

Utopia 9/11: A Plea for a New World

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In about a decade, its indefatigable stream of commentators¹ will celebrate the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia* or *On the Best State of a Republic* (1516). That's a long time to be a focus of attention. The quantity of ink this text has generated suggests that, like a Rorschach blot, it enables us to project outwards our obsessions, our fantasies, our day-dreams, our hopes of a return to an irretrievable past golden age or our yearning for an unrealizable future paradise.²

Adding to this flood of learned essays is inevitably presumptuous. To further suggest that previous commentators have failed to read attentively might be taken as arrogant provocation. If so, I confess. For I am persuaded that a careful reading of both books of *Utopia* makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that Thomas More is not one of the utopians.³ On the contrary, appropriate homage to this man must acknowledge that his intellect, limitless erudition, prodigious memory and unparalleled political commonsense situate him far above the literary genre that has been built upon his essay. This conclusion emerges from focusing on the generally neglected First Book and relating it to the world we experience in the 21st century.⁴

The First Book, swiftly cast aside by those who would dream of the future and who find the tale it contains tedious, speaks to us of the Europe of 1515, at the dawn of a revolution in all forms of knowledge, a period dominated by a political elite which exploited religion, fear and crass ignorance in order to satisfy its insatiable hegemonic appetite. Yet its infinite corruption was masked by a public discourse exalting high moral and family values.

The Second Book, scorned by lovers of the past, holds out to us a future on a human scale which would apply new technical discoveries, rationality and sound management of its resources to reconcile the common weal with individual pleasure. This Book is the blueprint for the modern era, the pagan Bible adopted by the Enlightenment which has allowed us to dream of a universal rule of law that we have inscribed in the institutional charters of our age.

Half a millennium later, the books are being rewritten – in mirror image. The great human dream incited by the Second Book of 1515 is withering and dying in the harsh

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climate of 2005. The new promises of the contemporary economic dogma of free choice are but a self-deceptive retrogression, a return to the world of the First Book for which we propose a new reading.

The First Book: 1515

The year is 1515 and the specialists in public affairs of the time are discussing, 'off camera', the difficult situation in the kingdom of France.⁵ A new 'celebrity' is invited to participate in the debate: Raphael Hythlodæus, a seafarer to far-flung lands.

The learned men are talking particularly of their present-day problem which, they confess, leaves them perplexed: the proliferation of outlaws, brigands and thieves that nothing, not even the death penalty, seems able to stem.⁶ Upon which one of the circle adds that 'seeing so few escaped punishment . . . he could not choose but greatly wonder and marvel how and by what evil luck it should so come to pass that thieves were nevertheless in every place so rife and rank' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 43). 'How could that be?', he inquires out of his ingenuousness. To those of us accustomed to 20th-century socio-economic analysis, the answer seems 'obvious'. But, put back into the context of the period, such a response is not conceivable, to the extent that it would throw into doubt the whole principle of the infallibility of justice and authority, legitimized by religion.

To allow the reply, for example, that thieves steal because they are hungry, that brigands proliferate because the society is unjust and the king abuses a power which has become more and more arbitrary and corrupt, it would be necessary for the exercise of this power to be *separate* from religion. It would require that the individual no longer bear the burden of transgression. Such an explanation was, I repeat, unthinkable in 1515. Those holding power reiterated unceasingly that individuals possessed free will. The thief stole, not because he was hungry, but because he 'chose' to listen to the devil; highwaymen killed, not because dealers in arms gave them access to weapons, but because they 'chose' to kill; the poor were poor because they 'chose' that estate, and so on. This is a theme to which we will return at the end of the article.

The 'guard dogs' who defended such an outlook barked with even greater frenzy as roles came to be reversed. Having used fear to keep the peasants in their place,⁷ it was they who began to feel a wave of anxiety rising within themselves. Their ancestral feudal power was now coming under challenge from all sides as this 16th century began: not only was there an explosive growth in Europe's population as it recovered from the Black Death,⁸ but also new technologies were forcing dangerous breaches in the feudal system of sword and gown.

First breach: the birth of merchant capitalism

Internal markets⁹ and a growing international trade had led to the creation of City-States¹⁰ whose trade role was progressively escaping from feudal control which, as we recall, had for centuries reposed upon the peasantry. In Italy, this development

had started from the 12th century onwards, leading to the establishment of the first *republics*. 'In France, the existence of the *merchant* class as a distinct social category became fully apparent in the 13th century: it was the great fairs of the Champagne region which created the appropriate environment for its emergence.'¹¹

The first commercial companies¹² came into existence, and so initiated a gradual evolution away from unquestioning acceptance of the divine law of a *debt* owed to one's feudal master and towards a hope of profit – shared among partners – derived from trading in markets and from overseas expeditions. Such merchant trading introduced a 'neutral' and 'egalitarian' element, which caused particular disturbance to the medieval order, be it of Church or State. By 'neutral element' must be understood an element which 'had no place of belonging', which was 'itinerant', and which was grounded in the abstract *par excellence*: the calculation of commercial opportunity. This, 'perhaps even more than deductive reasoning, is assuredly what dominated that extra-religious culture.'¹³ 'A new world was forming, a society was restructuring itself within the ambit of high finance, with profit as its primary goal.'¹⁴

Second breach: the first globalization

As already mentioned, the overseas trading-posts gave an opening for the development of a new 'world economy', to use an expression of Fernand Braudel's. Not only would the ships of Christopher Columbus and the conquistadors¹⁵ bring back trading goods of both old and new types, but they would also strengthen the egalitarian link that bound together all those who took up the risk of mounting the expedition.¹⁶ Draughtsmen, artisans, skilled craftsmen, notaries and solicitors became busily engaged in projects which were financed by kings and wealthy merchants, among whom the profits would be shared.

The navigators also brought back with them 'human merchandise' which, after being paraded as curiosities in the salons of the upper classes, came to pose insoluble theological problems for those who reduced the world to the bounds of Christendom, and would give much substance for thought to lawyers immersed in the legal niceties of jurisprudence. The legal system was mired in complexity, to the great advantage of the professional lawyers. Should advice be sought from them, Hythlodæus would say, someone will 'put the king in remembrance of certain old and moth-eaten laws that for a long time have not been put in execution; which, because no man can remember when they were made, every man has transgressed . . .' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 89).

Such learned commentaries on the law were so bound up in detail that they were incapable of embracing universal principles, and hence the 'problematic of the New World (which) turned around the rights to take possession of new lands, the legitimacy of war, and co-habitation'.¹⁷ Questions were raised for which there were no answers: Who were these 'savages' who could not be equated with the 'infidels' fought against in the preceding centuries? Did they have any rights? To whom belonged the lands whose vastness was just becoming perceptible?

Third breach: the advent of printing

The contagion that was the spread of curiosity about 'the inhabitants of strange lands' would clearly not have been possible without the invention of printing.¹⁸ If its beginnings were slow, once the technique had become efficient near the end of the 15th century, the printed word spread at a phenomenal rate. At the turn of the 16th century, ten million books had already been printed, creating in the process a further enclave beyond the reach of feudalism – that of non-religious knowledge.¹⁹ The privileged control over the transmission of narrative, the painstaking reproductions of the clerical copyist, the exclusive secrecy of monastery libraries, the crystallization of human speculation about a scarce-revealed mystery, were all swept away by the printed text, which brought with it mass production, swiftness of transmission, universality, a shattering of mysteries and an accessibility to those new classes of secular society who were eager for this new medium of self-expression, self-marketing and hence of self-affirmation.

The new books related voyages or told of idyllic far-off islands; in so doing they allowed a discovery of the 'other', and hence of the self.²⁰ The works of Antiquity were rediscovered, and now they were being translated directly from the Greek,²¹ abandoning all pretence that they could be integrated into Christian doctrine. In the tradition of humanism the First Book of More's *Utopia* abounds in references to foreign lands and ages past.

Even more importantly, *Utopia* would become the first non-religious bestseller (the Bible being the first absolute bestseller). As such, it helped spread a new dream throughout Europe, one that spoke of a place which was both real and imaginary, of a world where fear was unknown, where new inventions would be used for the greater benefit of the individual and of society. In short, a promise of paradise that did not require the difficult passage through a vale of tears,²² but which could be found during one's own lifetime on earth. The bright future which Karl Marx would hold out several centuries later was beginning to dawn.

Monarchs and money

But the morning chorus of this new dawn was still to be heard. Thomas More and his contemporaries were still living through the anxious last years of the Middle Ages which, from its beginnings in an era of chaos until its rapid decline after reaching a stunning apogee, had extended over ten centuries. A whole new class was coming into existence, a class of the dispossessed: the homeless, the rootless, peasants driven from their land by speculators, the chronically ill with hordes of lepers and cripples the most prominent, the mentally disturbed who could no longer find shelter in 'the madmen's nave'.²³

Those in power, as always when a power is in decline, began to panic: the nobles and the abbots were constantly in need of money and 'this is the cause that victuals be now in many places dearer . . . and by this means very many be fain to forsake work and to give themselves to idleness' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 54). The Church, which we recall possessed between a fifth and a third of all land in Europe at the end

of the Middle Ages, found itself obliged to manage this land, and thus rapidly turned itself into a banking organization.²⁴ In their turn, monarchs, whose power had been based upon a social hierarchy of dependencies and the quantities of energy, provisions, tools and arms that they could exact in the name of feudal obligations now 'depended more and more . . . on saltpetre, cannons and mercenaries which they could procure with money'.²⁵

For monarchs spent much of their time waging war to preserve their kingdoms, whether large or small, whose frontiers were constantly being modified. Within these borders, they also had to confront rebellions of all types, from demands for autonomy to complete independence. Abroad, they mounted by turns defensive or offensive campaigns in a world that had become more and more competitive, to the great delight of cannon manufacturers who could now offer ever-new models to the mercenaries. Warfare became a constant necessity; never could the army be disbanded and more and more mercenary forces had to be recruited. But at the same time the state's coffers were emptying; money fled abroad.

Amid the chaos of organizations in disorder, parasitic opportunists of every kind proliferated, be they land or maritime speculators, pirates or other raiders to whom mercenaries sold their services for the highest price. In short, a vicious circle was created: 'No abundance of gold can be sufficient for a prince who must keep and maintain an army,' concludes Thomas More through his mouthpiece Hythlodæus, citing the adage of Crassus (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 91). The dependence of the powerful on the merchant order was growing steadily greater.²⁶

The collapse of scholasticism

The human aspiration to greatness, rooted in myth and magic, was all the more necessary as traditional religious thought, which had lost all momentum after centuries of endless reiteration, found itself incapable of encompassing the new, be it the new discoveries of science or the mysteries of the New World. The philosophers of the time, lacking in any inspiration after years of scholasticism, could provide no assistance in resolving these matters. As Hythlodæus tartly remarks:

. . . if a man in such a company, when some disdain and have despite at other men's inventions, and some count their own best; if among such men a man should bring forth any thing that he has read [that was] done in times past, or that he has seen done in other places, then the hearer fare as though the whole estimation of their wisdom was in jeopardy to be overthrown and that ever after they should be counted for very [fools] unless they could in other men's invention pick out matter to reprehend and find fault at. If all the other poor helps fail, then this is their extreme refuge: 'These things (they say) pleased our forefathers and ancestors: would God we could be so wise as they were'. And as though they had wittily concluded the matter, and with this answer stopped every man's mouth, they sit down again. (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, pp. 39–40)

The crisis became acute. The attempt to elaborate a scholastic metaphysics of existence at the Council of Basel, which might have produced a concept of the universality of man, was blocked by the traditionalism of the Pope who submitted

the metaphysical ideas for examination by the clergy alone, which fell back on textual tradition. The prevailing current of nominalism in the universities of Northern Europe, by denying mankind the possibility of arriving at universal concepts, condemned humanity to the same fate, that is, to the anxiety of multitudinous diversity.²⁷

War and insurrections multiplied, sowing terror all round; thieves proliferated despite the new resources aimed at combating them, such as mercenaries paid enormous sums and a host of hastily erected prisons. What solution could be found for that steadily rising incidence of violence?

The Second Book: 1789

The answers of the 'experts' of the time do not merit much attention. Hythlodæus exclaimed with indignation: 'For great and horrible punishments be appointed for thieves; whereas much rather provision should have been made that there were some means whereby they might get their living, so that no man should be driven to this extreme necessity, first to steal, then to die' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 44). In the face of an authority which insists that the individual alone should be held responsible for wrong-doing, he proposes an hypothesis which is radically new for that period: that crime is essentially social in origin, the consequences of government which mismanages its natural and human resources. It is true that Hythlodæus does not say so in quite those terms. He is not a teacher, but prides himself rather on being a man of action: a traveller who draws lessons from his experience. The proof that my hypothesis is correct, he implicitly declares, is that I have just come back from the land of nowhere, appropriately named to that effect 'U-topia' (meaning 'of no place' in Greek), where the common weal 'is so well managed and administered' that crime has practically disappeared. We are entering the modern age.

We, who take for granted the existence of a common good vouchsafed by the state, find it difficult to realize how radical such a hypothesis was. We have had centuries to get used to the idea advanced by Hobbes that we have signed a social contract based on reason, or to those of Rousseau and Kant that we are capable of envisaging a common good that is universal, or to be persuaded by Hegel and Marx that such a good is in the process of becoming.

But at the beginning of the 16th century, which could not imagine a world without God and without his earthly representative, duly anointed in a specially consecrated cathedral, the hypothesis advanced by Hythlodæus was revolutionary – even though in the book Thomas More took good care to conclude that it was a 'dream' rather than a political proposition. The man who was to become Chancellor of England shortly after the publication of *Utopia* was much too subtle a politician to allow himself to be carried away by 'utopian' visions. Besides, like all his contemporaries, he could not conceive of a world without God, as shown by the solace he found in prayer during his final days immured alone in the Tower of London.

What More is essentially doing here is replying to the semi-humorous challenge put out by his intellectual soul-mate Erasmus, who had himself just published another bestseller, *In Praise of Folly*, that used a literary device (the *declamatio*)²⁸ to

denounce the moral chaos into which his age was plunged. Such humour was permissible to the humanists, as satire and jesting were becoming a mark of the period. But many commentators have been taken in, reducing *Utopia* to a rather loose reply to the work by Erasmus which, it must be said, was just as loose. Others have seen in it nothing more than a charming tale, in the way some saw in *Alice in Wonderland* just a simple children's story. An injustice if there ever was one! Lewis Carroll was in fact a mathematician who created a universe based around the logic of the playful. Thomas More was a master rhetorician who proposed to the modern world a rigorous philosophical system. He was, after all, a student of the Greek *logos*, of the Thomist *summae* and of medieval rhetoric.

The propositions

Everything holds together in *Utopia* and everything is clear from the beginning; the propositions concerning Man are not only put forward but held for what they are: not as transcendent truths but as possible definitions, games of the mind which permit the elaboration of a logical system, which is what Thomas More does. We are far from Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Husserl or Heidegger, who all affirmed, without the slightest trace of humility, that they had laid the permanent foundations of systems of thought on which could finally be erected 'all future metaphysics', to pick up the famous expression of Kant. So persuaded were they of having formulated the absolute that they have been followed by hordes of disciples, converted to what is, in the end, but an act of faith.

The game-playing with ideas found in *Utopia* explains why Thomas More is not considered a 'true' philosopher and studied as such. Despite its success, the work has not generated any disciples. Quite to the contrary, the book tends to profoundly irk educated readers, including those who nevertheless admire another book published in 1515, also deficient in logic but which deals with *Realpolitik*: Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Let's come back to More's base principle: the cause of evil is social (today we would say socio-economic). The chief specific cause of this is private property. 'Thus I do fully persuade myself', he says (through Hythlodæus), 'that no equal and just distribution of things can be made, nor that perfect wealth shall ever be among men unless this property be exiled and banished; but as long as it shall continue, so long shall remain the heavy and inevitable burden of poverty and wretchedness' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 107). It is therefore purely and simply abolished by the Utopians, right down to its symbolic connotations. All house doors are constituted of two swinging leaves which give under the slightest push of the hand and which close again automatically. Hence whoever will may enter. Thus, nowhere can be found the slightest trace of private property. The basis of the social structure is human dignity, a product of the altruism inherent within mankind. It is that which distinguishes man from animals. A society's role is to assist man to realize his true nature.

The second cause of social ills, which is everywhere apparent according to Hythlodæus, is the manipulation of scarcity, which is a particular aspect of appropriation. Nature, he says, would never have accorded any utility to gold 'if the folly

of men had not set it in higher estimation for the rareness's sake' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 174). The solution is to depreciate the mythic value of a metal which was in reality relatively abundant. It was therefore 'of gold and silver they [the Utopians] commonly make chamber pots, chains and fetters . . . wherein they tie their bondmen' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, pp. 175–6) as well as the badges of infamy that traitors must bear. As for pearls, they are given to children to play marbles with.²⁹

Man is innocent. Thus, freed from the burden of sin and its expiation, he has but one goal in life, a goal shared moreover with all living creatures: he wants to avoid pain and simply seeks pleasure. But because he is endowed with the skill of practical reasoning, he has an advantage over the animals: he can maximize his pleasures by differentiating among them and by eliminating those whose subsequent cost (in terms of suffering) is likely to be too great.

This is an Epicurean axiom that leads to a practice of asceticism since by logic one should not become attached to anything in order to minimize the causes of suffering. Epicurus indeed recommended that one should flee social commitments (by having no family, no children, nor even friends who might be too demanding) so as to live simply in the acceptance of the present, reduced to its most simple expression. The 'gardens of Epicurus' celebrated in song by Pic de la Mirandole were neither dionysian nor social.

Hence Thomas More, who was too much a Christian and a politician to allow himself to be tempted by such Epicurean social withdrawal, added a variant to the definition of the man of pleasure: human beings, he propounded, are naturally altruistic, but calculatedly so. We are not far removed here from the most recent theses of evolutionists: man maximizes his chances of survival by being part of a group, and in this sense serves his individual interests when he serves the group. Thomas More gave clear assertion to this precept: to take care of a sick person is not only to ensure one receives reciprocal care in one's own turn, but it is also to assure one's own pleasure. The reasoning Utopian would have understood that his personal happiness came through that of others and that the maximization of his individual pleasure depended on the good governance of the community. The common good and individual happiness were one and the same.

Truth is utility

In fact, every reasonable person understands this, and his earthly representative, the Utopian, has the precious tool of reason at his disposal. It should be made clear though that we are not talking here of a *Logos* measured on the scale of Ideas, or of a transcendental reason which allows us to contemplate some higher principle of morality. Utopian reason is instrumental in nature, a tool for assessing probabilities which functions at the level of practicality, not those of contemplation or revelation. In the Utopian world, the texts of the ancients, whether philosophical or religious, lose their status as foundations of authority and pass to the secondary role of providing complementarity or pleasure. They are drawn on for whatever is useful. From religions is retained notably their most positive aspects, like that of the immortality of the soul. A pleasant idea after all (for there is nothing more difficult than facing

the idea of finitude), which is most useful should there be a need to strengthen the moral order of society.

It should be noted that a plurality of religions was entertained, not a single religion which might become dominant and so strip away the pleasure principle. The Utopians are free to choose their religion, and furthermore, the door is open to others. If travellers mooring their ships in Utopia's ports succeed in introducing a cult which is compatible with the *praxis*, the local inhabitants may be converted to it without hindrance.³⁰

For the Utopians exhibit a remarkably predatory habit towards all that is practical. They borrow for themselves any technique, product or thought that adds to both common and individual wealth and pleasure. In this sense, Thomas More's Utopia is not a utopia in the tradition of Plato's Republic, or the utopias of the 19th and 20th centuries. These other models were fixed in time and suffered from obsolescence due to the belief of their founders that they had found an eternal ideal. Even Marx, whose concept is a progressive development, stops time once the conditions for human happiness are achieved.

Good is efficiency

This predation is not, however, one driven by the imperative of growth in the modern sense, but a practical policy which never loses sight of the need for maintaining the stability of the common weal. In Utopia, growth is never for growth's sake. Rather, things are assimilated and managed in such a way that everyone works to the best of their ability and for the contentment of each and every one. Considering the Epicurean premises from which Hythlodæus started out, this choice seems self-evident, given that the over-accumulation of goods and capital could be regarded as an excess of unnatural and unnecessary pleasures which are likely to bring about many social ills. In reality, one of the greatest transgressions against oneself and others is non-productivity. Thomas More, through the mouth of Hythlodæus, does not cease to lambast 'good-for-nothings', 'idlers', the 'slothful' and 'parasites' among whom are numbered indolent property-holders, overfed monks, false beggars, malingerers, litigious lawyers, philosophers and women who see in marriage the excuse for laziness. Nor will there be found anywhere in the island places of leisure which encourage sloth and indulgence, such as taverns, cabarets and brothels.

Such indeed is the importance of productivity that it accords the Utopians the right to annex any lands they need which they judge to be poorly exploited. Not without some astonishment one reads this text which seems to justify the contemporary practice of hostile take-overs: '[A]ny people, explains Hythlodæus [which] holds a piece of ground void and vacant to no good or profitable use, [keeps] others from the use and possession of it who . . . ought thereof to be nourished and relieved' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 155).

We are close to the modern era and its multi-national businesses when Thomas More opens the doors of Utopia Corporation to the most capable and competent of foreigners, who are made fully participating members. As for less wealthy foreigners,

they are granted more or less the status of migrant workers, as they will work for a period on probation and not for lesser wages but for a longer number of hours.

For the comparison with modern business stops there. In Utopia wages do not exist, nor does a currency. Money is judged unnecessary since the pleasure of participating in the creation of the common good fills the Utopians with delight, and because the community supplies them with all they need: free education, a precursor system of social security and a civil life 'steeped in agreeableness' where the legitimate use of force, the prerogative of any government, is reduced to a minimum.

Good government is small government

More's Utopia is not the Republic of Plato, which was the physical expression of a realm of Ideas contemplated by philosopher-kings by whom it was sternly governed. Rather, Utopia is a kingdom of shared pleasure incompatible with any autocratic power, however legitimized it might be by God or Ideas or any other transcendent concept. It horrifies the Utopians to hear stories told by visiting mariners recounting fearful tales of corruption and incompetence on the part of those who claim to draw their authority from a source other than the consensus on which all the Utopians' decisions are based.

Granted, Utopia does have a government, a thought centre which administers the decisions, but everything is done for it to be little more than an efficient secretariat. The laws themselves are reduced to a minimum and 'they are clear for everyone'. There are few magistrates and few people's representatives. For the Utopians have the right of 'secret election' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 136) in a representative system of several levels. In urgent cases, they go directly to a referendum and the whole island is consulted. It is also ensured that no elected person can become incrustated in a territorial power base from which he cannot be dislodged. Instead, representatives come and go, and no hereditary or caste system is permitted to hinder the application of the principle of merit as defined by the community. The Utopians are all equals – before productivity.

And as all have understood that their personal happiness is contingent on that of the common enterprise, measures of control and coercion are rarely necessary. Certainly there are a few monitors who 'take heed that no man sit idle but that every one apply his own craft with earnest diligence' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 141), but it is the monitors who risk lacking work. Social control passes from the arbitrary violence of the individual to diffuse collective pressure. Whence the idea that the reverse side of the sin of idleness is that of wanting to escape this consensus. One cannot be free except insofar as the other, who includes the self, permits it. And this permission is never in the form of a directive but as a persuasion, based on an appeal to reason. The social ethic is no longer outwardly coercive: it is interiorized in the form of 'self-control'.

The weight of persuasion exercised by God is replaced by that of the other, but this weight in principle is light, since the individual understands that he is in fact serving his own interest, and since envy and hatred have been eliminated by economic reform.

Effectively, therefore, there remains little to direct except the common utopian enterprise, and the government, unencumbered by disputes over power, applies itself to this task with diligence and efficiency. It draws up plans by having recourse to economic statistics. Everything comes under its management: human, natural and financial resources. But this management has one single goal: to the extent that meeting public need permits, to gain as many hours possible on the time absorbed in satisfying the physical needs of the body so that 'all people should have as much free time to themselves as may be necessary for the improvement of their minds, for in this they think the happiness of life consists' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 152).

Return full circle: 2005

That was the utopian dream! But it was not just a dream. Near the end of *Utopia*, Thomas More has his namesake say: 'Would to God it might once come to pass. In the meantime, [though] I cannot agree and consent to all things that he said, being else without doubt a man singularly well-learned, and also in all worldly matters exactly and profoundly experienced, so must I needs confess and grant that many things be in the utopian weal public, which in our cities I may rather wish for than hope for' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, pp. 308–9).

That said, we are par excellence the animal that dreams. Across cultures and civilizations, we sculpt our ideals in the stone of cathedrals, we inscribe our moral precepts in the flesh of the tortured and we set out our hope for a better world in every word of our declarations of human rights and freedoms. More's *Utopia* has opened for us the doors to a possibility of happiness that does not go through the expiation of sin; it postulates an attainable collective harmony, a paradise on earth based on reason. Centuries of reflection on the nature of 'good government' have continued from that launch platform. Jean Bodin pursued the idea of an overarching state structure, Thomas Hobbes founded the principles of consensual instrumental reason. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Kant imagined a transcendent reason which would guide both individuals and societies. Hegel and Marx inscribed this in history under the name of progress. All wanted to believe that human happiness depends upon good government and public institutions that served the common good. More's text was not only the first of its type, but it obliges us to 'found' this hope on explicit rigorous propositions and to remain logically consistent with ourselves. Whence, no doubt, comes the sense of 'déjà vu' which may accompany the reading of this text, a sentiment, though, that may often be accompanied by irritation when we are forced to face up to the absurdly gratuitous postulates on which we have for so long based so many of our hopes.

For five centuries have rolled by and such hope has not only sustained currents of thought but has also been put into practice. It has spread from state to state and across all continents. We now may dream of a universal world government which would serve humanity as a whole rather than the particular interests denounced in the sombre First Book of *Utopia*. But let us not close that First Book too quickly, for powerful hegemonies are returning in force to attack the Island of Utopia from all sides.

Now, in 2006, let us imagine a group of specialists in public affairs who are discussing the present-day situation, without Hythlodæus, and are deploring the disorders, crimes and chaos afflicting the world. But let us imagine specialists who this time denounce the failure of the utopian dream. 'It was a resounding failure', they will say, 'because the government and public institutions in no way serve the common good, but very particular interests.' And they will cite a plethora of examples, whether empirical or accompanied by figures and data, which seem to confer on the discussion an objectivity they will claim is scientific.

The specialists of 2006 are just as bound up in their preconceived notions as their predecessors of 1515 who drew their authority from the interpretation the Church had put on thousands of Greek or Latin manuscripts. Besides the figures and data supplied by the universities, today's analysts have access not only to works in the field but also to whole schools of thought devoted to social criticism. The Chicago School, as just one example, has published multiple studies to show that the principle of altruism on which the common good of Utopia is founded is not only erroneous but detrimental. In October 1986, James M. Buchanan even received the supreme honour of a Nobel Prize for Economics for his analyses of the behaviours of politicians and civil servants, which in his view establish clearly that when bureaucratic rivalries take place, they are always to the detriment of the common good, defined in terms of the budgets assigned to social programmes.³¹

Human beings are by nature egotistical

Buchanan's prize was in actual fact the second Nobel of its type; the first was awarded to Milton Friedman who had taken up in its entirety the first utopian proposition of the maximization of individual pleasures, but had cast aside the aspect which would permit the foundation of an egalitarian society in Utopia: the pleasure that comes from giving pleasure. For the precursor of *Public Choice Theory*, the individual is egotistical: 'almost every individual serves his own private interest . . . The great Saints of history have served their "private interest" just as the most money-grubbing miser has served his private interest. The *private interest* is whatever it is that drives an individual.'³²

To be sure, Thomas Hobbes had said the same thing back in the 17th century when declaring that 'Man is a wolf towards Man' (*Homo homini lupus est*), but he had recognized the necessity for government and social institutions. A feeling stronger than love – fear – brings people together who, in order to escape from that fear, arrive eventually at a reasonable consensus called a 'social contract'.³³ Today the most extreme partisans of *Public Choice Theory* have dismissed 'fear', or rather have renamed it the 'healthy competitive spirit', and have abandoned all idea of a social contract. For them, public institutions are therefore not only of no use, but are positively threatening for the economic health of all. The individual is on his or her own and he or she must be left the liberty of their choices.

Out of this principle, a whole logic is derived, articulated for example by Mario Bunge around the following 10 points:

1. The individual as consumer is sovereign.
2. Man is insatiable in his needs.
3. Man is essentially acquisitive.
4. Every person has preferences and can classify them logically by order of priority.
5. Every person is disposed to act in pursuit of satisfying their needs.
6. Man tends to minimize the effort necessary to satisfy his needs; more specifically, man hates work.
7. Man is naturally competitive, even aggressive, rather than cooperative.
8. The more wealth one possesses, the less one appreciates the increase in quantity (law of diminishing marginal utility).
9. Man must constantly confront choices and hence is forced to take decisions.
10. Man seeks optimization: he takes decisions that are most fitting for optimizing his effectiveness (or well-being or acquisitions).³⁴

Economics as a religion

Despite this, there is no implied return to Epicurean solitude which, we recall, was fundamentally asocial, nor to the Hobbesian wolf stalking the Arctic tundra in solitary isolation. No libertarian theoretician has challenged the great Aristotelian principle that affirms that 'man is a political animal'. But they have managed the remarkable achievement of reconciling the individual devoted only to himself with involvement in a social dimension by creating a type of religion from the ground up, as Harvey Cox, in a celebrated article which appeared in 1999, has so well demonstrated.³⁵

For this former Harvard professor of theology, there was a sense of *déjà vu* when he came to read the business newspapers. All the themes of the financial pages, he found, were direct parallels of theological texts. They were constructed around giving a sense to human history and ideas such as the 'fall' and 'redemption' of man. Put 'God' in the place of 'the Market' and all becomes clear: the market is omnipotent. Cox defines this term as 'the ability to define reality', 'the power to create something from nothing and nothing from something'. The reality created by the market leaves no other space available since everything can be reduced to figures and traded on the stock exchange, whether it be sacred sites, human body parts, traditional methods of nutrition or Tibetan prayers. Its omnipotence is such that proofs to the contrary (for example, monetary losses in billions of dollars) are interpreted as simply doctrinal corrections and a supplementary proof of its existence.

The market is omniscient. Like God, it knows man and his most secret needs (the proof of which is the sale of a product or service that corresponds to these). Only the market can determine the value of goods and services through the indicative processes of the international stock exchanges. Financial experts have become high priests and prophets whose advice must be heeded on pain of excommunication and damnation. Every political initiative must pass by its judgement.

The market is omnipresent. It has invaded everything, including private life (family, couple relationships, friendships, etc.), which hitherto had escaped its ambit.

Cox fails to add that the market is also a promise of paradise, with the powers of divine reward this time attributed to the 'invisible hand' of Adam Smith. Thus can the logic of the proposition be drawn: when individuals are finally left free to choose, their interests will intersect in a free market and eventually will find a state of dynamic equilibrium which is for the greater benefit of each and every one, since prosperity, unencumbered by governments and bureaucracy, will be able to spread its benefits to a greater and greater number of individuals. Such is the promise made by the prophets of futurology like Alvin Toffler.³⁶

Transgression and fear

Without realizing it we find ourselves back in 1515, for with the individual who is the sole master of choice returns the individual solely responsible for his actions. The modern-day 'thieves' now have the weapons that a free firearms market can procure for them. But just like their miscreant forebears, they bear alone the weight of transgression should they use them wrongfully. The slogan is constantly repeated: 'Guns do not kill people; people kill people.' No other explanation of crime is tolerated, whether one points to social class divisions, a deficient education system, the age of the perpetrators, the easy accessibility of firearms or advertising which drives up their sales. The firearms dealer (the market) is innocent and cannot be held to blame for the criminal who is free by definition to heed or not the voice of the devil.

We are thus rediscovering the age-old precept of freedom of choice which served feudalism so well. It should not surprise us then if the proponents of the free market are also religious fundamentalists whose mission on earth is to denounce and punish the sinners that plague them. Like the market worshippers, their first goal is to get rid of every institution which administers a collective good in which they do not believe and which in particular will not let them mete out punishment as they intend. These two factions both need the most guilt-inducing forms of their religion to spread in order to heap the whole burden of any fault on the individual, just as Henry VIII, whose giant shadow hovers over the First Book of *Utopia*, had needed to believe that individuals freely chose to hearken unto the devil when they stole a loaf of bread. One should not be surprised if they receive the electoral support both of the most fervent religious believers among the very poor and of the most cynical atheists on Wall Street. Both groups are united by an overwhelming desire for punishment.

Such a transfer of responsibility on to the individual is accompanied, as 500 years ago, by an obsession with the body, deemed the source of 'sin' if its instincts are allowed free rein. It is no longer quite the same sin, but the base principles remain unchanged. It is that the individual must feel solely culpable for not controlling his or her impulses. For example, the obsession with thinness is a political instrument par excellence, because it will demand that individuals prove (by their slimness of figure) that they have mastery over their bodies without there being any analysis of the responsibility carried by those industries that are destroying them. The obsession over slimness/health/appearance will also and especially channel energies towards individual concerns, hence leaving aside the more important body, which is the social body.

The new powers, by which we mean the multinational corporations, thus have their hands free to achieve what they are predestined to achieve by the laws of the market harmonized by the invisible hand of a bean-counting God: limitless growth.

Plea for a new-era Utopia

But is this truly a return to the past? Have the two books of *Utopia* simply been inverted, with the First Book now denouncing the follies of applying utopian principles while the Second holds out alluringly before us the prospect of a free and prosperous world? Was Plato right when he declared around 2500 years ago that 'there is nothing new under the sun'? We are simply going to offer another proposition: No.

For Raphael Hythlodæus, multiplied many times, has not let go and continues to tirelessly denounce, in writing or in images, the hegemonic arrogance displayed by the new powers, the tortuous ideology to which they subscribe and the dangers they represent for all humanity.³⁷ Which does not mean that he waves the Second Book like a bible. For *Utopia* is no longer read as simply, and we no longer dream of such an island, directed like a modest business without any concern for the surrounding world. There is no longer any such island on earth and direction can no longer be anything but global.

But no intergalactic traveller has yet come to tell us of a far-off planet and have us dream of a better way of running ours by proposing to us a coherent and consistent system. For the moment we lack a coherent language.

We are still at the point of trying to find unifying concepts for the whole of humankind, a task made all the more difficult as new discoveries and technologies blur the boundaries between the human and the animal, between life and death, between the living cell and the living being. Cut off from our traditions and exposed to a variety of different thought-systems, we are incapable of replying with a single voice to the three questions posed by globalization: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?

We are still at the point of trying clumsily to put together charters of rights which might harmonize both individual and collective needs. The task is not easy. On the one hand, the altruistic precept derived from the Enlightenment is under attack from all sides, not only by the market economy but also by those who see in it an instrument of cultural domination and who would rather revert to sacred religious texts and culturally specific traditions. On the other hand, we must now integrate new collective rights, notably those for the protection of the environment which have been completely ignored by 500 years of 'altruistic' thought. The Utopians saw nature as a mere commodity, while the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, though they may have rhapsodized nature as a woman, also treated her as such. As for the writings of Karl Marx, they have contributed to the creation of ecological disasters on such a scale that these have threatened the very survival of the workers of the dreamed-for revolution. All still remains to be done in the matter of international law.

We are having immense difficulty in maintaining even the embryonic form of a

global government representing the human totality which might decide priorities for the world and which especially may have the possibility of getting the new forms of law respected.

We have an urgent need of a *Utopia*, because it is impossible for us to commit ourselves to any cause without a vision to guide us. Is there somewhere in the world a Thomas More and an Erasmus who are working on the human dream? That is my wish and my hope.

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Notes

1. The enthusiasm for More is itself a source of curiosity. Richard Marius, amongst others, points out that *Utopia* 'has come close to being buried by the profusion of academic studies; dozens and perhaps hundreds of authors have been inspired by it to erect their own utopian dreams, and, to a certain degree, one might also say that the science fiction genre was born of *Utopia* . . . [I]t takes only one evening to read this little book, whereas you need a lifetime to understand it' (Marius, 1985: 153).
2. McCutcheon (1983: 9).
3. Eliade (1963).
4. According to J. H. Hexter, it would seem that Thomas More and Erasmus compiled the First Book after the Second Book (see Logan, 1983: 11).
5. Thomas More was not tempted by wilful self-destruction. It was not a great idea to talk of the kingdom of England, where Henry VIII held sway. By proxy therefore the characters discussed the kingdom of France which rivalled England in both qualities and faults.
6. 'Holinshed, in his *Chronicles*, affirmed that during his reign Henry VIII had more than twelve thousand thieves and vagabonds hanged.' Quoted by Prévost (1978: 378).
7. The great classic Delumeau (1978) is interesting to read on this subject.
8. There were in fact several demographic explosions in Western Europe. One occurred between 1110 and 1350, another between 1450 and 1650.
9. Braudel (1982a).
10. See Braudel (1982b).
11. Mairet (1978: 212–13).
12. 'What was new, from the 14th century on, was that merchants began to form companies [. . .].'
Translated from Mairet (1978: 214).
13. Trans. from Mairet (1978: 226).
14. Trans. from Mairet (1978: 216).
15. See Boorstin (1983: 150f.).
16. See Bernstein (2001).
17. Strosetzki (1990: 18).
18. Morgan (1996).
19. This development has been humorously described in Eco (1994).
20. The discovery of the self would culminate in the *Lettres persanes* [*Persian Letters*] of Montesquieu.
21. See Bodéüs (1988).
22. One should read on this subject the classic work Huizinga (1954).
23. For an interesting discussion of this see Geremek (1987).
24. 'The Church, once an organisation for dispensing service, became an owning and tax-collecting

- organisation. To put the matter briefly, butter and eggs could not be sent over the Alps to Rome, but money could' (Ames, 1949: 129).
25. In 1848, Thomas Babington Macaulay was writing in relation to this: 'In the monarchies of the Middle Ages the power of the sword belonged to the prince; but the power of the purse belonged to the nation; and the progress of civilisation, as it made the sword of the prince more and more formidable to the nation, made the purse of the nation more and more necessary to the prince' (Macaulay, 1913: 36). Ames (1949: 34) takes up the same theme in these terms: 'Everywhere in western Europe we find the same contradictory political picture. The new monarchies were despotic, constantly consolidating and seeking broader areas to control; but they were hardly all-powerful. In the newly vital matter of money, they found themselves weak.'
 26. 'The middle class, in its inconsistent and only partly conscious campaign against feudalism, had the merchants as its chief economic power and the humanists as its ideological shock troops – with More active in both groups' (Ames, 1949: 8). See also Schöpflin (1990: 58).
 27. See Lohr (1988: 537–638).
 28. The writer pretends to praise what in fact is being criticized by emphasizing all its most caricatural characteristics.
 29. By designating these two causes as sources of the ills of societies, Hythlodæus neatly resolves the problem of the accumulation of capital, the consequence of work, which was posing a problem at the beginning of the 16th century and was leaving humanists uncertain of what stand to take, and hence more ambiguous and contradictory than ever. Erasmus and Guillaume Budé, among others, berated the use of gold and the accumulation of wealth (in the form of gold and landed property). But at the same time, according to Ward Allen, 'it is amply clear that the humanists respected gold'. In his later writings, More would adopt the same point of view: it was not gold in itself which corrupted, but the use to which it was put.
 30. 'There are several sorts of religions [among the Utopians]', explains Hythlodæus, 'not only in different parts of the island, but even in every town; some worshipping the sun, others the moon, or one of the planets. Some worship such men as have been eminent in former times for virtues or glory, not only as ordinary deities, but as the supreme God' (*Utopia*, Oxford 1895, p. 266).
 31. Buchanan (1986).
 32. Friedman (1976: 11).
 33. McPherson (1962).
 34. Dr Mario Bunge, philosopher and professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy at McGill University. 'Considérations d'un philosophe sur l'économie du néo-conservatisme (néo-libéralisme)' [Considerations of a philosopher on the economics of neo-conservatism (economic neo-liberalism)] in Jalbert and Lepage (1986: 49–70). The essence of this text is drawn from an unpublished study under the English title *The Methodological Crisis of Economics*. An initial version of this study was published in Spanish, see Bunge (1982).
 35. Cox (1999).
 36. Toffler (1995).
 37. In North America these may be identified (among many others) as J. K. Galbraith, Harvey Cox, Paul Krugman, Joel Bakan, Georges Soros, Edward Luttwack, Michael Moore.

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