

William R. Burleigh
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UTOPIA

In my undergraduate days, tinkering with the study of political science, no book both thrilled and perplexed me so much as Thomas More's Utopia. With youthful impatience, I strained to find the key – amid all the brilliant rhetoric – to what this little volume was trying to tell me. Just why, when I myself felt so puzzled, had it become so celebrated over the past 500 years?

You surely recall the story: More, cast as himself, is introduced in Antwerp to a strange, bearded globe-trotter named Raphael Hythloday. They become engaged in deep debate over Hythloday's five-year sojourn on a remote island, bearing the name "Utopia," where he found peaceful people living happily in a moneyless society devoid of private property. Their ensuing conversation touches on the deepest, most fundamental ingredients of an ideal commonwealth but – alas – they retire for supper being unable to reach any accord.

On that first reading, it was readily clear that More, one of the most gifted minds of his time, was posing far more questions in his sophisticated meditation than he was willing to offer answers. But I remained stumped for the most part in being able to provide any answers.

As the years passed, I became aware that I was far from alone in my puzzlement over this much read, much debated classic. John Ruskin, for one, considered Utopia "perhaps the most really mischievous book ever written." A modern day student of

More, Gerald Wegemer, goes so far as to hold that Utopia poses “one of the most distinctive intellectual puzzles ever devised in the history of literature.” Scholars remain so divided over its many meanings that one of them lamented they can agree on little other than to acknowledge its brilliance. Several have found it “endlessly enigmatic.”

It has been remarked that while the book can be read in a single evening, a lifetime is needed to come to terms with it.

So it happened that not long ago, in one of those moments driven by idle curiosity, I took a copy of Utopia from my book shelf and began reading it once again. I suppose I did have one lurking, underlying reason for doing so. Early in my newspaper career I enjoyed a ringside seat observing the legacy left by two utopian experiments in the Indiana wilderness. Ever since, I have been fascinated by what utopian believers find so compelling in ideas that strike the rest of us as fanciful. What better place to begin looking than by going back to Thomas More, who after all introduced the very word “utopia” into our language.

Maybe it is a gift of old age that books we once found opaque emit glimpses of clarity when we return to them years later. I found that to be the case with Utopia.

Back in college, I had reached the shaky conclusion that More had surely concocted an elaborate satire. But beyond that, I stumbled. Now I realized the evidence was staring me in the face, starting with the name of the book itself. More, the first major writer of the English Renaissance, had immersed himself in things Greek, and so he created the word “utopia” from the Greek. Loosely translated, it means “no place.” That alone represents quite a clue. On the island where Hythloday claims to have resided, the principal river is named Anyder, which translates “river without water.” It runs through a

capital called Amaurot, or “the unknown city.” Among its residents is the poet laureate, a fellow named Anemolius, once again taken from the Greek word “windy,” or, as one translator has it, “Mr. Windbag.” The island’s governor is named Ademus, or one who has “no people.” The closest neighboring island is populated by Polylerites, or “people of much nonsense.”

More seems even more pointed with the name of the book’s principal actor – Raphael Hythloday. His first name “Raphael” comes from the guiding angel who helps to heal Tobias’ blindness in the Book of Tobit, but that last name Hythloday, once again derived from the Greek, stands for one who is “cunning in nonsense.” So which is Raphael Hythloday, a healer or a deceiver?

More’s signals to his audience that they might not necessarily take the text at face value don’t end with these humorous absurdities. Utopians are said to so scorn gold and silver, for example, that they use it to make their chamber pots. Yet, while they themselves consider war an activity “fit only for beasts,” they use surrogates to wage it savagely, cynically rewarding mercenaries and turncoats with the gold and silver ingots they have hoarded, and not the stuff of the chamber pots.

Thus, through his sly wit, More invites readers to weigh the problematic ideas which permeate what is plainly a Never-Never Land.

As More engages in this serious exploration, he grapples with age-old questions of how a people can bridge the gap between the ideal and the real in their political arrangements. What are the ingredients of political life best suited to meet basic human needs? What price freedom weighed against compulsion? How can a balance be struck between principles and their inevitable collision with political expedience?

In what is perhaps the book's most famous argument, Hythloday professes himself "wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely done away with, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can the business of mortals be happily conducted." The abolition of private property becomes Hythloday's simplistic solution to the admittedly manifold evils he sees in the European courts of his time – and he sees many.

More, always the prudent statesman, cannot agree. "I don't see it that way," he replies. "It seems to me that people cannot possibly live well where all things are in common. How can there be plenty of commodities where every man stops working? The hope of gain will not spur him on; he will rely on others, and become lazy."

More points out that if humans try to improve what they have, they are better served than if they intoxicate themselves with grandiose dreams of a world that can never be.

Hythloday persists, however, all the way through the last half of the book. In pushing his arguments favoring the state of nirvana he claims to have found on the island, he becomes more and more unhinged from reality and more and more attached to what most of us would recognize as a fantasy world. My young friend Nathan Schleuter, a professor who has devoted his studies to the utopian mind, has concluded that Hythloday is a fanatic – and a humorless one at that.

In what I found to be a key to understanding the book, More tells Hythloday at one point: "Don't give up the ship in a storm because you cannot hold back the winds. And don't force strange ideas on people who you know have their minds on a different

course from yours. . . . It is impossible to make all men good, and that I don't expect to see for a long time to come.”

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Such probing argument over such lofty matters found a ready audience when the celebrated humanist Erasmus was deputized by his good friend More to have the first edition of the Utopia published – in Latin – at the end of 1516. A perfect seedbed awaited. The Renaissance was exploding with new-found confidence in man's abilities to give shape to the societies in which they lived. Readers of the book seemed to skip over More's ironic posture and instead took at face value what they saw as his blueprint for an ideal commonwealth. Thus, the book came to occupy a prominent place in serious political thought as well as in the world of fiction. For five centuries it has fascinated readers, influenced writers and invited imitators. It has literally created a whole genre of literature that carries the title More himself invented – Utopian.

Within a decade of Utopia's publication, Tommaso Campanella's theocratic City of the Sun and Francis Bacon's New Atlantis appeared, sounding themes that echoed More – voyages to faraway islands where people live idyllic lives holding goods in common. Shakespeare himself was attracted to the same utopian idea when, in the second act of The Tempest, he has the old councilor Gonzalo muse:

*Had I a plantation of this isle, my lord,
and were the king on't, what would I do . . .*

*All things in common nature should produce
without sweat or endeavor . . .*

Rabelais wrote a chapter he entitled The Expedition to Utopia in which he mentioned a trip to the Amaurots. Other voyages taken by Robinson Crusoe and Lemuel Gulliver became familiar names in the utopian canon. A surprise entry came from the pen of Samuel Johnson, who in his Rasselas discovered an ideal community in a place he called Happy Valley. The English political philosopher James Harrington wrote his Commonwealth of Oceana in searching for an ideal constitution, a search that would influence the designs of government in the American colonies in the states of Georgia and the Carolinas.

The interest in utopias reached a high point in the late 19th Century and into the 20th. In Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward, his main character Julian West sinks into a trance and awakens in the idyllic city of Boston in the year 2000. Countering Bellamy, William Morris a few years later published News from Nowhere in which his main character awakens from a trance in the new surroundings of a London that worries over advancing scientific technology.

With the advent of the scientific age, the focus of utopian writing changed as concern mounted over the uncertainties faced when ideas run amok. Thus arrived dystopian works, dystopia being another invented word, first recorded in a John Stuart Mill essay, referring to places where unhappy, fearful people live dehumanized lives, especially in totalitarian regimes. As schoolboys, we became familiar with the challenges posed in these books -- Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, George Orwell's 1984 and William Fielding's Lord of the Flies. Even today at your neighborhood cinema, there is currently featured a dystopian flick titled "The Giver." And on cable this season, a costly

but failing reality TV show is putting volunteers on a lonely island. Its title? Why, “Utopia,” of course.

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Even from such a brief survey, a question naturally arises: Are utopias and dystopias to be found only in books and film? No, I think we also can readily recount attempts in which individuals and groups of people have felt strongly enough about altering their lot that they have actually attempted to establish communities built on utopian ideas. Most of them have collapsed in a heap, notably Karl Marx’s classless hell.

More’s original work emerged amid the Age of Discovery. Hardly a quarter of a century before Utopia was published, Columbus had sailed to the New World. The adventurers who followed him returned with tales of people living in a natural state, where property was held in tribal common, and whose lives seemed to be marked by innocence. It is no wonder that in the years and centuries to follow, utopian reformers turned to the Americas, especially, as an unspoiled part of the world in which to locate social experiments.

In the early 19th century, some now-familiar examples began cropping up. In New England, the Transcendentalists undertook Brook Farm while all along the American frontier, Shaker and Hutterite communities arose. And one unspoiled, isolated place in the backwaters of southwestern Indiana along the banks of the Wabash River became the locale for not one but two notable attempts to create societies built on decidedly utopian models.

The first was the brainchild of a robust, strong-willed German religious reformer – Johann Georg Rapp – who, announcing that “I am a prophet,” had split from his Lutheran moorings in Wurttemberg and brought his followers to America, “the land of Israel,” believing the old ways were ending and the Second Coming was at hand. For 11 years, they lived together in a Pennsylvania commune. Having surrendered all their earthly goods, they put 4,500 acres to productive use while submitting to Father Rapp’s spiritual leadership. All the while they waited for a Second Coming that didn’t come, even though their leader had convinced them that it would happen within their lifetimes. Impatiently, they began to feel crowded by new neighbors pushing back the frontier. So Father Rapp decided to relocate. His deputies petitioned the United States government to help them find a more remote, fertile site.

Two hundred years ago this very year, they came to the Indiana Territory on keelboats, traversing the Ohio and Wabash rivers some 600 strong, having purchased 24,734 virgin acres from government agents for \$61,050. They named their new home “Harmonie.” They continued to agree to hold all property in common and to accept no pay for their labors, a cornerstone of their utopian dream.

In an amazing burst of Germanic energy, within two years they had begun carving out of the wilderness a complete village sited on a neat grid with broad streets. Within its bounds they built two large churches, 40 two-story brick/frame dwellings and 86 log houses to house members of the community, and a mansion-like lodging for their bearded leader. They tended flocks of merino sheep and raised pigs and cattle. They planted literally thousands of acres around the town, growing barley, wheat and other grains. Using their German know-how, they lined the hillsides with vineyards and orchards. In a

remarkable example of their ingenuity, they even contrived portable greenhouses in which they were able to grow lemons, oranges and figs.

The community's economic engine was powered by two saw mills, two granaries, a water mill and a dam, hemp and oil mills, a textile mill in which silk was woven from their own silkworms, two distilleries and Indiana's first brewery. They themselves drank only moderately but they soon found a thirsty market for their products in the settlements springing up in the hinterlands. They became known for the high quality of their weizenbier, their porter and a dark *dubbel* ale.

Up and down the inland rivers, from Wheeling in the east all the way down to New Orleans, the Rappites sold their woolens, silks, wagons, hats, ropes and leatherwork. Their commercial feats became known as the "wonder of the West." Without intending it to be so, they were the ultimate capitalist communists alongside their equally renowned Shaker brethren..

As they awaited the Millennium, Father Rapp, who held some cockamamie views about sex, urged celibacy, considering it a morally superior state to marriage. The book of Genesis, he was convinced, taught that Adam was bisexual and that if man abjured sexual relations, he would eventually return to the same self-reproductive state in which Adam arrived in Eden. So there would be no new marriages in Harmonie, although Father Rapp made an exception in allowing married couples to continue living together. The other men and women dwelt separately in four dormitories, the first structures to be erected in the town and which stand to this day.

Lord Byron, living a decidedly different lifestyle in Italy at the time, caught wind of Father Rapp's novel ideas, memorializing them in one of his many satirical digressions in the poem Don Juan:

*Why called he "Harmony" a state sans wedlock?
Now there I've got the preacher at a deadlock
because he either meant to sneer at Harmony
or marriage, by divorcing them thus oddly.
But whether Reverend Rapp learned this in Germany
or no, 'tis said his sect is rich and godly.*

The word around neighboring towns was that members of Rapp's sect weren't particularly hospitable. Part of the complaint stemmed from the fact that they wouldn't allow drunkenness in their taverns. They had a reputation for being solemn folks. Each night, it was said, they uttered a prayer of thanksgiving that that day had marked "a step made nearer to our end."

But the end didn't come. So again they grew restive. Some of the early frenetic energy was dissipated. Malaria spawned in the nearby swamps was becoming more of a problem. The practical minded leadership saw new opportunity in the industrial markets growing up back east. According to gossip circulating at the time, and later, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Father Rapp, instructing him to move. He was said to point, as evidence, to the angel having left a footprint on a stone slab outside his home. In point of fact, that piece of stone, containing what appeared to be the print of a child's foot, had been purchased in St. Louis as an ornamental curiosity by Rapp's son, Frederick. Ruse or not, the Rappites were persuaded to pull up stakes once again and move back to their

original home in western Pennsylvania to a place these prosperous burghers had appropriately named Economy.

(As a postmortem, Father Rapp's utopia lasted longer than most but eventually ran afoul of his ideas about sex. Only two celibates remained when the town shut down in the early 1900s.)

The Rappite land in Indiana found a ready buyer in 1825 when a well-known Scottish social reformer, Robert Owen, was informed of an advertisement for its sale. Ironically, this handsome dreamer had already made a fortune in textiles in Scotland, where in his mills at New Lanark he had attempted to reform the character of the impoverished working class by trying to root out their notions of individualism and competition. For a mere \$135,000, he bought Rapp's town – lock, stock and barrel – and envisioned the establishment there of a true utopian society.

While Father Rapp had awaited the Second Coming, Owen was eager to create a heaven on earth. With true utopian conviction, he thought he could wipe out ignorance and poverty through free education. His purchase, which he renamed New Harmony, would serve as his proving ground. He issued a manifesto inviting all who shared his dream of a socialist utopia to come to the Wabash River at once. Within three months, a thousand had shown up, many of them foreseeing an easy and secure life with no effort required.

Owen's reputation as a social visionary preceded him. Americans were anxious to find ways of avoiding the economic unrest and disruption being visited on Europe by the Industrial Revolution. No sooner had Owen arrived in the United States in early 1825 than he was invited to Washington. There he was granted use of the House of

Representatives to make two speeches, each droning over three hours, to members of Congress with the new President, John Quincy Adams, and members of the Supreme Court in attendance. He outlined his plans for New Harmony, vague as they were, saying he hoped they would become a template for villages across the new nation.

“I am come to this country to introduce an entire new state of society,” he pronounced, “to change it from an ignorant, selfish system to an enlightened social system which shall gradually unite all interests into one, and remove all causes for contests between individuals.”

My, how proud Raphael Hythloday would have been of him!

The differences between the Rappite and Owenite approaches in the little town in Indiana proved stark and the results immediate.

Where Rapp based his community on religion, Owen found religious belief superstitious. He detested all forms of organized religion. Where the Rappites thrived on tight organization, the free-wheeling Owenites were intoxicated by the lack of restraints. Both sects demanded all property being surrendered to common pursuit, but where Father Rapp’s followers were altogether industrious, many of Owen’s turned out to be downright lazy. In fact, those who didn’t want to work in the new Harmonie could simply buy credit as a substitute at the community store.

From the very outset, Owen spent little time in his newly acquired Indiana settlement. He was too busy embarked on a massive tour promoting the venture. He lectured to learned audiences in Philadelphia and elsewhere on the glories of his “new system of society.” He met with three former Presidents – Adams, Jefferson and

Monroe. According to records of the time, the excitement he managed to create was palpable.

Still he laid out no clear plans for bringing his ideas to reality. As a result, within months the idyllic town of Father Rapp fell into chaos. Fences went unmended, hogs ran loose and basic supplies ran short. Arguments about sharing arose between those who were willing to work and those who weren't. At least one duel was fought. Two female residents, having been guaranteed equal rights, were seen engaging in fisticuffs in front of Community House No. 4. Every time a thunderstorm came, an old man named Greenwood would walk through town carrying a 12-foot iron rod, hoping lightning would strike him dead inasmuch as it was the Lord's prerogative, not his own, to bring things to the end he desired.

Just when Owen's gauzy experiment seemed ready to dissolve, he acquired a more level-headed partner, William Maclure, whose aim was to get serious about the announced emphasis on education. So in January of 1826 Maclure assembled what has become known in Hoosier history as the "Boatload of Knowledge" – a collection of well-regarded thinkers willing to resettle in the uncivilized wilds to live out Owen's dream. The keelboat arriving on the banks of the Wabash brought an imposing intellectual cargo. Among its passengers were Thomas Say, the Philadelphia naturalist who would become known as the father of American zoology; Charles Alexandre Leseuer, a French naturalist of impeccable credentials; Fanny Wright, the feminist who would later bring her free thought movement to Cincinnati; Madame Marie Duclos Fraetageot, a distinguished school mistress pioneering the new methods of the Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi; and

Robert Dale Owen, the founder's 23-year-old son who was destined to make a mark on the young country far more notable than his father's.

They set about creating a heady atmosphere on the edge of the wilderness. There was intellectual ferment aplenty – endless conversation about books and ideas, thoughtful debates on ways to educate the young, research on specimens gathered from the forest and rivers, lectures on worldly subjects using Father Rapp's churches for the secular discourse.

On the Fourth of July celebrating the nation's 50th birthday – the very day those venerable Founding Fathers, Adams and Jefferson, both died – Owen came back to New Harmony after a seven-month absence to issue what he called a “Declaration of Mental Independence.”

His town's purpose, he intoned, was “to break asunder the remaining mental bonds which for so many ages have grievously afflicted our nature and, by doing so, to give forever full freedom to the human mind.”

This was nice airy oratory but neither Owen nor the principals around him had yet given any real direction to the nitty-gritty of governance that was needed to bring his socialist scheme to reality. In fact, after his Fourth of July declaration, Owen never again returned to the town. More and more he was seen as a “gentle bore.”

The dissension and lack of common purpose within the populace that had been present from the beginning threatened now to doom the experiment, this in spite of the presence of the *glitterati*, whose arrival had done little to produce any order. Instead, the intellectual contingent went about enjoying their own pursuits and the camaraderie of their associates, finding the required manual labor as distasteful as did the other free-

loaders attracted to New Harmony. Josiah Warren, one of Owen's original partners, lamented that "it appeared that it was nature's own inherent law of diversity that had conquered us."

So in March of 1827, hardly two years from Owen's purchase, two of his sons formally announced in the *New Harmony Gazette* that the experiment was officially being abandoned by the Owen family.

When it was all over, a sober assessment showed that the Germans left landmark buildings that are still standing to this day, but not much more. On the other hand, Owen's shiftless followers had left a legacy of ideas. Given the chaos that had pulled the town apart in the end, the litany of lasting achievements created during those few years remains breathtaking -- the young nation's first free public school system open to both boys and girls, the first kindergarten, the first women's club, an early institute for vocational training, a free public library. The community's strong advocacy of women's rights and the abolition of slavery proved crucial in embedding these ideals into Indiana's new state constitution. Two newspapers of national reputation were started, one migrating to New York and achieving journalistic distinction. In 1830, Thomas Say published a six-volume illustrated bible on the study of mollusc shells in America. Geologic research continued to flourish in the town with the U.S. Geological Survey being officially headquartered in New Harmony until 1856.

Three of Owen's sons themselves left notable marks. Robert Dale, the oldest, was elected to Congress and there he introduced the legislation creating the Smithsonian Institution. David Dale, a celebrated geologist, played a leading role in building the Smithsonian's "castle" in Washington with stone he selected. Richard, after a military

career during the Civil War, entered academic life and eventually was elected president of Purdue University.

But once the Owen commune collapsed, New Harmony itself went into a century-long slumber until, in the mid-20th Century, a visionary of a different sort appeared on the scene. Jane Blaffer Owen was a wealthy Texas oil heiress who had married into the Owen family. When she was introduced to the village of her husband's ancestors, she was immediately smitten. She busied herself for the rest of her long life pouring untold energy and money into celebrating New Harmony's heritage and molding it into the tourist attraction it is today.

Perhaps Jane's most noteworthy achievement, quite in keeping with the town's utopian flavor, was to commission the renowned architect, Philip Cortelyou Johnson, to design a space that was to become celebrated throughout the architectural world as the Roofless Church. It is basically a stark, open, walled area -- because to Jane's way of thinking the sky was the only roof broad enough under which the human and the divine could embrace.

On a sunny Sunday in 1960, May 1st, the church was dedicated. Some 1500 fashionably dressed admirers, twice the town's population, paraded into the enclosure through its massive bronze doors, the work of sculptor Jacques Lipschitz. Among the famous and near-famous was Paul Tillich, the theologian whose ashes a half dozen years later would be scattered in an adjoining park, there to be remembered in an area Jane named the Cave of New Being.

On this May day, as the Rev. Pitney Van Dusen, rector of Union Theological Seminary, intoned the dedicatory rites, a steam-powered calliope mounted on the bed of a

pickup truck circled the streets around the church site. I happened to be a young reporter covering the event. When I learned that Jane's husband, Kenneth Dale Owen, a hard-bitten oilman and direct descendant of the first Owen, had arranged for the music as his pointed commentary on the dedication, I asked him why. With drink in hand, he eyed me and explained: "Son, when a circus comes to town, you always need a calliope!"

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Up in that utopian village of Ann Arbor, Michigan, there is in residence one of our favorite bluegrass outfits, the RFD Boys, who for four decades have strummed a signature piece that plaintively asks:

*What's the moral of this story,
Won't you tell me, please –
What is the lesson I need to learn?*

As one wades through the fascinating tangles of history first launched by Thomas More's Utopia, what indeed is the lesson for us to learn, the takeaway for a bewildered generation that often has trouble separating fact from fiction?

Through the years, scores of possibilities have surfaced in the flood of imaginative utopian writings and experiments that have kept coming. At this post-modern moment of ours, however, one particular answer emerges with a timely resonance. It is this –

Beware of the ideologue with the simplistic solution to the world's complexities.

Hythloday fits an all-too-familiar pattern of those who appear on the stage with their telltale utopian twists of thinking, seeking to explain all of society's ills as stemming

from one particular institution or source. In their enthusiasm for an easy, single answer, they see nothing but their own goal while ignoring the obvious costs.

G.K. Chesterton once had a name for such ideologues. He called them madmen, defining them as “men of one idea,” lacking a sense of “proportion in a thing.” The cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt went even further, describing them as “the terrible simplifiers.”

It’s not hard to look around and find them. To take but one grotesque example, there are the murderous schemers bent on creating a Middle Eastern caliphate with their single-minded distortions of history. Closer to home, one can’t avoid those naïve dreamers who are constantly urging their big-brother nostrums on the American electorate. Just the other day the aide to one well-known U.S. senator, this one of libertarian stripe, admitted that his boss had a plan for – quote – an American “utopia” even though he admitted it was still in the distance.

As you can see, Raphael Hythloday’s ghost hovers ever close by.

SOURCES:

The idea for this paper was originally discussed during a long-ago conversation with Dr. Nathan Schleuter, a student of utopian literature and now an associate professor of philosophy at Hillsdale College. The author is grateful for his guidance.

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