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Leaving home: Europe and *Utopia*

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Abstract

In the lead-up to the Brexit referendum, politicians and journalists invoked the concept of utopia to disparage positions diametrically opposed. On the one hand, the adjective 'utopian' was deployed to describe appeals to the possibility of a rediscovered national self-determination and 'control'. On the other hand, it was utilised to characterise the conception of a European federation that might subsume or trump the autonomy of separate nation states. I argue in this essay that the deployment of the adjective on both sides of the debate is not a mere accident of language. Rather, it betrays a deeper correspondence between the idea of Europe and the conception of utopia – not just any utopia, but, specifically, that of Thomas More. In More's text we can read a prolepsis of the profound tensions that underlie the UK's relation to Europe today: Utopia anticipates both a retreat into an illusory, isolationist conviction of the possibility of national integrity, and, at the same time, the dream of a Europe not (yet) achieved, whose most ambitious and thus far unrealised objectives – peace, collaboration, respect for human dignity and succour for the dispossessed – flicker into being in the utopian imaginary of a text written over half a millennia before our own fragile and highly contested historical moment.

Keywords: Thomas More; Utopia; Brexit; England; European Union; Europe; Protectionism; Insularity; Cosmopolitanism

The productive utopian function also draws images from the still valid past insofar as they are ambiguously fit for the future, ... and it makes these images useful since they are the expression of what has still not happened. It makes them useful for sunrise.¹

Every reading of utopia inevitably participates in the genre by offering not simply an interpretation but a new utopian document produced out of and responsive to its own historical moment.²

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968), 126.

² Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 14.

Introduction: the Protean ‘Utopian’

Donald Tusk’s somewhat belated warning to a gathering of Christian Democrat and centre-right European leaders in Luxembourg in late May 2016 was one of several examples in the relatively recent past of a long line of interventions wherein the concept of utopia has been invoked to describe aspects of the European Union (EU). Speaking at an event marking the 40th anniversary of the European People’s Party, Tusk claimed that his fellow Christian Democrats had been:

responsible for confronting reality with all kinds of utopias. A utopia of Europe without nation states, a utopia of Europe without conflicting interests and ambitions, a utopia of Europe imposing its own values on the external world. A utopia of a Euro-Asian unity.

But the desire of the political élite for ‘instant and total integration’, he noted, is not shared by ‘ordinary people’, many of whom were skeptical or pessimistic about Europe, and some of whom even ‘question[ed] the very principle of a united Europe’. To meet that challenge, Tusk advised, Christian Democrats needed to look for what they shared rather than underline their differences.³

Tusk appeared to be employing the word ‘utopia’ to designate a state of affairs not yet achieved, over-idealistic perhaps, but not in and of itself necessarily ridiculous. Some might take issue with the things he characterised in the speech as ‘utopian’: the idea of ‘a utopia of Europe imposing its own values on the external world’, for example, may well be as unpalatable to liberal Remainers (who see themselves as part of that Europe) as it would be to many Brexiteers (who see themselves as separate from it)⁴, though for rather different reasons. But the overarching desire, however premature, for integration, is and was a fundamental feature of the Euro-enthusiasm Tusk and his audience all shared, even though the main thrust of his intervention was to signal a necessary, pragmatic step back from a federalist vision whose time has not yet come. ‘Ordinary people’ may not have been ready for many aspects of the integration to which Tusk gestured, but recognition of that pragmatic ‘reality’ does not, for Tusk, imply that it is a foregone conclusion that those ideals are not worth wanting.

This was not the way, however, that Tusk’s speech was reported in the press, where newspaper after newspaper focused their headlines (and sometimes their entire reports) around Tusk’s adoption of the word ‘utopian’: ‘Tusk blames “utopian” EU elites for Eurosceptic revolt and Brexit crisis’, announced *The Telegraph*; ‘Abandon “utopian dreams” says EU head’, reported the BBC.⁵ ‘Stop dreaming of integrated EU utopia, says Tusk’, instructed *The EU Observer*; ‘EU chief Tusk slams utopian “illusions” of united Europe’, wrote Reuters.⁶ Some publications, such as *The Financial Times* and even – counter-intuitively – *The Daily Mail*, did refrain from suggesting that Tusk used the word ‘utopian’ in a purely pejorative manner, but the majority embraced an understanding of the word which

³ Donald Tusk, Speech marking 40th anniversary of European People Party, 2016.

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/05/30-pec-speech-epp/>

⁴ Non-European readers may need a gloss here: ‘Remainers’ are those who voted to remain in the European Union; ‘Leavers’ or ‘Brexiteers’ are those who voted to leave it.

⁵ Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, ‘Tusk blames “utopian” EU elites for Eurosceptic revolt and Brexit crisis’, *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/05/31/tusk-blames-utopian-eu-elites-for-eurosceptic-revolt-and-brexiteers/>; BBC, ‘Abandon “utopian dreams”, says EU Head’, 2 June 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36429331>

⁶ Ezster Zalan, ‘Stop dreaming of integrated EU utopia, says Tusk’, *EU Observer* 31 May 2016, <https://euobserver.com/political/133613>; Alastair McDonald, ‘EU chief Tusk slams utopian “illusions” of united Europe’, Reuters, 30 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-utopias/eu-chief-tusk-slams-utopian-illusions-of-united-europe-idUSKCN0YL1UU>

‘accentuates its sense of impossibility and absurdity’⁷ to the point where any residual idealism is extinguished under the weight of scathing ‘realist’ ridicule. In so doing, they reprised a longstanding association of the European project with a sense of the word ‘utopian’ wherein is signalled naïve unrealism, overreaching ambition, and ultimate, inevitable, failure. In this, these commentators echoed one of the most famous British Eurosceptics of all. ‘What [they] should grasp ... from the lessons of European history’, this particular Eurosceptic had warned decades earlier:

is that, first, there is nothing necessarily benevolent about programmes of European integration; second, the desire to achieve grand utopian plans often poses a grave threat to freedom; and third, European unity has been tried before, and the outcome was far from happy.

‘(A unified) “Europe”’, Margaret Thatcher went on to say, ‘is, in fact, a classic utopian project, a monument to the vanity of intellectuals, a programme whose inevitable destiny is failure: only the scale of the final damage done is in doubt’.⁸

But just as the word ‘utopian’, in a pejorative register, is frequently invoked to characterise the European project, so too it has often been levied by Remainers at the Brexiteers’ vision of a post-Brexit Britain. Angela Eagle, for example, described Michael Gove’s claim that Britain could retain free access to European markets after leaving the EU as ‘completely ridiculous utopian rubbish’, ‘a utopian dream’.⁹ Mareike Kleine, in a contribution to a London School of Economics (LSE) blog on Brexit, argued that the debate had ‘evolved into a cacophony of utopias’, the Leave camp imagining a ‘fairytale world ... freed from European shackles’;¹⁰ and Will Davies, on a Goldsmiths blog, characterised the regressive, backward-looking nostalgia for a lost Victorian laissez-faire economy, ‘fuelled by a combination of destructive and fantastical urges’, as the ‘utopia’ of Brexit.¹¹ Even *The Daily Mash* (which aims its somewhat hit-and-miss parodies at users of social media sites) joined the fray with an article sardonically predicting that ‘Sunderland [which voted leave by a much greater margin than expected, and which was one of the first to declare in the referendum] will become a gleaming, futuristic utopia by 2018 now that Britain is leaving the EU’.¹²

In the lead-up to and aftermath of the Brexit referendum, then, politicians, pundits and academics invoked the concept of utopia to describe positions that were diametrically opposed. Remainers deployed it to denigrate assertions of the possibility of a newfound national self-determination and restoration of ‘control’, while both Remainers and Brexiteers utilised it to characterise appeals to a conception of a European federation that might subsume the autonomy of separate nation states. The word (and the concept) becomes the adjective of choice for those seeking to undermine a federalist conception of an ideal Europe – as well as for those lamenting the fact that its time has not yet come – at the same moment

⁷ Luisa Passerini, ‘“Utopia” and Desire’, *Thesis Eleven*, 68 (2002), 16.

⁸ Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* (London: Harper Collins, 2002) and see Hans Kundnani, ‘Europe as utopia’ Hanskundnani.com 23 March 2014.

⁹ Heather Stewart, ‘Michael Gove’s post-EU vision labelled “utopian rubbish” by Angela Eagle’, *The Guardian*, 19 April 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/19/michael-gove-eu-angela-eagle-utopian-rubbish>.

¹⁰ Mareike Klein, ‘Utopian Fantasies: the myths peddled by referendum campaigners’, LSE blogs, 2016. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/17/the-brexit-referendum-does-not-offer-a-clear-choice/>

¹¹ Will Davies, ‘Liberalism after Brexit’. Political Economy Research Centre Blog, 2016. http://www.perc.org.uk/project_posts/liberalism-after-brexit/

¹² *Daily Mash*, ‘Sunderland to become futuristic metropolis by 2018’, 2016. <http://www.thedailymash.co.uk/news/society/sunderland-to-become-futuristic-metropolis-by-2018-20160625109816>

that it is used by those seeking to puncture an isolationist conception of an ideal England (which has since become the very figure of Europe's vulnerability).

Is this merely coincidental? Or does the word's protean ability to qualify fundamentally opposed conceptions of what is 'ideal' with respect to Britain's relation to Europe bespeak a more intrinsic connection to the concept? My claim in this essay is that the latter is true, and that the polarisation in the UK that we have seen enacted before us on a daily basis for the last three years is prefigured in the text in which the term was first coined and the concept first fully articulated. Indeed, there is something of an irony that the referendum took place in the same year as the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia*. Far from 'not matter[ing] very much', as Ruth Levitas somewhat oddly claimed in her contribution to *Utopian Studies*' 500th Anniversary commemoration of More's text,¹³ *Utopia*, half a millennium after it was written, matters quite a lot. It has something profound to say about the long history of England's conflicted relation to Europe and some of the ways in which the English have imagined, and still do imagine, their relation to the continent next door.

I: Leaving for Utopia: insular comparisons

Let's begin with the relation between England and Utopia.¹⁴ Seeking that relation can sometimes feel like looking for America in Simon and Garfunkel's ballad, *America*, itself a melancholy utopian yearning for an idealised nation that is never locatable, always elsewhere. Book 1 of More's *Utopia* appears to govern the reader's response to Utopia-the-country by introducing the description of it as an answer to the criticisms of England articulated in the opening debate between More, Hythloday and Peter Giles. Read in this linear manner, Utopia-the-country is the embodied corrective to Early Modern England's social evils, offered up as England's opposite, the best state of a commonwealth which throws into relief the shortcomings of home, the definitive answer to a series of vexed and apparently insoluble questions. But as numerous readers of the text have noted, Utopia may ostensibly be other to England, but is also a kind of mirror image of it, an alter ego or national twin in various respects – geographical, social and cultural. Both England and Utopia are islands, for instance, whose distance from their respective mainlands is similar (about 21 miles at the Channel's narrowest point, between Dover and Calais; about 15 for Utopia and its neighbouring continent). England has 53 counties and the City of London; Utopia 54 cities; the capitals have similar bridges over similar tidal cities and Amaurot is, in Marina Leslie's

¹³ Ruth Levitas, 'Less of More', special issue of *Utopian Studies: On the Commemoration of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas More's Utopia. Part II*. (2016), 396.

¹⁴ Readers unfamiliar with More's text may benefit from some context here. More's *Utopia* (the book) is composed of two parts. Book 2 (which More actually wrote first) consists of the description of the island nation of Utopia – its geography, customs, beliefs and practices. Book 1 consists of a debate between several people about the ills of England and Europe. One of these people in the Book 1 debate is (ostensibly) More himself; another is a man called Raphael Hythloday, a stranger who has travelled the world and seen the ways in which other people do things. It is Hythloday who describes the ideal commonwealth of Utopia, and he does so as a kind of corrective to the evils of life in contemporary England debated in Book 1 (in particular poverty, vagrancy, migration and the death penalty). All too often, interpretations of *Utopia* (the book) and Utopia (the country) and utopia (the concept) proceed as if the description of the place was the only thing that mattered, or even the only thing that existed, whereas the book itself is equally divided between the description of the place and the account of the literal and metaphorical journeys necessary to get there. The present essay teases out the consequences of such misreadings (both of More's foundational text, and, implicitly, of the very concept of the utopian) to argue not only that a sensitive reading of *Utopia* can help us recognise that there is a much longer history to the UK's current paroxysmal relation to Europe than we may sometimes imagine there is, but also that we need to harness the utopian imagination to help us through what are very dark times so that we may continue at least to imagine a better future.

words, ‘the ghostly double of London’.¹⁵ Lifestyles are similar: the Utopian working day at first appears so much shorter than that of More’s contemporaries, but ends up sounding very similar to theirs, and so on.¹⁶ Even Utopian slavery is not that far from English practices once the English management of vagrancy is taken into account.¹⁷

These are familiar observations about the relation of Utopia to More’s England, and identification of such local similarities and differences between England and Utopia – in this custom they are like us; in this other respect they are different – can sometimes help elucidate particular structures to Utopian society (its shrinking liberties, for instance¹⁸). As Leslie observes, ‘the entire “system” of *Utopia* is built on the principle of analogy and the complex process of discrimination, which renders comparison both useful and suspect’.¹⁹ But there is something faintly unsatisfactory about these very particular observations as well, vulnerable as they are to M. W. Wartovsky’s observation that anything is like anything else (or indeed unlike it), and in an infinite number of respects.²⁰ Perhaps more useful, though, are analogies of general tone, frame and ethos. So let’s start with this: Utopia-the-country is studiously isolationist in nature. That isolationism, expressed in the language of agency and control, as well as in the notion of the island (*isola*) nation²¹ is emphasised throughout the account of this imagined community.²² It appears first in Book 2, which opens by telling us of the island’s geography, and in particular, describes the entrance to Utopia’s main harbor, which, though ‘to the great commodity of the inhabitants, receiveth in ships towards every part of the land’ is also extremely well-protected from the outside world. The two edges of the harbor entrance to the land of Utopia are marked by shelves and rocks which ‘be very jeopardous and dangerous’, and in the middle between them rises out of the sea a great rock (a bit like Jersey), garrisoned for protection against unwelcome visitors. The treachery of the marine topography ensures that no-one who is not guided by a Utopian pilot can enter the country; those pilots ascertain the direction they must take by reference to landmarks on the shore, but those landmarks are moveable, so that they may be (and are) changed to confuse would-be invaders or uninvited guests, drawing them to their doom. Elsewhere on the island, we are told, there exist other havens (that is, other harbours), but these are ‘so surely fenced, what by nature and what by workmanship of man’s hand, that a few defenders may drive back many armies’.²³

The description of Utopia in Book 2 thus opens with an account of the ways in which it polices its borders and keeps people out, and this marked turning away from encounters with others also characterises the single historical event which we hear about in the course of

¹⁵ Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias*, 40; Philip Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2002), 54.

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Antonis Balasopoulos, ‘Dark Light: Utopia and the Question of Relative Surplus Population’ in special issue of *Utopian Studies: On the Commemoration of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas More’s Utopia. Part II*. (2016), 621.

¹⁸ It was Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* who first pointed out that Utopia appears at first to be a much freer, more liberal country than Early Modern England was, but that on closer reading, its liberties are subtly and progressively shaved away.

¹⁹ Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias*, 20.

²⁰ M. W. Wartovsky, ‘Telos and Technique, Models and Modes of Action’, quoted by F. A. Muller in ‘The Characterisation of Structure: Definition versus Axiomatisation’, Friedric Stadler, et al. eds, *The Present Situation in the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg and London: Springer, 2010), 411.

²¹ J. C. Davis, ‘Going Nowhere: Travelling to, through and from Utopia’, *Utopian Studies* 19:1 (2008), 4.

²² Benedict, Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Verso: London, 1983).

²³ Thomas More, *Utopia*, in Susan Bruce, ed, *Three Early Modern Utopias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 50.

Book 2. Utopia has no history: it has no *need* of change because conflict has been eradicated or contained, and the perfect does not require amendment; change cannot be visited upon it because, as we have already seen, the island's natural defences, augmented by industry, protect it from invasion. So Utopia's only history lies in one single originary act. Once upon a time, we learn in Book 2, Utopia was a peninsula, joined to the mainland by a passage of land of about 15 miles in length. Utopus, who invaded the land, set his soldiers and the natives to work digging up that land, creating a channel between Utopia and the continent to which it was previously joined, which then was filled up by the sea. The island is thus geographically like England, cut off from its mainland by a channel of similar size, as already noted. More important to recognise is the deliberate, intentionally isolationist nature of the act which is foundational to its inaugural moment. Utopus, one might say, 'takes control', and severs the ties that bind the land of Utopia to the mainland and their once common but now forgotten past; that moment becomes formative in the Utopian imaginary, a spatial event with the status of a myth that organises collective identity around the imaginary community engendered by the birth of the nation. As Philip Wegner observes, in digging up the ground, 'Utopus marks a border where there had previously existed only a frontier'.²⁴ That sense of the paramount importance of 'borders' (symbolic because of the way in which it rehearses a myth at the heart of the imagined community) has been a repeated refrain in the Brexit years, from the insistence with which 'taking back control over our borders' drove the Leave vote in the referendum (see figure 1), to the agonising negotiations over the border – or lack of it – between Ireland and Northern Ireland (or in the middle of the Irish sea) in post-Brexit Britain.²⁵

This insistence on separation, breaking away or wresting of independence from a larger geographical body, may denote a general anticipation of the practices of the modern nation state: Wegner, following Anthony Giddens, sees it as a 'disjunctive act of territorial inclusion as well as exclusion', anticipatory of the 'subsequent spatial practices of the modern nation state'.²⁶ But it has a particular resonance to England: that breaking away is a very English myth, and the subsequent isolationism the Utopians enjoy is as fundamental to a particular construction of England as it is to Utopia.²⁷ For, once separated from its mother continent, Utopia-the-island maintains that splendid isolation throughout its history, up to and including the moment of its discovery to Europe. That triangular correlation between isolationism, England and Utopia is bolstered by Hythloday's explanation for Utopian isolationism, even while that explanation ostensibly undermines the parallel. The Utopians never make treaties with other nations, Hythloday relates, because treaties are too easily broken in that part of the world, which is so unlike Christian Europe where 'the majesty of leagues is everywhere esteemed holy and inviolable ... through the justice and goodness of princes and the ... reverence and motion of the head bishops'.²⁸ More plays with the relations between four geo-national poles, and perhaps also with the dominant rhetorical trope of *Utopia*, *litotes* (a rhetorical device which affirms something by denying its contrary – *not unlike* a double negative, we might say in illustration).²⁹ Here, apparently, is a straight and

²⁴ Philip Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2002), 54.

²⁵ For a lyrical visual expression of the border and its histories, see Clare Dwyer Hogg with Stephen Rea, *Hard Border*, *Financial Times*, 21 September 2018. <https://www.ft.com/video/33264c1e-c744-4b24-bdb7-b89b09716517>

²⁶ Phillip E. Wegner, 'Here or Nowhere: Utopia, Modernity and Totality' in *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, ed Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 120.

²⁷ Menno Spiering, *A Cultural History of British Euroscepticism* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

²⁸ More, *Utopia*, 95.

²⁹ Elizabeth McCutcheon, 'Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Litotes in *Utopia*', *Moreana* 31–32 (1971).

stable contrast: that part of the world is *unlike* Europe; here, ostensibly, the differences are emphasised both between England and Utopia, and Europe and the continent from which Utopia has been divided; here, ostensibly, England is implicitly categorised as part of that virtuous Europe, equally possessed of just and good princes, reverent bishops and equally able to honour the integrity of holy, inviolable leagues. But the irony undermines this. It negates the negation of litotes, so to speak, so that Utopia's unreliable neighbours become not 'unlike Europe' but rather 'not unlike Europe' (another, more Morean, way of putting Leslie's 'Utopia is and is not like Europe').³⁰ At the same time, it undoes the apparent contiguity between England and Europe, which unravels to expose a re-imposition of the difference between them in the recognition of an underlying isolationist desire, for which Utopian practice is the fantasised wish-fulfillment.

So we hear of no treaties; instead, the Utopians use their neighbours' lands as a convenient tool for population control. As I have argued elsewhere, the Utopians are more concerned about the prospects of depopulation than they are about over-population. They maintain a stable population at home by settling surplus Utopians in towns that they establish on the mainland, driving out the native population if they do not submit to Utopian rule.³¹ This establishment of towns on the mainland acts as a kind of pressure release for the island itself: the Utopians send more bodies out if they need more space at home and recall them if the home population drops. This exchange of populations from the Utopian mainland settlements allows the Utopians to keep the population at home absolutely stable, but a collateral (and unarticulated) benefit is that it negates the need for foreign labour, as the labour force re-entering the island is always already a Utopian one, returning from colonies abroad. Little wonder then, with a population as ideally managed as this, that there is no mention at all of immigration. All imagined incomers to the island are either temporary guests or – saving Utopus and his soldiers – would-be-but-unsuccessful invaders or the unfortunate bodies whom the Utopians either buy very cheaply or receive for free as a by-product of the judicial processes of neighbouring lands, whose convicts the Utopians are always happy to make use of as slaves.

In other words, Utopia-the-island is homogenous in the extreme, insular in every sense of the word. It is monochrome, monoglot, monocultural, monovocal (some have even said monotonous); it is a nation whose ideal nature is marked predominantly by protectionism, sameness and separation. Utopia-the-island, inward-looking, static and conservative, is the negation of anything hybrid, polyvocal, outgoing, intermingling or cosmopolitan. The concept of negation, fundamental to the text and signaled both in its title, and in its favourite figure of speech, can define very well the relation between Utopia and England: the country of Utopia is *not unlike* a particular construction of England, we might say, when we think about the ways in which these two imagined communities resemble each other. Utopia is the wish-fulfillment of the isolationist Englander. By the same token, the picture of contemporary England that More proffers is uncannily *not unlike* the Europe of today, to which our contemporary England stands in an uncertain, shifting, (and perhaps itself litotic) relation. Hytholoday's attack on 'an unjust ... unkind public weal, which giveth great fees and rewards to ... to goldsmiths... and ... maketh no gentle provision for poor ... labourers' certainly hits its sixteenth-century targets, those who enclose the common lands and expropriate the means of subsistence of the common labourer. But from enclosure to bedroom taxes, the structure of expropriations as well as those who benefit from them is depressingly familiar across the centuries: More's description of these 'rich men, [who] not

³⁰ Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias*, 20.

³¹ Susan Bruce, 'Utopian Justifications: More's *Utopia*, Settler Colonialism, and Contemporary Ecocritical Concerns', *College Literature* 42:1 (2015), 23–43.

only by private fraud but also by common laws, do every day pluck and snatch from the poor some part of their daily living'³² might sting more contemporary European bankers too, pursuing a rather later version of austerity.

Even more uncannily resonant in its transhistorical percipience is Hythloday's description of the traumas of the dispossessed forced to sell their meager possessions for nothing and

depart away, poor, silly, wretched souls, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woeful mothers, with their young babes, and their whole household small in substance and much in number, as husbandry requireth many hands. Away they trudge, I say, out of their known and accustomed houses, finding no place to rest in.

Utopia-the-country is, on the surface at least, and as I have noted elsewhere,³³ proposed as *Utopia's* answer to the problem of the economic migrant; that solution, however, is only an apparent one, for *Utopia* displaces the displaced beyond the borders of the text rather than eradicating displacement itself. Utopia, where there is no property, may have rendered the expropriation and displacement of its own population unnecessary, but it recreates the spectre of economic migrancy outside its borders in the mainland populations the Utopians expel from the towns and villages they colonise, justifying that expropriation, moreover, with the very same rationale as the English landlords who enclosed the commons at home – more productive use of the land. And again here, there is an arresting resemblance across the centuries: this trope, wherein insularity becomes the answer to the problem of migrant populations, persists doggedly across the years, re-invoked for new politics by new isolationist forces. Figure 1 shows an infamous advertisement circulated by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and unveiled by its then leader, Nigel Farage, just prior to the Brexit referendum, which, as many immediately pointed out, echoed Nazi propaganda (Figure 2);³⁴ similar images were shortly afterwards adopted to similar purpose by Viktor Orban in Hungary.³⁵ Anti-semitic theories alleging that the caravan of migrants making its way up through central America to the US border in October 2018 was funded by George Soros³⁶ overlooked how uncannily convenient the image of that caravan proved to be for

³² More, *Utopia*, 120–21.

³³ Bruce, 'Utopian Justifications'.

³⁴ Stewart, Heather and Rowena Mason. 'Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>

³⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>

³⁶ Many press reports noted the way in which Trump encouraged the circulation of theories that the caravan was funded by Soros and orchestrated by the Democrats. See for example Jeremy W. Peters, 'How Trump-Fed Conspiracy Theories About Migrant Caravan Intersect With Deadly Hatred', *New York Times*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/29/us/politics/caravan-trump-shooting-elections.html>. Perhaps that encouragement should be read in the context of the many other cases where, journalists have noted, Trump has accused the Democrats of something that he has actually done himself; this may be, that is, strategy, not coincidence (see for example Paul Brandus, 'Donald Trump erodes Social Security and Medicare solvency while blaming Democrats', *USA Today*, 19 September 2018 <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/09/19/donald-trump-weakening-social-security-medicare-not-saving-column/1340839002/>; Benjamin Hart, 'Trump Blames Democrats for His Most Horrifying Immigration Policy', *New York Magazine*, 26 May 2018 <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/05/trump-blames-dems-for-his-most-horrifying-immigration-policy.html>; David Jackson, 'While in Paris, Trump accuses Democrats of trying to steal Florida elections', *USA TODAY*, 10 November 2018.

Donald Trump's campaign in the midterms, which deployed it in language – an 'invasion' or 'flood' – calculated to inflame xenophobia and protectionism.³⁷



Image 1: Breaking Point: Advertisement produced by UKIP

<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/11/10/donald-trump-accuses-democrats-trying-steal-florida-elections/1957842002/>; Jacob Pramuk, 'Trump repeatedly blames Democrats for family separation policy he could change right now', CNBC, 18 June 2018
<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/18/trump-repeatedly-blames-democrats-for-family-separation-policy.html>.)

³⁷ I am not the only one to have entertained a rather different conspiracy theory about this caravan: interviewed by Mishal Hussein on BBC Radio 4's *Today Programme* on 31 October 2018, Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein, until 2018 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted the 'extraordinary timing' of the caravan. 'I wish that at some stage there is a deep investigation into how it all began', al Hussein commented: 'where did it come from? [...] It seems to be uncanny that President Trump only months ago wanted to make immigration a centrepiece of the campaign leading up to the midterms and suddenly this caravan appears. I can't believe that it's entirely coincidence'. (Al Hussein, Zeid Ra'ad, interviewed by Mishal Hussein, *Today Programme*, BBC Radio 4, 31 October 2018, about 7:18 AM, 1:22:15 minutes on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0000yjn>.)



Image 2: Tweet by Connor Beaton juxtaposing the UKIP Breaking Point image with images of screenshots posted on Twitter by Brendan Harkin in reply to UKIP's tweet of the Breaking Point propaganda poster

As Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, observed in BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, recourse to xenophobia is a key item in the 'political toolbox' of the resurgent far-right politics embodied in what he calls these 'abominations', these 'merchants of hatred' springing up throughout the world in 2018.³⁸ This kind of xenophobia is not something to which *Utopia* resorts, despite its tacit proposal of an isolationist solution to the problem of migrancy and destitution, perhaps because this particular manifestation of xenophobia is predicated on the existence of a nationalism which, being merely nascent in the sixteenth century, was inadequately advanced to allow the experience or expression of that pernicious fear. But if through our reading of *Utopia* we can recognise that 'trudging' refugees is an iconography with a long history, so too can the text illustrate the long pedigree of another strategic, if rhetorical, device in the political toolbox: elision of the causes of that displacement. *Utopia* never overtly links Utopia's colonisation of neighbouring lands to the refugees that that practice must perforce create. The Leave campaign persistently suggests that the mass migrations of peoples from the Middle East is unconnected to prior conflicts in which the UK played a central part.

II: Other terrains and better ways: re-inventing Utopia

Is it the case, then, that insularity is the only conceivable *Utopian* answer to injustice and exploitation? Must a critique of an inegalitarian society whose population is exploited by financiers – More's goldsmiths and usurers; our contemporary banks, brokers, hedge funds and venture capitalists – and whose rulers indulge in practices that create armies of refugees whom are then ignored, find its only possible resolution in a conception of the 'ideal' that

³⁸ Al Hussein, *Today* Programme interview.

discourages alliances, eradicates immigration, is hostile to cultural and ethnic exchange and cuts itself off from that continent to which it was once geographically attached? No, that is not the case. For we need to look now at what is perhaps the most fundamental of *Utopia*'s negations: Utopia is not *Utopia*; the island, though it shares the same name, is not the book. As J. C. Davis has remarked, reading after reading of *Utopia* 'neglects the process and implication of travel to ... utopia in favour of the destination itself',³⁹ but if we resist that impulse, we can foster a different understanding. While Book 2 is monologic, insular, separatist and inward-looking, Book 1, which the reader must negotiate to get to Utopia and to understand the text of *Utopia*, is the reverse. And if Utopia-the-country is reached via a passage downwards into Asia, Utopia the concept is introduced via a route across a smaller sea, eastwards into Europe. 'The king's majesty sent me ambassador into Flanders', the More-within-the-text begins in Book 1; so to Bruges and then to Antwerp he travels, meeting other European ambassadors along the way, 'excellent men all', from Cassel, on their way to (where else?) Brussels. In the course of that first Book, More also mentions Portugal, Canterbury, France, Rome, Italy, Milan, Naples, Venice, Brabant, Burgundy, Germany, Switzerland, Aragon, Navarre and Scotland.

Utopia, D. B. Fenlon noted over forty years ago, was 'composed in Latin, conceived in Antwerp, completed in London, published in Louvain, reprinted in Paris, Basle and Florence' and written by a man who was executed for refusing to adhere to the doctrine that the head of the Church was to be found in England not in Europe.⁴⁰ So *Utopia* – the book, not the country – is a very European text, predicated on the existence of Europe, and More – or one version of More – is nothing if not cosmopolitan. And whereas Book 2 offers us a monologue, and a closed, static country that always dampens and then contains disagreement, Book 1 is polyphonous, offering dialogue, delighting in the exchange of ideas among people whose places of origin and opinions may differ, but whose shared intellectual interests can bridge those gaps, encouraging debate even where there is disagreement. However much More may later have disavowed such liberties, the integrity of the book is predicated on a conviction of the unassailable value of rational critique. The whole point of More's journey into Europe in the text is the 'debatement' of 'weighty matters', and conversation and debate with those who differ from us are repeatedly represented in the text as emotional encounters, productive of pleasure and of laughter, but also of righteous anger at injustice, a conviction of the dignity of the human person even in the extremity of dire poverty – how extraordinarily humanitarian it is in this sixteenth-century text that even the large families of the poor are defended on the grounds that 'husbandry requireth many hands' – and the imperative desire for change.

So the Europe of *Utopia*'s Book 1 foregrounds pleasure, dialogue, difference and exchange as much as it does a fervent sense of the injustice of corruption, poverty and dispossession. How we eventually understand the relation of More's foundational political text to the debates we encounter today depends on how we read it. It is undoubtedly the case that in its rejection of the hybrid, the polyphonic, the cosmopolitan, the strange and the foreign, emblematised in the inaugural moment when Utopus 'takes control' and separates the land from its mother continent, the Land of Utopia in Book 2 resembles a construction of an ideal England with which we have become horribly familiar, if not yet resigned to, in our own time. And this construction is an extremely regressive one: 'the seduction by a

³⁹ Davis, 'Going Nowhere', 1.

⁴⁰ D. B. Fenlon, 'England and Europe: *Utopia* and its Aftermath'. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975), 115; and see Nicole Pohl, "'The World begins in Man": A brief and selected history of translations of *Utopia* into German', special issue of *Utopian Studies: On the Commemoration of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas More's Utopia. Part II*, 2016, 493–504; and Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias*, 33.)

mythologised past’, notes Timothy Snyder, ‘prevents us from thinking about possible futures ... since the nation is defined by its inherent virtue rather than by its future potential, politics becomes a discussion of good and evil rather than a discussion of possible solutions to real problems’.⁴¹ Utopia, as I have said, is the figure of the wish-fulfillment of the Brexiteer. But if we read *that* picture as an indication of what it means to be utopian, we end with a poor, mean construction of the concept, one which invokes ‘the conception of the good’ only to represent it as what Michael Kenny describes as ‘an eternal loser in the struggle with realism’,⁴² just the same as the way in which the reporting of Tusk’s speech employed the term, unable to imagine a utopianism that is not eviscerated in the encounter with the actual. That kind of conception of the utopian proceeds as if More had only written Book 2, or as if Book 2 were the final and definitive answer to the question posed in Book 1. But *Utopia* is not linear. It doesn’t have a beginning, a middle and an end. It is more like a diptych, or a dialectic, whose synthesis does not provide an answer to the text’s original question – what is the *best* state of a commonwealth? – but instead acts as an indication of how to think of a better one than we have now. As such, its ethos is much closer to the open-ended, dialogic, outward-looking cosmopolitanism of Book 1 than it is to the insular homogeneity of Book 2. The isolationist model may be a compelling one for a particular vision – or version – of England, and wider entities, such as Europe (or even, if we are not careful, the UK), may be more challenging terrains on which to forge collective identities, lacking as they do an ‘obvious common past’,⁴³ and divided by their histories rather than united by them.⁴⁴ But the internationalist, not the nationalist, model is more at one with the spirit of *Utopia*: the land of Utopia may be in Hythloday’s past, but the spirit of *Utopia* looks towards the future.

Utopia is not a blueprint for an ideal society, nor a picture of unrealistic aspiration. It offers no clear, unambiguous answers: it begins, as it ends, with disagreement, irresolution and questions that cannot be answered but, precisely for that reason, must not be abandoned. Paul Fitoussi observed in volume 3 of his *Report on the State of the European Union* that ‘we need new utopias to show the way’; democracy, he argues, is itself a utopia, because ‘it is always unfinished and has always to be reinvented’.⁴⁵ We may live in a world today that is anti-utopian in the extreme,⁴⁶ a world in which the utopian imagination is so debilitated that imagining a space other to our own that is not looking backwards seems simply inconceivable.⁴⁷ Such a state of affairs, in the context of the present subject, is not helped by the fact that as Stefan Berger observes, the EU has been singularly unsuccessful in coming up with anything that might replace the national frameworks through which so many of us experience our identities, of which for Englanders, Utopia is an *ur-expression*.⁴⁸ A cruel nostalgia,⁴⁹ itself a shorthand for the painful desire to return to a past homeland whose

⁴¹ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century* (London: Bodley Head: 2017), 123-4.

⁴² Michael Kenny, Introduction: exploring ‘the Utopian’. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12:3, special issue on utopianism in western political theory (2007), 211.

⁴³ Laura Rosato and Anna Saunders, eds. *The Essence and the Margin: National Identities and Collective Memories in Contemporary European Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

⁴⁴ Stefan Berger, ‘History and forms of collective identity in Europe: why Europe cannot and should not be build on history’ in Rosato and Saunders, *The Essence and the Margin*, 21-35.

⁴⁵ Jean-Paul Fitoussi, ‘Globalization and the Twin Protections’ in Jean-Paul Fitoussi and Jacques Le Cacheux, eds, *Report on the State of the European Union Vol 3: Crisis in the EU Economic Governance* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan), 11-12.

⁴⁶ Darko Suvin, ‘Theses on Dystopia’, in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (Routledge: New York and London, 2003), 187.

⁴⁷ Balasoupoulos, ‘Dark Light’, 625.

⁴⁸ Berger, ‘Collective Identity’, 32.

⁴⁹ Robert Eaglestone, ‘Cruel Nostalgia’ in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018).

actuality always disappoints, marks the faux-utopian impulse which is as embodied in More's imagined community as it is in that of the Brexiteers.⁵⁰ But *Utopia's* most important legacy is not a picture of an irretrievable place, but the demonstration of a method, communicated through an imaginative literary form, for debating a better world and, through the process of that debate, improving the one we have now. God knows, it needs that improvement: Brexit is just one, very local, instance of what sometimes seems like a global retreat from openness, cosmopolitanism and post-war dreams of peace and social justice. We need all the strategies we can get to counter this retreat into insularity and protectionism, and utopianism is one such strategy, a very useful implement in the political toolbox of the left. For to be *Utopian* is to embrace a method of thinking through our problems which always, but not only, looks outward into the world, and which also, as Ruth Levitas has noted, entails a state of mind that can recognise provisionality, acknowledge responsibility and cope with necessary failure.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Raffaella Baccolini, 'Finding Utopia in Dystopia: Feminism, Memory, Nostalgia and Hope' in Tom Moylan and Raffalela Baccolini, eds, *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (Peter Lang, 2007), 172. See also Michael Gardiner, 'Brexit and the Aesthetics of Anachronism' in Robert Eaglestone, ed, *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵¹Ruth Levitas, 'Looking for the blue: the necessity of utopia', *Journal of political ideologies* 12:3 (2007), 289. Recognition of failure, after all, is a precondition for transcending it.

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