

7.1.1 Experiments and Avant-gardes in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

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Introduction

Early modern Europe witnessed immense cultural change and conflict, with huge ramifications for society and politics. In this chapter we are interested in two cultural processes in particular, and how they resulted in new ways of both imagining society and its normative values and actively creating alternative and experimental modes of living. The first such process was an intensified interest in the lessons of the past, and especially antiquity. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, increasing numbers of people across Europe engaged in a self-conscious ‘Renaissance’ that involved recovering the knowledge and skills enjoyed by the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Arabs and working to reclaim that knowledge—to translate, learn, and disseminate it in order to improve contemporary societies. The second process concerned religion and faith: the doctrines and practices determining a person’s relationship to God—and by extension their fellow men and women—and the institutions by which these beliefs were organised and controlled. Over the course of the ‘long Reformation’ (from the early sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries), Christian principles and practices were contested, often violently, by a host of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ denominations, with ordinary men and women often empowered by their own interpretations of the word of God as a result.

One fascinating and complicated convergence of these cultural developments was the publication of *Utopia* by the English statesman and writer Thomas More (1478–1535) in 1516 and the wider dissemination of ‘utopian’ ways of thinking and living thereafter. More originally wrote *Utopia* in Latin for his educated humanist friends (that is, classically educated men with a direct interest in ancient Greek and Roman culture) and would have liked to have kept it that way. Instead, however, it became a publishing phenomenon: as

well as quickly going through numerous Latin editions, it was translated into national vernaculars across Europe, and subsequently the world, and was used to justify critical and even revolutionary agendas with which More would have been—to say the least—uncomfortable. But, significantly, *Utopia* also gave rise to the concept and language of ‘utopianism’, the label now used to describe the capacity for people to transcend the circumstances and power structures of their immediate and particular lives in order to imagine ways of living based on idealistic principles. This capacity was not always regarded positively: styling someone or something ‘utopian’ was as likely to be a criticism as a compliment in the period. However, utopianism nevertheless became an important feature of early modern—and indeed modern—culture. It did so as a new genre, with writers like Francis Bacon and James Harrington famously creating their own imaginary worlds in order to explore and critique arrangements of ideas and values. And it did so as a practice, with men and women responding to the cultural ferment of the Renaissance and Reformation by participating in new and distinct ‘societies’ and ‘communities’ based on principles of their own choosing and experimenting with ideas about class, gender, and sexuality that transgressed existing patriarchal and ‘respectable’ norms.

This chapter considers the impact of *Utopia* in these two respects. The first section introduces the text itself and shows how, through its translation into national vernaculars, More’s *Utopia* could take on practical and contemporary relevance despite its fictionality and classicism. The following section then outlines some of those early modern utopian experiments in communal living and patterns of behaviour which contradicted prevalent conventions of patriarchy, society, and sexuality.

Thomas More’s *Utopia*

Utopia, meaning ‘no place’ in Greek, was an imaginary island described by More through a fictional dialogue between a traveller and explorer called Hythloday and a character called Morus. Reflecting the real encounters of Europeans with distant and unfamiliar people in the course of their exploration of the globe, *Utopia* ostensibly described, very credibly, yet another such encounter. However, readers with an appreciation of Latin and Greek would have recognised More’s many puns and jokes as well as his deep and critical engagement with classical political theory. They might also have noticed that the longest, final chapter described how the majority of Utopians voluntarily chose a mode of religion with many resemblances to the kind of reformed Christianity espoused by More (albeit a decade before the challenge posed by Martin Luther turned More into both a persecutor of Protestants and a Catholic martyr).



Fig. 1: Title woodcut for Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Isola_di_Utopia_Moro.jpg.

Juxtaposed to the many social and economic problems facing contemporary England outlined in Book I, the Utopian customs and institutions described by Hythloday in Book II accordingly revealed what a civil, reasonable, and equitable 'commonwealth' might look like. These customs and institutions were based on a range of classical and Christian values which, in many instances, were exaggerated for ironic effect. Before agreeing to marry, for example, Utopian men and women examined each other naked to check they were happy with the person with whom they would be spending the rest of their lives; Utopians could believe in a God or Gods of their choosing, so long as they did not try to publicly harangue others into believing the same; and, most infamously, in Utopia there was no private property, monetary system, or even desire for material riches and possessions—householders lived communally and regarded gold and jewels as frivolous irrelevancies. The communist system enjoyed by Utopians was supported by a system of slavery, with unrepentant criminals and captured foreign soldiers living in bondage and doing unpleasant work like butchering animals and household

chores. Yet so well-treated were Utopian bondsmen and women that peoples from neighbouring countries often requested to be enslaved, as their lives were healthier, safer, and more orderly than the lives of free peoples elsewhere.

Although More originally intended his text for a humanist and Latinate trans-national 'republic of letters', a brief outline of its early publishing history shows its growing appeal across Europe. Three Latin versions appeared between 1516 and 1518, including the original Leuven copy published by Dirk Martens and the famous Basel edition published by the humanist printer Johann Froben. The first vernacular translation of *Utopia*—though only Book II—was published in German in 1524 (as well as in Basel), and an Italian version of both Books I and II was published in Venice by Ortensio Lando in 1548. A full French translation was published in Paris in 1550; an English version appeared in London in 1551; and a Dutch translation was published in Antwerp in 1553. Although a Spanish version was not published until 1637, a Spanish manuscript copy—the 'Gondomar' translation—was circulating as early as 1535. However, it was not until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the text appeared in the vernaculars of Eastern Europe and Russia.

Each of these translations created a new, vernacularised version of *Utopia* that was unique in terms of its formatting, wording, interpretative emphases, as well as the cultural and political context into which it was introduced. They also demonstrate how the relatively esoteric knowledge of Europe's educated elites began, over the course of the sixteenth century, to be more widely disseminated socially and used practically. To take just one example of this process: the historian Jennifer Bishop has meticulously reconstructed the circumstances leading to the first translation of *Utopia* into English in 1551. The translator was Ralph Robinson, a well-educated clerk touting for employment in London in the early 1550s. His patrons were a group of London merchants and master craftsmen deeply involved in implementing a 'reformation' of religion and government through their participation in guild, city, and parliamentary politics. Although written by a Catholic martyr, *Utopia* appeared to offer plenty of insights into what a reformed Protestant polity might look like: for example, in its commitment to enlightened political counsel, its prioritisation of the common 'weal' and happiness, and its lauding of the participatory nature of Utopia's political structures (which bore uncanny resemblances to London's civic institutions). While these Londoners were by no means attracted to the communism practiced by Utopians, they nevertheless found the principles of social responsibility and commonwealth espoused by More appealing and a useful mirror through which to view contemporary society. Thereafter, new translations of *Utopia* in different languages tended to coincide with moments of political crisis and, on occasion, revolutionary opportunity.

Utopian Communities in Early Modern Europe

If the text of *Utopia* was one legacy of Thomas More, then the label of 'utopianism' was another. Commentators often used it to belittle political positions. During the English Revolution, for example, the regicide John Cook felt the need to make clear that "I am not of their opinion that drive a parity to have all men alike, it is but a Utopian fiction, the Scripture holds forth no such thing". He likewise stressed that the idea "a man should have money because he dreams of it" was just "a Utopian imaginary Consideration".

Cook's dismissal of these alternative positions was, in fact, testimony to their proliferation over the preceding century across Europe, with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation leading to multiple radical religious groups and sects. These groups offered opportunities to experiment with new ideals and practices regarding gender, class, and sexuality. Radical Protestant or dissenter congregations multiplied, sharing a common belief that separation from the Church, and sometimes complete self-government of individually constituted religious bodies, was the only way to create a pure and spiritually regenerated church. These congregations, such as the Baptists, Levellers, Quakers, and Methodists, often counted a high number of women, offering them new opportunities to have spiritual equality and sometimes to speak in church or even preach. Compared to the traditional Christian demand that women, supposedly inferior to men, keep silent and do not interpret or teach scripture or occupy a church office, these new congregations contained a radical new potential for women. Not only had Thomas More's worst fears, that readers would take his irony literally and use his text as a justification for radical ideas (hence his preference to keep *Utopia* away from the masses), come to pass; his own terminology was now appropriated to describe these experiments in worshipping, living, and loving.

The shoemaker George Fox, for example, as the founder of the biggest dissenter church in England in the mid-seventeenth century, the Quakers or the Society of Friends, asserted women's rights to preach and predict. Quakers held informal religious services in domestic 'meeting houses', where men and women sat in silent contemplation until they felt an inner prompt, 'the light', to speak up and share their inspiration with others. In these visions, both men and women used metaphors in which conventional gender boundaries were transgressed. In addition to using fluid, genderless language, many female visionaries described themselves as 'weak and empty vessels'; as passive, irrational and passionate receptacles for divine inspiration, indicating that exactly their feminine attributes could lead to closeness to God as an instrument of divine authority. Quaker men, in turn, identified with infantile

and feminine qualities such as spiritual babyhood ('bliss'), passivity, emotionalism and the loss of inhibition.

Some women became leaders of spiritual sects. Antoinette Bourignon (1616–1680), raised as a Catholic in the Southern Netherlands, through her visions and conversations with God grew convinced that she had been chosen by Him as His instrument for salvation. She started publishing religious writings and gathered people around her in Amsterdam, Germany, and Scotland. Aiming to restore true Christianity on earth before the immanent end of time, Bourignon called herself "the mother of the true Christians", thus relating to her followers in both an authoritative and affective way. She symbolically turned the hierarchy between men and women and between clergy and laity upside down while highlighting the mother-child bond. As a spiritual mother, she thus united her followers as brothers and sisters. The Flemish prophetess employed the stereotypical images of the empty vessel, the unlearned virgin and the spiritual mother as weapons to gain spiritual leadership over a group of mainly male followers. At the same time, she published her works herself and can be seen as the commercial manager of a religious business enterprise. However, critics accused Bourignon of leading a group of (married) men as an unmarried woman, suggesting illicit sexual contact between them. Some called her a witch inspired by Satan.

Planning to establish a community of true Christians on the North German island of Nordstrand, Bourignon formulated community rules including sobriety, moderation, the abolition of private property, and a certain measure of equality. She also prescribed the breaking of bonds with the outside world. Everyone was welcome regardless of wealth, age, religion, nationality, or (dis)ability. In practice, however, not everyone turned out to be able to work for the common good, thus a remnant of selfishness remained.

Gender and Class in Utopian Communities

In 1675, a similar religious community was founded by the Labadists in the village of Wieuwerd, within the Dutch province of Friesland. With 600 members at its height, the community was oriented around principles of holiness and gender equality. Here, too, all property was communal and sartorial rules emphasised simplicity. Men and women from different countries ate at the same table, often in silence, yet there was a hierarchy distinguishing senior from junior members. In later Labadist colonies in Surinam and Maryland, slaves were held—total equality was a myth. The community in Wieuwerd, moreover, had to re-introduce private property after twenty years as its source of funding dried up.

Both the religious groups of Bourignon and the Labadists included prominent members. Scholars such as the Anglo-Irish natural philosopher and physicist-chemist Robert Boyle, the Moravian pedagogue, philosopher and theologian Comenius, and the Dutch biologist Jan Swammerdam were part of Bourignon's spiritual movement, whereas the founder of the Labadists, Jean de Labadie (1610–1674), a French pietist who had originally been a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, attracted notable female converts such as the famed Dutch poet, scholar, and author of theological writings Anna Maria van Schurman. Van Schurman (1607–1678), known as the “learned and most noble virgin” of Utrecht, since she excelled in art, music, literature and was proficient in fourteen languages, had already transgressed gender boundaries by becoming the first woman to study at a Dutch university in 1636, attending lectures behind a screen or in a curtained booth so that the male students could not see her.

Thus, these radical religious groups offered women ways to transgress the limitations that conventional religion and patriarchal society had imposed on them. At the same time, these sects also experimented with other forms of equality, notably with regard to class. Moreover, these experiments crossed national boundaries with the help of epistolary networks, partly overlapping with the scholarly republic of letters.

De Sade and Sexual Freedom

Even though mainstream society often vented critique at these radical religious groups, they had considerable freedom to experiment, especially in the Dutch Republic's political and cultural constellation of religious pluralism, with freedom of press and conscience. However, the existing boundaries of religious and moral acceptability were definitely crossed by the French libertine author Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). Sade produced numerous novels—the most infamous being the pornographic *The 120 Days of Sodom or the School of Libertinage* (1785)—as well as plays and pamphlets, many of which have been burnt or lost because of their illicit content, including sexual violence and torture. Because of his writings and sexual abuse, the French nobleman spent thirty-two years of his life in various prisons and an insane asylum. Sade's thought was anchored in individual sexual, religious, and political freedom. He pushed liberty to its extreme, arguing for the freedom to rape and kill, demonstrating a kind of moral skepticism and political relativism. Sade has been regarded both as a cruel, cynical misogynist and as an advocate of religious, political, and sexual freedom. The aristocratic author underlined individualism and bodily desire, thus also critiquing the Enlightenment focus on reason to battle religion and superstition.

On the one hand, Sade's radical atheism and individualism, as well as his plea for violent sexuality, could not be further from the seventeenth-century radical religious sects that emphasised true Christianity and moral decency or, indeed, the mode of civil and communal living espoused by Utopians. On the other hand, both Sade and these sects show how gender, sexuality, religion and politics are inextricably connected in utopian radical thought, which offered new ways to envision society but also transgressive modes of living in practice. More's *Utopia*, the concomitant notion of utopianism, and the religious upheaval in early modern Europe sparked opportunities to imagine a different society. The influence of these early modern utopian experiments endured into the nineteenth century, when socialist authors looked to radical religious groups and to More's *Utopia* as examples of a real sense of community and as precursors of modern socialism. In turn, Sade's transgressive texts have influenced twentieth-century philosophers' discussions of links between the body, sexuality and power, and have also impacted the cultural and sexual politics of the late twentieth century, especially the sexual revolution's recognition of different forms of sexuality. Early modern utopian and transgressive experiments are thus important precursors to modern political theory and cultural practices.

Conclusion

In a period of radical religious upheaval, utopian thought provided a means to envision society in a radically new way, particularly with regard to religion, the relationship between men and women, and shared property. Thomas More's *Utopia* was a jokey book and ironic thought experiment on what an ideal society might look like. But in spiritual sects, communal living and radical religious ideas, 'utopianism' became a basis for practical living. These early modern texts and living experiments would inspire modern socialists and free-thinkers, even to the present day.

Discussion questions

Read and discuss the following extracts from *Utopia* (taken from the 1684 English translation by Gilbert Burnet):

Hythloday on the religion of the Utopians: 'There are several sorts of Religions, not only in different parts of the Island, but even in every Town; some worshipping the Sun, others the Moon, or one of the Planets: some worship such Men as have been eminent in former times for Virtue, or Glory, not only as ordinary Deities, but as the supreme God: yet the greater and wiser sort of them worship none of these, but adore one Eternal, Invisible, Infinite, and Incomprehensible Deity; as a Being that is far above all our Apprehensions, that is spread

over the whole Universe, not by its Bulk, but by its Power and Virtue; him they call the Father of all, and acknowledge that the beginnings, the increase, the progress, the vicissitudes, and the end of all things come only from him; nor do they offer divine honours to any but to him alone. And indeed, though they differ concerning other things, yet all agree in this; that they think there is one supreme Being that made and governs the World, whom they call in the Language of their Country, Mithras. They differ in this, that one thinks the God whom he worships is this Supreme Being, and another thinks that his Idol is that God; but they all agree in one principle, that whatever is this Supreme Being, is also that Great Essence, to whose Glory and Majesty all honours are ascribed by the consent of all Nations.' (pp. 173–174)

1. What are the key features of Utopian religious belief as described here by Hythloday?

Hythloday on Utopia as a society ('commonwealth'): 'Thus have I described to you, as particularly as I could, the Constitution of that Common-Wealth, which I do not only think to be the best in the World, but to be indeed the only Common-Wealth that truly deserves that name. In all other places, it is visible, that whereas People talk of a Common-Wealth, every Man only seeks his own Wealth; but there where no Man has any Property, all Men do zealously pursue the good of the Publick: and indeed, it is no wonder to see Men act so differently, for in other Common-Wealths, every Man knows, that unless he provides for himself, how flourishing soever the Common-Wealth may be, he must die of Hunger; so that he sees the necessity of preferring his own Concerns to the Publick; but in Utopia, where every Man has a right to everything, they do all know, that if care is taken to keep the Publick Stores full, no private Man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no Man is poor, nor in any necessity; and though no Man has anything, yet they are all rich; for what can make a Man so rich, as to lead a serene and cheerful Life, free from anxieties; neither apprehending want himself, nor vexed with the endless complaints of his Wife? he is not afraid of the misery of his Children, nor is he contriving how to raise a Portion for his Daughters, but is secure in this, that both he and his Wife, his Children and Grand-Children, to as many Generations as he can fancy, will all live, both plentifully and happily, since among them there is no less care taken of those who were once engaged in Labour, but grow afterwards unable to follow it, than there is elsewhere for these that continue still at it' (pp. 197–199)

2. Why does Hythloday regard Utopia to be 'the only Common-Wealth' that truly deserves that name and the 'best in the World'?
3. In what ways might these descriptions of Utopian religion and society justify radicalism in practice?

The Narrator's conclusion: '... and so taking [Hythloday] by the hand, I carried him to supper, and told him I would find out some other time for examining that matter more particularly, and for discoursing more copiously concerning it; for which I wish I may find a good opportunity. In the meanwhile, though I cannot perfectly agree to everything that was related by Hythloday, yet there are many things in the Common-Wealth of Utopia, that I rather wish than hope to see followed in our Governments; though it must be confessed, that he is both a very learned Man, and has had a great practice in the World' (p. 206)

4. Do you think the narrator is endorsing the commonwealth of Utopia in this concluding sentence?

Suggested reading

- Bishop, Jennifer, 'Utopia and Civic Politics in Sixteenth Century London', *The Historical Journal* 54:4 (2011), 933–953.
- Sylvia Brown, *Women, Gender and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
- de Baar, Mirjam, 'Transgressing Gender Codes: Anna Maria van Schurman and Antoinette Bourignon as Contrasting Examples', in *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, ed. by Els Kloek et al. (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), pp. 143–152.
- Mack, Phyllis, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 [1992]).
- Phillips, John, *The Marquis de Sade: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- Shrank, Cathy and Phil Withington, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas More's Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).