

**CITY SURVEILLANCE IN THOMAS MORE’S UTOPIA:
THE SHACKLED UTOPIANS AND THEIR LOCATIONS AND
DISLOCATIONS UNDER LAWS**

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ABSTRACT

This essay mainly explores the connection between the administrative/operative machinery which is at work in the utopian society and the way it manipulates the mobility as well as the lives of its dwellers. The essay also discusses the manipulated locations and dislocations of the citizens in the utopian island. Michael de Certeau’s ‘Walking in the City’ has been used as a theoretical framework to approach Thomas More’s work in fiction, *Utopia*. The aim of the research is to explore the usual in Utopia. Usually, the *Utopia* or the Island itself has been considered as an ideal place to live in; however, this paper attempts to find out something less ideal or the excessive check on the citizens that mars their liberty or free will. The study argues that the lives of the citizens on the island are mutilated with almost numerical values to the extent that they almost seem serving under a servitude.

Keywords: Thomas More’s Utopia, Utopian society, Life in Utopia, Surveillance Infrastructure, Citizens

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INTRODUCTION

'Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.'

—Michael de Certeau

The above statement by de Certeau suits perfectly to the fictional story narrated by Raphael Hythloday, which is mostly about his voyages and travelling. Particularly, his last voyage to the utopian island, when he unyoked himself from his entourage, has been given weight. The early part of the sixteenth century was heavily devoted to adventures, travelling and discoveries; the American island is the major contribution of the discoverers to the world's history. Similarly, the documentation of *Utopia* emulates any scientific discoveries of the age and is no less invaluable than them.

The critiques of *Utopia*, since its publication in 1516 to date, have been proliferating and agglomerating day by day as Duncombe (2012) exaggerates *Utopia's* volumes, editions and the critical books on it to be "a medium-sized island in themselves" (p.v). But so far none of these critiques has succinctly grasped and interpreted it; partly because of the book's paradoxical nature and partly because of its author, Thomas More's enigmatic attitude towards it. He himself was unsure whether he "should publish the book at all" (More, 2011, p. 8). However, most of the critics agreed on the fiction's triple-barreled nature: an implicit criticism on the English capitalist class in the time of Henry VIII; the recommendations for the abolition of private property and the slogan for civil equity.

Having an encompassing nature, *Utopia* is equally appealing to nearly all professionals including political philosophers, city development authorities, social activists, Marxists, economists, anthropologists, social scientists and geopoliticians. The book (*Utopia*) mainly underpins & corroborates the political philosophies detailed in Cicero's *Ethical Writings (-44): Moral Obligations/Duties* & Plato's *Republic & Laws*.

Utopia, like the unseen island it describes, is the Mona Lisa—with its unexhausted potential for creating new meanings/connotations upon every rereading from various angles. Nonetheless, the book had been received as a useful tool for maneuvering and strategising policies for developing a democratic/commonwealth

society in the early part of the sixteenth century England and, perforce, is still being treated as a theoretical framework as well as a think-tank for establishing a financially stable society in most of the commonwealth countries today. The way, Raphael Hythloday, the fictional character of *Utopia*, narrates the conurbation of the imaginary island and its system, is worthy for its Aristotelian *enargeia*— as if the utopian island had truly been there.

The utopian society, as *Utopia* portrays, enjoys the perfect life a man wants. No place in the utopian island is hyper-ghettoed; no derelict city, no moth-eaten building that wants reclaim. Although wealth from gold is spent chiefly on defensive stratagem against any future war if waged on them, the people are not shell-shock at all. The economy is running smoothly with the precise utopian statistics as “they produce much more grain and cattle than they need, and share the surplus with their neighbours” (More, 2011, p. 41). Everything in *Utopia*— the population, the number of cities, the number of labourers, even the width of ‘the streets’—it says, ‘twenty feet wide’; lavish for the sixteen century standards—is kept within strict mathematical figures. The island, amazingly, neither suffers an economic perturbation nor owes anything in the shape of debt to other islands in the neighbourhood. The author manipulates even the nature and climate of the utopian city to perfection/utopian standards; saying that the water is too much ‘brackish’ when it is away from the city but when the [river] “Anyder runs past the city” (More, 2011, p. 40) the water is always fresh, sweet and clean.

Several significant areas have been discussed in the book and each one had been recounted with great prolixity, but the main issue that demands attention—which is much debatable and has a scope in this scientific and populated world —is the way the governmental body/administrative unit in the utopian city uses the unseen¹ power to

¹ The word “unseen” has been used here because the utopian society did not believe in the possession of power and material; paradoxically, we see the use of power exercised by the city authorities on its citizens, especially in monitoring their movements and reducing some of them to slaves. The idea of unseen/mysterious is linked up with the idea of “anonymous rule” by Michael de Certeau.

control the movements and lives of its citizens. And the exercise of power on them countervails the sense of freedom implicitly promised in *Utopia*—its exploration is also the theme of this project. Therefore, this essay mainly attempts to explore the connection between the administrative /operative machinery which is at work in the utopian society and the way it manipulates/surveys the movements/mobility as well as the lives of its dwellers. The essay also discusses the manipulated locations and dislocations of the citizens in the utopian island.

ANALYSIS

The discussion on city surveillance in *Utopia* here is indebted to the ideas of surveying a city by de Certeau, discussed in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau (2011) asserts that an ‘anonymous law’ makes a person move in different directions along with the [city] “streets, buildings and traffic signals” (p. 92). This *anonymous law* may be attributed to the norms or regulations imposed by the city authority, not only on the pedestrians but the general public, cyclists and vehicle drivers as well. Or this law may be associated with the architectural ambitions of a city where new buildings appear dramatically or constructed very much unpleasant to the tastes of local residents. Garreau (1991) argues that the Americans go radically in experimenting and architecting their public spaces but “most don’t even know much about it’ because they are so modish that nothing in them ‘seems like the old towns” (p. XVIII). He adds that “every metropolis that is [flourishing] is doing so by sprouting new places....those we live in but we [hardly] recognize them” (Garreau, 1991). All sorts of impediments before the face of free mobility in the public spaces are stationed either by law or ambitious urban planners. Here and there, rules are highlighted by the local authorities—normally with red or designated with signs and symbols: keep to the left, no parking, keep in lane, no ball games, no horns, no crossings, double yellow lines, no pedestrian crossings, no smoking area—much to the annoyance of the streetwalkers; all of which though the pedestrians, cyclists and drivers, in most cases, comply to but resentfully. The city authorities claim and consume all the existing spaces in a city

under their autonomous will-power. But the practitioners, at times, transgress these rules deliberately when not feared by the consequences or when any loopholes are available. These utopian standards mostly create undesirable results, such as, Paul (1982, p. 32) quotes Nozick in his essays saying that Nozick has introduced a new utopia: “meta-utopia”—a collective utopia, so that one’s utopia may not be “imposed on others”. The imposition of such ‘powers’, says Nozick, “by modern states has no moral basis but offends people individual rights” (p. 30) and may lead to anarchy even worse than dystopia. De Certeau’s (2011) concept of the surveying “voyeur like a god or solar Eye” is linked up herewith the authorities: ‘syphogrants, tranibors, phylarchs, priests, elders in house and the governor (More, 2011, P. 43), in the utopian island who keep a tight and an expansive vigil like the modern CCTV on the activities of the inhabitants therein; particularly on their visits to other cities within or outside the jurisdiction of the fictional island. The borders in the utopian cities are strictly calculated and sharply circumscribed; allowing almost no leakage/vulnerability to be violated by the practitioners or to serve as a foil against any foreign intrusion². “No city wants to enlarge its boundaries” (p. 40); the phrase symbolically stands for curbing the spatial expansion of the island as well as for hampering the mobility of the utopians. This argus-eyed surveillance is advocated by de Certeau (2011) in the section: ‘Operational concept’ in ‘Walking in the City’ about the city planning, according to which he contends:

[The] city founded by the utopian or urbanistic discourse... must replace the tactics exercised by the users who [make the most of] the opportunities and who through these trap-events reproduce the [obscurities]...everywhere (p. 93).

This strict and overbearing surveillance and check deprive its citizens of any leisure and liberty. It besmirches the impeccable concept regarding the existence of perfect freedom claimed by *Utopia* in the cities of the utopian state. The deeper we scrutinise the life standard of the utopians, the more we discover the screws of rules tightening

² The word ‘practitioners’ throughout the essay will be/is used for the citizens/inhabitants of the Utopian island and in some other cities in the neighbourhood.

upon them. This undying chain of rules engenders dystopia in utopia. Hythloday's geographical description of the spatial boundaries and urban sprawl in *Utopia* is very much normative and is dressed in stringently codified regulations/standards. Although, *Utopia* is the claimant of possessing a perfectly democratic state as well as the avatar of disseminating equal rights to its citizens, yet there are numerous points where it demonstrates contradictory to what it purports to be by disenfranchising its citizens not only of their free movements but also pushing them to a toiling slavery/servitude (p. 53). The concept of slavery in *Utopia* explicitly betokens the harsh reality of the offshoots of dominant capitalism and feudalism—resulting in serfdom, homelessness, vagrancy and beggary—that had been in vogue in the remote past of book's publication (More's times). More relentlessly censures the capitalist class in book-I but, astonishingly, we still find the remnants of slavery in—begotten by the said capitalism—*Utopia* which renders its nature rather paradoxical or vague. Menial jobs such as the role of butchery have been assigned to the slaves, widening the disparity of social status among the utopians. It also distorts the concept of equity. We can also witness that some citizens are exempted from daily work. Another example of this inequality is: the priests wear multicoloured dresses at church while the common utopians attend it all in one same dress. All these points, in one way or another, mutilate and challenge the purity of utopian society in *Utopia*.

The book says the utopian society “is so well governed, with so few laws” (More, 2011, p. 35), but when it is closely read, this is far from the case. There soar up to the surface many latent and entwined rules encaging the citizens; no space is observed with the lack of norms or criteria. Every step they take is encumbered or hindered by moral obligations and discipline. One's private time is denied to one and is extortionately utilised in the interest of the common benefit. No free choice is welcomed; even the thoughts and language of youngsters are suppressed when the old ones are present, such as they (elders) contort their (youngsters) gestures or suppress their [speech].

The youngsters are not easily allowed to choose a profession for themselves but

“as a rule’, are forced ‘to be trained to a father’s craft” (More, 2011, p. 45). If he wishes another, he is to be moved or handed over to another family having the same familial or hereditarily transmitted trade; denying him his basic right to live with his family. Leisure and free-play are strictly forbidden in utopia, the siphogrants make sure that no one sits or loiters idly. This point reveals the lurking infirmity in *Utopia* that curbs the basic instincts of a free-born man and mars one of the chief arguments, accentuated by the author, in the book that it preaches the concept of freedom in the utopian society. However, More might have made this argument to reform the boys who used to loiter and indulge in obscene or vulgar activities in London streets at night when the visibility for surveillance by the city authority upon them was poor. Guegen (1978) comments on More’s emphasis on moral vigilance. He points out More’s philosophy that “vigilance must be maintained against legal and educational ignorance [in children] disguised as wisdom and [knowledge], for if unchecked such wisdom and [knowledge] will lead to the worst condition of cities and souls” (p. 45).

This inflexible attitude of the city authorities and elders blatantly depicts that the utopian citizens are immured and subjected to hard and fast rules. Head over head, inevitably reaches up to the authority of the governor, forms a systematic lineage of the ruling cabinet. Every house, like the traditional household management, is run by the eldest person, unleashing an array of ethical obligations over the younger members of the house. As Engeman (1982) makes it clear that “the Utopian institutions, maintained

by priestly indoctrination, are eternal—no revolt against them on behalf of other principles can succeed” (p. 145). It is true that the citizens abide by and react to these rules docilely, and that we do not come across any outcry in protest from them or any citizen is seen counterplotting to overthrow any stamped order/rule, they are undoubtedly monitored microscopically and handicapped in every respect of their lives.

Their traveling either for business purpose or simply for pleasure is strictly monitored and a prior permission must be sought to do so. The citizens do not enjoy any free movements across the island and are fettered like slaves. The governor has the sole discretion whether to allow or detain one wants to go to another city. The spatial

space around them is so tightened that they seem immobilized/handicapped—If one transcends the spatial limitation demarcated by the city authorities or the governor, one is considered to be a fugitive and hence is subjected to a “severe punishment” (More, 2011, p. 53). This depicts how strictly their lives are observed. The fixation of boundaries in the utopian island is suggestive of a xenophobic behaviour of the governing authorities. If any stranger enters, as Hythloday retails, into their territories, he is compelled to observe their law; otherwise, he is forced to leave and if he thinks he is subjected to an oppressed heteronomy and then trespasses their laws or resists to leave, “they wage a war against him” (More, 2011, p. 49). They [law makers] apply on to them (the citizens) a “strict visiting” policy or exacting a tax on them mentioned by Davis (1990), as he points out that “partitioning themselves off from the rest of the alien [citizens] in other geographies, or imposing a variant of neighborhood ‘passport control’ on outsiders is injurious to their own democratic growth” (p. 463). It means that the utopians value rules above all other considerations. They keep their frontiers inviolate; their freedom is not democratic but is boundary-based.

This spatial delimitation can be seen in the rhetoric of space by de Certeau (2011) in the chapter on ‘Spatial Stories’: Marking out boundaries; as he contends that “there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of the frontiers (p. 123).” And the term, he uses for the ‘visits’ or ‘movements’ of the practitioners is: “elsewhere” or “cosmological beyond” (p. 123) can be used here for the travels of the utopian outside their homes to another city or outside the island. Every space is under direct observation/vigilance in these cities: “no hiding space”, no spots for secret meetings, because they live in the full view of all (More, 2011, p. 53). This surveillance can fit to de Certeau’s (2011) argument of “panoptic view” where everything is under the monitoring eyes of the city authorities (p. 93). So, if we exaggerate the status of law to a little extent in their cities, we may sum up that the lives of the utopians are not their own but they live a slavish life even at their own land monitored under broad observation like a modern CCTV surveillance. The letter of permission which the utopians require from the governor for crossing a city’s jurisdiction can be matched up

with a passport, NOC or other travel documents today. Every strange rule in the utopian society abounds to the deprivation of the city's inhabitants of any liberty. Many writers have denounced and gainsaid such overarching rules being practised among the utopians and considered these rules as oppressive and troubling. Friedmann (2000) logically points out that *Utopian thinking*: the space to imagine a future that deviates prodigiously from this 'present situation 'that we know...in the peculiar form of dystopias; utopian thinking may alert us to a disposition, which, if carried to 'a logical extreme', would create a despicable world (p. 263). Other writers like such as Boghosian (2013) speak very furiously about such unending irritating surveillance. He too is of the opinion that:

We are monitored—with excessive surveillance in shopping malls, in streets, in banks, in churches etc. without our knowledge and consent—by the city officials/police; a surveillance that severely hampers our 'civil liberty (p. 33).

She continues, 'as individuals...we must pull down this system if we secure our fundamental rights to survive (p. 34). The time in which Utopia was written and published stirred some other thinkers of the age who, some in favour, others against, reacted to it. The writers in the late sixteen century also had witnessed such an interminable imposition of abounding laws on them. Montaigne (2014) registered his statement like this: 'Laws upon laws breed nothing but annoyance'. Law and rule are the killers of any pleasure'. [It intercepts our joys as] the death intermeddles itself with our lives (p. 326).

Similarly, there may be an invisible complaint from the utopians against such rules; a complaint we cannot witness but may be lurking behind their complacency. The stupendous number of the lawmakers; priests, ambassadors, governors, and phylarchs among the utopians, is solid evidence of the exuberance of laws on their island. Their endless check on the citizens further exacerbates their liberty. Cuthbert (1995) has written a research paper about excessive surveillance in the largest Hong Kong city, arguing that the said surveillance is an impediment to the growth of democracy. The number of police, he writes, and other technologies are being

multitudinously and alarmingly increased—allowing no space, no privacy to its citizens to move about freely. He refers to a hit movie of Hollywood “where every room in a 30-story block was monitored with camera videos and the [intimate] secrets of the residents were brought under surveying camera” (p. 294). The space of the video filmed every image walking on the road close to the city centredown the building. Such inscrutable and unauthorised filming is not only “annoying and unlawful” but also oppresses the citizens (p. 294).

The geographical mobility of citizens within and across the island is kept under strict arithmetic regulation. The willingness behind the movements performed by the internally dislocated citizens has not been fully explained. It is clear that in order to avoid overpopulated cities the surplus (more than thirteen) persons from one household are transferred to the one without enough. But it is dubious in the sense which persons should be depopulated? Or is this dislocation willing on part of the person being migrated to a new house/city/location/territory? If their geographical mobilizations / dislocations and their relocation in other places are against their will, then it may be called a forced migration or displacement which may arouse a kind of unrest among the household members. This law, though, seems fruitful to curb and mitigate the population growth in the cities, on the other hand, creates a disruption in the momentum of family growth/understanding maintained by the utopian society. This autonomy of the city authority may be connected to the concept of monarchic authority discussed by Gordon (2001) in “Performing London”. He says:

...the dawning of the boundaries of the representational [place] also assists an interpretation of the city under the sign of a ceremonial monarchic authority through the very determination of what constitute[s] a city (p. 74).

Seemingly, if everything is under the autonomous will of the powerful, the law then adopts the nature of reinforcement—may lead to anarchy/rebellion in the utopian island. And the citizens will not find any escape like de Certeau's ‘spectator’ mentioned by Gordon at the end of his essay. Gordon (2001) argues: ‘there had been no vantage point held by the early modern cities to idealise [it] and avoid intrusion of the city (p.

84). Similarly, the utopian citizens (not the authorities) do not have a *vantage point* to idealise the rules for themselves but inevitably succumb to them.

The distribution of labourers from the city to the rural farmlands is also extremely statistical. Their adherence to digits is cogent proof of their lives being regulated not naturally but mechanically; dismissing any sense of a nonchalant disposition in financial affairs. Their (labourers') exchange is executed under a proportionate balance. The only thing in *Utopia* in which the law does not conspicuously come to the front is the distribution of labourers to keep the island from a nose-diving economy. Again, there raises the question that a two-year servitude in farming; whether this is an unnatural selection forced by the magistrate against the will of the citizen or a willful decision made by the citizens to exchange their services, numerically, twenty for twenty. No wages to the workingmen might produce counterproductive results—rather than encouraging the citizens to work altruistically and do more but rather forcing him to be lethargic or nonchalant towards the state economy. The nature of some rules in utopia is so mysterious and mercurial—left, not entirely explained—that they appear to prompt the island from utopia to dystopia. Such as the concept of patriarchy is seen in *Utopia*; “wife is subject to her husband and ‘women as a weaker sex’ does a lighter job” (More, 2011, p. 45). More’s mentioning of women as weaker sex betokens the utopia society as gendered. This brings the validity of gender equity in the island under question and suspicion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be substantially argued that *Utopia*—though having integrated and well-knitted arguments for creating an appreciable commonwealth island—carries its many inherent flaws with it. All through the island, we observe the amalgamation of laws and principles governed there with no sense of perfect emancipation from them. Social laws, religious laws, moral/ethical laws; all these augments their churning paste to the lives of the utopians. The island, under the willing suspension of disbelief, appears to be like flies entrapped in the labyrinth of the cobweb

with its fixed coordinates. The Utopians have been regulated under a lot of tension, though this stress is not emotionally demonstrated by the citizens of the island. Therefore, the major finding of the Michael de Certeau study which has been explored and found is the statistical and numerical restriction and regulation of the people living in has marred and denatured the pure nature of the concept utopia in *Utopia*. The study may also be called dystopia in utopia.

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