Utopia as Inspiration
(or a rage for order?)

Consider the following. An abundant, self contained society which has no need for money and where everyone lives in communal respect to everyone else. There is no such thing as private property. The pursuit of happiness is considered to be of the highest ethical value but yet this is not inconsistent with having concern for the well being of others. All manual work is shared such that the average working day is only six hours long allowing enough free time to cultivate the mind. There are very few laws.

To some, this may constitute the idyllic conception but to many others it would be so far from any possible world that it would verge on abhorrent. Such a community, even if it could exist, the sceptics would argue, could only be authoritarian and static; but more than that, the very conceiving of such a thing in itself would be dubious and written off, to use the words of Karl Popper, as misplaced rationalism, or as simply a rage for order. This short essay will put forward a case against this kind of scepticism and will attempt to show how the notion of a perfect community, if not possible in practice, is certainly useful psychologically in being able to provide incentive for making improvements in the quality of life without which, humans may never have progressed beyond the Paleolithic Age.

Ideal societies are often referred to as "utopias" after the book written by Thomas More in the early 16th Century where he contrasted the austere conditions of England at the time with how things might otherwise be, in a fictitious account of an island situated somewhere in the New World. It may be instructive to take the advice of William Morris at this stage who said that the only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author, in which case, a look at More himself may provide an incite into the thinking behind the writing.

He enjoyed a privileged life and a successful career as a lawyer and member of parliament ending up as Lord Chancellor before falling foul of Henry VIII which lead to his execution. Running parallel to these worldly affairs was a deeply religious and scholarly individual who had a strong inclination towards the practice of monasticism, all of which had been advanced by an education in the humanist traditions of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy.

From this, one begins to get the impression of a gifted man who was widely experienced in the pragmatic matters of life but who was also drawn by a profound spirituality both of which may have combined in him to produce conflict. If this was so, then More would not have been alone, as much of the philosophy of the age, crystalised in the work of Thomas Acquinas had been bound in religion and was particularly concerned with how to reconcile the rationalistic doctrines of Aristotle with the traditions of Christianity which represented two rather different strands of thought, one being based on the psychology of reason and the other on the need for mankind to be redeemed from sin by the grace of God. It is consequently not uncommon to find in Acquinas distinctions with what he believed as a philosopher and what he believed as a theologian. These same difficulties would have been uppermost in More's meditations also.

This brief look into the concerns of the late medieval philosophers gives an indication of the kind of influences More was subject to and indeed it is possible to see how these influences had a direct bearing on his depiction of the moral life of the Utopians. For them, reason itself is not sufficient in identifying true happiness but must be supplemented by certain religious principles which in most cases would mean adherence to some form of monotheism where happiness itself, through the pursuit of pleasure, is seen as the goal of life and all of this is in perfect accordance with the will of God. It is here that More succeeds in providing a synthesis of the previously mentioned elements of conflict by combining self interest with altruism as the Utopians are given to fully understanding that one's own happiness is not compatible with spoiling the happiness of others. Another example of an attempt at this resolution is his portrayal of the central figure, Hythloday, who had come across the island of Utopia while travelling in the New World. All Hythloday's arguments, whether it be on the problem of theft or on the matter of a scholar taking the position of court councillor, are justified on grounds of both honour and expediency. In other words, it is not only morally correct that one should not take up council but it would be impractical to do so also. Morality and expediency are fused here to make for the strongest argument, a strategy that is rooted in humanist rhetorical theory. This enterprise of attempting to synthesize potentially disparate principles is also to be found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle who held that the most pleasurable life is the life of virtue and for Socrates virtue was knowledge itself. They were inextricably bound to each other.

It is from this aspect of the Utopian culture, their moral philosophy, that everything else is derived. It is the central element. All the benefits of plenty, the social order, the absence of the requirement for money, the minimal laws, concern for the old, freedom from corruption all stem from the successful resolution of profound and difficult inner conflicts thereby allowing for the dominant ethic to be the understanding that the interest of one is also the interest of the other. The material successes or failures are secondary. The apparent lacking in individuality brought about by say, uniformity in clothing, retreats into insignificance as one feels sufficiently secure and individual in oneself without the need for an outward display. The need to require a permit before leaving the town becomes a mere detail, that is if one wanted to the leave the town at all which may only seldom be the case as all conceivable needs are catered for close at hand. The pan-optical architecture designed to maximise the capacity for observation is not a problem as no one has much to hide in any case. Put another way, many of the utopian practices considered to be repressive or authoritarian are reduced in importance at a stroke brought about by a spiritual and psychological enlightenment, itself a consequence of the resolving of opposites. The material environment and the social and political structure of Utopia is still important but it exists as a consequence of their elevated psychology and not the other way round. It is in this fundamental way that utopianism differs from Marxism which begins with the material and works towards its end whereas with utopia the material end comes directly from an enlightened understanding of the way the world is.

Seen in this way, More's seminal work is essentially an inspirational piece. It is the work of an artist rather than that of a political scientist and is designed not so much to act as a plan for a model society with all the proper things in proper measure but as a means of transporting its readers into the realm of ideas and aspirations with the hope that after they have been suitably uplifted they will be better prepared to face the difficult tensions and conflicts in their own lives and so contribute towards the improving of the society in which they find themselves. Seen in this way, the definition of utopianism can be regarded in a much broader sense to mean any kind of ideology which inspires one to act even if the end itself does not necessarily correspond to the original vision but is most certainly a different end than had there been no vision at all.

One fairly contemporary example of this was the neo-Liberal influence within the 'New Right' of the British Conservative Party from the mid 1970s which advocated less government on the basis of respect for individual liberties and the hope of establishing an enterprise culture. There can be no doubt that faith in such a philosophy formed the cornerstone of Margaret Thatcher's motivation throughout her term as prime minister but close investigation shows that the liberal element when it came to actual implementation of policy was minimal to nonexistent and it was actually the conservative strand of dogma that tended to pervade resulting in just as much, and in some cases more, government than had been before. Still, there is a perception that Thatcher was an effective leader and had some sort of spell-binding influence on the British psyche although it may take historians some time to work out exactly what that has been. Though she would no doubt abhor the handle, in a sense, Margaret Thatcher was an adherent to a form of utopianism too; a milk and honey land of free enterprise, affluence and self sufficiency with government merely looking on with minimum interference. Conviction politics by any other name.

Karl Popper warned that we cannot make heaven on earth and perhaps he was right if he implied by means of the rational and practical application of a blue-print for perfection implemented to order. Any such attempts would be doomed to failure. The work of creative artists and philosophers, however, has always been the life-blood for change, representing some deeper aspect of a collective consciousness influencing and encouraging individuals and communities to be the best they can be. Sir Thomas More's Utopia is one such work.

Thus, utopianism should be suitably labelled, "NOT TO BE TAKEN. FOR INSPIRATION ONLY!!" Ironically, More shared with Oscar Wilde the fact that they both fell victim to the unresolved conflicts of their respective societies. It is no doubt a mark of progress that in 20th Century England, people no longer have their heads cut off for refusing to support the monarch nor are they expelled from society for their sexual orientation. Perhaps in the light of that, it is appropriate to give the last word to Wilde:

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at."

(78) Wonderful essay. A thoroughly enjoyable read! You may have to expand on the 'negative' features of Utopia for an exam, but nevertheless this piece of work is well-written & well-argued.

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