

Primary Sources: Utopianism in an Early Globalized World (1500–1540)



Introduction

The intensification of global encounters in the early 16th century led people around the world to have a much-expanded understanding of the diversity of the world. These developments forced people to re-think their cosmologies, including their own place in the universe. As a result of these experiences, many people's ability to imagine alternative possibilities for what human societies could look like also expanded. We can see this in the imaginary utopias that literate people devised as well as in real-life utopians people began experimenting with in real life. In the sources here, we focus on one writing from Europe and one from the Americas, both written by educated Europeans. The first author (who never left Europe) imagined a fictional utopia in the Americas. The second author attempted to construct a real-life utopian community in early 16th- century Mexico. Building actual utopian communities, as we will see, required not just imagining what might be possible, but also accommodating oneself to the values, aspirations, and hopes of other people. And even then, success is far from certain.

Discussion questions:

1. How did global encounters of the early sixteenth century affect utopian thinking around the world?
2. What continuities and ruptures emerged in the utopian thinking of European humanists after 1492?
3. What was the relationship between imagined literary utopias of the early 16th century and the real-life utopias that people attempted to put into practice in Europe and the Americas?
4. What methods of reading can we use to understand utopian thinking among indigenous Americas during this period by using primary sources written by Europeans?

Primary Sources

Introduction

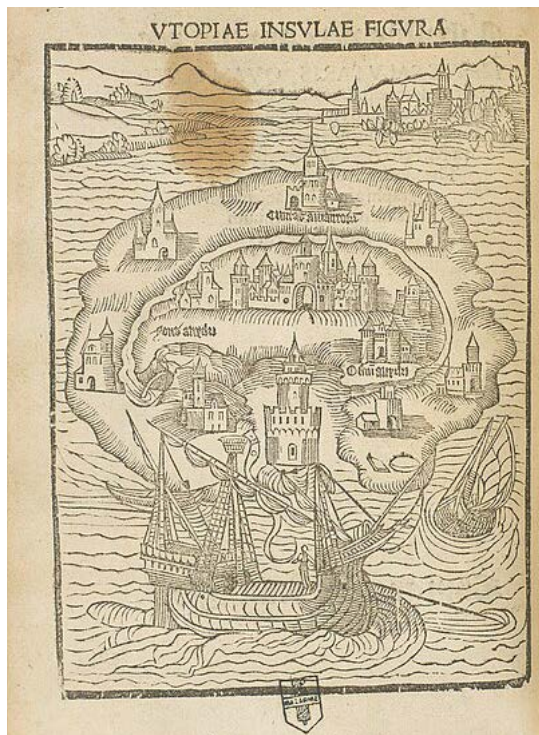
Primary source 1:
Thomas More's
Utopia (1516)

Primary source
2: Vasco de Qui-
roga's "Rules and
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Primary source 1: Thomas More's Utopia (1516)

In a book published in 1516, the English humanist Thomas More described an island in the Americas that never existed. The book begins with an imaginary story, based on real events in More's own life, of a fictional More meeting Peter Giles, a friend from the Netherlandish city of Antwerp. The two men really were in Antwerp together in 1515, when the story takes place. However, in this version, the two men run into a fictional character, a Portuguese explorer named Raphael Hythlodæus, who had supposedly traveled with Amerigo Vespucci on his 1501–1502 journey to South America. Most of Book 1 includes a discussion about the responsibilities of a learned and just man to serve kings, even if this requires compromises. In Book 2, Hythlodæus describes Utopia, an imaginary land that he supposedly visited on his journey.

Source: Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz (Yale University Press, 1964), 59–61, 63, 65, 68–70, 75–78, 82, 91–92, 103, 107–12, 114, 140, 146–47, 151–52.



Map of Utopia, from Thomas More's 1516 book, *Utopia*.

The island of the Utopians extends in the center (where it is the broadest) for two hundred miles and is not much narrower for the greater part of the island, but toward both ends it begins to taper.... Utopus, who as conqueror gave the island its name (up to then it has been called Abraxa)¹ and who brought the rude and rustic people to such a perfection of culture and humanity as makes them now superior to almost all other mortals, gained a victory at his very first landing... The island contains fifty-four city-states,² all spacious and magnificent, identical in language, traditions, customs and laws...

The person who knows one of the cities will know them all, since they are all exactly alike insofar as the terrain permits. I shall therefore picture one or other (nor does it matter which), but which should I describe other than [the

capital city of] Amaurotum?... The city is surrounded by a high and broad wall with towers and ravelins at frequent intervals.³ A moat, dry but deep and wide and made impassable by thorn hedges, surrounds the fortification on three sides; on the fourth the river itself takes the place of the moat.

The streets are well laid out both for traffic and for protection against the winds.

1. This is a joke that refers to the fact that the name of the Americas has very recently been coined, based on the name of Amerigo Vespucci. Since the word 'utopia' comes from Greek for "no place" then Utopus's name means "ruler over no place."

2. This is the same number as existed in England – the joke here is that utopia is meant to be understood as a kind of parallel world to England on the other side of the world.

3. Ravelins were a recent innovation in military defense, first adopted in 1497 in the Italian as an initial response to the introduction of siege cannons.

The buildings, which are far from mean, are set together in a long row, continuous through the block and faced by a corresponding one....⁴ Every home has not only a door into the street but a back door into the garden. What is more, folding doors, easily opened by hand and then closing of themselves, give admission to anyone. As a result, nothing is private property anywhere. Every ten years they actually exchange their very homes by lot....⁵

Agriculture is one pursuit which is common to all, both men and women, without exception ... Besides agriculture... each is taught one particular craft as his own. This is generally either wool-working or linen-making or masonry or metal-working or carpentry. There is no other pursuit which occupies any number worth mentioning.⁶ As for clothes, these are of one and the same pattern throughout the island ... though there is a distinction between the sexes and between the single and married. The garments are comely to the eye, convenient for bodily movement, and fit for wear in hat and cold ...

The chief and almost the only function of the syphogrants [200 elected officials] is to manage and provide that no one sit idle, but that each apply himself industriously to his trade, and yet that he be not wearied like a beast of burden with constant toil from early morning till late at night ... The intervals between the hours of work, sleep, and food are left to every man's discretion, not to waste in revelry or idleness, but to devote the time free from work to some other occupation according to taste. These periods are commonly devoted to intellectual pursuits. For it is their custom that public lectures are daily delivered in their hours before daybreak. Attendance is compulsory only for those who have been specially chosen to devote themselves to learning....

[H]ouseholds as a rule are made up of those related by blood.⁷ Girls, upon reaching womanhood and upon being settled in marriage, go to their husbands' domiciles. ...The inhabitants who refuse to live according to their laws, they drive from the territory.... If they resist, they wage war against them....

Every city is divided into four equal districts. In the middle of each quarter is a market of all kinds of commodities...Each kind of goods is arranged separately in storehouses. From the latter any head of household seeks what he and his require and, without money or any kind of compensation, carries off what he seeks. Why should anything be refused? First, there is a plentiful supply of all things and secondly, there is no underlying fear that anyone will demand more than he needs...

Special care is first taken of the sick who are looked after in public hospitals....

Now if any citizens conceive a desire either to visit their friends who reside in another city or to see the place itself, they easily obtain leave from their syphogrants and tranibors [a higher official, who oversees ten syphogrants], unless some good reason prevents them.... If any person gives himself leave to stray out of his territorial limits and is caught without the governor's certificate, he is treated

4. Thus, the streets are arranged in a grid system.

5. Not only was private property standard in More's England, but recently grazing lands formerly held in common were increasingly privatized. Thus the trend was for increasing the privatization of property, not the opposite, as in Utopia.

6. From More's perspective, such crafts would have included goldsmithing and jewelry making, brewing and distilling, painting and tapestry making – that is, crafts that might be luxuries and thus superfluous.

7. This was standard in 16th-century Europe, though there was some variation about the extent to which multigenerational households were common.

with contempt, brought back as a runaway, and severely punished. If he dares to repeat the offense, he is punished with slavery...



Abraham Ortelius' map of Utopia, c. 1595.

In that part of philosophy which deals with morals, they carry on the same debates as we do. They inquire into the good: of the soul and of the body and of external gifts ... They discuss virtue and pleasure, but their principal and chief debate is in what thing or things, one or more, they are to hold that happiness consist... They never have a discussion of happiness without uniting certain principles taken from religion as well as from philosophy, which uses rational arguments. Without these principles they

think reason insufficient and weak by itself for the investigation of true happiness. The following are examples of these principles. The soul is immortal and by the goodness of God born for happiness. After this life rewards are appointed for our virtues and good deed, punishment for our crimes. Though these principles belong to religion, yet they hold that reason leads men to believe and to admit them....

The people are in general easygoing, good-tempered, ingenious, and leisure-loving. They patiently do their share of manual labor when occasion demands, though otherwise they are by no means fond of it. In their devotion to mental study they are unwearied....

Prisoners of war are not enslaved unless captured in wars fought by the Utopians themselves; nor are the sons of slaves, nor anyone who was in slavery when acquired of slaves, nor anyone whom they could acquired from slavery in other countries.⁸ Their slaves are either such or such as have been condemned to death elsewhere for some offense.... These classes of slaves they keep not only continually at work but also in chains. Their own countrymen are dealt with more harshly, since their conduct is regarded as all the more regrettable and deserving a more severe punishment as an object lesson because, having had an excellent rearing to a virtuous life, they still could not be restrained from crime....

Women do not marry till eighteen, men not till they are four years older.⁹ If before marriage a man or woman is convicted of secret intercourse, he or she is severely punished.... In addition, both father and mother of the family in whose house the offense was committed incur great disgrace as having been neglectful in doing their duties. The reason why they punish this offense so severely is their foreknowledge that, unless persons are carefully restrained from promiscuous intercourse, few will unite in married love, in which state a whole life must be spend with one companion and all troubles incidental to it must be patiently borne.

In choosing mates, they seriously and strictly espouse a custom which seemed to us

8. There was almost no slavery in More's England, though there were forms of bondage that limited people's labor and movement, and it was permissible by law to enslave people captured in war. But by this point, the Spanish and Portuguese has been slaving African and Indigenous Americans for some time; the English would follow once their presence in the Americas had expanded.

9. In More's England, most young people married in their twenties (and marriage was consensual, not arranged). The exceptions to this were among noble families, for whom arranged marriages at an early age sometimes served strategic political and economic purposes.

very foolish and extremely ridiculous. The women ... is shown naked to the suiter by a worthy and respectable matron, and similarly the suiter is presented naked before the maiden by a discreet man. We laughed at this custom and condemned it as foolish. They, on the other hand, marveled at the remarkable folly of all other nations. In buying a colt, where there is a question of only a little money, persons are cautious that though it is almost bare they will not buy until they have taken off the saddle and removed all the trappings for fear some sore lies concealed under these coverings....¹⁰



Thomas More commemorated with in sculpture at the late 19th century Sir Thomas More House, London.

Violators of the conjugal tie are punished by the strictest form of slavery.... For all other crimes, there is no law prescribing any fixed penalty, but the punishment is assigned by the senate according to the atrocity, or veniality, of the individual crime. Husbands correct their wives, and parents their children, unless the offense is so serious that it is to the advantage of public morality to have it punished openly. Generally the worse offenses are punished by the sentence of slavery...

They have very few laws because very few are needed for person so educated ... Moreover, they absolutely banish from their country all lawyers, who cleverly manipulate cases and cunningly argue legal points.¹¹ They consider it a good thing that every man should plead his own cause.... with the Utopians each man is expert in law. First, they have, as I have said, very few laws and, secondly, they regard the most obvious interpretation of the law as the most fair interpretation....

To the priests is entrusted the education of children and youths. They regard concern for their morals and virtue as no less important than for their advancement in learning. ... The feminine sex is not debarred from the priesthood, but only a widow advanced in years is ever chosen, and that rather rarely.¹² Unless they are women, the priests have for their wives the very finest women of the country...

Outside Utopia, to be sure, men talk freely of the public welfare – but look after their private interests only. In Utopia, where nothing is private, they seriously concern themselves with public affairs ... in Utopia there is no poor man and no beggar. Though no man has anything yet all are rich....

When Raphael had finished his story, many things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described ... Meanwhile, though in other respects he is a man of the most undoubted learning as well as the greatest knowledge of human affairs, I cannot agree with all that he said. But I readily admit that there are many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized.

10. It is not clear whether this proposal is a joke or not. Such a practice was not common. But syphilis was starting to spread rapidly throughout Europe at the time, so such concerns may have been heightened.

11. More was a lawyer.

12. In More's England, women were barred from the priesthood. The idea of women priests may have been so unthinkable to More that it was meant as a joke that utopians allowed them, or it may have been inspired by More's awareness of the existence of priestesses in ancient history. As with much of Utopia, More left the line between joke, suggestion, and social commentary ambiguous for the reader.

Primary source 2: Vasco de Quiroga's "Rules and Ordinances for the Governing of the Pueblos of Santa Fe de México and Santa Fe de la Laguna" (1553)

The Spanish lawyer and bishop, Vasco de Quiroga (1470/1478–1565) established the missionary communities of Santa Fe de México and Santa Fe de la Laguna in 1532 and 1534 as alternative sites of Spanish colonialism for Indigenous peoples of Mexico. The general patterns of life in these communities were quickly established. In time, Quiroga entered into conflicts about these settlements with Spanish colonists, missionary orders, and other church officials over jurisdiction. During such conflicts, Quiroga first wrote out his Rules and Ordinances for these communities in 1553. The rules do not describe how daily life in these communities functioned; they describe how Quiroga wanted them to function. Still, by the time he wrote these rules down, he had lived for many years in one of these communities, so they are likely a pretty good sketch about the general organization of daily life, even if they do not explain how inhabitants understood their lives or document resistance to Quiroga's plans.

Source: Vasco de Quiroga, *La Utopía en América*, ed. Pax Serrano Gassent (Dastin, S.L., 2002), 255–74. Translated by John Finkelberg.

Rules and Ordinances for the Governance of the Communities of Santa Fe de México and Michoacán, Given by their Founder the Most Reverend and Venerable Don Vasco de Quiroga, the First Bishop of Michoacán.



Portrait of Vasco de Quiroga.

Rules for the community, and for those who are in the mechanical trades, and other useful and necessary trades for the common good of the community and inhabitants of it, such as the trades of weavers, and others including stonemasons, carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths and other similar necessary professions for the republic of the community...

[Y]ou must also all know how to do well and be trained and skilled in the trade of agriculture from childhood, with great desire and will.

Also the natural fathers and mothers of each *familia*¹³ should try to marry their children if they are of legitimate age, boys when they are fourteen years old or older and girls when they are twelve years old.... Everyone will always follow the order of the Holy Mother Church of Rome and will not marry clandestinely, and if possible, with the consent of the natural fathers and mothers and their *familia*....

Also that girls should ... learn the women's trades given to them ... for their own benefit and for that of the republic of the community, such as working with wool,

13. In this case, the term *familia* referred to a group of ten to sixteen married couples and their children from the same kinship network who lived together.



A 16th century church in Mexico, the San Bernardino de Siena Church, in Xochimilco.

linen, silk and cotton, and for everything necessary, accessory, and useful to the craft of the looms that together they heaved around in their houses and with their *familias* and thus in this way each relative would live in their *familia* as it is said. The oldest grandfather will be the one who dominates and whom the entire *familia* must abide and obey....

Also, when they go to work in the fields, all those who are from a *familia* go together with their head of household... These heads of household must be exempt from physical labor, but they can be a great example to encourage the subjects so they should not want to excuse themselves and sometimes lend their hands to the work so that others are

not ashamed and do the same and thus are not lazy or use excuses to stop doing what they should....

[There will be] up to eight or ten or twelve married couples in each *familia*....

It is important that the clothes you wear are like those at present. You wear honest clean white cotton and wool, without colors, without other expensive and overly curious decorations. And such that they protect you from cold and heat and of the same color if possible because they last longer and do not cost as much.... And these, there should be two pairs of them, one with which you wear to appear in public in the square and in the church on holidays and the other of which is for work....

Also as it has been said, the parents of this community must elect among themselves a principal, whom they all obey, then a rector, to whom this principal must inform about what happens. It is necessary that he be a good Christian, and live a good life.... He will serve for three, or six years, or for all the time that is convenient, and as approved. Together with the rector, they will elect three or four councilors, who have the same qualities, and that these may be chosen every year....

Also if any of the poor Indians of this community have complaints about one another or, among themselves or with the rector and councilors, you will investigate plainly and amicably, and everyone will tell the truth, and no one will deny it, because there is no need to go and complain to the judge somewhere else....

Also that you provide a space where things can be collected and kept so that they are not damaged, lost, or stolen, including wheat, corn, and the other seeds, and farm goods that are held in common, as is said, so that later there they can be distributed among all residents.... And for every *familia* too, they should have a place where they keep safe what is distributed to them....

Also the people will seek the cleanliness of their souls and their person, so that



Portrait of Vasco de Quiroga.

everything conforms, and appears clean both outside the body and within the soul. And don't you wear curious dresses, not too expensive, as it is said above, do not fix yourselves, nor paint your faces, hands, nor arms in any way as you used to do, except for medicine, when it is useful, and necessary, because just as cleanliness is praiseworthy, dirt is blameworthy....

For the sick there is a ... large square infirmary... where there is a large room for the sick with contagious illnesses, and another in front of it for those of diseases that are non-contagious, and in the middle of the patio a little covered chapel, open on both sides, where there is a competently decorated altar where Mass is said....

Also that if any of you, or your successors in this said community, does something unruly, or outrageous, or a bad Christian, or getting drunk, or being too lazy, or refusing to obey these regulations, or doing anything against them, and being incorrigible in this, or going against the benefit and common good... let them be then thrown out of the community.



18 th century church in the town of Quiroga, Michoacan.

Image Citations

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