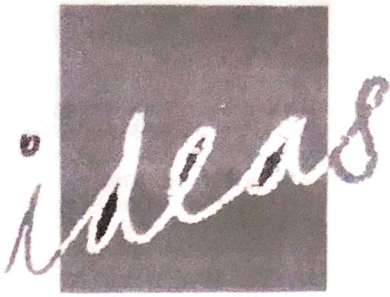


THOMAS MORE UTOPIA

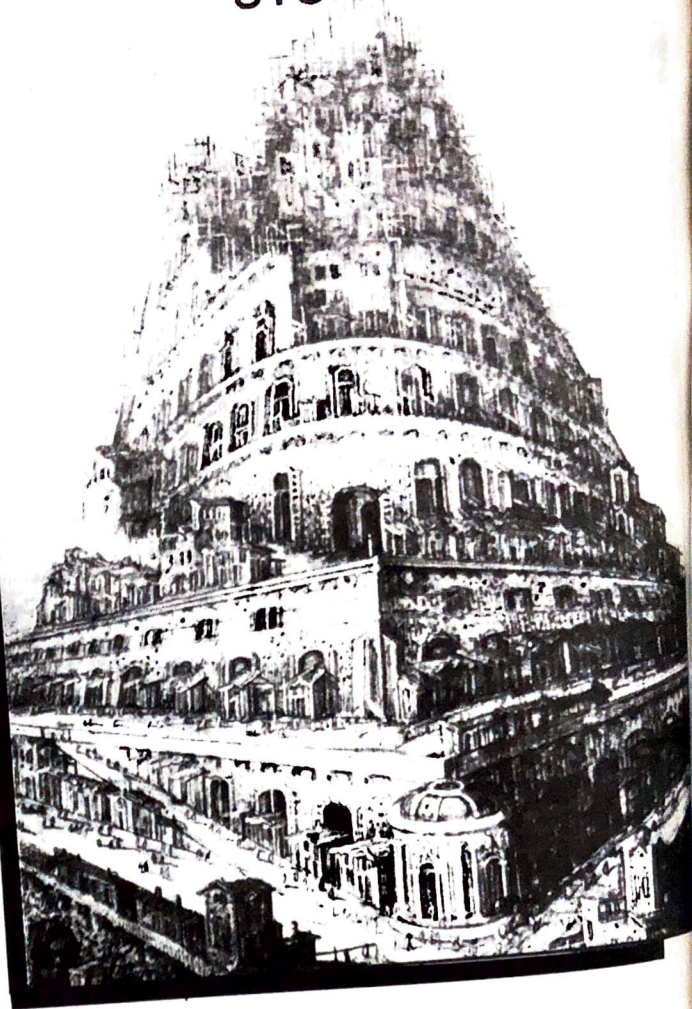


THERE have been seminal moments in human history when our understanding of the world has dramatically altered. After we have grasped the impact of such moments, we deal with the world which includes the once inconceivable and cannot unimagine what we now know. It is difficult to imagine the effect Darwin had on the popular mind, whether one accepts or rejects his thesis. Even harder to deal with is the impact on the European mind made of Christopher Columbus' landfall in America.

In contrast the moon landing is thought by many to be a similar contemporary landmark. Somehow this is not quite the same thing at all. We have all known about the Moon. Anybody can see its existence with their naked eye. The achievement is in the technical wizardry which enabled men to traverse the distance. What Columbus did was entirely different. He set off to find the Indies, the exotic and economically vital spice islands whose existence was a part of the common myth. Even the notion that the world was round had been part of speculation for a considerable time before his voyage.

So much attention has been given to the terrors his sailors might have suffered from fear of falling off the edge of the world that the real sea change that voyage produced has been neglected. When Columbus made landfall it was not the spherical nature of the globe which staggered the imagination – rather the existence of new land, not conceived of before. It was the breaking of the fixity of the Earth itself which constitutes the information we cannot grasp with hindsight.

What was to be made of the New Found Land, these Americans inhabited by solidly real people so distinctly different from Europeans in their manners and ideas? Where had they come from, how did they fit into the fixed, accepted scheme of things? Contrary to popular impression first reports of these natives were favourable, indeed idyllic in their description



Whose Utopia is it Anyway?

Utopia is not just a pleasant vision of what might be. It is a moral programme of what could be. Western civilization has developed its utopias by drawing on ideas, data and experiences of other societies and cultures. Yet, non-western societies and cultures have only been passive onlookers to the central utopian drama which has become a Western privilege and a European concern, writes **Merryl Wyn Davies.**

of their lifestyle and environment. Here were people with an ease of existence which was characterised, or so it seemed to early travellers, by none of the exertions, none of the perennial inhibitions and restraints of European conventions of property and monarchy and money grabbing. It appeared ideal.

It seems in no way haphazard that Sir Thomas More located his *Utopia* in this New Found Land. *Utopia*, like all the proper names in the book is a Greek word meaning *No Place*. Those knowledgeable in Greek, not a common facility in More's day or ours, would have found many a good joke in the Greek naming of things. For the *No Place* has rivers called *No Water*, a chief magistrate whose title is *Not People* and the entire tale is related in the book by a traveller whose surname, Hythlodæus, means dispenser of nonsense. Yet all this nothingness is made possible because it is in the New World.

More wrote *Utopia* in 1516, just 25 years after Columbus made landfall. It is the first example of a pattern which was to become a central feature of European thought. The reality of a known land where people lived differently was used as the location for a projection of ideas which were entirely European in their origin and concern. The very fact that the fixity of the known world had altered made it possible to think about radical change in one's own society in a totally new way. The extension of the European horizon gave a new perspective on European life.

Utopia is in no way a study of anything actual in the New World. Though it does use some pieces of information which quickly became available about the lifestyle of the new people found there: the notion of commonality and the absence of private property. These provide the seminal germ of *Utopia* which in all other respects is entirely European, familiar in its radical departure from the norms of More's own society. While More was a scholar, translator of Greek classical literature, he was also a lawyer and man of public affairs steeped in the dilemmas of the England of 1516.

This England was in the midst of profound changes. The old king, Henry VII who died in 1509, had consciously reordered English society, dismantling the mechanism of feudal order to realign the nation in dependence upon the central authority of the Crown to make England a nation state in the modern sense of the word. The

effect of the changes had given opportunity to new classes of men who were busily engaged in enclosing what had once been common land for the benefit of sheep, the economic golden goose of English commerce. The rural agrarian population suffered dispossession and dire hardship as a consequence and had little alternative but to turn to theft to support life.

Given such a context it is hardly surprising that More seems to see the gibbets and scaffolds of England as summation of what his society had become and that the most savage attacks in *Utopia* are on capital punishment and the venality of monarchs. The ideal society which More locates in the New World has no private property, the whole society is organised to produce the necessities of life which are distributed equitably according to need. Gold, the lure which took men to the New World and upon which Europe was soon to glut and gorge itself, was not a substance to plunder and kill for but socially despised by the citizenry of *Utopia*.

It is impossible to speculate whether More would have written the same *Utopia* if there had been no New World for a setting, it is more significant to trace the way in which European thinkers followed Sir Thomas in using this New Found reality as a backdrop for speculation; the way in which the experience in the New World established many consistent themes in European thought about markedly different societies.

As knowledge of the diverse societies of the Americas became available there was no dent or questioning in the implicit assumption of European proprietorial rights over these new lands. More wrote before the Spanish had made contact with the vast organised empires of Aztec or Inca. However vast the land or complex the society what had been 'unknown' was to be claimed and rights to the use of the inhabitants distributed by the Spanish Crown. This pattern was followed by other powers, and the New Found Land immediately became European property to be exploited according to European fashion and dictates: gold and silver from Central and South America, land for settlers and furs from North America.

How else could it be when the concept of the right of dominion over the earth was so firmly rooted in the European mind? It was the Biblical teaching which the conquistadores took with them and which as *saved*

Christian men obviously made them superior to the unredeemed inhabitants whom they sought to forcibly convert. The right to dominion is a concept which must have been strengthened by the way in which Amerindian society seemed visibly to wither before the European onslaught. The treatment meted out to the native population of the Americas was not appreciably different to the treatment of the rural poor of More's England. Smallpox, measles and chickenpox were familiar aspects of European life. The combination of servitude and disease devastated the indigenous population of the Americas who had no natural resistance to unfamiliar germs. And surviving the silver mines of Potosi was more than could be expected of any human being. The great dying which followed European incursion everywhere in the New World, however, seemed to 'confirm' the right to dominion of European man, by clearly demonstrating the unfitness for civilisation of the Indian.

Explaining the manners and mores of the Amerindians was a different matter. Explaining the Amerindians place in the scheme of things could be said to have laid the basis for the foundation of anthropology as well as the other branches of the social sciences which specialise in speculation about the nature of society. The implicit assumption of the superiority of European Christendom, confirmed by physical domination, was one element of the enduring legacy of Columbus' find. It is only the intellectual potency of the mental leap provided by the extension of the limits of the earth itself which can explain the other enduring legacy. For the New Found Land and its native peoples became to European man a model for his own past, a living example of the dawn of human society.

The first scholars to appropriate this notion were the antiquaries. Before the American landfall there had been no concept of ancient man being different. Information about the past was drawn from Greek and Roman sources but the non Greek and Roman builders of such monuments as Stonehenge were discussed and described as if they were themselves characters from the works of the Greeks and Romans. The mental picture of the early Britons can be clearly seen from the illustrations in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, of 1577, in which that notorious queen of the ancients, Boadicea, is the very image of Elizabeth I of England with her army fitted out in armour and



The noble savage: misunderstood and misrepresented



weapons of the Elizabethan era.

In 1558 Thomas Harriot published *A brief and true account of the new found land of Virginia* which was illustrated by John White. It contained a detailed account of the environment, manners and customs of the native population derived from first hand experience. Harriot wrote of the stone tools used, the birchbark canoes and means of cultivation and White depicted all these things. In 1592 the work was published with an appendix in which White's drawings of the Virginian Indians, with their overtones of Greek statues, became the models for the Picts "which in the olde tyme dyd habite one part of the great Brittainne".

The mental map had changed as surely as the map of the world had been enlarged by the knowledge of the Americas. European man saw in the inhabitants of the New World a living model of their own past, which they began immediately to understand in a new way. Stone tools uncovered in Europe were no longer the work of fairies, but the handicraft of real people whose way of life could now be perceived. If one could learn of the lifeways of ones ancestors from the contemporary habits of Amerindians it was but a short step to seeing the same Amerindians as a key to understanding the development of culture from the ancient Britons to the present eminence of European civilisation.

The step did not become a full fledged theory until the nineteenth century and there is one connecting

link which needs to be put in place; the concept of natural man. This was the major theme of the French *ideologues* of the eighteenth century. They were intellectuals much in the mould of Sir Thomas More, utopian thinkers whose main concern was the society in which they lived. They viewed pre-Revolutionary France with all the horror that More had for the England of his day. They saw civilisation as an oppression of the free, noble spirit of humanity because the uses of civilisation were to differentiate people and abuse the mass of them.

To people such as Rousseau reports of the American Indians were a secondary example to the new researches being uncovered in the South Seas. Europe was in its Pacific period when the Hawaiians and Tahitians were the arcadian idyll of the dawn of time. Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* is a fascinating document for the various strands of European thought which it brings together and the confirmation it gives of the way non-European peoples were to be viewed from that time on.

The main concern of the *Discourse* is the future of European society and the stumbling block it identifies in the ordering of that society is inequality. To establish his case Rousseau did not need to look outside Europe, indeed the work is dedicated with a long preamble to the people of Geneva which Rousseau regarded as a paragon of an equal society. The Calvinist exercise in social engineering which had been forged in the religious

Reformation could have been taken as sufficient model for his case. The fact that he did not argue merely from such a base must be accounted for by a new feature current in Europe at that time. The new feature was scientism, it was scientism which necessitated that Rousseau take the evidence from the South Seas and, building on the model of Newtonian physics with its natural laws, lay before his audience the demonstrable fact that natural laws applied also to society.

Rousseau was not the first to dabble in natural laws applicable to humankind. Such thinking began in the English Revolution a century before, another utopian era when Winstanley's Diggers and Muggletonians and Anabaptists were earnestly seeking to win the Revolution over to ideas which came straight out of the pages of More's *Utopia*. These religious men argued that people possessed natural rights, God given, which it was not in the power of King, nor Bishop, and certainly not a Pope to over-ride or pervert in the ordering of society.

By Rousseau's day the natural rights, as in Thomas Paines *The Rights of Man*, were to be scientifically proved by the existence of natural man in a state of nature, who was none other than the inhabitants of the South Seas and the Amerindians. The *ideologues* were deists who believed in the unity of mankind, their scientific study would succeed precisely because of this unity in the natural endowment of the species, just as Rousseau argues in the *Discourse* that the common origin will enable natural man to be

brought along to the full enjoyment of the technical achievements of civilisation.

For all the commonality of origin which embraces all humanity there is a gap, the yawning leap of civilisation between European man and the rest. 'Progress' has intervened and left the rest of the world populated by survivors of earlier stages of human existence. From the study by scientific means of the ways and thought of these living fossils the uncluttered natural propensities of man and human society can be elucidated. The information is not for the purpose of better understanding the peoples of the South Seas, or the natives of America or Africa but a better understanding of the means by which the condition of European man has been arrived at. Rousseau was dedicated to egalitarianism, yet the conception he outlined in the *Discourse* could just as easily be appropriated by those dedicated to proving the inferiority of other races. And it was.

The French Revolution gave way to the Napoleonic era, the utopianism of the *ideologues* turned sour in the light of the realities of the new France. While their hopes of a model society did not materialise, they left their legacy of scientism behind them. Anyone familiar with the history of Orientalism is aware of the passion for scientific investigation which Napoleon took with him on his expedition to Egypt and how many new disciplines of study trace their origins from that era. Egypt was not the only recipient of such attention, other expeditions were planned to the South Seas which were specifically to investigate 'man' and the discipline of anthropology was also being born. It was born out of particular European concerns, to answer particular European preoccupations. It was born with the European view of other peoples and other societies which had been set by the experience of the centuries since Columbus made landfall in the New World.

Having mentioned Orientalism it is important to note how clearly this fell into the European mind set. The contemporary peoples of the Middle East were not met and studied as fellow human beings the knowledge of whom would improve relations between nations. The impetus was to study living survivors who could unlock the nature of society at the time of Christ, and therefore provide information on the growth and development of religion. It was an attitude towards the Muslim lands which would

have been unthinkable in Thomas More's day but two and half centuries later, dominion had become an integral part of the European outlook. The rest of the world was the backdrop for the exercise of that outlook, not a reality to be met on equal terms.

It is clear from the history of European thought, of which anthropology is a characteristic product, that dominion over the earth, the religious doctrine, easily became political dominion and economic control which effortlessly led to the dominance of European man as a philosophical and then scientific proposition. The process of investigation in fact worked backwards from these propositions. Anthropology began with hypotheses, scoured the available sources from travellers reports or missionaries writings or handed out questionnaires to travellers for them to bring back information, which was then used to reshape the hypothesis to devise new questions. The grand theorists were largely armchair theorists not men with practical experience of the societies they speculated about.

Throughout the nineteenth century the broad scheme remained constant there were three stages of man's rise which culminated with the preeminence of European civilisation: barbarism, savagery and civilisation. That broad outline contained many disputes, debates and differences of detail and it embraced all the specific topics of the discipline: race, evolution and culture. The early part of the century was dominated by polygenist thought. This maintained that different races had different origins and progressed or not along separate paths. Darwin's theories converted most anthropologists to unilinear evolution which therefore focused attention on how the transition from one stage to the next was made. Each stage along the way had its own type of culture and culture carried the information about even earlier forms from which it had derived. The present reality of other societies was not the focus of attention: they were bearers and carriers of useful information about the past of Europe and the past from which they themselves had emerged, they were in effect research tools.

The study of kinship which was so basic to the development of anthropology, began by studying the naming of relationships between people not to understand how the kinship system operated at the time of study but to discover their origins. There were theories that originally all societies had begun in a state of primal promiscuity.

This, it was argued could only have been followed by patriarchy, the rule of the female, since as rules of identity became necessary as society became more settled only women could identify their children while no child could be certain of its father. This speculation was supported by evidence of kinship terminology, which also proffered evidence of bridecapture and the means by which settled society was established.

The scientific study of anthropology was predicated on the basis of the existence of natural laws of society, just as physics had uncovered natural laws. These laws would demonstrate how societies developed, the inherent necessities to which culture provided the answer. In effect the scientific study of man would answer the baffled question of Europeans on first becoming aware of the Americas, where did it fit in the scheme of things? It has been conventional to see the study of anthropology as an intellectual justification for colonialism, to see its theoretical shifts and turns as related to the fortunes and interests of the European powers. In a way that is to over-simplify the matter. Anthropology coalesced long after the mind set which made it possible had been established and both were well in place before the high water mark of colonialism as a doctrine was being discussed. Precisely at the time when policy making was being urged to end the slave trade, at a time when the slave trade was losing money, the intellectual vogue was for polygenist thought which could have been used as a justification for the continuation of slavery.

What is perfectly clear is that the rise of anthropology answered to deep rooted European concerns and the theoretical formulations which shaped it in the nineteenth century derived not from understandings of the point of view of the people it purported to study but the intellectual climate of Europe. There was indeed a connection between intellectual concerns and political and economic interests but such links were not direct and straight forward. What remained constant was the acceptance of European supremacy.

There is one other utopian thinker who follows in the wake of Sir Thomas More and who made use of the supposedly scientific researches in anthropology in expounding his theory: Karl Marx. Many commentators have seen a direct link between the vision of society as a property less commune set out in Marx and that of

More's *Utopia*. But the essence of Marx was not so much in outlining a particular vision of a society yet to be, rather it was detailing the inherent processes of history by which it would be created. In his speculations on the form of society in history Marx was clearly attracted by the writings of anthropology, in particular the work of Lewis H Morgan. Rather like Rousseau, Marx's analysis could have been constructed entirely from European materials but the examples of propertyless societies still extant and betokening an earlier era of European society were a demonstrative lever in the argument that the status quo in Europe was not inevitable.

Marx along with all the other grand theory builders of the nineteenth century was seeking to build a 'universal' structure looking for 'universal' regularities which applied to all societies and all times. Yet the basic raw material they used had two components: European experience of Europe and limited knowledge and less insight into the manners, customs and philosophy of other peoples outside Europe. The utopian idylls they built out of first acquaintance with strange societies were little more than illusions which Europeans wanted to believe in. Such arcadian notions often did not survive the era of native resistance to Western incursions. But whatever the noble dream of natural man or the reality of colonial encounter, the dominance of western society and European man's view of himself at the apex of evolution and progress was never questioned by travellers tales or scientific study.

The history of European thought with its interwoven cross currents clearly points to the absence of objectivity in the creation of supposedly 'universal' social scientific propositions. It is possible to trace many strands of thinking back to the time when the fixity of the world as known to Europe was overturned by Columbus' landfall. European thinking about their own society and other societies has remained Eurocentric in character despite all the ideas, models and information that has been drawn from non-European bases.

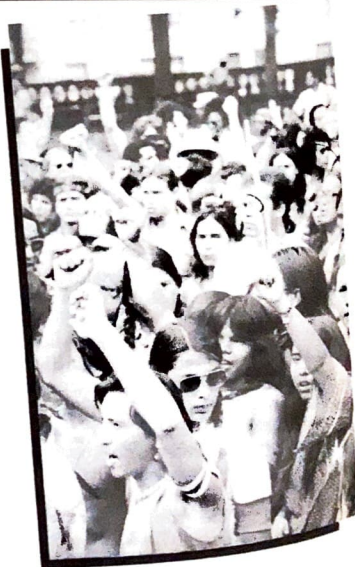
Nineteenth century anthropology is disowned by present day practitioners. Evolutionary schemes and implicit value judgements were to be expunged and replaced with cultural relativity. This notion, first argued by Fraz Boas, put forward the supremacy of culture over biology and required that any culture could only be understood and explained in its own terms. Such a



Asserting a cultural identity: Indians demonstrating in Washington DC

change did not challenge racialist thought in the West, nor did it challenge the actions of colonialist rule. The development of intensive fieldwork by participant observation as the distinctive method of anthropology only became the norm in this century. The fruits of these researches were couched in a strange limbo. The realities of life in America, Africa and Asia were being formed by the European presence, what was being studied was a cultural setting as if that influence did not exist.

If anthropology became the study of other societies in their own terms it was a harmless pursuit, the greatest failing which can be levelled against the discipline. For anthropology which in this century has trained students passionately interested in knowing other cultures has failed to make any





platform in the Western outlook for communication between peoples on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. The western attitude to other peoples began with an ideal and that trend has not been lost. Today followers of conservation and ecological movements long to live in wigwams, to 'go back' to nature and live as natural men and women. The implicit searching question which other manners and mores pose to the pattern of European life exist in distinct watertight compartments. The need to live in harmony with the environment and responsibly utilise it, demands answers in the midst of industrial society, a re-examination of its priorities and policy making. No policy is made and operated by escaping to a dream of arcadia which is not based on sound knowledge of the life and thought of those who suppose to have inhabited the 'natural world'.

The over-riding impression which

endures about indigenous lifeways is the notion of simplicity. It is there in Rousseau and all who have followed. Whether the intention has been to idealise or vilify, the perennial theme has been of a simpler, less complicated and stressful way of living. What European thought has failed to recognise is the equality of the moral challenge which faces all people, in all societies, at all times. It makes no way of life simpler, it merely affects the nature of the divergent answers which humanity has made to common questions.

The thrust of twentieth century anthropology has been to prove the rationality, the functional utility within a given social setting of particular forms of behaviour. In a sense it takes the intellect no further than Thomas Harriot's appreciation of the marvellous ingenuity of the Indians of Virginia which he recorded in 1588. It places all non-European peoples living within a balanced stasis, which places them outside the utopian notion. Living in a simpler kind of utopia, how can there be the urge for change, reform, the better exercise of human resources to answer the moral challenge of living? That is not one of the questions anthropology has set itself the task of answering.

Utopia is not just a pleasing portrait of what might be. The thrust of all utopian thinking is that the ideal society is an idea to be worked towards by change in one's own society. To conceive of utopia is to devise a moral programme which requires the recognition of evils and injustice as well as the recognition of how these evils and injustices can be abolished by the reorganisation of existing realities. In developing the notion of the plasticity of the social fabric, European thought has drawn heavily on the existence of different forms of society beyond Europe. But these other societies and other peoples have been passive onlookers to the drama which is Europe centred and Europe concerned. In effect Europe has invented the knowledge it requires from the rest of the world and not met the same utopian questions in a different form in other parts of the world. The world has been scoured for answers to a set of questions devised in the studies and libraries of Europe. The reality and experience of other people have not been allowed to raise independent questions which reshape the European agenda.

No doubt European utopian thinkers would have no difficulty in dealing with the rest of the world. Once their

Utopia is devised it is to be worked for and then extended to embrace all the world. The exclusivity of European thought is not that it overlooks the rest of the world, it is precisely that the rest of the world will follow the lead of the leaders, the exclusivity reside in the assumption of dominance, being in the forefront of the development of human possibilities. The language and rhetoric may have changed but the underlying pattern of assumptions that modernisation means westernisation and this is a programme which can be bought and syphoned off from western experts is the economic and mental programme of the Third World today.

Neither Utopia nor anthropology, two notions which have had an interrelated history, can be appropriated without acceptance of their implicitly European assumptions. Yet conceiving of a better future and learning from the realities of the experience of other people are tasks which should be undertaken by all societies. The agenda therefore must be to devise new ways of questioning, study and learning which derive from independent non-European bases.

For Muslims the concept of domination which has been so central to European thought does not exist. The concepts of *tawhid*, the Unity of God and therefore of his creation, and *Khilafah*, the trusteeship of man in responsibility to God, deploy a very different means of understanding the diversity of human social existence. Non-Muslim peoples and societies are not indicators of stages of development for there is only one measure which can be made the basis of understanding: *right* action within the context of the present. The questioning of the action of other people informs our understanding of a common challenge which faces all humanity and the multiple ways in which answers can be found. Such a study would be an Islamic anthropology but as such it could not be a supermacist or self congratulatory or self justifying study. It would be a discipline which opens the intellect to discovering the utopias, the moral dreams, which exist in other peoples consciousness aimed at extending our own understanding of the meaning of moral existence in society. Far from being a means of inventing notions about other peoples as a projection of our own way of thinking it demands the openness to other forms of social existence to fully appreciate the consonance of all humanity which is *tawhid*, the central teaching of Islam. ■