the diaries of Amerigo Vespucci, published eight years before More set to work.

5

Utopia is set in the New World. A handsome island nation with fifty-four towns that suspiciously match the fifty-four counties of England, the country had made of itself a vibrant society despite an absence of natural resources and a pagan worldview. Utopians are happy, safe, fulfilled, and ready for the Christian message once it arrives in the form of traveler Raphael Hythloday, who spends five years in the country. A grizzled sea captain, Hythloday later returns to England where, one day, he falls into conversation with fictionalized versions of More and his group of friends. For a time they debate the nature of the best possible commonwealth—private property or no—and discuss whether good-intentioned souls should willingly become counselors to

their kings. More and his friends insist there is no state better governed than England; Hythloday disagrees. They challenge him to offer one better.

After a recess for lunch, Hythloday describes the island of Utopia—from the broad strokes of its geography to the details of its governance. At the end, the fictional More is hardly convinced that Hythloday has won the point. He dismisses a variety of Utopian laws and customs as “really absurd,” yet concludes the book with a statement that seems designed to enhance its ambiguity:

Meantime, while I can hardly agree with everything [Hythloday] said ... I freely confess that in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features that in our own society I would wish rather than expect to see.

6

The bulk of *Utopia* was written as a way to kill time during stalled trade negotiations More was conducting in Bruges and Antwerp. Part one—the discussion of service to one’s king—surely reflects the fact that during the writing of the book More was offered an annuity to join the royal service permanently under Henry VIII. It wasn’t an easy decision. More was a successful lawyer; the job would be a pay cut. More important, service to anything was a sacrifice of autonomy, and how could he be sure that as a counselor to the king he would amount to anything more than a court jester?

Utopia amounts to a duel among jesters. The book is replete with Greek and Latin puns that would have stood out as though embossed on the page to its humanist-schooled intended audience. “Utopia” is the most obvious of these, but “Raphael Hythloday” runs a close second: The name, in degrees of free adaptation, translates as “nonsense speaker” and “bullshit artist.” Hythloday’s seagoing caricature was a hint that his character should be understood, as one commentator noted, as “the Jester’s part in the comedy of *Utopia*.” The fictional More—*morus*, the fool—was another. *Utopia* is a dichotomy of jokers.

Which must have made it frustrating for its author when readers began to ignore the obvious signposts and take *Utopia* literally. The deluge of imitators—the genre now counts hundreds of novels that borrow the book’s template but ignore its irony—would not begin for a few years, but it became apparent almost at once that some had failed to get the joke. More publicly offered a gentle suggestion that certain readers might consider revisiting the text to more fully evaluate its myriad details. Privately, he lashed out at those who remained cold to the book’s searing humor: “This fellow is so grim that he will not hear of a joke; that fellow is so insipid that he cannot endure wit.”

This last was a real problem. For literature, More claimed, was by far the most effective way to achieve “a good mother wit.” And wit was “the one thing without

which all learning is half lame.”

More’s later history would make little difference in how the book came to be perceived. He spoke out against the communism that *Utopia* seems to endorse (as undersheriff of the city of London he was more Sheriff of Nottingham than Robin Hood, though he did have a reputation for fairness). He participated in Lutheran-burning even though Utopians practice religious tolerance. And he was eventually executed for refusing to sanction Henry VIII’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon, even though divorce is permitted in his perfect world (H. G. Wells, an earnest utopian himself, later characterized this refusal as “reluctance to play the part of informal table jester to his king”). But More lost control of his creation long before he lost his head, and the very innovations that caused certain readers to mistake *Utopia* for a plan were precisely the things he had wanted to mock or indict. In his later years, he explicitly distanced himself from the book. After Thomas Müntzer quoted *Utopia* during the Peasant War to justify communal property More suggested that both *Utopia* and *In Praise of Folly* be burned.

Yet at the same time it must be noted that More seemed to enjoy the nighttime dreams he had during the book’s production—dreams of himself as King Utopus. His regal self was taller, he wrote to Erasmus, and he was quite satisfied manning the helm of the Utopian ship of state. He held his head high. He marched down the street in a diadem of wheat and with a scepter of corn, and was accompanied by his nobility in the task of meeting ambassadors and princes of other nations—all poor creatures by comparison.

7

So was *Utopia* criticism of the England it resembled? Was More applauding an imaginary nation that employs shrewd statecraft and common sense to defend itself with the least harm to others? Or was he criticizing a misread of Machiavelli just as *The Prince* was being published, and calling for a government that would compensate for human fallibility with divine inspiration?

No one really knows.

Excepting perhaps the Bible, there is no work that is simultaneously so influential and yet so difficult to pin down as to its precise purpose, or even its nature. This work does not aspire to solve the riddle of *Utopia*. I am not a utopologist (and there are such things), nor can I say that I am utopian in any specific sense of the term. But I was weaned on utopia, and after it became for me more than a word on a street sign, utopian novels began to crowd my bookshelves. To write a book that emulates *Utopia*’s toggle between analysis and what scholars call its “speaking pictures”—in other words, to borrow the episodic strategy of the genre—is, for me, on one level, an

attempt to produce a definition of myself. On another it's an investigation of wit. More's wit, it has been suggested, was intended to "correct, chastise, wound." But to what end? Wit is a straight line without a finisher, without a punch line. You, reader, supply your own. For five hundred years the world has stood dumb before the wit of *Utopia*. In the picture of my brother and me on Utopia Road, it seems as though I've gotten the joke, as though I've got a punch line in mind. My boy's good humor is already attuned to More's irony:



Which makes me, perhaps, an unlikely vehicle for the message of this book: the utopian flame should not be snuffed—it should be stoked anew. The history of utopian thought sheds a light on civilization that both illuminates and scalds: Civilization triggers utopia, embraces it—then indicts it. The stigma now attached to utopia not only fails to get the joke, it blames hopefulness for hope's failures. Utopia critiques crisis. It acts. To crush the utopian spirit would be to extinguish the campfire just as its warmth is needed most.

Winter closes in: Is being saved worth the risk of being singed?

A WILDERNESS

It is impossible to understand history without utopia, for neither historical consciousness nor action can be meaningful unless utopia is envisaged at both the beginning and end of history.

—PAUL TILLICH, “Critique and Justification of Utopia.”

For no man can write anything who does not think that what he writes is for the time the history of the world.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “Nature,” *Essays: Second Series*

I was up in the Gila National Forest of southwestern New Mexico, straddling the Continental Divide above ten thousand feet—locals like to say you can walk to Canada from here, as though you can't from anywhere else—and I was hiking into the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, the first officially designated wilderness in the United States. Leopold, the father of wildlife management and a founding member of the Wilderness Society, once had been labeled utopian for arguing that outdoor America should be rebuilt with the same political tools that destroyed it. More pressing for me, he'd also said that wilderness wasn't really wilderness unless it could "absorb a two weeks' pack trip." I was only an hour into his reserve, but still I was starting to get a little freaked out. This wasn't entirely my fault. For the last several weeks I'd been communicating with a band of renegade scientists, perhaps utopians themselves, and the point had been made to me a number of times that the thing missing from wilderness these days was big animals and fear. So I was zigzagging between views of the entire eastern half of the continent on one side and the entire western half of the continent on the other, huffing and puffing in the thin air and gazing out across the land's crumpled carpet of pine, and I was thinking about animals that were large enough to eat me. I was about fifty miles from a crappy little town called Truth or Consequences, and it felt like it. So far, the only actual animals I'd seen were lizards whose frantic push-ups revealed that in no way did they regard me as an apex predator. Everything was peaceful, serene, sacred, etc., but still I started to get a feeling that I get only when treading in deep dark water. I started to feel like prey.

A primal wilderness might actually be a good place to begin a study of utopian thought, as, arguably, utopian thought itself begins with Christian conceptions of untrammled country: Eden, Promised Lands, Heaven on Earth. The Bible, in fact, may be the source of the word "wilderness," though strictly speaking it splits the difference on it. It's the place we should conquer (Genesis 1:28), but it's also where Jesus finds wisdom (Matthew 4:1) and Elijah and Moses find guidance (I Kings 19:4, Exodus 19:3). It's what Adam and Eve are cast into (Genesis 3:22)—making Eden more Utopia Road than *Utopia*—but God lives there, too (Exodus 3:18, 7:16).

Some version of this contradiction explains why, though I could comprehend that being afraid of wilderness was a good thing, my imagination was screaming at me to get out of there. Specifically, I had begun to consider the mountain lion, which,

because suburban sprawl has been encroaching on its territory for decades, has been known to stalk and kill people. As I approached a peak a variety of unfortunate scenarios involving lions and myself played out in my mind. I decided to scribble a few notes and head back to the car.

I sat on a boulder, my back toward a sharp incline. The work went fine for a while. There was no burning bush to dictate any primitive constitution, nor was it for fear of God that I had stopped, but still I rejoiced: The mountaintop offered a visceral sense of the earliest of utopias. I had scraped up against a remnant of some still-golden age.

Then I felt a low grumble behind me. I froze, my pen midsentence. The feeling, the sound, slipped up my neck. I began to turn, and the mountain flat out exploded. New Mexico does have defunct volcanoes, so this wasn't such a crazy thought, though really I was expecting a vise of jaws on the back of my neck. But when I got all the way around there was only the harsh light of the sun, and a sonic blast of a roar, and then, just a couple hundred feet over my head, the outline of a military jet flashing over the treetops. It was no lion—just some jarhead asshole buzzing the watershed in the oldest wilderness in America.

I had come to be frightened of animals, but wound up scared of what was essentially myself.

9

A few years after Amy snapped the photo of Peter and me, our family moved to another house in the same town. For convenience I'll continue to refer to this town as Utopia Road, though that was not its name.

The external effects of Utopia Road were apparent by then. Early on, wilderness had surrounded the small civilization we had chinked out from the California chaparral. On the bus ride to school I could look into the hills and spot coyotes surveying their encroached-upon territory. Their morning routine was to watch our morning routine with their trickster's scaled-back dignity. The basic sales pitch of modern suburbia claims that this juxtaposition of civilization and nature makes for a kind of unity, a "marriage of town and country." But by the eighties rampant growth had caused a flop, and our sterile neighborhoods had laid siege to the last scattered pockets of scrubland. Utopia became dystopia. The coyotes vanished.

Wherever one goes, it seems, that flub in civil calculus tends to coincide with the emergence of local wildlife rehab programs, amateur hospitals fueled by good will. Animals that fail to beat a hasty retreat to whatever angular flakes of wilderness remain either wind up as roadkill or turn up injured in backyards. Before long just about everyone finds themselves standing over a bleeding and helpless raccoon, wondering whether there's anyone to call who knows what to do.

In Utopia Road, there was someone who knew what to do. Marge and Tom Knothe had started out modestly, helping a friend care for wayward songbirds, but soon they graduated to injured kestrels and owls they kept in their screened-in porch. Before long they had a complex of two-by-four-and-chicken-wire enclosures in their backyard to care for opossums, pelicans, and hawks that people brought them. The Knothes were both schoolteachers; they had no real training in caring for animals that often came in injured well beyond the hope that they could ever be returned to the wild. Their one-level ranch had more than an acre stretching out behind it—a wilderness in the California real estate market—and in the heyday of what became known as the Wildlife Rescue Center they cared for a total of sixty-eight different species. They took on teenage volunteers and a motto: To Be Wild and Free.

Peter volunteered at the Center for two years before I was old enough to follow in his footsteps. Marge and Tom were weary souls by then. Tom had lost an eye to illness and tilted his head when he looked at you, like those pelicans, and Marge had a weak heart after a decade of shouldering the entire community's guilt. At fourteen I volunteered on Thursdays and weekends, cleaning opossum cages, chopping up chicken parts for the raccoons, and pureeing baby mice for invalid hawks, blending them to a solution we called "Pinkie-Colada." Even before I arrived the Center had flowed over with permanent residents, and the place was part farm, part asylum, a purgatory where injured animals, sinless as cherubs, waited out their end time. Marge and Tom were pleading publicly for help by then, and the Center was on the brink of disappearing like the land it hoped to save. I was the last volunteer at the Wildlife Rescue Center.

10

I started thinking about Marge and Tom again a couple of years ago when I read a scientific paper proposing something called "Pleistocene Rewilding." It was a crazy idea. North America during the late Pleistocene period was home to a menagerie of large animals—megafauna—that included ground sloths as tall as giraffes, diprotodons like one-ton wombats, tortoises the size of Volkswagen Beetles, and an array of lions, horses, elephants, and bears, all of which suddenly went extinct about ten or twelve millennia ago for reasons no one is certain about. Recent biological studies had proved that megafauna, predators in particular, were good for ecosystems, and the Pleistocene Rewilders—the paper had twelve coauthors—wanted to bring the lost animals back. They claimed man had a hand in the Pleistocene extinctions and that the continent had been left ecologically bereft—sterile, safe—as a result. Pleistocene Rewilding would rebuild what had been unwrought.

The paper caused a minor frenzy, first in the media (the authors landing on

morning talk shows and finding themselves the target of clever headlines like “Lions and Cheetahs and Elephants, Oh My!” and “Beasts of Both Worlds”), then among academics who hated it (“obnoxious” and “nuts,” two critics later told me). My problem was that I liked the idea. I liked it a lot. And I liked it precisely because it struck me as utopian: an impossibly positive action that stood in stark contrast to the dastardly suburban sales pitch. As a first step, the Pleistocene Rewilders had proposed “ecological history parks,” experimental ranges populated with megafauna, which tourists would flock to, they claimed, for the same reason people flocked to the San Diego Zoo’s Wild Animal Park. The Wild Animal Park was just five miles away from Marge and Tom’s Wildlife Rescue Center.

And the impulse was the same, I thought. The instinct to fix what you’ve broken, whether by reducing greenhouse emissions or rewilding nature, was no different from the instinct to help a writhing raccoon or to turn your backyard into a labyrinth of pens. I began to investigate Pleistocene Rewilding and came to understand the beef some had with it. It didn’t “re-” anything. Pleistocene Rewilding would create a world that had never existed, which was ill-advised. If the plan came to pass, the fear was, then the fate of the Wildlife Rescue Center might repeat, and the whole continent could wind up as a sad zoo imploding of good intentions.

All utopias run the risk of dystopia.

I didn’t care. Hadn’t I grown up in just such a failed vision? What was the alternative? What I hoped to discover was that a utopia could battle back against dystopian scourge.

11

As soon as I started digging into Pleistocene Rewilding—talking both to its supporters and detractors—I found the suburbs of San Diego and even Marge and Tom’s songbirds down there among its roots.

When Thoreau, in “Walking,” claimed that America was well suited to human habitation because it lacked “African beasts, as the Romans called them,” he appears not to have known that the Americas once seethed with such creatures. It’s ironic, then, that the arc of conservation begins with Thoreau; it then bends through John Muir and Aldo Leopold, a trajectory that measures a decline in quality of prose style, an increase in ecological understanding, and a tailing away from transcendentalism pretty much in line with modernity’s drift from religion to science. If Thoreau was conservation’s Adam, then Leopold was its Abraham. Leopold’s “land ethic,” which sought to change via fiat man’s relationship with nature, was the single guiding belief behind the recently emerged science of conservation biology. For specific laws, conservation biology needed a Moses, and it found one in Michael Soulé, an academic

notable for having once left academia completely to spend five years in a Zen Buddhist temple in Los Angeles.

Soulé was one of the coauthors of the Pleistocene Rewilding paper.

12

Soulé grew up not far from Utopia Road.

Like my brother and me, he had made a playground of the southern California wilderness, wandering from chaparral mesas to tidal pool systems, and later to isolated canyons between suburban developments. Conservation biology itself, he told me, when I called him in Colorado, had been kicked off at a conference in San Diego in 1979. As a student at Stanford, Soulé studied lizard evolution on California islands. Islands figured heavily in conservation biology, as it drew on island biogeography, a field pioneered in the sixties to explain species extinction patterns. At that point, biologists had begun to reject a long-standing belief that nature was all about stasis and balance. Island biogeography charted a measure of predictability within the new complexity. Nature as stasis was replaced with nature as predictable cycle of crash and reclamation, extinction and immigration.

Conservation biology, Soulé said, didn't really hit its stride until he emerged from the Zen temple. In a nutshell, it was a crisis discipline, like cancer research, that could offer scientific rationale for conservation action in the face of uncertainty. In 1985, Soulé published four axioms that became the science's guiding commandments:

1. Diversity of Organisms is Good
2. Ecological Complexity is Good
3. Evolution is Good
4. Biotic Diversity has Intrinsic Value

From there he returned to San Diego's isolated canyons. He began a study of precipitous declines in the populations of the same songbirds that Marge and Tom Knothe were keeping in shoeboxes across town. The entire scientific community agreed that the world was experiencing a man-driven crisis of species extinctions, and you could witness it here. Civilization was strangling wilderness. But could you prove it scientifically? It had been suggested that factors that made extinctions predictable on islands—size of landmass, distance from shore, etc.—might also apply to “habitat islands,” isolated woods or nature reserves. Soulé used the songbirds to demonstrate that the mainland was predictable, too.

The culprit in the canyons, it turned out, was coyotes. Not too many of them—too few. Coyotes preyed on raccoons and opossums, which in turn preyed on songbirds, and when you removed the coyotes, raccoon and opossum populations soared and the