

**Functions of Utopia:
How Utopian Thinking Motivates Societal Engagement**

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Abstract

Images of ideal societies, utopias, are all around us; yet little is known of how utopian visions affect ordinary people's engagement with their societies. As goals for society, utopias may elicit processes of collective self-regulation, in which citizens are critical of, or take action to change, the societies they live in. In three studies, we investigated the psychological function of utopian thinking. In Study 1, measured utopianism was correlated with the activation of three utopian functions: change, critique and compensation (Levitas, 1990). In Study 2, primed utopian thinking consistently enhanced change and criticism intentions. Study 3 also provided evidence that mental contrasting (Oettingen, 2012) – first imagining a utopian vision and then mentally contrasting the current society to this vision – underlies the facilitative effect of utopian thinking on societal engagement.

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In 1516, Thomas More created an ideal society of his own imagination. Calling it *Utopia* (trans. 1965) – a play on the Greek words for both ‘no-place’ (*outopia*) and ‘good-place’ (*eutopia*) – he highlighted the societal failings of his own Tudor England by contrasting them with this ideal island society (Gerard & Sterling, 2005). Although stories and writings of ideal societies existed well before More – in, for example, myths describing humanity’s paradisiacal origins such as Biblical accounts of the *Garden of Eden*, as well as Classical texts like Plato’s *Republic* (see Levitas, 1990; Kumar, 1987; Sargent, 1994) - *utopia* has become the generic term for these imagined ideal worlds (Hölscher, 1996; Kumar, 1987). In the contemporary world, everyday life is filled with utopian texts and images (e.g., Claeys & Sargent, 1999; Cooper, 2014; Sargent, 2010; Segal, 2012). Expressions of utopian desires can be found in art and literature, in the formation of utopian political theories and social movements (Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Levitas 1990), and in the establishment of utopian intentional societies like monasteries or communes (Sargisson, 2000; Sargent, 1994).

Despite the cultural prominence of utopias, social psychology has thus far failed to examine the role of utopian thinking in the lives of ordinary people. In this paper we investigate the social psychological implications of utopian thinking for the first time. In particular, we test the general hypothesis that utopian thinking can motivate people’s engagement with their society. As several utopian theorists have highlighted, utopian thinking is something in which ordinary people frequently engage (Levitas, 1990; Sargent, 1994), and utopias may be important drivers of social change (Chomsky, 1999/1970; Levitas, 1990; Mannheim, 1991; Polak, 1961). As imagined possible worlds, utopias may motivate individuals’ engagement with society, in much the same way as possible selves can play a significant role in individuals’ lives (Markus & Nurius, 1986; for a recent review, see Oyserman & James, 2009). In the following, we first present a theoretical basis for our

hypothesis, and then report correlational and experimental studies to provide empirical support.

Functions of Utopias

Utopias are desired possible worlds – ideal worlds that may possibly exist, at least in imagination. Given that possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) – selves that one may possibly become – can instigate *individual* self-regulation, we hypothesise that utopias can animate *collective* self-regulation. That is to say, utopias may motivate people's strivings with a view to moving their current reality closer to their ideal, so as to attain desirable outcomes and avoid undesirable ones.

Collective Self-Regulation for an Ideal Society

Although the psychology of self-regulation is a major area of research (e.g., Vohs & Baumeister, 2011), group-based self-regulation (Abrams, 1994, called it social self-regulation) is a more recent development (e.g., Sassenberg & Wotlin, 2009, for a review). It integrates the perspectives of individual self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Sheier, 1981; Higgins, 1997, 2000) and social identity and self-categorization theories (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) to shed light on the process by which individuals self-regulate their cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes for their groups in both intergroup (e.g., Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah & Brazy, 2007; Sassenberg, Kessler and Mummendey, 2003; 2007) and intragroup contexts (e.g., Fishbach, Henderson, & Koo, 2011; Jonas, Sassenberg, & Scheepers, 2010; Robins & Boldero, 2003). The concept of utopias can make a significant contribution to this area of research, since utopias are salient standards against which existing societies can be criticized, and goals towards which to energize societally transformative behaviours (e.g., Wegner, 1998; Levitas, 1990; Polak, 1961; Sargent, 1994).

There is abundant historical evidence that utopian visions have, in fact, motivated social change behaviours. A number of socialist movements of the 19th century – those of Cabet, Saint-Simon, and Fourier in France, and Owen in Britain, for example – sought to develop both an account of society’s history and current ills, and a plan to reshape society in accordance with their utopian visions (Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Kumar, 1987). Indeed, in Cabet’s *Icarian* movement, we find an example of a traditional literary utopia (Cabet’s, 2003, trans., *Travels in Icaria*) and a movement attempting to bring about the vision of the book. In addition, the American and French revolutions arguably aimed to bring about Enlightenment utopian visions of political and legal liberty and equality (Goodwin & Taylor, 1983). There is also evidence that many ideas leading to social change (e.g. egalitarianism, feminism) had been present in utopian writings before they became widespread in society (Goodwin & Taylor, 1983). Levitas (1990) has even described the rise of the New Right (neo-conservatism) as utopian because it seeks change and represents an aspiration for a desired way of living or future society, thus suggesting that utopian visions are not always associated with the political left.

Expressions of utopian visions motivating change are also observable in intentional communities, which Sargent (1994) defined as “groups who come together from more than one nuclear family who choose to live together to enhance shared values or enact a mutually agreed upon purpose (p. 15).” These communities are tied together – and distinguished from other, non-utopian societies – by the fact that they coalesce around a particular goal, vision, or project. Prominent examples include the enactment of monastic rules by monks and nuns in the cloisters of medieval monasteries (as well as in Eastern monastic traditions), the Israeli *kibbutz*, Protestant intentional communities such as the Amish (Sargent, 1994), and modern environmental and new wave societies (see Sargisson, 2000). Although they do not change the entire society, they construct a real social arrangement that exists in the contemporary

world. As argued by Sargent (2009), utopian thinking does not have to advocate revolution; even piecemeal change can be guided by a vision of where society could or should be going.

At this point, it is apposite to note that when we describe utopias as potentially eliciting *societal engagement*, we use this term in the sense of broad participation in societal processes, from something as trivial as talking about social issues (e.g., Jacobs, Cook, & Carpini, 2009; Kashima, Paladino, & Margetts, 2014) and criticizing the current state of the society, to participation in a democratic polity (e.g. voting). In this way, societal engagement is similar to what has been termed citizenship (e.g. Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano & Kalof, 1999) and is to be distinguished from (but may include) both committed activism, and what has been called collective action (e.g., van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), which involves a disadvantaged group's action to redress perceived inequality in their society. As the preceding discussion suggests, while expressions of utopian thinking *may* be in response to group-based discrimination or inequality (e.g. feminist utopias), they need not necessarily be so, as in the case of many political philosophies or intentional societies. Societal engagement is collective action broadly conceived – citizens' participation in social processes that can potentially contribute to social change for a better society.

Three Functions of Utopias

Particularly useful in a social psychology of utopian thinking is Levitas' (1990) seminal work on the concept of utopia, in which she postulated that there are at least three functions of utopia: *change*, *criticism*, and *compensation*. First of all, utopias can act as sources of motivation for social *change* (e.g., Levitas, 1990). This is because utopian visions can become goals for which people strive, so that their society moves closer to their ideal. These strivings can take behavioural or cognitive form. Behaviourally, people may engage in individual or collective action for social change, including institutionalized political

engagement such as participation in political parties, petitioning, and voting, as well as activist behaviours such as demonstrations and protests, or even revolutionary actions. Cognitively, as Sargisson (2000) noted, utopias may create new spaces where creative thinking is possible by presenting contemporary problems and radical alternatives, perhaps transgressing or negating what currently exists. Thus, utopian visions may foster the conditions for thought, debate, and experimentation. By making available the images of a desired possible world, utopias can act as goals that motivate self-regulatory activities (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Higgins, 1987; Miller, Gallanter, & Pribram, 1958; Rosenblueth, Wiener, & Bigelow, 1943; Wiener, 1948). Furthermore, according to Karau and Williams' (1993) Collective Effort Model, individuals are likely to exert their efforts toward a collective goal when the goal is seen to be desirable and the individual's effort and behaviour are seen to be instrumental in achieving the goal. Assuming that the achievement of a utopian vision is desirable, an individual is likely to be motivated to engage in social change behaviours that are seen to be instrumental for approaching the imagined utopia. This line of reasoning suggests that the activation of the change function of utopias should result in stronger motivations to engage in behaviour designed for social change.

Second, given that utopian visions set the upper limits of people's imagined possible worlds, they can function as standards against which the current reality is evaluated and *criticized* (see Boldero & Francis, 2002, on standards and goals). In this case, the greater the discrepancy between the utopian vision and the current reality, the more negative would be one's evaluation of the current reality. This suggests that the activation of the criticism function of utopia should lower people's satisfaction with their current society, and/or their tendency to justify the current social system (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Although we are unaware of direct empirical evidence for this prediction in the social psychology of collective self-regulation, there is analogous evidence in the individual self-

regulation literature. Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory and associated empirical research have shown that the discrepancy between people's ideal-self and actual self is associated with negative emotions (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; see Boldero & Francis, 2002, for a review). Similarly, a number of studies have found that a greater discrepancy between people's ideal self and actual self is correlated with lower subjective well-being (e.g., Campbell, Assanand & De Paula, 2003; Cozzarelli & Karafa, 1998; Hart, Field, Garfinkle & Singer, 1997; Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003; McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Reich, Kessel, & Bernieri, 2013; but see Phillips, Silvia & Paradise, 2007). There is also a small amount of research showing that actual-ideal discrepancies for one's social group are associated with lower collective self-esteem (Bizman & Yinon, 2004) and negative emotions (Petrocelli & Smith, 2005), suggesting that these self-regulatory processes are not just observed at the individual level.

Lastly, although the criticism and change functions of utopias imply greater engagement with one's society, utopian thinking also has the potential to hamper societal engagement. As Levitas (1990) suggested, utopias can serve a *compensatory* function – people may avoid the shortcomings of their current society by indulging in the fantasy of a desired utopia, escaping into it without critical examination of the current reality or any prospect of its alteration (see also Mannheim, 1991, on ideology and utopia; and Mumford, 1923, on utopias of escape and utopias of reconstruction). Within the individual self-regulatory process, evidence suggests that positive fantasies reduce the individual's striving towards his or her goal (e.g., Kappes & Oettingen, 2011), and lower the likelihood of attaining the goal (e.g., Kappes, Oettingen, & Mayer, 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; for a review, see Oettingen, 2012). This line of reasoning implies that the activation of the compensatory function would result in escapism, which is regarded in the stress and mental health literature as an emotion-focused coping mechanism involving daydreaming and

fantasising, as well as avoidance techniques (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Escapism and avoidance have been shown to be ineffective coping strategies and related to poorer mental health outcomes (e.g. Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Gall, Evans, Bellerose, 2000; Rohde, Lewinsohn, Tilson, & Seeley, 1990).

Having described the three functions of utopia, it is important to note that we are conceptualising these functions as *consequences* of utopian thinking rather than *features* of utopian thinking. That is to say that imagining one's utopia may result in the motivation to engage in change, criticism, or escape behaviours. The activation of the three functions can be measured using corresponding psychological constructs. The change function of utopia can presumably be observed in any kind of social change or collective action behaviour; however, given that these are typically focused on a particular issue, the change function is better assessed by a measure of general citizenship (see Bain, Hornsey, Bongiorno, & Jeffries, 2012, on environmental citizenship), which is consistent with the notion of broad societal engagement explained above. The criticism function can be observed (inversely) in one's level of satisfaction with the current society, which we can consider in general terms (similar to satisfaction with life), or of satisfaction with society's structure and institutions, as in system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003). Finally, the compensation function can be observed in a desire to engage in escapist thoughts or behaviours (see Aldwin & Revenson, 1987).

Present Studies

In three studies, we examined the functions of utopian visions, and their links to the collective self-regulatory processes of engagement with society. In particular, we investigated the psychological functions that utopian visions serve, and whether utopian visions affect people's engagement with their society, especially with regard to their inclinations to act for

social change and their satisfaction with the current reality. In Study 1, we examined the relationships between attitudes towards utopian thinking, or ‘utopianism’, and Levitas’ three utopian functions. In Study 2, we primed utopian visions and showed that they causally affect people’s engagement with society. And in Study 3, we examined a potential mechanism underlying the effect of utopian thinking – the process called mental contrasting (Oettingen, 2012), in which one’s utopian vision and current society are contrasted. Note that throughout these studies we were interested in the effects of utopian thinking *per se*, rather than the *content* of those utopias.

Study 1: Utopianism, Utopian Functions, and Societal Engagement

It is assumed that individuals vary in their tendency to spontaneously engage in utopian thinking or ‘utopianism’, and in their views on the value and appeal of utopian thought. Indeed, utopian theorists such as Sargent (1994, p.3) have argued that utopianism is a ‘universal human phenomenon’, in which people consider ways in which their lives might be improved. Inter-individual variability in utopianism may be associated with the kind of utopian function activated and the tendency to engage with one’s society.

Existing research suggests that people spontaneously engage in thinking about the future, and some of this thinking may indeed have a utopian character. In their diary study, Berntsen and Jacobsen (2008) found that future-oriented spontaneous thoughts are as frequent as spontaneous autobiographical memories, and future oriented thoughts are generally more idyllic, containing attractive images without negative emotions. A recent experience sampling study (D’Argembeau, Renaud, & van der Linden, 2011) also found future-oriented thoughts to be frequent and to often contain positive action planning and positive daydreaming. Whether such spontaneous utopian thinking increases societal engagement, however, is yet to be investigated. In Study 1 we constructed a new scale to

measure the extent to which people engage in utopian thinking. We suggest that positive attitudes towards utopian thinking will be associated with greater activation of Levitas' three utopian functions – change, criticism and compensation – and that this will be reflected in psychological constructs related to each of the three functions: citizenship (change), satisfaction with society and system justification (criticism, inversely) and escapism (compensation).

Method

Data was collected from three samples for Study 1. The first (Sample 1) was collected from participants in the United States. The second (Sample 2) was collected in the United Kingdom as a comparison to Sample 1; however, this data set was collected shortly after the European Union membership ('Brexit') referendum (referendum conducted 23/6/2016, data collected 18/7/2016), leading to some concerns that our results may have been affected by the proximity of the data collection to a major political event. In order to compare this dataset with one from the United States in approximately equal proximity to a major political event, we collected a third sample from American participants (Sample 3) shortly after the 2016 US Presidential election (election 8/11/2016, data collected 8/12/2016).

Participants. Sample 1 was comprised of 101 residents of the United States recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (54 males and 47 females, aged between 21 and 69 years ($M = 34.7$, $SD = 10.6$)). Participants for Sample 2 were 102 residents of the United Kingdom recruited using Prolific Academic (45 males and 57 females, aged between 18 and 73 years ($M = 34.2$, $SD = 11.7$)). Sample 3 were 138 residents of the USA, again recruited through Mechanical Turk (59 males and 80 females, aged between 22 and 62 ($M = 35.58$, $SD = 10.08$)). Power analysis using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang & Buchner, 2007)

showed that the smallest of our samples (N=101) would allow for a 90% chance of detecting an effect of size $r=.30$ as significant at the 5% level.

Procedure. The procedure was exactly the same for all three samples. Participants were first asked to perform a short writing task in which they imagined and described their idea of utopia, ‘an ideal or best possible society which is hoped or wished for’; they were asked to spend no more than about five minutes on this task. This task was included to make the idea of a utopian society and utopian thinking salient to participants, and to provide context for the subsequent questionnaire. Participants then completed a questionnaire comprised of the measures described below. The utopianism measure was always presented first, followed by the other measures in random order. Within each measure, items were randomly ordered.

Utopianism Scale. Participants completed a 9-item scale measuring their attitudes toward thinking about an ideal society, and their general propensity to engage in utopian thinking. Items were designed to measure three facets: Value (‘it is important that people think about an ideal version of society’); Practice (‘I often think about what an ideal society might look like’); and Anti-Utopianism (‘Focusing on an ideal society can have negative consequences’). It was expected that, although the first two facets both index a positive attitude toward utopian thinking, there may be a distinction between the evaluation of utopian thinking, and the self-reported frequency of engaging in utopian thinking. See Table 1 for a complete list of items.

In order to measure utopian functions, we included four measures of societal engagement using established psychological measures or slight modifications thereof. The change function was measured by Citizenship for Change (modified from Bain et al., 2012, Environmental Citizenship) – if utopian visions motivate people to change their society, they

would intend to engage in various civic activities in an attempt to change it. To measure the criticism function, we selected Satisfaction with Society (modified from Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin's, 1985, Satisfaction with Life Scale) and System Justification (Kay & Jost, 2003) on the assumption that a critical stance against the current society induced by one's utopian vision should reduce one's satisfaction with society, and one's tendency to justify the current social system. Activation of the compensation function should *disengage* people from their current society, and prompt psychological escape elsewhere, and was thus measured using an Escapism scale (see below).

Satisfaction with society. Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin's (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale was adapted to assess participants' satisfaction with the society in which they live. The 5-item scale was adapted by replacing the word 'life' with 'society' (e.g. '*The conditions of my society are excellent*'). The items were averaged to compute Satisfaction with Society (SWS).

System justification. Kay and Jost's (2003) 8-item scale was used to measure system justification. This scale assessed participants' perceptions of the fairness, legitimacy and justifiability of the prevailing social system (e.g. '*In general you find society to be fair*'). The items were averaged to compute System Justification.

Citizenship for change. Participants rated their desire to perform five activities to change their current society on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*): taking some form of action to change their society; taking action to change the direction in which their society is headed; speaking to family and friends about the need for change; donating money to an organisation supporting change; and giving their own time to volunteer for an organisation supporting change. The items were averaged to form a scale for Citizenship for Change.

Escapism. Participants completed an adaptation of the escapism factor of Aldwin and Revenson's (1987) scale. We take this to be a measure of societal disengagement. It was originally designed to tap people's tendency to escape from past events, and so the instructions and wording were adapted slightly to refer to an ideal society. Participants were asked how appealing (1 = *not at all appealing*; 7 = *very appealing*) they would find a variety of activities (e.g., having fantasies, daydreaming or wondering about an imagined society, and wishing that bad things about the current society would go away) if they were to engage in them over the coming few hours. For instance, the original item, '*Having fantasies about how things might turn out*', was modified to '*Having fantasies about what an imagined world might be like*'. The items were averaged to compute Escapism (see Appendix A for a full list of items).

 Table 1 about here

Results and Discussion

First, we wished to establish the factor structure of the Utopianism Scale. For each of our three samples, all items from this scale were entered into exploratory principal components analyses with Oblimin rotation (see Table 1). Both Velicer's MAP test (O'Connor, 2000) and the eigenvalues-greater-than-one criterion suggested that two factors should be retained in each of the three samples. One item ('*Trying to imagine an ideal society is a useful activity*') had substantial cross-loadings and loaded inconsistently across the three samples, and was therefore removed from the analysis. The principal components analyses were re-run and two clear factors were obtained in each of the three samples (see Table 1).

Separate factors for the value placed on utopianism and the practice of utopian thinking did not emerge, but rather the items assessing these attitudes loaded together to form a generally positive attitude towards utopian thinking (which we labelled ‘Utopianism’). The other factor contained items expressing a negative attitude towards utopian thinking (labelled ‘Anti-Utopianism’). Items from each of these factors were averaged to create ‘Utopianism’ and ‘Anti-Utopianism’ variables.

Means, standard deviations and reliabilities of, and correlations between, all variables in the study are in Table 2. The modest negative correlation between the two factors suggests that utopianism and anti-utopianism do not represent opposite poles of a singular construct. Instead, while utopianism represents a positive attitude towards, and engagement with, utopian thinking, anti-utopianism is a recognition that such thinking may have some negative consequences. These are certainly not logically inconsistent attitudes, as has been suggested by utopian theorists such as Levitas (2008) who identifies several utopian writings which contain a level of tension between utopian hopes and anti-utopian realism.

Table 2 about here

As expected, utopianism correlated positively with Citizenship and Escapism consistently across the three samples. Largely consistent with our expectations, utopianism correlated negatively with Satisfaction with Society and System Justification in samples 1 (US) and 2 (UK), but not in sample 3 (post-election US). Anti-utopianism shows correlations that mirror those of utopianism: negatively associated with Citizenship and Escapism, but

positively correlated with Satisfaction with Society and System Justification, though their magnitude was somewhat less than those of utopianism.

Study 1 has shown evidence that engaging in, and having a positive attitude towards, utopian thinking is associated with all three of Levitas' utopian functions: change, critique and compensation. It should be noted, however, that the relationship between utopianism and the criticism function is somewhat complicated – it appears that utopianism tends to predict criticism of society's systems (decreased system justification) and general dissatisfaction with society somewhat inconsistently. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that major political events, such as a national referendum (e.g., Brexit) or presidential election, may set a societal context that perturbs and masks psychological relationships.

The strong positive relationship between utopianism and compensation (escapism) should also be interpreted cautiously because the tendency to spontaneously engage in imaginative thinking is present in both utopianism and escapism. It may be this conceptual overlap which accounts for at least some of the relationship between those two variables. In the studies which follow we seek to clarify these effects by experimentally manipulating utopian thinking.

Study 2

In Study 1, we showed that utopianism was associated with Levitas' (1990) three utopian functions: change, critique and compensation. In Study 2 we investigated the potential motivational consequences of utopian thinking in an experiment. Here, we primed people's utopian visions and examined the effects on societal engagement with the same measures used in Study 1. In addition, this enabled us to investigate the difference between the effects of dispositional utopianism and those of induced utopian thinking. As noted above, the utopianism-escapism correlation in Study 1 may have been inflated because they

both share the same individual difference tendency to engage in imaginative thinking. By experimentally manipulating whether participants engaged in utopian thinking, it is possible to control for this tendency.

Method

Participants. Two-hundred and one participants took part in the study (104 males and 97 females; $M = 33.9$ years, $SD = 12.14$). Participants were all residents of the United States, recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Procedure. There were three experimental conditions and one control condition in this study. In the control condition, participants were simply asked to respond to the same battery of scales as in Study 1: Citizenship for Change, Satisfaction with Society, System Justification, and Escapism, presented in random order. In the experimental conditions, participants completed a task designed to prime one of Levitas' three functions of utopia. In the Utopia Appraisal and Current Appraisal conditions, participants wrote about their own utopia ('an ideal or best possible society which is hoped or wished for') and then rated a set of appraisals and their emotions (pride, contentment, joy, anger, sadness, frustration, guilt, shame, hope, and fear) about their utopia or their current society, respectively. The utopia appraisal task was designed to orient participants towards the utopian society, under the assumption that this would elicit more of the change function, while the current appraisal task was designed to orient participants towards the current society, and the criticism function. The emotion task was intended to strengthen the prime by emotionally engaging participants with the relevant target.

In the Utopia Appraisal condition, the set of appraisals addressed the likelihood of achieving the utopian society, and the roles and responsibilities of ordinary citizens in bringing about utopia. In the Current Appraisal condition, the set of appraisals evaluated the

current society, citizens' role in making society what it is, and the possibility of changing the current society. Note that the emotion and appraisal rating items were simply given to prime the change and criticism functions of utopia, and so the resulting data were not analysed (see Appendix B for a complete list of appraisal items).

In the Utopian Imagination condition, participants completed only the utopia writing task under the assumption that, without further direction, participants would be free to engage in the utopian fantasy, thereby eliciting the compensation function. Previous research on fantasy realization has shown that free thoughts and images of an idealised future tend to be associated with premature mental attainment and consumption of that desired future (see Oettingen, 2012), similar to the compensation function as described by Levitas (1990). After these tasks, participants responded to the same questionnaire as in the control condition.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for each of the dependent variables across the four conditions. A set of orthogonal planned contrasts was conducted on each of the dependent variables. The first contrast compared the three experimental conditions with the control condition; the second, the Criticism condition and the Change condition with the Compensation condition; and the third, the Change with the Criticism condition. The first contrast showed that participants in the three experimental conditions where their utopian vision was activated expressed significantly greater Citizenship intentions, $M_{Utopia} = 4.76$ vs. $M_{Control} = 4.34$, $t(197) = -2.23$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.34$, but lower Satisfaction with Society, $M_{Utopia} = 2.61$ vs. $M_{Control} = 3.18$, $t(197) = 2.97$, $p < .01$, $d = -0.45$, and System Justification, $M_{Utopia} = 3.15$ vs. $M_{Control} = 3.75$, $t(197) = 3.17$, $p < .01$, $d = -0.50$. There was no significant difference for Escapism, $M_{Utopia} = 4.34$ vs. $M_{Control} = 4.24$, $t(197) = -0.53$, $p > .05$, $d = 0.09$. No other contrasts were significant.

Table 3 about here

These results show that utopian thinking has causal effects on societal engagement. After thinking about their utopia, participants were more likely to express greater willingness to engage in citizenship behaviours and also to be critical of their own society (i.e., be less satisfied and system justifying). It is also noteworthy that there was no difference between the three experimental conditions. We had suspected that the different orienting tasks would direct people's attention to the utopia or current society, and may elicit different utopian functions, but regardless of the orienting task, simply thinking about utopia activated the criticism and change functions.

We did not, however, observe any evidence for compensation; participants in the three utopia conditions were no different to the control in their desire to engage in escapism. This is in contrast to Study 1 in which higher levels of utopianism were consistently associated with greater escapism. It may be that the utopianism-escapism correlation in the previous study was inflated because both variables shared a component of spontaneous imaginative thinking as we noted earlier. When utopian thinking was experimentally manipulated, however, the effect on escapism appeared to be reduced to non-significance.

Study 3

In Study 3, we explored a psychological mechanism for the effect of utopian thinking, *mental contrasting*. According to Oettingen and colleagues (e.g., Kappes & Oettingen, 2014; Kappes, Singmann, & Oettingen, 2012; Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001; Kappes, Wendt, Reinelt, & Oettingen, 2013; see Oettingen, 2012, for a review) having a positive fantasy

about one's individual future (e.g., getting better grades, losing weight) can be translated to a motivation to improve on one's negative reality when the positive imagined future self is mentally contrasted to the current reality. Oettingen (2012) suggests that the critical element is the order in which the positive imagined future and the current reality are thought about. When people think about their positive future *first*, this acts as a framework against which to consider the current reality, which then is likely to become a goal to which one is committed. Intriguingly, the reverse-contrast, in which the current reality is thought about first and then a positive future self is imagined, dissipates the motivating effect of the positive imagination. Oettingen and colleagues' research also proposes that 'dwelling' (i.e. thinking about only the current state) and 'indulging' (i.e. thinking only about the desired state) do not lead to goal commitment or performance.

We surmised that, as goals for one's society, utopian thinking can proceed through similar (collective) self-regulatory processes. Thus, mentally contrasting one's utopia with the current society should strengthen the effect of utopian thinking and facilitate goal commitment. By contrast, reverse contrasting, dwelling on the current society, or indulging in the utopian fantasy should inhibit goal commitment. In order to test these hypotheses, we conducted a similar experiment to Oettingen and colleagues' mental contrasting, but using collective, rather than personal, ideal states (i.e. utopias).

Method

Participants. One-hundred and ninety-eight participants took part in this study. One participant's data was removed from the analysis, as it was determined that they had previously participated in another related study, leaving one-hundred and ninety-seven in the analysis (110 males and 87 females), aged between 18 and 64 years ($M = 34.0$ $SD = 10.5$).

Participants were all residents of the United States, recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Procedure. This study used a between-subjects design with five conditions, which largely reflect those used in Oettigen and colleagues' research. There were two control conditions, which were similar to 'dwelling' in which one thinks only about the current state. Participants in these two conditions were asked to write a short paragraph about an ordinary day in their life (Current Life), or a brief paragraph about the society in which they currently live (Current Society). The Current Society condition was included to examine whether simply making the concept of 'society' salient would elicit societal engagement motivation. In three remaining conditions, participants were asked to imagine and describe an ideal society in the same way as in Studies 1 and 2. The Utopian Imagination condition was identical to that in Study 2, in which participants only imagined and described their utopian society. In the other two conditions, participants were asked to imagine and describe an ideal society, as well as their current society in two different orders: in the Mental Contrasting condition, the order was their ideal society first, and then the current society – the condition in which the motivating effect is hypothesised to occur – and in the Reverse Contrasting condition, their current society first and then a utopian society – where the motivating effect of positive imaginations is unlikely to occur.

Participants were then asked to complete a brief distractor task (identifying ten states of the USA from their shapes), followed by the scales used to measure societal engagement in the above studies in random order: Satisfaction with Society ($\alpha = .93$), System Justification ($\alpha = .88$), Citizenship ($\alpha = .93$), and Escapism ($\alpha = .85$).

Results

Table 4 about here

The means and standard deviations for all conditions are displayed in Table 4. We examined the results through a series of planned contrasts, which are detailed in Table 5. The first set of contrasts were preliminary analyses (1) to examine whether the control conditions can be collapsed to establish a baseline, and (2) to explore whether mental contrasting confers an advantage over just thinking about utopia. With regard to (1), the two control conditions, Current Society and Current Life, did not differ significantly on Citizenship, Satisfaction with Society, System Justification, or Escapism. With regard to (2), the Utopian Imagination and Mental Contrasting conditions did not differ from each other on any of the dependent measures.

The second set of contrasts tested our hypotheses: utopian thinking (Utopian Imagination and Mental Contrasting conditions) enhances societal engagement (3) relative to the controls, and (4) relative to Reverse Contrasting. To test (3), we contrasted the Utopian Imagination and the Mental Contrasting conditions with the control conditions, i.e., Current Society and Current Life. The utopian thinking conditions were higher on Citizenship, but lower on Satisfaction with Society and System Justification. There was no significant difference for Escapism.

To test (4), we then contrasted the Utopian Imagination and Mental Contrasting conditions against the Reverse Contrasting condition. Consistent with Oettingen and colleagues' finding, the effect of utopian thinking was weaker in the Reverse Contrasting condition than in the other two conditions for Citizenship, Satisfaction with Society, and

System Justification; however, there was no difference in Escapism. In fact, when an additional planned contrast (5) compared the Reverse Contrasting condition with the control conditions, no difference was found on any of the four dependent variables.

Table 5 about here

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the effect of utopian thinking on societal engagement. When people imagined their ideal society, they felt less satisfied with their society, engaged less in system justification, and showed stronger intentions to engage in citizenship behaviours for social change. We also provided support for the hypothesis that mental contrasting is a likely mechanism underlying the effect of utopian thinking. In line with Oettingen and colleagues' (e.g., Oettingen, 2012; Oettingen et al., 2001) suggestions, when participants were asked to imagine their utopias first and then to describe their current society, they were motivated to engage in citizenship behaviours for change and to be critical of the current society, but when they were asked to imagine their current society first, their societal engagement was no different to the conditions in which they did not engage in utopian thinking. These findings are consistent with their theorizing that reverse contrasting (thinking about the current state and then one's goal) tends to decrease commitment to the attainment of desired futures as a goal and the adoption of instrumental behaviours to pursue the goal (e.g., Kappes et al., 2012, 2013, 2014).

The present findings, however, also point to potential differences between utopian thinking and individual positive fantasies. Note that Oettingen and colleagues have found that 'indulging', in which only positive futures are fantasized, to be insufficient to strengthen

people's goal pursuit (e.g., Kappes et al., 2012, 2013, 2014), however, the current studies (see the Utopian Imagination conditions in Studies 2 and 3) have consistently found that thinking about utopias was sufficient to activate the utopian functions of criticism and change. This may be interpreted in terms of a peculiarity in utopian thinking – that is, some form of contrasting between the real and the ideal is a general feature of utopian thinking. When people are asked to think and write about their “utopia, an ideal society that they wish or hope for” they may spontaneously mentally contrast their current society with the ideal society, which then serves as a goal for which they strive by engaging in instrumental citizenship behaviours. This may be an important feature which distinguishes utopian thinking from individual fantasies.

General Discussion

The present research investigated the psychological consequences of ordinary people's utopian thinking – their imaginations of ideal societies – on societal engagement. We expected that the activation of utopian visions effects people's engagement with their society. In three studies, we showed that utopian thinking resulted in motivation to engage with society in line with Levitas' (1990) functions of utopia. By way of summarizing the results, we conducted a meta-analysis across all three studies to examine the overall effect of utopian thinking. The effects included in the meta-analysis were the correlations between the Utopianism factor and the dependent variables from Study 1, along with the comparisons between the utopia conditions and controls in Studies 2 (three utopia conditions v. control) and 3 (Utopian Imagination/Mental Contrasting v. two controls). The correlation coefficients from Study 1 were converted to Cohen's d (see Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins & Rothstein, 2009), and then a mean effect size, 95% confidence intervals and Q -statistic were calculated for each of the four utopian function variables: Citizenship, $d = 0.66$ (95% CI: 0.48,0.85), $Q = 25.95$ ($p < .001$); Satisfaction with Society, $d = -0.31$ (95% CI: -0.46, -0.15), $Q = 5.57$

($p=.23$); System Justification, $d = -0.48$ (95% CI: -0.64, -0.32), $Q = 4.27$ ($p=.37$); Escapism, $d = 0.54$ (95% CI: 0.37,0.71), $Q = 34.68$ ($p<.001$). These results suggest an overall negative effect of utopian thinking on satisfaction with society and system justification, and an overall positive effect of utopian thinking on citizenship and escapism; however, the Q -statistics suggest significant heterogeneity in effect sizes for these latter two variables. We will discuss each function separately below.

Utopian thinking was consistently associated with the activation of the change function. In Study 1, we showed that individual differences in utopianism were consistently associated with higher levels of citizenship intentions. Studies 2 and 3 provided evidence for the causal effect of utopian thinking by showing that the experimental induction of utopian thinking reliably activated the change function as indicated by stronger intentions to engage in citizenship behaviours. Although there was a significant heterogeneity in effect sizes - suggesting that individual differences in utopian thinking appear to be associated with the activation of change function more than the experimental manipulation of utopian thinking - all effects were significant, attesting to the robustness of the effect of utopian thinking on societal engagement for change. It may be that utopian thinking as an individual difference includes factors that affect the change function in addition to simply imagining a utopia. Future investigations may be able to identify those factors.

Importantly, Study 3 also provided evidence for mental contrasting as a mechanism underlying the psychological effect of utopian thinking. Following Oettingen (2012), we hypothesized that the nature of the comparison made between one's utopian and current societies is an important driver of change motivation. Indeed, we found that the process of thinking about one's utopia followed by the current society was more effective in activating the change function than the process of reverse contrasting (i.e., thinking about the current society followed by imagining a utopia), which did not differ from the control conditions.

Mental contrasting did not, however, elicit greater change motivation than simply thinking about one's utopia. This, as noted above, may point to a difference between utopias and other kinds of goals, in that utopias automatically elicit a comparison with the current state, thereby producing a kind of mental contrasting. Alternatively, it may be that the mental contrasting effect would be greater when one imagines a specific type of utopia and a specific type of behaviour/intention aimed at achieving that particular utopia (see discussion below).

With regard to Levitas' other two functions, the results were more complex. The effect of utopian thinking on the criticism function as measured by Satisfaction with Society and System Justification differed somewhat from the change function. Study 1 showed an inconsistent relationship between utopianism and criticism, especially regarding general satisfaction with one's society, which was only significantly correlated in two of the three samples. In contrast, when utopian thinking was experimentally induced, it consistently lowered Satisfaction with Society and System Justification, as was the case for the change function. In line with our interpretation above regarding mental contrasting, it is possible that utopian thinking naturally entails an unfavourable comparison with the current society, and thus, when encouraged to think about a utopian society in Studies 2 and 3, the failings of the current society were especially salient to participants, enhancing the criticism effect. Nevertheless, the meta-analysis showed that the effect of utopian thinking on the two criticism variables was homogeneous and significant overall.

The results for the compensation function were also somewhat mixed, as suggested by the significant heterogeneity in effect sizes across the three studies. Although the individual difference measure of utopianism consistently predicted escapism (Study 1), when people were experimentally induced to engage in utopian thinking, they did not show an increased tendency to engage in escapism (Studies 2 and 3). We suggest that, to some extent, utopianism and escapism both measure an individual difference in the psychological

tendency to engage in imaginative thinking, and that this may be responsible for the utopianism-escapism relationship in Study 1. Induced utopian thinking, however, does not disengage people from their society by inducing escapism, and is more likely to elicit a change orientation, as shown in Study 3, where engagement in utopian thinking alone (in the Utopian Imagination condition) activated the change function at levels similar to the mental contrasting condition. Future research may examine the circumstances, if any, in which utopian thinking is associated with a more compensatory or escapist orientation. One possible determinant, addressed in the work of Oettingen and colleagues (see Oettingen, 2012) is expectancy of success (see e.g. Bandura, 1997, on self-efficacy; Scheier & Carver, 1992, on generalised expectations); change motivation may be enhanced by a perceived high likelihood of achieving (or at least approaching) one's utopia, whereas a more escapist motivation may be elicited when one's utopia is more distant or unrealistic.

Limitations and Future Directions

A critical aspect of utopian visions missing from this research is a consideration of the *content* of those utopias. There is a large variety of utopian visions in this literary genre (see e.g. Davis, 1981 for a typology), and it is likely that different types of utopias will differentially activate the criticism, change, and compensation functions based on differing levels of discrepancy with the current society, achievability, and so on. Indeed, there is evidence that ordinary people's utopian visions conform to a small set of prototypes, and that some kinds of utopian visions are more likely to elicit social change motivation than others (see Fernando, O'Brien, Burden, Judge & Kashima, 2017). However, in this paper, we have been primarily concerned with the utility of utopian thinking *per se* for eliciting social engagement, rather than whether any specific type of utopia is particularly motivating.

This research focus has made it difficult for us to examine the effect of utopian thinking on any specific behaviour. That is to say, unless we know what an individual's utopian society looks like, it is difficult to predict what kind of social change behaviour this person is likely to engage in. Utopian visions are diverse, and for this reason, general utopian thinking is unlikely to have observable effects on any specific behaviour. This has limited this research to behavioural *intentions* for social change rather than specific change-oriented behaviour. The relation of utopian thinking to specific behaviour is an important issue to be addressed in future research, since actual social change behaviour often comes at some cost to the actor (e.g. time, money, effort), which is not the case for expressing a general motivation to change society. Thus, it may be that the motivation to change one's society is only manifested in real behaviour under certain circumstances. Most likely this would need to be examined in conjunction with measurement and/or manipulation of the *content* of people's utopian visions in relation to a specific political issue (e.g. climate change, social justice, economic development) and actions related to that issue. In addition, as noted above, we may also observe a stronger effect of mental contrasting when examining specific behaviour associated with attempts to achieve a particular utopian vision.

We should also note that for Studies 2 and 3, we had no particular expectations regarding effect size, and so used available sample size rules of thumb suggesting that between 30 (Wilson VanVoorhis & Morgan, 2007) and 45 (Cohen, 1992) participants per cell would be sufficient to detect an effect of medium or large size as significant at $\alpha = .05$ with a power of .80. Subsequent post-hoc analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), considering our observed effects sizes in Studies 2 and 3, suggested that we had power of .56 to detect an effect of $d=.30$ in those studies. Thus, we may have been slightly underpowered in those studies; nevertheless, given the consistency of results across those two studies, and the fact

that the tests of escapism were typically clearly non-significant, we do not expect that this had any bearing on the overall pattern of results.

Conclusion

Although there has been voluminous research on people's tendencies to maintain their society (e.g., Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009) and culture (e.g., Kashima, 2008), theorizing and research on utopias as motivators of cultural or social change points to a potentially novel direction for social psychology. Despite a growing interest in social psychological mechanisms involved in social change (e.g., Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009a, b; van Zomeren et al., 2008), the literature seems to largely focus on activism, and how a disadvantaged group in society may engage in social and political action to improve their social standing. While this is clearly one of the processes by which society changes, there is a broader sense in which citizens may engage with their society and participate in the provision of public goods. The present research shows that engaging with an ideal for society, utopia, tends to elicit this kind of broader social change motivation. Future research can continue to investigate how utopian visions act as collective goals to effect the collective self-regulation of collective action in this sense.

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Table 1

Component Loadings for Principal Components Analysis with Oblimin Rotation of Utopianism Scale in Three Samples

	Utopianism			Anti-utopianism		
	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3
I often think about what an ideal society might look like.	.92	.87	.89	-.03	.09	.00
I spend a lot of time thinking about an ideal society.	.88	.91	.91	.25	.13	.12
I often think about what sort of world I would ideally like to live in.	.83	.73	.86	-.11	-.10	-.02
It is important that people think about an ideal version of society	.69	.57	.56	-.28	-.30	-.36
Dreaming about an ideal society could be dangerous.	.09	.07	.20	.87	.81	.92
Focusing on an ideal society can have negative consequences.	.06	.00	.01	.85	.80	.76
People shouldn't try to envision an ideal society.	-.03	-.16	-.08	.84	.75	.78
It is useless to dream about what an ideal society might look like.	-.20	.05	-.23	.65	.71	.62

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations and Bivariate Correlations between all Study 1 Variables

	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
Sample 1								
1. Utopianism	4.45	1.28	.86					
2. Anti-Utopianism	2.68	1.26	.82	-.28**				
3. Citizenship	4.37	1.46	.92	.57**	-.18			
4. Satisfaction with Society	3.07	1.36	.91	-.21*	.29**	-.19		
5. System Justification	3.35	1.24	.88	-.34**	.29**	-.36**	.69**	
6. Escapism	4.38	1.51	.81	.51**	-.22**	.38**	-.17	-.15
Sample 2								
1. Utopianism	4.57	1.12	.79					
2. Anti-Utopianism	3.08	1.19	.78	-.30**				
3. Citizenship	3.97	1.40	.90	.50**	-.44**			
4. Satisfaction with Society	3.04	1.04	.84	-.23*	.10	.00		
5. System Justification	3.22	0.90	.79	-.32**	.25*	-.27**	.66**	
6. Escapism	4.59	1.50	.87	.54**	-.24*	.30**	-.12	-.17
Sample 3								
1. Utopianism	4.64	1.30	.85					
2. Anti-Utopianism	2.45	1.09	.78	-.38**				
3. Citizenship	4.24	1.60	.92	.59**	-.29**			
4. Satisfaction with Society	2.91	1.36	.91	.01	.07	-.15		
5. System Justification	3.45	1.27	.89	-.11	.05	-.22*	.71**	
6. Escapism	4.66	1.46	.85	.51**	-.09	.37**	-.10	-.12

Note: ** p. < .01; * p. < .05.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Dependent Variables across Four Conditions in Study 2

	Utopian Imagination	Utopian Imagination + UA	Utopian Imagination + CA	Control
Citizenship	4.80 (1.12)	4.90 (1.17)	4.61 (1.34)	4.34 (1.28)
Satisfaction with Society	2.81 (1.11)	2.44 (1.11)	2.53 (1.19)	3.15 (1.32)
System Justification	3.16 (1.14)	3.24 (1.22)	3.14 (0.99)	3.75 (1.21)
Escapism	4.41 (1.07)	4.17 (1.14)	4.42 (0.94)	4.24 (1.36)

Note. UA – utopia appraisal; CA – current society appraisal

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations for Dependent Variables across Five Conditions in Study 3

	Utopian Imagination	Mental Contrasting	Reverse Contrasting	Current Society	Current Life
Citizenship	4.44 (1.59)	4.81 (1.52)	4.02 (1.71)	4.00 (1.35)	4.25 (1.39)
Satisfaction with Society	2.88 (1.28)	3.30 (1.57)	3.70 (1.68)	3.57 (1.49)	3.50 (1.30)
System Justification	3.14 (1.14)	3.31 (1.16)	3.93 (1.34)	3.89 (1.36)	3.68 (1.12)

Escapism	4.91 (1.70)	4.93 (1.40)	4.47 (1.54)	4.59 (1.54)	4.55 (1.47)
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Table 5
Planned Contrast Analyses (Study 3)

Contrast	Citizenship		Satisfaction with Society		System Justification		Escapism	
	<i>t</i> (193)	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i> (193)	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i> (193)	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i> (193)	<i>d</i>
1) Current Society v. Current Life	0.67	-0.18	-0.18	0.05	0.72	0.16	0.13	0.03
2) Mental Contrasting v. Utopian Imagination	1.18	-0.24	1.38	0.30	0.68	-0.15	0.60	-0.01
3) Utopian Imagination /Mental Contrasting v. Current Society/Current Life	2.07*	0.33	-1.91*	-0.30	-2.85**	-0.46	1.15	0.19
4) Utopian Imagination /Mental Contrasting v. Reverse Contrasting	2.02*	0.38	-2.02*	-0.41	-2.93**	-0.59	1.29	0.26
5) Reverse Contrasting v. Current Society/Current-Life	0.32	0.08	-0.58	-0.11	0.55	0.13	-0.33	-0.07

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Appendix A

Escapism Scale

- Having fantasies about what an imagined world might be like.
- Daydreaming or imagining a better time or place than the one you are in.
- Wishing that a bad thing happening to you would go away or somehow be over with.
- Wondering about an imagined world.
- Just wishing that those bad things about the current society would disappear and somehow be fixed when you wake up tomorrow.

Appendix B

Appraisal Items Study 2: Utopia Appraisal

- I think our society will be transformed into my ideal society
- There is no chance our society will ever become like my ideal society
- I don't know whether my ideal society will be achieved or not
- It is possible that our society could approach my ideal
- There is good reason to believe that my ideal society can be achieved
- It is really hard to think of realistic ways of achieving my ideal society
- An ordinary citizen cannot be expected to contribute that much to bringing about an ideal society
- I am not responsible for bringing about change in my society
- I must play my part in bringing about positive changes to improve my society
- I can think of lots of examples when we have changed our society for the better
- It's difficult to think of times when we have achieved substantial changes to our society
- I feel that my own actions can help bring about positive change to move society closer to the ideal

Appraisal Items Study 2: Current Society Appraisal

- There is something wrong about the way our current society works
- What's happening in our current society is not right
- Most ordinary people like me had little say in how society has developed up to now
- Ordinary citizens, like ourselves, had a strong role to play in making our society what it is today
- Our current society is full of immorality
- The way our current society operates causes me personal disadvantage or hardship
- There is a great deal of incompetence in our current society
- The way society currently operates makes us all look bad
- Our society is a credit to our citizens and makes us look good
- You can tell a lot about the citizens of a society by looking at how the society operates as a whole
- There is little chance that our society can be made to undergo substantial change
- If changes can be made to our society, they will only be minor ones
- It is possible that our society can be changed fundamentally



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