In his own *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*, David Hume took it upon himself to reclassify the genre into two types: impractical ideas of perfect commonwealths, and practical ideas of perfect commonwealths. “All plans of government, which suppose great reformation in the manners of mankind, are plainly imaginary,” he wrote of the former category. “Of this nature, are the *Republic* of Plato, and the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More.”

Utopias, in other words, are as much visions of political organization as they are visions of human nature. The genre of political writing invented by the *Republic* and revived by *Utopia* were “plainly imaginary” precisely because the societies they depicted could not be realized on earth without a total upheaval of human nature. As such, Plato and the authors who saw themselves as his successors wrote their treatises on blank slates; they dreamed not of societies that arise and grow gradually but of those that are founded in a single, unified event. They were inheritors of a tradition that saw revolution as a viscous cycle of political regimes, each worse than the one that came before. Against this tradition, these authors sought to imagine a new beginning of both the city and the individual soul, and in doing so, discerned the need for a powerful narrative that might heal the wounds of that abrupt beginning.

Each of the societies represented in the *Republic*, *Utopia*, and Bacon’s *New Atlantis* maintain some version of a myth told in relation to its founding. These founding myths capture what is fundamentally utopian about the enterprises of the *kallipolis*, *Utopia* and Bensalem: the desire for a single, coherent beginning of a society in which all its governing principles are laid down at once, and which, in turn, guarantee the perpetual survival of that society, as long as its citizens devote themselves entirely to the conservation of those initial conditions of the founding. They articulate a dream for an artificial founding, as opposed to an organic evolution toward the utopian state.

But these myths also seek to comment on the kinds of natures required of both their audience and their propagators in their respective societies. Insofar as these myths give expression to a Platonic aspiration for perfect beginnings, they also strike a difficult political question regarding their relationship to the scholar classes that are inevitably, after the Platonic model, singled out and privileged in *Utopia* and in Bensalem. Are these intellectual elite, the most rational and scientifically-minded members of their respective communities, included in the audience of the founding myths? If they are not, their relationship to the myths would become one of sanction, if not proliferation, of noble falsehoods. And yet if they are, the myths themselves would seem to skip over an integral aspect of the organization of that society, clouding their status as founding myths. These myths have, then, a subversive and paradoxical element: they exist in the service of reason and its political application, but they simultaneously expose the fragility of such visions.

Key words: founding myths, political mythology, utopias

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