



Thomas More's Utopia and the Quest for a Just Society: Politics, Property, and Equality

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ABSTRACT

Thomas More's Utopia was first published in Latin in 1516 and is one of the most influential works of political literature and Renaissance humanism. The novel, a conversation and travelogue, describes a fictitious island society with political, economic, social and religious institutions quite different from those of contemporary Europe. More's Utopia is interesting not only because it describes a perfect society but rather because it uses the imagined society of Utopia to critique the political and economic systems of sixteenth-century England and Europe. The present article deals with More's idea of a just society with special reference to politics, private property, economic equality, social justice, labor, poverty, governance and individual liberty. In Utopia, More's critique of social injustice centers on the rejection of private property, he argues, because the growth of wealth produces competition, greed, poverty, and social chaos. Yet the text does not offer a simple blueprint for a perfect society. The ambiguity between the positions of Raphael Hythlodæus and More's own position makes Utopia a complicated work of political satire and philosophical exploration. The paper also proposes that Utopia is still relevant in discussions of economic injustice, social justice and political responsibility and alternative governance models.

Keywords: Thomas More, Utopia, political literature, social justice, private property, equality, governance, Renaissance humanism, political philosophy

Introduction

Utopia by Thomas More is unique in the history of English literature, political theory and social philosophy. It was published in 1516, in the midst of the European Renaissance, a period of intellectual ferment, humanist inquiry, theological debate, governmental centralization and substantial social and economic growth. More did not treat this historical background in the form of a political essay, but in the form of an imagined dialog about a non-existent community. It is a piece of literature, political philosophy, social criticism, satire and ethical reflection.

The title Utopia matters. The imaginary island represents an alternative to European political civilization. But the phrase implies an ideal place and a "no-place. This ambiguity is important because More is not just saying that Utopia is a perfect political system. Rather he

opens up a space for present institutions to be seen in a different light. Thus the text is not only a description of an ideal commonwealth, but also a critique of the world as it is.

Book I of Utopia addresses the social and political problems of Europe. Further, Raphael Hythlodæus is employed to examine poverty, crime, punishment, war, political corruption and the relation between wealth and social power. Book II deals with the political and social organization of Utopia. The comparison of these two sections makes the reader compare European institutions with those of the fictitious island. The Project Gutenberg eBook of Warfare, Robbery, Poverty, Enclosure, Government of the Realm, and the Idea of the Perfect Commonwealth.

This article examines Utopia as a work of political literature, focusing primarily on one question: How does Thomas More depict a just society in his treatment of politics, property, and equality? It argues that More's most significant political intervention is his challenge to the idea that private property and unlimited economic growth are necessary bases for a healthy society.

Thomas More and the Context of the Renaissance

Thomas More (1478-1535) was a major figure of the English Renaissance. He was a lawyer, statesman, humanist and writer, who added to the intellectual culture of Renaissance humanism. His intellectual equals are Erasmus and other European humanists. Utopia was written when More was engaged in diplomatic work in the Low Countries, and was first published in Louvain in 1516. It was afterward revised and published at Basle in 1518.

To understand Utopia the Renaissance humanist environment is essential. Humanists cared about classical literature, about moral philosophy, education, civic responsibility, the relation between people and society. More's work reflects these interests, but also addresses political reality directly.

As such, the society shown in Utopia cannot be divorced from the problems of More's own time. It forces the reader to ask whether political institutions exist to serve the common good or merely to protect the interests of powerful organizations. The relationship between law and justice becomes increasingly important. More's narrative casts doubt on whether laws that protect property and still make many people poor can be called just.

Utopia as Politics.

In political literature it is often about the relations between power, authority, society and justice. Utopia is especially important because it employs fiction as a mode of political criticism. Rather than offering a concrete political program, More invents a traveler, Raphael Hythlodæus, who depicts an alternative society.

But the dialog form lends the work a remarkable degree of ambiguity. More's reader is never quite sure if he expects every feature of Utopian society to be taken literally. This ambiguity has given rise to much scholarly debate. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes Utopia as "deliberately opaque," and scholars dispute whether, and if so how, to categorize More as a political philosopher.

Thus the political importance of the work lies in part in its questions. What is a fair society? Legitimate political authority maintains unequal wealth? Does private property promote peace or war? Is it justified to punish when social institutions produce poverty? These fears elevate Utopia from the level of a novel of fiction to that of a serious study of political society.

The Notion of a Just Society

At the heart of More's conception of society is the relationship between individual interests and the common good. Utopian social arrangements are designed to minimize differences in money and status. The community attempts to organize life for the common good, not for the unlimited advantage of the individual. This is a dramatic shift from a society where there is social stratification based on individual wealth. Utopians are trained to think of themselves as part of a broader whole. Their political and economic structures are thus aimed toward social stability and the welfare of the community.

Given the setting of Utopia, asking whether the people have formal equality before the law is not sufficient to determine if a society is just. Material conditions in their nature are also important. Rules alone cannot guaranty fairness when some people are incredibly rich while others are incredibly poor. More's *raison d'être* presages a central problem in present political philosophy: whether justice should be defined just in terms of legal equality, or in terms of economic and social equality.

Government and Politics in Utopia

The Utopian government is organized in a system of local and central authority. Political positions provide a purpose beyond self-interest. But political institutions are there to serve the community.

One of the distinctive features of Utopian politics is the repudiation of hereditary aristocratic privilege. David Norbrook notes that in Utopia's political system, offices are elected and filled on political and religious grounds, not on hereditary aristocracy. This is politically important, for the European society of More's time was decidedly hierarchical. Political authority was decided by social rank, land ownership, aristocratic entitlement and hereditary domination. Utopia sees a situation where the government authority is more closely tied to civic duty. The political framework suggests that governance must be for the common good and not for the self-interest of those in power. Leadership is defined as a form of social responsibility.

Private Property and Social Inequality

The question of private property is perhaps the most disputed point of politics in Utopia. More's imagined society disavows private property and grounds economic life in communal ownership.

The relationship between property and justice is central to the work. In European society it is private property that separates the rich from the poor. Wealth means social power and poverty leads to crime and marginalization. Utopia attempts to remove the structural basis of these inequities by replacing private ownership with arrangements of the community.

As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, More's Utopians engage in community possession so as to avoid the passions and ideological conflicts accompanying the acquisition and loss of property.

This feature of Utopia has attracted the particular attention of economic historians and political philosophers. Mangelofa and Ovaska regard the work as an important early study of a common property-based economic system. They argue that communal ownership is more closely associated with institutional arrangements and economic considerations.

Yet the idea of more as a theorist of modern socialism or communism would be historically false. His theories were based on Renaissance humanism, Christian ethics, classical political thought and the social conditions of Tudor England. His attitude to property should thus be seen within the framework of the intellectual thought of the sixteenth century.

Wealth, Poverty and Social Justice

More makes one of the most severe criticisms of European society the connection between riches and poverty. Book I of Utopia emphasizes the social conditions leading to crime and punishment. The work encourages readers to look at the social and economic forces that contribute to criminal behavior instead of assuming that criminals are simply morally corrupt people. That's a huge change of viewpoint. More evidence suggests that society may contribute to the problems it later seeks to solve through punishment.

This argument has had long political significance. If poverty comes from economic arrangements, then the answer to it must be more than just moral education of the individual. It needs to be restructured. In this way, Utopia anticipates future discussions on the relationship between poverty, social exclusion, economic injustice and criminality. More's imaginary society implies that harsh punishment might not be as effective as preventing extreme poverty in the first place.

Distribution of Wealth and Labor

Work is an important part of Utopian society. Work is viewed as a responsibility to society, not as a way to earn personal money. "Utopians are against excess of luxury and idleness. At the same time, labor is organized in such a way that it enables members of society to contribute to the common good without having to compete for their income every day. This arrangement raises a significant political-economic question: Who profits from human labor? In a private accumulation society, the benefits of labor may not be equally distributed. More's Utopian society is a response to this situation; the production and consumption of goods is based on universal needs.

This arrangement also questions the cultural status of riches. In Utopia, things that are markers of rank in European civilization have no social significance. The point is to highlight the contingent nature of class divides based on material possessions.

Social Order and Equality

In Utopia equality does not always mean absolute sameness across the board. That is, reducing the huge inequalities that allow some people to dominate others through the accumulation of riches and hereditary power.

This is one of the more major differences in the interpretation of More. His society still has governmental institutions and social obligations, family units and organizational structures. Utopia is not a society without authority. More sees a community where authority is exercised in conformity with the collective good. The goal of equality is therefore linked to social structure. Great economic inequality can cause unhappiness, criminality, competition and political turmoil. Utopia hopes to erase these divisions to form a more stable society.

Justice, Retribution and the Law

One of the great problems of Utopia is the relation between law and justice. More's analysis of European society reveals that the problem of punishment lies in the fact that the legal system does not address the root of criminal behavior.

A fair justice system should punish the criminals as well as investigate the social reasons behind the crime. This is especially important considering that early modern European civilizations were characterized by harsh punishments. More's essay questions the morality of harsh punishment when poverty and misery are caused by the social order itself. The political message is clear: justice is linked to social conditions.

Religious and Moral Order

Religion is a key part of the Utopian way of life. More shows a culture in which different religious beliefs coexist, yet religion is tied to ethical and civic life.

Religious tolerance was an important question in the sixteenth century in Europe. Religious conflicts were becoming more and more violent. Utopia is therefore an example of religious belief supporting social virtues without harming political unity. It proposes that religion could be a moral footing for social responsibilities. The person is not seen as totally separate from the community. It is about the good of other people.

Personal Liberty and Social Intervention

Utopia is usually regarded as a perfect society, yet some elements may appear restrictive to today's readers. The personal life is well ordered. All your employment, social life, travel, family relationships, etc. are dictated by society standards.

This creates a significant strain in More's political ideas. Utopia, by contrast, provides fairness, security and collective health. But individual personality may be sacrificed to the cohesion of the community. This tension reveals that More's work is not a simple case for endless liberty or equality. It makes the viewer examine the narrow line separating individual liberty and social good.

Utopia: A Sixteenth-Century Critique of England

One of the most powerful readings of Utopia is to read the fictitious island as a mirror, through which More analyzes contemporary England.

Book I is about poverty, crime, conflict and social inequity. These situations are counterpointed by the imaginary society of Book II. This contrast makes the reader judge the institutions of his own society.

The original essay sets up a relation between political philosophy and present-day social criticism. More's work was written in a time of political and economic change in England and his satirical style meant he could subtly critique the institutions of society. So utopia is more than an escape from reality. It's a literary device for exploring reality.

More's Political Vision and Its Ambiguities

The great difficulty in understanding Utopia is to discover what More himself thinks.

Raphael Hythlodæus is in favor of many of the radical ideals associated with Utopia. More's narrative persona, however, does not simply endorse anything Raphael says. The dialog establishes a gap between author, narrator and fictive speaker.

This uncertainty is the core of the work's literary impact.

This issue has been investigated further in recent work. According to Joanne Paul, Utopia is intentionally obscure and to comprehend More's political thought, one must read beyond

Utopia. Her research finds themes of inequality, authority and representation throughout More's overall political philosophy.

Therefore, Utopia is not just a political program. It should be better interpreted as a literary experiment that encourages political thinking.

Utopia and the problem of economic equality

Economic equality is part of More's understanding of social justice. The abolition of private property is to prevent the possibility of extreme accumulation. The argument may be summarized as follows. Inequality in wealth and social power and social strife are caused by private accumulation. More's alternative is to reverse this development. Communal ownership results in less economic inequality, more social stability and higher collective welfare. This does not mean that More provides a complete theory of the economy. Rather than this, he uses the imaginary economy of Utopia to question the assumptions of his own society. The continued interest shown by academics in this aspect of the work underscores its importance. Utopia has been studied economically as an early contribution to debates about property, production, incentives and social organization.

Political Realism and Political Idealism

Perhaps the most important tension in Utopia is the tension between political idealism and political reality. Utopia is an imaginary society in which the institutions are re-organized on the basis of the principles of rationality, equality and common good. Real political societies are the product of ambition, self-interest, historical tradition, economic interest and rivalry of power.

That raises the hard question: Can there be an ideal political system in the real world? The answer is still not known.

Since then, the word utopian has acquired a pejorative connotation in describing notions that are seen as impractical or impossible. But the history of Utopia reveals that the text was not meant to present an impossible fantasy. More's intellectual remoteness from Europe made it possible for him to criticize the political realities of Europe.

Utopia: Its Relevance Today

Utopia was published more than five centuries ago, but many of the questions it raises are still pertinent today.

Modern societies still have:

- Inequality.
- Wealth concentration.
- Political graft.
- unequal access to resources
- Poverty; - joblessness-
- Isolation from society
- Elitism in politics.
- A clash between private interest and the public good.

More's work does not provide ready answers to these modern-day questions. Still, it poses the question to the reader whether current structures are inevitable.

This is perhaps the most significant modern value of Utopia. The political imagination is what allows a society to think of something else.

In an era of global capitalism, technological change, growing concentration of wealth and social welfare issues, More's question about the link between property and justice is surprisingly relevant.

Critical assessment

While intellectually important, Utopia is not to be taken as an ideal case of social justice.

First, the Utopian society is a highly regulated social order. Hence the liberty of the individual is limited.

Second, the piece contains gender and social assumptions that mirror its historical context. Today's readers may well ask whether its conception of equality is inclusive enough.

Third, More's vision of work and community living poses challenges to notions of individual choice and economic incentives.

Fourth, the connection between More's political ideas and Raphael's radical arguments is unclear.

Finally, contemporary study has questioned the classic view of More as a visionary champion of communal property. L. Silverman's 2025 study explains that O. More's aversion to popular radical movements, his anxiety over law, property and authority, are key to understanding Utopia's political context.

These limitations do not detract from the value of the text. Rather, they demonstrate why Utopia continues to be a subject of debate.

Conclusion

Thomas More's Utopia is a seminal work of political literature in that it uses the imagined society as a means of political critique. More's imaginary island of Utopia invites readers to reconsider the interconnections among property, wealth, poverty, political power, law, and social justice.

The rejection of private property is one of the most radical aspects of the work. More evidence suggests that extreme inequality is more than an unhappy social condition: it may be linked to the organization of property. He dreams of a form of joint ownership and aims to build a society where economic activity is based on community welfare and not unlimited personal wealth.

But utopia cannot be reduced to a political program. It is complex political satire with dialogic structure, narrative ambiguity, juxtaposition of the European and Utopian civilization. More allows readers to think about other possibilities without needing to buy into all aspects of the proposed system. It is this unpredictability that renders Utopia forever relevant. It asks questions rather than gives answers. What are the things that make a society feel just? How to distribute the wealth? What is the proper role of government? What is the right proportion of giving up personal liberty for the good of the community? Can politics rise beyond the selfish interests of people?

These questions are still pertinent to political and social thought more than 500 years after they were first published. Utopia demonstrates the power of literature to interrogate political beliefs and to imagine possibilities for the future of human community.

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