Thomas More
UTOPIA

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Build-your-own Utopia

Humanist Izzard

https://www.boxoffice.harvard.edu/Online/default.asp?doWork::WScontent::loadArticle=Load&BOparam::WScontent::loadArticle::article_id=2D409CFF-6379-4FC4-A658-24C26CFEE12D

What is a Utopia?

Etymology: modern Latin (More, 1516), < Greek οὐ not + τόπος a place
- 1a. An imaginary island, depicted by Sir Thomas More as enjoying a **perfect social, legal, and political system**.
- b. *transf.* Any **imaginary, indefinitely-remote** region, country, or locality.

- 2. a. A place, state, or condition **ideally perfect** in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions.
- b. An **impossibly ideal** scheme, esp. for social improvement.

Literary Contexts

- Travel Narratives: The "New World"
  - Dis-placed perspectives => alternative visions

- Satirical Dialogues (Lucian 1st century Greek)
  - Witty, elusive discourse, rhetorical flourish
  - *A True Story*: the first science fiction tale

- Scholasticism:
  - Mediaeval exegesis
  - "hair-splitters"

- Lorenzo Valla's "On the True and False Good"
  - The good is what gives pleasure;
  - Virtues are only those things which accomplish this and have no value in themselves and are only names we give to self-interested behaviour

General Background

- Structure:
  - Book II (written first): describes the institutions, social practice, geography and economy of Utopia;

  - Book I: dialogue/conversation between a civil servant called "Thomas More" and a traveler called Raphael ("message of God") Hythloday ("no-sense")

Questions Raised

- How do *principles* translate into *realities*?
  - What is the relationship between THEORY and PRACTICE? Between IDEALS and PRAGMATISM?

- Can a *perfect* society be a *living* society?

- How does the idea of *perfection* accommodate *diversity, creativity, exceptional behaviour,* or *talent*? Can a perfect society be a *meritocracy*?

- How do we assign *value*?

- Is it possible to found a society on purely rational principles?

Humanism in a Christian Context

- More was *at once* a devout Catholic *and* an early Humanist

- Humanism's materialist, anti-metaphysical stance:

"In this respect, humanism parted company from a western intellectual tradition that prioritized the universal over the particular, the transcendent over the worldly, the contemplative over the active, and the theoretical over the practical."
   (Hanan Yoran para.6)

- *Utopia*: an intersection of "vertical" and "horizontal" EPISTOMOLOGIES

Utopia: No-where

What is the significance of the name of the "ideal" land?

- U-topia (No-land, nowhere)

How is Value Determined?

- Consider the use of DICHOTOMIES (paired, mutually exclusive opposites) in the text.

- What makes something *valuable* in Utopia?
  - The valuation of gold vs. iron (611);
  - The language used to describe the value of "fine clothes" and jewels (617);
  - The "dunderhead" rich man: "…as if he were personally attached to the coins, and a mere appendage to them" (613)

Humanism and Utopian reason

How does More's *Utopia* attempt to reconcile Humanist values with Christian ones? Is he successful? Consider:

- The reliance on the concept of Right Reason in relation to "the emptiest of fictions" (616);
- The definition of nature: "When an individual obeys the dictates of reason in choosing one thing and avoiding another, he is following nature" (615).
- **The fact that the entire Utopian economy is based on slave labour and colonial exploits conducted by mercenary armies**.

Is More a REVOLUTIONARY?

More's *Utopia* has been said to argue for

- Free love and severe restriction on sexual activity;
- Communist collectivism and radical self-interest;
- Self-actualization and repression of individuality
- Equality and oppressive exploitation of slaves.

What do you think of Utopia?

A diplomat's position

"What you cannot turn to good you must at least make as little bad as you can. For it is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation which I do not expect for a great many years to come" (Book I).