finding utopia… the quest for the perfect [paper topic]

As promised, here is a source for helping you locate a case for your next assignment. This is only to help grease the wheels, as this is far from definitive. But if you are feeling stuck, this should help. If it doesn’t, talk to me, and I will try harder.

First, we should think in terms of broad categories, and then see what kind of specifics come out of those. These are not the only ones, but to get things started how about these: time (past, present, future); place (real or virtual); duration (permanent or temporary); scope (universal or limited); ideology (socialist, anarchist, libertarian, ecological, fundamentalist, apocalyptic, etc). Obviously, these categories are not mutually exclusive – in fact all cases should be able to, theoretically, at least, be fit into each one. However, some cases will privilege some of these axes more than others. Regardless, just picking one that you might be interested in from one of the categories should at least get various balls rolling…

TIME: what period of time are you interested in? Back then, right now, or what people are looking towards in the future?

Past:

We had a lot of utopian action in US history, with any number of experiments, some more successful than others. Interested in an archeological justification for studying these communities? <http://www.academia.edu/318876/Excavating_Utopia_Why_Archaeologists_Should_Study_ideal_Communities_of_the_Nineteenth_Century>

Looking for lists? Try these (there’s a fair amount of repetition, but some differences):

Wikipedia (we’ll see them later!) is often a decent place to start:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_American_Utopian_communities>

<http://www.ushistory.org/us/26b.asp>

<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/amana/utopia.htm>

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1987/2/87.02.06.x.html> (this one has references)

<http://www.answers.com/topic/utopian-communities> (hey, there’s an interesting vermont example!)

from the more recent past, there was an exhibit a few years ago in middlebury about experiments in the 1950s in VT <https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/exhibits-feed/almost-utopia>

They say the past is a foreign country, and you know what else is a foreign country? Foreign countries! Even though we US-ians used to have a lot of utopian spirit back in the day (which as withered on the vine of late), we are not the center of utopian universes. The most famous is Robert Owen’s New Lanark, in Scotland, but there are others out there, that can be dug up if interested, like, for example, all the finnish experiments that took place all over the world (<http://www.sosiomedia.fi/utopia/english_article.htm> )

Present:

US: intentional communities is the big category ([www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/08/utopia-erik-reece/494741/>) , with several from vermont (as well as some recent, but now defunct, ones, like <http://www.meadowdance.org/> from Burlington)

there are also ecovillages (here is the network for the entire globe! <http://gen.ecovillage.org/>, but there are others out there). Or may be you prefer the “off the grid” framing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPhj0oxskFY>

let’s not forget local foodism or local currency experiments (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_currency> )

in addition there are numerous experiments in collective/communal living from the present/recent past (here’s a recent story about “back to the landers” coming to Vermont in the 1960s, <http://www.7dvt.com/2008hippie-havens> )

vermont is not just for hippies! It’s also for mormans! https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2016-newvistas-mormon-utopia/

Elsewhere:

Ditto with intentional communities and ecovillages and sustainable communities and hippies. They are everywhere. Here’s one in Portugal: <https://ideas.ted.com/is-this-portuguese-eco-village-a-21st-century-utopia/>

Mondragon in the Basque region is the “go to” example for successful collective economic organization. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mondrag%C3%B3n_Cooperative_Corporation>

A recent project in Europe tried to document many current efforts, entitled paths to utopia (les sentiers de l’utopie in the original French)

Here’s an article they wrote:

<http://www.towardfreedom.com/europe/2244-utopian-communities-in-europe>

but there’s also a documentary: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4RER29na1I> (it has subtitles!)

if you are interested in squatting and the efforts to build urban collective spaces in Europe (and in America!), let me know, as I can point you in certain directions

In Israel, there is also the kibbutz movement to consider. (<http://www.kibbutz.org.il/eng/>; <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/kibbutz.html> )

Participatory budgeting in Puerto Alegre, Brazil <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_budgeting>

Here is a list that is a bit more expansive in terms of global reach (which is good, because of my relative parochialism…) <http://www.forbes.com/2008/04/10/enviromental-utopias-communities-oped-utopia08-cx_ee_0410ecotopia_slide_3.html>

Future:

Some of these are explored in more detail below, such as the planned libertarian communities, although that is only one example. The point is rather to remember that even something that is only a plan at this point, still exists as more than a text. There are supporters, fund raising, planning, politics, strategies, etc. Since the creation of a utopian place is such an obvious challenge, there are good reasons for focusing on something that is not yet fully formed.

Other examples? What about pushes for Universal Basic Income (also, Guaranteed Minimum Income)? <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic_income_guarantee> (which could also be linked to “living wage” movements)

PLACE:

Real Places: most of these so far listed, are actual places that can be found on a map. But that is not the only place to look for utopian experiments

Virtual Places: there is a (not surprising) amount of verbiage spewed on how the internet is a utopian space, so we should expect to find lots of efforts to make that happen in practice. There are a couple of “big” examples, like Wikipedia or the Free Software movement, but there are also, for example, “pirate utopias” (the file-sharing community) that could qualify. One might also consider cases like Second Life as other locations where utopian experimentation goes on.

And, let’s not forget tv – reality tv makes all kind of utopian promises, and even has its own utopian themes (even if they don’t pan out): <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/04/reality-tvs-wildest-disaster>

DURATION:

“permanent”: this is often the goal of the average experiment, even if they rarely last that long. But time need not be so big…

“temporary”: sometimes the most perfect moment/community is the one that is fleeting, that you can enjoy its perfections because you know you won’t then be trapped by them. There’s a famous book we’ll read a bit of later this semester that captures this impulse (“temporary autonomous zones” by hakim bey), but we might find this most fully expressed in such experiments/experiences as burning man (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_Man> )

SCOPE:

Everything: most utopian movements, seem to want to do everything and change everything. That’s a lot! Some are more modest…

Something: There are lots of ways of thinking about this, but the first thing that comes to mind, for me, is the slow food movement (<http://www.slowfood.com/> ), which officially only wants to change the way we eat, which might scale up, but might not.

IDEOLOGY:

Anarchist? Socialist? Pacifist? Libertarian? Fundamentalist? Feminist? Apocalyptic? White Supremacist? Take your pick! The point is to think about whether you are interested in exploring a specific ideology as a practice, and see how people have tried to make it work. Once you pick an ideology you want to test (if that’s the direction you want… again, these are only suggestions to help you get started), then it becomes easier to find specific examples.

LET ME GOOGLE THAT FOR YOU…

When all else fails, let’s see what we find when we just go on a random internet search.

One thing we find, is that people on the internet like to make lists!

<http://www.toptenz.net/top-10-experimental-towns-and-communes.php>

<https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/21/utopias_n_3768023.html>

they also like to tell why utopias are doomed to fail:

<https://areomagazine.com/2018/03/08/why-utopian-communities-fail/>

<https://aeon.co/essays/like-start-ups-most-intentional-communities-fail-why>

I hope that helps! If not, let me know.