



Episode 1,079: The (Pernicious?) Idea of Utopia

Guest: Justine Brown

WOODS: Never talked about Thomas More on the show. I mean, maybe in passing I might have referred to him in connection with Henry VIII, but I'm not sure. Maybe I haven't. I certainly have not ever discussed his work *Utopia*. And you sent me a fairly challenging and certainly interesting account of what he was up to in that work, which has been, as you know, a source of controversy for quite some time. Before we get into the interpretation of it, why don't you set the stage by telling us a little bit about him and just at least the background of what you're going to find if you crack open *Utopia*?

BROWN: Yeah, so Sir Thomas More is probably most famous, one, for having written *Utopia*, and two, for having been executed by Henry VIII. He was chancellor, and he was executed in 1535, and when Henry VIII wanted to get an annulment from Catherine of Aragon, Thomas More refused to go along with that. He wouldn't sign the oath. He just resisted. They were very close, Henry VIII and Thomas More, so he tried not to embarrass Henry VIII, but because he was a very ardent Catholic and this would mean that Henry VIII had broken with the Catholic Church and basically appointed himself as pope so that he could then give himself an annulment and marry Ann Boleyn, More couldn't accept that. And he sort of tried to retire from public life, and Henry VIII more or less pursued him, and the result was a trial and More's execution. And at the time, this was considered very shocking in Europe because More was very famous as a humanist. He was considered one of the great writers and thinkers of the time. He was very close with Erasmus, for example.

More wrote a great deal, but we know him best for *Utopia*, and people sort of assume that *Utopia*, you know, not having maybe read it, they assume that More was describing his ideal society. But it's pretty clear as soon as we crack the book open that More is very playful, right from the beginning with the title. The title, he coined the word "utopia," and he was in it punning on two Greek words which sound very similar. One means "a perfect place," which sounds like what we would expect, but the other means "no place" or "nowhere." So right away, built into the title we have this idea that the perfect place is nonexistent. And there are similar sorts of jokes all through the book. So the man who claims to have visited Utopia, his name would translate to mean "messenger of nonsense." The city is called Aircastle. There's another city called Tallstoria. So that sort of joke — there's a river called Nowater — these are linguistic jokes that More would have expected his audience to get. It was originally written in Latin and these are people who would have had a little Greek, at least. So right away, you have this insistence that what is being described is fiction.

WOODS: All right, let me jump in on that, because I went around asking — I asked two friends of mine who would be knowledgeable in this area what they thought of what you had to say.

BROWN: Yeah.

WOODS: And by and large, they agreed with you, one of them wholeheartedly. One said — One wrote me this: "Tom, although More remains controversial, this is how I read *Utopia*. She looks right to me. It's definitely a mocking of Utopia." So I wanted to solicit outside opinions because it's an area where I'm not an expert.

But then the other person said — and I'd like to give you a chance to address this. He's willing to go along with the idea that More isn't a communist and isn't just offering a blueprint for the good society and the idea of Utopia as monastic living for married people seems plausible. But he says, "My problem with this argument is that it ignores Part I of *Utopia* when there's all the dialogue about the injustices prevalent in England at the time — for example, capital punishment for theft — and the discussion of how social reform in England might be accomplished. I've always considered this section too lengthy to be a mere frame pretext for the story of *Utopia* itself." What do you think about that?

BROWN: Well, I'm not trying to argue that we should just dismiss it out of hand as a pure practical joke, but I do think that we know two things about More. You know, we know a lot about More, but two things we definitely know: he was very playful. His family never knew when he was joking or serious. He was known as a child for playing elaborate practical jokes. And he was a very devout Catholic. So I think that, to the degree that what we see in *Utopia* is More's idea of a perfect society, I think it's more commensurate with an ideal Catholic society. And what do we know about monasteries? They are clean — ideally, of course. They are clean, they are orderly. There's a sort of balance between manual labor and intellectual work. There are places where there is no money, of course. And in Utopia, families live together in groups. It's keeping things small enough so that money arguably wouldn't be necessary because of the scale is small enough.

So I think what would jump out probably — Actually, More, before he came to work for Henry VIII, he was an MP and he did a lot of different projects in the City of London. One of his great projects was to improve the sewers. So he was quite a practical person. And he obviously places a lot of importance on the idea of hygiene and maybe probably, from what we know of life in London at that time, it would have been smelly and dirty and cramped. And I think that the aesthetic qualities in Utopia sort of jump out at me. It's a place that has wide streets. It's clean. It smells good. They actually sprinkle perfume on the air when people are eating. So there's actually quite a lot of pleasures in Utopia. So that's what sort of jumps out at me.

So I don't think that it's an out and out — I don't think it's either. I think, again, that the title sort of tells us that this is elusive. It's almost like More played a practical joke that's still being played out today, because we're still wrestling with the degree to which he was serious.

WOODS: All right, so we've gotten kind of a picture of what the society in *Utopia* looks like, but for the average person going through the average day, what is the average day like and what role does money play and where is equality in all of this? What are the practical effects of this? If I were to live there, what would it be like for me?

BROWN: Right, well, you would live in a large sort of communal house with a lot of families. It's actually — there is no money and no private property, and in fact, people mock gold and silver. The prisoners in Utopia have to wear gold and silver and everybody laughs at them. It's

very hierarchical, so that's another thing that — I mean, they may have had no private property, but it certainly wasn't — it's not egalitarian. It's very hierarchical in that there are clear leaders. Each town has a kind of prince. Men and women are not equal. They have clear roles. For example, wives confess to their husbands at the end of every month, I believe, where they've gone wrong. Children defer to adults. Intellectuals — basically everybody works in Utopia, but intellectuals may form a kind of elite. If they show promise, they're expected to go off and do intellectual work.

There's quite an appealing emphasis on education, though, and I think in Utopia, education is promoted for everybody. What always comes into my mind is what I know about Thomas More's own house. More married twice and he had a lot of kids and he also adopted several — two girls, actually, and I think one other person. He had a house which for a long time houses Erasmus. Erasmus wrote *In Praise of Folly* there. More had a school in his house where the males and females were educated, and apparently this was — we know this was quite rare at the time, but it also served as a kind of inspiration for other nobles at the time, who, because of what More did, they adopted the same policy. So this is something that More himself — men and women are educated in Utopia, and so they were in More's house.

Another thing is that More employed a fool. That's a detail that I like very much, and it shows what was important for him: laughter. And we know something about the way this all looked, because Holbein the Younger painted and drew the family, and we see this sort of large — very sort of serious, but there's an air of merriment about them. So there are some parallels between Utopia and More's own house.

WOODS: All right, here's the thing. I'm trying to figure out what he accomplishes with a work like this if it's not crystal clear what his intentions are, such that people still argue about it now. Is he trying to say this kind of society can't exist? If so, why can't it exist? Why doesn't he write a book showing the pitfalls of this type of society so it would be super clear? I mean, let me put it this way: if he's just trolling us, to use a modern term I don't much care for, what's the fun of trolling if the people don't know they've been trolled?

But on the other hand, I'll give you the example of my very good friend Michael Malice, the king of the trolls on Twitter. And on Twitter, he will troll somebody forever, and I want to jump in and say, "You stupid idiot, he's just trolling you." But he gets very — now, he doesn't get upset at me because he likes me, but if any old stranger were to come along and say, "Look, he's just trolling you," it would drive Michael crazy. But I want to say to Michael the whole fun of it is to say, "Look, you idiot. He's just playing with you." To me, that's the whole fun, but the Michael, the whole fun is not having the person know.

So maybe I'm off base, but I guess I just need to know what is the point of the book if we can't even be sure what the point of it is. Why write it?

BROWN: Well, I mean, as I say, More did have a strong kind of comical spirit. But I don't think that the book is completely unserious. I really do think that it's both. The first part of the book that you mentioned, More himself is a character in the book, and he talks to Hythloday, who's the traveler who's come back and reported on his travels.

And by the way, *Utopia* is a kind of parody of a travelogue, because this is not long after 1492 and the discovery of America and all of a sudden we had this widening of our horizons as Europeans and a sense that anything could be out there in the world. And some texts were

starting to come back from Amerigo Vespucci and of course Columbus. And in fact, the character in *Utopia* claims that he has voyaged to the New World with Amerigo Vespucci and essentially is Utopia is – we could say Utopia is America in some way, that Utopia is this thing that's out there.

There are also hints in it here and there that it could be Atlantis, the fabled, disappeared island. So there are echoes of Plato. There are echoes of definitely – and in fact, he invokes Plato at the very beginning. I really do think that the layered quality of *Utopia* can't be overstated. I mean, it was called by John Ruskin the most mischievous book ever written. And so it is at once this reference to the kind of new horizons that were opening up and all the excitement that was going with that, and it sort of purports to be this report from the Americas, and yet it's clear that it's also a – there's an insistence on the fictional in it.

But in the first part, More as a character is talking to Hythloday about the role that – whether philosophers should go to court and whether they should advise kings, which is quite an interesting sort of irony, I suppose, because it was – it's long before More himself was invited to court. He had to be invited many times, because he actually had a lot of doubt about this. He himself didn't want to go to court. He was worried that Henry was already expressing some sort of – he was showing some hints of being a tyrant, and he said something to the effect of, although he liked Henry in some ways, he would quite happily give away my head if he thought that would get him a little bit of territory in France.

So More was feeling – one thing that he's dealing with in *Utopia* is this question of the role of the philosopher. And at one point, Hythloday warns him. He actually says something which would turn out to be prescient, which is that his morals as a philosopher might come into conflict with what he finds at court and might have bad results for him, which is exactly what happened to More.

So I really think that he's just playing a kind of – he's doing something quite complicated with *Utopia*, and for such a small book, it's certainly generated a lot of response. So it's not just a mere practical joke. I'm not trying to say that we should just dismiss it and say it's only that. But I suppose – I mean, it's definitely a riddle for conservatives, because I think that people assume that More was some sort of proto-communist, and indeed, the communists claimed him. But I don't think that – so maybe that's something that we're still trying to figure out.

WOODS: More on utopia, so to speak, after we thank our sponsor.

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Of course, ever since the publication of *Utopia*, there have been countless examples of utopian thinking, utopian projects, actual attempted utopian communities. And this is a strain that we see in American history in the 19th century. It was not uncommon to find a different – Charles Fourier was rather influential in the U.S., and there were people who started communities based on his ideas, and they really were based on a kind of a central-planning approach but on a small scale and on a kind of radical egalitarianism.

There were different kinds of utopias, where the idea was – the one thing that seems to keep them linked is the idea that, in society as we know it, there's some institutional barrier to

happiness. And so for some people, it was private property and there you had these utopian communities where they would get rid of private property. These communities never lasted more than a couple of years, any of them. Or the John Humphrey Noyes community, which, exclusive monogamy was the problem, so we'll solve that problem by not having that.

And so whatever it was, there's one thing that's causing all of these different social problems. And that was a way that a lot of reformers in general thought in the 19th century. Maybe it was alcoholic drink and that's leading to problems, or it was ignorance, which is why we need education. So there was a kind of utopian streak running through so many reforms. Horace Mann, who was the great pioneer of public education in the U.S., actually said at one point that it was his view that 90% of crime is the result of ignorance and being deprived of education. That's utopian. That's the idea that there's an institutional barrier to social perfection, and if we get rid of that barrier, we'll have it. That's just all over the place.

Now, I see in your history that you've written a book on the idea of utopia and its implementation in British Columbia. What's that all about?

BROWN: Yes. Well, I was born in Vancouver myself. I was very inspired by this, because actually, as a kid, I — well, I was brought up by hippies and lived on communes, which of course are utopian communities. We lived on more than one commune. And they also experimented with the Back-to-the-Land movement, which involved going and living basically like the settlers did and abjuring electricity and all modern conveniences. So I, as a way of kind of partly writing about that and kind of trying to come to terms with that history, I decided to begin researching utopian communities in British Columbia because there were so many of them going back to the 19th century, actually.

So British Columbia is the furthest western province of Canada. The reason that — the confluence that really attracted me was, first of all, the notion of "nowhere" in *Utopia*, and the fact that British Columbia, certainly when I was growing up, was a kind of nowhere land. Nobody really seemed to know where it was. They really didn't seem to know much about it. There was a huge amount of land that still could be — it was kind of like the last frontier. It still is in many respects a kind of last frontier. So it was this grand utopian space, which was filled with hippie projects when I was growing up.

There were some very ambitious utopian projects — socialist, Finnish utopian community. One was called Sointula, which means harmony. There was one that was founded — it's called Metlakatla, and it was founded by an Anglican clergyman for the benefit of native people, Native Americans, as we say in Canada, First Nations people to try to give them a safe and orderly existence when there was quite a wild group of settlers around. And there was one other thing called the Emissaries of Divine Light, which was sort of kind of a Theosophist community, so the idea that all religions are one. There was more than one Theosophist community, actually. That was around in the '20s.

So I basically felt that utopianism was a really strong current in British Columbia, as you've demonstrated that it was in the United States. And that's what drew me to that subject.

WOODS: I'm curious about whether we can think of utopia as necessarily being a left-wing idea, because it doesn't have to be.

BROWN: I'm trying to rescue it from that.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, because what I was describing was based on the idea that human beings are perfectible and it's not really their fault that things aren't working out so well; it's just our institutional arrangements are screwy, and if we can adjust those, things would flow smoothly. Now, I could imagine a libertarian kind of so-called utopia, but it wouldn't be a utopia where we would try to claim that there will be no problems, there will be absolute social harmony, because if we believed that human beings were capable of doing that, we wouldn't have nearly the skepticism of government that we have. So I think it's possible to say we could imagine a libertarian society as a counterfactual and then say, in this society, we would have all these good consequences. But I wouldn't want to describe that as a utopia, because I think you'd always have problems just because of human nature.

BROWN: This is the problem with this word. Nobody wants to be called a utopian nowadays because it sounds like a prescription for disaster, basically, especially after the 20th century in particular with totalitarianism.

WOODS: And also people think it shows your head is in the clouds and you're not a serious thinker.

BROWN: Yeah. Of all the people I interviewed — I was classifying them as utopians, but nobody was happy with that word. Nobody wanted to be a utopian. The popular term was "intentional community," or at least it was certainly very popular on the left. Utopian communities are always a sort of mainstream, you're right. They always imply a problem with the larger society. And sometimes their critiques are correct. It's not completely ridiculous. They serve as a kind of laboratory, I think, for certain ideas, which we can try to play out. If we sort of — I do think an understanding of utopias, the built-in idea that the good place is — well, the perfect place, we're not going to find it in this world, but that doesn't mean we can't try.

As you've suggested, there are some current communities that we could define as libertarian utopias. There have been — and I'm sure they'll all be unhappy with being named that, but nonetheless, if we can define a utopian community as having a degree of isolation and being animated by ideals which can be articulated, many things fall under that umbrella. Some people see the Atlantis, also known as Galt's Gulch, in *Atlas Shrugged* as a fictional utopia. And then of course there are a number of libertarian projects. I would include the Free State Project under that banner. The seasteading projects could be classified as utopias, potentially. I find that the libertarian utopias, they tend to be less prescriptive and they tend to be more playful. I don't know if you're aware of Sealand, the country that was founded off the coast of England here, off the coast of Norfolk.

WOODS: No.

BROWN: Basically it's on an old oil rig platform, and it was in the 1960s I believe, and they were operating a pirate radio station there and they basically managed to designate it as a country. And they have passports and they appointed themselves the Royalty of Sealand. So there was an obituary for the Princess Joan of Sealand recently in *The Telegraph*.

WOODS: Ah, how about that? Now, when it comes to libertarianism, our critics often suggest that libertarianism per se is utopian, not necessarily the Free State Project or seasteading or any of these other collective sorts of projects, but the very philosophy itself is utopian. And that I have very strenuously objected to.

BROWN: Yes.

WOODS: Because I think it's based on a misunderstanding of what we're saying. First of all, it's based on — at least my version of it is based on the nonaggression principle. The nonaggression principle does not actually say, if nobody aggresses against anybody else, you'll have a great society. It just says you're not allowed to do it. It's morally wrong for you to do it, regardless of the consequences. So there's actually nothing utopian about that. But if I were to say, if there were less aggression in the world, I think we would be able to solve our problems better, well, that's a debatable proposition. Again, it's not utopian. It's not immune to evidence. But we get this analysis that we're just utopian because we're not so interested in the day-to-day debates about governing and this bill or that bill and we're too ethereal and focused on principles. But I don't think that's utopian. I think that's a misnomer.

BROWN: Or yeah, I guess the critique is that this libertarianism is focused on how people ought to be ideally or how societies ought to be ideally but they're not going to be like that because of the grim realities, maybe, imagining that, well, the nonaggression principle is a wonderful ideal, but what if other countries then aggress against us and where are we? Is that the sort of critique that you hear?

WOODS: Yeah, that would be a — they could say that — Now, that would be at least a legitimate beginning of a discussion. If they're going to talk about foreign policy and they're going to say libertarians just seem to think that, if you have a good neighbor policy or you observe the golden rule, that nobody's ever going to bother you, and that's not true — then we would have to argue that out and we would have to say that we don't necessarily say that, that nobody will ever both you, but that you could probably minimize or eliminate a lot of conflicts that do exist and then focus on those cases where, despite your best efforts, you just can't keep the bad guys away. So I think even there, we're not being utopian. I would turn it around and say I think the interventionists are the utopians, who think the world is just one more U.S. intervention away from enjoying peace and prosperity, when every single time they do it, it winds up a disaster. That's the utopian. They can't even see that everything they do blows up in their faces.

BROWN: Yeah, yeah, this sort of neocon attitude, like we'll just go to Iraq and we'll just pop over there and turn Iraq into the United States within about five years.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, just totally nuts. Well, listen, I appreciate this discussion. We've got to talk more about utopian ideas, because that's a really, really interesting discussion. There's of course the interesting Edward Bellamy book, *Looking Backward*, as part of American history in the 19th century, where he proposes to look — he writes a story where he's looking back on the past from the point of view of somebody I believe in the year 2000 and how much better things are because they're more scientifically arranged and all that than they had been 100 years ago. And this is definitely fertile ground for future conversations, so I appreciate you contacting me about Thomas More. I thought, yeah, we've got to get this going. Thanks so much.

BROWN: Thank you.