

Utopia as a commentary on english society



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In Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, More creates a land that contrasts directly to 16th century Europe. More starts by using the stories of fictional character Raphael Nonsenso to directly criticize the European form of government. He also attacks the European philosophy in his description of the Utopian Commonwealth, which is designed to reflect the flaws of Europe. Although some concepts of More's *Utopia* seem impracticable, the society he creates is viable because its laws counteract man's inherent failures as a race. By abolishing currency, mandating education, and legislating two years of required agricultural work, *Utopia* manages to demolish corruption, eradicate social class structures, and guarantee a consistent sense of morality among its citizens. More's outlook on 16th century English society depicts an immoral world run by greed. Some of his criticisms bear more significance than others. Initially, More tells a fictional story of a dinner party attended by Raphael Nonsenso, a lawyer, a Cardinal, and a friar. The topic of capital punishment for thieves arises, and while many support this new decree, Raphael points out its flaws on secular and religious grounds. He proposes an alternate punishment for thieves: the return of the stolen goods and a lifetime of slavery. The lawyer (whose profession, incidentally, does not exist in *Utopia*) argues that Raphael's proposal is impossible, and others agree until the Cardinal points out that the outcome of Raphael's idea could not be known unless actually tested. Hearing that, each dinner guest changes his view and begins to praise what he had just been ridiculing. This story first shows the flaw in the English judiciary system, which is that testimony is judged by counselors who are more interested in power than truth. More importantly, it shows that judgment is formed not on the merit of a proposal but as a response to the opinions of the powerful. As Raphael observes: "

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This [response], from the Cardinal, was enough to make everyone wildly in favor of an idea which nobody had taken seriously when I had produced it." (p. 32) In English society, opinion reflects obsequiousness more than rational thought. More further rebukes English society for the gap between the rich and the poor, specifically the differences in class distinctions. More describes each Utopian city as surrounded by farmland, and each citizen must spend occasional two-year stints in the countryside performing agricultural work for his or her respective city. These farms are regarded as land to be worked rather than personal estates to be owned, so when one city gains an agricultural surplus, it is exported and distributed among other Utopian cities at no cost. More says, " Under such a system, there's bound to be plenty of everything, and, as everything is divided equally among the entire population, there obviously can't be any poor people or beggars." (p. 65) The idea of communal agricultural work was a revolutionary idea for its time, most notably because agricultural work was a task usually reserved for the poor, derided by those with any amount of wealth or notability. Thus the Utopian system razes the class distinctions that dominated 16th century Europe. Furthermore, Utopian markets operate under a form of communism, and the economic structures of markets and money simply do not exist there. Without a capitalist economy or a formal currency, greed becomes impossible and the bribery and political corruption that accompany greed are gone as well. More creates a character to disagree with the usefulness of the Utopian agricultural system, stating, " I don't believe you'd ever have a reasonable standard of living under a communist system. There'd always tend to be shortages, because nobody would work hard enough. In the absence of profit motive, everyone would become lazy, and rely on every

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else to do the work for him.” (p. 45) However, this is proved untrue by the description of the economical framework of Utopia. Although there is immense motivation in capitalist societies, it is also true that for every one highly motivated and essential worker, there are several others who contribute nothing to society, including most women, priests, landowners, and beggars. In contrast, Utopian workers labor for only six hours per day, but because “hardly any other member of the population is either unemployed or non-productively employed,” (p. 58) tasks are completed equally as fast with less work required from each citizen. Furthermore, More’s comment that in a communal society no one would feel the compunction to work for the simple reason that they would be fed by the work of others is answered in the Utopian law punishing all laziness and lounging on the job. This law acknowledges the flawed nature of man; therefore, it is not that More’s criticism is wrong, but that it can be overcome through proper teaching and social structure. Thus, Utopia is not the result of ideal human behavior, but instead is the product of laws that force its citizens to act perfectly despite their innate flaws in nature. Consequently, the Utopian Commonwealth described becomes a viable possibility. Because Utopian laws and customs compensate for the inherent nature of man, the practices can be applied to any people, no matter the culture or society. For example, natural greed is curbed by the lack of a recognized form of currency while precious metals and stones are devalued. More states: “The Utopian way of life provides not only the happiest basis for a civilized community, but also one which, in all human probability, will last forever. They’ve eliminated the root-causes of ambition, political conflict, and everything like that.” (p. 112) Although the Utopian system is theoretically

feasible, it would be almost impossible to fully transform any other form of government into it. Because the changes made to common human desires are so radical, people would naturally resist the change because it would be seen as having a negative impact on their personal lives. Despite the unlikelihood of More's ideal government becoming a reality, his Utopia is an important foil to the English society of his time. Works Cited: Saint, More, Thomas Sir,. Utopia. London: Penguin Books, 2003.