

The Worker Set Free: Labor and Utopia

Utopia implies freedom from want. To achieve a utopia, scarcity must be abolished. Unfortunately for the societies that aspire to that goal, the current system of labor relies on scarcity. Currently, work is necessary to survive, which means that the best economy is one in which everyone is employed. But when a small subset of the population can produce enough resources to satisfy the needs of the entire population, our assumptions about labor must change.

In H.G. Wells' *The World Set Free*, the countries of Earth grapple with exactly this problem. The discovery of atomic energy spurs an age of rapid technological progress and automation. At first, this seems great, since new innovations are enabling new levels of prosperity and luxurious ways of life; indeed, "enormous fortunes were made and fantastic wages earned by all who were concerned in the new developments" (Wells, 1914). However, the dark side quickly becomes clear: with less and less labor required to produce the resources that humanity needs, more and more people are thrown out of work. Society is divided into those to whom the profits of the new technology flow and those who have no way to enjoy the fruits of society's advancement. Aid offices are overrun and protests spring up, and not just from lack of aid: to the unemployed, the dignity of work is as important as having the means to survive. During the Great March of the Unemployed, the protesters "bore a few banners with the time-honoured inscription: 'Work, not Charity' ... They were being 'scrapped'—as horses had been 'scrapped'" (Wells, 1914). This is the result of a society that fails to respond as the new prosperity invalidates the old notions of labor. The message of the Great March of the Unemployed in Wells' 1950s London is that "some of these others must have foreseen these dislocations [of labor]—that anyhow they ought to have foreseen—and arranged" (Wells, 1914).

Shortly after the Great March, the Last War breaks out (Wells' war comes about four decades after its real-world counterpart). Fought using the newly-developed atomic bombs, the war ends when its participants realize that there could be no true victory because "the power to inflict a blow, the power to destroy, was continually increasing. There was no increase whatever in the ability to escape" (Wells, 1914). War, it seems, has been made obsolete. The leaders of the great powers meet to create a new world government, leaving individualism to the past and ushering in a new age of global consciousness.

It is this new collectivism that allows the world of *The World Set Free* to become a post-scarcity utopia. The resources that have become abundant thanks to science can now be distributed based on need. Labor for survival's sake becomes a thing of the past: "it was necessary therefore to take over the housing, feeding, and clothing of this worldwide multitude without exacting any return in labour whatever... So quite insensibly the [world] council drifted into a complete reorganisation of urban and industrial life, and indeed of the entire social system" (Wells, 1914). As a result, pursuits exist as the result of intrinsic desire. Those who are creative become artists. Those who are fascinated by science become researchers. The utopia arises when society adapts to the new reality that labor is no longer a necessity and raises the standard of living for the whole of the populace.

Thomas More's *Utopia* also features a society that has adapted to prosperity. In *Utopia*, abundance is a product of efficient use of labor, rather than technology. Rather than create a society in which there is a class of employed citizens and a class of unemployed citizens, every Utopian works a short work day so that there is enough labor to go around. They "appoint six of these [hours] for work... The rest of their time besides that taken up in work, eating and sleeping, is left to every man's discretion" (More, 1551). This means that each citizen has more leisure

time than in More's contemporary Europe (or even the modern developed world), which is a major improvement to quality of life. Industry is determined by heritage, so labor is distributed in such a way that all needs are satisfied, but there is still freedom of choice, since those who are dissatisfied by their careers can change. In *Utopia*, society responds to abundance by redistributing labor to improve the standard of living of all citizens.

Should the leaders of a society respond to abundance maliciously, what could have been a utopia instead becomes a dystopia. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the ruling parties of the world ensure full employment through perpetual war. This creates artificial scarcity, driving down the standard of living instead of raising it, while simultaneously suppressing complaints. According to *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, a book within the book, "the primary aim of modern warfare... is to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living" (Orwell, 1949). Instead of using the fruits of technology to improve the lives of its citizens, the government of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* creates a system of labor that preserves its own control.

There is another side to the labor system used by a society beyond its basic functions of production and allocation of resources. The way people work can either reflect or impose the values of the society. In *The World Set Free*, the focus of labor shifts to science and art. The people of the new world community dedicate their efforts to the betterment of mankind, demonstrating the new common consciousness that arose in the wake of the Last War. In *Utopia*, the highest values of the society are productivity and industry, and the focus of the populace is on the betterment of these virtues: "that no man may live idle, but that every one may follow his trade diligently" (More, 1551).

However, in a more sinister manner, this can be a source of control. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, all labor is framed by the war effort. This means that complaints are stifled, and leisure is at a bare minimum. The desire to question authority is suppressed, and demand for luxuries becomes non-existent. Another society that uses labor as a form of control can be seen in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. The community in *The Giver* has achieved peace and harmony by adopting a policy of Sameness, in which nonconformity is forbidden. Decision-making is centralized: "the community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made" (Lowry, 1993, p. 48). Children are assigned careers for life at age 11, which they are to follow without complaint. This ensures that labor will be properly distributed. But this practice also impresses upon the children the lack of individual choice and self-determination that the community wants to impose. Through work, people live the values of their society.

As scarcity fades, societies must adapt their systems of labor. A shift orchestrated to distribute the fruits of progress can lead to utopia, as in *Utopia* and after the war in *The World Set Free*, but one that disregards the well-being of the people can lead to dystopia, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (and arguably *The Giver*). Negligence also leads to suffering, which precedes the war in *The World Set Free*. New labor systems can also reflect values or impose control: more often the former in utopias and the latter in dystopias. From utopian literature, we can see how society must reimagine its view of labor in order to adapt to vanishing scarcity.

Works Cited

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