

### Utopia: Discussion and Paper-Topics

1 In class, I suggested that Book I of **Utopia** may be more significant in some respects than Book II, both as a menetekel of More's own later life-choices ( if they were choices ), and more generally as a statement of an honest intellectual's dilemma. Hythlodaye puts this dilemma most acutely when he asks

How can one individual do any good when he is surrounded by colleagues who would sooner corrupt the best of men rather than do any reforming of themselves? Either they will seduce you, or, if you keep yourself honest and innocent, you will be made a screen for the knavery and madness of others. Influencing policy indirectly! You wouldn't have a chance. ( p. 30 )

More ( I suggested ) may well have concluded some years later that he **had**, indeed, come to embody something of **both** forks of Hythlodaye's bitter dilemma, as the reluctant but industrious servant of "our liege lord King Henry, the Eighth of that name".

Does this conjecture seem to you plausible? Or are its apparent implications too bleak, purist, 'romantic' or simply defeatist, as the "More" of Book I ( and some of More's most recent conservative biographers and critics ) seem to suggest?

In particular, might "Hythlodaye" / More's argument in the passage quoted above be essentially right, but only in the **worst** and most oppressive regimes -- absolute monarchies, say ( remember that the young Henry the Eighth was one of the more promising and 'enlightened' despots of his time ), or fascist dictatorships?

Or might a form of it also hold good in relatively '**good**' ones -- the cabinets of Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon, say, during the Vietnam war; or the Breshnev-era CPSU ( if you accept that this was 'relatively good' ) when Mikhael Gorbachev was working his way up through the ranks? As a partial corollary, perhaps, of the ( much later ) dictum that "**power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely**"?

What do you think?

2 Which aspects of the Utopian social order seem to you most attractive, and which most **unattractive**, even grotesque?

Might some of its more obviously bizarre provisions be best understood, perhaps, as "modest proposals" -- ironic exaggerations and deliberate hyperbole -- the suggestion, for example, that backroom political dealers be treated as capital criminals ( p. 39; cf. Shakespeare's remark somewhere in Henry IV, that "[t]he first thing we do, we kill all the lawyers" )?

3 If the aim of **Utopia** is advocacy of some kind of **egalitarianism**, where does it succeed best, in your view, and where does it most conspicuously fall short?

( To me, for example, its sternly paternalist treatment of the behavior of young people and presuppositions about the social role of women, seem fairly obvious instances of the latter. Fortunately, this seems to be one respect in which More's personal behavior in later life transcended the prescriptions he wrote down at thirty-seven. )

4 In the ruins of "Communism" ( or state-capitalism, or corporate feudalism, or whatever it was ), what role do you see ( if any )

for More's egalitarianism ( or socialism, or 'communitarianism', or whatever it was )?

What role, that is, beyond the one(s) played by parliamentary-democratic institutions in 'good' countries ( with decent social-welfare systems, and relatively enlightened -- if ineffectual -- foreign policies ), such as Canada?

What about Hythlodaye's stinging indictment on p. 89, at the end of his narration in Book II?

When I run over in my mind the various commonwealths flourishing today, so help me God, I can see nothing in them but a conspiracy of the rich, who are fattening up their own interests under the name and title of commonwealth.

Or of "the new world order"?

Might not an 'honest intellectual' in what is now called the 'third world' see just such a "conspiracy of the rich", in the ( often quite bizarre ) economic manipulations of its peasants, industrial and domestic workers by people and organisations in the 'first world'?

A button I sometimes pin on my bag ( when it doesn't fall off ), reads:

If the world were a global village of 100 people, one third would be rich, or of moderate income, and two thirds would be poor. Of the 100 residents, 47 would be unable to read, and one would have a college education. About 35 would be suffering from hunger and malnutrition; at least half would be homeless or living in substandard housing. Of the 100 people, 6 would be Americans. These 6 would have over a third of the villages's entire income, and the other 94 would subsist on the other two thirds. How could the wealthy 6 live in peace with their neighbors? Surely they would be driven to arm themselves against the other 94. . . perhaps even to spend, as Americans do, about twice as much per person on military defense as the total income of two thirds of the villagers.

Is 'utopia' on a global scale really much closer, in this "village", than it was in 1516?