

(RE)TRACING THE UNTRACEABLE: UTOPIA AS A THOUGHT
EXPERIMENT IN THE FORM OF FICTIONAL REALITY
*ARNSWALD Ulrich***Abstract*

While Thomas More's *Utopia* is traditionally lauded as the progenitor of fictional state-modeling, this view often hinges on the unquestioned premise that utopianism acts as an abstract antithesis to social reality. Challenging this, *Utopia* can be reinterpreted not as an actionable blueprint for 16th-century social reform, but rather as an imagined alternative – a mental thought experiment rooted in irony, wit, and paradox. More presents a conceivable but unachievable vision, yet the island is plagued by repressive institutions and mandatory uniformity. Rather than a model for direct imitation, this structure serves as an intellectual space for Renaissance humanists to critically reflect on European society. Consequently, the work functions as a parody (*experimentum rationis*), providing a protected sphere for profound critique that bypasses censorship. This imaginative capacity envisions alternatives to the status quo, effectively linking critical reflection with transformative action. Ultimately, *Utopia* serves as a foundational archetype for the genre's exploration of both idealized and dystopian societal models, using the imaginary to liberate political imagination rather than providing a comprehensive blueprint for reform.

Keywords: Thomas More; Utopia; ideal state; imagination; thought experiment.

I. Introduction

Even more than 500 years after the publication of Thomas More's *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque nova insula Utopia libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus* ("The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining")¹ in Flemish Leuven in 1516, many interpreters still see this work as a blueprint for an ideal state, which they declare and recommend as a model for future states².

**Privatdozent at the Institute of Philosophy at the Leopold-Franzens-University in Innsbruck.*

¹ Thomas More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4, edited by Edward Surtz and Jack H. Hexter, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 1965.

² Arthur Ray Heiserman, *Satire in the Utopia*, "PMLA", vol. 78, no. 3, 1963, pp. 163-174; Jack H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: The Biography of an Idea*, Harper & Row, New York,

Many scholars continue to champion this “truly golden handbook” as a model for future states, assuming More intended to present an exemplary, quasi-realistic polity. Gregory Claeys, for instance, represents this view by describing *Utopia* as a depiction of a desirable society. He states that “with Thomas More’s groundbreaking text *Utopia*, we have a quasi-realistic account of a significantly improved society”³.

Interpreters of utopian thought contend that the ideal state exists not as a current reality, but as a conceptual model for a future societal design. This framework functions simultaneously as a critique of the prevailing order and as a tangible, alternate possibility. Since the concept is inherently conceivable, it serves as an actionable pursuit.

Utopia serves as a ‘counter-design’ to the *status quo*. The design for a better society is therefore anchored in this world and at the same time a counter-design to the prevailing conditions of the society. Even if the idea cannot be realized immediately, it would still represent a vision of a world

Evanston, and London 1965, p. 84; Dermot B. Fenlon, *England and Europe: Utopia and Its Aftermath*, “Transactions of the Royal Historical Society”, vol. 25, 1975, pp. 115-135, p. 122; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town 1978, pp. 255-262; Warren W. Wooden, *Utopia and Arcadia: An Approach to More’s ‘Utopia’*, “College Literature”, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, pp. 30-40, p. 31, p. 37; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist*, “Moreana: Thomas More and Renaissance Studies”, vol. 17, no. 65/66, 1980, pp. 5-22, p. 11; Walter R. Davis, *Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’ as Fiction*, “The Centennial Review”, vol. 24, no. 3, 1980, pp. 249-268, p. 252f.; p. 266; Brendan Bradshaw, *More on Utopia*, “The Historical Journal”, vol. 24, no. 3, 1981, pp. 1-27, p. 3; p. 26; Lyman Tower Sargent, *More’s Utopia: An Interpretation of its Social Theory*, “History of Political Thought”, vol. 5, no. 2, 1984, pp. 195-210, p. 210; Ann W. Astell, *Rhetorical Strategy and the Fiction of Audience in More’s ‘Utopia’*, “The Centennial Review”, vol. 29, no. 3, 1985, pp. 302-317, p. 319; Robert Shephard, *Utopia, Utopia’s Neighbors, Utopia, and Europe*, “The Sixteenth Century Journal”, vol. 26, no. 4, 1995, pp. 843-856, p. 847; p. 852; Ursula Niklas, *Utopia and Modern Times: Thomas More, Hannah Arendt, and Suppression of the Political*, “History of Philosophy Quarterly” vol. 18, no. 2, 2001, pp. 207-226, p. 209, p. 214, p. 217, p. 218, p. 223; Douwe Fokkema, *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2011, p. 31f., p. 36, p. 38, p. 83; Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea*, Thames & Hudson, London 2011, p. 12; Annette M. Magid, Thomas More in America, “*Utopian Studies*” vol. 27, no. 3, 2016, pp. 521-528, p. 525; Emmanuel Heisbourg, *Utopia in Music and its Influence on Political Beliefs*, “Segni e Comprensione”, vol. 34, no. 98, 2020, pp. 92-109, p. 92f., p. 108; Kevin Rodriguez Wittmann, *Mapping Insularity: A Visual History of Islands in Medieval and Early Modern History*, Brill, Leiden 2024, p. 2; Joanne Paul, *Beyond Utopia: Thomas More as a Political Thinker*, “History of European Ideas”, vol. 50, no. 3 (2024): 353-369, 357.

³ Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea*, 12.

that would be desirable in the future. Utopia would thus be the dream of a new order that encompasses all areas of social life.

By defining the ideal state as objectively perfect and desirable, the theory assumes consent *a priori* rather than requiring it in practice. This assumption creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where any structural change is immediately labeled as desirable progress, bypassing the need for actual member approval.

This understanding of utopia overlooks only one aspect, but it is a crucial one: Thomas More's Island of *Utopia* is not a desirable state – quite the contrary.

II. More's Utopia as a Totalitarian Guardian of Virtue and Tyranny

In contemporary utopia research and in political philosophy and political theory, utopia is often used in a colloquial sense as the archetype of all positive state utopias. Even though More gave the genre its name, it may be legitimate not to reduce it to a utopia or utopian thinking à la Thomas More.

Nevertheless, such a retrospective approach to examining More's concept of utopia has its appeal and may reveal aspects that have been lost in the history of the reception of his work. In any case, based on More's *Utopia*, we can identify some characteristics of political utopias in brief:⁴

1. Political utopias are theories of the state that describe a fictional but inner-worldly society and a fictional, inner-worldly model of the state.

2. A utopia is therefore always an anti-individualistic endeavor, as it exclusively depicts a fictional community in a stationary social model as a "utopian ideal."

3. The author does not expect his utopia to be realized in the near future – in other words, certainly not in his own lifetime.

4. The utopia itself is always allegorical or achronic. This corresponds to the narrative character of its social criticism. In other words, it never takes place in the present as we experience it.

⁴ Ulrich Arnswald, *Zum Utopie-Begriff und seiner Bedeutung in der Politischen Philosophie*, in "Thomas Morus' Utopia und das Genre der Utopie in der Politischen Philosophie", hrsg. von Ulrich Arnswald und Hans-Peter Schütt, KIT Scientific Publishing, Karlsruhe 2010, pp. 1-35, p. 7.

5. The utopian design always inevitably stands in contrast to the existing conditions of the present. However, the constructed counterworld is not to be understood as an alternative to how things should be, but rather as how they could be.

6. Utopia is a kind of critique or parody of a conceivable future tomorrow. Utopia thus does not represent a real ideal, but rather a thought experiment with wit and spirit.

7. Every utopia develops its own “reality.”

At the same time, this small work, first published 500 years ago in December 1516 in Leuven and comprising just over a hundred pages, is probably one of the most controversial works in the history of political thought, with its interpretation still being debated to this day. These controversies result, among other things, from the structure of the book, which presents two opposing worlds. When looking at the structure of the work, the division into two books is immediately apparent.

In the first book of the work, which provides a framework for the actual narrative of *Utopia*, detailed and direct criticism is levelled at the political and social conditions in England and Europe at that time. In More’s critique of the early 16th century, his contemporaries are held up to the mirror in the form of a sharp-eyed analysis of social and political conditions. In a kind of mélange of philosophical-political treatise, conversation among scholars, and narrative of a well-traveled man, the social conditions of England at that time are denounced.

The second book of the work, which makes up about two-thirds of the text, tells the story of the fictional island of *Utopia*. This part describes in particular the organization of the state and the living conditions of its inhabitants. It also suggests that it is a blueprint for a supposedly ideal way of life that ensures peace and happiness for all. The constitution of this ideal state, “*Utopia*,” appears to be formally conceived in a strictly rational manner. The island of *Utopia* thus appears, among other things, to be the archetype of all positive state utopias.

However, the question must be asked: can More’s *Utopia* really represent an ideal state? – A brief look at the supposedly postulated ideal state immediately reveals something else:

- State primacy of control over all areas of life⁵.
- Idleness is not tolerated. There is a strict obligation to work (even for travelers).⁶
- The daily routine is completely uniform and strictly prescribed⁷.
- All individuality is eliminated (e.g., clothing, jewelry, etc.)⁸.
- Utopians do not allow for privacy. Work and leisure must be spent under the eyes of everyone⁹.
- Children are state property and, in the event of overpopulation or underpopulation, can simply be redistributed by transferring the surplus from overcrowded extended families to families with fewer members¹⁰.
- There is no autonomous sphere in the economy: production, distribution, and the human labor that underpins them are completely politically controlled and publicly organized¹¹.
- There is a kind of moral terror. The state dictates what is permitted and what is not. There is no room for personal decision-making. Morality is always based on the moral concepts of the state, not on individual moral concepts¹².
- The state resorts to a system of slavery for the benefit of the Utopians. This is hardly in line with the communist idea of abolishing money¹³.

⁵ More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, p. 127, p. 128, p. 143; Thomas Morus, *Utopia*. Übersetzt von Gerhard Ritter. Nachwort von Eberhard Jäckel, Philipp Reclam Jun., Stuttgart 1990, p. 67f.; p. 78.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 125f., p. 147; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 66f., p. 79.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 127; p. p. 128; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 67f.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 133, p. 135; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 71f.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 121, p. 147; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 63, p. 80.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 135, p. 137; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 73.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 137, p. 139; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 74f.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 147; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 80.

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 185; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 105.

- Adulterers are punished with the harshest slavery¹⁴.

• *Utopia* is based on an expansive foreign trade regime that dominates neighboring states economically, even though the ideology of the islanders is supposedly communism¹⁵.

• The reasons for war also include downright imperialist policies. The economic self-interest of the Utopians is sufficient reason for war, without the need for aggression on the part of the other side¹⁶.

These few points¹⁷ alone should suffice to show that an ideal state hardly ever takes this form. Hanan Yoran is right when he sums it up as follows: “The self-image of Utopia is indeed misleading. Most obviously, many of the ideal state’s practices are oppressive and brutal even by nonutopian standards¹⁸.”

The opposite view to the concept of an ideal state or ideal community can also be found as an interpretation of the fictional island state—namely: *Utopia* as totalitarianism. This interpretative perspective sees the danger of an ideal state model imposed on people from outside, leading to a standstill in social development and to hermetic closure of the community and its social form, and thus ultimately resulting in totalitarianism. This totalitarian end result is inevitable, because any all-encompassing communality results in a latent totalitarianism of *utopia*. In this respect, every utopia automatically has a totalitarian tendency inherent in it.

At the same time, however, More calls his work “*The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining.*” The witty and amusing perspective referred to in the title pervades the work. People and places that are part of the description of the distant island are satirized throughout. Either the

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 191; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 109.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 149, p. 151; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 80f.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 137; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Ulrich Arnswald, *Thomas Morus' Utopia als Fürstenspiegel. Über ein lehrreiches und anregendes Gedankenspiel zum Entwurf neuer möglicher Staatsverfassungen*, in “Die gute Regierung. Fürstenspiegel von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart”, herausgegeben von Mariano Delgado und Volker Leppin, Academic Press Fribourg; Paulus Verlag, Fribourg; W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2017, pp. 294-314, p. 296.

¹⁸ Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham; Boulder; New York; Toronto; Plymouth, UK 2010, p. 165.

translation of the respective proper name refers to the opposite of the description intended for the reader, thus counteracting it, so to speak, *qua* negation, or the meaning of the proper name is at least strongly relativized, if not completely ridiculed.

This dense network of meaningful proper names is intended to create the necessary distance for an adequate reception of the work. More seems to have been inspired by Lucian of Samosata by creating these names.¹⁹ This entertaining and witty narrative style also means that the reader must work hard to discern the author's intentions. The various intertwining dialogues are intended to actively involve the reader in the search for a better constitution.

More leaves all lines of argumentation open in the dialogue. Therefore, the continuation of the travelogue and the conversation is postponed to another day, with the outcome still open. This is intended to allow the critical reader to form their own opinion, whereby they must engage in a game whose rules they cannot fully comprehend.

Here it might be useful to take a closer look at a few selected examples of criticism and parody in *Utopia*:

1. The narrator and eyewitness of *Utopia*, Hythlodeus, can be translated—somewhat unflatteringly—as “big mouth” or “chatterbox”²⁰.

2. “Utopia,” meaning “nowhere,” is ruled by a ruler named “Ademus,” which translates as “king without a people”²¹.

3. The capital is located on the river “Anydrus” – “Waterless”²².

4. Neighboring peoples have names such as the “Nephelogeates,” which translates roughly as “people from cloud cuckoo land”²³.

5. Hythlodeus, the narrator of *Utopia*, has the first name Raphael. The biblical angel Raphael is considered both the patron saint of travelers and the savior of blindness²⁴.

¹⁹ Hans Süssmuth, *Studien zur Utopia des Thomas Morus. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Münster/Westfalen 1967.

²⁰ More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, p. 301; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 181.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 411; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 177.

²² *Ivi*, p. 392; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 177.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 500; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 180.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 301f.; Morus, *Utopia*, p. 181.

More's neologisms are so revealing in themselves that the question of chance becomes irrelevant. The entire text is a thought experiment full of wit and spirit that is extremely difficult to grasp. It can therefore hardly be disputed that satire and parody play a significant role in the success of a book that allowed itself to be praised as "*A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining*."

Rather, it is now often claimed that the alternation between seriousness and irony is often overlooked and that the work is therefore either understood as an ideal conception of the state, without the irony being recognized, or dismissed as parody and satire, without the seriousness and criticism expressed in the work being appreciated²⁵. However, both seem wrong to me. According to my interpretation, there is no truth between seriousness and irony that a reader could verify with certainty, despite all hermeneutic efforts. The meaning of More's *Utopia* is not concretely tangible in terms of content, except in the social criticism of the first book, as I will now attempt to explain in a further step.

In this heightened interpretation of the work, there are several commentators who acknowledge that satire, parody, and irony are part of the work and contribute to its humor, but who nevertheless argue that there are equally clear messages of criticism in the second book that are specifically aimed at the readership²⁶. Allegedly, the author uses irony as a stylistic device to lead the reader into an alternative world, with the aim of enabling them to perceive their own reality with a sharpened gaze²⁷. However, some critical remarks are meant to be taken seriously—namely, whenever these things were supposedly important to More. But how can one tell whether the author is serious or not? Or how can one tell whether he is making fun of things that

²⁵ Heiserman, *Satire in the Utopia*, p. 171; p. 174; Kristeller, *Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist*, p. 11; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Thomas Morus als Humanist*, in "Thomas Morus als Humanist. Zwei Essays", herausgegeben von Dieter Wuttke, Bamberg: Kaiser, Bamberg 1982, pp. 9-37, p. 25; Bernd Renner, "Real versus ideal": *Utopia and the Early Modern Satirical Tradition*, "Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme", vol. 41, no. 3, 2018, pp. 47-66, p. 49f.; p. 53; Otfried Höffe, *Thomas Morus – ein Staatsmann erfindet Utopia*, "Zeitschrift für Politik", vol. 66, no. 1, 2019, pp. 63-85, p. 64.

²⁶ Heiserman, *Satire in the Utopia*, p. 168; p. 171; p. 174; Renner, "Real versus ideal": *Utopia and the Early Modern Satirical Tradition*, p. 49f.; p. 53; Höffe, *Thomas Morus – ein Staatsmann erfindet Utopia*, p. 64.

²⁷ Thomas Schölderle, *Geschichte der Utopie. Eine Einführung*, Böhlau, Köln; Weimar; Wien 2012, p. 14.

he takes seriously? And who says that the character of More in the text is identical to the author of the text, for example?

This is especially true since the most widespread interpretation is one that equates the opinion of the eyewitness Hythlodeus in *Utopia* with the views of the historical author of the text, Thomas More, even though the text itself attributes the authorship of the content to the travelogue of the reliable source Hythlodeus. Some statements also suggest that the fictional More, who is only a marginal figure in the book's conversation, even makes fun of the real author More²⁸.

Logically, therefore, any determination of seriousness or irony cannot be deduced from these internal settings alone. In addition to the fictional level at the beginning of the work, there is a biographical level before the narrative transitions into fiction. Above all, however, the level that is decisive for the localization of the work is the meta-level of the accompanying letters.

III. Literary Form as Utopian Medium

The accompanying letters to *Utopia* are more than just accessories, as can be seen in the Yale edition²⁹. Rather, they are an integral part of the narrative. With his carefully selected letters, Thomas More opens an additional narrative level by involving his humanist friends in the interpretation of the multi-layered work *Utopia* through several accompanying letters.

The witty game of fiction also takes the form of a series of letters and poems written before and after the main text by humanists who were friends of More and who give their opinion on the model character of the political and social institutions of the Utopians in Hythlodeus' travelogue. To the reader's confusion, real and fictional aspects are thus interwoven. The reader is astonished by this game.

The ironic exaggeration in the book *Utopia* begins with an introductory letter in which More addresses the city clerk of Antwerp, Peter Giles, whose Latin name is Petrus Aegidius, asking him to review his memorandum of the joint conversation with Raphael Hythlodeus and to correct it if necessary³⁰.

²⁸ Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, p. 256f.; Wolfgang E. H. Rudat, *Thomas More, Hythloday, and Odysseus: An Anatomy of "Utopia"*, "American Imago", vol. 37, no. 1, 1980, pp. 38-48, p. 44 ff.; Höffe, "Thomas Morus – ein Staatsmann erfindet Utopia," 78 f.

²⁹ More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, pp. 2-45; pp. 248-253.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

For the reporting from *Utopia* itself, Hythlodeus continues to be introduced as the guarantor and actual author. The entire construction of the framework conversation inevitably raises the question of the function of the description of the state within the fiction of the island of *Utopia*.

The difficulty in evaluating the letters lies in deciphering the ironic exaggerations, grasping the witty inversions of facts, and recognizing their significance. With this challenging puzzle, Thomas More shows which circle of readers the work is aimed at and what the key to understanding it is. The multi-layered nature of the work makes it clear that *Utopia* deals with the ideas of the humanists. The literary character of *Utopia* underscores that More is aware “that it is not only seriousness that finds the roots of things, but often even more easily, because it is more playful, cheerfulness, irony, humor”³¹.

In this respect, *Utopia* is also a humanistic study in which More exchanges ideas and reflects on the character of human beings with his humanistic friends.³² It is already clear at this point that the work does not have the coherence of a unified whole. It breaks down into pieced-together parts that may be meant seriously or ironically; in any case, this often cannot be conclusively clarified.

Literarily, More’s humanistic study is imaginative and very skillfully written. More constantly plays with his readers, for example, when he asks Peter Giles to correct his summary of Hythlodeus’ travelogue, if necessary, or instructs him to ask him in the future in which part of the new world the island of *Utopia* is located. For the two of them had forgotten to ask this very question: “We forgot to ask, and he forgot to say, in what part of the new world *Utopia* lies”³³.

The report ends just as spectacular. In the final scene, the dialogue format is resumed, followed by a passionate plea from the reporter Hythlodeus, who initially pretended to be neutral but now passionately advocates for the utopian community of the state of *Utopia*, only to end abruptly as dinner is about to begin. With this ending, everything is once again open. Due to the impending dinner, the evaluation of the report on the Utopians’ way of life is simply postponed³⁴.

³¹ Süssmuth, *Studien zur Utopia des Thomas Morus. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, p. 109f. (translation by the author).

³² Kristeller, “Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist,” p. 11; Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters*, p. 159.

³³ More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, p. 43.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

All this demonstrates the literary quality and humor of the work, which is aimed entirely at humanists educated in Latin and Greek. More himself is said to have expressly rejected a translation of the work into English. What is certain is that the text is addressed to humanist friends who were able to correctly interpret the text with its literary tricks and allusions. Consequently, the work *Utopia* exists in a state of irretrievable complexity, resisting any singular, definitive interpretation³⁵.

IV. Assessing More's Utopia as a Conceptual Model

While Thomas More's *Utopia* is undeniably the foundational archetype for all positive state models and utopia is its generic term, the desirability of living within the state Thomas More conceived of on this fictitious island of *Utopia* remains highly debatable.

Even if one wanted to, it would not be possible, since a utopia is still regarded as a concept that, while conceivable, cannot be directly realized. The name "Utopia," derived from the Greek "ou" and "topos," refers to a "nowhere" that cannot be found, projecting all longings into an unattainable distance. The fictitious island is a pipe dream, a concept, and a vague vision of a possible world or a time in which a new social, religious, or technical order prevails³⁶.

However, if *Utopia* is a fantasy of an island and a society, then while the dream of an ideal state may still fascinate many in light of today's imperfect conditions, it is also accompanied by a certain glorification of this fantasy. Even though utopian fantasies continue to captivate many, the initial allure of an ideal society obscures a problematic reality. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that this "perfect" model of society is based more on dubious, authoritarian rules than on true human liberation, proving that the hasty interpretation of the ideal state is deeply flawed. The results of the supposedly perfect social *utopia* show that the institutions and rules of utopia are questionable.

Nevertheless, discussions still flare up today about whether the fictitious island of *Utopia* represents a cloud-cuckoo-land or an ideal state. To this day, the book is more controversial than any other work of political philosophy from antiquity to modern times. The imaginary place of the realization of the perfect state ultimately ends in a nightmare scenario of a

³⁵ Süssmuth, *Studien zur Utopia des Thomas Morus. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, p. 33.

³⁶ Arnswald, "Zum Utopie-Begriff und seiner Bedeutung in der Politischen Philosophie," pp. 1-35.

social, religious and technical order that reduces the ideas of *Utopia* as the best political system in connection with the most reasonable form of human coexistence to absurdity. Even the comprehensive social order (economy, administration, urban planning, gender roles, child-rearing, etc.) in the best state of *Utopia* (*De Optimo Reipublicae Statu*) leaves people practically no individual freedom and corresponds to a totalitarian state system.

It is disturbing that today's interpreters, after experiencing two totalitarian systems of rule in the last century, are still not sufficiently sensitized and immune to such temptations. This fact is not concealed in More's *Utopia*: "But you should have been with me in Utopia and personally seen their manners and customs as I did, (...) (i)n that case you unabashedly would admit that you had never seen a well-ordered people anywhere but there."³⁷, by which he means a completely organized and controlled society. And Peter Aegidius provides yet another clue when he states that it will take a long time "before we adopt anything that is better arranged with them than with us"³⁸.

The imaginative quality of this work arises automatically from its form as a travelogue detailing a distant island. Because the depicted perfect society is merely an inner-worldly fiction—and not a structure expected to be implemented in contemporary European states—it functions as a work of political imagination. The political reality of a perfect state as "reality of fiction within fiction" (Arnswald) turns the fictional narrative into a political imagination.

Utopian political imagination in More's *Utopia* centers on the communal, both in how society is structured and how material resources are shared. It is the imagination of a society that is developed within the framework of collective life for a different conceivable collective life. But why does More call his book "*A truly golden handbook, no less useful than entertaining*"? What else might More have intended with his ambiguous work?

In response to these questions, *Utopia* is rather an "*experimentum rationis*," i.e., a thought experiment, and not the blueprint for an ideal state as many ardently desire. It is not even a strictly utilitarian-rational thought experiment, as is often claimed. In my interpretation, it is exclusively a thought experiment intended to open scope for debating all possible and conceivable models of government. That is precisely its function: a truly

³⁷ More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, p. 107.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

golden experimental handbook about the best constitution and the new island of *Utopia*.

The island of *Utopia* does not provide a definitive solution – let alone a serious one – to the abuses in England at the time described in the first book. Clearly, such a multi-layered understanding of the work no longer allows for a simple, one-dimensional interpretation of the author's intention. It also seems certain that *Utopia* cannot be understood as the comprehensive social reform work that it has often been portrayed as in the history of utopia research and still is in some quarters. Thus, the work was never intended to be understood as an ideal to strive for.

At the same time, however, it cannot simply be viewed as an intellectual game, because the background against which this fictional thought experiment takes place is too serious, and the criticism of the conditions of his time too scathing, for it not to have consequences. From the playfulness with the true meaning of proper names to the ironic relativizations or even the internal inconsistency of his remarks, there are many indications that the author More wants to encourage his readers to critically question his supposedly ideal social model as well as the social reality of the present at that time. The open ending of the conversation between More and Hythlodius is further evidence of this. Why should the conversation end openly if all problems and evils had been eliminated?

More presents the humanistically educated reader of his time with a social counter-model that only appears to have solved all injustices on the surface. In the first book, the author draws the reader's attention to the social misery of their time, but on closer inspection, *Utopia*, with its many unattractive institutions and practices, fails to provide a concrete answer to this in the second book, since the alternative social model – as I have explained – must be critically questioned. The latter is therefore not a social reform manifesto, as is often assumed without reflection. The aim of this only seemingly serious proposal must rather be seen as enabling a space for discussion beyond censorship for the circle of educated humanists of his age.

The island of *Utopia* is thus a deliberate provocation aimed at questioning the real social reality of the present at that time. Instead of continuing to thoughtlessly regard the *status quo* as God-given, readers should come to the radical realization that the political and social conditions in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century were miserable and in urgent need of improvement.

Mores's aim is not to develop a model constitution for the future. Rather, he seeks to show how the unsatisfactory state structures of the present

can be transformed into real structures of order that could lead to completely different upheavals. Thus, *Utopia* is not just a historical novel, but a vital tool for political imagination that allows society to question existing power structures through the lens of a fictional “ideal” that turns out to be the opposite.

V. Fictional Worlds as Political Imagination

Fictional worlds can not only play out hypothetical scenarios without having to take existing power structures into account, but they are also a tool for evoking something like political imagination in the first place.³⁹ What could be dangerous for the state and society in the real world can be freely explored experimentally in the fictional world. Even if reality conflicts with social norms, even if it challenges the existing order, it is still only a thought experiment in the realm of fictional possibilities. In this respect, fictional worlds are enablers rather than inhibitors of political imagination.

Fictional worlds can also serve as entertainment, while at the same time being both thought experiments and entertainment. As complex thought experiments on possible future scenarios, they can also serve as a space for comprehensive ethical reflections on society, which is practically impossible in real society. This fictionality serves as a protective space in which to engage in radical criticism of the state without committing to a specific political program.

Fictional worlds – whether in literature, film, games, or speculative theory – are not escapist bubbles detached from reality. They are political laboratories. They allow creators and audiences to imagine alternatives, critique existing systems, and explore the consequences of different social arrangements. In many ways, fictional world-building is a form of political thought experiment.

The idea of utopia as a thought experiment for fictional world-building, based on a reading of More’s *Utopia*, extends even to physicists such as Ernst Mach,⁴⁰ who in *Knowledge and Error* (1905) speaks of a natural scientist as

³⁹ Garry L. Hagberg, “Introduction: Occasions for Reflection on Political Possibility,” in *Fictional Worlds and the Political Imagination*, edited by Garry L. Hagberg, Palgrave Macmillan / Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham, Switzerland 2024, pp. 1-8, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Ulrich Arnschwald, “Die Verbindung des Utopismus: Von Morus über Mach bis zum Wiener Kreis – Ernst Machs ‘Gedankenexperiment als Utopie’” in *Der Wiener Kreis – Aktualität in Wissenschaft, Literatur, Architektur und Kunst*, herausgegeben von Ulrich Arnschwald, Friedrich Stadler und Peter Weibel, LIT Verlag, Wien 2019, pp. 11-31.

“the author of social and technological utopias”⁴¹. In this case, however, it is a matter of creating a technical world and not a politically ideal situation.

Political imagination is the collective capacity to envision alternative social and political realities beyond the existing *status quo*. It acts as a bridge between critical reflection—understanding what is wrong with the present – and transformative action – creating a different future. Reflecting on such politically significant literature allows for freer and more creative thinking about political possibilities and community-building, given that “[w]ere it not for this imaginative space opened between what we have before us and what we might have before us, political idealism, and indeed many forms of political reflection, would be impossible”⁴².

When the capacity to imagine alternatives fades, the *status quo* is reinforced, making it difficult to challenge current power structures or inequalities. A narrow, short-term focus on crisis management replaces long-term, hopeful, or utopian visions, making the future appear as a threat rather than a potentiality: Then the following applies: “Visions of progress seem to have been replaced by endless cycles of crisis, and the horizon of expectations has narrowed, making the future seem more a threat than a promise”⁴³.

However, it would be wrong to believe that Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) is the fundamental text of modern political imagination *par excellence*⁴⁴. Here, we may also recall Plato’s *Republic*,⁴⁵ which, with its allegory of the cave, also qualifies as a work of political imagination. What is special about More’s great opus is therefore not its political imagination, but rather the fact that the work establishes the genre of utopia,⁴⁶ as Lyman Tower

⁴¹ Ernst Mach, *Knowledge and Error: Sketches on the Psychology of Inquiry*. With an Introduction by Erwin N. Hiebert, D. Reidel, Dordrecht; Boston 1976, p. 136.

⁴² Hagberg, “Introduction: Occasions for Reflection on Political Possibility,” p. 1.

⁴³ Suvi Salmenniemi, Inna Perheentupa, and Hanna Ylöstalo, *Political Imagination and Social Change*, “Sociological Research Online”, vol. 30, no. 2, 2025, pp. 345-362, p. 347.

⁴⁴ Nellickal Jacob, *In the Shadow of the Real: A Reading of Thomas More’s Utopia*, “International Journal of Research in English”, vol. 7, no. 2, 2025, pp. 159-161, p. 160.

⁴⁵ Plato, *Republic*, translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York 1993.

⁴⁶ Robert Shephard, “*Utopia, Utopia’s Neighbors, Utopia, and Europe*,” p. 843; Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London 2002, p. 162, p. 228.

Sargent notes: “There is a general form for the term *Utopia* as a literary genre. It refers to works which describe an imaginary society in some detail”⁴⁷.

It is no coincidence that More’s island of *Utopia* has shaped the tradition of fictional models of society. However, even without the projection into the future, it would not be certain that the fictionality described would automatically lead to a better and more desirable society.

VI. Conclusion

While Thomas More’s *Utopia* is widely credited with establishing the genre of fictional state-modeling—blending theoretical and literary elements—this view hinges on the premise that utopianism functions as an abstract antithesis to actual social conditions. Consequently, this traditional perspective can be challenged if that premise is not accepted.

More coined the proper name “Utopia” for his fictional island, which later came to represent any imagined political state. A utopia is understood as an idea that is conceivable but cannot be implemented immediately, representing a dream, concept, or vision of a world or time in which a new social, religious, or technical order prevails. At the same time, More sought to highlight the potential negative consequences (which today even seem comparable to totalitarianism) of excessive social organization in and of itself, even if efforts toward organization and improvement may be motivated by a desire to remedy the injustices of the current situation.

While the flawless nature of this concept implies that all citizens must align their lives with its principles, I find this premise untenable in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. The assumption that community members must uniformly adhere to these ideals is problematic in More’s work. *Utopia* can also be understood, as we call it today, as a dystopia that does not produce a desirable model of state. Rather than a perfect state, I view *Utopia* as a dystopia, serving more as a theoretical thought experiment (*experimentum rationis*) than a desirable, actionable model⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Lyman Tower Sargent, *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited*, “*Utopian Studies*” vol. 5, no. 1, 1994, pp.1-37, p. 7.

⁴⁸ There are other authors besides myself who view *Utopia* as a thought experiment, but I am the only one who attributes this necessity both to an ironic and parodic game among humanists and to the need to circumvent the censorship of that era. These authors include: Jack H. Hexter, *More’s Utopia: The Biography of an Idea*, p. 91; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance*, pp. 213-262; Elisabeth Hansot, *Perfection and Progress: Two Mode of Utopian Thought*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, pp. 59-78; Davis, *Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’ as Fiction*, p. 253; J. C.

Since the island of *Utopia* is home to many unattractive institutions and unappealing practices, it does not offer a viable solution to the problems of 16th-century England. Therefore, it is inaccurate to view the work as a comprehensive work of social reform, a common misconception in much utopian research. Consequently, *Utopia* should not be interpreted as a blueprint for social reform, despite the prevalence of this view in traditional and contemporary utopian studies.

Fictional narratives act as a catalyst for political imagination, providing a protected sphere for profound state critique liberated from immediate political commitment. This imaginative capacity envisions alternatives to the *status quo*, effectively linking critical reflection with transformative, real-world action. Consequently, More's *Utopia* serves as a foundational archetype for the genre's exploration of both idealized and dystopian societal models.

Rather than a blueprint for transforming reality, Thomas More's *Utopia* functions as an imagined alternative – a mental thought experiment rooted in irony, wit, and paradox. It is not intended to be a model for direct imitation, but rather an intellectual space for Renaissance humanists to critically reflect on European society. It serves as a parody, allowing discussion that bypasses censorship.

Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516-1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York; Melbourne, 1981, p. 372; Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities. Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London, 2002; Nenad Mišćević "Political Thought Experiments from Plato to Rawls" in: *Thought Experiments in Philosophy, Science, and the Arts*, edited by Mélanie Frappier, Letitia Meynell, and James Robert Brown, Routledge, New York; London, 2013, pp. 191-206.

