

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 75: Utopianism

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Lyman Tower Sargent 00:27

Welcome to this Very Short Introduction Podcast. I am Lyman Tower Sargent, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where I taught for 40 years. During that time, I held fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Nottingham, and at the London School of Economics, and the Universities of East Anglia, Exeter, London, and Oxford in England, and at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand.

Lyman Tower Sargent 01:02

My Very Short Introduction is on utopianism, or what I call "social dreaming," which I discovered as an undergraduate. While I can no longer remember what utopias are at first, I found them deeply satisfying, and recognized that in crossing disciplinary boundaries, they reflected my understanding of the world better than the classes I was taking. More importantly, utopias say the world doesn't have to be like, that it could be much better, or, as I began to read dystopias, much worse, with the dystopias served as warnings about problems the authors saw in contemporary society.

Lyman Tower Sargent 01:43

My interests led the head of the campus library, where I was working to help pay my way through university. This helped me buy a set of documents from an attempt to put into practice the ideas of a French author of utopia, who founded what became seven communities in the United States, from the late 1840s to the late 1890s. As a result, I ended up writing my doctoral thesis on that movement in France and the United States, and with the encouragement of my doctoral mentor, read much more widely in utopianism about the many communities that were founded based on a vision of the

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 75: Utopianism

good life. And while I also taught and worked in other areas, primarily American political thought and contemporary political ideologies, my interest in utopianism has been the central focus of my research, from which I had been awarded the Distinguished Scholars Awards from the Communal Studies Side and the Society of Utopian Studies, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Utopian Study Society Europe.

Lyman Tower Sargent 02:51

The word "utopia" was coined by Thomas More, as the name of the imaginary country described in his book now known as *Utopia*, rather than a long complicated title he gave it when it was published in Latin in 1516. Now more than 500 years later, there are fundamental disagreements over how to read the book. One agreement, though, is that the word *utopia* means "no place," or "nowhere," but that More also used "topia," or "place," with the preface "Eu," which creates a word meaning "good place." As a result, "utopia" with just the "U" has come down to us as referring to a non-existent good place. Others have added additional prefixes to create "Uchronia" or "good time," coined in 1876, and, most importantly, "dystopia," or "bad place," that appears to have been first used in 1740.

Lyman Tower Sargent 03:58

Throughout my career, I've been interested in ideal societies or utopias as both critique of the present and its suggestions for possible change. As I say in the book, all utopias ask questions. They ask whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that they could. Most utopias compare life in the present and life in the utopia and point out what is wrong with the way we live now, thus suggesting what needs to be done to improve things. And that critical function is perhaps the most important thing that utopianism does. It holds a mirror up to society showing its flaws, and says we can do better.

Lyman Tower Sargent 04:44

The book has two important messages. First, I contend that if we want to improve individually and socially, we need to have a better idea of where we want to go for a utopia, which refers to good, better, best. It does not mean perfect. Second, and here I'm quoting the text, "Utopianism is essential for the improvement of the human condition,

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 75: Utopianism

and, in this sense, opponents of utopianism are both wrong and potentially dangerous." But I also argue that if used wrongly, and it has been, utopianism is itself dangerous. And in this sense, supporters of utopianism are both wrong and potentially dangerous.

Lyman Tower Sargent 05:32

I was recently surprised and pleased to see these words used in English and Swedish as the epigraph in the catalogue of a 2016 exhibit in an art gallery in Stockholm. In one of my first articles, I said that utopianism had what I called three stations: utopian literature, intentional communities, and utopian social theory, which includes utopia in political theory, relationship between utopian ideology, and the roles of utopian religion and colonialism and postcolonialism. Of course, the idea of good and bad places existed long before the word utopia and dystopia were coined, and people are frequently creating places to live that were intended to reflect their visions of the good life. Such places have many different names: communes, utopian communities, or experiments. Now, most members of such communities and scholars prefer the neutral name, "intentional communities." As a member of such a community once said to me, "The word utopia has set to highest standard." Some of these communities were quite successful, some of them horrified those that did not share the vision, and some lost the vision. Others came to an end for a variety of reasons. And what constitutes success is hotly debated among both community members and those studying them.

Lyman Tower Sargent 07:05

For quite some time, longevity was used as the main way of measuring success, but many felt if a community filled the needs of its members for however long, it was a success. But it's also worth noting that, today, in many parts of the world, there are communities that are 50 and 75 years old, and some that are even 100 years old. Also, new ones are being regularly established. Mostly, nowadays, ecovillages designed to be sustainable, or as cohousing communities, where homes are mostly individually owned, and the property in some buildings are owned by the community and with different degrees of community life.

Lyman Tower Sargent 07:50

Utopianism has also been the label for way of thinking, and much of the book is concerned with the ways that ideas about social betterment have influenced the way people thought and behave. For example, colonialism came about because people wanted a better life than they could find in their home countries. So they can be thought of as having been pushed from a dystopian life, while being pulled by the vision of a better place and a new place. That better life might have been paying able to practice their religion as they wish, or, more often, the hope of being able to provide the basic utopia of a full stomach and decent clothing and housing for themselves and their families. But settler community colonies inevitably created dystopias for the indigenous inhabitants, who had their own notions of what constituted a good life. And since settler colonialism has mostly ended, the picture has become more complex, with a recognition that both sets of utopias are valid: awareness of the dystopias that were created for the original inhabitants, and the successes and failures of the dreams of the settlers. The attempts to reconcile all these interests has produced a wide variety of utopian and dystopian texts.

Lyman Tower Sargent 09:13

For some Christians, utopianism and the imagery of Eden, the millennium, and Heaven and Hell, are central to their belief, while for others, it is, as one book has it, "the perennial heresy." Heresy is that, from one perspective, the idea of utopia seemed to deny Original Sin, through which the utopia of Eden was lost and cannot be regained through any human action. For Christian utopians, though, the point is not to reach Eden, but the time to try and create a better or good life as Christians by living a life that reflects Christ's teaching. The disagreement among Christians is at least partially over whether or not utopia implies perfection. Sinful humans cannot achieve perfection in this life, so from this perspective, the believe in utopia is heretical. But if utopia means not perfect, but better or good, as most utopians contend, the possibility of a Christian utopia makes perfect sense. And there are a lot of them.

Lyman Tower Sargent 10:27

The role utopianism plays in political theory is quite similar, in that it also turns on the word "perfect." Those who reject utopianism contend that utopias are blueprints that must be followed in every detail. And given what humans are like, that is impossible. Therefore, force and violence will be used to bring utopia into being, and continued force will be needed to keep it. Very few utopias, though, are blueprints, but are visions of what life could be like, and are designed not to be put in practice in all their details, but to point, by contrast, with things that are wrong about the current system, and suggest how they could be improved. No one can deny that regimes like those detected by the opponents of utopianism have and do exist. But the problem is not in the idea of a good life, but in the fact that some people come to believe that others should be forced in the mold they envision. And one of the main functions of utopianism in the 20th and 21st centuries has been to critique such regimes by pointing out that they are in fact dystopian and envisioning alternative, better ways to live.

Lyman Tower Sargent 11:53

Such utopianism has been very effective in undermining the dystopias created by those who believe in their own infallibility. This distinction is reflected also in the complex relationship between ideology and utopia, and ideology is a system of beliefs that provides this, the believer with a coherent view of the world, and, almost always, a sense of how much better life would be if this set of beliefs were put into practice. Thus, there is a utopia at the heart of an ideology. A utopia, though, is not an ideology. But if it attracts believers, it can become one, and that has happened and it's the basis of much of the opposition to utopianism. Given that critique is the most important function in utopianism, it is also one of the most effective ways of criticizing an ideology. Today, we're once more in a time of conflicting ideologies in which true believers know with certainty that they are right. As a result, we need to find a place to stand that allows us to be aware of what each ideological position entails. Utopianism provides that standpoint, but it has to be a self aware and self-critical utopianism so it does not fall into the trap of becoming just another intolerant ideology and system that there is only one, right way.

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 75: Utopianism

Lyman Tower Sargent 13:24

My belief, obviously, is that utopianism is important, even essential, but also that it can be dangerous and misused. I hope that what I've had to say today might lead you to learn more about utopianism and its meanings and influences on you, personally, as a society in which you live, but looking more deeply at it that is possible in a short talk. Thank you.

The VSI Podcast Outro 13:51

Thank you for listening to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. You can subscribe to our podcast on your favorite app, such as Apple or Spotify, to receive all of our episodes directly in your feed. All of our episodes, new and old, can also be found on SoundCloud and YouTube at Oxford Academic. You can also access content from Very Short Introductions on the Oxford Academic platform through your institution.