
PERSPECTIVE

Thomas More's Utopia as a steady state economy

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Abstract

The idea of a steady-state economy based on the relationship between population and land was first introduced in the writings of Plato (*Laws*) and Aristotle (*Politics*), both in the fourth century BC. Nineteen centuries later, in 1516, Thomas More published his *Utopia*. In this paper I argue that More's *Utopia* is a steady state economy based on two fundamental institutions: public ownership of the means of production and democratic system of governance. What makes *Utopia* a steady state economy is the limited land (*Utopia* is an island) and the stability of population. Given that resources are limited the 'Grow or Die' motto of modern capitalism does not apply and therefore a different system of social values is developed in *Utopia*.

Keywords

Thomas More, *Utopia*, steady-state economy

Introduction

Thomas More's *Utopia*, first published in 1516 under the Latin title *De optimo statu reipublicae deque nova insula Utopia*, was translated into English by Ralph Robinson and appeared in print in 1551. *Utopia* represents the fourth major philosophical attempt – following Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*), *Laws* (*Nomoi*), and Aristotle's *Politics*, Book VIII (*Politica*) – to conceptualise an ideal society structured

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to promote the happiness and wellbeing of its citizens. Plato composed the *Laws* as a pragmatic alternative to the *Republic*, believing that the ideal society proposed in the latter was too advanced for practical implementation. As he himself noted: 'If what we have attempted to do is realised it will be closer to immortality and second in value' (*Laws* 739E). He also envisioned, conditions permitting ('if God allows'), the formulation of a third model.

The frameworks for social organisation articulated by both Plato and Aristotle can be regarded as comprehensive theories in which economic activity is recognised as a central determinant of social justice and human flourishing. The economic structures they propose align closely with what contemporary scholarship refers to as a steady-state economy (Lianos, 2023). In the economic theory of the nineteenth century, the steady state condition of an economy appeared in the 'magnificent dynamics' of classical writers under the name of stationary economy (Mill, 1970; Baumol, 1951) and also in Marx's *Capital* as simple reproduction in contrast to expanded reproductions (Marx, 1887). More recent discussions of a steady-state model include Keynes (1930) Huxley (1956) Boulding (1964) and of course Ehrlich (1971) as well as Daly in his many writings. *Utopia* can likewise be interpreted as a depiction of a society grounded in the principles of a steady-state economy. The purpose of this short article is to show that More's *Utopia* is also a society based on the same economic system.

Before examining *Utopia* itself, it is worth considering why More situated his ideal society on an island. While this choice likely draws on Plato's myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus*, the recent discovery of America – roughly twenty years before More wrote *Utopia* – may have inspired his vision of a society fundamentally different from European civilisation, both socially and geographically. The connection between More's work and contemporary humanist thought becomes evident through his friendship with Erasmus, who composed *In Praise of Folly* while staying in More's house in 1510. This intimate collaboration suggests that Erasmus was familiar with the ideas that would later emerge as *Utopia*. Indeed, Erasmus's dedication of *In Praise of Folly* to More – particularly his playful closing, 'Farewell, my best disputant More, and stoutly defend your *Moriae*' – reveals not only his awareness of More's developing concepts but also his enthusiastic support for them.

Steady state economy

The steady state economy (SSE) in its modern version is an economy with the following characteristics:

- a. There is private property of the means of production, i.e. of land and produced capital.
- b. The working and the coordination of the economy is based on the mechanism of the free markets.
- c. Population is constant at some at some chosen sufficient level.
- d. Production of goods and services is constant at some chosen sufficient level. Population and production are codetermined.
- e. Institutions are established to make sure that population and production stay at the chosen level. To this purpose, some have suggested family planning, transferable birth licence (Boulding, 1964), an international market for limited birth licences per family (Lianos 2018), monetary benefits for small size families etc. To reduce persisting economic inequalities, minimum and maximum limits to personal income are recommended and also maximum limits to personal wealth.

The modern interest in the SSE derives from the serious environmental problems that became obvious during the second half of the twentieth century (See, among others, Ehrlich, 1968; Daly, 1991, 1972, 2008; and Meadows et al., 1972¹) and the concern that the limited resources of the Earth could not provide enough for the rapidly increasing world population. It became clear that a choice should be made between population size and per capita product. Of course, it is not easy to simultaneously determine the right population size and the right level of production but, generally speaking, it is possible to find combinations of population and production that are acceptable (Lianos, 2013; Lianos and Pseiridis, 2016).

Given the optimal population is estimated to be around three billion assuming an acceptable per capita income and ecological equilibrium at the same time (see Daily et al., 1994; Pimentel et al., 1994; Lianos and Pseiridis, 2016; and Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2017), realising a steady state economy is difficult at the present time since the global population stands at 8.2 billion. Herman Daly (1991) has argued that what is needed now is moral growth rather than economic growth.

Modern societies are conditioned to believe that economic growth is the ultimate goal. They rarely consider whether their aims are morally sound or rooted in meaningful values, prioritising size over quality. In other words, economic growth often occurs without corresponding moral development. While economic growth relies on efficiency, moral growth depends on the pursuit of higher values.

One issue occasionally discussed in the literature concerns the social organisation of the steady state economy. The central question is whether it can function as a capitalist economy or whether a socialist economy is necessary. Daly argued that the SSE is neither capitalist nor socialist but something different (Daly, 2010). Richard Smith states that, since capitalism cannot exist without constantly expanding markets, a steady state economy cannot therefore be a capitalist economy (Smith, 2010), while in contrast Philip Lawn believes the opposite (Lawn, 2011). My own opinion is that the crucial characteristic of an SSE is a stable population and therefore an SSE can be either capitalist or socialist (Lianos, 2021).

More's *Utopia*

Thomas More's *Utopia* is divided into two books. Book One takes the form of a dialogue, featuring correspondence with several figures, including the town clerk of Antwerp, Peter Giles, and counsellor to Charles V, Hieronymus van Busleyden. Central to the narrative is a fictional character named Raphael Hythlodæus – his surname derived from the Greek words ὕθλος (ythlos) (meaning 'nonsense') and δαίω (daio) (meaning 'to distribute' or 'to share'). Raphael is portrayed as a Portuguese sailor and seasoned traveller who has explored many parts of the world. He spent five years in the fictional land of Utopia, gaining deep knowledge of its society. Book Two² is a monologue delivered by Raphael, in which he describes in detail the customs, laws, and daily life of Utopia.

Book One

Book One is devoted to a discussion of the evils of the Old World, i.e. the European countries. More is the first to admit that 'nothing is less novel than monsters. For you cannot go anywhere without finding Scyllas and greedy Celaenos and people devouring Lastrygonians and immense fictions of that

2 According to Erasmus, good friend of More's, Book Two was written before Book One but this does not affect the logic of the presentation.

sort, but sensibly and wisely educated citizens you will hardly discover anywhere' (p. 21).³ In the discussion that follows, Raphael mentions negative aspects of the Old World including civil rebellion, the death penalty for theft, miserable poverty and scarcity contrasting with the luxurious lives of noblemen, mercenary armies, insatiable landowners enclosing agricultural land and displacing tenant-farmers, high food prices, excessive indulgence in food and drink among the servants of noblemen and artisans, the rise of monopolies and oligopolies, prostitution, and corrupt forms of entertainment.

Because of his extended knowledge and experience, Raphael is twice encouraged by More to 'attach himself to a king' (p. 22) and become 'an excellent councillor to any king' (p. 23). Also, More reminds Raphael that his friend Plato 'teaches that commonwealths will finally be fortunate only when philosophers rule them, or when their kings are philosophic' and asks him 'how far off will good fortune be, if philosophers do not at least deign to impart their counsel to kings?' (p.34). Raphael's reaction to More's exhortations is threefold: first, kings are interested in extending their kingdoms and do not care about the welfare of the people and peace; second, among kings there is no place for philosophy; and, third, kings are surrounded by advisors with a variety of different and contradictory opinions so *his* opinion would be unconvincing and therefore redundant.

Book One ends with Raphael and More expressing their diametrically opposed opinions. Raphael believes that

wherever there is private property, wherever everybody measures everything with money, there it can hardly ever happen that a commonwealth will be governed justly or prosperously ... There could only be one way to public well-being: by decreasing the inequality of possessions – which I do not think could ever be observed when individuals have private ownership (p. 42).

More expresses the opposite opinion, arguing that

life can never be lived with any convenience where all things are owned in common. For how could there be a good supply of things

3 Quotations are from More 2023.

with everybody trying to get out of work, not be urged by the profit motive and becoming lazy by relying on the work of others? But even if they are urged to work by the scarcity, when nobody is able lawfully to protect as his own what he has acquired, is it not inevitable that everybody will suffer from perpetual murder and sedition?⁴

Book Two

In the second book of *Utopia*, Raphael, in a long monologue, gives a detailed description of private and public life in Utopia, an island state, starting with the geography and ending with the religious ceremonies of the church.

Following his narration, we learn details about the plan of the cities, the system of government (magistrates), occupations and production, population, travels, social organisation, trade and foreign exchange, pleasures, happiness and ethics, the legal system, euthanasia, marriage, divorce and adultery, alliances and wars, religion and tolerance for other beliefs. For the purpose of comparison with the modern version of SSE, we will briefly describe Utopia's population, social organisation and production of commodities.

(1) Population size

Utopia has 54 cities, 'all spacious and magnificent, with language, customs, institutions and laws entirely identical'. Each city has 6,000 households and each household can have between ten and sixteen adults. Thus, Utopia has a population of approximately 4.2 million adults and assuming two children per couple (in order to keep population constant), the total population of Utopia is close to 8.4 million. The members of a household are mostly blood relatives and therefore a household is practically an extended family. To keep the distribution of population balanced among households and among cities people can be transferred between households and between cities. If the population exceeds in total the right size people are sent to create colonies in the mainland where the natives have land that is not used. If the population falls below the right size the citizens who created the colony will return to Utopia. Also, there are age limits for girls and for men below which they cannot marry.

4 Obviously, Raphael presents Plato's position on ownership expressed in the *Republic* and presents Aristotle's position in *Politics*.

More does not explain how the 'right size' is determined but my explanation is discussed in the next section of this paper.

(2) The economics of Utopia

The most important element of Utopia's society and its economy is that there is no private property. People in the households do not even own the house where they live. All property is public. Technology of production is developed enough so that total yearly production is more than sufficient to cover the needs of the population and part of it is exported. The oversupply of goods relative to demand is such that there are no markets, no prices and no monetary system. Utopians can simply pick up things from the stores in the quantities they need to have a comfortable but not luxurious life. There is gold and silver which are used only in the foreign trade. The Utopians are so productive that they need to work only six hours a day. There are no economic inequalities. All products are equally distributed and therefore no one can be poor or a beggar. Utopians do not worry about the future and therefore there is no need to accumulate commodities for future use. In other words, there is no need for saving and for growth of production.

It appears that the Utopians have achieved the Aristotelian moral standard 'to live temperately and liberally' because 'these are the only desirable qualities relating to the use of wealth' (Politics, 1265 pp. 33–36).

(3) The government

The political system of Utopia is a variant of representative democracy. Each city is divided in units of thirty households each of which annually elect a magistrate called a phylarch (leader of a tribe, in Greek). Thus, every city has 200 phylarchs. To every ten phylarchs is assigned a protophylarch (first among the phylarchs) and thus there are twenty protophylarchs. The two hundred phylarchs take an oath to choose by secret ballot the one among four nominated candidates whom they believe to be the best city-ruler.

The city-ruler is chosen for life unless he is suspected of conspiracy to overthrow democracy and establish tyranny. Issues and problems of the commonwealth are discussed every other day in meetings of the phylarchs with the city-ruler. Decisions are taken after three days of discussions in city council.

There is a city council in every city and a council of the whole island but Raphael does not give any other information about the island council, its constitution and its functions.

(4) Moral standards

The citizens of Utopia live under numerous restrictions in their private lives. For instance, traveling from one city to another requires official permission – which is easily obtained – but those who travel without it are subject to punishment. Girls under eighteen and men below 22 cannot marry. Sex before marriage is forbidden and seriously punished. Violating the rules of marriage is punished by slavery and, if committed a second time, the penalty is death. Lunch and dinner are served at designated times and in specific halls, although individuals are permitted to eat at home if they choose. Everyone wears the same type of clothing.

Utopians do not resent the restrictions imposed by the legal system because they understand the necessity of strict laws for a just society. This and their contempt for luxuries and wealth show their moral standards and moral growth which modern writers consider a necessary condition for an SSE.

Comments

Population

The 'right size' of population for Utopia is not mentioned in the text but, as previously stated, can be estimated from the number of cities, the number of households in each city, the number of adults of each household (assuming an average of thirteen) to be 4.2 million adults. The population of children should be approximately equal to the population of adults given that stability of population requires two children per couple⁵ and that average life expectancy at the time of More was around forty years. Therefore, the population of Utopia was approximately 8.4 million.

There are two questions related to the size of population: first, how was its number chosen and, second, why was it constant? Regarding the first question it occurred to me that More might have had in mind the population density of England and

5 This does not necessarily mean two children per woman. It may be the result of a higher fertility rate in combination with high child mortality.

I have attempted to estimate the area of Utopia to find the density of population. The shape of the island is like a crescent moon with circumference of 500 miles and diameter throughout the greater part of 160 miles. The area of a circle⁶ with circumference of 500 and radius of 80 miles is 20,096 square miles. This is an approximation because Utopia is not a perfect circle as the two ends are narrow and the sea comes into the land and forms something like a lake. This size of the area corresponds to 0.005 of a square mile or 13 square metres per adult citizen and half of that if children are included.

At More's time the density of population in England was 0.019 square mile per citizen (50,000 square miles divided by a population of 2.6 million). Thus, compared to England, the population density of Utopia is extremely high. If this was More's intention, it is hard to explain.

Regarding the question of why population is kept constant, no explicit explanation is given by More. However, it is obvious that in an island of given size there must be limits to the size of population, not only for economic sufficiency but also, as in Aristotle, for efficient administration and for law enforcement.

Economics and morals

The reader of *Utopia* will easily come to the conclusion that Utopians are happy living according to the Aristotelian principle of a comfortable but not luxurious life. This has been achieved by a successful coordination of their social organisation with their moral values. According to the stoic saying, they are rich not because they have wealth but because they do not need it. In Utopia there is no private property; land and material capital are public. Utopians have no uncertainty and therefore no motive for profit and growth.

6 If C is the circumference of a circle, A is the area, D is the diameter and R is the radius then $C=\pi D$ or $C=\pi 2R$ where $\pi=3.14$ and $A=\pi R^2$. If $C=500$ the radius must be 80, not a hundred. If the radius is 100 the circumference must be 628. Therefore More's estimate of diameter and circumference are contradictory. For the estimation of the area, I take the value of the radius to be 80 because of More's use of the word 'compass'. If the radius is taken to be equal to 100 the area of Utopia is 31,300 square miles. Based on some 'clues' from *Utopia's* text Simoson (2016) has estimated its area to be 45,096 and 47,690 square miles. Apparently the information given by More is not consistent.

The government

The city-ruler is elected in a three-stage process with the final stage being a secret ballot. There is also an island council about which More does not give any information but it is reasonable to assume that its members are the city-rulers. It is clear that the rules and the laws of Utopia apply to all cities and therefore it appears that the assembly of the city-rulers is the government.

Utopians love democracy, as indicated by the provision that, if the elected for life city-ruler is suspected of 'seeking tyranny', he can be forced to step down.

Discussion and conclusion

The similarities between More's Utopia and the modern steady-state economy are clear. In both models the size of population is constant and the production of goods and services is maintained at a chosen sufficient level and therefore there is no economic growth. However, differences are also clear. In Utopia there is no private property and no markets, whereas in steady-state economy there is private property and the operation of the economy is based on free markets (although restrictions may be introduced in production and distribution). These differences are important because of the effect they have on the distribution of goods, i.e. on economic inequality. In Utopia there is *absolute equality*; in steady-state economy there is *limited* inequality.

For More's time, this is a strange combination, making it intriguing to ask what *Utopia* truly represents: is it a satire of a certain type of social organisation or is it a serious attempt to model a new social system? Obviously, if *Utopia* is a satire, it would be of little value to claim it as a philosophical study of a steady-state economy model. There are three elements that support the idea *Utopia* is a satire. First, the title 'Utopia' meaning 'no place' may be interpreted as a suggestion to its reader not to take it seriously. Second, the name 'Hythlodæus' meaning someone who talks nonsense implies the same. Third, the title 'phylarch', meaning leader of the tribe, may be understood as a demeaning characterisation of the cultural level of Utopia.

We can interpret the inclusion of these satirical elements as a warning not to take everything literally but not as a negation of Utopia's philosophical content. It is hard to imagine that More – or any scholar – would write a satire about something

that does not exist, or compose a work he does not believe in while simultaneously criticising it. It seems to me that More was very serious in suggesting fundamental social changes even if not necessarily exactly those described in *Utopia*. Also, it is not unreasonable to assume that More needed a protective shield as he was not, like Plato, in democratic Athens but in the England of ruthless Henry VIII. In addition to its satirical parts, *Utopia* ends with More making it clear that he does not approve of everything that happens in Utopia but he acknowledges that some reforms are necessary in Europe. In the last paragraph, More says 'I readily confess that there are very many things in the commonwealth of Utopians that I would wish for in our states, rather than hope for'.

Instead of discrediting *Utopia* as a satire of new progressive ideas, it is faithful to the spirit and letter of Utopia to understand its content as an attempt by More to combine Plato and Aristotle and at the same time severely criticise (in Book One) the status quo via the fictitious Raphael Hythlodæus. Also, More speaks ironically of the nobility in both Books of *Utopia*. In Book One, More asserts that 'sensibly and wisely educated citizens you will hardly discover anywhere' (p. 21). And at the end of Book Two his ironic tone is clear when he writes that many things were

... very absurdly established in the customs and laws of that people ...
but most of all ... the common life and livelihood without any exchange
of money: by this one institution all nobility, magnificence, splendor,
majesty are profoundly overthrown – the true (according to public
opinion) glories and ornaments of a commonwealth (p. 102).

In brief, it seems to me that *Utopia* is not a satire but More's vehicle for indirect social criticism of his time. Thomas More's *Utopia* is close to a combination of Plato's *Republic*, where there is no private property, and Aristotle's *Politics*, where democracy is suggested as the best political system. Thus, *Utopia* can be seen as a democratic socialist steady-state economy.

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