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### A Utopia in American Society

Although written in 1516, Sir Thomas More's implied virtues within the idealist society of Utopia would help progress American society involving the value of community and the little emphasis on material wealth. American capitalist society today thrives on profits, materialism, and individualism where millions of people compete with one another and millions are left unemployed, without medical insurance, lacking in education and living in relative poverty. Although Utopia contains evidence of communism along with the loss of a unique identity, a sense of collective living is upheld where no one is left alone to fend off poverty, anxiety and insignificance. Even slaves had their place because they earned their status, rather than being born or sold into slavery because of their race, ethnicity or skin color. Although Utopia is not a perfect society, if its simple values involving communalism and its little importance of materialism were applied to American society today, modern social problems in America would be improved.

Utopia was published in 1516, when the exploration of the new world was just beginning, right around the time of Amerigo Vespucci's travels. Utopia literally means "nowhere" or "good place" in Greek, because it was an island created within More's mind. It was a "profoundly devout and reformist" land (Marius 154) which served as a critique of European society as evidenced by the discussion of materialism, individualism, and the order of work. Today, Utopia could also be seen as a criticism of American society since American ideals such as the value of wealth and material objects as well as individualism runs parallel to the European ideals.

More was interested in "reform in church and secular life, aspired to make society harmonious and to keep in careful balance the various rival communities in the commonwealth and the rival passions and needs of individual human beings" (Marius 65, 66). There is an

emphasis on the importance of structure, where everyone knows his or her place in society and everything is planned and measured so that Utopian society works in perfect harmony. These were devout Christian ideals, as well as “values like community consensus over individual judgment, the physical life to be considered not an end in itself but only as a vehicle for the much more important growth of the spirit, the notion that passion is an unmitigated enemy of virtue, devout simplicity, a hatred of idleness and frivolity” (Marius 154). On the other hand, American culture involves individual achievement over group achievement, independence rather than interdependence and the use of “material artifacts created mostly through modern technology, such as cars, mass-produced food, clothing” and such (Giddens 39). These values have caused some fortunate citizens of the United States to be happy in material excess while the majority of the American population is left behind without health insurance, without employment, without adequate education, and living in poverty.

The Utopian nation is ruled by rationality, where each citizen is “trained in a trade, is guaranteed employment, and will get what he or she needs from cradle to grave” (More 715). This is a society where everyone is promised employment, whereas in American society, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there was a 9.8% unemployment rate in November, which is much higher rate than the healthy 4-6% range (bls.gov). This means 15.1 million people in the United States were left unemployed (bls.gov). In Utopian society, the jobs are decided based on what is needed and “each is taught one particular craft” and “no one sit[s] idle,” yet no one is to “be wearied like a beast of burden” (More 746). They only assign six hours a day for work compared to eight hours or more for a full time worker here in the United States. The United States can borrow from the Utopians by working to lessen its high unemployment

rate so that everyone has the opportunity to make a stable income, yet no one is overworked in order to live decently.

Rather than a small group of people amassing material wealth and excess while the masses are struggling to live in the United States, all Utopians receive only what they need to survive, without the struggle. The economy for Utopia deals with “barter, not money; clothing is uniform; education and medical care are free to everyone; and defense is conducted by foreigners whom the Utopians hire to protect them” (More 715). Here in the United States, however, medical care is not available to everyone; which means, “46 million [were left] uninsured in 2003, including 8.4 million children” even though it spends more for health care than any other industrialized nation (Eitzen 152). In addition, the United States and the Union of South Africa are the only “high-income nations that do not have some form of universal health coverage for all of its citizens” (Kendall 229). This occurs because of the “for-profit structure of much medical care” rather than the genuine interest of healthcare for every citizen of the United States, as seen in Utopia (Kendall 233). Utopia also provides equal access education to everyone, whereas in the United States, “one in four U.S. adults is functionally illiterate” or unable to read and or write at the skill level necessary to carry out daily tasks (Kendall 273). In addition, as “educational funds are growing more scarce, a record number of students are entering the nation’s schools: 54 million in 2001, an increase of 19 percent since 1988” (Kendall 278). This means that students lack the adequate education to succeed in life because of the overcrowding of underfunded schools that need at least \$112 billion for “building repairs and upgrades” in the more than 80,000 schools in the United States (Kendall 280). By borrowing the values of education and healthcare practices from the Utopians, the United States can greatly improve the

quality of life for all of its citizens, not just the wealthy. Therefore, everyone has the opportunity to thrive without the stress of lacking an education or basic healthcare needs.

Unlike the United States, Utopia does not place such a high value in material wealth and they “wonder that any mortal can take pleasure in the uncertain sparkle of a tiny jewel or precious stone when he can look at a star or even the sun itself. They wonder that anyone can be so mad as to think himself more noble on account of the texture of a finer wool, since, however fine the texture is, a sheep once wore the wool and yet all the time was nothing more than a sheep” (More 755). As evidenced by the mass saturation of commercials everywhere, materialism in capitalist America permeates society. The United States makes “money the standard of everything” and there is a for-profit mindset that drives the economy in the United States (More 747). The mindset of Utopia is entirely different as “they wonder, too, that gold, which by its very nature is so useless, is now everywhere in the world valued so highly that man himself, through which whose agency and for whose use it got this value, is priced much cheaper than gold itself” (More 755). There is no reason for Utopians to desire more if they already receive what is necessary to survive. In Utopia, “there is a plentiful supply of all things, and secondly there is no underlying fear that anyone will demand more than he needs” because the culture of materialism, profits and wealth does not exist (More 750). Here in the United States, materialism and the desire to buy more should not overshadow the need for everyone to live a decent life without the shackles of poverty and the lack of education, employment and healthcare.

Also, Raphael in the first book of Utopia explains that poverty and “political evils come about because men hold private property” (Marius 158). At the end of Book I, he goes even further when he claims that “no just and even distribution of goods can be made and that no

happiness can be found in human affairs unless private property is utterly abolished. While it lasts, there will always remain a heavy and inescapable burden of poverty and misfortunes" (More 105). However this ideal is highly unrealistic and even "More saw the abolition of private property as both absolutely desirable and ultimately impossible. Given man's corrupted nature... a propertyless society would have to remain... a model to emulate but never achieve. Private property, for More, was a necessary evil" (Phillips). Raphael in Utopia represents everything More was not, as one who refused royal service and one "who cares for nothing for rank or possessions...he only wants freedom. To be a courier, he says, "would be slavery itself" (Marius 155). This shows how even More was susceptible to the trappings of material wealth since he "feared that he might lose money" during 1517 yet by 1518, "More's services to the Crown brought substantial material rewards" (Ames 58). Even though it is an unrealistic expectation to completely abolish the desire for material wealth, the United States could still lessen its high regard of material excess in order to lessen the evils of materialism that More discussed.

The evil in materialism lies in the problems that it causes. Even during the sixteenth century, there was "great inequality, massive deprivation and scattered rebellious energies, some of which took the form of calls for land reform and even some for the abolition of private property" which, as More stated before, is not entirely possible (Phillips). Here in the United States, the evil in private property and materialism lies in relative poverty, where people may be able to afford basic necessities such as food clothing and shelter, "but cannot maintain an average standard of living in comparison to that of other members of their society" (Kendall 35). Wealth and income in the United States is extremely unevenly divided, as "the top 20 percent of households earned about half of the nation's aggregate income in 2002, and the top 5 percent alone received more than 20 percent of aggregate income" (Kendall 32). The United States also

contains the highest poverty rate of any advanced industrial nation and in 2003, the total number of people living in poverty was 36 million (Kendall 36). In 2009, 14.3% of the U.S. population had income below the poverty threshold and the number of people living in poverty increased to 42.9 million (census.gov). This vast economic inequality stands in stark contrast to Utopia's near equality for everyone to partake in the shared, communal resources. Even the slaves are "well treated" and if they were to show "repentance" for their sin, their slavery is "either lightened or remitted altogether," giving them a second opportunity to become a productive member of Utopian society (More 767). Compared to Utopia, the United States falls short of supplying all of its citizens the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. If many of the nation's citizens cannot afford to live a decent life and instead live in relative poverty, there can be no happiness for all.

Rather than being pitted against one another for the availability of resources, Utopia is a "shared needs" society where everyone works together to acquire the resources necessary to live (Giddens 39). Utopian society is a "culture supported by citizens who have identical tastes, aspirations, and outlooks on life" (More 715). One of the main arguments against the order and harmony to this society is the "uniformity, [and] a lack of individuality, which is unappealing to modern readers" but that is only because American culture overall values ideals such as individual achievement rather than group achievement (Forward). It is very important that "we should not impose our own values onto a text that was written almost 500 years ago. In those days there was a massive divide between rich and poor, and it has to be said that More addressed some very complex topics in a constructive manner" (Forward). The emphasis in Utopia is on communal values where everyone gets a share and no one is left lacking, which is rarely seen here in American society. This may be why it seems strange that Utopia symbolizes the end of

individualistic values, when in fact the beginnings of “collective problem solving” is taking place (Giddens 39). The Utopians “own everything at common at home” and “within their community, they are completely communistic” where everyone helps out one another (Marius 169). Whereas in the United States, there is competition for employment, for the best grades in the class, for the most wealth, etc., Utopia holds a much more community based structure where no one gets left behind. Therefore everyone has equal access to education, everyone is guaranteed employment, everyone has healthcare provided, and poverty is nearly nonexistent and everyone is guaranteed to live an honest life.

Yet, even More agrees that Utopia is hard to achieve because human nature is too corrupt. He saw “the world as a wicked place and the human heart as a pit of darkness requiring the light of diligent public scrutiny if the monsters lurking there were not to crawl out and devour the person and the society” (Marius 154). These ideals may be difficult to impose on American society since American values such as individualism, competition, and for-profit capitalism are deeply ingrained within the culture. So “the hope for a better world existing somewhere beyond the seas was a hope for the practical worth of the higher moral sense that was supposed to distinguish humankind from the savage beasts” (Marius 160). There is always hope that the state of matters will change for the better; when the nation realizes everyone benefits by working together so no one is left lacking, rather than competing with one another.

In the end, Utopia is an idealist society rather than a realist society. Yet, the U.S. could progress by borrowing the simple values of Utopia for a better society. Utopia is not a perfect society. It still contains its flaws including its inequalities between the sexes and its blind devotion to religion. However, most of its root ideals involving community and the disregard for material wealth would help out citizens of the United States struggling to live. Utopian values

such as working together rather than competing with one another, de-emphasizing the materialistic culture and for-profit businesses, and caring more for the well-being of the group rather than one's own self would greatly improve educational, healthcare, employment and economical inequalities in America today. Everyone, not just a select few, would be able to participate in the pool of resources so that everyone can have the chance to live a fulfilling life without the lack of healthcare, without the fear of unemployment, without the lack of education and without the fear of poverty.

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