

## INTRODUCTION

### *Utopia at 500*

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The little book we now familiarly refer to as *Utopia* was published five hundred years ago in Leuven, the capital of what is today the Flemish province of Brabant in Belgium<sup>1</sup>. As a work of fantasy it has had an astonishingly successful history. As both the no-place and the good-place, then eventually perhaps also the place-one-should-not-go, the dream which becomes a nightmare when we try to realise it, utopia has become inscribed in our vocabulary and our ideas. It means many things to many people, yet few would deny the power of the concept. So it is worth briefly revisiting just how this has mutated over the centuries.

Firstly then to Sir (or Saint) Thomas and his ideas. The text is presented to us in the form of a dialogue in which the central narrative about the society called Utopia appears in Book Two, when the travels of Raphael Hythloday are related to a rather sceptical Thomas More. (But which, we immediately ask, is the real More in this schizophrenic division?). More commences *Utopia* with an account of the desperation of the poor in the England of his day, in Book One. We are quickly made aware by the mention of Amerigo Vespucci that recent travellers to the new world have brought back fantastic but compelling tales of their discoveries. Some hinted that conditions were akin to the golden age of Greek mythology, the very opposite, thus,

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of contemporary England. More would have known of Peter Martyr d'Anghiera's *De Orbe Novo* (1511), a description of the natives of Cuba as having community of goods, and there were other assorted rumours of this type. Few would today describe Utopia's inhabitants as noble savages. But *Utopia* does appear to be just such a tale: it projects an island lying somewhere in the equatorial regions, founded both by shipwreck and the wise design of the great mariner Utopus many centuries earlier. When we recall that Columbus thought the earthly paradise lay just beyond the mouth of the Orinoco river More's postulate seems if anything less fantastic.

The constitution and mores of Utopia appear to owe more to classical antiquity than to the customs of the aboriginal Americans. Yet their peculiarities betray three features which some contemporaries supposed did define native life in the new world, and which have been attached to our image of utopia ever since. These are: community of goods; an apparent contempt for gold and silver and ostentatious pride generally; and the abolition of money. The discovery of the new world from one viewpoint could indicate that the turning away from apostolic communism had been a tragic error. As we are all aware, the travel literature which served as a backdrop to More's text—and most notably the tradition of Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*—was replete with fantastic lands. The names More gives, firstly to Utopia itself, then to its capital, Amaurot (obscure or unknown) suggests a satire on this tradition as such. But then the introduction of Vespucci returns us to a realistic set of presumptions. Yet Utopia, far from being the perfect society with which it is still too often confused, is not even the best possible society, given the prevalence of war and slavery in particular.

Whilst the ethos of friendship and trust which defines Utopia is always commendable, it is also by no means obvious that communism is the answer to the woes of England as described in Book One, where More laments the poor are being hung *en masse* as great landlords drive them off the land to enclose the commons for highly profitable sheep raising. Communism is the theme which appears to bring the Utopians close to Apostolic Christianity, or to being more Christian, in other words, than More's contemporaries. But communism is also what More, on balance, finds least plausible in Hythloday's tale: how, he asks near the end, can these Utopians really be motivated without the ownership of property? And if this regime of common endeavour works here, he hints as the book closes as to his scepticism as to whether Europeans could live this way, converting from their opulence and love of pleasure to this superior Platonic and Christian life. This vision remains to More a tantalising

and fascinating one. But to many readers the two islands of Britain and Utopia have too little in common to imagine that the model is meant to be imitated.

*Utopia* of course has several other leading themes which merit mention. Its inhabitants divide their time between fifty-four almost identical towns and cultivation in the countryside. They dress, eat, work, and behave in remarkably similar ways. They combat vice by a regime of near-complete transparency, leaving no space in which crime and vice might flourish. In Utopia, we are told, there are “no wine bars, no pubs, no whorehouses. There are no opportunities for wickedness, no hiding places; there is no scope for conspiring in secret. They are always under the observation of their fellow citizens and have no choice but either to work as hard as the next person, or else engage in respectable pastimes” (More 1999: 108). We cannot travel outside our neighbourhood without passports. We must wear the same plain clothes. We must exchange our houses every ten years. We cannot avoid labour. We all go to bed at the same time (8 p.m.), and never, under penalty of slavery, with someone else’s wife or husband. In More’s time, for much of the population, such restraints would not have seemed overly unreasonable. For modern readers, however, Utopia appears to rely upon relentless transparency, severe regulation, and the curtailment of privacy. In both its external and internal relations, thus, it seems perilously dystopian<sup>2</sup>.

Utopia, then, is not really a fun place. It is a safe place. It offers repose. But the price is restraint. Moreover, Utopia remains an imperial power. When overpopulated it sends out colonies, seizing the uncultivated land of indigenous peoples, and driving out “any who resist them” (More 1999: 103). Well-paid mercenaries keep enemies at bay, the Utopians’ much-vaunted contempt for gold here standing starkly in contrast with the great value their treasure has when expended on slaying their enemies. Utopia’s peace and plenitude now seem to rest upon war, empire and the ruthless suppression of others, or in other words, their dystopia. And there are other limits to their generosity. The Utopians are tolerant in most matters of religion. But they despise those who deny the immortality of the soul because “but for the fear of punishment, they would have nothing but contempt for the laws and customs of society” (More 1999: 147) Intolerance is the price we pay for the purity, homogeneity

<sup>2</sup> These paradoxes are explored in my *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Claeys 2016).

and closeness of the group, as More made all too evident in his (nonetheless consistent) persecution of Protestants in his own day.

Nonetheless perhaps More's text is just an entertaining story. Generations of scholars have reached no fixed opinion as to how seriously More meant us to take these themes. There is much jest and satire mixed up in the text. There is little doubt that More regarded much of Utopian life as ideal, but much more than he thought that most of it was attainable by most of us. Yet More's intentions, and a close contextual reading of *Utopia*, are perhaps secondary to most students today by comparison with the influence of its central ideas.

The most common reading of the text, from Vasco de Quiroga, who adapted Utopia as a blueprint to establish a community near Mexico City in the 1530s<sup>3</sup> to Robert Southey to Karl Kautsky and beyond, has been the realistic one, in which Hythloday serves as prophet of the communist ideal. The reasons for this are not hard to discern. The success of utopia coincided with a decline in the belief that the terrestrial paradise actually lay somewhere in this world. It also overlapped with repeated eruptions of the sentiments, often assuming the form of a hysterical megalomania, which we associate with millenarianism, the prospect of Christ's return, the overthrow of Satan, and the establishment of divine rule.

These have a lengthy pedigree. The millenarian wing of the utopian ideal dated as far back as the twelfth century vision of Joachim of Fiore, who divided history into three stages, those of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and for whom the third, paradisaical period, where there would be no work, wealth or poverty, and no food, each having evolved into a spiritual being. In 1936 Karl Mannheim and in 1947 Norman Cohn were amongst the first to identify the sixteenth-century Anabaptists with the secularisation of millenarian ideas, heralding the great utopian schemes and movements of the twentieth century (Mannheim 1936: 191-192). The seventeenth century echoed constantly with utopian schemes, plans, ideas and sentiments, from Bacon through Winstanley and Harrington to Bellers, Penn and Saint-Pierre. In the 18th century the belief in an original equality was powerfully reinforced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in particular. Then, in the nineteenth century, faith in a future heaven also began to wane, and with it millenarianism, which had thus necessarily to be secularised. The desire for a much better state for humanity became naturally fixated on

<sup>3</sup> The story is told in Toby Green. *Thomas More's Magician. A Novel Account of Utopia in Mexico* (2004).

the real present and future, on this world. Now, as Henri de Saint-Simon famously proclaimed the Golden Age of mankind lay not “behind us, but before; it lies in the perfection of the social order” (de Saint-Simon 1976: 98).

Utopia thus came to embody the principle of equality, and of the purity of the group defined by its beliefs, which were formerly represented by Christianity. There is a reasonable case here for seeing what Reinhart Koselleck termed the “temporalization of Utopia”, “the metamorphosis of utopia into the philosophy of history”, where the “imagined perfection of the formerly spatial counterworld is temporalized” in the eighteenth century, as a key stage in millenarian secularisation (Koselleck 2002: 85, 88). Yet there remained, and perhaps still remains, much confusion between the millennium and utopia. The leading communist in the French Revolution, Gracchus Babeuf, aimed to abolish “all frontiers, fences, walls, locks on doors, all disputes, trials, all theft, murder, all crime, all Tribunals, prisons, gallows, torture, jealousy, insatiability, pride, deceit, duplicity, finally all vice”—a “classic millennial vision” of boundless felicity, in Richard Landes’ phrase (2011: 290). But utopia was a condition of bounded felicity, of restraint and self-restraint. What the “millennial shock wave” of the French Revolution shared with utopia was a suddenly exploding egalitarianism, described in terms of the mass hysteria of the crowd by Gustave Le Bon, which reverberated through European history for the next two centuries (Landes 2011: 288).

The stages on the road to the present will be familiar to most readers of this journal. In the early modern period the utopian idea, as we might conceive it today, was often still identified with the provision of security and stability through the creation of institutions which once formed became immutable. Satires aside, those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary utopias which reflected More’s aims seriously tended to regulate luxury through sumptuary laws restricting personal consumption and adornment, and by limiting property ownership in land especially (James Burgh’s *Account of the Cessares* from 1764 is a typical example). In Britain in particular, many literary texts reflect the aims of a republican tradition defined in this epoch especially by the works of James Harrington, whose *Oceana* of 1656 offered a loosely-fictionalised constitution enjoining greater social equality and political representation. Utopian republicanism had by 1750 become a distinctive position, going beyond the notion of an agrarian law to community of goods. But in practice authors of fictional utopias toyed with many variants on these themes, including land nationalisation (Thomas Spence). The most transparent and rigidly controlled of these

schemes generally however have little appeal to modern readers, who expect that utopia and liberty are somehow natural partners in the first instance, and disagree that liberty is a just price to pay for equality.

The French Revolution of course represents the first great watershed in the modern development of the utopian idea into this direction. Here a republican constitution accompanied an ideology based upon the “rights of man” which some have assumed possessed a markedly utopian dimension (see Moyn 2010). The shift towards a much more radical ideal of equality which the Jacobin coup of 1792 produced also echoed the central theme we identify with the tradition as such. And beyond this there were new, massive popular festivals, an ethos of increasingly social transparency, and much else that reflected the utopian impulse. But here there loomed, too, the possibility that utopian aims might have dystopian results, with the emergence of Jacobin Terror under Robespierre (1793-1794). But the Revolution in general also indicated that crucial trend towards seeing utopian aims as realisable imminently in a future-to-come, rather than as being the discovered vestiges of a lost golden age or state of nature or a tropical paradise, or a future heaven to be achieved. Utopia now became *euchronia*, the good time which is not yet but upon which we are advancing. The modern concept of progress, an indefinite process of becoming better and more perfect, our own most cherished ideal, though sadly on its deathbed today, had emerged. Now we would remake mankind, not in the image of Original Sin, but in that of millenarian felicity.

The story of utopia’s advancement from this time is a familiar one to most of us, for we are its adherents and beneficiaries to an impressive degree. The main fork in this road came of course with the revolution of 1848 and even more that of 1917, when the communist version of progress came finally to offer itself as the great alternative to the supposed free-market variant offered by liberalism. A general course of increasing perfectibility through opulence, the extension of life, the remaking of the human body and the relief of pain might clearly fly as a utopian programme. But the enhanced Morean variant of this, achieving all this and adding the elimination of crime, for instance, was clearly inherited by Marxism. This became the dominant oppositionist ideology of the twentieth century. Even before the Bolshevik Revolution, however, the immense controversy surrounding Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1887) indicated that other collectivist variants on the management of modern economies could give Marx some competition in the ideological arena.

Marx himself of course denied that his own schemes were in any sense “utopian”, and castigated his socialist predecessors for refusing to harness the proletariat to the revolutionary means required to introduce the new system. But in its expectation of dramatic improvements in human behaviour engineered by a collectivist organisation of property Marx in fact merits the utopian title if anything rather more than those who supposed such achievements might be workable in the small-scale community. And even Marx remained intrigued in his final years by the prospect that modern communism might indeed have antecedents in the Russian *mir* and other forms of primitive communalism.

Nonetheless it was precisely in such communities that the nineteenth century saw utopia unfolding. To spend a day in one, most notably in the Fourierist *phalans-tère*, was, in principle, to encounter a varied routine of multiple forms of work, adjusted to our aptitudes. There would be five or so meals; cultural activities; and a Court of Love assuring us all a minimum of sexual gratification akin to a living wage. Here is no languor, no lethargy, no world-weariness, only *joi de vivre*. The Owenites, the Cabetists, not to say the Shakers, Etzlerites, Harmonists and a hundred strands of religious sectarians, offered many variants on these themes, though Fourier doubtless promised more fun than the rest. All, however, offered security, a *Gemeinschaft* variant on community, or what I call “enhanced sociability”, by contrast to the increasingly alienated, insecure urban society which was rapidly emerging (Claeys 2013). In this vision of the idealised village or small town there is often joy, celebration, creativity, even individuality, not merely security, equality and a sense of greater community. Trust and familiarity are permitted because the scale remains small. Politics remain personal because no coercive state is necessary. William Morris, amongst others, would imagine that even nations could be remade along the lines of such principles.

And yet, with a few notable exceptions (the Amish, the Hutterites, the two million Mennonites), many of these communitarian efforts failed, often very quickly. But the exceptions here also prove that communism does work on a small scale. The lack of bloodshed generally in so-called “utopian” socialism validates such experiments to a considerable degree, while hinting that the application of their principles to a large-scale, highly industrialised, urban context, at a national level, may well prove their undoing. Both Bellamy and Wells nonetheless projected national and world-states, respectively, in which both technological innovation, change and, par-

ticularly in Wells's case, individuation were combined with the earlier goals of utopia. Their visions proved immensely influential in the decades from the 1890s to 1914, when the progress of the civilised world in general came suddenly to a crashing halt. We should remember generally here too, however, that the more equal societies are the more trust can be expanded on a larger scale. Where everyone is aware that most are sufficiently well off not to resort to crime paranoia is minimised and general social relaxation is enhanced.

The twentieth-century engagement with utopia was multi-faceted. On the one hand Bolshevism proved a disastrous model for a more egalitarian variant on modernisation which ultimately swallowed some eighty million lives, most notably in the USSR, China and, proportionately worst of all, Cambodia. Many on the left in particular do not like to confront such facts. But such unwillingness falls little short of intellectual dishonesty: such a confrontation must be an indispensable prerequisite for continuing the study and promotion of utopia. Apologies for Stalinism, the refusal to acknowledge the nature and devastating impact of left "totalitarianism", do nothing to serve utopianism, and indeed undermine it. For this cedes to utopia's critics, most notably from Hayek, Popper and Talmon onwards, much ground which might be contested, but refusing to acknowledge that the pursuit of some utopias has been disastrous, while that of many others has not.

On the other hand the tradition of progress which utopia helped to produce opened up vistas of scientific and technological improvement which assured greater health, longevity and (we suppose) happiness for large numbers of people. As the century closed, however, the spectre of totalitarian dystopia gave way to a far more humbling confrontation with nature itself, as environmental destruction came to pose an even greater threat to humanity's long term prospects than either politics or technology had previously done. Yet the scope for utopian thinking, for imagining long term futures, is consequently more necessary than ever before. Utopia precisely provides the possibility of leaping forwards to envision which futures might be attained and which might be avoided. In perilous times this is a tradition which we need more than ever.

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The twenty-six essays which compose this collection cover a substantial range of both historical and theoretical themes, indicating at the least that the utopian idea



thrives today across a number of disciplines as well as in domains (like computer games) which are themselves of recent origin and which indicate that utopia can also be addressed as an aspect of the internal psychic fantasy world. There is some consideration here of the lengthy and complex historical relationship between utopian ideals and religion. There is some effort to reconsider practical efforts to found actual communities which embody utopian ideals. Several authors revisit the emotional substrata of utopian aspiration rendered accessible through music in particular. Literature is here nonetheless the chief focus, in keeping with the form of Thomas More's original text and that of the tradition which has imitated and satirised it. The themes represented here mirror in literary form the dystopian drift in the external world discussed above. Many of the leading authors of post-totalitarian dystopian fiction are included here, notably (to name but a few) Margaret Atwood, Robert Heinlein, J.G. Ballard, David Foster Wallace and, most recently, Michel Houellebecq. Within these treatments, the possibilities are explored that dystopia may emerge from or assume the form of racist regimes, environmental destruction, corporate dictatorship, or religious fundamentalism, or some combination of these factors. Such potential outcomes of modernity need, the authors of this volume also assure us, to be balanced against the utopian promise which bodily remodelling entertains, and the possibility of longevity which scientific and technical advances encapsulate as the epitome of modern individualist utopianism. From the first essay onwards, we frequently revisit the theme of scientific novelty and improvement as simultaneously both an (e)utopian and a dystopian theme. From this viewpoint the post-totalitarian literary dystopia not only overlaps more closely with real world developments than many of its pre-totalitarian emanations. It also claims a different pedigree, looking, for instance, more to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) for inspiration than to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

These trends also indicate, however, a declining interest in contemporary utopianism as a real-world trend. Scramble though we may to clutch at the straws of contemporary populist radicalism, the general consensus not only after 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet system but equally after the financial crisis of 2008 is that the left has no serious alternative vision of capitalism to offer voters. Images of the ideal model small-scale community, or even of the ideal world-state *à la* Wells, remain now the stuff of utopian museography. As ideals of our future course of action or development they have seemingly little or no relevance. And for all those who herald the hypertransparency of the internet as emboldening a new generation of cyber-

citizens, others lament the vapid populism and undignified anonymous abuse which the same medium promotes. Yet we recall, as more than one author here reminds us, that Thomas More strictly envisioned an entirely confined utopia—"gated", we might say today—cut off from the rest of the world and contingent only upon its own devices, not the accession of humanity to its values. Herein lies the paradoxical relationship between small-scale communitarianism, or even small-nation utopianism, and those movements, most notably Marxism, which have insisted on the inevitability of a shared consensus of values for humanity as a whole. Whether the latter, larger vision remains a viable proposition readers may judge for themselves. Whether, at the other extreme, utopia can now only lie in the hyperinteriority of the psychic world, or in a shared virtual community rooted in similar premises, may yet be another answer to these problems. The essays presented here assist us in probing further to ascertain what value utopia retains for us today.

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