



## AN IDEAL COMMONWEALTH: JUST A MYTH OR A POSSIBLE OPTION?

**Tina Šabec<sup>i</sup>**

Primary School Prade,  
Pobeška cesta 52, 6000 Koper,  
Slovenia

### **Abstract:**

This study discusses an ideal commonwealth as presented in Thomas More's socio-political satire Utopia. The book has two parts, in Book two More gives a detailed description of the island of Utopia, a self-sufficient state that produces everything necessary for its inhabitants. Furthermore, the island, people, cities, customs, laws and other special characteristics are described. Finally, the study seeks to examine today's view of More's humanistic ideas. The question arises to what extent is the idea just a myth or is there realistic options to implement this in today's world.

**Keywords:** ideal commonwealth, myth, option, Thomas More, Utopia

### **1. Introduction**

More's book Utopia is divided into two parts. In the first part, Book 1, the author criticizes the current social standing in Britain in dialogue within a dialogue form. For the debate in book 1, the obvious formal models are the dialogues of Plato or Cicero, which consist of long speeches punctuated by brief interruptions. More knew the economical, social and political situation in Britain well since he was a Lord Councilor, having the most important role in the country after the king. The two spheres of his work, one as a politician and statesman and the other as a writer and thinker, often brought contradictions into his life. They were also likely the reason for his unfortunate and tragic end. When he reached the peak of his political career, he had a conflict with King Henry VIII. As a result, he was first dismissed from his Lord Councilor position and soon afterwards thrown in jail and beheaded in 1535. But if Thomas Moore had not had such an important political position, he would not have had so much information and knowledge about problems and social situations, and his writing and thinking nature would not have been as profound and critical as it was.

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [tina.sabec@os-ev-prade.si](mailto:tina.sabec@os-ev-prade.si)

## 2. Discussion

To show possible solutions for different problems mentioned in Book 1 such as unjust laws, political and economical situation in England, society divided into social classes and based on private property, More designed an ideal commonwealth like Plato and Aristotle before him. In Book two More gives a detailed description of the island of Utopia, a self-sufficient state that produces everything necessary for its inhabitants. It is written in the form of discourse by Raphael Hythloday, who promised to tell Peter Gilles and Thomas More about the state of Utopia where he spent more than five years. He would never return, but he wished to acquaint people with the best possible state regulation. What is life on the island of the Utopia like? In Book 2 the island, people, cities, customs, laws and other special characteristics are described.

People elect their officials once a year. Thirty households together elect an official called a phylarch. All 200 phylarchs elect their prince, who holds office for life unless there is a threat of the state becoming a tyranny. All officials are usually elected for a single year. Two rules they have in their senate seem very interesting and worth closer observation. The first one is that no decision can be made on a matter of public business unless it has been discussed in the senate on three different days. The second is that the senate never debates a matter on the same day that it is first introduced.

The above-described political regulation is progressive and democratic at the same time. All officials are elected by the people from the lowest to the highest. Only the prince has a lifelong function, but it can be taken away from him if he were to attempt any sort of tyranny. Even the prince himself has to answer for his decisions to the people. These ideas are revolutionary at the beginning of the 16th century. Contrary to absolutism More vested all the power in the people. This was a brave statement to make at that time, especially if you were the king's councilor. He was also trying to make some other changes, such as reducing public service to the minimum. Other utopian systems gave great and exclusive importance to public service. On the contrary, More's idea was to make public service simple, cheap and as small in number of employees as possible. Utopians are childhood trained for farming, which is an occupation everybody performs. Besides farming each person is taught another trade of his own, such as wool working, linen-making, masonry, metalwork or carpentry. They work only six hours a day: three hours before noon, after lunch, they rest for a couple of hours, and then they work for another three hours. More's a big concern for the working class is shown in this idea. He saw workmen's need for rest as opposed to landlords who were only concerned with their own profit. How is it possible to work only six hours and still make enough for a living? In Utopia, all people work. The shopholders' job is to make sure that nobody sits around in idleness.

Social and business relations are explained in the next chapter. The way they distribute goods is equal for everyone. There is a market in the middle of each city where all the products are brought and stored. Then the head of every household takes whatever his family needs without paying for it. In Utopia people do not have or use money. Since there is plenty of everything, nobody takes more than he needs: *'Why would anyone be suspected of asking for more than is needed, when everyone knows there will never be any shortage?'*

I consider this idea the most utopian because some people are never satisfied with what they already have and always want to have more: a better car, a bigger house, or more luxurious

holidays. I do not think a place where there would be enough of everything for everyone will ever exist. But the thought itself is extremely positive and human. Utopians take special care of sick and elderly people who always get what they need first. I also believe that they are the ones who need our attention but nowadays we often forget about them. The sick and elderly are often put to the margins side of society.

The way utopians treat gold and silver and their attitude towards showing one's wealth and richness is also very special. In Utopia slaves and criminals have to wear golden chains, rings and crowns. That way possessing anything gold or silver is the biggest disgrace and people are not interested in having or wearing them. They give pearls and diamonds to their children to play with again, when they grow up, they do not want them anymore because they would look silly and childish.

After the explanation of how the Utopians deal with treasures, an interesting story about Anemolian ambassadors is told. One day they came to Amaurot, the capital city, not knowing about their very different customs. They were wearing the most expensive and colorful silk clothes with heavy gold chains adorned with all kinds of jewelry they owned. They thought their hosts had nothing to wear and were very poor and they showed off even more. The Utopians laughed at them, thinking poorly dressed servants are their lords and ambassadors wearing golden chains slaves so they did not bow to the ambassadors but to the humblest servants. Children mocked the lords wearing pearls and commented on their childishness. After seeing people's reactions, the visitors recognized their attitude as wise and they put away their expensive clothes and jewelry. Utopians are amazed at the madness of people who think they are nobler just because they were very expensive clothes. No matter how delicate a threat, they say, a ship wore it once, and still was nothing but a sheep. I think this story is very educational and believe nowadays we often give too much importance to our outside image and are in a way like the arrogant and foolish Anemolian ambassadors. The fashion industry instead of Utopians is the one that laughs at us, making huge profits from people's vanity. Some people spend unreasonable amounts of money on designer clothes and believe that they would bring more importance, happiness and fulfillment but the feeling usually lasts for a very short period of time. One of the last chapters in book two discusses warfare. Utopians are generally peaceful people and they despise war. They go to war only for good reasons, but this term has a very broad meaning in their dictionary. Their understanding of so-called just war looks contradictory to me. The mentioned good reasons to start a war are to protect their own land, to help friendly countries, and to liberate an oppressed people in the name of humanity from tyranny. The last one has the most questionable intentions. Can utopians alone judge which people are oppressed and which are not? Today some big and strong countries are also trying to liberate breast nature nations but under this pretense, they're hiding other not so friendly intentions. Also, the consequences of such behavior are often not human. War in this case is not an act of humanity but one's own interest.

At the end of Book II, the socially divided unjust systems based on the private property of other nations are criticized again. The only solution, money abolishment, is emphasized. In Utopians' belief fraud, theft, robbery, quarrels, brawls, seditions, murders, treasons, poisoning and a whole set of crimes which are avenged but not prevented by the hangman would at once die out if the money disappeared and so would fear, anxiety, worry, toil and sleepless nights. I

believe this problem is more complex and cannot be solved that quickly. Raphael Hythloday's debate ends with his wish. He told his story so that all mankind could imitate the utopians' community which is the happiest and capable of lasting forever.

### 3. Conclusion

Thomas More's humanist visionary reform tends to be impossibly idealistic. The ideal nature of society is a very likeable option since many would like to live in a commonwealth where there are no greed, corruption or power struggles. On the other hand, some people would have difficulties if their lives would be without money or private property. I believe it would not suit everyone because of different personal philosophies and perceptions. The absence of privacy and individuality might also be problematic from different points of view. However, optimism that an ideal society is possible is needed nowadays and in the future.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### About the Author

Tina Šabec is a professor of English and Slovene. She works as a primary teacher. Her research interests include language learning, classroom dynamics and English literature.

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