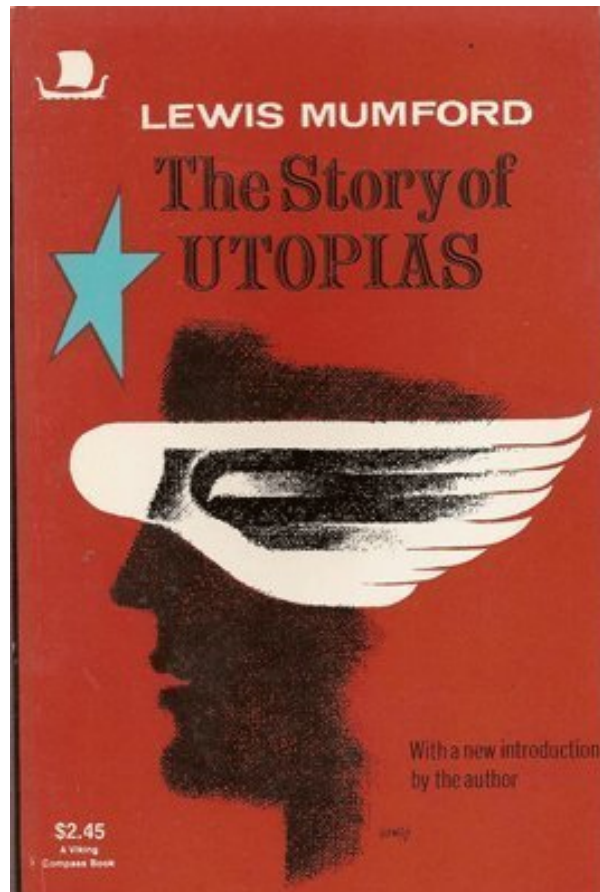
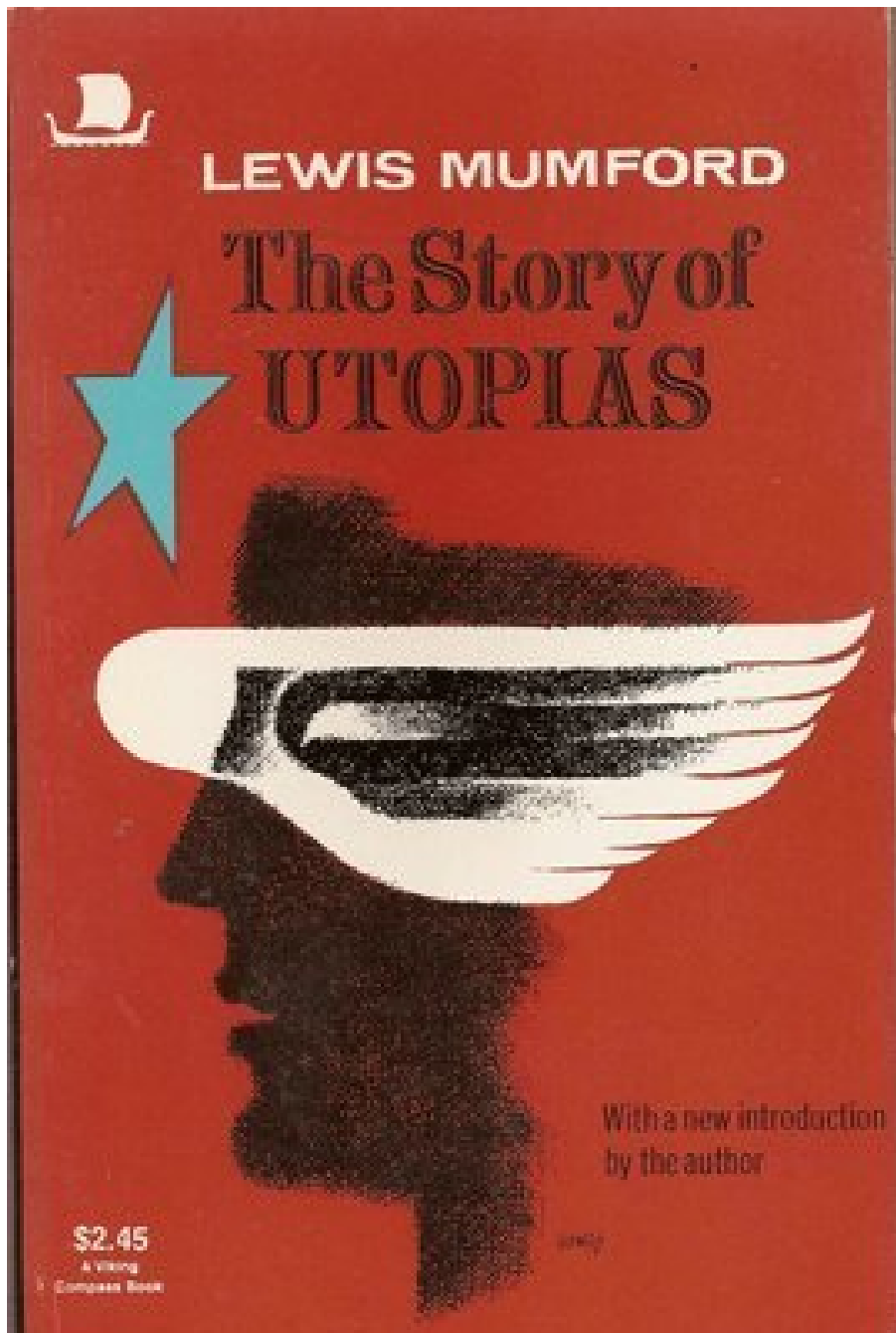


THE STORY OF UTOPIAS BY LEWIS MUMFORD



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* With an Introduction by HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON "A Map of the World that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at. . . ."

- Sales Rank: #4899955 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Penguin Books
- Published on: 1962-04-19
- Released on: 1962-04-01
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SURVEY OF THE GREAT SOCIAL ENGINEERS' IDEAS EMBEDDED IN SOCIETY

By Aspic

The Story of Utopias

by Lewis Mumford

reviewed by Martin Knox

Mumford is more concerned to present ideas for utopias of reconstruction, that alter relationships permanently through education, adaptation and so forth, than utopias of escape, that are evaluated by their ability to return people to reality, such as Alice In Wonderland.

Utopian ideas are preserved opaquely in the political, social and economic fabric of nations, where myths

and partial utopias linger from experiments, often centuries earlier and in blueprints for tried and untried living, preserved in a number of books, described by Mumford as about 20 different utopias, that vary greatly in the detail from one to another.

In *The Story Of Utopias*, Mumford surveys cultural landscapes to trace preconceptions of the major utopias and synthesise an independent view of the contribution of each utopia. It is an ambition that is sometimes achieved, at others this reader is confused by the myriad allusions to contemporary matters, with insufficient description of the utopia under discussion. He also assumes that the reader is already familiar with, or will pick up and read immediately, the utopian works under discussion. Mumford's purpose, especially in the later chapters, seems to be to deduce constraints on utopian designs so that they can succeed in reality.

The Story Of Utopias attempts to collate the major visions on an undated timeline, comparing and contrasting design variable settings. These include contexts, land ownership, urban layout, economic relationships, industry, consumption, lifestyles, groups, communities, families, inheritance and roles of individuals.

Mumford distinguishes Plato's recipe for moderate living with Socrates' provision for growth with an 'inflamed constitution'. The issue is still familiar today, as an argument between capitalists, who want huge cities to grow even larger, while they are opposed by human welfare-oriented citizens concerned about deteriorating lifestyles as population density increases.

Thomas More's utopia *Amaurot*, in the realm of Henry VIII, is austere. It is organised into groups of thirty families, each 10-16 people, ruled by a magistrate, rather like an Oxford college but with factories and workshops. They eat together, accompanied by music. Gambling and hunting are the province of the lowest cast: butchers and slaves. The chief end of a man is to grow to the fullest stature of his species.

Johann Andreae proposed *Christianopolis* as an artisan democracy. There is a conscious application of science to industrial processes. There is no money, nor wealth. The highest respect is for morals and piety, allied with Calvinism.

Charles Fourier's utopia *The Associationists* has institutions that permit man's original nature to function freely, motivated by 'passions'. He abolishes the individual household and has an industrial army of golden youths and maidens who make good public works not war, reminiscent of Chairman Mao's Red Army.

James Buckingham conceived a model town association resulting in a Garden City, called *Letchworth* in the UK, which propagated *Welwyn Garden City* and may still be propagating garden cities elsewhere.

Theodor Hertzka's utopia *Freeland* was the basis of an attempt to colonize a section of Africa he selected. It failed. It was to be an individual utopia on a social foundation of certain laws and statutes. It was a type of socialism based not on revolution but construction of a co-operative society. It would allow people to be free but not free to enslave others through wealth and power. It was organised around machinery and Mumford's view is that the means has become an end.

Etienne Cabet's 1845 *Voyage En Icarie* had 100 provinces each with 10 communes. The capital would be a city like Paris with 4 quarters and 60 communes, all organised for war. The inhabitants were to enjoy a sophisticated metropolitan lifestyle, under the control of a dictator and according to Mumford had more influence on embryonic Soviet Russia than Marx.

Edward Bellamy in 1887 forecast institutions for the year 2000. Every person was to receive 4000 pounds per annum for his needs and must work to age 45 in a cog-and-wheel production system. Shopping is by ordering from state stores, not unlike the Argos tradition in the UK. There was dignity and heroism in labour and artisanship, but no scholars or scientists. He was scathing about the Westminster adversarial system:

'The game of ins and outs, political government, has disappeared; when the community wants a bridge or a new field, it is competent to decide without lining up in a purely fictitious antagonism.'(p71)

H G Wells' vivid fantasy: '*A Modern Utopia*' has four classes: the kinetic, the poetic (intellectuals), the base and the dull. who were exported to islands where they could practice fraud, chicane, and violence to their hearts' content.

Francois Rabelais' work *Gargantua* sought to provide for the good life living in an 'abbey' with tennis, fruit trees, parks, deer, archery, rich tapestries and splendid costumes.

Next came a society revolved around The Country House, with its chapel, its art gallery, its theatre and its gymnasium. The Country House was like a robber's hoard or a hunter's cache, with every indulgence for passive enjoyment. Possessions there were not earned, they were inherited. It was a prescription for The Acquisitive Society with a ruling class who had no occupation valued by society - the antithesis of Plato's Republic.

Charles Dickens' Coketown supplied material goods to The Country House. It had: a mill, a factory and was laid out by an engineer, with a jail, an infirmary and a sanatorium.

These two were held together by the *idolum* (idea) of the National State, a utopia that persists today. Wanderers are settled and goods brought to them for consumption. The biggest city is Megalopolis, where people have ideals of paying their taxes, serving in the armed forces, eating only nationally advertised foods, never buying from the producer when we might buy from a middleman, reading their own country's literature, never desiring any other climate, never trying to find in other cultures what they missed in theirs, Mumford lists the partisan utopias which are the foundation of political movements. He says that the humanists:

'looked upon human institutions as external to men; ...straitjackets that cunning rulers had thrown over the community to make sane and kindly people behave like madmen. If one devised neat political constitutions, with plenty of checks and balances, all would be good.' p97

Mumford is also sceptical that there can be a worthwhile utopia because its inventor will ally himself with one or more groups and deal out harsh treatment to others. He says that utopians have produced paper not new worlds:

'They were the tactics of a general who would go into battle without training his army; they would have a demagogue who talks of a million men springing up overnight.(p97)'

Apart from practical concerns, Mumford has not applied a consistent criterion of utopian success, such as community peace. On the contrary. he has passed over all kinds of armed camps and social discrimination without a murmur. He seems tongue in cheek about the possibility of a good utopia.

'Utopians have land and natural resources belonging to the community, no one is let off work, the reckless and ill-bred shall not burden the community with the support of their offspring while those of finer capacity are neglected or overwhelmed in numbers.'(p119)

Science is venerated in a few utopias but Mumford does not regard it as necessary to glue utopias together. He distinguishes Science from Art as different *idola* (ideas) and he suggests that Art offers a broader picture. He says that idealism and Science operate in different compartments but happiness depends upon their combination. He notes that Science itself has degenerated, presumably by its popularisation.

The breadth of this thin book is astounding, so it is ungenerous to fault lack of depth. In places Lewis Mumford has soared over his subject with an eagle eye. At others he has floundered with a mishmash of utopias that he has been unable to reconcile.

The writing is precise, colourful and easy to read.

In retrospect, I would have benefitted from using this book in designing my utopia in *The Grass Is Always Browner*. In particular, Mumford's view of a utopia as a grand adventure, with a coherent view of the human condition, is more visionary than mine. I settled for long extrapolations into the future of contemporary trends.

I recommend you buy this book: it is one to read and then to keep for reference. It can be used as a guide book to further reading on the subject, or to reveal the origins of many ideas embedded in our society.

The blurb says:

'As an anthology that invites readers to immerse themselves in the masterpieces of the literary giants, it is a must-have addition to any library.'

Reviewer: Martin Knox

Date: 14/03/15

Book reviewed: *The Story of Utopias*

by: Lewis Mumford

ISBN 9781477437100

Amazon,

Middletown, DE, USA: 20 January 2015

122 pages.

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