Journal of Dharma 45, 1 (January-March), 9-28

UTOPIA REVIVED? Parag Khanna's *Technocracy in America* and Thomas More's *Utopia*

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Abstract: Utopia is a recurrent motif in history. Starting with Plato's *Republic* and through the works of numerous other thinkers, philosophers undertook bold endeavours of imagining entirely new societies beyond the existing ones. Despite utopia borders on dystopia and many of its features were embodied in the 20th century totalitarian regimes, it is premature to declare the utopian vision dead. The American author Parag Khanna in his book *Technocracy in America: Rise of the Info-State* (2017) offers a sharp critique of contemporary democracy and instead favours a form of digital technocracy, which he calls an 'Info-State.' In this paper, I argue that Khanna's political model is strikingly similar to the iconic *Utopia* – the treatise of Sir Thomas More (1517) – and is based on the same underlying philosophical and ethical assumptions. The attempt to resurrect the utopian vision and present it as a viable alternative to liberal democracy poses a danger to liberty, in the same fashion as it inspired totalitarianism before.

Keywords: Democracy, Ethical Systems, Info-State, Isegoria, Liberty, Popular Will, Technocracy, Utopia.

1. Introduction

As contemporary society develops, it faces many challenges to the ethical foundations of its existence. Liberty is one of such foundations. And the challenge to it comes from the attempts to resurrect what I call in this paper the *utopian vision*, by which I understand a sort of hubris of human reason, into which it slips when it believes in the ability to engineer a 'perfect' society beyond

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the existing one. Starting from *The Republic* by Plato, such imaginary communities were often conceived in the form of strict regimentation of the lives of their citizens by the caste of dispassionate administrators. Throughout history, numerous thinkers embarked on these projects. What almost always ensued, though, was the elimination of liberty, which was traded for order and perfection. Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century were, perhaps, the biggest attempt to put the utopian vision into practice.

After the fall of the USSR, Francis Fukuyama famously predicted 'the end of history' and argued that there would be no large intellectual competitors to liberal democracy in the future. However, now it is widely claimed that the world is amid the third global crisis of it (the previous two refer to the situation in Europe and the USA in the 1910s and 1930s respectively) (Sitaraman). The biggest threats come from populist regimes, post-truth politics, international terrorist groups, aggressive foreign policy, global financial crises, climate change, etc. Our age is also marked by an unprecedented development of digital technologies, which make many thinkers believe that a new era is coming, in which our societies – and human life itself – will be transformed beyond recognition.

Together, the global crisis of liberal democracy and the belief in the power of new technologies give a new breath to the utopian vision. As it already happened in the past, this way of political thinking can cause a great harm to liberty. In this paper, I analyze the work of the American political scholar Parag Khanna *Technocracy in America: Rise of the Info-State* (2017) as an example of the attempt to revive this vision in the 21st century. In order to demonstrate why the sociopolitical project suggested in this work can be considered a utopia, as well as to elucidate some important features of the utopian vision from a historical perspective, I will draw a number of parallels with the iconic representative of this genre – Sir Thomas More's *A Little, True Book, not Less Beneficial than Enjoyable, about How Things Should Be in the New Island Utopia*, or, simply, *Utopia* (1517). Before I proceed to this analysis, it is necessary to outline some general features of the utopian vision of society.

2. *Utopia: The Antagonist of Liberty*

Since the dawn of philosophy, humankind has developed two broad and antagonistic visions of society – one based on liberty, and the other on utopia. Throughout history, these visions took different shapes and were advocated by different thinkers, but there is a certain paradox in history that whenever one vision becomes more or less common, we begin to turn our eyes to the other. Ancient Athens is widely regarded as a cradle of democracy. Its values – liberty, above all – were praised by Pericles in his immortal *Funeral Oration* (circa 430 BC). In the same city, just fifty years after Pericles, Plato wrote his *The Republic*, which inspired the illiberal philosophical discourse for many centuries to come. In the subsequent epochs, these underlying motifs were repeatedly rediscovered, reinterpreted, and adjusted to their Zeitgeist, with Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill, and Mahatma Gandhi learning from Pericles, and Hegel, Marx and Mussolini drawing their inspiration from Plato. The competition between the liberal and utopian visions has always been a struggle between the values of freedom, justice, and equality, on one side, and different kinds of tyranny, which often came under lucrative promises of earthly paradise, on the other.

One should not be tempted, however, to think that the utopian vision is dead and rests in the cemetery of ideas. Parag Khanna's *Technocracy in America: Rise of the Info-State* is a bright attempt to revive it in the modern age. While the form of his project is cutting-edge – a data-and computer-run society led by a caste of apolitical managers – its underlying purpose is world-old and rests on the same idea of enthroned Reason, which animated Plato and Sir Thomas More.

According to Gilles Lapouge, all utopias were based on the same subliminal motivation to revive the harmony of Paradise, which was lost when Adam and Eve were expelled from there (16). They also embody the self-confidence of a man and his faith in the power of his reason to achieve excellence in contrast to chaos, imperfection, and fallibility of the real world.[1] Lapouge

[1]The Greeks had similar ideas about the lost harmony of the 'golden age,' particularly in the poems of Hesiod.

argues that the first utopian thinker, probably, was Hippodamus of Miletus, an architect who lived in the 5th century BC. After the troops of the Persian king Darius destroyed the city of Miletus in 494 BC, Hippodamus got a unique chance to design the whole city from scratch. He acted as an architect and social engineer, while designing a city for ten thousand inhabitants, which he divided into three groups (craftsmen, tradesmen, and warriors) along strict geometrical lines.

Plato went further than Hippodamus. In his dialogues *The Republic* and *The Laws,* he attempted to design the whole society, not just to build a city. "In the city of *The Laws*," writes Lapouge, "there are no individuals, only citizens. Idlers, dreamers, tramps, and bachelors are outlawed. This mathematical city works like a computer, without mistakes or breakdowns. The idea is to cram the soul into the pattern of the city and the city into the pattern of the cosmos" (18).

Starting from these early projects, another feature of the utopian vision became apparent – its specific anthropology. When a social engineer deals with his models, he treats them as if they are populated not by 'real' human beings with their unique thoughts, desires, and dreams, but rather by soulless automatons resembling insects – bees and ants. "Heedless of the passage of time, immobile and submissive, contemptuous of individual liberties, blindly obeying pre-programmed instructions, an anthill fulfills the irrational dream of absolute reason," summarizes Lapouge (20).

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* gave its name to the utopian genre and is often considered its iconic representative. The work is divided into two books. In Book I, the author developed a sharp criticism of the early 16th-century English society, especially its corrupt courts, greedy nobles, and starving peasants who lost their livelihoods due to the practice of enclosure whereby the communal farming lands were turned into pastures. In Book II, More's fictional narrator Raphael Hythlodaeus (literally, "the teller of nonsense") described a radically different society, which he encountered during his voyage to the newly discovered American continent. Hythlodaeus portrayed Utopia as an island with fifty-four cities, each containing six thousand households

with from ten to sixteen people in each household. The houses were rotated between citizens every ten years to make sure everybody was equal. There was no private property in Utopia, the goods were stored in warehouses and distributed fairly. Both sexes were equal and well-educated. Since there were no idlers in Utopia, the working day was reduced to just six hours, which left its citizens with plenty of time for leisure and education. There was no money in Utopia and gold was despised. Its political order was a combination of meritocracy and direct democracy. Thirty households elected an official named Syphograntus, ten Syphograntes elected a Phylarchus, and the board of Phylarches elected a king who stayed in office for life. The author even envisaged such innovations in Utopia as social welfare, free hospitals, and even euthanasia. This society, thus, stayed in direct opposition to Europe of that time, which was plagued by extreme inequality, permanent conflicts, and religious bigotry.

The utopian vision becomes especially lucrative in those historical periods when humankind invents a new rationalistic toolkit laden with great transforming power and expectations. Generally, there were three such periods in the Western world. The first was in Ancient Greece (e. g., Hippodamus and Plato), which harnessed the power of philosophy to invent those 'blissful' societies. The second began in the Renaissance when humanism shook the medieval faith that happiness could be sustained only in the afterlife, while rationalism offered guidelines to those worldly delights. *Utopia* by Thomas More, *The City of the Sun* (1602) by Tommaso Campanella, and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) are all based on the same underlying belief that it is possible to intervene in the society for the happiness of its members, just as a scientist intervenes in the object of his experimentation. Finally, the third period began in the digital age when this old dream of a society governed by reason was resuscitated by the virtue of Big Data and computer technologies. Just like Plato or Thomas More, such thinkers as Parag Khanna dream about an orderly and seamless society, which is supposed to work like a computer and deliver the most happiness to its citizens under the guidance of its wisest rulers.

The utopian vision of society has three crucial differences from the antagonistic liberal vision of society: Two ethical systems, *Isegoria* and 'Objective' Truth *vs* Common Consent. [2]

2.1. Two Ethical Systems

A key difference is the answer to the question what is the ultimate purpose of society – liberty of its members or something else? David Beetham, Professor at the University of Leeds, claims that democracy serves just one purpose – delivering freedom to its citizens, or rather "specific rights needed to realize democratic freedom" (65). For the utopian vision, on the contrary, the limitation of liberty is justified if it leads to what is perceived as a greater good. The Russian-American mathematical psychologist Vladimir Lefebvre delineated in his book *The Algebra of Consciousness* what he called the two ethical systems. The *raison d'être* of the first system is to ban evil, while, for the second, it is to promote good. According to the first system, human rights should not be violated while accomplishing some political or economic goals. For the second system, harm is justified if it leads to what is perceived as a greater good. Lefebvre argued that his systems illustrated the difference between the West and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but this idea also embodies the contrast between liberal and utopian visions. While the former vision treats liberty as a paramount social value, the second forfeits it for the sake of building a 'perfect' society.

2.2. *Isegoria*

Should the policy of the state represent the will of the majority of its citizens or, rather, of a narrow elite based on its exclusive knowledge? In ancient Greece, the term *isegoria* described the equal right of all citizens to participate in political debates. Plato gave, perhaps, the best illustration of *isegoria* in his dialogue *Protagoras*:

[2]For lack of space, I do not consider the liberal vision here. Please see, Laniuk, Yevhen. "Freedom as a Foundation of Liberal Democracy: A Normative Perspective." *Visnuk of the Lviv University. Series philosophical science* 23 (2019): 35-46.

> Now I observe that when we are met together in the assembly, and the matter in hand relates to building, the builders are summoned as advisers; when the question is one of shipbuilding, then the ship-wrights; and the like of other arts. ... But when the question is an affair of state, then everybody is free to have a say – carpenter, tinker, cobbler, sailor, passenger; rich and poor, high and low; evidently because they are under the impression that this sort of knowledge cannot be taught (319b-319d).

But why is there a difference between handicrafts, such as shipbuilding, and the affairs of the state? If we allow to vote only those citizens who have academic degrees or whose IQs are above average, won't we really have a better governance and less populism? The answer is a watershed between the two visions. Liberty can be exercised only in the 'republic,' which literally translates as 'common cause.'[3] The republic is a 'common cause' of free and responsible citizens, the art of living freely together. It cannot be instrumentalized or treated as a means of achieving some 'greater good,' because it will lose then its a priori value as a collective exercise of liberty. But if liberty is not the highest concern, then it would indeed make sense to entrust the state only to those citizens who 'know better' how to achieve this 'greater good.' Starting from Plato and his idea of enthroned philosophers, the dominant utopian motif was to have only the 'best' people making decisions on behalf of the others.

2.3. 'Objective' Truth *vs* Common Consent

All policies of the state (at least, hypothetically) should serve the benefit of the people. But what is this benefit? Does it exist independently of the people's will as some kind of 'objective' truth or, maybe, it cannot be separated from this will? The answer is another demarcation line between the utopian and the liberal vision. According to the researchers Christopher Bickerton and

[3]Here I understand the term 'republic' in its etymological sense of 'common cause' (*res publica*), and not as a form of government. Such countries, as Spain or the UK, are still 'common causes,' despite they have a monarchical government.

Carlo Accetti, "the outputs of party democracy as political regime are considered legitimate not because they approach to some pre-political conception of 'truth' or 'justice', but rather because they are expressed through a specific set of procedures that are taken to be expressive of the constitutive values of democracy, *i. e.*, freedom and equality" (193). On the other side, Plato, Thomas More, and other utopian thinkers believed that it was not necessary for rulers to 'ask' their citizens what their policies should be, because they contemplated Truth itself. In Plato's *The Republic,* the philosophers ruled, because their souls were the closest to the realm of *eidos*, or the permanent reality of things. Today's 'data-driven policy' offers a variant of this reasoning, tailored specifically for the digital age. Why should public policy be based on democratic votes if it can be based on Big Data, or Truth itself? What may seem like a solution offered by modern technologies is rather a continuation of the old utopian idea of the reign of Truth.

3. Utopia New and Old: Parag Khanna and Sir Thomas More

Parag Khanna's *Technocracy in America: Rise of the Info-State* is exciting to read. It is succinct and provocative; its arguments are sharp and witty. The author has carefully documented how democracy fails to fulfil popular expectations throughout the world and how authoritarian regimes are doing their best instead. But despite his sharp mind and bright style, I cannot embrace the content of his arguments and would prefer to stay away from the 'brave new world' of his high-tech utopia. This is, probably, because we look at things from the opposite banks of liberal and utopian visions. I believe that liberty has the highest value and should not be limited for the sake of effective governance and financial growth. For Khanna, top concerns seem to be performance and economic efficiency, and if it were necessary to limit liberty for their sake, he would do so unflinchingly. I am sure that liberal democracy has no alternatives – neither now, nor in the future. For Khanna, conversely, it is historically transient and should give its way to a corporate technocratic management, which he calls the 'Info-State.'

In his book, Khanna repeatedly claims that contemporary democracy, perhaps, is living out its last days. It does nothing good except breeding populist and corrupt politicians, drowning policies in a mess of talks and tug-wars, and bringing to power mostly incompetent individuals. He rejects the idea that liberal democracy has a value if it does not lead to a measurable economic success. The reason for this, according to the author, is that "everyday people don't measure their lives by how democratic their state is, but whether they feel safe in their cities, can afford their homes, have stability in their work, have a plan for growing old and can remain connected to friends and family" (14). He believes that to be admired, a political system must "deliver." "The input of democracy," he writes, "can never compensate for the output legitimacy of delivering the basics" (20).

He claims that there is a much better political system in the world, from which democratic countries must learn. He calls this system a "technocracy" and refers specifically to its modern form, which features a clique of apolitical administrators who exercise corporate-style management based on data and modern technologies. This system, he claims, has been responsible for the economic miracle in such countries, as China and Singapore, and should become a role-model for other countries in the 21st century. "Democracy," he writes, "has to be seen not as a universal solution, but as a principle to be observed in the quest toward the higher objective of good governance" (Khanna 21).

These introductory remarks frame his discourse in the context of Lefebvre's second ethical system, as he finds good governance so important that he would sacrifice democratic liberty for its sake. Khanna is straightforward about this: "We are coming to appreciate," he writes, "that the difference between successful and failing countries is not rich vs. poor, left vs. right, or democratic vs. authoritarian, but whether they have the capacity to meet their citizens' basic needs" (Khanna 15). Historically, the focus on delivery and good governance was a hallmark of the utopian vision. Almost every utopia was a perfectly governed place of plenty. What was beneath, though, was oppression and the sacrifice of liberty.

Khanna dedicates a large portion of his book to the adoration of non-democratic countries, such as China and Singapore, and their economic successes. "China's spectacular rise versus that of democracies," he writes, "has shown the World that it is better to have a system focused on delivery without democracy than a system that's too democratic at the expense of delivery" (Khanna 20). He is oblivious, however, about the price that these countries had to pay for their glowing economies. His eulogy to Singapore is silent about how this country limits its citizens' rights and inhibits the opposition, and his lengthy discussion about China and its 'government-knows-best' policy is oblivious about its totalitarianism. Despite it is impossible to dissociate these two sides of the coin, in *Technocracy in America* the reader will find an enthusiastic tribute to one side but a total disregard of the other.

In the chapter *A New State for a New Era,* Khanna outlines a blueprint of the society of the future, which he calls "an Info-State." The Info-State will be built around planning "rather than narrow-minded and short-term populist whims" and will have the virtues of being both "utilitarian (inclusively seeking the broadest social benefit) and meritocratic (ruled by the most qualified and non-corrupt leaders)" (5). In particular, he suggests that it should take the form of a "collective presidency of about a half-dozen committee members backed by a strong civil service better able to juggle complex challenges … using data technologies for real-time citizen consultation" (5). This "2.0 version of the Soviet Politburo" will be charged with three major tasks (unsurprisingly, the protection of human rights is not on the list): i. respond efficiently to citizens' needs and problems; ii. learn from international experience in designing policies; iii. use data and scenarios for long-term planning (5).

Khanna claims that it is precisely the model that paved the way to Singapore's economic greatness, in which policies "have historically been designed by technocrats outside of public scrutiny" (7). The author, however, does not ask himself the questions, which seem inescapably to follow: How should the society react when its technocratic government will start to abuse power? How can it reclaim power after its democratic institutions

have been discarded as an unnecessary ballast? What should prevent the technocrats from behaving dishonestly, except for the thin air of their moral virtues? Though Khanna finds democracy less efficient than technocracy, at least, the former has answers to these questions.

A distinctive feature of his political project is the use of digital technologies for extensive social planning. "Data-driven direct technocracy," he writes, "is superior to representative democracy because it dynamically captures the desires of people while short-circuiting the distortions of elected representatives' special interests and corrupt middlemen" (81). "Data," he continues, "helps to balance what people want with what is good for them" (82). Here he seems to refuse to acknowledge that the practice of gathering intelligence about people with the intention of controlling them is called 'surveillance.' In other words, his Info-State will be a massive surveillance state. Singapore and China, especially the latter, are already adapting digital technologies, especially webcams, for immense surveillance, which has become an integral part of their autocratic regimes (Keegan).

"The more the world becomes connected and complex, developed and data-suited," Khanna continues, "the more the info-state model will rise in status. Global political discourse is shifting to a post-ideological terrain, where performance is the arbiter of success" (7). The idea that pragmatism should be the only ideology is laden with a dangerous moral relativism. Such values, as liberty and justice, are not measured in economic units. But if they are dismissed, then what prevents Khanna's Info-State from learning from the experience of the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, which used enforced labour in concentration camps and euthanized their disabled citizens? Weren't these crimes formally justified as 'pragmatic' solutions intended to boost the economy? The only obstacle against the repetition of these crimes is our strong faith in democratic values – and that's precisely what Khanna wants to drop out.

The combination of a meritocratic ruling and a utilitarian seeking of the broadest social good places Khanna's Info-State within the utopian domain. Historically, utopias were portrayed

just like that – ruled by the wisest sovereign who patronized his subjects for their own good. Paradoxically, it was a dystopian leitmotif as well. In Aldous Huxley's famous novel *Brave New World*, just like Khanna, the author portrayed a happy and harmonious society under a watchful eye of the state, which used science for the maximization of social prosperity.

Despite More's *Utopia* and Khanna's *Technocracy in America* were written in very different historical periods, they have a number of similarities. I regard these similarities as an attempt to restore the utopian vision in the modern age, as well as a testimony of its sameness in the cross-historical perspective.

The first parallel pivots around the belief, common for both works, that it is possible for a philosopher-statesman to design a sublime society based on the power of his reason. "One feature which is often overlooked [in *Utopia*]," writes Dominic Baker-Smith, "is its foundation: the entire polity, from social organization and street plans to its benign religious toleration, is due to one man, Utopus, whose military conquest of the country enabled him, in Plato's terms, to wipe the slate clean. He represents the ideal philosopher-king who reconciles wisdom with power." From this viewpoint, Khanna's admiration of Chinese and Singaporean leaders Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kwan Yew, especially the latter, hinges on the same archetype of the philosopher-king. "The state-builders, urban planners, and economic strategists of the 21st century all take their inspiration from Lee Kuan Yew, not Thomas Jefferson," Khanna claims (46). Of course, one may disagree that the king Utopus was a fictional character, while Lee Kwan Yew acted in real history, but it does not deny the fact that the two thinkers, More and Khanna, were fascinated by the ideal of a 'perfectly wise' philosopher-statesman who would transform the society in the same way, as an artist transforms his raw material into a masterpiece.

The second parallel between *Technocracy in America* and *Utopia* relates to their specific anthropology. According to Lapouge, people in utopias are portrayed as voiceless executors of hardwired commands who are organized by the state for their own good, like bees in a beehive (20). Both More and Khanna assume that the state

knows perfectly what is good for its citizens, while the citizens, on their part, fully approve whatever the state does. When Khanna says, for example, that data "helps to balance what people want with what is good for them" he speaks like a utopian.

The third parallel concerns the relationships between the political ideal and the real world. One may argue that the works of More and Khanna are profoundly dissimilar because More described a fully imaginary society, while Khanna based his arguments mostly on the real-life examples. But if we consider that the Greek word 'utopia' has a double meaning and is translated into English both as 'no-place' (*u-topia*) and a 'better place' (*eu-topia*), then More's work can be seen in an entirely different light. The thinker portrayed not so much an *imaginary* society, but rather a *real* one – the life in the monasteries, which he metaphorically disguised in the symbol of utopia. "Convents, abbeys and monasteries were oases of peace and quiet in a stormy world, harmonious settled communities that would have delighted Plato. There were no families, nor even individuals," writes Lapouge (20). However, even in the sense of 'no-place,' the work of Khanna still has some 'utopian' overtones, especially when he admits that "some of these proposals [regarding technocracy] may seem unrealistic given our present institutions and policies" (5). Like More's narrator Raphael Hythlodaeus who encountered Utopia during a sea-voyage, Khanna even uses the same naval metaphors: "Tocqueville came from beyond our shores in praise of America's embodiment of progressive political ideals. Today Americans should travel beyond their own shores in search of inspiration" (5).

The fourth parallel refers to the underlying Epicurean assumption in both works that happiness is a guiding principle in life. "Like good humanists," writes Dominic Baker-Smith, "they [Utopians] are keenly interested in moral philosophy and the nature of the happy life, which is one reason why they are so dedicated to learning Greek. Raphael provides an extended account of their views on pleasure, in their view, the most important ingredient of human happiness." Thomas More created a blueprint for a 'happy' society. Later, this Epicurean focus on

'happiness at any cost' became a hallmark of totalitarianism, as embodied in the infamous phrase by Josef Stalin: "Living has become better, comrades. Living has become happier." Khanna also pretends to have a 'blueprint for happiness,' especially when he enumerates what pretends to be its components. Let's quote him again: "Everyday people don't measure their lives by how democratic they are, but whether they feel safe in their cities, can afford their homes, have stability in their work, have a plan for growing old, etc" (14). Many of these things (safe cities, affordable homes, a plan for growing old, etc.) were in the Soviet Union. What it lacked, though, was liberty.

Liberty *vs* happiness is an old philosophical dilemma. While the liberal vision favours liberty (therefore, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, people are entitled only to the 'pursuit of happiness,' but not to happiness *per se*), the utopian, in the manner of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, struggles to make everybody happy. Khanna also seems to be stepping into the same old river.

The fifth parallel concerns surveillance. The citizens in both works should be continuously visible to the state and deprived of privacy. In particular, More writes: "Now you see how little liberty they have to loiter. There be neither wine taverns, nor ale-houses, nor stews, nor any occasion of vice or wickedness, no lurking corners, no places of wicked counsels or unlawful assemblies. But they be in the present sight, and under the eyes of every man" (68). Khanna, in his turn, intends to accommodate digital technologies for surveillance and goes as far as to encourage the state to snoop into its citizens' social media profiles. "Social media," he argues, "should become a strategic tool for gathering knowledge about citizens' priorities" (Khanna 86).

The sixth and the last parallel that I draw deals with their historical contexts. More wrote *Utopia* in the beginning of the capitalist epoch when the English landlords, instead of growing crops, resorted to a more profitable sheep-farming, enclosed the common land and started to use it as pastures. This resulted in extreme social inequality when a tiny group of elite mastered the new logic of capitalism and became super-rich, while a lot of

peasants were deprived of their livelihoods and downgraded to pitiful wretches, who had to steal and beg for food. The government was preoccupied mostly by foreign wars and merry pastimes and did nothing to improve the plight of the poor. Thus, *Utopia* was an antithesis to the sixteenth-century English society. It was a negative picture of the same society, in which the reality was 'flipped over.' While the 16th century England was a place of misery and inequality, Utopia was the land of bliss and harmony. In England, the government cared only about its wealth and status – in Utopia, it altruistically served the common good. In England, the novel capitalist class was greedy for wealth and dominance – in Utopia, there was a ubiquitous equality and money was despised, etc. Some other contradistinctions can be made, but what is important here is that both the real English society in the 16th century and More's imaginary reaction to it were the products of the new historical forces that ended the Middle Ages and ushered in the new secular, capitalistic, positivist age. "Utopia was an attempt to cling to the medieval ideal of the contemplative life – an ideal that the Reformation, which privileged action and change, was 'disrupting', to use the modern coinage. Monkish life itself was under attack from the forces of the Reformation and was soon to reach a climax with the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536," writes the British historian Tom Hodgkinson.

Today we also live in the time of changes, many of which echo the early capitalist age. The so-called post-industrial, or information, society is historically discontinuous with the previous industrial one, and, like in the times of More, the winds of change bring opportunities for some and challenges for the other. Among these challenges, there are, in particular, economic inequality, the risk of unemployment due to automation, migration and labour outsourcing, unstable prices, the growing vulnerability of modern economies to unexpected crises, etc. These economic problems are translated into politics – many scholars believe them to be the root of populism in Europe and North America.

Like More, Khanna has depicted an inverted reality, in which technocracy has replaced populism, data-driven policy has swapped places with the tide of 'fake news,' and the growing gap

between 'the people' and 'the elite' has yielded to a new social harmony. However, this imagined anti-world, like the one in *Utopia*, is portrayed as an idealized extension of the same historical tendencies that cause troubles in the real world. In particular, technocracy is often named as one of the causes of populism in such places, as the EU. "The real cause of Western democracies' current travails," argues researcher Sheri Berman, "is that many core political institutions have decayed dramatically over the past years — or ceded responsibility to unelected supranational bodies — hindering their ability to translate the demands of a broad range of their citizens into concrete action at home" ("Against the Technocrats"). Khanna, however, believes that the cure for these ills is to have even more technocracy, up to the point of rejecting the people's sovereignty altogether. Likewise, the unrestrained boosterism of digital technologies, blind to their social effects, is credited to be responsible for a number of disruptive impacts upon the economy and society at large – from technological unemployment to the rise of 'fake news.' Yet, Khanna finds the cure in a data-driven Info-State. In particular, he writes: "At no point in the past decade has any official or academic in a foreign country told me they want their country to look like 'America.' They want to have a Silicon Valley, a New York City and a Boston – hubs of innovation, finance, and knowledge" (Khanna 107). In this context, Silicon Valley is a perfect example at hand. The Valley is widely regarded as the world's leading hub of innovations and technologies, but beneath its shining surface there is a gruesome 'dark side.' This area has become notorious for its unbearable cost of living for anyone outside the IT-sector, skyrocketing inequality, and high levels of homelessness and drugs – the problems caused by its immense technological boosterism. In the article "How Silicon Valley Fuels an Informal Caste System," Antonio Garcia Martinez argues that the population of San Francisco Bay Area becomes extremely polarized into four broad classes, or even castes: i. The *Inner Party* of venture capitalists and successful entrepreneurs who own the Valley's tech machine; ii. The *Outer Party* of skilled technicians who ensure that the machine that belongs to the first party runs smoothly; iii. The *Service Class* in the

'gig economy,' or people who work the jobs that 'AI hasn't managed to eliminate yet,' like Uber drivers;[4] and iv. The *Untouchable Class* of the homeless, drug addicted, and/or criminal who live "at the ever-growing margins: the tent cities and areas of hopeless urban blight." Martinez claims that the mobility between these classes is minimal and finds the growth of this system "horrifying, and antithetical to both liberal democracy and the American project." If Khanna wants the future of the world to be like the cyber-dystopia of Silicon Valley, I'd prefer to stay outside.

The solution to a problem, caused by some factor, cannot lie in the multiplication of that factor. If one spoon of honey makes me sick, then eating the whole jar will probably kill me. Likewise, if the combination of technocracy with the disruptive impact of modern technologies has already caused problems, then it seems irrational to expect anything good from having more of them. Perhaps, the answer to the problems, posed by Khanna, especially populism, should be sought in an entirely different framework, namely the strengthening of democracy and mitigating the effects of devastating social changes. As Sheri Berman wrote,

> We need to find ways of making democratic institutions and elites more responsive to and representative of the people rather than the reverse. Fighting back the populist tide will require encouraging greater participation on the part of citizens and greater responsiveness on the part of elites and governments. If that occurs, our current democratic malaise may prove to be a passing phase. If not, Western liberal democracy may indeed be in peril ("Populism Is a Problem").

The utopian vision becomes especially lucrative in the periods of dramatic socioeconomic transformation, like the one we face in the world today or our ancestors faced five-hundred years back. But "the energies we invest in envisaging a better world," cannot just consume "the energies we need to create it" (Eagleton). Ultimately, they can also consume liberty.

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[4]Martinez calls them "expendable cogs in an automated machine," who serve the first two parties. "In the past," he writes, "computers filled hard-for-humans gaps in a human value chain. Now humans fill hard-for-software gaps in a software value chain."

4. Conclusion

Throughout history, many thinkers were fascinated by the idea of perfect society. Starting from Plato, these bold endeavours took different shapes, but were customarily conceived in the form of rational regulation by the caste of dispassionate administrators whose policies reduced poverty, crime, and disease, while maximizing prosperity. Despite the utopian thinkers tried to envision a 'happy' society, their projects were also the blueprints of tyranny, because they sacrificed liberty for the sake of order and welfare. Therefore, the utopian vision, by which I understand not a specific model, but rather a certain mindset behind such projects, can pose a danger to liberty, especially when it becomes a widespread political outlook.

Alvin Toffler argued that the world's history can be divided into three "waves:" the agricultural, the industrial, and the Information Age, or "Third Wave" society. Each of these "waves" gave a breath to the utopian vision. *The Republic* by Plato was an example of utopia in the agricultural age. Starting from Thomas More, numerous thinkers came up with utopias adapted to the Industrial Age with its dominant motif of scientific rationalization. Now, the question remains how the utopian vision will look like in the "Third Wave" society?

Parag Khanna's *Technocracy in America* offers a glimpse into this vision: his 'Info-State' is discontinuous with the present, yet it is based on the new trends of the information age. It has absorbed the old dream about a rationally governed and 'happy' society, yet it suggests using cutting-edge technologies to arrive on that dream. If such a model succeeds in the future, its author will be definitely listed among its visionaries.

And the possibility that it will come true does not seem far-fetched. After I finished the draft of this paper, the infectious disease COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, China, and spread worldwide, causing a pandemic. The governments of many countries have introduced unprecedented measures to curb the virus and quarantined almost one-fifth of the world's population in their homes, as of mid-April 2020. Never before, with a possible exception of WWII, were the rights of so many people restricted,

including their freedom to move. There is a legitimate worry that some countries will use public health issues as a pretext to strengthen their grip of power, and the pandemic will cause a global setback of democracy. Another worry is that authoritarian countries, such as China, are increasingly praised for their efficiency in fighting the virus, in contrast to their democratic counterparts. Under this pretext, some of their policies, including surveillance via digital technologies, may be justified even in democratic countries. The outbreak of coronavirus potentially can give a big boost to Khanna's arguments and accelerate his vision.

Nobody can claim to know the future. Yet, if Khanna offers one variant of it, let me offer another. I call it a 'liberal utopia.' In the 'liberal utopia,' there will be a broad democratic participation via new technologies. Different groups of people – workers, students, women, retirees, minorities, migrants, etc. – will be able to articulate their interests, and everybody's voice will be heard. In this future, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, everybody will be able to "shake the world in a gentle way." The 'liberal utopia' is based on the ethos of democratic *res publica*, but it will not be a 'common cause' of some citizens, nor even the majority of them, but of all members of society. The state will strive to provide equal opportunities to everyone, yet everyone's right to unique self-fulfilment will be protected. The success of a country will not be measured by how rich or powerful it is, but whether it protects human rights, is democratically governed, and serves the people's needs. If this utopia ever comes true, it will not be due to the new king Utopus or any other 'perfectly wise' ruler, but thanks to millions of people.

I believe that it is possible to realize this vision. For this purpose, it is necessary to put democratic liberty first – and the rest will follow.

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