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More's *Utopia*: Colonialists, Refugees and the Nature of Sufficiency

Susan Bruce

Each city, then, consists of households, the households consisting generally of blood-relations ... To keep the cities from becoming too sparse or too crowded, they have decreed that there shall be six thousand households in each ... with each household containing between ten and sixteen adults. They do not ... regulate the number of minor children in a family. The limit on adults is easily observed by transferring individuals from a household with too many into a household with not enough. Likewise, if a city has too many people, the extra persons serve to make up the shortage of population in other cities. And if the population throughout the entire island exceeds the quota, they enrol citizens out of every city and plant a colony under their own laws on the mainland near them, where the natives have plenty of unoccupied and uncultivated land. These natives who want to live with the Utopians are taken in.

When such a merger occurs, the two peoples gradually and easily blend together, sharing the same way of life and customs, much to the advantage of both. For by their policies, the utopians make the land yield an abundance for all, though previously it had seemed too barren and paltry even to support the natives. But those who refuse to live under their laws, the Utopians drive out of the land they claim for themselves; and on those who resist them, they declare war. The Utopians say it's perfectly justifiable to make war on people who leave their land idle and waste, yet forbid the use and possession of it to others who, by the law of nature, ought to be supported from it. If for any reason the population of one city shrinks so sharply that it cannot be made up without draining others, the numbers are restored by bringing people back from the colonies. This has happened only twice, they say, in their whole history ... They would rather let their colonies perish entirely than allow any of the cities on their island to get too small.¹

In episode one of 'The Promise' (2011), Peter Kosminsky's uncompromising Channel 4 drama about the Israel/Palestine conflict, Erin, the naïve English woman who's spending her gap year at the Tel-Aviv home of her rich Israeli

friend, is told a brief story by her friend's brother, Paul, about a lesson his father tried to teach him when he was a boy. 'When I was ten years old', he tells her,

my father took me to see the border. The Jewish side was, uh, green and fertile, and the Arab side was brown, with a few goats, and then he said to me – and this was this big lesson he wanted me to remember – he said, 'look what they've done with the land in 2000 years. Look what we achieved in fifty'. And this is a good man, a liberal man. It took me years to learn how to question the assumptions behind the things he said to me that day. 'They are not as deserving as we are. They do nothing with the land. They are animals. They hate us.'²

Juxtaposing More's passage with this extract from 'The Promise' illustrates one way in which contemporary readers of *Utopia* might want to keep some Utopian practices at arm's length. Utopian foreign policy, as George Logan has argued, appears hard to distinguish from imperialism. Logan quotes several critics who reached the same conclusion, from the interpretative tradition of post-Versailles Germany noted by Russell Ames and Shlomo Avineri, to Avineri's own claim regarding the dependent relations between Utopia and its neighbours.³ More recently, similar claims have been advanced by Andrew Hadfield, who remarks that the Utopians operate as 'displaced Europeans – English even – who have to confront exactly the same problems as their real counterparts, including the question of appropriating foreign lands to ease domestic pressures'.⁴ Thomas Betteridge, similarly, reads *Utopia* as an encounter narrative which expresses a European fantasy of America as empty space.⁵

Perhaps these colonialist inclinations are unsurprising given the ways in which Utopia is modelled, at least partly, on More's own England. Utopia is a nautical island nation whose main city, Amaurot, has a geography similar to that of London's; it is separated from the mainland by a short channel of water, which Utopus created when he conquered the island, overseeing as he did so the digging of a fifteen-mile channel between Utopia and the mainland (43). The connection of the island's name with that of its first founder is a practice characteristic of early modern imperialism (witness Virginia, the Carolinas, Pennsylvania some years later, and America itself around the time *Utopia* is written). Hythloday had sailed with Amerigo Vespucci (10–11); and Jeffrey Knapp observes that although More 'seems markedly ambivalent about the very fact of America's discovery', *Utopia* 'represents More's attempt to turn England's classical nowhere-ness into a way of seeing England and America as destined for each other'.⁶ More generally, the book is imbued with the dynamism of an emergent sense of nation. The myth of a founding moment – the birth of a nation – is exemplified in Utopus' act (Louis Marin, for instance, reads the destruction of the isthmus as akin to the cutting of an umbilical cord⁷ and Knapp draws attention to theories that England too had once been attached to the mainland⁸). This sense of a nation founded, politically speaking, *ex nihilo*, marks the text as responding to the preoccupations of its own time, as does

the transcription and transliteration of the 'Utopian' poem and alphabet which appeared in the 1518 Basel first edition of the text. Later 'rudely Englished' by the putative translator (with, the 1556 edition of the text is at pains to point out, 'simple knowledge and mean understanding in the Utopian tongue'⁹) the poem and alphabet and its subsequent 'translations', first into Latin and thence, in vernacular versions of the text, into English, Dutch and Spanish, amongst others, can be read as a palimpsestic representation of the text's relation to colonialism and to nation. In the poem, Utopia speaks itself, articulating its own existence – 'Uto-pus it was who redrew the map? And made me an island' – in the 'kingdom of its own language' as Spenser put it. Helgerson, who drew attention to the resonance of Spenser's phrase, points out that in most literature of that nature, the triangle between king, people and language is squared by the inclusion of the poet,¹⁰ but in a typically Utopian twist, that role falls here to the translator, Utopian authorial agency elided, rendered as absent as the place itself. The transliteration and then translation of 'Utopian' into, first Latin, and then a series of vernaculars, echoes the response of real-life European travellers to the new languages encountered in the New World: they transliterated the vocabulary of these indigenous languages into European characters, and then translated them into English, or Portuguese, or Dutch.

In similar fashion, Book I opens by situating its 'characters' in national terms. Its opening paragraphs herald the spatial and political realities of a new, outward-looking European landscape and its burgeoning international networks, both humanist and diplomatic. England, Castile, Flanders, Bruges, Cassel and Antwerp are all mentioned in the first three paragraphs of *Utopia* (8–9) and the epistolary form of the book's paratexts perform the triumph of communication over distance, expressing a delight in the transcendence of national limitations through the power of intellectual exchange which is mirrored in the text's form, composed as it is of a dialogue between two foreign travellers (Morus¹¹ and Hytholoday) and their hosts. *Utopia* opens and proceeds by way of multi-national conversations, and with the buzz of excitement generated by a new *internationalism*. Yet a delight in overcoming the limitations of national boundaries gestures simultaneously to the concrete existence of those boundaries: internationalism presupposes the existence of nation. Indeed, the tension in *Utopia* between, on the one hand, a (new) patriotism expressed through the sense that one's own nation generally does things a good deal better than someone else's might, and, on the other, the pleasures afforded by new forms of European unions, is perhaps not worlds apart from some present day English attitudes to 'the Continent'.

To the traditional understanding of *Utopia* as linked to the emergence of early colonialist experiences, my juxtaposition of this passage with a more recent narrative may add other observations. Anachronous though they may be, the terms of these respective justifications of Israelis and Utopians are strikingly similar. The 'unoccupied and uncultivated land' of one's neighbours

may be made green and fertile, 'yielding an abundance enough' for many, *if only people have the will so to transform it*, instead of being left barren, fit only to feed very few. Both passages voice the conviction that with sufficient labour, the most unforgiving of terrains can be made productive; and, by extension, that those willing so to exert themselves thereby earn the right to the terrain's use. But what each does *not* say is perhaps even more instructive. Both passages are deeply ideological accounts, a fact betrayed by what they omit to mention (which we will come to shortly) and by the drift of the censure embedded in them, from condemnation of the sloth of those who have indulged merely in subsistence farming to something more fundamental. Within a few phrases, the rhetoric of both passages quietly equates the laws of stronger nations with rather more transcendental legitimations. The Utopians insist first that the inhabitants of the land 'live under their laws', and, if they refuse, 'drive them out of the land they claim for themselves'. Utopian 'laws' being those which enable agricultural productivity, utopian law becomes first co-terminous with, and then indistinguishable from, the Law of Nature, which justifies expulsion just as, in 'The Promise', the Israeli narrative equates agricultural failure with the failure to be human, from which follows an irrationality implied to be the true source of the Palestinian conflict.

What is elided in language, then, becomes a crucial factor in its meaning, but material factors must also be suppressed if such imperialist accounts are to serve the ideological work they are designed to fulfil. Unmentioned in the Israeli account is any reference to the politics of water: to the technology and power necessary to bring water in, to control where it goes, and to ensure that its benefits fall to the Israelis, not the Palestinians. (All this particular story lacks, to make its application to Utopia complete, is a reference to its own 'River Anyder' – the waterless river.) And in Utopia, Hythloday's assertion that it is utopian law which enables the land's productivity obscures the resources that allow the Utopians to indulge in this periodic peripatetic population management in the first place. To that claim, we move in a moment. It will illustrate how, despite its ostensible simplicity, this passage exemplifies a fundamentally *Utopian* contradiction. But first, we make a brief digression back into Book I, which will complicate my reading of this passage as a proto-colonial moment.

This measured Utopian ebb and flow into and out of neighbouring lands is not the only instance in the text of references to movements of populations. Book I has its own instances, in the 'great train ... of ... servants' temporarily in the employ of the 'noblemen' of England who 'live idly like drones off the labour of others' and who are 'promptly turned out of doors' to wander through the countryside when they or their masters fall ill; or the mercenaries of France who overrun and destroy the land when they are no longer needed to fight (16–18). Most (in)famous of all are the vast throngs of 'wretched people – men, women, husbands, wives, orphans, widows, parents with little children

and entire families' forced into vagrancy by the practice of enclosure (19). The itinerant poor populate the margins of Book I even when not explicitly invoked, ghostly presences attending the debates about the death penalty, the ills of private property, and the counselling of kings. It is the suffering of those subjected to the depredations of such 'hideous poverty' (20) which prompts Hythloday to articulate his account of an alternative social vision to that blighted European landscape wherein poverty 'exists side-by-side with wanton luxury' and vice – the beer halls, gambling and brothels which Utopia so clearly does without.

Our passage might then serve as Book II's Utopian solution to Book I's concerns with vagrant populations and the disorderly, shifting impermanence they inhabited and were believed more generally to herald.¹² Book I's images of superfluity, overflow and excess are countered in Book II with a model of managed containment, an economy of bodies forever shifting its surplus population somewhere else, or bringing it back again when deficiency manifests itself at home, in the interests of maintaining stasis within the Utopian nation. For if Utopia is 'like' England, it is also England's other, the place against which England and its ills can be thrown into relief. Situating this proto-colonial moment not merely in the historical context of the new imperialism, but also against the textual backdrop of an ethics of population control introduced (paradoxically) by its absence in the Europe of Book I, makes the meaning of this passage less straightforward than I have so far been suggesting. The foreign towns that the Utopians establish are not colonial enclaves in the sense that – say – Virginia was. They can be evacuated at a moment's notice, without any affective attachment to new landscapes having been established within the Utopians who have temporarily inhabited it. Even the founding of Utopia itself is not unproblematically colonialist. Utopia is created as a nation, not as a tributary or colony of another, and Utopus, although not himself Utopian, never goes home to wherever he first came from. Instead, like Hythloday, whose 'inheritance he has abandoned, giving it to his brother' (10), Utopus may be a figure for someone who finds an adoptive country and leaves his old one behind. Hythloday himself, 'Portuguese by birth', has abandoned his nation as easily as he has his patrimony. When we see him first, our attention is drawn to his 'sun-burned face ... long beard, and ... cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders' (9), and even the phrase 'Portuguese by birth' implies that his attachment to his native land is no longer as fundamental to his identity as it once was. Peripatetic, enigmatic, seemingly now nationless, Hythloday is the original stranger, the consummate wanderer, drifting from Old World to New and back again only to promise to repeat the process anew once he has finished the telling of his tale.

There is a complex interplay going on in *Utopia* then, between the imperialist impulse to appropriate the agricultural wealth of other countries, justified by the concept of 'nation' embedded in the invocation of Utopian law, and the

idealization in the text of figures able to shrug off their national identities and leave that birthright behind them, just as perhaps Morus himself does when the conversations of his European companions make him forget the family he's left at home (9). It is not, in other words, merely a question of exporting one's own law into new territory then claimed as an extension of one's own land. 'Growth', sanctioned though it may be by the Law of Nature when associated with agricultural productivity, is not in and of itself a Utopian objective or unmitigated 'good'. In this respect, the governing principle of Utopian expansion mirrors other Utopian practices. In Utopia, the desire to accumulate quantity is always countered by the notion of sufficiency, and the temptation to covet a commodity for its special qualities is limited by a social engineering which, precluding difference, proscribes affective attachment to objects. This phenomenon we see in the narrative of the Anemolian ambassadors, mocked by Utopian children for their attachment to the 'gaudy decorations' of glittering stones and to the fine thread of the wool they wear, which 'a sheep wore once, and still was nothing but a sheep' (64–5).

Another way of putting this is that privileging use – over exchange – value and dispensing with money and any other form of property serves the superficial function of protecting the Utopians from succumbing to the pleasures and dangers of commodity fetishism. Utopian communism controls the desire to accumulate many things, and the desire to possess any one, particular thing. But this distinction between Europe and Utopia wherein Europe is the locus of excess, the uncontained, the superfluous (and, therefore, the locus of desire) and Utopia the place of order, containment and the valorization of sufficiency (and, therefore, the locus of satisfaction), obscures the fact that underneath this rational, ordered surface and, indeed, shoring it up, is a very heightened sense of the intrinsic rather than conferred value of the commodity, and a constantly renewed surplus that Europe could only envy. As Halpern's brilliant reading of the Utopian attitude to gold shows, its logic is contradictory, 'shot through with the logic of the commodity' even whilst it pretends to eschew that logic. The ritual debasement of gold in Utopia, Halpern argues, 'suggests a desire that must be repressed ... invest[ing gold] with an innate desirability that transcends all social contexts ... and transform[s] social value ... into a quality of the thing itself', not to speak of the inconvenience of requisitioning all the chamberpots in wartime and simultaneously freeing all the slaves.¹³ As for surplus: '[A]lthough they know ... how much food each city and its surrounding district will consume,' relates Hythloday, 'they produce much more grain and cattle than they need for themselves, and share the surplus with their neighbours' (45). As Christopher Kendrick has pointed out: 'Utopian working arrangements are not calibrated to produce just enough, but much more' of the goods that they need.¹⁴ Surplus – of corn, or cattle, or 'precious' stones – is what enables the Utopians to dominate their neighbours. It shores up their independence, provides the means to buy the things they lack (notably, iron),¹⁵ and most

usefully of all, pays their mercenaries to fight their wars for them. Perhaps it even underscores the subjugation of their neighbours, to whom some of that 'overplus' may periodically be donated. Why produce the surplus yourself if someone else is always giving it to you? For gift economies can act to keep your inferiors in their places, as many a potlatch king and his losing competitors have come in the end to recognize.

But all this leads us to a final irony, with which it's time to end. If a hidden surplus shores up the Utopians' ability to conquer their neighbours, that same hidden surplus also unsettles the ethical justifications with which we began, undermining the case for embarking on that agricultural appropriation in the first place. Halpern holds that the contrast between Utopia and England, between utility and waste, echoes the class division in English society between petty producers and aristocracy.¹⁶ But who are the really petty producers in the larger, extended, imperial Utopian landscape? Isn't it in fact the mainlanders, those so roundly condemned as undeserving in the passage with which we began for their failure to work the land to make it produce more than they need? But that is what subsistence farming is: an agriculture that produces no surplus, only 'enough' to feed the farmers and their families, sufficient and fruitful for the maintenance of an indigenous population. So the really paramount question, which remains as pressing today as it was in the sixteenth century, concerns, perhaps, the nature of sufficiency. How much should we say is 'enough'?