

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Utopia 1516***

Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)

As we continue tracking into the Renaissance, we come on figures who belong simultaneously to two worlds, the older and the newer. Thomas More is a harbinger of this complexity. He is best known for his *Utopia*, a vision world in which he tests out the alternatives social forms imaginable in his time, and potentials for enrichment of the given. In this he is as radical as his Florentine contemporaries, Ficino or Pico, working as a kind of poet-sociologist on the margins of change, but doing so without deranging the present as a standpoint for thought. He is also a friend of antiquity and its consistent, conservative values.

### **Book One**

#### *The setting*

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) describes an imagined culture. That culture is lengthily described to the author by a ship captain who had spent five years in this mysterious 'communist' land. More's work might be called an early novel, for it is in expository prose, awakens the imagination, and at the same time seizes the feeling of ordinary reality. The jagged edges of reality—the details of a distant way of life—remain vivid throughout the long central narration of the work, made by the ship captain Raphael to More himself, and inevitably forcing us to reflect on the realities of our own world. So compelling is the brew of historical reality—the reality of More's own life-- with fiction, that we have to slap ourselves to realize that the outside narrator of *Utopia*, Sir Thomas More, was one day to be the Lord Chancellor of England. The world Raphael introduces us to is, as just implied, a loosely speaking 'communist' state.

#### *Titles*

Among the various titles proposed for the present text, a reasonable starting point would be *On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia*. Basically the work concerns political philosophy in a wide sense. How should a government be constructed? What kind of society makes people happy? What does 'utopia' mean? The classically oriented readers, of More's England, would quickly have grasped the ambiguity buried in the word 'utopia,' with its Greek roots implying 'no place,' or, by another spelling of the Greek, 'the good place.' Much wiggle room for satire is in fact available here, in this question about 'utopia,' and indeed there is ample dispute over Sir Thomas More's intentions, in portraying the present mystery island with so many lessons to pass on to cotemporary England. (The foundation of Utopia dates from 1700 years prior to the present in which Raphael is narrating to More himself.) Does More want us to admire the described island, and its distinctive ways? Or is this work satirical in the sense of 'looking askance or with humor' on the new terrain described by Raphael?

#### *The Lord Chancellor*

From the beginning we are led through the tale by the distanced, calm voice of the narrator, one day to be the Lord Chancellor of England, and one day to be beheaded for alleged treason to that same state of England. At the center of the present work More is reflecting on a gripping tale he has heard on one of his high level missions to the capitals of Europe. He recalls falling into a deep conversation with a wizened sea captain, who tells him about a culture far south of the Equator, where he lived for five years, absorbing the profound differences between his culture of the free living mariner and the gentle culture of the communist island of Utopia. We learn, in the course of the First Book—there are two—some of the salient differences between the two cultures, More's own and the communist.

#### *Theft*

One of the sharpest points of conflict, between the two cultures, occurs around the issue of theft, on which the future Lord Chamberlain, as might be expected, comes down hard, doing his best—as a law and order figure—to suppress the original evil of mankind, of whom—as Erasmus too had argued—one should always expect the worst. The stakes around theft were indeed high in England. Capital punishment was a possible fate for thievery in the Britain of the day, and leniency was rare—especially in cases where private property had been threatened. The sea captain—we quickly become aware that he is more or less a spokesperson for the Utopians—speaks up for a more pragmatic response to such crimes as theft. On the whole, he has learned to value punishments that are constructive, both for the criminal—who must wear clearly marked clothing, and a ID criminal badge, and who must reflect on his crimes—and for the state, which can profit from the hard labor imposed on the criminal. The death penalty, as Raphael claims, has no constructive role to play in the resolution of a crime like theft. The entire Utopian perspective—pragmatic and melioristic—is implicit here.

### *Enclosures*

The sea captain turns his scrutiny onto another contentious issue, pertaining to the British economy, in fact to the economic development of modern Britain, as he sees it. I mean the question of the enclosures of land, within village and towns, which are set aside for sheep grazing. This move leads toward the privatization of public property, and away from the older traditions of public grazing land. In this matter, as throughout the present text, the direction of utopia is toward communism, communal property, communal thinking, the common good. The sea captain condemns the woes of private property.

### *The dominant perspective of the book*

The above is the bias of Raphael himself, and he retails it vigorously to his dignified British collocutor. (Whether in the end More's own satire strikes out against communism or not is a complex question, to which there are arguably conflicting responses. (The overall bias, of the present seventy-five page text, arouses much scholarly dispute, and not least because the whole text raises central questions about the perspective of the author. More seems to speak both through the distinguished and modest spokesperson of the British government, and through Raphael, the ship's captain and proponent of the world of Utopia.)

### *Satire?*

Are we then reading a satire, in the depiction of Utopia, an overdrawn portrait of an unrealistically bland state, or are we reading the outline of a genuine eutopia—not a *no place* but a conceivable *good (eu) place*, with main paths of value for 'modern' societies like More's? Is the book a satire?

### *Adventure*

An element in our answer will be that Raphael is satisfying that hunger, in More and his time, for adventure stories about the new world. (Montaigne's 'Of Cannibals' will exemplify the hunger for fresh discovery a century after More, when the extent of the New World, in the Americas, has begun to disclose its thrilling and easily victimized new—old treasures. Charles Mann's book *1491* will convey the sense of global excitement, awakened by the succession of fifteenth and sixteenth century discoveries, which are in and on Thomas More's historical horizon.)

## **Book Two**

### *The Setting*

After lunch, Raphael settles down to provide More with the thoroughgoing account he had promised the dignitary, earlier in the day. Whereas the first encounter between More and Raphael had been recounted as an actual encounter, each man real in his setting, and the setting real, the second book recounts Raphael's account of Utopia, and locates itself inside no 'historical frame'—except for passing and casual

references to the date of Utopos' founding of his city nation, 1700 years ago. (True enough, Raphael devotes his introductory to a description of the island of Utopia, which is about the size and shape of England; two hundred miles across and crescent shaped) Raphael barely appears as a figure in Book Two, and when he does it is hardly to establish any deconstructive relation between Books One and Two, but rather to lend, to Book Two, an unmistakable air of fictionality.

### *Communism*

In the second book, Raphael will continue to satisfy More's curiosity about Utopia, and will leave no doubt that he, whatever the case may be for More, is deeply beguiled by the principles of utopian communism. These principles include the abolition of private property—which, along with private wealth, Raphael considers the chief encouragement to human vice—the sharing of all goods and services, and a life in which the solidarity of individuals is their guarantee of a happy life. These principles dominated the society of Utopia, were the dominating insights of the culture's founder, Utopos, and provide a complete blueprint for the organizing of men in society. It goes without saying, perhaps, that the narrator of this entire story furnishes a sotto voce back theme of critique, to all that Raphael praises, a counterpoint element which deplores the 'monotony' of Utopia, and guarantees a scratchy tension to the whole tale.

### *Open doors*

Salient details mark the form of communism Raphael recounts. The citizens of Utopia live in houses with front and back doors—potentially gates to a closing in of the family unit (often fifteen to twenty members) and yet in practice, because these doors are never locked, there is no closure at all in Utopian cities. There are thirteen cities in Utopia, and as all resemble each other, and all houses are built on the same model, we can see that the lives of all the citizens flow into those of their neighbors, throughout the nation.

### *No jewelry*

Aligned with this deflation of individualism, The Utopians, for example, do all they can to extirpate the social desire for jewelry, gold ornaments, and elegant clothing—to which they prefer a common and plain dress. They express their contempt for gold finery and its monetary worth by employing this precious metal in vulgar and degrading roles, as for instance in chamber pots, where the substance is regularly defiled; they express their contempt for foreign ambassadors who arrive on their shores bejeweled, elegant, and ready for the obeisance they do not receive.

Despite the plain style favored in Utopia, the attitude reigning there is not anti-cultural; in fact the citizens find their greatest pleasures in reading, conversing, and sharing ideas. In other words, jewels and gold are scorned—anti-communist appendages—but the fruits of mutual understanding and thought are abundantly appreciated. Every day, just at daybreak, public lectures are given throughout the nation, food for thought that day, and for learning paths into the future.

It seems obvious, in its turn that the tenor of Utopian communism will be happy. Pleasure is hardly sought for its own sake, but rather comes as a byproduct of virtue. Entertainment comes down to the communal labor—never too vigorous, as the well-organized system of society requires—in which one has the pleasure of doing good for others. No factitious amusement—gambling or hunting—is of interest to these island people.

### *Social Organization*

#### *The Farm World*

Utopia is the product of planning, and clearly depends on the reliability of human nature to keep it running smoothly. The basic is this: there are thirty-four cities on the island. The controlling system, sited in a capital city, is maximally simple: once a year three old, experienced, and travelled men travel to the capital to discuss the needs of government and public policy. These elders represent the citizens, both

rural and urban. The dominant character of the entire nation is agricultural, and much of the concern of the three elders and the Governor General is the condition of agriculture on the island. Around each island city there are twelve miles of farmland, on which the farm worker citizens of the nation work--as tenants rather than landlords—for a period of two or three years. The condition of these farms must be overseen, for the common good, which profits from good harvests and nutritious yields. Nor is the social organization of rural life so simple. No rural house has fewer than forty occupants, headed, in each case, by a mature master and mistress. One *phylarch*—note the regular presence of Greek in the Utopian language—rules over every three houses, with households and householders exchanging occupants every three years.

#### *Urban and Domestic life*

Whether on the farm or in the cities, the Utopians are gregarious. It is, for instance, very rare for citizens to eat alone, or to remain for any length of time alone. (It is the responsibility of the state to care for its citizens, seeing to it that the population continues its rotational patterns on a regular basis.) Life in the capital city, Amaurot, is exemplary for the whole nation. There are impressive walls, towers, and bastions, and twenty wide streets, each open onto a central thoroughfare. Once a year a new prince is elected, meeting every day with his advisors. (Noteworthily, the three agricultural inspectors, mentioned above, are different from the three advisors in question, at the present.) Nevertheless one can immediately see that bureaucracy is cut to the bare bone.

#### *Food and drink*

Within the urban dwellings of the capital, the food taken is simple—much garden produce, wine and water, little meat—and the bulk of the food preparation, especially any preparation of meats, is carried out by slaves. Given the nutritious simplicity of the fare, the sharing mode of the economy, and the equitable mind of the ruling prince—replaced after a year—it is no wonder that there is little poverty, and that the island's highly developed medical skills are on the whole competent to deal with any diseases that break out.

#### *War and other interpersonal actions*

War is welcomed only as a means of saving the state, but never as a way of reaching out to grab land. (The Utopians have arranged their land as their needs and their desires require. They have few hidden appetites. A massacre, for instance, is unthinkable, for it requires a longing to kill, which does not exist among the Utopians, people of reliably temperate emotions.) In general the attitude within an ongoing war is as little belligerent as possible; the culminating sign of victory being simply to kill the enemy's prince. Wiles are permissible within war, their purpose being to bring peace; for example, in prospect of a war piles of money are set aside for use in bribing the enemy. Since the chief consideration in war is the attempt to avoid bloodshed, it is easy to understand why mercenaries and slaves are regularly assigned to the toughest jobs, and suffer the greatest casualties.

#### *Religion*

It is taken as given, that nature and the world it brings us are benign and governed by divine purpose. The broad assumption, of life in society, is that to be good to others is part of aligning yourself with the purpose of your creator. Commonly, however, it is accepted that there are two different paths to that alignment, the simpler and more natural path, of following God's will in your daily activities, being 'a good person,' and the path of extraordinary charity, which involves living every moment to help others. Lives of the latter category are regularly taken to lead to a happy after life, as well as to insights—as into divine miracles—which no normally good life can fully understand. While the institution of the Christian Church is known, and priests are commonly found--no more than thirteen in any city—the presence of Christ is more to be felt in the articulation of nature rather than in any human institution. The reward of a quiet life is sufficient for those who question the ultimate value of religious behavior.

#### *A Footnote on Satire*

Both Desiderius Erasmus, a friend and admirer of More, and Sir Thomas More, were viewed as satirists, in the two works—*In Praise of Folly* and in *Utopia*—for which they were most popular. (On his first travel to England, Erasmus stayed with More and remained close to the creative sensibility of this equally prolific thought leader of his age.) What joins these two small masterpieces as satires?

In a satire, one narrative perspective adopts, toward another perspective, an attitude of mildly benevolent acceptance. In *In Praise of Folly* Erasmus has to look down, benignly but not belligerently, on the mindset of those mortals who are the raw materials of his portraiture of the pullulating human condition. (Folly opts out of any belligerence of perspective, by depicting herself as a bemused observer. In fact Folly devotes the first half of her *oratio* to the genuine pleasures of life, modest delights of the flesh, indulgence in which should lead no one to blush with shame.) More, the narrator of his framed tale, adopts an almost whimsical attitude toward the surprising account offered him by Raphael. Are the Utopians to be admired or thought stiff and artificial?

Both More and Folly look down on their created worlds with a mixture of fascination and scorn. The looking down, in *Utopia*, can be tracked from the direction of Raphael, whose attitude toward the Utopian life ranges from tolerant to fascinatedly approving. In either instance, whether the ‘satirical’ attitude is tracked from More or Raphael, onto the subject of *Utopia*, the projected attitude is gentle enough to qualify as satire, and not, for example, as diatribe, like Swift’s, or excoriation as we might excavate it today from the rhetoric of politics.

Our two early Modern texts, More’s and Erasmus’, have in common a point from which to mock. Folly and Raphael interweave mockery with patches of admiration. How does their mockery, for example, square off against that of Rabelais, who boldly and not subtly, mocks everything from contemporary fiction, through the machinations of church politics through contemporary medicine through heroic sea voyages in quest of the god of wine. Neither Raphael nor Folly throws punches at the object of their mockery, but Rabelais permits himself a boxing stance stand off, clobbers without leaving a compensatory compliment.

### *Study guide*

What is Thomas More’s attitude toward the world of his Utopia? Does he value the agrarian communism he (through Raphael) discovers there? What values are peculiar to this world, in the view of the future Lord Chancellor of England? Would those values be common purpose, appreciation of peace, or the public distribution of the news, every morning at daybreak? If you incline to accept these values as indicators of More’s view of utopia, would you also incline to consider this work as a satire—of an unrealistically simplified version of gentle life? Can a satire be both a critique of and a salute to the main traits of another culture? Is Erasmus’ satire, *In Praise of Folly*, both a devastating critique of man the fallen, and a salute—right at the onset—to the beauties of taking it easy, the wisdom of the maxim that one should never complain, never marry.

Does the creation of a utopia suggest a modernity-seeking mindset? Is More’s very making of this imagined land a step in the construction of the ‘modern mind?’ (Does ‘imagining a lateral possibility,’ as More does, forecast a readiness to ‘think outside the box in Renaissance fashion,’ or to assess one’s own time and place with the needed freedom from the shackles of the present? Is this kind of experimental freedom kin to the freedom of the scientist of More’s time, who begins to value experimental thought as a kind of search for future constituting algorithms? Can you enrich this question by looking ahead to other examples of utopias—in Francis Bacon, Samuel Butler, or George Orwell?

Erasmus and Sir Thomas More were close friends, and spent quality time together on the former’s momentous trip to England. Imagine two sets of conversations—one between More and Erasmus, one between Ficino and Pico—and review the skills they would bring to effective state building. Which pair would show the more pertinent skills of administration and social organization?