A worldwide survey on the idea of utopia, from classical
mythology to contemporary science fiction

Utopia

The History of an Idea
Gregory Claeys

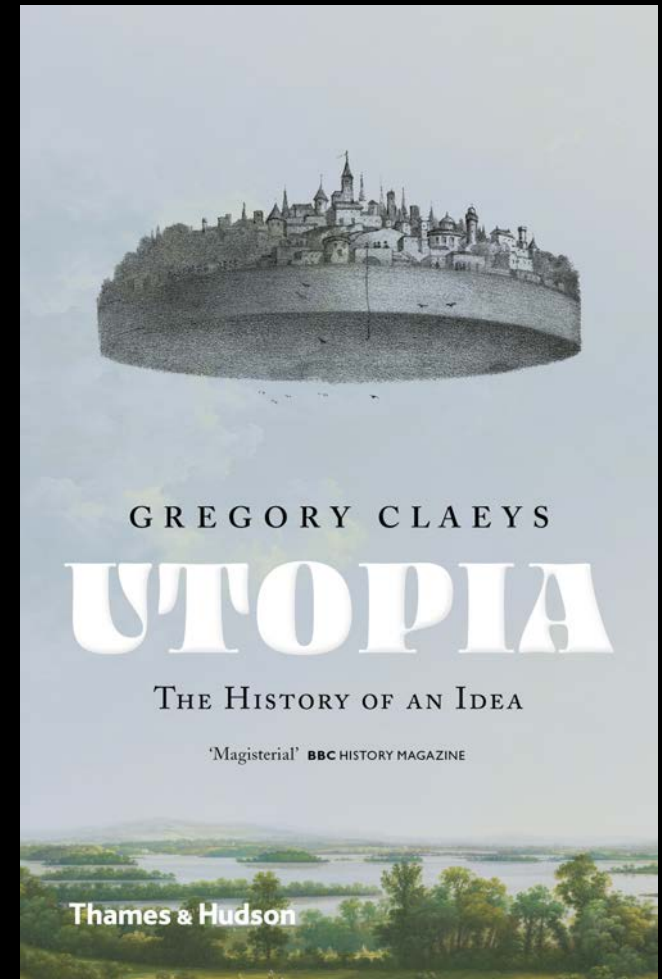224 illustrations
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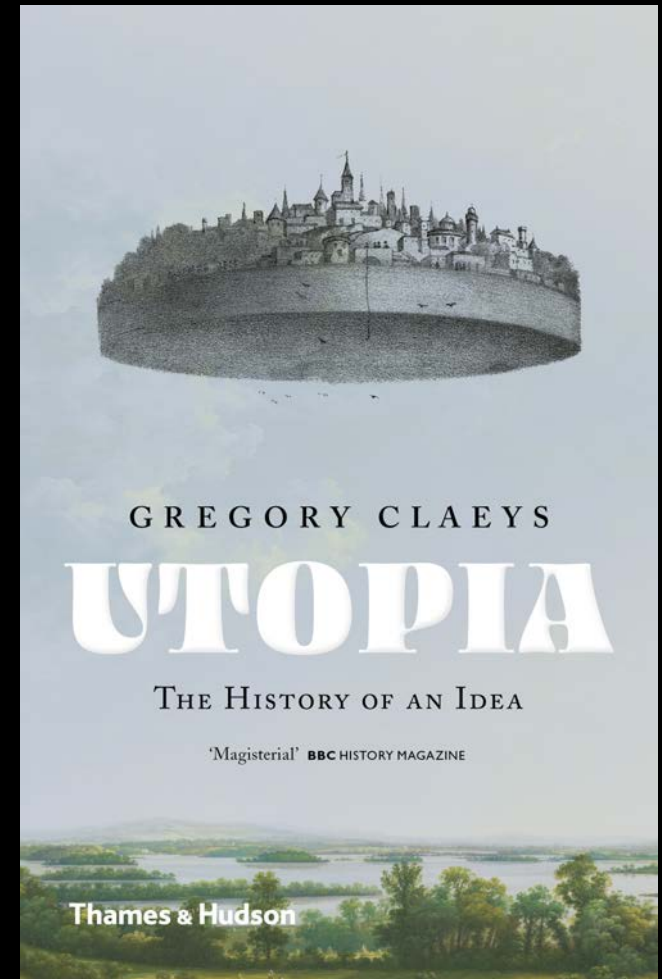Paperback
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Praise for *Searching for Utopia*

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Key Sales Points

- Readable but authoritative account of a topic deeply relevant to the world today, by leading scholar in the field Gregory Claeys

- Covers visions of the ideal society not only in the ancient and Western worlds, but also in Asia, Africa, the Arab world and the Americas

- Subjects range from the biblical Eden and the classical Golden Age to *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*, revolutions and the progress of technology, communes and kibbutzim, political and ecological dystopias, Flash Gordon and Star Wars

- Wide range of discussion, as Claeys demonstrates how utopianism has influenced history, literature, art, architecture, and religious and political thought

Contents

CHAPTER I

The Classical Age

MYTHS, GOLDEN AGES AND IDEAL CONSTITUTIONS

Much like nostalgia for one's youth, many societies have creation myths that go hand-in-hand with the idea of a past golden age of purity, harmony and virtue. In Greece, Homer established this period as existing a thousand years before the Trojan War, when the first men were made of gold and were governed by the god Kronos. The idea was embellished by, among others, Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 8th century BC), who tells us:

> ...they lived like gods, with carefree heart, remote from toil and misery. Wretched old age did not affect them either, but with hands and feet ever unchanged they enjoyed themselves in feasting, beyond all ills, and they died as if overcome by sleep. All good things were theirs, and the grain-giving soil bore its fruits of its own accord in unstinted plenty, while they at their leisure harvested their fields in contentment amid abundance.[1]

At this time the gods are generally portrayed as benevolent and as having a more direct relationship with mortals than is the case today. But the gods also punish human beings for betraying promises or agreements. For example, in Greek myth Zeus sends Pandora to Earth bearing a jar of miseries (including war, famine and sin), which are unleashed on humanity in punishment for Prometheus stealing fire from heaven.

According to Hesiod, the golden age is abandoned when the gods somewhat impulsively create a 'much inferior' silver

race. Now the climate grows colder, food requires cultivation and humanity must shelter from the elements. When these people fail to honour the Olympian gods adequately, they too are supplanted – by a bronze race. This age is marked by growing human enmity, but is succeeded by a 'more righteous and noble' race of demi-gods, some of whom, after death, are permitted to dwell in the Isles of the Blessed. Next is the fifth or iron age, which is marked by warfare, greed, a breakdown in parental respect, and the spreading of envy and hatred. The gods intervene constantly to punish wickedness, and the pitting of good against evil comes to define human behaviour. The proto-utopia, once lost, is never regained, though the fault lies at least partly in the whimsy of the gods.

The Roman version of the golden age was taken up by Catullus, Horace, Seneca and Ovid, among others. It also portrays a state of harmony, abundance and peace, presided over by the god Saturn. Perhaps the most famous account of this age, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (AD 8), describes the gradual corruption of this state and the emergence of the silver, bronze and iron ages. To commemorate their loss the Romans invented the festival of Saturnalia, which re-created the golden age once a year (17–23 December). Slaves were permitted to dine with and speak freely to their masters, sometimes even ordering them to perform demeaning acts. Feasting, merry-making and a moratorium on harsh punishments took place. The Feast of Fools, or carnival, of the Middle Ages, was an imitation of Saturnalia and celebrated the theme of 'the world turned upside down'.[2] This marks the first appearance of utopia as an act of (pseudo-) historic memory and re-creation.

Such utopic moments would become increasingly rare, however, and most aspirations for real improvement remained displaced to the afterlife. Elysium, the Elysian Fields or the Islands of the Blessed were the various names given to the land inhabited by the blessed throughout eternity. As described in Hesiod's

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