

Not So Great Utopias

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Abstract

The road to serfdom, says Hayek, comes out of the pursuit of a mirage. In the attempt to achieve a great utopia featuring both economic and political equality, society winds up with real-world communism. This article contrasts the attempts at small, self-sufficient communities by the early utopian socialists and by religious communists with the realities of real-world communism. It also shows that modern state-communism either winds up at serfdom or makes pragmatic compromises with individualism.

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I. Introduction

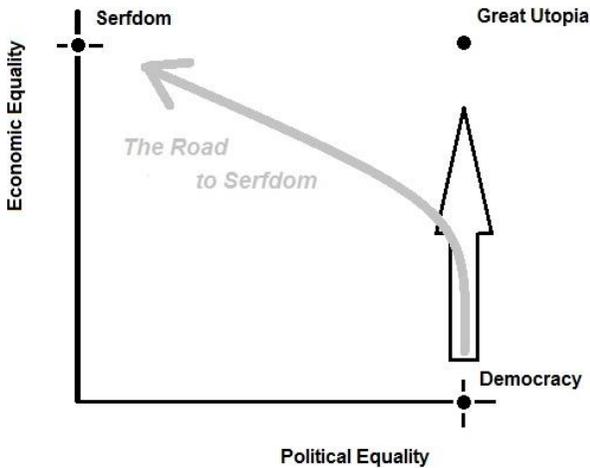
In chapter 2, “The Great Utopia,” of *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), F. A. Hayek distinguishes between the promise of socialism (economic equality) and the promise of democracy (political equality), contrasting the socialism proposed by French political and economic theorist Henri de Saint-Simon with the democracy observed by French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville. The utopian socialism envisioned by Saint-Simon is a fantasy. Real world socialism, as exhibited in Stalin’s Russia, is totalitarian. Thus, the road to serfdom results from the pursuit of a mirage, something that has never been and that can never be, a make-believe form of socialism. In seeking this mirage, countries wind up in serfdom (see figure 1).

Since the publication of Hayek’s book, there have been many experiments with state socialism. Soviet communism has been joined by Chinese communism and also by various forms of socialism in the developing world. Central planning, rapid industrialism and import substitution, and collectivization of agriculture were widespread with

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the end of the colonial period. Results generally ranged from disastrous to disappointing. Most of these experiments proceeded along the road to serfdom until they ended in market-oriented reforms or in failure.

Figure 1. The Road to Serfdom, Illustrated



II. The Utopian Socialists

Saint-Simon (1760–1825), French philosopher Charles Fourier, and Welsh social reformer Robert Owen were early socialists. As characterized by Marx, they were “utopian socialists.”¹ Saint-Simon, considered by his followers to be something of a prophet, argued that an enlightened class should organize society to eliminate poverty among the working class.² When he first made his proposal, he did not consider it to be revolutionary, and he imagined that the king of France might implement it. Soon thereafter, Saint-Simon saw his proposal to be revolutionary—indeed, to be a new religion. “The whole of society,” he said, “ought to strive towards the amelioration of the moral and physical existence of the poorest class.” For a time, it looked as though Saint-Simon’s disciples might actually turn his ideas into a political movement. But his specific genesis of socialism dissipated after the French Revolution of July 1830.

¹ In contrast, Marx described himself as a scientific socialist.

² Amand Bazard (1958), a disciple, gave a series of lectures summarizing Saint-Simon’s ideas.

While Saint-Simon's ideas were never put to the test, those of the other two utopian socialists were. Owen (1771–1858) was a successful British industrialist who incorporated progressive ideas into his business.³ For example, he opened company stores where his mill workers could buy goods at low prices. Because of such endeavors, Owen is regarded as a pioneer of cooperatives, as well as an early socialist. He is also recognized as an advocate of factory reform legislation. But, more than a reformer, Owen was a visionary. In *A New View of Society* (1972, see also 1973), Owen advocated the organization of workers and their families into self-sufficient communities, or communes, of 500 to 3,000 people.

In 1825, two Owenite experiments were attempted, one in Orbiston, Scotland, and the other in New Harmony, Indiana. Both quickly failed, as did about a dozen subsequent attempts at Owenite communities in the United Kingdom and the United States.⁴ Owen eventually rejected all religions and instead desired a spirit of universal charity. He sought what he thought to be a more perfect system of liberty and equality, ending the system of buying cheap and selling dear. In his old age, he converted to spiritualism and called upon Napoleon Bonaparte, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, William Shakespeare, and others to prepare the world for universal peace, charity, forbearance, and love.

Fourier (1772–1837) (1957, 1968), like Owen, called for small-scale, self-sufficient communities, exactly 2,985,984 of them, that he called “phalanxes.” This call was but one part of his new ordering of science, in which men would grow tails, the oceans would be made of lemonade, the earth would feature six moons, and the stars would copulate and reproduce themselves. Within the phalanxes, the wage system was to be replaced by a guaranteed living allowance and a division of profits based on work and capital investment. There would be special incentives for work that nobody wanted to do. However, Fourier believed that if work were arranged well, there would be a natural supply equal to every demand. For example, children could be used for cleaning sewers because they “love to wallow in the muck and play with dirty things” (Taylor 1982, p. 119).

Just as Fourier saw workers reduced to slavery by economic liberalism, he saw women reduced to prostitution by marriage. For a

³ Trincado and Santos-Redondo (2014) compare Owen's socialist ideas to the individualist ideas of Jeremy Bentham, one of his business partners.

⁴ See Thies (2001) and the references cited therein for a more complete discussion of the history of American communes.

long time, his thoughts on human sexuality were merely implicit in the large communal bedrooms of his phalanxes, with the children housed separately. But, with the long delayed publication of *The New Amorous World*, it became clear that, just as there was a minimum income, there would be a sexual minimum that was to be provided by an “angelic group” of extraordinary beauty (Beecher and Bienvenu 1971).

Fourier did not think of his proposals as entertainment but as serious political economy. This is because he was mad. He waited for philanthropists to underwrite his phalanxes, advertising in the local newspaper the hours he would be ready to receive them at his house, and—growing frustrated at their nonarrival—he shot himself in the head. But his wild criticisms of the capitalist system proved irresistible to those inclined to radical ideas. In France and America, he gained tremendous followings, and dozens of phalanxes were organized during the 1840s. Almost all of these attempts failed in one to three years. Hence, his followers came to be known as four-year-ists.

The most successful Fourierist colony in America was the North American Phalanx, founded in Monmouth County, New Jersey, in 1843. It made major concessions to individualism. Although the colony featured a three-story phalanstery (a self-contained structure housing a cooperative community), most of its members, the number of which peaked at 150, preferred to live in family homes. The work standard was ten hours a day, with extra pay for additional hours and less attractive work, and with equal pay for men and women. Indeed, women wore a pant-like kind of uniform called bloomers that was then considered daring, and the group was governed democratically. However, rather than rebuild after a fire, the commune dissolved in 1856.

For Robert Dale Owen, a son of Robert Owen, New Harmony failed because it attracted the wrong kind of people. His father “wanted honesty, and got dishonesty, temperance, and instead he was troubled by the intemperate, industry, and he found idleness, cleanliness, and he found dirt, carefulness, and he found waste, desire for knowledge, and he found apathy.” In contrast, religious-based communes, such as the Shaker communes that reached their heyday during the nineteenth century and the Hutterite communes that are still going strong today, have enjoyed a relatively high success rate in terms of longevity. Their success is presumably because their rules weed out free-riders and induce greater commitment. Thies (2001)

demonstrates that even among the religious-based communes, certain concessions to egoism improved the success rate. He also demonstrates that the few “anarchist” communities of the nineteenth century, such as Josiah Warren’s Modern Times of Long Island, also enjoyed a high rate of success. Table 1 describes some of the more notable communes in US history.

Table 1. Notable Communes in US History

| Commune | Year | Type | Founder | Place |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Shakers | 1776 | religious | Mother Ann | Watervliet, NY |
| Harmony | 1804 | religious | George Rapp | Pennsylvania |
| Owenite | 1825 | utopian | Robert Owen | Indiana |
| Amana | 1842 | religious | Christian Metz | Iowa (orig. West Seneca, NY) |
| Fourierist | 1843 | utopian | (Charles Fourier) | North American Phalanx, NJ |
| Communia | 1847 | communist | William Weitling | Iowa |
| Oneida | 1848 | religious | J. H. Noyes | NY |
| Modern Times | 1851 | anarchist | Josiah Warren | Long Island, NY |
| Hutterite | 1874 | religious | (Jacob Hutter) | Dakota Territory |

| Commune | Year | Property | Sexual Relations | Children |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Shakers | 1776 | egalitarian | celibate | n/a |
| Harmony | 1804 | family gardens | celibate | n/a |
| Owenite | 1825 | egalitarian | liberalized divorce | unaddressed |
| Amana | 1842 | family gardens | monogamy | family |
| Fourierist | 1843 | corporate | free love | communal |
| Communia | 1847 | egalitarian | monogamy | family up to age six, then communal |
| Oneida | 1848 | egalitarian | free love | communal |
| Modern Times | 1851 | anarchic | not addressed | unaddressed |
| Hutterite | 1874 | egalitarian | monogamy | family |

Wilhelm Weitling, a German communist, also attempted a commune in America that failed (Wittke 1950). He blamed its failure on the inability to force people to work when property is shared equally. Under communism, he argued, people do not have the “liberty to refrain from working.” Weitling objected to “the folly of majority rule” and complained that “if women only wouldn’t get children,” they’d be better communists, but “children stimulate their egoism.” While his attempt failed, he thought that after at least fifty years of purification by revolution and war, a true communist society could be established.

Weitling’s approach to socialism can be seen as transitional between utopian socialism and the Marxist-Leninist form of communism. In the Marxist-Leninist form, the Communist Party acts as “the vanguard of the proletariat.” The members of the Communist Party act as agents for change, using the state’s coercive powers to transform the people of a country from egoists into the New Socialist Man. To be sure, the concept of Communists acting as a vanguard was not original to Lenin, and can be found in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx 1906, p. 33):

The Communists, therefore, are, on the one hand, practically the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the lines of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

What is new or at least explicit in Lenin is that the Communist Party would act as the dictator, and not merely as the leader, of the working class. “Class political consciousness,” says Lenin (1973, p. 98), “can be brought to the workers only from without.” Lenin thus distinguishes the ultimate goal of Communism from the goals of trade unions and Social Democratic parties, which are merely to improve the conditions of the working class.

III. The Motivation Problem

Early religious-based communes emphasized traditional virtues in work and family life and de-emphasized materialism. They tended, accordingly, to prosper. In addition to making certain concessions to egoism, these communities tended to be small. Hutterite villages (which exist to this day) prepare themselves for splitting into two, ameba-like, as they approach about 150 people. Shaker communities

consisted of so many villages (the number varied from one to several), each of modest size. Amana also consisted of so many villages, each of which was relatively small. The early religious-based communes also tended to be organized by charismatic leaders, although a number of them transitioned to democratic forms of governance. Such characteristics—the suppression of materialism and the organizational structures typically found in religious-based communes—could have been instrumental in their success, by inducing cooperation among members and suppressing shirking. Putnam (2007), for example, addresses the issues of size, diversity, and trust within groups.

The utopian socialists, conversely, attracted people to their communities on the promise of material advantage. In most cases, they attracted heterogeneous groups of people, and in some cases, large numbers of people. In New Harmony, something like a thousand people gathered together, ranging from swindlers and shirkers to honest laborers and intellectuals. Although egalitarianism was promoted, there was no requirement that members work. Those who did work were paid in credits that could be used to buy personal and family items at the community's stores. But credits could also be obtained in return for financial contributions. That some worked and others did not was a source of friction among community members. In addition, there were shortages of skilled workers and competent managers, perhaps because of the egalitarian pay structure for those who worked. The promotion of egalitarianism thus harmed New Harmony by generating envy, distrust, and an imbalanced work force.

Josiah Warren, already mentioned as the founder of the anarchist community of Modern Times, was among those who joined Owens's experiment in socialism. He left convinced that socialism could not be made to work. Instead of socialism, he proposed a form of individualism described as anarchism. While Warren disdained banks, corporations, and other forms of hierarchy, he was more interested in "mutualism" or reciprocity in work than in providing an income guarantee. Warren's anarchist colony featured a mix of private plots and jointly owned facilities. He also promoted a form of currency "backed" by labor, meaning redeemable in one bushel of corn or else in one hour of gardening,⁵ and he grappled with valuing goods in terms of the amount of labor needed to produce them. Modern

⁵ Murray Bookchin can be cited as a modern anarchist, and the Ithaca Dollar as a modern version of community-based currency.

Times and the several other anarchist communities organized during the nineteenth century simply lost their distinctiveness over time and “disappeared” among the panoply of residential arrangements characteristic of a free society.

The communists had a different approach to the motivation problem. As foreshadowed by Weitling, it was to believe that eventually there would come the New Socialist Man who would work for the common good. To help bring this new man into existence, the state would transform schools into indoctrination centers and remove children from their parents to be raised by the collective. Along with indoctrinating youth, there was also control of information in general and the suppression of dissidents.

Until the arrival of the New Socialist Man, motivation would be necessary. But because of the limitations on positive incentives required by egalitarianism, motivation would mainly feature negative incentives. Under capitalism, it can be said that the punishment is that you are not rewarded—not promoted, not hired, or not “re-hired” (terminated). Under communism, the reward is that you are not punished—not sent to the Gulag. Hence, in communism, shirking consisted of doing the minimum that avoided punishment: “We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us.” Without positive incentives, costly systems of monitoring were needed, and work consisted more of easy-to-measure, repetitive tasks than of creativity and the exercise of judgment.

IV. The Coordination Problem

The utopian socialists supposed that there was no problem with the coordination of economic activity. Supplies of resources were simply assumed to each be forthcoming in the proper quantities needed to meet consumer demands. Therefore, there is no need for either a price mechanism to coordinate economic activity, or for central planning. Fourier, who at least considered the matter, believed there would be no fundamental problem with the coordination of economic activity because supplies “naturally” equal demands. However, as a practical matter, he allowed that premiums might be paid to those who worked longer hours or who did disagreeable work.

The small-scale, self-sufficient communities that the utopian socialists proposed could be seen as an attempt to replicate a simpler time when human relations were intimate and specialization and trade were not extensive, when the pace of change was slow, and when

economic activity could be coordinated mostly by tradition. But by the early nineteenth century, the advantages of specialization and trade were already so extensive that no small-scale, self-sufficient community could achieve anything like the standard of living that could be achieved in the emerging global economy.

V. Economies of Scale

Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, was quick to notice the revolution underway in specialization and trade, which he illustrated with the case of pin manufacture (Smith 1904, I.1.3). Furthermore, he recognized that “the division of labor” was governed by “the extent of the market.” (Smith 1904, I.3.1) In the case of pins, the cost of trading pins across various distances would determine the extent to which an enterprise in any one place would be able to take advantage of the available economies of scale in pin-making.

At the time Smith wrote, he could speak of the economies of scale available in the specialization of workers in each of the several stages of pin manufacture, using the same technology one worker would use to do the entire job himself. But by the early nineteenth century, new technologies involving industrial machinery greatly advanced pin manufacture. Two small news items illustrate the amazing progress that was underway:

The small machine for making pins, originally of American invention, has been so far improved by H. Whitmore that he makes from the simple wire 30 per minute, completely holed and pointed, entirely by machine, with one hand only to turn the crank. They are better than any other pin because the head and shank is one piece.

—*National Gazette* [of Philadelphia], June 19, 1823

Brown & Elton of Waterbury, CT, have in operation an improved machine for the manufacture of pins, which turns out two barrels per day. A barrel contains 4,000,000 pins.

—*Galveston Civilian and Gazette*, June 2, 1848

By the time Marx wrote, the standard of living offered by specialization and trade in the context of an extensive market made small-scale, self-sufficient communities obsolete. Marx thus embraced the use of machinery in production, and he defined socialism as state ownership, as opposed to private ownership, of the means of production. But, with extensive specialization and trade, some method—either the price mechanism or central planning—

would have to be used to coordinate economic activity. Tradition aided by intimate knowledge would not be sufficient. In the case of a market-oriented economy, prices convey to consumers and producers the information they need to know of the relative scarcity of goods in making their seemingly uncoordinated plans for the future (Hayek 1945).⁶ In the case of a planned economy, the government engages in central planning and directly controls production and consumption.

VI. Post-Colonial Experiments in Socialism

Following the end of the colonial period, there was a new wave of experimentation in socialism. In many of the newly-independent countries of the world, and also in some long independent but underdeveloped countries, various forms of socialism were attempted. These experiments ranged from democratic socialism (e.g., India) to totalitarian socialism (e.g., China). Commonalities included central planning, rapid industrialization, and import substitution. To some extent, the motivation for import substitution may have been to develop a sense of nation as distinct from tribal identities and continued dependence on the former colonial power. Sometimes there was an impulse to promote small-scale production, such as Mohandas Gandhi's promotion of homespun cotton. Those in the middle class, being educated and accustomed to independent thinking, were frequently marginalized or worse to create a "classless society," leaving the country's rulers with only peasants and workers.

Among the charismatic leaders of this new wave of socialist experiments were Kwame Nkrumah (1964) of Ghana and Julius Nyerere (1968) of Tanzania (see also Kumssa and Jones 2015). These men attempted to meld Marxism and Fabian socialism with

⁶ To be sure, small-scale communes could still exist. They would simply not be self-sufficient. Within free-market economies, small-scale communes might specialize in one or another kind of production, as they choose based on market prices and their knowledge of their production possibilities. The communes would then exchange their surplus production with the outside world for goods in which others specialize. Hutterites, for example, do not attempt to be self-sufficient. While much of their production is for their own consumption, Hutterites are happy to grow cash crops, the proceeds of which are used to buy products they do not themselves produce. The Oneida commune engaged itself in manufacturing and eventually became famous for silverware. The Amana commune engaged itself in a number of industries, and eventually reorganized itself into a traditional individualistic community with a division of the property of the commune including shares of stock in a corporation engaged in the manufacture of appliances.

indigenous traditions. As with Marx, what they were for was mostly implicit in their criticism of capitalism. Nkrumah’s philosophy of “consciencism” was one of becoming self-aware, without much to say about a planned or intentional society. Nyerere’s philosophy of “ujamaa” and “self-reliance” was also mostly content free. “African socialism,” said Nyerere, was to see the nation as family. African socialism meant that the marketplace that had previously characterized the African society could be discarded in favor of collectivized farms, price-setting through marketing boards, and a transfer of the profits of the agricultural sector to the industrial sector. Criticism of the lack of progress achieved under African socialism (e.g., Artadi and Sala-i-Martin 2003) was “Africa bashing” (Cooper 1993, p. 198). Even so, by the early 1990s, underdeveloped countries were switching to market-oriented economies.

Table 2 lists all 31 countries identified by the World Bank as low-income as of 2015. War, civil strife, ethnic conflict and genocide, chaos, and oppressive government are associated with these countries. Marxist government has not been the only obstacle to economic progress. Indeed, several communist countries have achieved a measure of economic success. But the high tide of Marxist experiments that followed the publication of *The Road to Serfdom* has now mostly been replaced by an ebb tide, in some cases through the workings of the democratic process, in other cases through pragmatic reforms, and in yet other cases through collapse.

Table 2. Low-Income Countries As of 2015

| Country | Impediments to Economic Development |
|----------------------|--|
| Afghanistan | war |
| Benin | through ‘91 Marxist government, then a transition, then in ‘06 free and fair elections |
| Burkina Faso | strife |
| Burundi | war, strife, genocide |
| Cambodia | lunatic form of communism, war, strife |
| Central African Rep. | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Chad | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Comoros | strife |
| Congo, Dem. Rep. | war, strife, ethnic conflict |

| Country | Impediments to Economic Development |
|------------------|--|
| Eritrea | strife, ethnic conflict, war |
| Ethiopia | through '91 Marxist government; since then strife, war |
| Gambia | through '02 Marxist government; since then dominant single party |
| Guinea | through '06 Marxist government; since then war, strife |
| Guinea-Bissau | through '94 Marxist government; since then war, strife |
| Haiti | chaos |
| Korea, Dem. Rep. | lunatic form of communism |
| Liberia | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Madagascar | through '94 Marxist government, then a transition, then in '13 free and fair elections |
| Malawi | through '94 dictatorship, since then dominant single party |
| Mali | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Mozambique | civil war through '93, since then, transition |
| Nepal | strife |
| Niger | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Rwanda | strife, ethnic conflict, genocide |
| Sierra Leone | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Somalia | anarchy |
| South Sudan | strife, ethnic conflict |
| Tanzania | through '84 Marxist government, since then transition |
| Togo | dictatorship |
| Uganda | lunatic form of dictatorship, strife, war, genocide |
| Zimbabwe | dictatorship, continuous strife |

VII. Conclusion

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, we learned that false statistics sustained the argument that central planning advanced the conditions of the working class, and that the real purpose of central planning was to advance the interests of the state apparatus (Boettke 1988; Ledeneva 1998; Malia 1995; Pipes 2001). Today, the anticapitalist argument is no longer based on the promise of a higher standard of

living. To a growing extent, it disputes the goal of a continually increasing standard of living, and proposes instead “sustainability,” post-scarcity economics, and green politics. But this was not the road to serfdom with which Hayek contended. This is *our* road to serfdom.

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