Utopianism has a long-running history that includes turning the 1900s into the bloodiest century in human experience. Typically utopian schemes are founded on the premise that individual self-interest must be subjugated for the purported greater public good. As such, utopianism is fit for only a utopia: the term derives from the Greek words ou ("not") and topos ("place") and means simply "not a place."

Real-world social experiments that seek to achieve a communitarian ideal generally lead either to disintegration or repressive rule. Utopia turns into cacotopia, a "bad place." The utopian Soviet Union, according to ample documentation, was a kakistotopia, a "worst place."

By contrast, a eutopia, or "good place," is eminently attainable in the real world. The organizational structure that fosters it consists of a limited government that permits human creativity and achievement. Individual self-interest—far from being a bane—expresses itself in relationships of mutual benefit that result in productivity and the generation of wealth. Prosperity does not have to be forced. It just happens.

In his 1516 work *Utopia*, Thomas More claimed that his imaginary island of that name was a eutopia, translated as "happy

land" in the Yale edition of his works. You may not agree.

In More’s *Utopia*, wrote coeditor J.H. Hexter, “men live all the time under everyone’s eyes.” Citizens shunned individuality. All dressed in bland, simple garments and disdained ostentations like jewelry and other finery. Gold had so little appeal that it was used for making chamberpots. All persons ate their meals in large groups in common halls. Communistic Utopia had no money or private property.

Each household had access to as many goods from the common storehouses as desired. Abundance was so great, and no one secured in excess of need. This standard of living was attributable to the production only of necessities, not self-glorifying superfluities. Since so few goods had to be made, the diligent and productive labor force worked a maximum of six hours a day. The eradication of greed, achieved through the abolition of private property, eliminated wars.

The level of regulation of the citizenry extended even to travel permits—as Hexter noted, “there is no place to hide” in this Utopia—but all the people were content to live out their lives and seek their homey pleasures under rule by benevolent magistrates and scholars, by "cosmopolitan intellectuals, in effect by humanists like [More] himself." Hexter further observed that “part of the charm which his brainchild had for More

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derived from the eminent place in Utopia occupied by the intellectual élite.”

Intellectual elites are responsible for most utopian concoctions, such as the French Revolution, which like More’s Utopia produced unstylish uniforms for the citizenry. The revolution was aimed at more than merely creating a new form of government. The astute French critic Frédéric Bastiat (1801–50) clarified the revolution’s goals through quotations from prominent leaders, including educational theorist Michel Le Pelletier: “Considering the extent of human degradation, I am convinced that it is necessary to effect a total regeneration and, if I may so express myself, of creating a new people.”

Jean-Nicolas Billaud-Varennes claimed that “a people who are to be returned to liberty must be formed anew” and favored the ancient Sparta model of a restrictive, tightly controlled state. Louis Antoine de Saint-Just staked out a broad mission for the new leadership: “The legislator commands the future. It is for him to will the good of mankind. It is for him to make men what he wills them to be.” Maximilien Robespierre had a plan for remodeling the human race: “The principle of the republican government is virtue, and the means required to establish virtue is terror.” Saint-Just advocated a dictatorship under Robespierre—the populace must be coerced into its utopia. Both the dictator Robespierre and his ally Saint-Just perished under the guillotine as the projected utopia collapsed in kakistocratic carnage.

The sloganeering of the French Revolution—liberté, égalité, fraternité—persisted into the nineteenth century and undergirded various types of socialism and communism as they took shape. The ultimate failure of these movements could already be predicted in their formative phases. For all the homage paid to égalité and fraternité, they were marked by the maneuverings of numerous individuals who sought dominance. The motto of the Federation of the Just as it evolved into the Communist League was “all men are brothers,” but the federation’s original brother-in-chief, Wilhelm Weitling, found the heights of leadership perilous. Friedrich Engels recalled that Weitling became “one who was ever suspecting his rivals, his secret enemies, of laying traps to snare him . . . a seer who had a recipe ready to hand for the realisation of heaven upon earth, and fancied that every one he encountered was trying to steal it from him . . . Weitling could not get on with any one.”

(Some brotherhood.) Engels and Karl Marx disdained another would-be leader, Hermann Kriege, and “the slobbering spinelessness” of his doctrines, and blunted his influence so effectively that “as far as the Federation was concerned, Kriege was heard of no more.” As Marx and Engels jointly jockeyed in the competition for supremacy in the movement, Engels used hyperbole worthy of a Madison Avenue flack. Marxist theory, he claimed, was built on “a firm scientific foundation” and contained “scientific conclusions.”

**Pie in the Sky**

Engels fancied his and Marx’s brand of communism as feasible in contrast with “the fantastical elaboration of a social ideal as nearly achieving perfection as possible” that competing communists had cooked up. Yet Marxism is real pie-in-the-sky stuff. After the proletariat seizes all means of production, the state is supposed to wither away because the economic machine will produce such egalitarian harmony and prosperity that men will govern themselves without the need of external governmental structures.

But to get to that utopia a dictator is required to provide the initial shove. Marxism sputtered until Lenin seized the reins of Russia in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The new Soviet Union became the darling of worldwide admirers of centralized state control, of would-be oligarchs who fantasized that with the right power granted to the right people the right results could be achieved for the masses.

One of the chief American encomiasts for the Soviets was George S. Counts, a Columbia University education professor who believed that public education was a vital tool for quashing capitalism and replacing it
with a command economy. He toured the Soviet Union in 1927 by rail and in 1929 in a rugged American automobile. He admired “the socialist state which is maturing in Soviet Russia.”9 In contrast, he wrote, “the American people lack the machinery necessary for controlling the vast economic structure which they have fashioned. . . . Since they are unable to direct the course of events, they must content themselves simply wondering and guessing what is going to happen. Needless to say, unlimited indulgence in this game of chance is full of hazards.”10 But the Soviet communists, he explained, proceeded under the assumption that “social phenomena are capable of being controlled and that the development of society can be made subject to the human will.”11 (Saint-Just vive.) Success had not been uniformly achieved during the 13-year regime of the communists, Counts admitted, but “the evidence indicates that they make fewer mistakes than formerly and are slowly and painfully learning how to operate the machinery of control.”12

Counts was aware of the existence of the GPU, the state political police, as an adjunct to a government that “sought to promote the rational and orderly development of the entire social economy”13 but offered an apologetic: “While no doubt [the GPU] has made mistakes in individual cases, it has on the whole served well the purpose for which it was created—it has given solid support to the revolutionary cause during the critical years of infancy. Without it the dictatorship would most certainly have collapsed long ago.”14 Counts remained blindly committed to planned perfectibility. In 1937 he stated, “A map of the world that does not contain the land of Utopia is not worthy of mankind.”15

Equally agreeable to dictatorship in the name of emancipation was the American journalist Lincoln Steffens, who had chronicled corruption by the volumes in the United States and perceived the Soviet Union as a new system that would expunge “such evils as poverty and riches, graft, privilege, tyranny, and war” by “remov[ing] the causes of them.” Steffens viewed Lenin as a fellow liberal who reluctantly employed terror for the larger end of preserving the revolution against reactionaries who would destroy it. Lenin told Steffens in 1919 he preferred to scare opponents into leaving rather than haveing to execute them. But, Lenin added, only a “few thousands” had been killed in comparison with the recent “slaughter of seventeen millions of men in a purposeless war.” According to Steffens, the dictatorship, supported by a small, trained minority, “was but an evolutionary step to “make and maintain for a few generations a scientific rearrangement of economic forces which would result in economic democracy first and political democracy last.” When he returned to the United States, Steffens told friends, “I have been over into the future, and it works.”16

Private Gain

The utopistic oligarchy described by Steffens was seen by Counts as far superior to the American model in which “the evolution of institutions proceeds for the most part without plan or design, as a sort of by-product of the selfish competition of individuals, groups, and enterprises for private gain.”17

Yet that “selfish competition,” that pursuit of self-interest that Counts denigrated, unleashes magnificent material abundance when it is allowed to operate under a legal and social system that promotes it. Trade has existed among members of the human race since early tribal times. Each trading partner benefits by securing a good not previously possessed. Persons, individually or in groups, have incentives to expand production and trade to meet the needs of others if they are allowed profit from those endeavors. Thus government should protect property rights and prevent confiscation of legally attained assets. Abundance is certain to result.

As FEE’s founder, Leonard Read, wrote in his essay “I, Pencil,” “Leave all creative energies uninhibited. Merely organize society to act in harmony with this lesson. Let society’s legal apparatus remove all obstacles
the best it can. Permit these creative know-

hows freely to flow.”

The formula for building eutopias is based on freedom. It is so simple that the perplex-

ing question is why the formula has not been adopted worldwide. It opens the way for ordinary people to realize extraordinary accomplishments that serve both their own interests and the interests of others.

But the formula excludes utopians and their arrogant urge to mastermind social organization into conformity with their chimeras. Utopians have to use coercion to attain cooperation. Eutopians attain cooperation through voluntary actions that yield mutual advantage.

Except in fiction, the former approach founders in destitution. The latter produces abundance.

Why is the choice so hard to make?

2. Ibid., p. ciii.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. civ.
5. Ibid., p. cvii.
6. Frédéric Bastiat, The Law, trans. Dean Russell (Ivinston-

7. Quoted in D. Ryazanoff, ed., The Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (New York: Russell & Rus-

8. Ibid., p. 9.
10. Ibid., p. 11.
11. Ibid., p. 13.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 7.
15. Quoted in Edward A. Krug, The Shaping of the Ameri-