

# UTOPIA

Excerpt from

## The Evolution of Politics

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## Thomas More –Utopia

Thomas More was an English Lawyer, judge, social philosopher and chancellor who lived between 1478 and 1535. King Henry VIII executed him for refusing to accept him as head of the Church of England. The Catholic Church venerated him as a saint in 1935 due to his staunch support and rejection of the Reformation.

In 1516 More completed his book describing an ideal commonwealth in a far off land called Utopia. It is difficult to determine if More regarded this work as a serious commentary on contemporary political life or a flight of idealistic fantasy. The book is framed as a discussion between him and a character called Raphael Hythlodæus who recalls the distant commonwealth to More. An indication that it is not a serious work is the title of the book Utopia, which in Greek means 'not' (ou) and 'place' (topos), meaning 'nowhere'.

The first part of the book is a discussion on the harsh penalty of death by hanging for theft in England at the time. More argues that when people are starving they can either beg or steal to survive. He objects to the injustice inherent in the state and tries to understand how to deal with theft driven by poverty and misery. This sets the scene for his Utopian ideal of no money or private property on an island that is the happiest in the world without the curse of avarice.

He obviously felt strongly about the injustices and severity of punishment he perceived during his time as Chancellor. As a staunch Catholic he took the commandment of 'thou shall not kill' seriously and looked at a political solution in his ideal state. He regarded theft less serious than murder and in his ideal state would be punished by restitution to the owner. Repeat offenders were punished by enslavement. In his ideal state, slaves carry out most of the hard labour.

More describes a kingdom where it is preferable to support their subjects and ensure their wellbeing and happiness rather than ruling over beggars and thieves. His ideal state is one of equality and happiness with the removal of money, private property and personal ownership.

Therefore, when I reflect on the wise and good constitution of the Utopians, among whom all things are so well governed and with so few laws, where virtue hath its due reward, and yet there is such an equality that every man lives in plenty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MORE, THOMAS, Utopia, Project Gutenberg iBook, page 85

Utopia is described as a peninsula 200 miles broad and shaped like a crescent with an 11-mile bay protected from the winds and currents. The peninsula was made an island by digging 15-mile channel disconnecting it for the mainland. The island has 54 cities with the capital called Amaurot. No one owns their home as they take turns living between the country and city giving everyone a chance to learn agriculture. Every 30 families has a magistrate selected by the people who organises the manpower from the surrounding towns for the agricultural harvest which provides nutritional needs for everyone at no cost.

More give a curious description of the tidal influence on the river Anider that flows past the central city of Amaurot. The water in the river ebbs and flows every six hours and extends 30-miles inland so that the city experiences a river that regularly changes from salt to fresh water. This cycle has a determining factor on their fresh water supply for general use and agriculture. Considering this is an imaginative and ideal view of what a culture could be, it can be interpreted symbolically. The salt water and ocean is a collective representation of the origin of life yet has many dangers. The fresh water provided by the river purifies the salt water with life giving and sustaining properties. It is as if the natural cycles of the ebb and flow of a watercourse reflects the ebb and flow of the inhabitants from city to country.

The town plan of Amaurot is designed to protect against perceived enemies and against attack. The inhabitants fortified a tributary of the main river Anider, to avoid their water supply being diverted or poisoned. High thick walls with towers and fortifications surround the city with a ditch dug and filled with thorns on three sides and the river the fourth side. The houses each have a garden at the rear and all house street frontages look similar. Every ten years the people relocate houses selected by lots. All the houses are the same and there is no privacy due to the free access by any citizen.

Their doors have all two leaves, which, as they are easily opened, so they shut of their own accord; and, there being no property among them, every man may freely enter into any house whatsoever. At every ten years' end they shift their houses by lots.<sup>2</sup>

It is an interesting ideal in that personal privacy is reduced by a collective system of management. Being alone in this system would be difficult and feeling settled even more due to the lack of personal space.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 104

Each city is divided into four equal parts with a communal marketplace in the middle. This is reminiscent of the ideal cities based on the mandala<sup>3</sup> such as the medieval city of Palmanova in Italy, the Angkor Wat Buddhist temple in Cambodia as well as the town plans of cities such as Paris, Washington and Canberra in Australia. The sizes of the cities and families themselves are regulated. No city can have more than 6 thousand families and each family must have between 10 and 16 members. If a family has more children they are moved to another family, which is strictly enforced.

As mentioned previously, every 30 families have a magistrate called a Syphogrant. For every 10 magistrates there is another magistrate called the Archphilarch of which there number 200 and they in turn select a Prince. Agriculture is the main source of food and every person in Utopia is trained in its operation. In addition, every person has a trade that contributes to the functioning of the state. The Utopians wear the same clothes only distinguish with slight variations for gender and marital status.

The magistrates that govern 30 families are responsible for enforcement of the laws and ensure no person is idle. The people only work 6 hours a day, three before dinner (lunch) and three after. They then have supper and go to sleep at eight o'clock. In their free time the people are encouraged to read and study or entertain through music or discourse. There are strict boundaries placed on sensual pleasure. However, flexibility is built into the system depending on the population's needs and if more work is required for the sustenance of the community.

There is no reason for giving a denial to any person, since there is such plenty of everything among them; and there is no danger of a man's asking for more than he needs; they have no inducements to do this, since they are sure they shall always be supplied: it is the fear of want that makes any of the whole race of animals either greedy or ravenous; but, besides fear, there is in man a pride that makes him fancy it a particular glory to excel others in pomp and excess; but by the laws of the Utopians, there is no room for this.<sup>4</sup>

More's believed that a system of plenty can eradicate natural human emotions such as fear, greed and hunger. If it were that easy, humanity would have overcome these emotions by now. The fact is that we have not and cannot because they are an inherent part of our nature. He also fails to recognise that such emotions have both positive and negative aspects. For example, fear is a necessity as it keeps us from danger and

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'mandala' is a Sanskrit meaning circle and regarded as a focus and spiritual guiding tool. Carl Jung identified the mandala reflecting the mind's inner state at the moment of creation and as a symbol of their idea of unity.

<sup>4</sup> MORE, THOMAS, Utopia, Project Gutenberg iBook, page 127

doing foolish things. Greed is the emotion and energy to hoard resources for a potentially uncertain future.

The greed he speaks of has in his Utopia been moved from a personal realm to a collective realm. Instead of the individuals taking care of themselves and accumulating food, resources and belongings, the inhabitants of Utopia do it for everyone. The fear an individual has that he might not have enough to eat is the same fear the group now feel collectively. The instinctual motivation is the same, just moved away from the individual to the group.

Another example of how the ideal removes the Utopians from their animal nature is making slaves carry out hunting and the slaughter of cattle near running water to wash away the filth. More's attitude to the 'dirty' work shows his need for purification and spiritual cleansing from the needs of the body: "nor do they suffer (the towns people) anything that is foul or unclean".<sup>5</sup> The fact that they include slaves in their culture shows that they still oppress and abuse other human beings, which itself is spiritually unclean. Every task they feel beneath them is allocated to slaves by force.

It is curious that shortly after mentioning slaves carry out the so called 'dirty' or unsavoury tasks, More mentions nursing mothers and their baby's.<sup>6</sup> If anyone has experienced childbirth, and I speak here as a man, it is a messy, bloody and truly mammalian experience and shows that the process of birth relates us to a high degree to other mammals.

Travel by the Utopians is strictly regulated and a passport required from the Prince with conditions attached. These include the time away for the community and date of return. Travelling without a passport condemns the individual as fugitive and potential slavery. Utopia has no taverns for drinking as no individual is excused from labour and the ability to be idle.

They also put no value on gold and silver because they do not use money. The government does however stockpile it for use in emergencies and times of war. These precious metals are not held in high esteem because they have no use in their culture in contrast to more abundant and useful metal such as iron. They feel the same way about any kind of aesthetic adornment or vanity.

These are their religious principles: That the soul of man is immortal, and that God of His goodness has designed that it should be happy; and that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 128

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 131

He has, therefore, appointed rewards for good and virtuous actions, and punishments for vice, to be distributed after this life.<sup>7</sup>

They define virtue thus—that it is a living according to Nature, and think that we are made by God for that end; they believe that a man then follows the dictates of Nature when he pursues or avoids things according to the direction of reason.<sup>8</sup>

The flaw in the argument that ‘living according to nature’ is that nature is full of brutality and a murderous instinct for survival. Species in nature have love and nurturing within a species as part of the instinct to propagate, but outside of a species the carnivores hunt and kill or die of starvation. The herbivores on the other hand, have evolved techniques not to become prey. These include size like elephants and rhinos, speed like gazelles and antelope, numbers as protection in a herd, burrows and camouflage to hide and so on. The dominant form of survival outside of a species is based on power, not love.<sup>9</sup> The Utopians seem to side with all that is good in nature and project the negative beastly aspect to their slaves.

It is clear the Utopians seek pleasure in honouring their God with good intentions. Physical desires and pleasure is frowned upon and replaced with the search for knowledge and truth of spirit. “They are also persuaded that God will make up the loss of those small pleasures with a vast and endless joy, of which religion easily convinces a good soul.”<sup>10</sup> They do however not dismiss other sensual pleasures such as eating and the creation of music as an aspect of their health.

But, of all pleasures, they esteem those to be most valuable that lie in the mind, the chief of which arise out of true virtue and the witness of a good conscience.

With all the emphasis on kindness, tolerance and love they still make use of slaves. This Utopian ideal shows that their love has its limits. They only take slaves from prisoners of war captured in battle or their own citizens that have committed a crime who are treated more harshly than other slaves. Relationships between genders also have restrictions. Sex before marriage is punished with denial of marriage in the future. They have a pre marriage ritual where a matron presents the bride naked to the fully clothed groom. The groom then presented naked to a fully clothed bride. Adultery is punished by dissolution of the marriage and the guilty never allowed to marry again and condemned to the chains of slavery.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 154

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, page 156

<sup>9</sup> See the chapter called ‘The Idea of Power’

<sup>10</sup> MORE, THOMAS, Utopia, Project Gutenberg iBook, page 160

Rebellious slaves are treated like wild beasts and put to death if they do not submit.

The Utopians detest war but train their men and women in military exercises and discipline for when war is unavoidable. During war they use subterfuge as a starting point to avoid the killing of people. One tactic is to use the stored wealth of gold and silver to offer reward to the people in the enemy's cities to turn on and kill their own prince or others that are seeking war. The Utopian believe that this tactic can prevent or shorten a conflict and save lives. Another tactic is to sow seeds of discontent amongst their enemies.

They do not force their citizens to fight but seek volunteers. Retreat is condoned when the enemy appears overwhelming. Instead of swords, the Utopians use bows, arrows and pole axes of which they are very skilled. They disguise their war machines until they are required to fight the enemy. They never plunder the food or horses of a defeated enemy but do take their gold and silver for the next occasion.

The Utopians were very tolerant of differing religions. Some worship the sun, moon, planets, eminent men from former times for their glory or virtue, but the main form of worship is for the supreme, eternal, invisible, infinite and incomprehensible deity of power and virtue they call the 'Father of All'. The priests represent their father God and concentrate on learning rather than participate in the labour of the community. Some live unmarried, chaste and abstain from eating flesh while others marry and do not deny themselves bodily pleasure. They are the educators of the youth and like the magistrates, chosen by the people.

The people worship in magnificent spacious temples designed to be deliberately dark inside to 'recollect the mind and raise devotion'. The genders are separated with men on the right and women on the left side of the temples. They make no animal sacrifices but burn candles and incense. The patrons wear white and the priests' multi coloured garments during their services.

In the final analysis, we cannot divorce the idealism of Utopia from the life and experience of its author Thomas More. He was a man of the world and high achiever and dedicated to the legal system, king, state and church being a devout catholic. In the end, it was this worship and staunch rejection of the reformation that cost him his life. His friend the theologian Erasmus explained that More wanted to become a monk and indeed spent a year near the Carthusian monastery to join in the monks spiritual exercises. Here he learned to live an ascetic life and wore a hair

shirt and practiced the occasional self-flagellation, even though he later adopted a normal family life of marriage and children.

When More succeeded to the office of Lord Chancellor in 1529 he presided over the prosecution of over forty suspected or convicted heretics. He was accused of using torture while interrogating heretics, which he vehemently denied. Execution by burning at the stake was the standard punishment by the English state for major seditious and proselytizing heresy. Six individuals were killed by such a method under More's chancellorship.

It is no surprise that his book *Utopia* is based on an ideal that attempts to deny and remove natural human needs, wants and emotions. It is a collectivist view where the individual is secondary and serves what they consider the greater good of the community. More considered the removal of private property and money from his ideal community and a reason for a peaceful and content population. Yet they did store money in the form of gold and silver in case their *Utopia* was disturbed by war. Rather than personal restraint on behaviour, they used collective punishment to ensure what they deemed, correct behaviour.

More's vision of an ideal state is based on personal sacrifice, removal of wealth and its hierarchy, prestige, poverty, idleness, as well as the democratic selection of magistrates and priests, equality of education and citizenship. These are balanced by strict community laws for adultery, theft, the acceptance and abuse of slaves, the loss of individuality in dress, behaviour and manner. In addition *Utopia* includes the uniformity of housing and lack of individual expression, the removal of 'dirty' practices such as hunting and the slaughter of stock to the slaves and the subterfuge practiced in time of conflict with other commonwealths.

The second part of the book is a creative solution to the problems identified in the first part of the book. These include theft due to poverty and its deterrence of the death penalty. He attempted to find a solution by addressing the root cause of the poverty and harsh penalties he experienced as a chancellor in England. He believed that the desire for money was the cause of all fraud, theft, robberies, quarrels, tumults, contentions, seditions, murders, treacheries and witchcrafts.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, money has some influence over these natural emotions but its removal does not change the emotion. Greed for example, is an emotion based on desire for an object.<sup>12</sup> That desire can be based on fear

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 260

<sup>12</sup> I use the term 'object' as a philosophical term to differentiate it from the subject.



of not having enough or losing what one has. These emotions are independent from money as they apply to all objects. For example, the removal of money does not change the desire to have an object. Money is simply a token of value to get the object but is not the object itself. To put that in concrete terms, the desire for a horse to do the ploughing does not change if money is removed. It simply means that another form of exchange is adopted to satisfy the desire for a horse.

More's solution was to remove money from the equation, which he believed, removes the emotions of greed, desire, envy and so on. Emotions can be repressed by the individual but cannot be removed. The idea of removing an emotion or the object of the emotion is a mutilation of the human being. As mentioned previously, emotions have both positive and negative attributes and attempting to repress an emotion removes the positive aspect of it as well. Only individuals experience emotions whether alone or in a collective. What More believes is that removing the medium of exchange removes the emotions.

He does however acknowledge other emotions such as jealousy, betrayal and deceit as in the case of infidelity in marriage having nothing to do with money. They too are strictly regulated with the penalty of restriction to marry or turned into a slave. This is where his ideal falls over. Another aspect of More's solution is to remove private property. The consequence of this would in itself cause emotions that he wishes to overcome. Without a place we can call our own, we would never feel settled and always have the anxiety that we have no permanent dwelling place. Another point is that all the dwellings are the same, which in itself makes movement from one to another mute.

On a positive note the forced movement of the Utopians from city to country and back again has some psychological benefits for the wellbeing of the individual. It gives one the contrast of nature and culture and the benefits of both. The problem with More's ideal is that it needs to be forced. This is the biggest issue that the ideal Utopia makes on the individual.

The individual is secondary to the running of the collective. The freedom and independence associated with having one's own money and property is removed. Freedom of expression both in building and dress is also removed and enforced with the strictest regulation. The democratic selection of magistrates and other officials is laudable as is the volunteer of individuals to fight in times of conflict. What do the magistrates and prince do if the people don't want to fight? What do they do if an individual has a propensity for the creative arts of painting or architecture? There are many unanswered questions that he offers no solution.

In conclusion, More feels that his Utopia solved some of the problems of his time, but in doing so removed individual freedom and expression and kept the population in a state of childhood where they could never feel the connection of ownership to land or the independence associated with taking care of one self as an adult. We can see in history how this Utopian ideal is referred to in later forms of Socialism and Communism.

Utopia and the life of Thomas More cannot be removed from its epoch, as there were systems of government we may find abhorrent today. For example the harsh punishment for minor offenses as well as the use of slaves for forced labour. More in his ideal community sought to mitigate the unfair punishments for minor offences but celebrated slavery as part of his community.

The loss of currency as a token of exchange and private property makes Utopia a somewhat controlled environment verging on totalitarianism, especially when considering the lack of privacy and ownership of property and land. In the addition, the restrictions of sexual activity, marriage and associated rituals, travel restrictions, rigid work practices, lack of Dionysian outlets and personal expression make Utopia less of an ideal and perfect community and more of a prison camp by contemporary standards.