

# Utopia and education through the thought of Thomas More

## Abstract

This article aims to reflect on the work of Thomas More - *Utopia* (1516) - a timeless vision that enlightens human thought in the unpredictable world of contemporaneity. This reflection will be divided into six focuses of analysis: Organization, Land Cultivation, Private Life and Institutions, Education and Gender Relations, More's Critics, and Parallelism between More and Comenius. Finally, it will focus on the issues of utopia and education in the world and people's lives, as well as on its meaning and usefulness to lead the world of contemporaneity, without neglecting that utopia highlights what is absent in the present and imagines what can be achieved in the future.

**Keywords:** utopia, education, Thomas More, Comenius, renaissance, contemporaneity

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## Introduction

Thomas More was born in London (England) and is well known for his contributions to the field of education during the Renaissance era. More held various political positions throughout his life since his studies focused on advocacy and law.<sup>1</sup> In Peter Ackroyd's<sup>1</sup> biography of the author, more is always described as a man ahead of his time, educating his children in the same way, regardless of gender, and opening his home to anyone seeking the truth or wanting to discover his vocation. In this biography, we are told that he maintained a *practice of piety* of great moral and human value throughout his life. More was against the ideas of King Henry VIII of England on divorce, which was against the principles defended at the time by Pope Clement VII. King Henry VIII eventually arrested and sentenced him to death, and we are told in the same biography that More's last words were a statement that he "died as a good servant of the king, but first of God".<sup>1</sup> More lived in the Renaissance, when science and human thought flourished, questioning absolute truths that were previously uncontested, making them reborn, and giving rise to discoveries on new perspectives on life. More wrote his work, *Utopia* (1516), and lived according to the paradigms of his time, never ceasing to be influenced by the Catholic religion, which in his time was undergoing a decisive internal reform.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, it is important to recognize that classical humanism is characterized by the formation of the tolerant individual, eager to know, who conceives human nature in an immutable way. In this line of thought, education should guide individuals to its full realization. From this perspective, education, in its classical sense, can be understood as the transmission of the legacy of the ancients to the younger generations, making the educator a mediator between the old and the new. Consequently, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the humanists tried to approximate the Renaissance education, an anthropocentric education, to the Roman classical education, seeking an ideal that could guide the education of future generations.<sup>2</sup> To a large extent, classical humanism tried to conceive education from the propositions of classical authors, expressing it in the relationship between adults and children. The differentiation between adults and children is linked to the perception that the child shows signs of having a nature that needs to be interpreted by those who educate it – echoed in the thought of Comenius in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – the educator listens to the child as a doctor listens to his patients and helps it develop based

on its nature. Thus, sharing the legacy left by the ancients allowed people to identify with the society's culture. Finally, uncertainty was accepted at this time and education was conceived as a value in itself.<sup>3</sup> From a broad perspective, this article is conceived based on the idea that education reveals itself capable, through utopia, of illuminating ways to manage the uncertainty that covers contemporary life.

## Discussion

*Utopia* is written, in Latin, by Thomas More in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and first published in 1516. This is More's masterpiece and is divided into two books. In the first, More constructively criticizes England and Europe of his time. In the second, he presents an ideal republic - the island of Utopia. Regarding this island, Utopia is approximately the same size as England and has around it a natural fortification of rocks along a bay, offering a high level of protection for the Utopians who live there. These natural fortifications originated under the influence of Utopus, the conqueror of the island Utopia, as he joined forces between the people and the army to create them.

## Organization

The island of Utopia contains fifty-four cities, all with the same language, customs, organization, and laws. Amaurota is the capital of Utopia and is in the center of the island. It is in the capital where the island's issues are solved and from where the island is run. On the island of Utopia, the Senate stipulates the penalties for every crime or transgression. However, husbands are responsible for punishing their wives, and parents are responsible for punishing their children. The people can be responsible for the punishment of a citizen if his/her offense is of a very serious order. Most crimes are punished with slavery since this is beneficial both for the state and for the slave who constantly suffers from his crime due to the hard labor he must perform. If the slave rejects his condition, he is executed. However, if the slave proves to suffer more from "repentance than from punishment",<sup>4</sup> he can have his freedom restored by the prince or by popular vote. Finally, on the island, in addition to punishing crimes, they encourage virtues through honors, for example, they build statues of men who have served their country with virtue. As such, in Utopia, no one will rise above others out of greed. Note that not even the prince considers himself above his fellow citizens, he is only distinguishable from them by a bundle of wheat he carries, just as the priest is distinguished from others by the candle he carries.

### Land cultivation

All Utopians own land and none of them fight for the expansion of the territory because they believe that land is for cultivation and not for war. As such, in each house, in the countryside, lives about forty people, in which two of the most experienced and respected people rule it. However, there is one head of the house, the syphogrants (part of the magistrate), for every thirty houses in the countryside. Finally, the peasants produce food for all Utopians. Since nothing is paid or exchanged in Utopia, this food is managed in the island's capital, where the island's magistrates (governors) are located, and is distributed in quantities greater than what is demanded, according to the needs of each city.

### Private life and institutions

The syphogrants make sure that no one becomes idle. However, no one should work themselves to exhaustion; of the day's twenty-four hours, six are for work (three in the morning and three in the afternoon). With this, each Utopian could use the remaining hours he had free to occupy them with the activities he liked best, usually intellectual activities since the practice of idle or foolish activities was forbidden. In this line, when it was time for lunch and dinner, announced by a sound signal (bronze trumpet), all citizens, except the bedridden and hospitalized, eat in the dining rooms, although they can, if they wish, prepare their meals at home. In this dining hall, there is a separate dining room for children (up to five years old) and women (women who are taking care of the children, whether mothers or nannies, the other women eat at the main table with the men). In this room, there are plenty of cribs and enough space for the children to play. The sick in Utopia are cared for by the best doctors in town and with the best resources available. However, those who suffer from incurable diseases and who suffer to death, "causing pain to others and themselves" are proposed to end their suffering.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the priests, "interpreters of God's will",<sup>4</sup> advise them to perform a voluntary fast until they succumb "or else take a potion that makes them fall asleep without suffering until they die without realizing it".<sup>4</sup> However, this only happens with the patient's consent, if they do not want it, care for them will continue at the highest level. Nevertheless, public authorities may advise that euthanasia be carried out for a certain patient. It should be noted that suicide, without the consent of the priests or the Senate, is seen as an atrocious and unworthy act by the Utopians.

On the island of Utopia, women can only marry at eighteen and men at twenty-two. As such, it is forbidden and punishable by law to have sexual relations before marriage. In this sense, Utopians are extremely careful in choosing their marriage partner, since any bodily or character defect can ruin the marriage (monogamy) that will be for life. However, the Senate does allow divorce for reasons of adultery (punishable by the most severe slavery) or intolerable behavior by either party. Interestingly, the Senate does not allow divorce because either party has had a horrible physical accident and the other has gone on to repudiate them. They say that these moments of greater vulnerability, such as accidents and old age, are the moments that most need the partner's help and to abandon him/her would be a cruel act. In the context of religion, no human being can be judged and mistreated for not following Christianity. When this happens, the person who assaults another for his religion is sentenced to exile or slavery for public disorder. The Utopians have great respect for individuals who are devoted to God, that is, priests and all "especially religious men".<sup>4</sup> And it is the bishops who hold the church's highest authority in Utopia.

Finally, all religions in Utopia converge on faith in the divine nature, since faith is the only way to virtue, and consequently, to salvation. In this way, each person can pray to and worship the deity he or she wishes. However, the Utopians call this deity Mitra. Thus, everyone prays to Mitra, although this deity acquires various aspects and thoughts associated with the belief of each citizen and religious group. This perspective makes the inclusion of various religious thoughts possible, creating religious peace, and avoiding conflicts between the various doctrines.

### Education and gender relations

Agriculture is the main theory taught in school, while practice is taught through educational games in the field. And besides agriculture, each utopian learns a particular trade, for example, carpentry and weaving. The children, by custom, learn their father's trade, but if they show any other preference, they will be adopted by another family, responsible and decent, that practices the trade desired by the children. In Utopia, there are public lectures before dawn that are obligatory for those who dedicate themselves to study, however, many people voluntarily attend those that interested them the most. As such, those who are not interested in the intellect could devote themselves to their craft if they want to and would be recognized by the Utopians as a person beneficial to the community. Therefore, most Utopians occupy their free time with their studies, and if they reach a great level of education, they acquire the possibility of reaching great positions of the magistrate.

The Utopians dedicate themselves tirelessly, many willingly, to the study of Greek, although, they also study some of the Latin historians and poets. The Utopians learn and memorize letters, pronunciation, and speech extremely effectively and quickly. However, the best students also become the greatest scholars in the cities, and some are chosen by the Senate to continue their studies. In terms of classical Greek authors, they study Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Plutarch, and Lucian. As far as grammar is concerned, they study Laskaris, Hesychius, and Dioscorides. As for poets, they read Aristophanes, Homer, Euripides, and Sophocles. They also read historians like Thucydides, Herodotus, and Herodian. In the field of medicine, they read Hippocrates and Galen. In this context, Utopians love the sciences, especially medicine, since, for them, it is one of the most beautiful and useful sciences. In this sense, by examining the secrets of nature, the Utopians approach God, for if he created nature and it is his work, then it should be observed and enjoyed, since God will value the sensibility of those who value his creation, over those who are insensitive to it.

On the island of Utopia, families obey a gender hierarchy, with the male gender dominating. As such, the younger men owe obedience to the older men. At the table, the syphogrant family occupies the central seats, followed by the elders of the house and younger members of the same family, continuing to intersperse the elders with the younger members of each family. In this way, the younger ones, being next to the older ones, will not perform inappropriate behavior. However, before the meal begins, a text on a moral theme is read so that a conversation can be generated in which the elders start a discussion so that the younger ones can give their opinion on the topic, by this manner the elders get to know the character of the younger ones, all in an atmosphere of freedom while enjoying the meal. Finally, after supper, an hour is devoted to some recreational activity, such as music.

In Utopia, slaves are prisoners of war or are citizens of Utopia who have committed crimes or even other citizens of other nations sentenced to death (some foreign slaves of Utopia are so of their own

free will). These slaves are chained and forced to work continuously for Utopian families. However, the Utopians are more severe with their people, since being educated to the highest moral and intellectual levels did not stop them from committing crimes.

Finally, in the religious context, the priests are charged with educating children according to good morals and manners, since these values when instilled in childhood will prevail during adulthood. They also advise and censure citizens who lead dishonest and evil lives, being considered a great public shame and a reason for punishment by the prince if they do not change their acts.

### More's critics

More criticizes the idleness of the world in which he lives, which produces so much with so few working. He states that the idlers should be performing useful activities for the population. This would raise the productivity of the world and the entire population could live comfortably, "without rich men with more land than half their city and vagabonds with the physical strength of two men".<sup>4</sup> In Utopia, even the syphogrants, who have the privilege of not working, work to set a good example for their citizens. More also criticizes the laws of his time, which are so numerous that the average man cannot read them, nor would they be able to understand them after studying them for a lifetime, since they have to work to support themselves. Therefore, in Utopia, the laws are few and easy for people to understand.

Finally, More ends Utopia with a critical speech about power (e.g., land and money), greed, and pride that corrupts the various nations of the world. In which the rich steal from the poor and the poor, the most important citizens for the subsistence of society, die without ever being given credit or recognized with dignity. He claims that justice aids this discrepancy rather than prevents it. However, he confesses that "there is much in the Republic of Utopia that I would wish to see imitated in our cities - something I wish more than I hope for".<sup>4</sup> Thus, Moore ends Utopia with an incredibly kind wish, but with very little faith that it will come true.

### Parallelism between more and Comenius

In light of these discussions, the meaning of utopia in education kept evolving in the following centuries, namely, through the work of Comenius, who, like Moore, kept challenging the ideals of his time. Comenius was a 17<sup>th</sup> century educator who held the office of (Protestant) Bishop in the Moravian Church. The 17<sup>th</sup> century, like the 16<sup>th</sup> century for More, was a time of high cultural and scientific flourishing, since it was the time when Galileo, Copernicus, and Descartes developed the thinking of science as something parallel to metaphysics and theology, instilling the idea that it is necessary to act on social problems.<sup>3</sup> At this time, Comenius wrote what is considered his masterpiece - *The Great Didactic*.<sup>5</sup> In this work, Comenius combines religious and naturalistic ideas, connecting the ideals of beauty and perfection. Like More, Comenius was a man ahead of his time. From a broad perspective, Comenius proposed to schools a coherent pedagogical doctrine: "To teach everything to everyone, everywhere, in a complete way";<sup>5</sup> an educational utopia that still is current and challenging. In this sense, he advocated the education of all children throughout life, regardless of gender or social origin. It should be noted that More also defended, a century earlier, that education should be equal for both genders.

It is also important to say that Comenius was against the memorialistic and utilitarian pedagogy that existed in More's time and that remained in his era, where one learned to read by memorizing sentences, and where one learned to write on a sand board with a stick.

Consequently, education, in Comenius' view, had to do with educating for action - knowing to act (active conception), where children were not mere spectators, as education was considered a process that humanized people, making the being conscious and rational - a pedagogy of the essence (human and universal nature). Consequently, education was also linked to social life - educating for good manners, politics, spirit, and harmony - as also described in More's Utopia. In this line, education is perceived as a guide on the way to God, whereas Comenius, like More, tells us to listen to nature and worship this work of God. In Comenius' time, as in More's, the academy was intended for the flower of men, where the highest and most complementary parts of all the sciences and all the higher faculties were studied. Public offices, as a rule, were acquired by academics. At the same time, in More's Utopia, only the greatest intellectuals held the most powerful positions, such as working in the magistratum. Finally, Moore's thought concerning utopia came to be known for its contribution to the philosophical debate around educational utopia, as well as for its contributions to thinking about the family and society as educational spaces. In a similar vein, Comenius's thoughts came to be known for their contribution to the pedagogical debates around educating children, as well as for their contributions to thinking about the relationship between family and social/public institutions.

### The role of utopia in education within contemporaneity

In the wake of Utopia, Thomas More develops the basis of current utopian thought, in other words, he builds the foundations that connect the entire construction of human rights since the mid-twentieth century. To a large extent, educational utopia is not disconnected from social utopia (Araújo & Araújo, 2006). Therefore, the tensions present in Thomas More's work, for example, gender equity, the coexistence of different religions, the dichotomy between city and countryside/industrial and rural, and memorialist education and child-centered education are reflected in several contemporary educational and social tensions, such as the issues of intercultural coexistence and inclusive education.<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, social tensions are not without an educational nature since education is present throughout the spectrum of life and in numerous social spaces. From a broad perspective, utopia incites action around the continuous improvement of people and societies through questioning lived and imagined reality. Finally, in the interstices of utopia, learning to coexist with human life, where the permanent development of the whole person is revealed in the continuous improvement of the social universe, is now a social issue that gives rise to numerous debates (e.g., gender equality and interculturality).

### Conclusion

Education, like an utopia, is an imagined ideal of knowledge to be shared, of values to be taught, and of skills to be learned by free people in a society working collectively for the common good. In a broad perspective, utopia, in this reflection, is seen as a guiding light that takes down boundaries and contributes to overcoming challenging issues of our time by imagining *how can we make this work fairly and inclusively*. However, education is not utopian, as it is embodied in various parts of the planet by various people. It only presents this imaginary facet that is meant to be achieved. To a large extent, this very facet is what makes it possible for education to develop in the sense of reaching all people and encompassing the differences that exist around the world. From a broad perspective, this facet contributes to the work in education, namely through the struggle around educational and social utopias. As such, we could think an utopia is similar to the paradox of the tortoise and Achilles (Zeno of Elea), that is, no matter how hard we struggle to reach it, it

will always have an advance on us, and it will be this same advance that won't ever allow us to reach it. However, this same impossible-to-win race enables us to overcome moments of crisis and stagnation, because it gives us a horizon towards which to direct our action, even though we know that it will always escape us by a heel.

Thus, education can function as a guiding medium for the realization of a world between dystopia and utopia, that is, a world in which unity among people and the permanent struggle for peace among nations create a pacific tension. In this manner, it is important to note that education also means educating for peace, where the harmony between self-interest and the common good resides. Finally, education also represents a union between science and culture, whose power contributes to social and human change. In this line of thought, the discussion section intended to make clear the historical linearity of some social problems (e.g., gender relations, power relations within broader society, and religious tensions) that, although reconfigured by sociopolitical, cultural, and educational transformations, keep challenging the world we live in. In sum, Moore's thought opened a door to a new world (literally and metaphorically) that kept imagining how to deal with the social problems present in social and human life.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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