

In our Time Programme 42
Utopia

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, I'm joined today by John Carey and Anthony Grayling, to look at Utopias, real and fictional in the past, present, and future. Utopia, by definition does not exist. The literal meaning of the Greek is "nowhere", and yet coming up to the third millennium we're still enthralled by its allure. Why do some of us still believe in it, after the devastation wreaked this century by the Utopian ideals that gave rise to fascism and communism, and what do Utopias in fiction tell us about the present and even the future?

John Carey is the editor of a new fascinating anthology on the subject, "The Faber book of Utopias". He's a distinguished critic and journalist and Merton Professor of English at Oxford University. Dr Anthony Grayling is a lecturer in philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, and a fellow of St Ann's College, Oxford. He works for human rights as a member of the writer in prison committee of P. E. N, and the China and Tibet human rights group June the Fourth.

John Carey Utopia means "no place", why is it so often taken to mean "a good place"?

John Carey : Well, I think the idea came before the word, the idea as you said has been there really, I think, since human thought began. The idea of some golden age or some time in the past or some possibility in the future, heaven, a paradise, something that will be better than now, and when Moore called his Utopia "Utopia", "No place", I think it was a sort of joke, that is to say that actually, the title page of Utopia does to call it "the best place", but calling it "no place" really begged the question, "Could you ever have it? Is it possible?", and of course, there's enormous disagreement still about whether Moore thought it was or whether he thought it was good or bad. People say "Oh no, if he was a Catholic, he couldn't have believed in divorce and so on", others say, "Well look at the conditions in the England of this time, Henry VIII's England, the poverty and so on", this would seem bliss to peasants of that time. So I think that it's come....it came to mean "good place" before Moore invented the word, "no place", and that was a sort of cagey....a little caveat.

Melvyn Bragg : But in your 101 Utopias that you give us in this Faber book, you start with....I'd no idea that there was Egyptian poetry of that standard in ancient Egypt, you start with ancient Egyptian poetry, you go to (indistinct), we have *idealised* places don't we...great golden places, so there's no doubt at the start that Utopias are wonderful places?

John Carey : Yes, it's idealised to start with and I think that that the.....well, the first surviving Utopia, which isn't idealised, that is to say there's some hope of practical materialisation of it, is Plato's "Republic", enormously influential in the West, and Plato sets out not to describe a fortunate isle, a happy land, golden age, but to say, "If we have this kind of ruler, if we had rulers who do not make money, do not have political careers, are totally dedicated and wise and unselfish, and we regulate the race, we produce better people, by eugenics, strict eugenics, then we shall have a better world, a tougher world, a better world", and I think he's the first to have that practical programme, written in to his Utopia.

Melvyn Bragg : Anthony Grayling, why do you think we're still as enthralled by the idea of Utopia? Or do you think we aren't anymore?

Anthony Grayling : No I think we are, and I think we are because we always have been, in fact the whole of human history, both collectively and individually is a quest for Utopias. I mean all individuals are looking for a state of being, a state of life, which is good for them, perfect for them, you know, we're all hoping to retire to somewhere sunny, you know that's our own personal little Utopia, and human societies have always striven really to produce conditions, produce institutions, produce ways of life, that would be Utopian, or the closest thing to Utopia that could be acquired. Some of those endeavours have been aimed at providing the best conditions for everybody in the society, but they're rather in the minority, most endeavours have been aimed at producing optimal conditions for the ruling class in society, and quite often they've succeeded.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think the religious ideas of paradise and the afterlife are closer linked with Utopias?

Anthony Grayling : I think there all of a piece, because you know, the facts, the realities of life seem so harsh that

people think, "Well, there must be, there could be, let's hope that there is, a dispensation of things where we'll all be happy, and pain and suffering and inequality and injustice will be gone", you know heaven as the ultimate Utopia poses for us a very, very powerful ideal.

Melvyn Bragg : You say, John Carey, that write.....I'm quoting from you, "Writing Utopias comes from our wish to evade death", could you expand on that a little?

John Carey : Well I suppose that's true in an obvious sense when you're inventing heavens and after lives. But also I think because, death is the ultimate anti-Utopian thing. If you can only stretch life out, if you could only find a means of eternal life or eternal youth, well that's a very common Utopian idea. Some Utopian/Dystopian writers see through it, Swift for example, invents these creatures called Strolchbrugs who are immortals but are extremely miserable, as they are very, very old, and what they do he says, is envy if I recall, the vices of the younger sort and the deaths of the old. But if only you could, yes, if only you could get beyond death, then that would be a sort of ultimate Utopia. I'm interested by what Anthony says there, about Utopia for whom?

It's true that Utopias are very selective and if you think of the heavens, well I have some of the heavens in the book, they do often, not only reject certain people, certain people go to hell, but in some cases get pleasure from watching the sufferings of the people who go to hell.....

Melvyn Bragg : Totalian.

John Carey : Utopia by Totalian, where he's trying to persuade Christians of his day not to go and watch the Roman shows and spectacles, so he writes this Utopia where he's at the last day, at the last judgement, it will be wonderful, because it will be much better than now, the actors will be shrieking far more than realistically than they do on the stage, because they'll be covered in flames, and the acrobats will be much more nimble, because they'll be in the fire and so on and so on. Well, that kind of idea, that some people are not going to be there may seem barbaric in Totalian's case, but actually when any of us plans Utopia, some people will not be there, I suggest in the book for example, tyrants won't, torturers won't, terrorists won't, some people have got to be cut out, and the great question in planning Utopia, is how that's to be done, it seems to me.

Melvyn Bragg : We'll look at some practical examples. I mean one of the things that runs through the book, is the simplicity of some of the Utopias. John Ruskin talking about watching the corn grow, to read, to think, to love, to hope, a people cheerfully paying more taxes in Mercio's (??) Utopia, and on it goes. But the practical Utopia, the first as John said was Plato's "Republic", which you went through some of the points of a few moments ago. Now a lot of people think that that laid down a totalitarian template, children, wives were in common, there were rulers, who were rulers, and you couldn't be a ruler unless you were born to be a ruler and if you showed talent for ruling you were plucked out from the lower class and turned into a ruler anyway, alchemised into rule, there were slaves and so on, and it was..... poets were banned famously as we know. What...do you think that was a template, and why did practical Utopias....why have they to be so authoritarian?

Anthony Grayling : Well, it's certainly the case that Plato's "Republic" is terribly authoritarian, and it does provide a model for a number of Utopian ideas where the thought is that the intractability of human nature is such that you really have to crack down hard to make sure that the Utopian ideal can be realised. Of course there's the competing model in which everybody has maximum freedom, and everybody only has to reach out a hand to pluck the fruit from the bough, and so there's no need to labour, there's no need for hierarchy. Those sorts of Utopians thought that authority and social structures of a military kind were introduced in order to preserve inequalities, to protect the people at the top of the food chain from the resentment of the people at the bottom. So it's certainly true that authoritarianism and totalitarianism is a very, very strong theme and we've seen tragic application of that theme in our own time, in the twentieth century. But oddly, I mean you talked...you said earlier, you know, "have we lost the Utopian ideal?", I mean on the contrary, you know it's been the case all through history that not only has there been a striving towards Utopian conditions, either in society as a whole or for some caste. But also lots of groups of people have set up their own little Utopias. You can think of the monastic ideal as Utopian in a way, and in the twentieth century, if you look especially at the United States, but all over the world, there are literally hundreds, perhaps thousands of little Utopian communities, very communistic in their ideals, based on you know, all sorts of models like BF Skinner's (indistinct) and there are actually some..... I've got here in front of me on the table I've got a statement by the "Twin Oaks community" in the United States, which claims to, you know, embody the

Skinner ideals, which we can talk about a bit later, and these are very non-authoritarian, these are, you know, everybody's equal, they're...in fact there is an organisation called "The Federation of Egalitarian Communities" which is a federation of these Utopian communities, and there, you know, political power, authority is shared.

John Carey : Yes, I was talking the other day to a young man who grew up on a Kibbutz, and we talked about Kibbutzim as Utopias. I was most impressed, the more he went on about....to see how much the ideals were things I'd been reading about in parts of Utopias. For example, he said the idea in a Kibbutz is that everyone gets what he or she needs, and those who can work, work, at what they can work at, and that is actually, it seemed to me, really just a paraphrase of what Marx said. Marx's ideal was, "From everyone according to his ability, to everyone according to his need", and they'd taken this over. Now Anthony says that's "non authoritarian", the problem it seems to me, I mean Utopias are very problematic I think, I don't know what I think, no, but no, I think about them really. The problem is what he said was that when the teenagers grow up, they want a car, they want to go to Tel Aviv, they want possessions. Their parents who are idealists, and join the Kibbutz, say that is wrong. On the other hand, to thwart it, would be of course, authoritarian, how do you manage this, how do you make people realise that they don't need private wealth and possessions, when they think they do. It's clear that selfishness if that's what you call it, or self-fulfillment if you're in favour of it, are things that find it hard to survive in Utopias. How do you combat them?

Melvyn Bragg : Whichever Utopia you look at it requires an enormous sacrifice of the self to the whole doesn't it? Of the individual to the big body, whether it's these idealistic ones, you have sheets in front of you, or whether it's Plato's authoritarian one, or the communistic examples we've had this century. Do you think that's ever attainable?

Anthony Grayling : Well I think that that happens because, you know, the non-ideals reality that we're faced with is pressure of numbers, and therefore conflict of interests, limited resources, competition over those resources , and that's where these difficulties arise and why it's so hard to construct institutions that would allow people to live happily and flourishingly and independently. But if you had a situation where there wasn't so much conflict for resources, and that's exactly what some of these, you know, contemporary little communes are endeavouring to achieve, then those conflicts could be resolved or wouldn't arise, and there wouldn't be that problem, and that indeed is exactly the hope of some of these communities. "Let's try to set up a situation", they say, "where there's enough for everybody, enough to go round, so people don't have to pinch one another's apples, and we don't have to quarrel about who is going to do what, and then we'll all be happy".

John Carey : But that doesn't seem to me to be a solution at all, because you might as well say, "Well the English middle-class has got enough apples and so on, and is perfectly happy", but it's not Utopia. I mean, it seems to me that if you're going to have Utopia, it's got to extend further than some little commune in the corner of the United States. The great Utopian thinker in the twentieth century, the late nineteenth-twentieth century is HG Wells, and Wells thought the first step to Utopia must be a world state. You can't have Africa Starving and call it Utopia because you've got a little commune that works all right in the United States.

Anthony Grayling : I agree with you, absolutely I wasn't defending the.....

John Carey : No, no, no.

Anthony Grayling : I agree with you, absolutely, but I think the point I'm making is that the English middle-class *do* have enough apples, and they are much closer to Utopia than the people who don't have the apples.

John Carey : Absolutely true, and indeed if you look at the way the English middle-class live, and then read Utopias in the past, you see that we're in it, we're in it! I mean there's Bellamy's Utopia, looking backward, famous nineteenth century American Utopia, where this chap who visits it gets taken to a.....

Melvyn Bragg : It's set in 2020 is it?

John Carey : 2000, he refers to the year 2000. He was going to set it in 3000, then he became convinced it could change much more quickly, so he set it in 2000, and this chap's taken along to a room where the girl of the family presses some buttons and music comes out, he's amazed a symphony orchestra, she explains there is a menu, you can choose your piece, and he says, "it would be heaven, to live like this". Of course, we've got it. We've got

transistors, but we don't think it's heaven, well a lot of people in the past would have thought so. Anthony's point about, I think, conflict for resources is the vital one, because actually Plato didn't have that. I mean there's no suggestion that Plato's "Republic" is there because food is short, it's there because the Athenians had been defeated in battle and they've got to get a tougher race going. But now, and for Wells, of course, Wells is the first generation to realise that the world has a population explosion, which means that many people are starving and going to starve. How are you going to combat that? Now....and Wells for the first time, starts to introduce, and all Utopias after Wells have to face the problem of birth control . The idea that anyone can reproduce, for Wells is just (indistinct), you can't do that. It's extremely selective and that seems to me to be, that problem of over population, Wells says "Since Malthus every Utopian must face it", and I think that's right and otherwise what the 21st century is going to hold is horrendous.

Anthony Grayling : Absolutely, there are some very, very interesting things in what John is saying there. I'll pick up on two.

Melvyn Bragg : Yeah.

Anthony Grayling : One is that it's a deep paradox that Plato's Utopian republic is premised on the thought that Sparta, which was the victor in that conflict, embodied a kind of ideal, and ideal, an aesthetic, pure, healthy vigorous, masculine, military ideal. They lived according to the warrior virtues, which had been lost in Athens, which in the view of Plato and fellow aristocrats had become rather aesthete (???) and they'd substituted the wrong kinds of civic virtues for the warrior virtues, but of course it's precisely the aesthete (???) civic virtues type state which produced the leisure, which produced the philosophy and the science that enabled Plato to say "Let's have the Spartan ideal instead".

So there's a deep self-defeating paradox in that. But the other point that John made, that I find terribly interesting that we are in Bellamy's Utopia. Here we are we press buttons, music comes out, we have a Hoover we have dishwashers, you know all the amenities that people dreamed about in the 19th century who had to carry coals and draw water from a pump, and yet we don't seem so, a sceptic or a critic would say, any happier, if anything we seem a great deal unhappier, and this is the interesting point. It's post-Darwin that we realise, or seem to be realising that it's not institutions or artefacts that are going to help to realise Utopia, but modification of human nature. That human unhappiness or happiness is something, somehow, genetic or inbred or psychological, and is not a function of what's out there in the outside world, which is why in the 20th century, we've seen some good and horrific experiments at the manipulation of human nature.

Melvyn Bragg : Because, the human nature has been a battle ground of Utopias hasn't it? Particularly since the romantic age, where you have Coleridge's wonderful idea of the Pantisocracy, they'll all go by the (indistinct) and they will devote, I can't remember John, you'll remember, six hours to labour and three hours to reading and two hours to (John laughs) bringing up children, and then you have Voltaire's El Dorado which is a complete send up of the whole thing and that wonderful explosion at the end of it saying, "Men have always been vicious, miserable cosinine, and they will never change", so the battle is over human nature isn't it?

John Carey : Absolutely, and that bit in Voltaire as you say, because he talks to an old man who says, "Have hawks always killed pigeons?" (laughter)....

Melvyn Bragg : Man's character.

John Carey : "Why should you think he was going to change?". Anthony of course, is right about that. Now how is human nature to be changed? It seems to me that we're having some pretty horrendous answers to that question presented to us right now. The last piece, I think in the book is by Lee M. Silver at Princeton who says that "Within a hundred years genetic engineering particularly the production of synthetic genes, will allow parents who can pay for it, parents wealthy enough to buy for their offspring immunity from a whole range of diseases including schizophrenia, (indistinct) and so on, and not just that, but proficiency of an unbelievable kind in business, in art, in music, the great athletes the great, the successful scientists", will come from this little group of the "gene enriched". This sub-species of the race and the rest of us will be what he calls "naturals", that is menials and an underclass , furthermore he says "Within another century, interbreeding will be impossible, they will become genetically irreconcilable. It will be unthinkable that a gene enriched will breed with a natural, as a human being with a

chimpanzee. There won't be just one race. Well that'll solve the modification of human nature, in a way.

Melvyn Bragg : It is...it is...there are two things to say there. One is, I was talking to Jonathan Miller the other day, when I was in the States and reading Steve Jones' book the other week, one opposition to that is that the viruses are now going so strong that Steve Jones, and Jonathan Miller both think that they'll get us in the next 50-100 years and that they will...you know bacteria will, have it's (laughing) revenge! That's one thing, the viruses will have their revenge, put that to one side, I still think that's quite interesting, which is beside the point here, that is a Dystopia. You're seeing that sort of in the USA already aren't you? I mean because the massive...well the massiveness of the (indistinct) when you go there. I've been going there since my 20s for one reason or another, and going there now the massive distance the 400 richest people in America are worth the whole of the wealth of China, it's becoming unimaginable, and they are in take off. I mean heads are.....(coughs)excuse me, people are setting up places for themselves to be frozen, so that when the antidote for their disease is discovered they can be unfrozen and live again. So that is, like Bellamy, translated by Tolstoy (??) sold millions of copies, we're living in Bellamy now, we press a button and music comes out, this man Silver, just might be right.

John Carey : Yeah.

Anthony Grayling : Well I think that's (indistinct) in fact in one sense we've already got a version of Silver's Utopia with us now, because we've got the nutrition rich versus the nutrition poor and we know that, you know, mothers who, pregnant mothers who eat well produce healthier and more intelligent babies and so on. So I mean in a sense there's a little foreshadowing of that already.

Melvyn Bragg : Not such a little, I mean ifSteve Jones...I'm sorry to keep referring to Steve, but I don't see why not, once said that, "If you want to live longer in this country, be born as far as you can from the inner city".

Anthony Grayling : Exactly right, exactly right. I think you know that there are two Utopias at the end of John's book which if you were to put your money on which are likely to be realised in the future. That's one of them, (indistinct) was one of the gene rich and the other one is Mitchio Kakou's "Intelligent Planet", that's on its way too. This is the one where, you know you have "Molly" your computer, doing everything you telling you where the traffic jams are on your way to work, testing your urine in the morning to see if your healthy and so on. I mean these things are on their way. You can put your money on them being on their way, and the question arises "Are they entirely a bad thing?" or "In what respects are they a bad enough thing for us to want to modify them?".

John Carey : Well we have to ask, don't we, I mean I entirely see that argument, but we have to ask "How long can it go on?" so to speak, how long can what Melvyn's been talking about, this prefiguration, really of the Silver situation. I mean huge inequality, how long will it go on? I think of Montaigne. Montaigne who is in the book, and his essay on cannibals, who says after talking to these cannibals from Brazil, they said they were astounded by the differences in wealth in Europe, in their country they said, they called men "halves of each other", everyone was a half of someone else, and they were astounded that in Europe the poor halves didn't get up and cut the throats of the rich ones, and indeed how long will it be before they do? Can one really have this kind of inequality, without something like communism and very militant communism coming back? We think it's dead, but it's been in Utopias right through from Plato. I mean that's the common strain in Utopias. Then the other thing about the virus is actually, I believe about the virus, is I think that's a very...alas...a very likely prognostication.

Melvyn Bragg : But that's a Dystopian view.

John Carey : That's a Dystopia, and that leads me....I mean that....when you were talking about the modification of human nature, you might say, "If that is what we're going to have, that kind of Dystopia, then what we have got to do is go back into ourselves", as Ruskin says. It's not going to be institutions as Anthony just said, it's not going to be that. It's how you actually go back to yourself. That's why I put Thomas Trehearne in the book. Thomas Trehearne in the 17th century, I notice in your review you slightly objected to this, as not Utopian, but I think it is Utopian, because if it's like that outside, all you can do is cultivate your soul and make it seem as if through the eyes of a saint or a child, in a way that makes you happy.

Melvyn Bragg : There's a great fear of Utopias on the part of fiction writers. It seems, this century to have been justified. I mean the template being Zamiatin's "We" which Orwell came from "1984", and Huxley came from, and

that you know, it's the inhabitants are not names they're numbers. They all live by a rigid time-table, and everything's made of glass so you can see through. You get 15 minutes for sex, you have a ticket for sex on a certain day you can draw the blind for 15 minutes.

The fiction, I mean just general, we've only five minutes, the fictional men this century have really been against it haven't they. They've said "Watch out, these places, these ideals are going to crush you" and on the whole very much this century they've been right.

Anthony Grayling : Well writers are reactors and commentators aren't they? And if a person driven to write lives in a very Dystopian setting and tries to imagine a world where he and his fellow human beings would be happier, he will give us a portrait of it. If he lives at a time when Orwell and Huxley and so on did, where there were gross Utopian experiments, or would-be Utopian experiments of the kind that we've seen in this century, naturally they'll write against it, in order to warn us. They're responding in a way to a claim about a would-be dispensation for human beings, handed down from an elite, you know the vanguard of the revolution, which they very, very rightly and very, very properly disagreed with.

John Carey : But you see, the fictional writers, when you look at their fears are fearing quite different things. For example what Huxley fears frankly, is the lower classes, with their pop music. What Orwell fears is precisely the opposite. "Hope lies in the proles", he says. He fears authoritarian communism. So although they're all fearful, they are very fearful, it seems to me, they are fearful in different ways, and I like to look back to the Utopians like Gerard Winstanley in the 17th century, Baburth at the time of the French revolution.

Melvyn Bragg : Baburth is very moving, that piece.

John Carey : Wonderful...who are so noble, so selfless, so moving, not afraid, Baburth was on trial for his life, he was guillotined the next day, but he speaks out for equality, and if you put the fears, these muddled fears of the 20th century beside that, they seem to me very impoverished.

Melvyn Bragg : Mmm.

Anthony Grayling : Mmm. I think that's...but I think that's because the Babel of voices, the confusion of voices that has grown and grown from the 19th century because of the contribution that the 19th century made to horrors like Nationalism and Racism, and prior to that time in the rather clearer air, as it seemed to people of the enlightenment, the idea that reason, human reason is somehow competent to solve some of these problems, you get it....you find it possible for people like Baburth to say what they did.

John Carey : Yes.

Anthony Grayling : They are noble agree. I mean every now and then, here and there in the forest of Utopian ideals you see one or two silver birches gleaming away like that, because, you know, it's not impossible...it's not impossible to find a dispensation of things, and I think that most of us at some time in our lives actually find ourselves in communities or with people or with friends, who serve as windows, in a way give us a glimpse to a dispensation of things where we can relate to one another comfortably, and that in the end is what the Utopians desire.

Melvyn Bragg : Bring in Dyson who has a great idealised view of our future, that we will spread through the universe, we will inhabit galaxies, and implied in that that we will be benign doing that. I mean how seriously do you take that John?

John Carey : Well I do think that at the moment there are two Utopian ideals. One is as you say Freeman Dyson, represents that, where we colonise the galaxies. In his case, comets actually, where we plant trees that will melt the interiors of the comets, and we live in these huge branches...I mean trees hundreds of miles high, we live in them, and the other ideal is represented by Richard Jeffries, which is that people will disappear, we'll reduce the planet's population very much, and trees and things will take over this planet, it will become green, and I call these, as you know, in the book, the "greens" and the "space invaders", and I think we divide into those two, and I am a green.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes, and you think thatdo you think that there will have to be some sort of Utopias because of overpopulation? I mean do you actually see Utopias..these fumbblings as being models for societies that will come about, necessarily.

John Carey : Yes, necessarily or a terrible alternative, and this is what the Dystopians foresee. After all we discovered nuclear fission, and it was prophesied by Utopians HG Wells, well before it was discovered, as the Dystopian way out, that there would be nuclear war, famine, plague and so on, and I think in the 21st century that choice will have to be made.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you agree with that?

Anthony Grayling : Well I'm not so sure. I think one premise though, which is that the viruses and overpopulation are going to get us, that's far too pessimistic. One mustn't underestimate the power of human intelligence and the human immune system. After all, we've been living with these viruses for a long time. We've also been living with overpopulation, relatively speaking, all through history too. I don't think Utopia is possible, but Dystopia is not too bad.

Melvyn Bragg : Well thank you very much. Thanks, the books called "The Faber book of Utopias" by John Carey and I can't recommend it highly enough. Thank you both, Anthony Grayling, John Carey, thanks for listening.