(Re)Visiting Utopia: Critical Reflections

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Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Thomas Gilloch Boyle**, candidate for the MA degree in Political Science declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

In this thesis in political theory, I argue for a rethinking of utopia and utopian political thought. Instead of the typical argument to rein in utopia, to make it more 'realistic', I choose to advocate a liberation of utopia from the constraints of realism. This is derived from a particular engagement with the work of Thomas More, the original utopia, which I read as both a prescriptive text, but also, and more significantly, as a *critically reflective* text which provides commentary on More's contemporary society. I then proceed to utilise more contemporary post-colonial, neo-Marxist, and analytical philosophy to emphasise the significance and the power of utopia as critique. In particular, I argue that utopia, viewed as critical and reflective, and which does not seek to be constrained by the realistic, is of particular significance for conceiving of transformative practice, unsettling what is otherwise taken for granted.

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Contents

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias" – Oscar Wilde (1891: 303-304)

Introduction

For all of Wilde's desire to see Utopia on the map, it seems hard to find in the present day. In 21st century popular culture, the concept of utopia seems marginalised, whilst its antithesis, dystopia (a term first used much later historically) has gained prominence and enjoys widespread popularity. It seems that wishful thinking has been replaced by 'wishless' thought, hopefulness displaced by fear. A desire to rehabilitate utopia has seen it re-emerge, but in a constrained manner, chained by incrementalism and realism. A tame and timid utopia, rather than a wild utopia, which is permitted where it is controlled. In this thesis I propose a return to wishfulness.

The concept of utopia or 'the good place', is most strongly associated with the work of the English thinker, political figure, and Catholic martyr Sir Thomas More (1478-1535). The idea could be traced back much further however, to Plato's *Republic* (c.375BC) or Augustine's *The City of God* (early 5th century AD) and has played a role in a variety of artistic forms and across cultures. Utopias can be found in texts as varied as medieval myths of the land of Cockaigne and Chinese poetry and art of the Peach Blossom Spring, dating back to 421 AD. In this thesis I am going to redeem a critical and unconstrained utopia (a wild utopia if you will). To do this I will first utilise contemporary discussions on the ideal and non-ideal theory debate in political philosophy. I will then move on to discuss Thomas More's original *Utopia*,

the first to use the name, and still a keystone text for those interested in this particular area of political theory. I will read More's text from a particular perspective, emphasising it as a form of critical engagement with his contemporary surroundings and foregrounding his connections to the (settler-)colonial. Examining More from this perspective will allow me to advocate for a specific conception of utopia, one which prioritises critical reflection over realism. In so doing, I will draw on the works of contemporary thinkers in post-colonial, neo-Marxist, and the analytical tradition to consider the power of utopian theorising, and what it can offer political philosophy today.

Overall, my thesis will critically engage with the concept of Utopia and the relevance of utopian political thinking in contemporary debates. I will argue against the emergence of so-called 'realistic utopias', when they are conceived as in some sense 'achievable'. By this I mean that the utopian thinker's contemporary society could feasibly be transformed into such a space, i.e., realised. Instead, I will argue for an interpretation of utopian political theorising which embraces the 'irreal' and 'unrealistic'. Rather than seeking to rein in utopian political thinking, my thesis will argue that it is precisely in its separation and deliberate distancing from 'realism' that it acquires power as a critical force, and it is as a critique that we need to hold on to the utopian today. Seeking to make utopia 'realistic' is counter-productive: indeed, I will argue it makes it, not just a limiting form of theorising, but also more threatening in that it has a suffocating effect on the ability to imagine and voice fundamental change. Indeed, I will come to argue that it gives it an authoritarian, oppressive dimension or inflection, particularly in positing certain institutions and forms of governance characterised by rigidity, compliance, and coercive power. Exploring the concept of utopia, and its relationship with ideal political philosophy, will of course require that due attention be paid to *Utopia* (1516) by More, and this is especially the case here as I wish to emphasise the importance of reading

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More's work through a particular lens. More's work stands at the centre of my project here, not only as the original 'utopia' to be so named, but also as the defining example of this particular form or 'genre' of political thought. I will engage with More's work in a critical manner: on the one hand I argue for an appreciation of the radical critique his work contains of existing social and political arrangements in early 16th century Europe, and Tudor England in particular; and on the other, recognising the shortcomings and far from ideal character of his utopia itself. His vision of a 'perfect' society is in many ways alarming to a contemporary reader – it is certainly no 21st century utopia – but my argument will further suggest that it is the historical prescience of his vision which is even more unsettling than the actual rigour and unquestioning compliance of the life it would demand. His island utopia is prescient, granting his project a realisability/feasibility that he himself perhaps did not fully comprehend at the time of writing. My initial engagement with More's work will be critical in nature, with a particular focus on the eliminatory nature of the historical emergence of his utopia, which anticipates settler-colonial structures (a trend also visible in other utopian works, such as *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella (1602)). However, I wish to emphasise that, rather than challenging utopian visions more broadly with regards to their potentiality for offering change and revolution, this essay will argue for a recalibration of utopia, one which goes against a recent trend seeking to ground utopia in existing socio-political realities. I wish to read More today as an exercise in critique, rather than as providing any blueprint for an ideal society.

The Contemporary Landscape

I will begin with a pivotal text in contemporary political thought. In his work *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001), the philosopher John Rawls highlights four purposes of political philosophy within a society's public political culture. First, a practical role, necessary for tempering and overcoming "divisive political conflict and the need to settle the problem of order" (Rawls, 2001: 1). Second, a role of orientation "to help citizens to orient themselves within their own social world. Philosophy can meditate on what it is to be a member of a certain society—in a democracy, an equal citizen—and offer a unifying framework for answering divisive questions about how people with that political status should relate to each other" (Wenar, 2021). Third, a purpose of reconciliation: "to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form" (Rawls, 2001: 3). Rawls identifies the fourth as related to the third: we "view political philosophy as realistically Utopian: that is, as probing the limits of practicable political possibility. Our hope for the future of our society rests on the belief that the social world allows at least a decent political order, so that a reasonably just, though not perfect, democratic regime is possible" (2001: 4). When considering the types of theorisations required to change the political landscape, it is worth keeping in mind what exactly political philosophy sets out to do. Rawls is a utopian thinker, but of a realistic kind. For him, political philosophy involves reconciliation with what is, and a recognition of what is possible that, whilst inspired by a 'realistic utopia', is further limited by the existing. As we will see, just this is too much for some writers. But for me it is too little – utopian thought must breach both of Rawls's injunctions. We must move beyond the realm of the realistic to a more radical formulation of utopian thought.

I now wish to consider the arguments which have emerged around the use of 'utopian' or ideal political theory more generally, before turning to my own specific understanding of how this framework can be fruitful for contemporary political philosophers and offer political change to those who seek it. Drawing on the work of the American thinker David Estlund (2014 and 2020) will allow me to argue for ideal political theory, and therefore advocate a rejection of what he terms 'utopophobia'. I will go on to comment on what I believe is utopia's unique and essential role in conceiving of truly transformative practice, and in doing so I will utilise Estlund's views on the significance of utopian political thinking. There is, however, some significant divergence between my thought and that of Estlund. He believes that a "social proposal has the vice of being utopian if, roughly, there is no evident basis for believing that efforts to stably achieve it would have any significant tendency to succeed" (2020: 11). Estlund's "arguments here are not in defense of proposals at all, but of principles … of justice. Irrealism (the property of being unrealistic) is a vice of proposals, but not a vice of principles" (2020: 11). My thesis will draw on Estlund's arguments for defending principles in political theory from the accusation that they are undermined by their supposed 'irrealism', whilst also advocating for the power and potentiality of utopian thinking, arguing that a social proposal can be viewed as highly likely to be unachievable without this being a utopian vice. Proposals which contain this element can still serve a useful function for political thought, they can still possess utopian virtue. This dissertation is conceived of as a work in the 'utopophilic' tradition, not merely contra 'utopophobic' tendencies.

I would like to continue my thesis by discussing contemporary conversations regarding the place of utopian political thinking, which I wish to situate within the debate on ideal and non-ideal political theory. As various thinkers define the divide between ideal and non-ideal political theory differently, the exact overlap between utopian political theory and ideal

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political theory is not always particularly easy to define. Marit Böker, for example, states that "ideal theory and utopia are not the same — ideal theory refers to a strand of, or method in, normative political philosophy, whereas utopias span a wider range of disciplines and literature —, utopia (as a generic category) might be viewed as the extreme case of ideal theory" (2017: 89). It seems to me that even the wildest utopias typically tend to operate under some limitations, such as physical human limitations, but ideal theory can often operate with tougher limitations than a utopia can. Key, however, is to emphasise that ideal theory and utopian thinking certainly possess significant similarities, and the objections placed against utopian political philosophy are typically similar to the ones placed against ideal theory. This is certainly logical, if one conceives of utopian theory as lying within the continuum of ideal theory, even if it is at a more extreme end. If anything, that would suggest that arguments against ideal theory would simply be intensified when applied to utopian theory. My thesis will draw on the work of Estlund with regards to the significance of utopian and ideal theory within contemporary political philosophy, but initially I would like to establish and explore the views held by some other key thinkers on this topic, particularly with regards to clarifying differing conceptions of the divide between ideal and non-ideal theory. Zofia Stemplowska notably examines the relationship between ideal and non-ideal political theory, describing the former as being political theory which "offers no immediate or workable solutions to any of the problems our societies face" (2008: 319). Seemingly highlighting what utopian and ideal political theory fail to provide, this definitional distinction underpins much of the criticism directed at utopian and ideal philosophy. A good example of such criticism is to be found in the work of Amartya Sen. Sen notably critiques ideal theory in his book *The Idea of Justice¸* in which he argues against what he terms the tradition of "transcendental institutionalism" in favour of that of "realization-focused comparison" (2009:7). For Sen, transcendental institutionalism "concentrates its attention on what it identifies as perfect justice, rather than on relative comparisons of justice and injustice. It tries

only to identify social characteristics that cannot be transcended in terms of justice, and its focus is thus not on comparing feasible societies, all of which may fall short of the ideals of perfection. The inquiry is aimed at identifying the nature of 'the just', rather than finding some criteria for an alternative being 'less unjust' than another" (2009: 5-6). Clearly, ideal and utopian political theories will naturally align themselves with the tradition of transcendental institutionalism. In addition, the significance of institutionalism – whilst being part of the philosophical tradition which begins with Thomas Hobbes and continues with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke amongst others – is not necessary to the kind of thinking Sen is critiquing here. He emphasises that one could conceive of "a transcendental theory that focuses on social realizations rather than on institutions (the search for the perfect utilitarian world with people blissfully happy would be a simple example of pursuing 'realization-based transcendence'" (2009: 6). It is transcendence, contrasted with comparative work (which could actually be institutional in its focus – a possibility Sen also acknowledges) which is the key distinction. It is Sen's belief that transcendental theory (as he calls it) is unable to offer us a pathway forward in that it fails to provide meaningful ways to choose between alternatives. He provides a hypothetical scenario where "if we are trying to choose between a Picasso and a Dali, it is of no help to invoke a diagnosis (even if such a transcendental diagnosis could be made) that the ideal picture in the world is the Mona Lisa. That may be interesting to hear, but it is neither here nor there in the choice between a Dali and a Picasso" (2009: 16). Sen's thinking along this line is a significant example of the criticism levelled against ideal theory.

Another key thinker in the debate between ideal and non-ideal theory is Laura Valentini, who offers three different potential ways to conceive of the divide between them (2012). Firstly, she suggests a distinction between "full-compliance theory", theories which assume full (or

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almost full) compliance of citizens with the laws and regulations of their society, and "partial compliance theory" which does not (2012: 654). Secondly, there is the possibility of distinguishing between "utopian or idealistic theory" and "realistic theory", meaning "the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether feasibility considerations should constrain normative political theorizing and, if so, what sorts of feasibility constraints should matter" (2012: 654). Lastly, Valentini also offers a potential distinction between "end-state" theory and "transitional" theory, which "focuses on the question of whether a normative political theory should aim at identifying an ideal of societal perfection, or whether it should focus on transitional improvements without necessarily determining what the 'optimum' is" (2012: 654), perhaps most closely reflecting the distinction drawn by Sen. I think the clarity of the distinctions made by Valentini can certainly be blurred. I think it is perfectly plausible to query whether, if, for example, we accept that our theory will not have full compliance, this in some way presents a feasibility constraint, one which must then be considered with regards to whether we think this constraint relevant to the work we are doing. Estlund also moves across and between these different debates, and identifying them initially here will prove useful. I think that these, what might be termed, 'trends' in the divide between ideal and non-ideal theory can be useful in considering the problems that ideal theory might face, and the kinds of solutions that should be considered moving forward. Whilst acknowledging the diversity of arguments that have emerged in support and opposition to utopian and ideal theorising, my primary focus in the thesis will be to draw out one particular dimension of utopian political thinking which I argue is undervalued, that being its *critical power*, a perspective on ideal and utopian theory which moves across and has relevance within all the cleavages identified by Valentini. This understanding of utopia is also meant as a potential rejoinder to Amartya Sen, in that it reorients utopia's focus. When viewed as critique, it seems to me that utopia can be conceived of as helping in the painting problem, as we no longer focus on the wish that one of the

paintings we could choose between was actually the Mona Lisa. Instead, we can think about how our preferences shine a light on the imperfections we do see around us (which could be numerous or, potentially relatively few), which should surely contribute to understanding how we wish to move forward. In searching to establish utopia as a fundamentally *critical project*, I emphasise that this is a distinct argument from that which has been presented in the literature previously. Whilst the idea of utopia in a critical form has played a role in the neo-Marxist tradition, especially Ernst Bloch, and in some spheres of post-colonialism, this argument is largely neglected in contemporary political philosophy. Therefore, I wish to re-establish the significance of a critical utopia, and I will draw on some of the work from the post-colonial tradition to augment this point. I believe that this tradition helps especially in emphasising the importance of countering the call for a 'realistic' utopia. This returns us to Rawls, perhaps the most prominent creator of a theory of justice in the 20th century. He is also identified by Sen as the most significant figure propagating transcendental institutionalism amongst more contemporary thinkers (2009: 8), yet his utopia is qualified as "realistic" (1999: 4). This thesis argues against this method for seeking to tackle some of the difficulties posed by ideal theory. A realistic utopia may sound like something of a contradiction, but given its use in Rawls, it is now established as a concept of great significance within contemporary political philosophy.

Fundamentally, my argument is that the concept of utopia and the creation of perfection *critically reflect upon* the myriad imperfections in our contemporary social, political, and economic surroundings. In addition to this, attempts to make this imaginary more 'realistic' serve only to mollify the critique that can be levelled at the existing. Perfection may differ

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across time and space, we may consider someone's perfection to be horrifying,[1] many likely will (certainly if they read Thomas More for example), but this does not necessarily devalue the importance of utopian theorising more broadly. However, it certainly raises challenging questions about how one should go about constructing political alternatives and advocating for change. Should we focus on that which is within our grasp, that would require little to moderate political will from our fellows and is not challenged by forces existing at the limits of our control? However, if we are to reflect critically on our society, does limiting ourselves to what seems achievable place too great a limit on what we seek to do overall? Perhaps we should be more hopeful, perhaps there is even a need for a kind of radical hope. In his 2014 article *Utopophobia*, David Estlund states that:

> "Things are better in one way, of course, if the best theory turns out to be hopeful rather than hopeless [hope here meaning its likelihood of being achieved]: it is unfortunate if people will not live up to sound moral requirements, and fortunate if they will. But this consideration is patently not any evidence or support for a less hopeless theory. That would be simply to believe in different, more easily satisfied moral standards for the reason they are likely to be satisfied. That is no moral reasoning at all" (2014: 122).

In other works, Estlund argues that there is "no defense of the theoretical approach to justice that would bend the standards of justice to whatever unfortunate motivational incapacities humans might turn out to have" (2011: 237). Achievability is not a sign of any moral virtue, so why has it taken on such significance in constraining wishful thinking? Even when achievability is used to constrain ideal theory, it does not mollify the concern raised by advocates of non-ideal theory. Sen lumps Rawls in with the 'transcendental institutionalists' after all! When we do set limits to the political imagination and its theorising, what might this narrowing of scope cause us to miss, sacrifice, or exclude? When the separation between dream and the existing reality is of minimal significance, then this would fundamentally suggest a level of satisfaction with the prevailing state of affairs, a tendency which must

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[1] We are, of course, dealing primarily with the concept of utopia rather than the content of it, as this can vary across competing political ideologies.

surely be challenged, in order to avoid complacency creeping into debates about political futures.

To put this in another way: "moral-political concepts are not shown to have any defect in virtue of the fact, if it is one, that the alleged requirements or preconditions of these things are not likely ever to be met" (Estlund, 2014: 114). Estlund thus argues against what he sees as the prevailing tendency of mainstream political philosophy to engage in 'Utopophobia'. Utopian thinking and the ideal are met with suspicion and unease, exemplified by the fact that feasibility constraints – that is to say the demands to be realisable – are often voiced strongly. Estlund's response to this is, for me, persuasive: "if a theory of social justice is offered, and it is objected, "But you and I both know people will never do that," I believe the right response is (as a starter), "I never said they would"" (2014: 114). Indeed, I think this argument is important and would like to take it further. True, the achievement of utopia as a final point of social, political, or economic development (whether of humanity broadly or of a specific society) may well be impossible. The perfect society of any individual thinker certainly may well never exist (and one can say *will* never without defeating the point). But that does not mean we should not seek to imagine and describe such a state of affairs. For there is much we can feasibly gain from the voicing of the unfeasible. I will argue that utopias, by their very *unrealistic* nature, can point to important, and potentially uncomfortable, truths about our present reality.[2] This is uniquely present due to an important (and seemingly paradoxical) duality at utopia's core. It is through its separation from the real that we can see its power. A utopia that is too feasible becomes mired down in all the problems of reality and its entrenched norms and hierarchies, the challenges of feasibility faced by any political project

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[2] It is interesting to consider whether dystopias have the opposite character. They gain in impact when they seem eminently 'realistic'. Dystopia is at its most powerful when it feels too close for comfort.

deemed plausible. This returns us to the foundational work of Thomas More. My intention is to read *Utopia* as a primarily satirical and critical text.

Revisiting Thomas More's *Utopia*

Thomas More (1478-1535) was an English statesman, lawyer, and political thinker, who was eventually canonised by the Catholic Church, of which he was a devout follower during a time of significant religious strife in England. He was Lord High Chancellor of England from 1529-1532 under Henry VIII. Having refused the Oath of Supremacy, which affirmed the monarch as the supreme head of the newly established Church of England, he was executed at the orders of the same man who raised him to high office. He was eventually canonised and is the patron saint of statesmen and politicians. His *Utopia* was published in 1516, originally in Latin. In this work, More examines his ideal society of the same name. *Utopia* has two possible meanings, both of which have interesting implications for the text. *-Topia* comes from the Greek *topos* meaning place, but it is the prefix *U-* which is of particular interest for its ambiguity. The more commonly accepted meaning comes from the Greek for 'good', *eu-*. There is a potential second meaning, the Greek *ou-*, meaning none or no, and therefore utopia as no- or none-place. A kind of 'nowhere'. This second meaning provides a significant degree of ambiguity from the outset of More's work, and, as we will see, this is added to by other paradoxical and playful terminology littered into *Utopia*. The overall effect is to lend this traveller's tale a notably satirical element. It also suggests that we might focus less on the intricacies of realising such a place, a place whose realistic qualities seem questionable from the very beginning, and instead focus on other considerations, such as what it says about the society and political-theological landscape in which More lived. Utopia can certainly be conceived of as more of a lens through which to examine and reflect upon contemporary society, rather than solely as an actual project which one should seek to implement. Such a reading certainly has interesting implications which will be explored at length later on in this thesis. For now, I will focus primarily on the first understanding of the term (utopia as a 'good place'), which clearly plays an important role for More as well. It is important to note that this

interpretation is presented from the very beginning, as More himself states in a poem found in the original editions of *Utopia,* "Wherefore not Utopia, but rather rightly, My name is Eutopie: a place of felicity" (More, 2012: 9). Clearly More wished to emphasise this particular interpretation of his work's title, highlighting how this is truly an ideal society in his eyes. Following the mononym title, More adds a further subtitle translated as "Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth, and the New Island of Utopia" (2012). More certainly seems to clarify his intentions here: he is seeking to find the best possible system of governance, the best possible organisation of a society (or commonwealth). The ambition and scope of his project is made evident. Its stated focus is also clear – Utopia is a model of the good society, the best possible one, and this would certainly imply it is one to be emulated. What is good about this felicitous place is clearly meant in the absolute or transcendental sense.

More begins his description of Utopia (through the character of Raphael Hythlodaeus) by going into great detail on the local geography (2012: 83).[3]Its idyllic nature is obvious from the beginning, although its topography is at first uninviting to strangers: "the entry into the bay … is very dangerous" (*ibid*: 83). On the other side of the island there "are likewise many harbors; and the coast is so fortified, both by nature and art" (*ibid:* 83-4). Whilst there is clearly a degree of splendid isolation (partly created by human artifice), this is somewhat deceptive, as More goes on to admit that "this was no island at first, but a part of the continent", split off and "designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them … [through a] deep channel … fifteen miles long" (*ibid:* 84). The isolation of More's island of

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[3] "The island of Utopia is in the middle two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it, but it grows narrower towards both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent. Between its horns the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. In this bay there is no great current; the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbor, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce" (More, 2012: 83).

Utopia is artificial, its separation from the continent carefully designed and accomplished through human innovation. Its idyllic nature is (at least partially) constructed, rather than entirely naturally granted. A key feature of More's Utopia, the harmony provided by uniformity, is introduced early on, when he states that "there are fifty-four cities in the island, all large and well built, the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow" (*ibid*: 84-85). This leads him to declare later that "he that knows one of their towns knows them all" (*ibid*: 88).

Their political system is convoluted and extremely intricate (More, 2012: 91-92).[4] This convoluted system reflects More's views on several important matters, which highlights the potential interpretation of the text as not only a presentation of the ideal society in the eyes of More, but also a critical reflection on the less than ideal society he found himself in. Firstly, the aforementioned rigidity and uniformity of life and political representation in Utopia, which operates through individual families, is seemingly presented in contrast to the decadence of life around him, with the family unit clearly serving as the foundation of the social structure. Secondly, the importance of checks and balances on a monarch chosen for life. More's contemporary society was certainly one with challenges on the extent of royal authority (especially when it contrasted and clashed with Papal authority). Another notable section from *Utopia* mentions that, at gatherings in a temple, "the priest is placed above the

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[4] , More describing how "thirty families choose every year a magistrate, who was anciently called the Syphogrant, but is now called the Philarch; and over every ten Syphogrants, with the families subject to them, there is another magistrate, who was anciently called the Tranibore, but of late the Archphilarch. All the Syphogrants, who are in number two hundred, choose the Prince out of a list of four who are named by the people of the four divisions of the city; but they take an oath, before they proceed to an election, that they will choose him whom they think most fit for the office: they give him their voices secretly, so that it is not known for whom every one gives his suffrage. The Prince is for life, unless he is removed upon suspicion of some design to enslave the people. The Tranibors are new chosen every year, but yet they are, for the most part, continued; all their other magistrates are only annual" (2012: 91-92).

prince" (*ibid*: 107). Within twenty years, More's England was transformed so that priest and prince became one and the same. He even lived briefly to see it, and one can only imagine his despair that such a system endures nearly 500 years later. Thirdly, and closely related to the second point, it is of course highly significant that More's vision of a "Prince" who serves a lifetime appointment and is elected by a group of equal magistrates bears far greater resemblance to papal enclaves and this form of succession than the hereditary transfer of power within Europe's ruling royal families.

The close links between More's vision of Utopia and contemporary religious social and political orders would benefit from further elaboration here. The previously mentioned uniformity of Utopian society seems to closely connect with monasticism, a connection mentioned by Davis when he highlights how More was "under the influence … of the monastic model" (1991: 330). This influence was not uncommon in the genre that emerged following More's work, with monasticism also having a notable influence in the thinking of another Utopian theorist Tommaso Campanella (*ibid*: 333). More goes on to discuss how idleness is not seen in Utopia, nor is begging, and there are no taverns and brothels, meaning all live openly and honestly (2012: 110).[5] This is, firstly, clearly a critical perspective upon contemporary European cities and lifestyles, especially those found close to More in London. The focus on work and the abstention from 'sinful' pastimes are also clearly evocative of the monastic lifestyle. Purity and uniformity are central to More's vision of Utopia. However, it is intriguing to note how certain aspects of life are highlighted by More for their absence rather than the presence of something preferable. One might term this the negative dimension of

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[5] "You see that there are no idle persons among them, nor pretenses of excusing any from labor. There are no taverns, no ale-houses, nor stews [meaning bathhouses – commonly also brothels] among them, nor any other occasions of corrupting each other, of getting into corners, or forming themselves into parties; all men live in full view, so that all are obliged both to perform their ordinary task and to employ themselves well in their spare hours; and it is certain that a people thus ordered must live in great abundance of all things, and these being equally distributed among them, no man can want or be obliged to beg" (More, 2012: 110)

utopia, those aspects of life in the world the author found themselves in which are conspicuous for their, in More's case often explicit, absence. This further suggests the view of *Utopia* as being a critical engagement with the society More found himself in, rather than purely around the construction of the perfect society, although, admittedly, More often highlights that these various vices have been removed through the specific organisation of Utopia. The construction of the ideal and the negative dimension of utopian thinking cannot be entirely separated.

In addition, certain geographical features of the island of Utopia give it similarity to England and to More's home of London, which further contribute to the view of *Utopia* as primarily critical and satirical. There are, for example, as previously noted, "fifty-four cities in the island", which reflects the fifty-three counties which, along with the city of London, formed More's contemporary England (More, 2012: 84). Rather than focusing on the society that More builds in isolation, it is far more enlightening to consider the nature of the society More is critiquing, what his project says about the world he perceives around him, in particular on England and Britain, which possesses a similar degree of natural geographical separation. The demand, or hope, for a better political existence is key for More, and to do this he not only imagines one, but does so in a way which fundamentally seeks to juxtapose it against his contemporary surroundings. This means that the feasibility of the actual utopian project is of reduced significance. In fact, More seems to go out of his way to destabilise his own narrative, through the playful use of language. The name of his explorer, Raphael Hythloday, comes from the Greek Hythlodaeus – meaning "purveyor of nonsense" (Baker-Smith, 2019). The river which flows through Utopia is called "Anyder" – deriving from the Greek for "no water" (More, 2012: 88). Interestingly, More's description of the tidal flow of the river Anyder (which clearly does have some water in it after all!) also bears marked similarity to

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the river Thames running through London (2012: 89). Furthermore, More also includes the single bridge that crosses the Anyder, reflecting London once again as, at the time, London Bridge was the sole way to traverse the river. There are several other examples, such as Amaurot (the capital city) – meaning phantom (More 2012: 197). The humour of More in choosing these Greek names would not have escaped his contemporary readers, who would have been well versed not only in Latin, which *Utopia* was originally written in, but also in ancient Greek. So, the subtlety he displays for the modern-day reader, less versed in the classics, may actually not have been so subtle at all! Despite More's claim to be talking of the country of happiness, it is clearly no coincidence that it could also be the place of nowhere, or perhaps that it is actually London and England reimagined. A kind of phantom version of More's home. If this utopia is an implausible place, or at the very least a place with an ambiguous position between reality (used here in the sense of achievability/plausibility) and fantasy, then we must consider what exactly its role is. More's ambiguity and playfulness serve to emphasise the numerous and stark contrasts between the island of Utopia and England (and London in particular), despite their obvious geographical similarities. The land of Utopia itself is also of obvious importance and will be returned to later in this thesis with regards to the discussion of settler-coloniality.

Clearly, More's Utopia does provide a significant degree of further commentary on his contemporary situation. The challenges facing More's contemporary European society – religious division, violent conflict, monarchical overreach, and tyranny – are all absent from Utopia. For all its strict political and social structure and (at least to the modern reader) limited freedom, Utopia is at least tolerant of different ideas and enamoured with learning, whilst resistant to the tyranny of overly powerful individuals. More's humanist thinking – he was notably a friend and correspondent of Erasmus, and at the same time a devout Catholic –

clearly influence his conception of utopia. Whether we like the vision of the good society

which he creates or not, one can readily understand his eagerness to critique existing society

and imagine a better one. Early modern Europe was in a state of religious and political crisis.

The significance of crisis in spurring these works cannot be overlooked,[6] whether that crisis

be of a more personal or societal nature. For More, England was on the brink of renouncing

Catholicism, within a wider context of significant religious debate and conflict. The German

peasant wars were also imminent. But this was also a time of opportunity, one which

demanded political foresight. In the aftermath of the broader crisis of the late Middle Ages,

Europe was rebounding as an economic power. Population levels had, by the year 1500,

finally returned to what they were in the year 1300, having been diminished by famine (driven

by a 'mini' ice age) and the black death.

Fundamentally, More sees the problems of his contemporary society, its intolerance, its greed

and avarice. But this is also a time for potentially radical and transformative change. He

writes a work, with lots of ambiguity, formulating an alternative, which seems designed

specifically to tackle the problems he identifies. His utopia is something to strive towards, a

dream for a society. But it is seemingly in its critical perspective on his own society, and its

intense relevance to that society, that we see its power emerge. Rather than being primarily

oriented around the construction of a perfect new society, I think More's text speaks more to

the problems immediately surrounding him, with the author himself seeming to throw

repeatedly into question the plausibility of the work he himself offers. It certainly seems

unlikely that More wished to present his utopia as overly 'realistic'. I would suggest that this

could be understood as a reflective utopia, one which reflects the problems of a society by

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[6] For example, another key utopian writer, Tommaso Campanella, also wrote his utopian work *The City of the Sun* at a time of crisis, although rather more personal than societal in nature. Much of this work was written while Campanella was imprisoned (Ernst & De Lucca, 2021).

solving them in ways that the author of such a utopia may draw attention to. This is fundamentally different from a realistic utopia. A realistic utopia operates within certain constraints around feasibility that mean it is the best one can do, given whatever chosen variety of additional conditional factors (which may vary in strength and scale). But I think this a mistake, because it limits utopian thinking in a way that to me fails to lend it any greater power or influence, whilst simultaneously undercutting what it is best able to do.

To elucidate this point, I wish to return to the work of John Rawls. In my view, utopian and ideal political theorising help serve specific goals, goals which were identified by Rawls himself, and were mentioned in section 2. In my view, utopian political theory has particular relevance to the third and fourth purposes. In particular, I think this form of utopian or ideal thinking to be particularly important to the point of 'reconciliation', and the relationship between reconciliation and the realistic utopia of the fourth purpose. Firstly, it is interesting to consider the position of reconciliation with regards to institutional design, a concern raised by Sen about how utopian and ideal theory operate. Reconciliation with our institutions, as conceived of by Rawls, seems to not be overly concerned with advocating institutional change. It does not seem action guiding, instead encouraging us to reassess how we perceive the development of the institutions we find ourselves confronted with. Could a kind of reconciliation perhaps have been More's goal, to express his dissatisfaction with his society, but to simultaneously reconcile himself to its 'rationality'? This seems difficult to imagine. More broadly should reconciliation be our goal, or a goal of political philosophy, at all? Rawls himself acknowledges potential problems with reconciliation, stating that "the idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care. For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and un-worthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx's sense" (2001: 4). Marx's understanding of ideology as

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the ideas and values of the dominant class highlights the dangers of realism when combined with reconciliation in the manner described by Rawls, which he was himself aware of. The problem is that one becomes reconciled to that which is already. Marit Böker states that "although Rawls regards it as the function of realistic utopias to extend what is considered to be within the possibility of practical politics through a cogent depiction of an institutional alternative, this alternative must itself remain limited to what can be understood and acted on, given existing views and mind-sets— and is therefore inevitably influenced by what is considered understandable and practically feasible from within the existing, rather than the extended, remit of political possibility" (2017: 93). Whilst Rawls himself is clearly aware that reconciliation to the realistic can be dangerous when what is realistic is warped by vested interest and hierarchies, I would suggest that he does not fully capture the level of concern that this should raise, in part, perhaps, because he is simultaneously seeking to utilise political philosophy as a tool for reconciliation, which it seems ill-suited for. What is realistic seems to me to always be shaped by dominant interests and reconciliation is therefore always a reconciliation to another power. What utopian thought can offer is a refusal to be reconciled, a kind of radical refusal of what is realistic. Instead of seeking reconciliation through political philosophy, in which we "calm our frustration and rage" at our society (Rawls, 2001: 3), utopia offers a way for frustration and rage to fuel transformative political theorising and practices, unbounded by a conservative realist incrementalism. Being 'realistic' is not a virtue for a utopian dream, that realism can lead to a reconciliation with what is, rather than a radical vision of what can be. In fact, realistic utopianism can even pre-empt what is to come.

More and the Settler-Colonial

I now wish to discuss another concerning dynamic when utopia is closely tied to realism.

There is one specific dimension of *Utopia* by Thomas More that must be explored in relation

to the idea of a realistic utopia – and that is its prescient description of settler-colonialism,

which certainly lends the overall narrative a disturbing quality when considered from today's

sensibilities. The similarities between More's work and that of others means that this criticism

has relevance for several utopian works. More is writing at the time of the European

'discovery' of the Americas, and at the beginning of an emerging age of European colonial

power, one which will radically reshape the world in ways in which it is still defined. The

significance of this for this work cannot be overstated. In other works, the connections

between the 'age of discovery' and utopian ideas are similarly obvious, although they tend to

be written later, and are therefore less prescient and more indicative of attitudes and norms

which were more entrenched at the time. For example, in Campanella's *The City of the Sun*,

the narrative takes the form of a dialogue between a "Genoese Sea Captain" and a

"Grandmaster of the Knights Hospitallers" (2003). Christopher Columbus himself, known as

the first to arrive at the 'New World', was born in Genoa, Italy. This concept of the brave

explorer is obviously similarly introduced by More, whose central narrator of Utopia (Raphael

Hythloday) "is a Portuguese by birth, and was so desirous of seeing the world, that he divided

his estate among his brothers, ran the same hazard as Americus Vesputius, and bore a share in

three of his four voyages" (More, 2012: 30). Americus Vesputius is a Latinization of Amerigo

Vespucci, another Italian explorer of the New World. The word America is itself a derivation

of his name, made by early cartographers. There is an interesting similarity in that More's

fictional island of Utopia also takes its name from an outsider – the conquering general

Utopus (More, 2012: 84). The coloniality of Utopia is clearly emphasised from the very

beginning of More's account, and proves pivotal in the very foundation of the society he constructs.

Utopus, the conquering general of the island, is the most obvious example. The island was originally known as Abraxa. Utopus "brought the rude and uncivilised inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind" (More, 2012: 84). The structures of Utopia have been established by an outside force (seemingly an individual of incomparable power and authority) over a population deemed 'primitive' and 'backwards'. The original culture of Abraxa is 'unimportant' and lost to invasion. More never uses the term again. The connection to emerging settler-colonial structures is obvious. In his seminal work on settler-colonialism, Patrick Wolfe describes how "it strives for the dissolution of native societies … [and] it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base—as I put it, settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" (2006: 388). Utopia exists on the ashes of Abraxa, and it has certainly built quite the structure. The culture of Abraxa has been eradicated, as far as More is concerned it was never worthy of existence in the first place. It was so "rude and uncivilised" as to be worthy of elimination. "Elimination is an organizing principal of settler-colonial society" (Wolfe, 2006: 388). Whilst More does not state that the population of Abraxa suffered the kind of elimination experienced by Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial societies, this does not mean the society is not settler-colonial. As Wolfe states, the dissolution of Indigenous societies does not necessitate the death of Indigenous individuals. It simply requires the death of indigeneity. Abraxa is gone once there is no one left who is Abraxan. All that is left is Utopia.

More states that this settler-colonial structure is not limited simply to the island either. The

Utopians, if there is an increase in population:

> "over the whole island, then they draw out a number of their citizens out of the several towns and send them over to the neighboring continent, where, if they find that the inhabitants have more soil than they can well cultivate, they fix a colony, taking the inhabitants into their society if they are willing to live with them; and where they do that of their own accord, they quickly enter into their method of life and conform to their rules, and this proves a happiness to both nations; for, according to their constitution, such care is taken of the soil that it becomes fruitful enough for both, though it might be otherwise too narrow and barren for any one of them. But if the natives refuse to conform themselves to their laws they drive them out of those bounds which they mark out for themselves, and use force if they resist, for they account it a very just cause of war for a nation to hinder others from possessing a part of that soil of which they make no use, but which is suffered to lie idle and uncultivated, since every man has, by the law of nature, a right to such a waste portion of the earth as is necessary for his subsistence." (More, 2012: 102).

I previously drew attention to Utopia's geography and wish to return briefly to this point,

having established the connections between Utopia and the settler-colonial. In his work, More

is clearly invoking the coming age of discovery and the colonial imagination, even if it was

only in its infancy. This reading of *Utopia* as being primarily a travellers' tale of an

'elsewhere', seemingly far removed from his surroundings, is intriguing in that it can be said

to serve as a disguise for More's critical engagement with his contemporary Tudor society. By

masquerading his political philosophy as something else, More can conceal the biting

criticism of his contemporary society behind a veneer of innocence and otherworldliness.

However, whilst maintaining that his island of Utopia primarily serves a role as critique, it is

important to retain the significance of the social structure it does present. More's work cannot

and should not be fully exonerated. Utopia has the structure of a settler-colonial state, its

organisation imposed from an outside force, even if the population remains the same. Not

only that, it is an expansionary colonial force, which behaves aggressively to those neighbours

which are not deemed to be making proper use of the land they have been given. The logic of

unused land, or terra nullius, was prevalent in initial settler-colonial narratives in the

Americas and elsewhere, notably in Australia (Manuel: 2017). Violence was justified to take

control of land not fully used to its 'potential' by now dispossessed Indigenous peoples. The military superiority of the Utopian colonisers over the Indigenous inhabitants is implicit but complete. We are given no indication that such a military action would ever be met by sufficiently powerful resistance to cause too much trouble. As Wolfe (2006) makes clear, the logic of settler-colonialism is total and exterminatory.

More himself would not have witnessed the hey-day of the kind of settler-colonial power he was describing, a peak some would certainly argue is very much ongoing, with the 'New World' home to over a billion people and with the settler-colonial state of the USA, for example, typically regarded as one of if not the most powerful state actors on the planet. This fact makes his description of settler-colonialism uncomfortably and terribly prescient. He details with surprising, and rather frightening accuracy, the kind of settler-colonial violence that was imminent, although he himself was executed before it truly began to take hold in the Americas and beyond. The disdain for indigenous cultures, beliefs, and lives reverberates into the present. To be sure, his Utopia is politically quite unlike anything that has existed in history, but settler-colonial states, not so unlike Utopia, include some of the most powerful and wealthy countries on the planet. I think it is therefore worth considering the relationship between this island society of Utopia and the problem of realism. Surprisingly, it seems to me that reality and this particular example of utopian thinking are not as far separated as it would maybe appear initially, even if that reality was a little way down the road for More, who would of course not live to truly witness it. Whilst reading *Utopia*, it is hard not to be left unsettled by the reality it so closely resembles with regards to the initial construction of the country of Utopia itself. It is fundamentally similar to coming settler-colonial states, even if its 'achievements' seem to be the work of one truly unbelievable individual. In so being, it seems to me that it is the realistic nature of the construction of this utopian state that is

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perhaps most unsettling, even if its actual institutional structure and the compliance of its inhabitants strike us, perhaps, as highly unrealistic. More seems to even operate with non-compliance as a factor given that he advocated the necessity of criminal punishment for those who have gone against the laws of Utopia (More, 2012: 145-148).

When utopia is made 'realistic' the goal seems, naturally, to make it more applicable to the current political landscape, to provide immediate pathways that would potentially create change or incremental improvement. These more immediate, more feasible changes utilise the utopian background to navigate change in a way that brings the potential and, importantly, plausible utopia closer. However, there is a trade-off here. Instead of simply making utopia more powerful and useful by increasing its supposed applicability, I would suggest that realism in a utopia seems to me to simultaneously contribute to two problems. On the one hand, as previously discussed, it seems to have a limiting effect on the opportunities for radical transformation through a willingness and openness to be 'reconciled' with dominant ideology. On the other, utopias conceived of as realistic seem to simultaneously contribute to the very same kind of domination that they could seemingly argue against. Through the method of institutional design, realistic utopias create rigid systems which may not be particularly far-fetched, meaning they can be viewed as less of a critical reflection on existing conditions, and more as an actual roadmap for prescribed and controlled change. The realism of More seems to be that he shows surprising foresight in predicting how dominant ideology will permit the kinds of settler-colonial violence that were to emerge after his death. Utopias which are viewed as realistic fundamentally seem to me to gain a potentially more threatening image, although interestingly I think this threat level seems to be tied more to institutional rigidity rather than transcendentalism itself, to borrow Sen's terminology. By dragging the utopian into the real it seems to lose some of its utopian character, as the inevitable problems

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of human fallibility within institutions which may not permit it rear their heads. But human fallibility is not raised as an issue when utopia remains distanced from real life institutional enforcement, when it is used in the reflective, rather than realistic way, encouraging critical engagement with a society, an engagement that refuses to be reconciled to dominant 'realistic' ideology. If one re-examines More's work, from a generous perspective, it does contain several aspects which are not so displeasing even to the contemporary reader. His institutions are archaic and draconian, but he wishes to foster learning and tolerance, minimise greed etc., and these do not seem ideas that one cannot sympathise with. It is their implementation which one finds so challenging, particularly because enough of it does not seem so fantastical at all. When the space between the potential and the realistic is dissolved, we are not left in a state of renewal and hope, but a space with limited mobility and the elimination of what lies beyond the realistic. We have eliminated the non-utopian other completely. Tying the utopian down through realism is counterproductive, for it is in the attempt to bring the utopian into the real that its problems begin to emerge. Nothing that can be realised can be truly utopian in the sense of the 'good', the 'good' is in 'no-place'. Utopias are always disappearing over the horizon. We can only seek to try and describe it, given our own feelings of frustration with what lies around us. It is their implementation which one finds so challenging. There is a hopefulness in knowing someone is seeking to envision the good for a community. One reads things more generously. It is when this good is pushed onto you, that it begins to feel tainted. It is for this reason that I argue, taking Estlund's thinking further, that utopian thought can be more powerful and meaningful when it is not forced into being realitically possible. In its 'nowhereness' it can maintain a specific kind of goodness, because it can be viewed as reflective rather than prescriptive. When utopias develop institutions which seem to fit relatively comfortably within the realms of political possibility, they become viable. When gaining viability, they then become morally difficult, as the nature of transcendental institutionalism means they come to demand compliance, going against most contemporary

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intuitions calling for freedoms of conscience and action for example. Marit Böker states that "the totalitarian character of utopian visions is problematic only if there is a single dominant vision that, as such, can claim total validity (and might therefore impose itself)" (2012: 94). It is the imposition of utopias that gives reason for caution. But, in its 'nowhereness', however, utopia can still retain a reflective role, without the difficulties created when viability demands action and compliance. It is also a way to maintain its authenticity. Utopian thinking has to emerge from somewhere, from a tradition of ideas and thought. If it is enforced, as More's is, then it is domination, even if of a benevolent kind, which represses the development of new and potentially competing utopias. It is when it emerges from within, as a critical engagement with society, that utopia can be viewed as 'organic'. One can conceive of perfection, in an imperfect world, but understand that realisation is and can be accepted and expected to be impossible. It is not the realisation that is necessarily important, but the dreaming in the first place. Sometimes the realisation leaves us deeply unsatisfied. The eliminatory nature of the island of Utopia in More's work is an example of this. Other utopian projects suffer similarly. Even Rawls's attempt at "realistic utopianism" (1999: 4) is eliminatory in character, through the elimination of non-compliance (Estlund, 2014: 127). Utopias are a reality which necessitates the elimination of the 'other' within a society, whatever the other might be.

The Chilling Effect

Utopias realised are clearly threatening in their eliminatory character, and More's (amongst others) is reflective of a violent settler-coloniality, but I simultaneously would wish to hold on to Estlund's argument when he refers to the idea that such doing away with utopian thought would have a "chilling effect" on political philosophy (2014: 113). The British historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay stated that "an acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia", continuing on to say that "the smallest actual good is better than the most magnificent promises of impossibilities" (1943: 460). Disregarding that living in Middlesex sounds chilling to me on a personal level, what exactly is the 'chill' that Estlund discusses? He is clearly of the belief that we would limit ourselves for reasons that cannot be seen as morally driven. This would certainly have a worrying impact on political theories striving for some normative values (justice, fairness, equality, etc.). To return to Macaulay, it is clear he is talking of the concrete, or rather, what we already have. That acre in Middlesex has already been acquired. This does not seem therefore, to hold all that much relevance for political philosophy, which speaks to the potential, departing from the strictest realism and considering what we might wish to build and change. If we accept, as Estlund argues, that political philosophy does not lose moral value through its impossibility, then I think we can reframe the question slightly to challenge Macaulay. What would be an improvement to life in Middlesex? Better schools, more green space, a less disappointing cricket team? Maybe dream small, think of an improvement in the way local authorities fix potholes. As Estlund notes, "all normative political theory departs from realism in [the] … strict sense" (2014: 115), in so far as it does not advocate for the status quo. Macaulay himself may have imagined a Middlesex where he could more easily travel by carriage. He would have envisioned ways to improve his home area. So, perhaps an acre in the now is better than any promise of some future gain, but this seems a limitation on political theorising that is hard to

justify, not least because the 'principality in Utopia' may not prove as farfetched as Macaulay may believe. Estlund himself notes the power of ideal theory to provide transformative change. He writes that "it is also important to acknowledge that there are surprising cases where the most extravagant dreams turn out to be worth pursuing. Even if that is not the normal case, the unusual breakthrough cases are also important, and they would never occur without the dreaming. That, to put it succinctly, is the danger of not dreaming" (2020: 258). A principality to oneself is perhaps not the best example, being rather selfish, but one can think of progress and change that has been achieved historically. Estlund points towards what he terms cases of "unbelievable moral progress ... whose achievement would have been impossible to believe not long before it occurred" (2020: 259).[7] Humanity is clearly capable of huge and seemingly unexpected strides forward and, therefore, "it seems to be part of the human condition that we don't know our own strength" (2020: 261). I will take up and extend these ideas further in my discussion of Bill Ashcroft, Ernst Bloch, and utopian political thought in the context of post-colonialism. For now let us return to Macaulay's Middlesex, which may be superior to a principality in no place, but what could that acre be? What is its potential, and what are Macaulay's hopes for it? It would be unfortunate indeed, surely, if the greatest dream would only be to acquire a second acre. If Macaulay were to dream a thing, why should he not be ambitious in his dreaming? Fundamentally, however, Macaulay is not the kind of figure that I wish to appeal to with regards to the promise of utopian thinking. As Estlund's own examples make clear, it is the community, not any particular individual, which stands to gain most from this kind of unfettered dreaming. As a privileged, wealthy individual, Macaulay is not really the figure who would benefit from a radical critique of his contemporary society. He is fundamentally served by it and comfortable with his place there,

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[7] Estlund notes the "legal abolition of slavery; legal marriage and other union rights for gays and lesbians; avoidance of world war for over 70 years and counting (as of this writing); and election of a black U.S. president" as examples of such progress within his own US-based context (2020: 260).

in Middlesex or wherever else. It is for others whose dreams are more marginalised, that radical change should be strived for.

The Unsettled Place

The issue of utopia is always bound up with the fundamental question: a utopia for whom? This leads us to the work of the Australian scholar Bill Ashcroft (2007, 2012, 2016) and to Karl Hardy (2012). Hardy suggests the need to "unsettle" Utopia (2012), that is to say, to shake it free from its entrenched place in the western canon and bring in alternative critical perspectives to revitalise our imagination of an ideal other, indeed, to bring in the ideals of others. Engaging with marginalised perspectives serves to heighten the degree of separation of utopia from realism. By giving voices to those whom reality has fundamentally side-lined and excluded, one offers space for radical political theorising and practices which offer the potential for transformation. In the next part of my thesis, I will argue that utopian thinking needs to be unsettled, and unsettling. Utopia must be unsettled from its position within dominant western-centric thinking; and it must be unsettling to societies marked by injustice, inequality, and exploitation.

To explore these ideas further, I would like to draw on the work of Bill Ashcroft, writing on utopian political thinking within the post-colonial tradition. He states that "postcolonial utopias began with anti-colonial utopias that focused on the prospect of an independent nation, but the postcolonial vision of utopia has become the persistent belief in a transformed future" (Ashcroft, 2016: 4). As former colonies gained independence, the nature of the dreams and hopes that emerged from them changed. There is an enduring belief in the chance of fundamental change, a belief that is unshackled by any limiting 'realism'. In making his arguments, Ashcroft is heavily influenced by the work of neo-Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch in arguing for the promise of utopian thinking. One of the principal modern thinkers on Utopia, Bloch's views rest on "not a mere assumption that things will develop in a desirable direction, but an active attitude towards real tendencies with the goal to realize them" (Bloeser & Stahl,

2022). He begins his work *Spirit of Utopia* with the following: "I am. We are. That is enough.

Now we have to begin" (Bloch, 2000: 1). Action, from the beginning. But what drives this

action, how does it come to pass. To further elucidate this, and how it ties into utopian

political thinking, Bloch writes that:

> "no dreaming may stand still, for this bodes no good. But if it becomes a dreaming ahead, then its cause appears quite differently and excitingly alive. The dim and weakening features, which may be characteristic of mere yearning, disappear; and then yearning can show what it really is able to accomplish. It is the way of the world to counsel men to adjust to the world's pressures, and they have learned this lesson; only their wishes and dreams will not hearken to it. In this respect virtually all human beings are futuristic; they transcend their past life, and to the degree that they are dissatisfied, they think they deserve a better life … and regard the inadequacy of their lot as a barrier, and not just as the way of the world. To this extent, the most private and ignorant wishful thinking is to be preferred to any mindless goose-stepping; for wishful thinking is capable of revolutionary awareness" (Bloch, 2018: 31).

Bloch writes here, very obviously, in the lingering shadows of totalitarianism in Europe, but

he raises intriguing questions about the nature of desire, dreams, and the wish for greater than

what is currently to be found. I am reasonably confident that Macaulay was not a man who,

given his wealth and prestige, sought much in the way of revolutionary awareness, but that

does not mean he did not seek some things, however banal Bloch may have found them.

Such ideas can be found in several works by Bloch. As Ruth Levitas points out, his:

> "central project in his magnum opus *The Principle of Hope* is the rehabilitation of the concept of utopia. In attempting this, he draws attention to the Utopian element in a wide range of cultural forms. He includes day-dreams, fairy-tales, myths, travellers' tales, the sea voyages of medieval Irish monks, and the alchemists' attempts to synthesize gold, besides the more conventional field of literary descriptions of ideal societies [but] not only a broader field of literature, but also architecture and music may be important vehicles of utopia. What binds this diverse mass of material together is that all of it can be seen as embodying 'dreams of a better life.' All of it ventures beyond the present reality, and reaches forward to a transformed future. It embodies both the act of wishing and what is wished for" (Levitas, 1990: 13-14).

For Bloch, "the anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken only

as emotion, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but more

essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind" (Bloch, 1986: 12). Dreams of a better life are a cognitive driver for action.

Estlund argues that there is "no defense of the theoretical approach to justice that would bend the standards of justice to whatever unfortunate motivational incapacities humans might turn out to have" (2011: 237) and "that moral theories of social justice, political authority, political legitimacy, and many other moral-political concepts are not shown to have any defect in virtue of the fact, if it is one, that the alleged requirements or preconditions of these things are not likely ever to be met" (2014: 113-114). These sorts of ideas seem to blend quite nicely into the thinking of figures such as Bloch. However, I would still emphasise the problem of 'realism' in the work of Bloch, as his view of utopia is that it benefits from being 'concrete'. Whilst he does acknowledge, as previously noted "that the most private and ignorant wishful thinking is to be preferred to any mindless goose-stepping; for wishful thinking is capable of revolutionary awareness" (2018), it is clear that his preference lends itself to something more solid, something more capable of dealing with the constraints of being what he might term an educated utopia. For Bloch, as noted by Levitas, "the identification of educated hope, is essential. Without it, the argument that utopia is anticipatory thinking falls flat on its face" (1990: 24). Levitas goes on to state that "at best, [utopia without educated hope]… becomes indistinguishable from the much-repeated idealist theme common to early commentaries on utopia that Utopian images have a value only as unattainable goals, the pursuit of which constitutes a spur to human progress" (1990: 24). But I would emphasise that reflective, critical utopia can contain value, even if it is an unattainable goal, even if the not-yet remains a not. Orienting utopia to the anticipatory again gives it a prescriptive element. It is a road map with a particular destination, rather than a critical engagement with what is, and the ability to then consider change based on that engagement. Wishful thinking can and should be

liberated from the shackles of dealing with reality. When constraints are loosened, we might anticipate a more creative approach to political discourse.

If, as Estlund states, "almost all normative theory departs from realism in the strictest sense" (2014: 115), then I think it valid to consider why we are limited by the 'more realistic'. The utopian, the good, should, to my mind, eliminate the restrictiveness of realism altogether, allowing us to consider our positions anew (that is not to say that we are somehow transcending our positionality, we are of course always impacted by what is around us, but it should not limit the scope of what we think of). More's failure is to view utopia as something to be asserted from the top downward, by an invading conqueror. His triumph is his critical perspective on his contemporary society, the subtlety of the good place/non-place balance supporting this interpretation, his desire for something better, and his belief that its articulation was in some way meaningful. Meaningful indeed, as 500 years later it is still a key text in the history of political thought. When reading More's work in light of the work of Ashcroft and Bloch, it is interesting to reflect on that which goes almost entirely ignored. What were the dreams of the Abraxans? What might an Abraxan utopia look like? These ideas would have emerged, not from the outside, but from within a community seeking potential transformative critical reflection on society. More's argument that Abraxan society was backward is of course relative, and he likely did not spare it much thought, but it was a society that could and would develop in its own way. It would have fostered visions of the good nothing like those which were forced upon it. If it survived the domineering presence of the Utopians (which it did not seem to), it would have been able to provide critical reflection on that society itself, as colonial subjects continue to do in post-colonial societies. In a famous essay within the post-colonial tradition, Gayatri Spivak asks *Can the Subaltern Speak?* One might ask further, what does the subaltern dream of? And should this be in some way

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bounded or limited by reality? And when the subaltern dreams, those dreams will reflect subaltern dissatisfaction with an unjust status quo. When we consider the subaltern, its position is formed in its marginality and vulnerability. Those who have less in the current state of affairs are those to whom the constraints of 'realism' perhaps feel most restrictive. If one is to truly tackle large-scale injustices, how much can one be limited by the realities of our world. Does the scale of transformation hoped for not necessitate vision on a far greater scale? There is power and potential here: space can be made so that even the most vulnerable can imagine transformative change, but that should not be forced to conform to limits of feasibility or practicality. This would seem to restrict the ability to conceive of transformative politics. However, Ashcroft's view that postcolonial utopias "already make a distinction between the fantasy, the 'placeless place' and the spirit of hope" and that this distinction lies at the heart of liberatory practice and theory (2016: 5), appears to me to only partially capture the overall idea. For More's non-place is itself subversive, even if his institutional implementation is crude and domineering. His critical perspective on his own society is not made meaningless by the fact that what he advocates in its stead does not seem, to a modern reader, all that much of an improvement. The vocalisation of the other that is hoped for can always speak to frustration and dissatisfaction with the status quo. The 'placeless place' can still reflect many of the concerns we may have about our place.

The Utopian Ideal

In this penultimate section I wish to examine the relevance of the arguments I have made in this thesis while returning to contemporary debates relevant to utopia within political philosophy. Naturally, this essay is of definite applicability to debates within ideal theory as to how exactly such a concept should be conceived of and how it can be best utilised. In this section I wish to discuss the relevance of what I have said in relation to two pieces of what I think are highly significant works in discussions on ideal theory by Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska (2012) and by Marit Böker (2017).

Hamlin and Stemplowska are of relevance here for their discussion of the challenges raised by institutional design. As I have mentioned in this thesis, it is in the intricacy of More's institutional design that one begins to find his project most problematic, his attempt to make it plausible by providing, in intricate detail, the structure of the institutions to be found in the utopia he would build. Institutional design in the tradition of ideal theory is also the target of significant critique by Sen. Hamlin and Stemplowska emphasise how the challenges of institutional design tend to cause ideal theory and non-ideal theory to collapse into each other, noting that "one reason to think that institutional design is the aim of both ideal and non-ideal theory … is that the debate over the degree of idealness that is appropriate is often couched in terms of worries about impracticability, and it is social arrangements rather than ideals that are subject to considerations of practicality" (2012: 53). This connects with issues similarly raised by Estlund when he questions whether we should consider something less morally valuable for being implausible (an idea he rejects), particularly with regards to the demands of ethics and morality. To me, it also speaks to the challenges faced by utopian thinking when it becomes submerged by questions of feasibility. When utopian thinking cedes ground on this issue, it makes itself vulnerable to becoming oriented around institutional design in a way

which robs it of critical power and gives it a decidedly authoritarian slant. Utopia becomes

prescriptive rather than reflective. Furthermore, the ability of utopian thought to prescribe

certain institutional arrangements does not necessarily provide us with immediate assistance

in implementing change, a critical argument against ideal theory posited by Sen, and

mentioned earlier on in this thesis. Sen does not, however, seem to have concerns around the

collapse identified by Hamlin and Stemplowska. Having challenged the clarity of distinction

between ideal and non-ideal theory, Hamlin and Stemplowska then go on to posit their own

conception of a distinction between various theories of institutional design (whether leaning

toward ideal or non-ideal on that continuum) and a *theory of ideals.* "In the theory of ideals

the purpose is to identify, elucidate and clarify the nature of an ideal or ideals (we will call

this 'specifying ideals')" (Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012: 53). Although "there are two

component elements to the theory of ideals" I wish to focus on the first, which is "devoted to

the identification and explication of individual ideals or principles (equality, liberty, etc.)"

(Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012: 53). For me, this theory of ideals holds relevance to

discussions on utopia as reflective. When we think of utopia as critical, whilst it can be

critical of certain forms of institutional design, it seems to me that the strongest criticisms

tend to come from value-based positions. For More, his critique is especially scathing when it

comes to considering the state of England, not only with regards to its institutional design, but

also concerning festering corruption, ambition and greed, as well as intolerance and religious

hatred. Given the (previously discussed) general uniformity, lack of private property (More,

2012: 72), and absence of begging (2012: 11) we can easily glean, for example, More's hope

and wish for greater equality amongst the peoples in his own place. It seems that the

characteristics which are rewarded within such a system are far from the kinds which a just

society should appreciate and value. The ideals he theorises, of toleration, modesty, charity,

and selflessness are the aspects of *Utopia* that are most appealing to a modern readership.

I wish to conclude this thesis by discussing the work of Marit Böker. I have saved her

contribution to last, because her work is perhaps closest to my own thinking. She writes

specifically on the concept of 'realistic utopia', although she diverges somewhat to focus

heavily on the relevance of this thought for deliberative democracy specifically. However, I

still hold that her work fits well with the significance of utopian thinking for the more

marginalised, including the post-colonial subject, who I have shown through the work of

Ashcroft and Bloch to be of great import for this mode of political theorising. She writes that:

> "Political thought strictly set on staying within the limits of existing feasibility
> constraints risks contributing to a 'cynical realism' that capitulates to such realities
> when change might in fact be possible. While a utopian perfect society (arguably)
> implies the suppression of critical judgment, one without any utopian visioning also
> lacks critical perspectives, which makes it similarly prone to totalizing threats.
> Utopian thought challenges such cynical realism in that it works as a device to
> "defamiliarize the familiar," (Levitas, 2012: 56) which enables a critical
> problematization of reality in the first place. In other words, while progress as such
> may not require visions as radical as utopian ones, and could be sparked by normal
> political proposals for some reform, it is, on this view, precisely — and only— the
> complete and unconstrained re-imagination of the whole society that makes true
> critique possible. From this perspective, although critics of utopia are bound to be
> right that an attempted implementation of a utopian society is likely to lead to
> authoritarianism, utopian thought itself is also vital for the critique of authoritarian
> impositions of mainstream views and supposed facts" (Böker, 2017: 91).

Böker here clearly identifies a different kind of 'chilling effect', one that can have the power

to silence voices outside the mainstream, who may challenge the realistic utopias emerging

from the centre of hegemonic thought. It is important, as well, to emphasise that:

> "This does not necessarily conflict with views … that in day-to-day politics societies
> need "piecemeal" change based on "continuous readjustments" towards the 'better' as
> opposed to overhauls towards the 'perfect' (Popper, 1962: 158-159, 163). Yet it denies
> that such a view implies a complete dismissal of utopian thought as such: while
> piecemeal reform is also necessary in real-world politics, societies equally need a
> 'background discourse' of the entirely unconstrained, horizon-widening perspective
> that only 'perfect' utopias provide" (Böker, 2017: 99).

This horizon-widening is of great significance, and surely cannot be inhibited by misguided

attempts to limit it to realism. Böker appears to focus mainly on dialogue between utopias in

an ideal deliberative democracy, but she does acknowledge how "utopian visions should not in fact be understood as faultless models according to which society could or should be rebuilt here and now, but rather as contributions to a stock of reflective and critical thought within society" (2017: 90). Critical interrogation aimed at the justice of this structure is, to my mind, the primary dialogue that justice demands. To fail to do so would be to inhibit those ideas which provide the most fundamental critical reflection on society as it is today, which is surely the kind of reflection that is most necessary.

Thomas More's work seems to be at its most palatable when one considers the social ideals and individual virtues he was trying to advocate, rather than focusing on the intricacies of the institutions he was trying to bring into being, or on the historical path of progress which brought his Utopia into being from its settler-colonial origins. Rather than seeking to make his utopia 'realistic', it is clear that his attempts to 'realise' it were actually the parts that raised the biggest problems for utopian thinking as a way of doing political philosophy. When one considers instead the move towards less realism, a move away from the limitations of the realistic, constrained attempts at a limited 'perfection', one begins to appreciate the potential possibility of utopian thinking. As this section has shown, Böker and Hamlin and Stemplowska have shown how ideal, utopian theorising can be utilised in ways that do not limit it to problems such as institutional design, but instead widen the political space for transformations that go beyond the merely piecemeal and incremental. When utopian thinking is viewed as a critical, reflective tool for elucidating ideals, we see the power that this form of theory has to unsettle dominant discourses which constrain and limit transformative change.

Concluding Remarks

In this thesis, I began by locating and exploring contemporary debates in political philosophy, especially concerning ideal and non-ideal theory. In doing so, I drew, in particular, on the work of David Estlund to argue for the promise of ideal theory against detractors notably including Amartya Sen. Having done so, I then turned to engage with Thomas More's seminal work in the utopian tradition. I first described some of the structure and history of his *Utopia*, considering carefully the significance of the word's dual etymology, and the impact of these two separate conceptions on reading the institutions and topography which he created. Subsequently, I proceeded to turn a more critical eye on this work, utilising post- and settler-colonial frames to highlight the eliminatory character of More's vision, and the danger this can pose for utopian theorising more broadly. This involved connecting More's work with the emergence of European colonial power at the start of the 16th century. Whilst emphasising the challenges that this raised for reading More's work, I also highlighted how More's work was at its best, its most useful, when it was viewed less as an eliminatory construction (a prescriptive utopia) which seemed to sit intriguingly as a plausible and in some way realistic and actually prescient vision, but rather as a critical engagement with his contemporary society (a reflective utopia) in a manner which showed his critical insight into issues facing Tudor England and Europe in the late middle ages more broadly. This means I do not reject the promise of utopian thinking more generally. Instead of conceiving of utopia as an end-state that should be realised or at least strived towards, I engaged with alternative conceptions of the utopian to consider what insight they may offer. The connection between More and (settler-)colonialism meant that it was within the critical traditions engaging with those historical processes that it made sense to explore. Drawing on the post-colonial scholarship of Bill Ashcroft, and his undoubted indebtedness to neo-Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch, offered an alternative perception of utopian thought, one which reinforced my reading of Thomas More's

text as being at its best when viewed as a critical piece rather than a constructive project. Viewing utopia as a primarily critical venture means to liberate it. Making a critical form of theorising 'realistic' seems to me to fundamentally undermine its ability to offer transformative change. Rather than viewing utopian thinking as unrealistic, and therefore in need of being brought back down to the plane of realism, to the material, to the immediate, this work has argued for a liberation of utopian thinking from the constraints of realism. Drawing lastly on the work of Marit Böker, I advocate for a utopian thinking which seeks to expand the realm of political theorising to include those spheres which realism left obscured. Only through a refusal to be constrained by realism can we conceive of truly transformative political practice. This leaves room for non-ideal theory, and for practice which values incrementalism and gradual progression, but is not bounded by conservative conceptions of what is and is not feasible within the realm of the political. It is an argument in favour of recalibration of who political philosophy is for, and what it should strive to accomplish. Just because something is 'hopeless' does not mean that it is to be abandoned. On the contrary, its critical power must be redeemed. As the German philosopher Walter Benjamin reminds us, "only for the hopeless ones have we been given hope" (1996: 356).

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