
Seeking A Better World: From Utopia to Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT

Humanity is riddled with differences, ontologically as well as epistemologically. But the ideology of a Utopian society in contrast, is about doctrines that are applicable over a general populace. These doctrines in turn are formulated by a particular part/faction of the society. These factions who formulate these ideological structures do so in an attempt to cater to an entire population. But when ideologies cater to an entire population, what happens is that it assumes similar reception by diverse sections of it. It compromises while catering to diversities. The ideologies thus take a unitary value and tread upon the ontology of multiplicities and/or diversities.

Amongst diversities/multiplicities, you cannot think of unity. Unity is what a Utopian society aims at. Therefore a Utopian society and diversity are at loggerheads. Whereas Utopia gives a blueprint of a perfect society, the anti-Utopian thinkers proposed that society with diversity is better than the Utopian one. Multiculturalism denotes various cultures co-existing within a society. It acknowledges dissent as the natural result of distribution of social, political and economic power. It projects how the morality of individual cultures should be retained even as they adapt to a larger society, as conflict is its hallmark.

If diversity is not valued then eventually multiculturalism will wither away. While all multicultural societies have norms which create a community, a healthy multicultural society balances the need for some degree of assimilation with openness to its own dissension. If diversity is assimilated into Utopianism how would the end product be? Will it still lead to totalitarianism as its critics predict? The paper has sections which show the drawbacks of the Utopian ideology in political philosophy. The aim here to throw light on the fact that although Utopia presents itself as a harmonious society, appropriating the qualities of a multicultural society is an alternative in which we can have a practical Utopian society rather than an abstract one.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Diversity, Utopia, Anti- Utopia

DEFINING UTOPIA

Human groups have enormous differences in terms of income, opportunity and lifestyle. Conflict and inequality has upraised many movements be it Socialist, Communist, Egalitarian or Utopian. This section will focus on Utopia, a concept propounded by writers such as Thomas More to Karl Marx. The commencement of the Utopian concept came with a solution of a conflict free society. As a human being dwells amongst unequal conditions in society, in order to fix it, he/she resorts to the concept of Utopia which promises a society without discrimination and differentiation. Amidst the difference between political realism and political idealism, Utopia as a political ideal is a stake that challenges the differences between the cultures and promises to make a society based on solidarity and unity. An urge for a better society eventually leads to the premise that that which we lack in society can be achieved through an attempt at Utopia.

Building a society based on the concept of justice, equality and solidarity has always been a challenge to humanity. Utopian thinkers often consider the Utopian concept as the best blueprint by which a better society can be based. The very essence of it is an ideal state where one cannot be but one fervently wishes to be. Though impossibility is always associated with Utopia, it has its essence in practicality as well.

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H. G Wells assessments in his work, *A Modern Utopia* (1905) explore this conflict between impossibility and practicality.

Our business here is to be Utopian, to make vivid and credible if we can, first this facet then that, of an imaginary whole and happy world. Our deliberate intention is to be not, indeed, impossible, but most distinctly impracticable, by every scale that reaches only between today and tomorrow.ⁱ

Imagine a world much like ours where all discriminations and differentiations have been eradicated and the minorities have an equal right in the society. It is desirable but it is not practically achievable. Let us call this imagined world Utopia where every person has the perfect sense of justice and does what justice seeks. The Utopian political philosophy which rules this world delineates all the institutions we would live under. It tells us where things stand, morally speaking. It showcases how deteriorating the world is, compared to how things should be, and easily could be, if only we were willing to do what morality requires. The Utopia holds its values not in relation to present practice but in relation to a possibility of the future. It is not just a dream or hope but something that emanates from the lessons of history. And having a history implies that we are wholly an entity that changes over the time. And this further implies that Utopia may be nowhere, but historically and conceptually it can be just somewhere.ⁱⁱThe idea of such a Utopia is a notion that is open to interpretation which can be moulded depending on the needs of a particular society. It strives to aid people to convey their concern about the change and transformation they want in society and challenge the role of violence and power relations in the present structure.

An individual or a group experience hope and the Utopian impulse when they aim to realise possible dreams. Their notions of the 'good' are not anchored on a universal moral ground but are inextricably bound to particular ideological assumptions, cultural contexts, and interpretations of what is positive, valuable, and desirable. Utopian thinking with its belief in the transformation of the society is clearly an act of hope to visualize, to experience, to be called to what we lack in the present time.

Contrary to abstract ideas, Utopia is in fact our belief and tangible hope that a Utopian prospect can be realized in future. Utopias are discourses on human nature and the possibility of a better human society rather than simply blueprints of perfection. Utopian thinkers are usually known as political idealists. As Karl Popper mentioned in his *Open Societies and its Enemies*, ideas should be integrated in political life, as well as personal. According to him:

Political idealists are described by their opponents as men who are unable to face up to political realities, who dream of Utopias, i.e. of ideal societies which exist nowhere and which will hardly ever be realized anywhere. The political idealists describe themselves usually as people who are able to concentrate on an aim towards which mankind should develop, and who are not satisfied merely to struggle along without knowing where they are struggling to and what they are struggling for, but who are rational enough to ask themselves what their aims should be.ⁱⁱⁱ

Oscar Wilde holds that a map without Utopia is not worth glancing at. Progress is the realisation of Utopia. Utopia is neither purely fictitious nor blueprints for political action, but an alternative draft to a socio-political reality. Born out of the blemishes of the present society, it is the blueprint of a perfect place in which all inhabitants maintain a content existence. This blueprint of perfection and the possibility of constructing a Utopia is a metaphor which has been a milestone in literature and political arena. Utopia is usually seen as looking forward although depictions of it are often deeply nostalgic. Without any doubt diversity as it will be elaborated in the succeeding sections, is a practical phenomena but Utopia also has its practical essence in the political arena.

DRAWBACKS OF UTOPIAN IDEOLOGY

As Utopia glorified its image, the historical outcomes of the 20th century contaminated the Utopian ideology. Countries like Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler and Cambodia/ Kampuchea under Pol Pot became noteworthy examples of extreme idealism. With the fall of Berlin Wall, and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union, anti-Utopian theorists parsed the disintegration of the Utopian concept and political idealism. Anti- Utopian theorists marked the problem not in the misapplication of the Utopian ideology but with its substance itself. They claimed that Utopias which gained political power would lead to a totalitarian society and then towards dystopia. Many works

were published proclaiming the “End of Utopia”^{iv} and “Death of Utopia”^v. Dystopian literature such as *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Nineteen Eighty Four* by George Orwell, *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley explored this extinction of the Utopian concept.

The question arose as to what the drawback of applying a Utopian Ideology was. Anti-Utopian thinkers like Hannah Ardent and Isaiah Berlin located the danger in the totalitarian ideology that it upholds. They claimed that unitary form of Utopianism could lead to a totalitarian society. Political theorist like John Gray stated that Utopian beliefs lead to ridicule at best and totalitarian violence at worst.^{vi} Russel Jacoby also made a similar statement in the preface of his book *Picture Imperfect: Utopian thought for an anti- Utopian Age* (2005). In his words, today most observers judge Utopias or their sympathizers as foolhardy dreamers at best and murderous totalitarians at worst.^{vii} The fallen Utopias set an example of this point.

LOCATING AN ALTERNATIVE

A Utopian society is not based on equality, but an ideal Utopian society propagates equality in the society. This equality could be economic (aiming at communism), non-racial, equal opportunities for the sexes, social parity, etc. But when you conceive of such a notion of equality, you need to see its realization from theory into practice. It needs to be reproduced into reality. When such an attempt is made, there occurs a case of breakdown in theory which appears ideal in essence. This breakdown can be due to various parameters grounded in reality which tend to disagree with what is claimed on paper. For example, a classless society appears fascinating on paper. It appears to be a panacea to all ills. But when Communism tried to reproduce it, it failed miserably. Communism talked about classless society, where the two classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat would cease to exist, and thus usher in a new society free of class divisions. No one would have had to fight in the name of class. But history showed us otherwise. In the USSR, Communism could not realize this dream of Marx. Although it foretold that everyone would have their needs fulfilled equally without any prejudice, the dream failed to transpire. This was because mankind is riddled with differences, ontologically as well epistemologically. Let us assume that someone is skilled at a job allotted to him. He would not want his opportunity to be shared with someone else who is not. In the face of equal pay amidst different outputs, dissent is bound to happen. If differences are taken into consideration, it is hard to do what justice demands. In a society riddled with differences, Utopia as a political ideal to achieve equality and justice is not practical. In such society diversity is more desirable.

Also in a Utopian society based on the concept equality, it is granted that individuality and free will have to be compromised. Each person has a different orientation towards life. This would necessitate some rule or regulation common to all where his/her free will will be at stake. In a Utopian Society the concept of free will is replaced by a General Will. The idea of General Will is the crux of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s political philosophy and his most important contribution to political thought. The general will is the intention to promote a common good. It is a plea for popular sovereignty, individual freedom and consent as basis of political authority and sovereignty of state. It was a refutation of the theory of natural rights. Rousseau argues that since General Will is the will of the community and wills a common good, it is moral and absolute. To him, the General Will is always right and tends towards public advantage. This is how the concept of general will is gradually substituted for free will and then forcefully applied in a totalitarian society. Therefore a society based on free will is self contradictory. This is why a totalitarian society would ultimately destroy the values attached to freedom, morality and most importantly political discretion. This is where the concept of multiculturalism triumphs. Multiculturalism seeks to achieve a society based on diversity, unity and solidarity.

MULTICULTURALISM AND DIVERSITY

Multiculturalism is the conventional way to respond to the cultural and religious diversity. It is a comparatively new concept in the political theory. It has accomplished much since its origins in the 1960s but suffice it is to say that it has many obstacles yet to overcome. As Carlos Terros notes:

The multitude of tasks confronting multiculturalism is overwhelming. They include the attempt to develop a sensible theoretically refined, and defensible new meta theoretical and theoretical territory that would create the foundations for multiculturalism as a paradigm; the attempt to establish its epistemological and logical premise around notions of

experience, narrative, voice, agency and identity; the attempt to pursue empirical research linking culture/ power/ knowledge with equality/ inequality/ discrimination; and the need to defend multiculturalism from the Conservative Right that has demonized multiculturalism as an unpatriotic movement.^{viii}

Multiculturalism is used as an umbrella term to describe the distinctive nature of political claim and rights of disadvantaged groups and minority. Of late it has come to be known for promising an equal economic and political status to disadvantaged people suffering from their minority status. Political theorist Will Kymlicka developed the most important theory of multiculturalism based on liberal theory of autonomy and equality.^{ix} According to him multiculturalism refers to a way in which multiple cultures coexist in a society which accommodates conflict, negotiation and distribution of social, political and economic power, assimilation, preservation and adaptation. It implies an outlook where the autonomy of individual cultures is preserved even as they are revamped into a society at large.

In a multicultural society diversity refers to differences between both individuals and groups. Factually human diversity is where citizens vary in social status, talents and abilities, in terms of tastes and preferences, and social values. The notion of diversity in cultures is upraised as an important feature in social and political sphere. In recent times cultural diversity within a society has become an important issue. One of the major problems of multiculturalism could be that if the state were to embrace multiculturalism there would be a danger of it upholding of a majoritarian perspective. An ideal multicultural society, as envisaged by Bikhu Parekh, accepts reality and desirability of cultural diversity and structures its political life accordingly. “It is dialogically constituted... and generates a body of collectively acceptable principles, institutions and policies”.^x

Multiculturalism emerged as a controversial issue in the world. It enforces diversity that can assimilate different cultures and ethnic values. Diversity encompasses differences and each difference has unique and an indispensable feature that can benefit the society as a whole. The proper implementation of multiculturalism could mend gaps in the society and celebrate individualism and plurality. Diversity is a reality created by individuals and groups from a broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences. It is extremely important to support and protect diversity because it is an environment where individuals and groups are free from prejudice and it fosters a climate where equity and mutual respect are intrinsic. Diversity includes, therefore, knowing how to relate to those qualities and conditions that are different from our own and outside the groups to which we belong, yet are present in other individuals and groups. These include but are not limited to age, ethnicity, class, gender, physical abilities/qualities, race, sexual orientation, as well as religious status, gender expression, educational background, geographical location, income, marital status, parental status, and work experiences. It also acknowledges that categories of difference are not always fixed but also can be fluid. It respects individual rights to self-identification, and recognizes that no one culture is intrinsically superior to another.

CONCLUSION

In contrast to Utopia, multiculturalism which moves one step forward and visualises a diverse but harmonious society, is chaotic. There is bound to be disagreement, misunderstanding, offense and discomfort for the simple reason that cultures in a multicultural society are not socially and politically equal. Multiculturalism which is oriented towards social justice acknowledges that co-existence does not guarantee an equal or just distribution of power across cultures, and strives to create more equitable access to societal resources and opportunities. While authentic multiculturalism will always involve conflict, how this conflict is handled and resolved in a society becomes critical. If diversity is not truly valued, then eventually multiculturalism will wither away. While all multicultural societies have norms in which members must become flexible in order to cohere as a community, a healthy multicultural society balances the need for some degree of assimilation with openness to its own transformation.

Citations, Quotes & Annotations

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