The Birth of Utopia

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> Where Sir Thomas erred, it was the fault of the man, and not of the poet; for that way of patterning a commonwealth was most absolute, though he, perchance, hath not so absolutely performed it.
>
> <div align="right">Sir Philip Sidney, The Defense of Poesie (17)</div>

At the end of Plato's *Republic*, Chapter IX, when Socrates has described his ideal state, Glaucon expresses his disbelief that there exists "such a one anywhere on earth," to which Socrates replies:

> But in heaven, perhaps, a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn't make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other. (592b; Plato 275)

Socrates, or precisely Plato, has no confidence in realizing his Republic on earth; he withdraws instead from practical politics and places hope in miracle. If miracle means impossibility in practice, then how can his ideal city be possible in the world? Plato's answer, at least in the *Republic*, is that either philosophers acquire the kingly office in the state, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, that is to say, both political power and philosophy be united in the same person (473d). For Plato, a king can hardly become a philosopher unless by miracle (*Epistle* 7 326a-b); the other way seems to be the only choice. Nevertheless an obstacle still remains: how can a philosopher become a king? Plato wisely remained silent on this point.

How can a philosopher become a king? It is a difficult question. And it seems to be all the more difficult inasmuch as a 'king' in the Platonic sense is not simply one who holds kingly office, but one who possesses kingly science (*Politician* 292e), one who is

a legislator, like Lycurgus, of human civilization.

1800 years later, Thomas More in the *Utopia* offered a solution to this baffling question. Raphael Hythlodaeus,[1] the person who introduces Utopia to More and others in the book, thus reports the history of Utopia: "Utopia had been called Abraxa before Utopus' conquest, and has gained its present name thereafter" (*Utopia* 113).[2] Utopus was not only the Conqueror of Abraxa, but also the Founder of Utopia, whose institutions and laws made Utopia into "not merely the best but the only one which can rightly claim the name of a commonwealth."

But who is Utopus? In a letter to Erasmus, More confesses that "in my daydreams I have been marked out by my utopians to be their king forever" (*London, 4 Dec. 1516*; *Letters* 85). So Utopus is but the author's projection in the *Utopia*, and More himself is the actual legislator of Utopia. The characterization of Utopus, therefore, serves as More's answer to the previous question in regard to how a philosopher can become a king, though in language, rather than in reality.

Then, how did Utopus become the king of Utopia? Raphael Hythlodaeus informs us that before Utopus's arrival the inhabitants had been continually quarrelling among themselves on issues of religion. He observed that the general dissensions among the individual sects who were fighting for their religion had given him the opportunity of overcoming them all (*Utopia* 219-221). He, just like William the Conqueror and Henry VII, acquired his kingship through military conquest. Here, however, arises another question: to what extent is Utopus's kingship legitimate? Of course, the official chronicles of Utopia would say it was a war of liberation, by which justice was done and evil defeated. But from the viewpoint of the native inhabitants, it was first of all a successful foreign invasion. The people of Abraxa were deprived of their land; for most of them, Utopus was a foreign ruler, and even a usurper.

In fact, according to Hythlodaeus's report, Utopus created a series of laws and institutions for his people and obtained for them a happy life of humane civilization. We are told that, as soon as Utopus had conquered Utopia, the first thing he did was to forbid religious persecution, a policy which later became the first of their time-honoured institutions. Moreover, he ordered fifty-four city-states, all spacious and magnificent, identical in language, traditions, customs and laws, to be built in conformity with his design (*Utopia* 113, 219). Utopus had every right to be proud of his creation: an originally rude and rustic people were made well-cultured citizens. And when Raphael Hythlodaeus came to Utopia, he saw, to his delight, "the best commonwealth" in the world.

Is Utopus's conquest-construction therefore well justified? Erasmus, More's good friend and intellectual comrade, asserts in his *Education of a Christian Prince* (1515) that even the most just of wars brings it with a train of evils (Erasmus 103). However, their notorious contemporary Machiavelli bluntly professes in *On Livy*:

> Should a Republic simply have to be created or to be maintained, it would be necessary to introduce into it a form of government akin rather to a monarchy than to a democracy, so that those men whose arrogance is such that they cannot be corrected by legal

process, may yet be restrained to some extent by a quasi-regal power. (Machiavelli 261)

And,

> One should take it as a general rule that rarely, if ever, does it happen that a state, whether it be a republic or a kingdom, is either well-ordered at the outset or radically transformed vis-à-vis its old institutions unless this be done by one person. It is likewise essential that there should be but one person upon whose mind and method depends any similar process of organization. Wherefore the prudent organizer of a state whose intention it is to govern not in his own interest but for common good…should contrive to be alone in his authority.…It is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good, as it was in the case of Romulus, it always justifies the action. (234)

Consequently,

> [N]ormal methods will not suffice now that normal methods are bad. Hence it is necessary to resort to extraordinary methods, such as the use of force and an appeal to arms, and before doing anything, to become a prince in the state, so that one can dispose of it as one thinks fit. (261)

For Machiavelli, a good ruler should hold absolute power to do anything, either good or bad, for the good of his country, for the end justifies the means.

Machiavelli's teachings apply to Utopus perfectly. Indeed, Utopus is an unacknowledged forerunner of Machiavelli's ideal prince. Now we are tempted to ask: can Utopus's military conquest be possibly justified by its end?

We are told that before Utopus's conquest of Abraxa, this land had, on account of religious dissension, fallen into a general civil war. It was literally a state of anarchy, or what later political philosophers such as Hobbes would call "a state of nature" or "natural condition". In this *bellum omnium contra omnes*, life is always in danger, let alone the culture of earth, navigation, use of commodities, arts, letters and society (*Leviathan* XIII). Obviously, such a condition has nothing to do with being humane, and it is what Utopus terminated by military conquest. The means may be evil, but the end is good and right.

According to Jerry Weinberger, Plato in his Utopian trilogy, the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*, tells a noble lie that the citizens of the state are native inhabitants other than foreign invaders to cover up the necessarily unjust origin of all states. Bacon's *New Atlantis*, which is itself an imitation of Plato's *Republic*, presents a new beginning for the whole world by narrating that the native inhabitants were destroyed by a natural disaster (floods) rather than by foreign invasion. This new beginning is not only probable, it also avoids the cruelty of the beginning (Weinberger 30-35). As a matter of fact, More seems to have noticed this problem before Bacon, and forestalls possible reproaches by narrating Utopus's Creation or Genesis of Utopia, which is also a noble lie in itself.

Immediately after his conquest, Utopus ordained that no one should suffer for his religion, and that it should be lawful for everyone to follow the religion of his choice.

He believed it both insolence and folly to demand by violence and threats that all should think to be true what *you* believe to be true. Even if it should be the case that one single religion is true and all the rest are false, provided the matter is handled reasonably and moderately, truth by its own natural force would finally emerge and stand forth conspicuously. But if the struggle is decided by arms and riots, since the worst men are always the most unyielding, the best and holiest religion would be overwhelmed. In this sense, such regulations are laid not only for the sake of peace, but also in the interest of religion itself (*Utopia* 221).

So Utopus inaugurated toleration in Utopia. Toleration ensures liberty of conscience, which precurses general tolerance. If toleration or liberty of conscience is a point of departure for modern liberalism, then Utopia is the hometown of modern liberalism, and Utopus, or precisely More, is doubtless one of its earliest champions.

However, toleration or religious freedom in Utopia has a definite limit. First, religious tolerance does not apply to someone who is not tolerant. As Raphael reports, if one publicly speaks of his religion with zeal more than discretion, he shall be exiled after the verdict of guilty. Secondly, toleration does not apply to atheism and materialism. We are told that "Utopus gave conjunction that no one should fall so far below the dignity of human nature as to believe that souls likewise perish with the body or that the world is the mere sport of chance and not governed by any divine providence" (*Utopia* 221). Anyone who thinks otherwise will not be accepted as a member of mankind, and he, although unpunished for his belief, will be excluded from public life and live in disgrace.

More's attitude towards religion reminds us of his spiritual master Plato. In a letter addressed to his friend Dion, Plato makes a point of the immortality of the soul:

> And we should in very truth always believe those ancient and sacred teachings, which declare that the soul is immortal, that it has judges, and suffers the greatest penalties when it has been separated from the body. (*The Seventh Letter* 335a; *Republic* 807)

Therefore, men holding the faith of atheism shall be punished (*Laws* 907e-908a). Now we see More concur with Plato in this matter: man must fear something as the foundation of belief (it is not so important what this 'something' is as there must be something to fear), otherwise he would (as Hythlodaeus narrates to his audience) "strive either to evade by craft the public laws of the country or to break them by violence in order to serve his own private desires when he has nothing to fear." Seen from this perspective, Utopia is not an open society; rather, it is a closed society which pivots on a self-sufficient theologico-political philosophy.

Utopia (when it was still called Abraxa) was originally part of the continent. After conquering it, Utopus ordered a deep channel to be dug, fifteen miles long, which brought the sea around Utopia and separated it from the continent. As Raphael Hythlodaeus observes, the channel is known to the natives only, so that any stranger would run great danger of shipwreck if he should enter into the bay without a pilot. In fact even the native Utopians themselves could not pass it safe if some marks that

are on the coast did not direct their way (*Utopia* 111).

There are 54 city-states in Utopia, identical in language, traditions, customs, and laws, similar in layout and appearance. Their citizens, we are told, are supposed to dwell and work in one of them; they can travel to another city-state with leave from their leaders (Syphogrants and Tranibors); but if anyone leaves his city without permission, or when he is found rambling without a passport, he will be punished as a fugitive and sent home disgracefully; if he commits that fault again, he is condemned to slavery (*Utopia* 147). For this reason, there is no such thing as free trade in Utopia: each city-state is a self-sufficient economy; should its inhabitants want anything, they fetch it from the government, without carrying anything in exchange for it, under the supervision of the municipal officials (*Utopia* 117). For modern readers, this rings a bell with the distribution and quota system which obtained in 20th-century socialist countries.[3] All these things point to one fact: Utopia is not nearly so free as it seems at first glance; it resembles, if anything, a closed society.

308   Utopia is a closed but liberal society: as a prototype of a modern liberal state, Utopia is a closed society; though a closed society, Utopia is comparatively liberal. Indeed, atheists are deprived of rights of participating in political affairs, and they are forbidden to dispute in defense of their opinions in the presence of the common people. However, the government will not punish them in any way (such as imprisonment or *auto-da-fe* in Medieval times), but permit and even encourage them to speak before the priests, being convinced that "it is in no man's power to believe what he chooses" (*Utopia* 223) and truth will out by its own natural force. As Lord Chancellor of England, More had put many heretics to death (Ames 181; Marius 389-406); as the author of *Utopia,* More is nevertheless a worthy forerunner of modern liberalism. 170 years later, when John Locke preaches:

> The churches have neither any jurisdiction in worldly matters, nor are fire and sword any proper instruments wherewith to convince men's minds of error, and inform them of the truth (Locke 143, 156)

and that "neither those [are to be tolerated] that will not own and teach the duty of tolerating all men in matters of mere religion" and "who deny the being of God," (Locke 181-82), he is but in a large measure reiterating what More has said before.

Closed and liberal, liberal but closed: this is the paradox of the Utopian regime. Here we are tempted to ask: is life there really desirable? More's spokesman Raphael Hythlodaeus tells us:

> I lived there more than five years and would never have wished to leave except to make known that new world. In that case you unabashedly would admit that you had never seen a well-ordered people anywhere but there. (*Utopia* 107)

No doubt, More is sincere when he has Hythlodaeus saying so; but sincerity does not necessarily imply rightness. Utopia is a remarkably homogeneous society: its inhabitants think and act in uniformity; their life is strictly regimented; individuality or spontaneity is scarcely to be seen. Aristotle, in criticizing Plato's ideal state, stresses

the importance of diversity in human life:

> For in one way the state as its unification proceeds will cease to be a state, and in another way, though it continues a state, yet by coming near to ceasing to be one it will be a worse state, just as if one turned a harmony into unison or a rhythm into a single foot. (*Politics* 1263b; Aristotle 64)

Of course, uniformity ensures order and security. But it suppresses and strangles diversity and individuality. Just as Bertrand Russell points out:

> More's Utopia was in many ways astonishingly liberal.…It must be admitted, however, that life in More's Utopia, as in most others, would be intolerably dull. Diversity is essential to happiness, and in Utopia there is hardly any. This is a defect of all planned social systems, actual as well as imaginary. (Russell 521-22)

Diversity and individuality are not only the spring and source of happiness, they are also the very end of life, without which life will degenerate into its own mockery. Happy life is first and foremost life; i.e., living for oneself and living to be oneself; sacrificing this end of life for the sake of happiness is foolish and even against human nature. Any life against human nature, in whatever name may it appear, is not worth living.

309

Sure enough, this is not More's original intention. For him, as is indicated by the subtitle of the book, Utopia represents 'the best state of a commonwealth' and therefore the most desirable regime in the world. This most desirable state is, however, a product of absolute reason, which in a sense foreshadows (and even catalyses) modern disciplinary society on the model of the eighteenth-century Panopticon:[4] it is no surprise that its designer Bentham affectionately calls his Panopticon-based National Charity Company "my Utopia" (Semple 297-303), which is in fact a variant of More's Utopia in the age of capitalism. There individuality recedes and reduces to an interchangeable standardized part in the almighty state apparatus.[5] Thence follows the levelling of diversity and the disappearance of individuality, and then even the resolution of life itself. At this moment, Utopia alienates itself into Dystopia. Indeed, Utopia and Dystopia are a pair of paradoxical concurrents: born together, Utopia is at once contrary to and no other than Dystopia. By its very nature, Utopia is Dystopia. In this sense, Utopia's birth is as good as its death.

Notes

1. As introduced in the *Utopia*, Hythlodaeus (the Hebrew name *Raphael* means 'purveyor of truth', and the Greek *Hythlodaeus* means 'expert in trifles, well-learned in nonsense') has a profound interest in Greek philosophy, and he finds nothing valuable about the Latin authors except Seneca and Cicero (this is in fact More's self-depiction—More himself is fond of Greek philosophy, especially Plato). Hythlodaeus follows Amerigo Vespucci (the historical discoverer of America) in his expeditions three times. However, "his sailing is not like that of Palinurus but that of Ulysses or, rather, of Plato." In Virgil's *Aeneid,* Palinurus is the helmsman of a ship of Aeneas who fell overboard. In Plato's *Republic*, Eros returns from his journey in the underworld and relates what he has seen there. He tells

us that Odysseus draws the last lot that designates his next life, which instructs him to live "a life of an average citizen who is solely concerned about his own business" (620c). In *Phaedro*, through the mouth of Socrates, Plato asserts that a philosopher's work is to know himself (230a). "To be solely concerned about one's own business" is "to know oneself." It can then be concluded that Socrates is Odysseus reincarnated, and Plato, the disciple of Socrates, is a second reincarnation of Odysseus. The reincarnation still goes on, and Raphael Hythlodaeus follows this line. Seen in this light, Raphael Hythlodaeus is not only an early 16th-century projection of Plato the Ancient Philosopher, but also a spokesman for Thomas More the Renaissance Humanist.

2. More stopped in Antwerp when he was on a diplomatic mission to Flanders in 1515; then he embarked on writing his *Utopia*. He tells us that he met Raphael Hythlodaeus there, who had just returned from Utopia; when he first came to Utopia five years earlier, it had already existed for 1760 years. So Utopia was presumably founded in 250 BCE.

3. In criticizing Morelly's *Code de la nature*, Tocqueville points out that "*la centralisation et le socialisme sont des produits du même sol*" (Tocqueville 243). Morelly envisions "*une situation dans laquelle l'homme soit aussi heureux et aussi bienfaisant qu'il le peut être en cette vie*" (125), which Tocqueville summarizes as "*la communauté dé biens, le droit au travail, l'égalité absolue, l'uniformité en toutes choses, la régularité mécanique dans tous les mouvements des individus, la tyrannie réglementaire et l'absorption complète de la personnalité des citoyens dans le corps social*" (242); Morelly's brave vision recalls More's Utopia in many aspects. In hindsight, Morelly's ideal state is More's Utopia recast in the 18th century.

4. Michel Foucault deems Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as the archetype of modern disciplinary society or a symbol of modern power. In fact, Charlemagne would be more eligible for this patent. One of his earliest biographers (the Monk of St. Gaul) tells us, "you may see it in the mansions of the various dignitaries which, by Charles's device, were built round his own palace in such a way that from the windows of his chamber he could see all who went out or came in, and what they were doing, while they believed themselves free from observation; you may see it in all the houses of his nobles, which were lifted on high from the ground in such a fashion that beneath them the retainers of his nobles and the servants of those retainers and every class of man could be protected from rain or snow, from cold or heat, while at the same time they were not concealed from the eyes of the most vigilant Charles" (Eginhard 96-7). What Charlemagne did is again similar to what Valerius (also called Poplicola) had done. The latter built his mansion on the highland of the Palatine Hill, overlooking the Roman square. It is said that whoever passes can be clearly identified (Plutarch 123). All these point to one fact: there exists an earlier origin of modern disciplinary institution. Indeed the watch of the power-eye has been ever with human society, only people have adopted different technical devices: while our ancestors had to resort to spies in the past, we now use electronic monitors. As a matter of fact, all human designs and projects are essentially based on the 'power-inspection' model, and so is Utopia. More's Utopia, as illustrated on the front page of its early publication, is an enlarged panopticon: closed, well-organized and transparent to an all dominant power-eye.

5. Plutarch tells us that Lycurgus, the fabulous lawmaker of Sparta, "bred up his citizens in such a way that they neither would nor could live by themselves; they were to make themselves one with the public good, and, clustering like bees around their commander, be by their zeal and public spirit carried all but out of themselves, and devoted wholly to their country" (69). So it is with More's Utopia. As we know, More's Utopia is directly inspired by Plato's Republic, and the latter is modeled on Lycurgus's Sparta, which is the ultimate source and archetype of all later Utopian institutions. From Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, More, down to Francis Bacon, the author of the *New Atlantis*, Tommaso Campanella, the author of the *City of the Sun*, John Valentine Andrea, the author of the *Christianopolis*, John Harrington, the author of the *Oceana*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—his assertion that "*Celui qui ose entreprendre d'instituer un peuple doit se sentir en état de changer, pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine ; de transformer chaque individu, qui par lui-même est un tout parfait et solitaire, en partie d'un plus grand tout dont cet individu reçoive en quelque sorte sa vie et son être ; d'altérer la constitution de l'homme pour le renforcer; de substituer une existence partielle et morale à l'existence physique et indépendante que nous avons tous reçue de la nature. Il faut, en un mot, qu'il*

ôte à l'homme ses forces propres pour lui en donner qui lui soient étrangères et dont il ne puisse faire usage sans le secours d'autrui. Plus ces forces naturelles sont mortes et anéanties, plus les acquises sont grandes et durables, plus aussi l'institution est solide et parfaite. En sorte que si chaque citoyen n'est rien, ne peut rien, que par tous les autres" (71-72) simply reminds us of his Spartan forefather—still down to Morelly, Bentham, Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Karl Marx and his followers: all of them are (to use Derrida's terms) "supplements" or "*spectres*" of the philosopher-king Lycurgus.

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