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Out of this World

David Armitage

Utopia by Thomas More, edited by George Logan, Robert M. Adams and Clarence Miller
Cambridge, 290 pp, £55.00, February 1995, ISBN 0 521 40318 9

Utopias of the British Enlightenment edited by Gregory Claeys
Cambridge, 305 pp, £35.00, July 1994, ISBN 0 521 43084 4

It can hardly be a coincidence that the historical study of utopias has accelerated as faith in the promises of utopianism has declined. The very idea that utopias, those rose-tinted cities stranded outside time, might have a history is itself a recent discovery, and has largely sprung from assessments of More's *Utopia*, the work that revived the ancient genre of the ideal commonwealth for the modern world. More's work has been heralded as both a harbinger of Communism and as the intellectual first-fruits of the modern bureaucratic state. The corruption and collapse of the one, and the distrust and fear of the other, have made More's solutions for human depravity seem distant and even actively repugnant in ways that earlier generations of readers could hardly have foreseen. History has reclaimed *Utopia* and made its vision of a well-regulated present a thing of the past.

The serious historical appraisal of *Utopia* begins with the imposing Yale edition of 1965, which presented both Latin and English texts along with magisterial introductions by Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter. For Surtz (a Jesuit), More was very much Saint Thomas; for Hexter (a Whig), he was more clearly Sir Thomas, and their rival interpretations have challenged future scholars to find the truth behind the gangly hybrid of the library catalogues – 'More, Thomas, Sir, Saint'. Yet the Thomas More who wrote *Utopia* in 1515-6 would have to wait five years to be knighted, and 420 to be canonised; neither sir nor saint, he was a successful lawyer, entering middle age with a large family, a comfortable post as a London judge and a reputation as one of England's leading classical scholars. If he had died before writing *Utopia*, he would now be remembered not as a martyr, or even a statesman, but as an exemplar of Northern European humanism, that combination of the hard-hat disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and ethics which had been fashioned in Italy and the Low Countries in the decades before his birth and imported to England by his teachers Grocyn and Colet and his greatest friend, Erasmus. *Utopia* was the culmination of More's humanism, yet it was almost his swan-song to a set of genres which he had mastered, only to abandon them for the

ephemeral work of a royal councillor and the higher task of theological controversy.

If we have forgotten that *Utopia* was in Latin, and its author a humanist, we also need to be reminded that *Utopia* was only the book's subtitle. 'I am sending you my "Nowhere", which is nowhere well written,' More wrote teasingly to Erasmus in September 1516, and the enclosed manuscript, when it appeared in print three months later, bore the title, 'On the Best State of the Commonwealth, and of the New Island, Utopia' (*De Optimo Reipublicae Statu Deque Nova Insula Utopia*). More's European readers would have recognised it immediately as a work of moral philosophy, in a tradition stretching from Aristotle to Cicero and beyond. Most modern editions drop the full title, as they abandon its humanistic apparatus of dedicatory epistles and pointed marginalia. This may give the book a kind of accessibility but it obscures the work's origins in a movement that was as serious about its wit as it was in its scholarship.

The new Cambridge edition is an elegant reminder of its Latinity, its humanism and its seriousness. Robert M. Adams's classic translation – which has surely become the most widely-read English version since Ralph Robinson's of 1551 – accompanies a modernised Latin text that retains the elaborate paraphernalia of the early editions: the map of the island, some spoof Utopian poetry, the marginalia, and the flattery from Continental humanists. With this apparatus, it is possible to recover the experience of *Utopia*'s first readers, while being reminded of the distance that separates us from the Latinate culture that spawned figures as diverse as Milton, Hobbes and (at its end) Samuel Johnson. The waning of humanistic education in the 18th century, and the later separation of the modern academic disciplines, has made *Utopia* doubly distant and difficult. Without a knowledge of the categories More was manipulating, we are left with battles between historians, philosophers, political scientists and literary critics over who should umpire the contest over the work's meaning, let alone resolve its ambiguities. This edition, a sleek dolphin beside Yale's leviathan, presents *Utopia* as its original audience might have had it – as a spry but eminently serious work of imagination.

The greatest ambiguity of *Utopia* has always been found in More's judgment on his commonwealth: did he believe it to be an ideal, or did his irony show that he doubted it was indeed the best state? More was a lawyer, yet the Utopians have few laws, a Christian, yet they had no revelation. Should we then agree with Utopia's discoverer, Raphael Hythlodæus (the 'speaker of nonsense'), that 'there is not a more excellent people or a happier commonwealth anywhere in the whole world,' or with the figure of 'More', who closes the work with the observation that 'in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see'? The fact that this closing is drawn from Cicero only muddies the waters further: 'More' is not More, though he speaks with the authority of the humanists' greatest classical exemplar. Even the work's positive values – peace, leisure, plenty – become compromised by this ambiguity and the result, as the Cambridge editors remark, is that for all its playfulness *Utopia* is 'in fact a rather melancholy book'. The only good life is one conducted in accordance with classical notions of active virtue; such virtue can only be achieved in a society which abolishes private property, and the

society which has fulfilled these conditions lies in an unknown part of a newly-discovered world. Utopia is, in every sense, unapproachable and, for the present, inimitable.

More might have approved David Hume's epitaph on utopianism: 'All plans of government, which suppose great reformation in the manners of mankind, are plainly imaginary. Of this nature, are the *Republic* of Plato and the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More.' However, for More this would have been less a judgment on the importance of his humanist thought-experiment than on the incorrigible pride of sinful humanity. Hume's own 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth' (1752) was pragmatic, contingent and technical, a constitutional blueprint for the British Isles designed to overcome the classical contention that only small states could be new-modelled as republics. It shared with *Utopia* its ambition to treat 'the best state of a commonwealth': but in every other way, it was the opposite of More's moral fiction, in its aims as in its effects. Hume's attempt to combine a large territory with political stability seems to have caught the attention of James Madison, who offered a parallel vision in the tenth *Federalist* paper, thereby fulfilling Hume's hope that 'in some future age, an opportunity might be afforded of reducing the theory to practice ... in some distant part of the world.' That was not a hope More held for his ideal commonwealth, intended only to reform theory by showing the limits of practice, though he, too, inspired at least one New World experiment, in the Mexican province of Michoán in the 1530s.

If Hume aimed to bury utopianism, and thereby terminate a distracting strain of political theory, he clearly failed. As Gregory Claeys shows in his collection of *Utopias of the British Enlightenment*, the genre of the ideal commonwealth was alive and well in Whig Britain from before the Augustan age to well beyond the French Revolution. This is in its own way a revelation, for the 18th century has often been seen as the lost age of British utopianism, the hiatus between the republican re-imaginings of the Interregnum and the first stirrings of socialism in Robert Owen's New Lanark. However, *Utopia* itself had a vigorous publishing life throughout the British Empire, with at least ten editions (both Latin and English) published during the century, from Oxford to Edinburgh, and from Glasgow to Philadelphia, while over fifty works loosely definable as Utopias followed in its wake, not to mention the Robinsonades inspired by Defoe and the fantastic travels imitating Gulliver. Claeys's edition makes the same claim for these works that More made for his: that a fantasy can be a work of philosophy, and fiction the vehicle of politics.

However, the rubric of 'the British Enlightenment', under which these 18th-century utopias are collected, raises more problems than it solves. The Scottish Enlightenment now bulks as one of the greatest intellectual movements ever born in Britain, but the English Enlightenment remains distinctly elusive, with the cosmopolitan, Francophone exile Gibbon as perhaps its only undeniable member. Any putative 'British' Enlightenment is an even more shadowy beast, which, if it were to share the characteristics of the Continental Enlightenment, would not necessarily be friendly to utopianism. All the major figures of the European Enlightenment were anti-utopians, in both their specific judgments and their general sympathies. Montesquieu charged that More 'spoke rather of what he read than what he

thought', Diderot condemned contemporaries' speculative work to the contemptible category of utopias, while Rousseau distanced his constitutional writings from the fictions of More and Plato. By joining this anti-utopian chorus Hume showed himself the British figure closest to the *philosophes*, in this as in so much else. In general, the Enlightenment preferred genuine primitivism to imagined simplicity, and used the state of nature only as a sociological fiction and travellers' tales as the vehicle of satire. Either way, the conclusions would be relativistic, as the norms of Europe were shown to be incommensurable with those of distant societies (as in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*), or realistic, as when Rousseau noted in the *Social Contract* that a true democracy would be the government of the gods, but 'so perfect a government is not suited to men.' Either way, the Enlightenment was at heart counter-utopian in everything except perhaps its belief that institutional reform could be the instrument of human progress.

There is a darker reading of the Enlightenment which is close to the bleakest construction of utopianism, in which the cost of perfectibility is the loss of individuality. The illimitable capacity of unfettered reason might deform in the name of reforming, leading to the Foucauldian nightmare of penal and mental confinement, just as the totalising aspiration of utopianism could lead to totalitarianism, whether under Plato's guardians or More's tranibors and syphogrants. The Enlightenment did have its reformist strain, which believed that humanity could be reclaimed by the purposive application of reason. There is little of this in Claeys's collection, which offers fantastic voyages, lost tribes and enchanted Europeans rather than the procrustean institutional innovation which has given the Enlightenment a bad name. There is less of the panopticon than of pantheism here, and more thoughts after Gulliver than foreshadowings of the gulags. More's Utopians would have recognised the sumptuary laws of the anonymous *Island of Content* (1709) and James Burgh's *Account of the Cessares* (1764), the rotation of office and minimal laws of William Hodgson's *Commonwealth of Reason* (1795) and the natural religion shared by most of these ideal commonwealths. They might have had more difficulty sympathising with the *Island of Content's* hereditary monarchy, the praise of the English Constitution in Thomas Northmore's *Memoirs of Planetes* (1795), or the enthusiasm for the rights of man on which Hodgson founded his commonwealth of reason. Such 18th-century utopias sprang up in the spaces revealed by Bougainville and Cook, and they revelled in the expansive possibilities awakened by victory in the Seven Years War, while later the French Revolution added liberty, equality and fraternity to the traditional utopian promises of peace, order and abundance. On the whole, they were benign and limited, showing the weakness and isolation of any supposed English Enlightenment, rather than the strenuous aspirations deplored by Hume.

In the light of the awkward fit between the Enlightenment and utopianism, the study of 18th-century utopias has paid less attention to the materials from which they were imagined than to the consequences of their being framed at all. For example, in his recent study of *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, Robert Darnton has found heading the lists of Ancien Régime samizdat, not Rousseau's *Social Contract* – as scholars had expected

for at least a century – but rather Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s moralising fantasy, *L’An 2440* (1771). Darnton concludes from this fact, and the bulk of similarly transgressive pornographic and ‘philosophical’ works among 18th-century French underground classics, that utopianism let daylight in on the mysteries of the Bourbon monarchy and thereby eroded its legitimacy. Utopias in France were not solely *jeux d’esprit* but became road-maps for revolution: re-imagining society on the page, they suggested the possibility of remaking it in the streets. Claeys proposes a less incendiary but nonetheless transformative legacy for his British utopias, leading to ‘the more welfare-orientated forms of liberal democracy’ as well as towards socialism and communism. In both Britain and France ideal commonwealths extended the limits of the thinkable and were utopian by virtue of their visionary expansiveness rather than because of their impotent idealism.

The 18th-century British utopias were at least as likely to have been inoculative rather than infectious, helping to consign such ideals as feminism, socialism and communism to the realm of fiction and hence to the margins of political possibility. The argument over why Britain did not follow France into revolution at the end of the century will no doubt rumble on, though it may be found that utopianism provided a stabilising force in an uncensored public sphere such as Britain’s even as it expanded the boundaries of the political imagination in intellectually-policed France. Mercier’s vision of 2440 was piquant not least because it was futuristic, almost uniquely among French utopias. Contemporary English visions of the future were conservative by comparison, with collections of imaginary state papers making up Samuel Madden’s *Memoirs of the 20th Century* (1733) and a bloated empire imagined just after the Seven Years War for the early 20th century in *The Reign of George VI* (1763). If Mercier imagined away absolute monarchy and the established Church in favour of patriot kingship and natural religion, these English utopians reassured their readers that crown, church and state would still be flourishing three centuries hence. Only in feminist utopias, such as Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall* (1762), or in the post Revolutionary utopias of the 1790s, was Britain itself re-imagined philosophically.

Looking back over the age of reason and the dawn of his own century, Engels saw utopian socialism arising from the ashes of the Enlightenment and disillusionment with the French Revolution. ‘All that was wanting was the men to formulate this disappointment.’ Perhaps the disappointments of the 20th century will be formulated as utopias, come the turn of the 21st. Whether their promises will be more fittingly fulfilled can only be guessed. What is certain is that any visions of the future will bear the mark of their times, and images of other worlds will resemble our own, for the timeless has a history, and even ‘Nowhere’ came from somewhere.

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