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LIBER FIGURARUM XII
AND THE CLASSICAL
IDEAL OF UTOPIA

F. SEIBT

Herrn Kolegen Barth

mit schönen Grüßen!

Ferand Soll.

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Herrn Kollegen Bauer

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Ferdinand Seibt

IT WILL SEEM RATHER STRANGE TO BE LINKING OUR ABBOT JOACHIM WITH
Thomas More, or, in other words, to be turning him into a forerunner
of the classical European ideal of Utopia. And of course there are very
marked differences between the turn of mind and the aims of the English
Lord Chancellor and those of the Southern Italian Abbot. The two personali-
ties are in sharp contrast to one another. Equally the intellectual horizon of
the twelfth century, the High Middle Ages, contrasts sharply with the moment
when, after many long-recognized and often-analysed milestones, the age
of the New Learning emerges, a period of history with which we can still
to a certain extent identify. There are also, however, a certain number of
startling similarities between Joachim of Fiore's detailed conception of a
better world and that of Thomas More. These should be compared closely
before one comes to general conclusions about the Middle Ages and the
Renaissance.

Firstly, in its classical form, the European ideal of Utopia, drawing its
name and character from the slim bestseller of Thomas More, has to start
with a certain amount in common with the monastic world. This common
element lies not so much in the idea of asceticism as a way of life, at least
not at first sight, as in the concept of a regulated mode of life with communal
sharing of possessions and work, one house, one life in common and one
single ethic for all. In the medieval world a monastery, with its ordered
daily routine, its rational economy and its intellectualized purpose, formed
a marked contrast with the world around it, like an island in the middle of
the ocean. Viewed from inside the monastery walls, it appeared to be an
island of the correct life set in the middle of the erring world. This recalls
the 'happy Isle' on which the Utopians of Thomas More and all his literary
followers regard themselves as living: far from the world, whose values
and ideas they have, in many respects, turned upside down and fused into
a new way of life, more suitable in their opinion for the human race.

The justification in the writings of the Abbot of Fiore for such a close
comparison, lies in a slim volume in which he explains his ideas. It was
ignored for centuries in the copious literature about Joachim and his fol-
lowers. As far as is known Leone Tondelli was the first to make Volume 1
public, in 1939. The second volume – which appeared in 1953 – we owe to
the efforts of Marjorie Reeves among others.[1] It is a late book by Joachim,
concerned with the final stage of his spiritual development, as Marjorie
Reeves has explained. However, it was not taken into consideration in the
many previous evaluations of the Calabrian thinker. A comparable neglect
can also be found on the other side. Thomas More's Utopia does indeed

have a place in the literature of universal culture, but historians, especially German historians, have not generally been concerned with the importance of Utopian thinking in historical development and in the view past ages held of themselves. That field of study, occasionally termed 'retrospective prophecy', has for long given too little attention to the 'forward-looking prophets' in each age. Therefore my little comparison might perhaps throw light on some less familiar associations.[2]

II

Utopian speculation has constantly pursued its ends through Utopian architecture. The drawing board, not just the pen, has since time immemorial been used by the Utopian writer.[3] If, without reference to Utopia and realism, you compare medieval ground plans, then diagram XII in the *Liber Figurarum* appears in very remarkable company. The plan of the monastery of St Gallen – almost 400 years earlier – can be discovered in it, as well as the ideal city of 'Sforzinda' of Antonio Filarete of almost 300 years later. We must make sure for our purposes that Joachim gives his plan of an ideal settlement of monks, priests and lay people, details that are completely realistic, even though he may state that there should be three miles between monastery and priests' house, or three stages between two monastery buildings.

Of course the plan also includes certain abstractions. For example '*vici*' for the lay people are discussed, but the plan only shows a rectangle. According to the text there is an '*ambitum*' and a '*curtis*', a manor in other words, for priests and lay people, without such details appearing in Joachim's plan.[4] So Joachim's plan is not free of abstractions, any more than is modern cartography. All the same its realistic nature is made clear, at least in Joachim's explanatory notes in which '*oratoria*', '*domus*', '*cellulae*', '*ambitum*', '*curtis*', '*monasterium*' and '*vici*' are mentioned.

Thomas More admittedly did not turn to the drawing board, although the publishers of his *Utopia* were pressing for a pictorial representation from the time of the first edition.[4] But he painted a picture of his island in words and as a result drew up the plan of his settlement very precisely. Towns and villages are, as is well known, spread out in chess-board fashion. A certain number of villages are each assigned to one town so that the whole island is made up of smaller economic units. Precisely such an economic unity is obviously intended in Joachim's basic outline, as is shown by his comments on the lay people's deliveries to priests and monks, apart from the fact that, on another occasion, he refers to the monks' settlement in the centre of his

cruciform layout as '*civitas*', the priests' settlement at the '*predella*' of his Roman cross as '*suburbium*', and the base with the lay people and the agrarian infrastructure of the whole settlement already referred to, as the '*vici*'.[5]

Hence the ground plan also defines the hierarchical relationships between the groups living in this community. In doing this, Joachim, like other Utopian architects, thinks principally in terms of separation, on the basis of the monastic '*stabilitas loci*'. Thomas More on the other hand tries to make it clear in his description of the settlement that all are equal, at least the towns resemble each other and the majority of town and country dwellers change their homes every two years. Joachim separated lay people, priests and monks from each other very strictly and within the monastic settlement he proposed further distinctions between individual houses, according to the degree of perfection of the inmates.

What is common to both authors, however, is the idea that the planning of the settlement should have a direct relationship to its social organization. A social organization in the sense of a strict hierarchy was also indeed in Thomas More's mind, in spite of the egalitarian proposals for the majority of his Utopia dwellers, since he distinguishes sharply between the elected office holders, the educated '*classes literatorum*', and the remaining mass of the population, that support the whole society with the work of their hands. Joachim, admittedly with other aims in view, makes the same three-part division, which he labels with the ecclesiastical terms of monks, priests and lay people. Both have in the process given the urban settlement the greater standing. Intellectual life is pursued in the towns on the island of Utopia; what one might call the 'monastery towns' are the centres of monastic spiritualism for Joachim. The island of Utopia also has a capital, Amaurotum, which is the seat of the government. Joachim's monastic town is the seat of the '*pater spiritualis, qui preerit omnibus*'. He is not only the monks' patriarch, he also rules over the priests and lay people. One can also note in this context that the seemingly so pronounced equality of the island of Utopia is controlled in a very patriarchal manner. That all officials are called 'Fathers' is an outward symbol of the fact.

III

This may suffice as an initial résumé of this short comparison: that an obvious connection has been observed in both cases, between external living conditions and the internal structure of an ideal society. The often discussed propensity for construction, planning and projection, contained in the new conception of the world brought by the Renaissance and as evidence of

which Thomas More's *Utopia* is frequently quoted, does not seem to be, in its mental concept, exclusively typical of the new intellectual world of the Renaissance. It is of course well known, not least as a result of Marjorie Reeves's researches into Joachistic prophecy,[6] that More and Joachim are different not only in the aims of their planning, but also in their methods. The number of towns, the number of families, the chess-board-like distribution of the settlements or the square ground plans of the towns in More's concept are based on abstract geometry and allied thinking, which one can term rational. That is not the case with Joachim. Many elements in his conception are based on biblical symbolism or on speculations from an older tradition on the significance of numbers. On the one hand symbolism, on the other rationalism. Bearing in mind this methodological distinction, should one not consider carefully before attributing a connection and unity to these two concepts? One could object that More and his followers based their ideas on, as it were, the 'sensible', the 'natural' inspiration of 'modern', 'unprejudiced' reason. However, one must avoid a detailed demonstration that this evaluation merely indicates the apologia of a secular philosophy. With our ideas of what is 'sensible', we would immediately raise many objections to the planning of the island of Utopia, based on technical insights and a new level of scientific thought unknown to More. Therefore, even if both projects differ widely in their aims and their constructions originate in distinctly different principles, they are both constructed as the essence of a philosophical order which aims to unite the form and style of human life with awareness of the correct way to organize society.

Utopians of all periods claim they have discovered the way to reform a degenerate world. However, that was also the aim of Joachim's '*ordo novus*'. The Utopians based their conclusions on the recognition of a fundamental principle governing all relations between God and the world, the individual and the community. But that is also the precise conviction of the symbolistic thinkers, beginning with Joachim of Fiore. Both systems have as their starting point that the world is intelligible and that consequently the human spirit is a natural part of this intelligible world. Both theories are anything but self-evident. Placed in this perspective the connection between the radical projects for a new world in classical Utopian literature – whether theoretical speculation or a political programme – and the symbolist Joachim's project for a new order, worked out to the smallest detail, cannot be completely ruled out of the question.

IV

Let us turn our attention to several arrangements in Joachim's concept. They are mainly to do with the so-called seventh '*oratorium*', the settlements of lay people in his model. Here the married people live '*sub vita communi*', supporting the whole community with their tithes according to the instructions of the '*pater spiritualis*'. Together with priests and monks they are separated from the outside world. They are married, as Joachim says, '*causa prolis magis quam libidinis*'.[7] Naturally one expects a completely different life style in More's 'Eudemonion'. However, the Englishman also considers marriage primarily from the point of view of population policy, and hence each of his supposedly free Utopians has to marry, and all forms of free love are strictly forbidden. Individual ties between man and woman are in any case subordinated to the needs of the community; in the one case more severely, in the other less so. As a result even the sensitive English humanist has left little room for intellectual contact between the sexes. On the other hand, however, the strict abbot of Fiore has, in consideration of the human circumstances, modified the sexual asceticism of the lay population in his ideal settlement, '*considerata tamen in iuvenibus complexione et aetate*'. He is therefore drawing back from a level of severity which nevertheless characterizes the hard life of the theocratically ordered inhabitants of the monastic city. This ascetic ideal in the centre of his plans is, in turn, not completely alien to More. At least one footnote leads him to the monastic ideal of extreme denial, even if he does not make it the obligatory aim of the whole settlement.[8] There is however a certain plurality in the path to perfection for More, as there is for Joachim, who in another context expressly mentions the biblical justification of there being many mansions in the Father's house.

Many mansions can indeed be found in both settlement plans. This separation within the community does not, for Joachim, arise inevitably from the medieval monastic scheme, nor is it inevitable for More's project, when one considers the dwelling towers and barracks of later Utopias. However, neither More nor Joachim want to leave families in undisturbed possession of home and hearth. That is quite clear in More, where families have to exchange houses at specified intervals, apart from obligatory changes between town and country. Neither is the hearth seen in More as the focus for the family to feed itself. Cooking and eating is done in larger groups. In Joachim that can only be inferred from the comment '*de communi autem accipiunt victum*'.[9] One should perhaps think in terms of a monastic refectory.

The lay people in Joachim's ideal settlement have their own leader who guides them directly according to the will of the 'spiritual father'. Seen from

the outside, that is the same unitary regime as in all Utopian systems. The smaller and occasionally very well-balanced regulations on the happy island of Thomas More give the same impression when examined more closely. This is in contradiction to many pronouncements on the liberation from communal compulsion in the ideal state of the English humanist, pronouncements which have come to be attributed to his *Utopia*, so that contrary opinions from Bertrand Russell or Hans Freyer fifty years ago with reference to the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century are still often disregarded today.

In Joachim, as in More, there is a general obligation to work. It may seem rather strange that the great Utopian systems – without exception up to Francis Bacon and Johannes Andrea at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and in other cases right into the nineteenth century, even to the beginning of our own age – should have no sense of contemporary economic developments and be retrospective in their economic outlook. Neither Joachim nor More have much sympathy for trade or handcraft, except in More's case, as far as was essential, which he deals with in explicit terms. In Joachim it must be excluded from the situation altogether. In any case both systems are concentrated on an agrarian autarchy, so that both appear as being behind contemporary reality, particularly concerning the development towards dyed cloths which had become the most important branch of trade. Urban trade and urban economy, the differentiation in all activities of life between the rural and the urban, the great development towards economic pluralism, which was in process precisely between the twelfth century, in which one of our authors lived, and the sixteenth, the era of our other author, and was gradually raising the level of civilization above that of other world cultures; all this remained unimportant for these two as it did for all other authors of the classical Utopian ideal. Instead the town is always regarded as the idealized representation of the spiritual, religious and intellectual powerhouse. In this respect Joachim calls his new settlement a New Jerusalem, while the island of Utopia, to judge by its description, is seen as an urban landscape. However, it is not the real European city of the age that is discussed, but an archetype of 'conscription and communism' as Mumford defined the basic Utopian concept recently.[10]

Conscription and communism, in other words the archetype of Utopian cities, is presented by Joachim in surprisingly succinct terms: '*Apud istos Christianos non invenietur aliquis otiosus, qui non operetur panem suum, ut habeat unde tribuat necessitatem patientibus. . . . Qui ergo pro posse suo operari noluerit, compellatur a magistro et ab omnibus arguatur.*'[11] We can therefore see how property and work are viewed as community matters, so that personal performance has as little place as personal gain. Public opinion is mobilized

to stabilize the whole system. Distribution replaces reward. We find the same system on the island of Utopia.

There is no emancipation of women in Joachim's ideal community, just as Thomas More and his successors were not particularly progressive in this respect. Social mobility does not depend on economic, but possibly on political, performance, depending on whether someone presents themselves for election to this or that post. The surest way to social advancement is, however, spiritual performance in Joachim, through the paths of piety and religious wisdom: in More there is a bias towards the scholarly ideal. The comparison could be developed and would lead to further striking similarities.

V

Marjorie Reeves has clearly established that Joachim did not succumb to the mistake of believing in autogenous human perfectibility, in spite of his optimistic prophecy.[12] But she has shown, in other texts, Joachim's confidence in a restricted ability to achieve perfection on the part of human society as a whole. The same optimism is shared by all the classical European Utopians, from More onwards. It must be added in this context, that they one and all expected release from original sin through such an earthly paradise, not in its effect on the individual, but in its consequences for the whole of society. '. . . Utopia was a way of rejecting that notion of "original sin", which regarded natural human virtue and reason as feeble and fatally impaired faculties.'[13] Therefore European Utopia was still in search of that 'Paradise Lost', to which in the language of mythical symbols without words, so many holy places were dedicated in the Middle Ages, especially in monasteries. On the other hand Joachim had already moved away from the reflective paradise of the Middle Ages, in the attempt to capture the new ideal world in plan form. He had thereby gone some way beyond the medieval hope of paradise, which did not always confine itself to expectations of the life after death. His 'Third Order in the Image of the New Jerusalem' can be interpreted as a Utopian model in preparation for a new age. Yet he obviously did not, in dialectic detachment, see this new, third age arising as a result of the force of his proposal. He foresaw this new epoch of the Holy Ghost not as a demiurge, but as a prophet; in other words when Earth and Heaven were in accord, the new order would clearly accompany that accord: it would not bring it into being.

Joachim's *Liber Figurarum* has not been claimed for the European Utopian ideal, either in its aims or its method. Yet the comparison has made clear

that the so-called classical ideal of Utopia of the Renaissance cannot be divorced from historical continuity.[14] It is not the Renaissance and not the 'Birth of Modern Thought' that gave rise to the New Age, but an ancestry of many varied branches.

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1 Leone Tondelli (ed.), *Il libro delle figure dell'Abbate Gioachino da Fiore*, Vol.1: Turin, 1939; M. Reeves and B. Hirsch-Reich (eds), Vol.2: Turin, 1953. The text of Joachim's sketch is quoted here from the edition of H. Grundmann, *Neue Forschungen über Joachim von Fiore*: Marburg, 1950.

2 See my study in *HZ* 208, 1969, on 'Utopia in the Middle Ages', and my book about Utopia in Central Europe (i.e. Germany at the time of the Reformation), that appeared in 1972 under the title *Utopica* (Cologne).

3 Further examples are to be found in, amongst others, F.E. Manuel (ed.), *Utopias and Utopian Thought*: Boston, 1966, or H. Bauer, *Art and Utopia*: Berlin, 1966.

4 Once again Marjorie Reeves kindly brought this to my attention during the discussion of this essay in 1976. Cp. *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, Vol.4, ed. E. Surtz, S.J. and J.H. Hexter, New Haven, 1965, from which my quotations are taken.

5 Grundmann, 1950, p.105.

6 M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*: Oxford, 1969.

7 Grundmann, 1950, p.121.

8 Yale Edition, 1965, pp.162,186.

9 Grundmann, 1950, p.120.

10 Lewis Mumford, 'Utopia, the City and the Machine', in Manuel, 1966, pp.3–25.

11 Grundmann, 1950, p.121.

12 Reeves, 1969, p.132.

13 J. Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia', in Manuel, 1966, pp.101–15.

14 See my essay on 'Thomas and the Utopians' as a comparison of scholastic speculation and Utopian optimism, in *Miscellanea Medievalia*: Cologne, 1977.