

Utopian societies and reform movements in mid 1800s

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From ancient history to modern times, books have been written chronicling¹ so called 'perfect societies.' These include Plato's *The Republic*, as well as Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, in which a society is placed under incredibly harsh constraints in order to achieve what is believed to be a perfect society. However, the harshness of Plato's instructions as to how to run the 'perfect' society, as well as the chaos and rebellion that inevitably occurs in *The Giver*, illustrates the difficulty that goes into establishing and maintaining these perfect or utopian societies. In the mid 1800s America, the utopian society craze was rampant.

Influence from other countries led to the belief that these utopian communities could work, and therefore many groups of Americans around this period began to attempt to establish utopian societies, as well as changes within the school system. The changes and reforms in America at this period were not limited to purely secular movements, as there was an slight religious reform in place as well, despite suffering from hesitancy in many religious groups. The reform movements of the mid 1800s including the push for utopian societies, religious reforms, and women and African American suffrage right advancements, resulted from an ongoing dissatisfaction with the previous way of life, as well as an inspired vivacity for life found in the Second Great Awakening. A utopian society, by definition is defined as a 'perfect society' that were "designed and founded by intellectuals as alternatives to the competitive economy. Utopian communities aimed to perfect social relationships; reform the institutions of marriage and private property; and balance political, occupational, and religious influences." (sparknotes. com) These societies were greatly popular

in countries such as Russia, as well as other places that were influenced by what is now referred to as communist way of life. In America, despite the renewal that came with the Second Great Awakening, many Americans held hostility against the upper class who were able to provide for themselves much better than the rest of the population could. In these utopian societies, class levels were evened out, and there was less 'competition' and fight to earn the most money. This was a lead motivating factor as to why individuals desired to have utopian societies, as well as that the improvements with machinery and advances into the west gave the ideal of a futuristic society, one that fit well with these utopian thoughts. Very few of these utopian societies survived however, and the Oneida community was the only was that lasted for any significant period of time. (Wikipedia.

org) As mentioned, the mid 1800s were not merely a time for utopian developments, but there was also a flux regarding the schooling of children as well as women's rights. Horace Mann helped to developed what is now the public school system, and forever changed the way children are educated. He established new schools, and made it possible for those families who were previously unable to afford to go, to send their children to school. (cals.ncsu.edu) In addition to this, women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to protest regarding the limited rights of women, and how their complaints concerning working conditions were often overlooked.

Protests and conferences such as The Seneca Falls Convention, eventually helped to place a heavier emphasis on women's suffrage rights. Abolition directly stemmed from this, and suddenly there was an influx on freeing

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slaves and establishing equal rights for all men, regardless of color. This however, made far less progress, and the 1800s was only the beginning of the long haul through the civil war for slaves. (www. msnbc. msn) Finally, there was an enormous emphasis on new religion, and altering the way the older sects were preached.

Religions such as Protestantism and Calvinism began to shape their teaching, and move away from the rigidity they had previously professed. However, many of the other religions of the time and their leaders wholly opposed these advances, and desired to keep their organizations as they were, in the old teachings. Whether this was valid or not, despite the Second Great Awakening, many religions stayed stagnant where they were. The mid 1800s was a time of tumultuous social change in America, with an emphasis on utopian societies and rights for all. Many aspects of this time hold true today, as women's rights are at an all time high, and slavery and abolition is long in the past for America. However, utopian society never fully caught on, and in addition to books written on utopian society which were previously mentioned, there have been books written on dystopian societies which portray the exact opposite, such as Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451.

This type of society goes horribly wrong also, illustrating that neither extreme is beneficial. The advances in technology and science that we are making as a society now are leading to a lifestyle similar to that in the novel. However, the novel's protagonist states chillingly about his own society set in the future, " It doesn't think anything we don't want it to think," meaning

the machinery and the robots. Whether utopian or dystopian, it is our job to prevent this from happening. (www. brighthub. com)