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Systemic Remedies for Systemic Ills: The Political Thought of More's *Utopia*

George M. Logan

'Thus I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely abolished, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can the business of mortals be conducted happily. As long as private property remains, by far the largest and best part of the human race will be oppressed by a distressing and inescapable burden of poverty and anxieties. This load, I admit, may be lightened to some extent, but I maintain it cannot be entirely removed. Laws might be made that no one should own more than a certain amount of land or receive more than a certain income. Or laws might be passed to prevent the prince from becoming too powerful and the populace too insolent. It might be made illegal for public offices to be solicited or put up for sale or made burdensome for the office-holder by great expense. Otherwise, officials are tempted to get their money back by fraud or extortion, and only rich men can accept appointment to positions which ought to go to the wise. Laws of this sort, I agree, may have as much effect as poultices continually applied to sick bodies that are past cure. The social evils I mentioned may be alleviated and their effects mitigated for a while, but so long as private property remains, there is no hope at all of effecting a cure and restoring society to good health. While you try to cure one part, you aggravate the wound in other parts. Suppressing the disease in one place causes it to break out in another, since you cannot give something to one person without taking it away from someone else.'

*'But I don't see it that way', I said. 'It seems to me that people cannot possibly live well where all things are in common.'*¹

This passage occurs late in Book I of the two books of *Utopia*, in the climactic pages of the broadly ranging dialogue on English and European society and politics that constitutes that book. The speakers here are, first, the fictitious character Raphael Hythloday (Hythlodæus in More's Latin), who in Book II reports on the island commonwealth of Utopia, newly discovered somewhere off the coast of South America, and, in the second paragraph, More

himself – or, at least, a character who shares his name and biography, although the dialogue he takes part in is fictitious and in some passages of the work the author clearly holds his namesake at an ironic distance (as, indeed, he also holds Hythloday, whose name, based in Greek, means something like ‘expert in nonsense’ – though almost all of what Hythloday says is the opposite of nonsensical). The passage provides a key to understanding the most important facts about More’s contribution to utopian thought and writing. But seeing how this is so requires some prior contextualization.

Evidently *Utopia* did not originally *have* a first book. In 1519 (that is, three years after the initial publication of the work), Desiderius Erasmus – the pre-eminent humanistic scholar of the era – wrote a brief but extremely interesting biography of More, whom he had known well for two decades, in a letter to the humanist and religious reformer Ulrich von Hutten. The rapid overview of More’s writing included in this sketch reports that he had written Book II of *Utopia* ‘earlier, when at leisure; at a later opportunity he added the first in the heat of the moment’.² In the mid-twentieth century, J. H. Hexter – the most brilliant critic of More’s book – argued persuasively that the period of leisure must have occurred in the summer and autumn of 1515, the latter part of a period of nearly six months (early May to late October) when More was a member of a royal trade mission to Bruges.³ By 21 July, negotiations were stalled and recessed (as More reports in the opening of Book I), and at some point More betook himself to Antwerp, where he met another of Erasmus’s friends, Pieter Gillis (usually anglicized as Peter Giles), a humanist and practical man of affairs, city clerk of Antwerp. In one of the commendatory letters that buttressed the first and subsequent editions of *Utopia*, Giles hints broadly that the book originated in conversations between himself and More (120). He appears in Book I, whose opening recounts More’s introduction to him and, in turn, his introduction of More to Hythloday. Giles is the third, albeit minor, speaker in the dialogue that follows, and a letter to him constitutes the preface to *Utopia*. Hexter also pointed out that the ur-*Utopia* cannot have consisted simply of the current Book II, since that part lacks the scene-setting of the opening pages of Book I and thus begins with an unidentified speaker addressing an unidentified audience in an unspecified location. So, he postulated, the original form of *Utopia* must have had an opening similar or identical to the early pages of what is now Book I, and More – as an afterthought, back in London – must have opened a ‘seam’ in those pages to insert the dialogue that became the rest of that book. Almost certainly this seam was at the point where More, as narrator, says that he will recount only what Hythloday said about the island of Utopia – but then suddenly veers off to the dialogue that occupies the remainder of Book I (12 and n. 15).

More, as he explains in the letter to Giles, had an extremely busy life in London and did not in fact finish the book until nearly a year after his return from Flanders. On 3 September 1516 he sent his manuscript to Erasmus,

who was entrusted with seeing it through the press and with gathering commendations from fellow humanists and, if possible, also from ‘distinguished statesmen’.⁴ Erasmus shared the manuscript with Giles, who (as he says in his commendatory letter) added to it the marginal glosses – some 200 of them, ranging in length from a single word to a sentence – that form a running commentary on the book. And someone – one hopes it was More – gave it the title (converting from the Latin) *On the Best State of a Commonwealth and On the New Island of Utopia* (where ‘and’ creates an intriguing ambiguity), which is followed by the subtitle-and-puff (presumably by Erasmus or Giles) *A Truly Golden Little Book, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining, by the Most Distinguished and Eloquent Author Thomas More, Citizen and Undersheriff of the Famous City of London*.

From early on, editors and critics of the book have, in effect, often second-guessed More’s decision to revise the ur-*Utopia* by adding Book I. Many of the early translations of *Utopia* into the European vernaculars either omit Book I entirely or abridge it;⁵ and in a study of More’s reception, Anne Lake Prescott has traced in English editions of the work from the first one, by Ralph Robinson (1551), through Bishop Gilbert Burnet’s (1664), the process by which the elaborate title and subtitle-puff were gradually reduced to the single word ‘*Utopia*’ – ‘as though the island Hythloday describes in Book II had somehow colonized Book I and its discussions and debates: the part has become the whole ... From the mere object of a preposition in the first Latin titles, More’s island would eventually become a solitary italicized name: *Utopia*’.⁶ These developments testify to the fact that readers of More’s book over the centuries have generally been more interested in the account of Utopia than in the dialogue that precedes it – a fact that is more a tribute to the special merits of Book II than to any deficiency in Book I, which has, at least for the last century or more, been held in high regard by many readers. Still, most criticism of *Utopia*, from 1516 to the present, has been focused primarily or exclusively on Book II. When Book I has come in for attention, it has often been treated – in a way that, after all, the compositional history would seem to justify – as largely independent of Book II. Hexter, especially, wrote that ‘the published version of *Utopia* falls into two parts which represent two different and separate sets of intentions on the part of its author’.⁷

It is certainly true that *Utopia* can appear to be two largely discrete little books, not only in substance but in form. The primary disciplinary affiliation of Renaissance humanism was with rhetoric, whose classical Greek and Roman form the humanists revived, even as they revived the classical form of the Greek and Latin languages. More was a virtuoso rhetorician – his biographer Peter Ackroyd says that rhetoric was ‘the basis of all his work. His wit, his ingenuity as a writer, his skill as an actor, and his public roles, were all part of the same dispensation’⁸ – and the two books of *Utopia* constitute, in essence, brilliant examples of two quite different rhetorical species.

The dialogue of Book I consists mainly of deliberative oratory, the oratory of persuasion and dissuasion, associated especially with debate about public policy: the deliberative orator argues either for or against a course of action, most often with arguments based on one or both of the two great *topoi* of deliberative, *honestas* (honour/morality) and *utilitas* (utility/expediency).⁹ The framing dialogue of Book I of *Utopia* is a debate, structured by these *topoi*, on the question of whether Hythloday should join a king's council – and thus, in general, whether a humanist intellectual should enter practical politics. Early in that debate – which often goes by the name Hexter gave it, the 'Dialogue of Counsel', and addresses one form of the ancient question of the choice between action and contemplation – Hythloday offers, in illustration of his claim that in fact it would be worse than useless for him to become a councillor, a verbatim report of a debate (that is, a dialogue *within* the dialogue of counsel) in which he took part, almost twenty years previously, at the dinner table of John Cardinal Morton (archbishop of Canterbury and Henry VII's Lord Chancellor) on the efficacy and morality of the current English policy of capital punishment for theft. Subsequently, he gives fictitious but solidly grounded accounts of the deliberations of two royal councils (of the King of France and then of the king of 'some country or other') on, respectively, foreign and domestic policy; that is, on the French king's desire to expand his domain by force and fraud, and the desire of some king or other (he would have put English readers, especially, in mind of the grasping Henry VII) to enrich himself at the cost of impoverishing his subjects. In all three of these included episodes, More wrote for Hythloday utterly splendid deliberative orations showing the immorality and folly of actual policies of European governments, just as he wrote splendid exchanges between Hythloday and himself on the topic of the encompassing debate on whether an intellectual can make things any better by entering politics. Hythloday's final remarks on this subject – which close with the first paragraph of the passage quoted at the head of this essay – reveal his belief that *nothing* can effect major improvements in human society unless private property is first abolished. That shocking revelation produces an immediate change of subject in the dialogue and leads quickly to Hythloday's lengthy account of Utopia, whose communistic society supposedly demonstrates the correctness of his view. Thus in Book II the form of the work abruptly changes from dialogue to monologue – from deliberative to demonstrative rhetoric, the rhetoric of praise (or blame) – as Hythloday describes in detail the commonwealth that, as he says in his peroration, he regards as 'not only the best but indeed the only one that can rightfully claim that name' (103).

But More's decision to preface his monologue with a dialogue was really neither surprising nor ill-advised. First, the topic of his book – 'On the Best State of a Commonwealth' (as given at the beginning of its full title) – had been associated with dialogue since the prototypical works on the topic, Plato's *Republic*, *Statesman* and *Laws*. Second, dialogue was More's best and most natural literary form. In addition to *Utopia*, two other of his greatest works – *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* – are

in this form. Dialogue came naturally to More because it was natural for him to see more than one side to a question (he was a superb lawyer), and because *acting* came naturally to him. There is a wonderful story on this facet of More's character in the biography by his son-in-law William Roper. At the age of about twelve to fourteen, More served as a page in Cardinal Morton's household. Morton was a patron of the early English drama – Henry Medwall, the earliest English vernacular playwright known by name,¹⁰ was a member of his household – and plays were sometimes presented at his court, during which, Roper says, the young More would

suddenly sometimes step in among the players, and never studying for the matter, make a part of his own there presently among them, which made the lookers-on more sport than all the players beside. In whose wit and towardness the Cardinal much delighting would often say of him unto the nobles that sometimes dined with him, 'This child here waiting at the table, whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man'.¹¹

As James McConica has written, 'a penchant for taking on roles, for adopting various voices, ... was deeply imbedded in his nature'.¹²

But quite apart from More's special affinity for it, dialogue was appropriate to a work of this kind because it could, as had been evident since Plato, make philosophy, including political philosophy, much more interesting to read. If the passage that heads this essay were part of a treatise, it would summarize a position that is essentially Plato's and add in the next paragraph that Aristotle, in his critique of the *Republic* in Book II of his *Politics* (for that is where the arguments in this paragraph originated), made the following objections to Plato's position. How much more interesting it is to have the two positions attached to two sharply etched characters *arguing* – just before this passage, heatedly, with More expressing impatience and something close to contempt for what he sees as Hythloday's impractical idealism on the matter of counsel and Hythloday repaying him in similar coin, for what he sees as More's advocacy of morally unacceptable temporizing.

And yet More could not write *only* a dialogue, because his huge contribution to the study of 'the best state of a commonwealth' – the innovation that is definitive of the genre of utopian fiction – was to describe the alternative commonwealth not simply by dialectics but as if it already existed.¹³ For this, he needed demonstrative rhetoric – here, something close to what we know as 'travelogue'.

Book I of *Utopia* is, in a complex and multi-faceted way that is characteristic of its author, the *introduction* to Book II. Its framing dialogue of counsel constitutes an astonishingly brilliant and balanced treatment of the problem of counsel: the essentially insoluble problem of assuring that rulers both get and take good, disinterested advice, in a situation where rule comes by inheritance or military conquest, to individuals who are usually habituated to sycophantic flattery from early childhood and are not infrequently deficient in intelligence or education or both, and where the self-interest of counsellors

leads them to choose and expound their positions on issues with a view not to the public welfare but to besting their peers and flattering their superiors. For an intellectual of integrity, there are two possible responses in this situation. The first, powerfully espoused by Hythloday (it is also Plato's position; e.g. *Republic* 496c-e), is to keep out of politics. The second, equally powerfully espoused by the character More, is to participate but, though retaining one's principles, not to suppose 'every topic suitable to every occasion', instead cultivating an 'indirect approach': 'you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully – and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible' (34–5) – a solution that Hythloday regards as not only morally unacceptable but impracticable. This problem is, however, solved in the Utopian republic, in which all officials are drawn from a class of scholars, comprising individuals who 'from childhood have given evidence of excellent character, unusual intelligence and devotion to learning' (63), so that Utopia is an example of the only kind of state where Socrates says a philosopher should enter politics: one where the rulers are *themselves* philosophers (*Republic* 473c–e, 517b–520d).

The situation is the same with the other topics discussed in Book I. In the dialogue on crime and punishment that is embedded in the dialogue of counsel, Hitlodaëus develops a powerful argument that the ultimate cause of most crime is found in the inequitable distribution of wealth in a society polarized into paupers on the one hand and, on the other, the idle rich and their hangers-on. But in the highly egalitarian society of Utopia, where 'everything belongs to everybody' and where 'no one is poor ..., there are no beggars, and though no one owns anything, everyone is rich' (103), there is no cause for theft, and such crime as remains is committed by a remnant of incorrigibles who act badly despite not being driven by need and despite the excellent education that all Utopians receive. Similarly, the militarism and greed of rulers that Hythloday powerfully satirizes in his accounts of two typical meetings of royal councils do not exist in Utopia, where war is 'utterly despise[d] ... as an activity fit only for beasts' (85) and greed for money has been eliminated by the abolition of money.

Most fundamentally, though, Book I of *Utopia* introduces Book II by developing the method for the analysis of social problems and the formulation of solutions to them that underlies the design of the Utopian construct. In the dialogue on crime and punishment, Hythloday debates with an English lawyer who thinks that the cause of theft is simply the wickedness of thieves, and who therefore believes that the solution of the problem is simply to execute the thieves – and is thus 'amazed' by the fact that, despite the aggressive implementation of this policy, with thieves 'being executed everywhere, he said, with as many as twenty at a time being hanged on a single gallows[,]'¹⁴... so many thieves [still] sprang up everywhere' (15). To Hythloday, the explanation for this paradox lies in the fact that the primary cause of theft is to be found not in the character of thieves but in the polarization of society between rich and poor; and since the *problem* is thus systemic, the *solution* must also be.

This is also his view on counsel, and on every other problem he addresses; and it is clearly More's view as well: for the character More, who disagrees with Hythloday on the validity of one partial solution to the problem of counsel, expresses no disagreement with his social analysis. Hexter, among others, recognized the historic significance of this analysis. More's treatment (conveyed through Hythloday) of social problems is characterized by 'his capacity to see past the symptoms to the sources of trouble'; he sees 'in depth, in perspective, and in mutual relation problems which his contemporaries saw in the flat and as a disjointed series'.¹⁵ This brings us back one last time to the passage at the head of the essay, whose primary significance is that it contains Hythloday's explicit discussion of the holistic view of social problems that underlies all his arguments in Book I and underlies the Utopian construct; the passage also states what, for him, is the main implication of this view, namely, that social justice can be attained only through the elimination of private property.

The metaphor that More has Hythloday use here to characterize this view of social problems and their solution is one of systemic disease. 'As long as private property remains', the largest part of humanity will be oppressed by poverty. Good laws can lighten this burden to some extent, but they can have only 'as much effect as poultices continually applied to sick bodies that are past cure'. Social evils may be 'alleviated' in this way,

but so long as private property remains, there is no hope at all of effecting a cure and restoring society to good health. While you try to cure one part, you aggravate the wound in other parts. Suppressing the disease in one place causes it to break out in another, since you cannot give something to one person without taking it away from someone else.

Plato is fond of the metaphor of the statesman as physician (e.g. *Statesman* 293; *Epistle VII* 330c–331a), and his prescription is similar to Hythloday's: a complete reordering of society from the ground up, with a thoroughly communized ruling class at the top¹⁶. Indeed More *learned* the systemic approach to social problems and their solutions from Plato, and from Aristotle's *Politics*.¹⁷ More's significance as a political philosopher inheres especially in his revival of this Greek approach and in his great innovations within it: first, in presenting his design for an alternative commonwealth as an account of a commonwealth that already exists; second (or so at least it seems to me), in his recognition that the fact that society is a complex network of mutually-affecting parts means that there can never be – even in the realm of theory – a *perfect* commonwealth, because there will always be conflicts between the full realization of different desirable social goals. In the case of Utopia, the consequences of these conflicts show up, not surprisingly, most clearly at or beyond its borders, that is, in Utopia's relations with its neighbours.¹⁸ But this is not to say that best-commonwealth theory cannot provide a guide, both inspirational and practical, to making the social system 'as little bad as possible'.