



Thomas More's Socialist Utopia And Ceylon (Sri Lanka)

Laksiri Fernando

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THOMAS More's Utopia published first in 1516, written in Latin, is one of the foremost discourses on socialism in the modern period. Socialism undoubtedly has a common appeal among the vast majority of the people in Sri Lanka irrespective of ethnicity or any other distinction and most political parties at least pay verbal homage to its principles whether they practice them or not. This is also the case in Australia, where I live now, and many other countries similar or dissimilar to Sri Lanka or Australia. Even Sri Lanka's formal name is called the 'Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.' Many of the 'Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties' in the Constitution are based on some form of socialist principles in the broadest meaning of the term. This could be the result of the profound impact that the left (socialist) parties initially made in people's psyche; socialism as a higher system or value, since early 1930s or it could be the result of some other historical reasons. The political impact of the left parties today, however, is almost insignificant and socio economic system of the country is far away from anything akin to socialism. No political party in power makes any effort to properly implement the 'Directive Principles' in the Constitution and those are not justiciable in law courts in any meaningful manner. Yet people talk about socialism or aspire for its principles perhaps as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction about the present state of affairs both in the economy and in the social system. I was attracted to socialist views fairly early in my life. This was the heyday of the left movement in Sri Lanka in early 1960s. 'Utopian socialism' was a common term used in some leftist theoretical pamphlets, rather in a belittling manner, to make the point that 'their socialism' was scientific following the standard Marxist standpoint. I never had any qualms with that view those days although today I believe that even utopian ideas of socialism have much value sometimes more than the so-called scientific views. That time I didn't have the opportunity to know about Thomas More who in fact had coined the term 'Utopia' for his ideal society or the island until I entered the University of Peradeniya and studied Social and Political Theory in my second year (1965/66) for the special degree in Economics, majoring in Government. I vividly remember our inspiring lecturer, Dr K. H. Jayasinghe, introducing Thomas More and his Utopia in an extremely impressive fashion elucidating different aspects of the new society that More was advocating. Although we were introduced to Socialist Tradition, Moses to Lenin by Alexander Gray (1946) as our main reading and a critical exploration of socialist views including Thomas More's, our major focus was more on modern thinkers both of socialist and liberal strands and among those thinkers, theorists of Saint Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen who emerged after the French Revolution received major attention on the socialist strand. Thus we had little time to go through More's views in detail. During my own teaching thereafter, I had the opportunity to read through different editions of Thomas More's Utopia few times but for teaching purposes I was mainly using Book II of the publication which illustrates his ideas about a new society inter alia economy, society, polity, education and way of life. I always wondered, however, where this Utopia could be, if at all? Although looking for an actual location for a utopian society or land is not always a rational pursuit, the reading of More's Utopia made me think otherwise. I also thought that a real traveller perhaps was behind the Hythlodoy story, although this was disputed by many reviewers. (Extract from the preface)

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