

UTOPIANS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE HISTORICAL
EVENTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Utopians of the Ancient World and Their Influence on the Historical Events of the 20th Century

The ideas that shape the modern world have been formulated and crystallized for centuries and even millennia. The considerable part of the political and philosophical underpinnings of today's western world is based on ideas expressed by the thinkers of ancient Greece. The same claim remains true for ideas that are considered to have developed after the ancient era—for example, the notion of utopia in the modern sense of the word. The origins of this concept are nested, at least to some extent, in ancient philosophy and drama. These underlying motives that appeared in ancient Greece shaped the events of the 20th century, albeit indirectly.

To claim that the utopians of the ancient world affected the history of the 20th century, it is necessary to clarify whether the term is reasonable to use. Nowadays, the word utopia is inadvertently associated with Thomas More and his novel *On the Best State and on the Newly Discovered Island Utopia* written in 1516. In the novel, the author describes a perfect state which does not suffer the numerous political and social problems that faced his homeland back at the time. The author hints at the lack of reality of such a land by calling the island “utopia,” which can be translated as “no place.”¹ However, More was not the first author to dislocate the ideal society from the real one using either a place or time. Thus, the motive of the Golden Age of humanity is evident in the writings of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod, as he describes the era of human happiness and prosperity that had been long gone at his time.² This example shows that the writing of More is based on ancient ideas about the ideal society that cannot be achieved because of temporal or physical obstacles. At the same time, one may argue that these obstacles

¹ Lauriola, Rosanna. 2009. “The Greeks and the Utopia: an Overview through Ancient Greek Literature.” *Revista Espaço Acadêmico* 9 (97), 109.

² Ibid., 110.

depicted in literature serve as metaphors for the imperfections of human character that prevent human societies from building the ideal state of common prosperity and happiness.

However, not all works describing an ideal society are based on the premise that it is a “utopia” in the sense that people can approach such an ideal state but never achieve it completely. Thus, Plato created a utopia of reconstruction³ in his famous work *Res Publica*. The philosopher theorized about how a perfect state can be established, in line with More. Nevertheless, the difference in the approaches of the two lies in the fact that Plato argued for the practical implementation of his ideas about reconstructing the political landscape to establish a system in which the best fitting people would rule. Even Plato’s contemporaries criticized his ideas as unrealistic⁴ but the argument that Plato’s political model is inapplicable has not stopped people from looking towards a political reconstruction that would create a utopian state.

One of the attempts to create a utopia occurred in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. The October revolution of 1918 aimed at destroying the current political system to replace it with communism which would address the grievances of workers and peasants. However, although the degree to which the socialist ideology was the reason for the struggles the USSR faced during its existence and its eventual dissolution, it is safe to say the society created there was not ideal in a utopian sense. However, the impact of the idea of a utopia of reconstruction can be found in the rise of the fascist regime in Italy and national socialism in Germany. The change of regime in all three countries happened due to the growing discontent about the situation in each nation, respectively. The political forces that offered radical solutions were welcome among people who hoped for positive developments coming from the decisive

³ Ibid., 112.

⁴ Ibid., 113.

reconstruction of their states.

Another issue that allows associating the rise of totalitarianism in Europe in the first half of the 20th century and the utopian ideas Plato offered in *Res Publica* is the personality cult as one of the pillars on which those regimes stood. Thus, Plato advocates for competence as the decisive factor in choosing a ruler.⁵ This proposition is reasonable but susceptible to being manipulated by political agitators and propagandists. The argumentation behind the personality cult in totalitarian states is that the leader is the most competent person and, therefore, is bound to bring the country to a utopian state. It follows from the logic that everyone who opposes the leader is an enemy who desires to prevent the country from achieving a state of happiness and well-being.

All in all, ideas of a ideal society appeared in literature and philosophy much earlier than in the 16th century. However, the horrors of the 20th century such as the two world wars and the rise of inhuman totalitarian regimes taught humanity the lesson of being critical of the promise to create a utopian society. Destroying the current political structure and replacing it with a better one ignores the inherent human flaws that make the ideal society possible only in the “land of nowhere.”

⁵

Ibid., 112.

Bibliography

Lauriola, Rosanna. 2009. "The Greeks and the Utopia: an Overview through Ancient Greek Literature." *Revista Espaço Acadêmico* 9 (97): 109–24.



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