**Jonestown Research Paper**

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Having scoured the entire Jonestown Wikipedia page while deciding whether to take on the “utopia” as my research topic, I was bewildered and consequently intrigued as to how a community with such pure utopian roots had turned disastrous. Wikipedia’s article painted an image of a hellish concentration camp ruled by a drug-fueled lunatic. It was from this general knowledge of Jonestown that I crafted my research question. I sought to answer the question of when and how Jonestown transcended from utopia into dystopia. Once the real research began, however, I came to realize that my question was founded on a simplified and possibly misguided understanding of the community. I found that more scholarly interpretations focused less on painting Jim Jones as a villain and his people as helplessly brainwashed. This made it easier to fully analyze Jones’s character and the events that transpired. One such source was *“Salvation and suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown”* by David Chidester. It was the first source I discovered, and possibly the most influential on my research, as it influenced my interpretations of subsequent sources and prompted me to revise my research question to: “Prior to the events of November 1978, was Jonestown a utopia or a dystopia?”

One of the things that made the Peoples Temple so popular in its early stages was its utopian ideals at a time when America was deeply divided by violence and hatred. At the peak of its existence, the temple could be considered the most successful utopia in American history. While Martin Luther King Jr. was fighting for equality of all races, the Peoples Temple was one of the few places to have already achieved this, making it wildly popular among lower-class African Americans. Jim Jones’s belief in the equality of all people rendered his community an attractive destination for demographics persecuted by society. Temple member Jack Beam recalls an event in 1954 in which a church board told Jim Jones that he could no longer bring black people up on stage during his services, to which he responded, "The most segregated institution in the United States is the church at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and I'll have no part in that," and promptly walked out. (Fondakowski, 42)

Beyond just its social equality, Jonestown could be considered utopian due to its roots in what Jones called ‘apostolic socialism’- his own ideology crafted from the teachings of Marx and earlier utopian scholars. From the church’s early days, Jones’s sermons included an abundance of socialist ideas that was shocking to newcomers. Reflecting on her first time attending a Jim Jones sermon, former temple member Liz Forman recalls, “He was so Marxist that day, you cannot believe it. I mean, here I am, this reddiaper-thirty-one-year-old baby, and he starts in, and I cannot believe what he’s saying.” (Layton, 63) At some point in Jones’s beginnings as a pastor, he renounced the bible and began to revere socialism as the one true god of humanity. Jones taught his followers that socialism was akin to love, and thus the people of Jonestown practiced the communal possession of all material things within the community.

The work by David Chidester, *“Salvation and suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown”,* suggests that media outlets sought to dehumanize Jones and his followers as lunatics or a brainwashed cult rather than seeking to understand. “Perspectives on the Jonestown even consistently discounted the possibility that the Peoples Temple has been a genuine religious movement.” (Chidester, 8) Interviews with survivors seem to mirror this sentiment. Jim Jones’s own son, who spent most of his life hating his father, states, “I refuse to believe that everyone was wholesale bamboozled by this one evil man, and I include myself in that.” (Fondakowski, 11) Descriptions of the commune suggest that it was certainly utopian, at least in its intention. “Jonestown was designed as a utopian heaven on earth, a socialist paradise in the jungle.” (Chidester, 10) While I was hesitant to accept all of Chidester’s assertions, I found his theory about popular media dehumanizing those involved in the mass suicide to be pervading true.

Despite all of this evidence suggesting that Jonestown may in fact have been a utopia after all, it is difficult to impossible to ignore the anomalies that gave it its dystopian reputation in the first place. The urgency with which some temple members attempted to escape Jonestown with Congressman Leo Ryan surely adds doubt to Jonestown’s utopian claims. The act of holding citizens prisoner within a community is a clear dystopian trait. The autopsy reports suggesting that some Jonestown residents did not go willingly into death only increase doubts about Jim Jones’s ‘promised land’. If even one person was forced to die against their will, that would be grounds to call Jonestown a great dystopia. Ultimately it seems as though all of the dystopian traits that would have made Jonestown a living nightmare for disenfranchised temple members were the result of Jim Jones’s increasingly irrational paranoia- a fatal flaw that seemed to plague him from the beginning of his utopian dreams.

From my research, I found that popular media consistently misrepresented Jonestown. Interviews and memoirs suggest that many temple members did in fact consider Jonestown to be a utopia until the day of its demise. However, even in holding all of this to be true, it is impossible to ignore evidence indicating that human rights violations occurred in the jungle of Guyana. Finding it impossible to discount either viewpoint, I realize that one cannot classify Jonestown as either utopia or dystopia. In fact it was both. It was a hellish dystopia for some, but the gleaming definition of utopia for others. I have come to see that utopia is not defined by reality, but instead by the perception of each individual.

# Outline

* **Background information- How it began, Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, The Move to Guyana, November 1978.** 
  + Created by the Peoples Temple, a group founded in early 1950s- 300 members
  + Moved to California where it gained many members (3,000) and then relocated to Guyana after media scrutiny
  + Often referred to as cult, but not
  + Short description of Jones
    - Extremely charismatic
    - Sermons, fiery, righteous
    - Susceptible to power
  + Message often overshadowed by events of November 1978
* **Research question and how various sources added to it-**
  + Original research question
  + Origins and beliefs
    - Equality
      * Context
    - Socialism
    - Very utopian ideas
  + Neutrality of scholarly articles
    - Salvation and Suicide by David Chidester
  + Conflicting first-hand accounts
    - Stories from Jonestown by Leigh Fondakowski
    - Seductive Poison by Deborah Layton
  + New thesis
    - “Prior to the events of November 1978, was Jonestown a utopia or a dystopia?”
* **Analyze evidence- Come to conclusion**
  + Utopia for some, dystopia for others- impossible to discount injustices, yet also impossible to ignore those who felt strongly about Jonestown being utopia
  + Jones’s paranoia played key role in downfall
* **Make broader comment about social utopias- The line between utopia and dystopia is not as defined as one might think, Utopia is defined by one’s experience rather than the reality, The consequences of dictatorship in utopia**

**Bibliography**

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I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

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