HUMANISTIC IDEAS IN MORE'S UTOPIA

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Abstract:

This article focusses on the humanistic ideas of Thomas More (1478–1535), explained in his book Utopia, a work of fiction and socio-political satire, written in Latin and published in 1516. In Utopia Thomas More gives an exhaustive and detailed description of The State of Utopia which already exists somewhere in the New World. Those types of theories which are oriented into the future, into something which is not yet realised but is potentially possible are called utopian literature. It covers a wide area consisting of itineraries about fictional countries, suggestions of legal or moral legislation, and attempts to find the best state regulation. Humanism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively. But the questions are: are all More's humanistic ideas entirely good? Who can take responsibility to judge what is good for each man? The article deals with the mentioned dilemma.

Keywords: fiction itinerary, humanism, Thomas More, utopia

1. Introduction

Thomas More lived in the period of Humanism and was an important representative of humanist writing. While reading his book Utopia I realized that he had very progressive views for the Renaissance. Some of his ideas, however, seemed quite the opposite, some even unreasonable and amusing. These contradictions are interesting enough for deciding to explore more about the period and its ideas.

2. Discussion

If we examine the word humanism from a lexicographical point of view, the root word is humble (humilis, humus), coming from the Latin, meaning earth or ground; hence homo, earth- being and derived humanus meaning earthly or human. By the Middle Ages scholars had pointed out a distinction between divinitas, the fields of knowledge deriving from scripture, and humanitas, those relating to the practical affairs of secular life. Even today the study of languages and

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literature is still quite often referred to as the humanities. Different dictionaries explain the word human as showing or having positive moral qualities of man such as kindness and goodness. Through different historic periods, various types of humanisms developed their own specific ideologies: The Protestant humanism of 16th century northern Europe, rationalistic humanism, romantic and positivistic humanism and others. It is extremely difficult to draw a parallel between all these humanisms since the differences among them are just too big. One common characteristic could be concerned with man and exploring what is best for him.

At this point the question arises: Who can take responsibility to judge what is good for each man? Is it the president of the country elected by the majority of citizens, a humanistic teacher or somebody else? Since we have different beliefs, views on life and everyday problems, I do not think there exists just one kind of system which would be best for everybody. What is good and acceptable for one is not necessarily good for somebody else. Thomas Moore 'invented' just one system for everybody he predicted only one way. In my opinion this is not very human. It even reminds me of political systems where there is just one right way, and all the other options are forbidden.

In almost every society, there are inhabitants who are not satisfied with political, economical, social, religious or educational conditions in the country. At extreme limits, these feelings of dissatisfaction can lead to massive revolutions with radical changes of political or other systems as a result. The more moderate way of dealing with such problems are reflections about the future that would be the very best for all people. The thought of a better society, a better world is common to almost every critical discussion of society, but there are whole reflective philosophical systems whose main characteristic is a direction towards the construction of the future, not dealing with problems of the present state. The authors of these systems are similar to architects, making plans for an ideal society. They have two options: they may describe the ideal society as a project waiting to be realised or as somewhere already existing society. In Utopia Thomas More gives an exhaustive and detailed description of The State of Utopia which already exists somewhere in the New World.

Those types of theories which are oriented into the future into something which is not yet realised but is potentially possible are called utopian literature. It covers a wide area consisting of itineraries about fictional countries, suggestions of legal or moral legislation, and attempts to find the best state regulation.

The word utopia was first mentioned in December 1516 with the publication of More's book with the same title. More coined the word from Greek and Latin, two main languages of humanist scholars. The Greek adverb ou, not is coined with the noun topos, place and given a Latin ending. The new word means Noplace, a place that does not exist and is nowhere to be found. Today the noun utopia or the adjective utopian has become a common noun used often to denote impossible ideas or beliefs. The other explanation of the origin of the word utopia claims it could be derived from a Greek compound eutopia meaning happy or fortunate place. Most of the utopian ideas and suggestions can not be realised because they do not take into consideration important social factors that lead to social transformation. The thought of change has to become a part of the public at large. Only when the majority of people start to think about

their role in historic events and when they express active will to help making these changes can utopian ideas have a chance to become real.

One of the most important characteristics of utopian system is a critical attitude towards the present time. The critique can be direct or hidden and already contained in searching for better solution. More used both types.

From narrow criticism of the unjust laws in England, More expands his critique to both the political and economical situation in England and finally to sharp disapproval of every society divided into social classes and based on private property: 'Thus I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely abolished, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can mankind be happily governed (More, 39).

The starting and the most important point of More's current social criticism are economic relations. He finds the existence of private property the source of all evil and negative phenomena in society. Until it exists, society is divided into two opposite and hostile parts: one that managed to acquire a lot of private property and is rich, and the poor one on the other side. The consequences of those unbalanced relations are injustice, discontent and greediness of the rulers which leads to wars. The result of this is again bad economic situation for the majority and more money for a few people. More adds an interesting conclusion to this debate. He points out that usually the rich deserve the poor's destiny and the opposite, because the rich are greedy, unfair and harmful people. The poor, on the other hand are humble, simple and more useful to society. Therefore, they deserve the rich people's destiny.

The only way for just distribution of goods and common welfare, according to More, is the abolition of private property. Until this is carried out, the biggest and the best part of the people will suffer. Society will not become better as long as personal property exists. If it were removed, all other problems would disappear. More's root criticism is not religion, philosophy or politics, but private property. More's critical attitude towards all political systems based on private property and his wish to build a better one reminds me of another political system, socialism. The theoretical background of this system is similar to More's human-friendly ideal and fair. Socialism is a system in which property and distribution of wealth are under social control. Therefore, all important decisions about production, exchange and distribution of income and division of labour are made by the whole society and our collective. Social critics in the late 19th century condemned capitalism and private property. Karl Marx, who established the modern socialist movement, called for the abolition of money, markets and capital. Together with Friederich Engels, they developed their own branch of socialism as the result of a revolutionary class struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. More's critical ideas about private property had an important influence on future political movements of 19th and 20th century; but 19th and 20th century socialism were an existing reality and not utopian fiction. Later historical periods showed that some problems still remain with or without private property.

3. Conclusion

Humanist are concerned with man and exploring what is best for him and searching for ideal social regulation. I do not think there exists just one kind of system which would be best for

everybody since we have different beliefs, views on life and wishes. It is difficult if not impossible to decide what is absolutely good for everybody. In Utopia Thomas Moore envisioned just one system, the best in his opinion, but later historical periods showed that some problems still remain with or without private property, the source of all evil and negative phenomena in society as observed by More.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author
Tina Šabec is a professor of English and Slovene. She works as a primary school teacher. Her research interests are: English teaching, English literature and classroom dynamics.

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