

## NOWHERE LAND:

### *The Search for the Perfect Polity*

PLATO has long since taken his place in company with Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, and other Olympians of literature among authors who are more talked about than read. It may be true that none but a scholar in the exact and classical sense is in a position to appreciate to the full the beauty of Plato's style and the clarity of his thought, but those of us, and they tend to become an ever-increasing number, who can only read him in translation should not be deterred by that consideration. Plato's nearness to the present age is remarkable. Though Athens of the fifth century B.C. bears little enough resemblance to London of the early twentieth century, there is this broad comparison to be drawn between them: each looks to the future with hope out of a time of distress and the uncertainty that accompanies change; each feels itself to be politically bankrupt and puts little confidence in its accredited leaders; each feels that the trouble arises, not so much from the institutions in vogue as from the weakness, folly and incompetence inherent in human nature. It is for these reasons that Plato has much of value to say not merely to the poet and the philosopher in all ages, but also to the men and women immersed in practical affairs.

To-day we are apt to feel impatient of doctrinaire dreamers who draw up systems of government that look well on paper. The very word 'utopian' has come to bear a meaning that is suspect, if not downright sinister. Government of a State, we insist, is a living organism; like a plant, like an animal, it must be the outward expression of inward change. There can be no such thing as a static constitution. The law which

fits the conditions of life to-day will not fit the conditions of life fifty or a hundred years hence. For these reasons the idealist who comes to us with a perfect system warranted to work under all conditions is looked upon with suspicion. He is forever on the horns of a dilemma. If he ventures into details he is bound to interfere harmfully with freedom of growth; if he keeps clear of detail and attends only to broad principles, he is accused of being too much in the air. But what a splendid dream it is for the poet and philosopher, to fashion a perfect State wherein all men shall be virtuous and happy. And he is fortunate in this, that whereas the legislator must bear the odium attaching to the working of bad or mischievous laws (unless as in the modern state he can take shelter behind the Party or the Constitution), the framer of the ideal State can never see his dream become an actuality. Plato's Republic has remained an ideal on paper and therein, perhaps, he was fortunate. The obstacle in his way, the age-long obstacle of human nature unregenerate was not to be removed or evaded even by so strong a thinker as Plato. Until rulers become men of pure heart and clean hands and genuine lovers of wisdom the perfect State must remain a golden city of Cloudcuckooland: "Unless," I said, "lovers of wisdom bear sovereign rule in states, or those who are now called sovereigns and governors become sincere and capable lovers of wisdom, and government and love of wisdom be brought together, and unless the numerous natures who at present pursue either government or wisdom, the one to the exclusion of the other, be forcibly debarred from this behaviour, there will be no respite from evil, my dear Glaucon, for states, nor, I fancy, for humanity; nor will this constitution, which we have just described in our argument, come to that realization which is possible for it and see the light of day. It is this which has for so

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long made me hesitate to speak. I saw how paradoxical it would sound. For it is given to few to perceive that no other constitution could ever bring happiness either to states or individuals.” ’

Plato had the iron constitution of Sparta in his mind as well as the more cultured and humane polity of Athens when he sketched the outlines of his ideal state. For this reason the conditions of life in his Republic are of a decidedly tonic nature. Regarded from the normal standpoint of life as lived by the average citizen of the world, a short sojourn in the Platonic city might prove an excellent corrective, but only the heroic would care to become naturalized. In his state none but the governors and soldiers have any political rights. The agricultural and manual workers are, like the good child, to be seen but not heard. The cabinet minister of a modern state would, unless a very exceptional man, be decidedly unhappy if suddenly thrust as one of the governing class into Plato's city. He would have, first of all, to submit to a purgatory education directed to cleansing him of all egoistic passions; he would be compelled to live with the other members of the government in a house resembling a club or barracks, no home of his own being permitted; he would be paid just sufficient for his yearly expenses, but no more; he would be forbidden to traffic in gold or silver, or even to handle the precious metals; he might take a wife from his own class, but his children would be brought up in a state-controlled establishment. Under no circumstances might he possess private property. To drink much wine would be forbidden him lest 'he does not know where he is,' for 'it would be ridiculous for a Guardian to require a guard.' With respect to music and dancing, his higher interests would be carefully watched. No matter how he might long for jazz music or Wagner's operas, they would be denied him, and

it is unlikely that wireless or gramophone would be permitted in his quarters. Plato regarded music as an aid to the growth of the individual soul not as an anodyne or an intoxicating diversion for the multitude. He would be under the necessity of confining himself to a plain but wholesome diet and guarding himself against the seduction of 'the damsels of Corinth.' He would not be able to talk about his ailments to his friends nor to advertise his visit to Cap Martin for 'a much-needed rest' after a hard session, for, Plato writes, 'my belief is, not that a good body will by its own excellence make the soul good; but on the contrary, that a good soul will by *its* excellence render the body as perfect as it can be . . . .' Neither will he feel quite happy perhaps in calling in the aid of a Harley Street specialist every time he falls a victim to catarrh. On the subject of health Plato will speak to him very straightly. 'And do you not hold it disgraceful to require medical aid, unless it be for a wound, or an attack of illness incidental to the time of year—to require it, I mean, owing to our laziness, and the life we lead, and to get ourselves so stuffed with humours and wind, like quagmires, as to compel the clever sons of Asclepius to call diseases by such names as flatulence and catarrh.'

Plato knew very well wherein the weakness of his ideal Republic lay. Man, unregenerate, may succeed in scaling the heights, but sooner or later the weakness of the flesh compels him to descend. It was for this reason that the guardians of his state were to be philosophers in the true sense, and practical idealists; men with a real love for Beauty and Wisdom and the determination to strive for it in life as in art. No state, so far as history records, has ever had such rulers. But Plato's ideal stands, a fertilizing influence in the world's thought: 'Revolutions,' writes Professor A. E. Zimmern in *The Legacy of Greece*, 'spring

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not from without inwards, but from within outwards; and it is often when the external world seems most sick and sorrowful, when selfishness and irresponsibility sit enthroned in the world's seats of government, that the power of truth is most active in the silent region of the soul, strengthening it in order that it may issue forth once again to impress man's unconquerable purpose of order, justice and freedom upon the recalcitrant material which forms the stuff of men's common problems on this small globe of ours.'

To turn from Plato's Republic to Sir Thomas More's Utopia is like journeying towards the bleak north after a sojourn in the serene climate of Greece or Italy. We quit the subtler regions of metaphysic for the Roman discipline of material things. Spiritual values are still the dominant force, but already we begin to discern the Western heresy emerging which tends to believe that people can be made good by science, legislation, and the methods of the drill sergeant. Sir Thomas More lays greater stress on external aids. In his ideal state hospitals of a scientific tendency must be built. All children, boys and girls, must be thoroughly educated in the Greek and Latin authors. Streets must be broad and well-watered. Slaughterhouses are not permitted inside the walls. Every house must have a garden. The modern scientific, sanitary and legislative spirit is beginning to creep in.

More was a lawyer first and a philosopher afterwards. He believed it possible for the enlightened man to be able to take his share in public affairs and to remain a philosopher, with clean hands and a pure heart. Plato, who withdrew from public life to his colony at Colonus, had no such opinion: 'The perfectly just and noble man, clothed only in his justice, will suffer the worst consequences of a lifelong reputation for seeming to be that which he really is not—unjust. He will be put in chains, scourged, tortured,

and at last put to death.' When he came to those words in the Republic, did Sir Thomas More, one wonders, ponder his own career? To stand aside and lead a life of contemplation: or to enter the market place and devote his talents to the public service? Which was the better way? As concerning Plato there could not be two opinions. His literary heritage has proved the wisdom of his choice. But for More? On the one hand, power, riches, esteem and the (perhaps illusive) opportunity of doing good? And on the other . . . . ?

More was no hermit. The man of action was strong in him. He must be among his fellow men, talking, laughing, jesting. At Oxford young Thomas More had come into contact with Humanism, the fresh impulse that was to bring a new spirit into Europe. He read Greek and Latin authors. His father, one of the leading lawyers at the Bar, knew nothing of these new-fangled studies. He withdrew his son from such dangerous influences, and put him to study law at the Inns of Court. Henceforth Thomas More found himself in love with two mistresses: the Catholic Church and the culture of Greece. While reading Lucian he wore a hair shirt. He fasted; he prayed; he kept vigils; he gave lectures on St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* in St. Giles' Church.

The Utopia, written during More's diplomatic mission to Antwerp, was the offspring of the humanist side of his nature. The influence of Erasmus and of his friend, Peter Egidius, is strong in it. More looks forward to an England improved by wise legislation and beneficent government. There was to be a more even distribution of wealth, an enlightened education, the encouragement of new industries, and absolute freedom of conscience in religious matters. Every man, irrespective of class, has to work some hours a day at a craft. A large portion of the people's leisure is to be given to intellectual pursuits and such studies

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as liberalize the mind. The note of humanity and tolerance is struck again and again in the Utopia. War is not to be regarded as the glorious expression of patriotism, but as the blunder of governments. No leagues or treaties with foreign powers are permitted. Crime is to be restrained but by merciful laws. Public worship is organized, but it pays attention only to such first principles as hardly permit of differences of opinion.

But with the coming of the struggle concerning the position of the Pope this tolerance of the Utopia was swept away. On his appointment to the Lord Chancellorship in 1529, More passionately defended the cause of Rome against 'the pestilent sect of Luther and Tyndale.' The gulf that separates the imaginary from the real was very apparent in More's life. The man who could write so easily of complete toleration in religion could also write of Tyndale and his friends: 'heretics that ever sprang in Christ's church the very worst and the most beastly.' And this was the More who gave up his life.

Francis Bacon was better qualified by temperament than Sir Thomas More to delineate the broad features of the ideal state. In him the inquiring spirit of the Renaissance had come to full fruition. The *New Atlantis* is the crown of his dreams of a better world. Unfortunately, it is only a fragment, a dream hastily flung on paper. As to the details of life in his imaginary island we know very little. Society was patriarchal, the family and marriage were held in high repute: 'I have not read of any such chastity in any people as theirs. And their usual saying is that whosoever is unchaste cannot reverence himself; and they say that the reverence of a man's self is, next religion, the chiefest bridle of all vices.'

The glory of the island is the institution founded by an enlightened king of early times and known as

‘Solomon’s House.’ The purpose of this foundation is to reach ‘the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.’ The members of this college are held in high repute. When one of them returns from travel in distant lands, he is given a civic welcome. Fifty young men attend him, and the people, keeping excellent order without the assistance of any police force, line the streets through which he passes. Bacon’s belief in the amelioration resulting from the honest searchings of science, is seen to the full in his descriptions of Solomon’s House. The students are philanthropists seeking inspiration from the great source of Light. Here are no personal rivalries; no animosities bred of different schools of thought; no base seeking for fame or personal rewards. The benefit of man through the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge is the sole aim of the college, and the only motive inspiring its professors. Here are caves sunk six hundred fathoms deep in which refrigerations and conservations of bodies are effected and where certain diseases are cured. The sick are also cared for in ‘certain chambers, which we call chambers of health, where we qualify the air as we think good and proper for the cure of divers diseases.’ The laws of acoustics are studied: ‘We have also divers strange and artificial echoes, reflecting the voice many times, and as it were tossing it; and some that give back the voice louder than it came, some shriller and some deeper . . . . We have also means to convey sounds in trunks and pipes, in strange lines and distances.’ The mechanical arts are studied and ships are built ‘for going under water and brooking of seas, also swimming girdles and supporters.’ The germ of most modern inventions (and of many that have not yet come to fruition) are to be found in Solomon’s House. And so modern is Bacon’s point of view that even the

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doubt which led Samuel Butler, in *Erewhon*, to forbid the invention of new machines, was present in his mind. For the members of Solomon's House do not at once make public all their inventions: 'We have consultations, which of the experiences and inventions which we have discovered shall be published, and which not: and take all an oath of secrecy for the concealing of those which we think fit to keep secret.'

The same difficulty that confronted Plato in the creation of his perfect state stood in the way of Sir Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and all later creators of imaginary Utopias. The perfect state can only be brought into being by perfect men, since states do not create men, but men states. How are these perfect men to be bred? That problem has never been solved. Education will do something; wise laws will assist, but from the heart of man spring the fruits of good and evil. Many of Bacon's dreams have borne fruit to-day; we have the telephones, the railways, the ships, the medicine and surgery of which he wrote. But the serene and happy people who dwell together in unity on the island of Atlantis—where are they?

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