“The World Begins in Man”:

A Brief and Selected History of Translations of *Utopia* into German

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This article traces the translation history of Thomas More’s *Utopia* into German from the first seventeenth-century translations to the translations and reception of *Utopia* in the GDR and re-united Germany.

In 1516, Thomas More, adviser to King Henry VIII, Catholic, martyr, and saint, published his most controversial book, *De optimo reipublicae statu deque noval insula Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus* (*Of the best state law and of the new island Utopia, truly a golden booklet, as beneficial as it is cheerful*). During 2016, special issues of *Utopian Studies* (27, no. 2, and 27, no. 3), edited by Fátima Vieira, have been tracing the translation history of this book that still grips our attention five hundred years later. As in the translation (and reception) histories in all countries, *Utopia*’s translation in Germany reflects contemporaneous social and political debates and anxieties. Thus, the book was read and translated as a communist document *avant la lettre*, a contradictory Catholic satire, a fantastical and thus ineffectual blueprint, and a socialist prophecy.

In the seventeenth century, *Utopia* was translated not only into German but into the vernacular (albeit abbreviated). Other translations (by Gregor Wintermonath, for instance) published *Utopia* with Joseph Hall’s antipodean satire, *Mundus alter et idem sive Terra Australis antehac semper incognita; Longis itineribus peregrini Academici*
nuperrime illustrata (The discovery of a new world, or, A description of the South Indies, hitherto unknown/by an English Mercury) (1605). These latter editions are particularly important for the reception of Utopia as the foundation of a literary genre. Indeed, Hölscher reminds us that the first mention of “utopia” in German occurred before 1526 and directly linked the text to the literary tradition of “Schlaraffenland,” the medieval poem of the Land of Cockaygne: “Utopien ist ein erdichtetes Land, das der Engländer Thomas Morus, als wirklich vorhanden, beschrieben hat, und welches ungefähr die Stelle des Schlaraffenlandes vertritt” [Utopia is an imaginary country, which the Englishman Thomas More described as if it were real, and it has roughly the same status as the term Schlaraffenland].

The Land of Cockaygne was not an isolated poem but a tradition of poems across Europe, dealing with an imaginary paradise where leisure prevailed and food was freely obtainable.

The word utopia appeared again in German encyclopedias, first in 1741, equating Utopia anew to the chimeric “Tale of the Land of Milk and honey” or “Nowhere-land.” At first sight, the affinity between Utopia and “Schlaraffenland,” or the “Land of Cockaygne,” lies in the element of wish fulfillment and cornucopia, and Hölscher’s etymological research seems to confirm this. Thus, Ruth Levitas included the Land of Cockaygne in her category of “compensatory utopias,” which seek to counterweigh historical experiences of scarcity and deprivation.

In the same vein, Lewis Mumford includes it in his idea of “utopias of escape.” Recently, following Christopher Kendrick’s cue, Karma Lochrie has argued for a closer judicious reading of The Land of Cockaygne as a complex and critical influence on Thomas More: “Utopian wish-fulfillment is bound up with a desire that is both unsatisfied and acutely aware of its own dissatisfaction. I would argue that the Land of Cockaygne is guilty of this kind of wish-
fulfillment, in which a reality principle asserts itself, not so much in order to accumulate obstacles that might realistically be overcome, as to pose the contradictory nature of the utopian project itself. Cokaygne is the representation of a desire that is at the same time fully cognizant of the impediments to its fulfillment.”

Perhaps the translation history of More’s *Utopia* documents this ambivalence.

The first German translation from Latin into vernacular German was published anonymously by Claudius Cantiuncula (Claude Chansonnette, ca. 1490–1549) in 1524, the year when he left his post as syndic of the Council of Basel. Cantiuncula was a dedicated humanist. He translated and corresponded with his friend Erasmus and exchanged letters with More, Joan Luis Vives, C. Agrippa of Nettesheim, and Brassicanus. He was also a judiciary and political reformer and writer. Cantiuncula’s translation, *Von der wunderbarlichen Innsel, Utopia genannt, das ander Buch . . . Thomam Morũ . . . erstlich zů Latin gar kürtzlich beschriben und ußgelegt* (About the wondrous Island called Utopia, the other book . . . Thomas Morrus . . . recently first published and explored in Latin) was published in Basel by Johannes Bebel, a printer specializing in Latin and Greek authors and medical works. He translated only book II of *Utopia* and dedicated it to the mayor and Council of Basel. Committed to humanist reforms of the judiciary, Cantiuncula rejected book 1 of More’s *Utopia* as irrelevant to his purposes. Indeed, he saw *Utopia* as a handbook or “mirror for princes” (*Fürstenspiegel*), another early form of political utopia, and gave it as a quasi-farewell gift to the municipal government of Basel, which he perceived as dangerously radicalized by the Reformation movement. Kiesel also suggested that the either short summary or
complete omission of book 1 in German translations indicated a focus on the “utopian” content rather than a sociopolitical critique of European courts and their politics.11

Gregor Wintermonath’s translation of *Utopia* appeared in 1612, with additional editions in 1704 and 1730, and at times was complemented by Joseph Hall’s *Mundus alter et idem*.12 Similarly to Cantiuncula’s, the translation had a political undertone. As a translator, historian, and devout Calvinist, Wintermonath seemed skeptical of More’s utopian idealism. When his translation of Hall’s *Mundus alter et idem* appeared as *Utopiae pars II* in 1613, he seemed to underscore “men’s failings instead of their dreams.”13

The curious imprint Marteau, which published political authors such as Pufendorf and Paul Jacob Marperger, printed *Utopia, Oder Entwurff Einer Paradigmatischen Policey: Wodurch Die Hohe Obrigkeit Recht Mächtig/Die Spaltungen/Gerichts-Zänckereyen/Böse Artzeneyen/Ungleicher Vortheil Im Handel . . . Gestillet/Gold Und Silber Fast Unnöthig Gemacht/Der Staat Starck/Reich Vergnügt . . . Und . . . Fast Ein Güldenes Seculum Wiedergebracht Wird* (*Utopia, or the Blueprint of a paradigmatic Policy: By which high Authority, Law, Power, Divisionism, juridical discord, injurious medicines, unequal advantage in trade will be pacified and a strong rich and happy State and almost a Golden Age will be restored*) in possibly 1700.14 Its title, interestingly, indicated a pragmatic approach to issues such as discord, inequality, and the abuse of state power—a typically praxis-oriented slant on political science but promising, at the same time, a return to the golden age (*Güldenes Seculum*).15 Though Hölscher still records for the eighteenth century an understanding of *Utopia* as illusory and abstract, it
seems that political science in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries embraced the ability of utopian discourse to focus the imagination toward the pragmatic.

A freely translated edition followed in 1753, by J.B.K., *Das Englischen Canzlers Thomas Morus Utopien. In einer neuen und freyen Übersetzung (The English Chancellor Thomas More’s “Utopia.” In a new and free Translation)*, one that Karl Kautsky deplored as “very free and very naive” but at least publishing both books of the original text.16 Hermann Kothe’s 1846 translation found equal condemnation with Kautsky, who insisted that Kothe not only translated the work from French (this is not verified) but misunderstood and mistranslated many phrases and paragraphs so that the text was riddled with inaccuracies.17 Kothe’s free translation somewhat fed into the understanding of *Utopia* in the decade before 1848 when polemical names were used for “the false convictions of any political opponent,” endorsed by the lexical definition of *Utopist* of 1847 as fantastical:18 “Politicians and social reformers who leave the realm of reality and busy themselves with fantastical plans to improve the world have recently been described as utopian thinkers.”19

From the late nineteenth century, More’s *Utopia* was received in the intellectual and political context of the utopian socialists, and further publications and translations were initiated by German socialists, often under the auspices of Karl Johann Kautsky (1854–1938), the Marxist theoretician, philosopher, and journalist who read Thomas More as a precursor to utopian socialism in his book *Thomas More und seine Utopie (Thomas More and his “Utopia”)* (1888). The next translation was published by Victor Michels and Theobald Ziegler, providing the basis for a later edition by Gerhard Ritter.20 This critical edition of the *Utopia* was one in a collection of reprints of the important
Latin compositions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, *Lateinische Literaturdenkmäler des fünfzehnten und sechszehnten Jahrhunderts*, edited by Max Hermann, and was extolled by Kautsky as “magnificent.”

Ignaz Emanuel Wessely, translator and lexicographer, translated and annotated More’s *Utopia* in 1896 and issued it with a publisher specializing in the social sciences. Therefore, More’s *Utopia* was swiftly integrated into the socialist canon. This was underscored by the fact that Eduard Fuchs, the Marxist cultural historian, activist, pacifist, and satirist, wrote the preface to this edition. As editor of the satiric weekly *Süddeutscher Postillon* (South German Forerunner) and the socialist newspaper *Vorwärts* (Forward), Fuchs was particularly interested in satirical caricature as a means of political critique and transformation: “In 1830, when the French bourgeois state was supposed, finally, to have developed from a fiction to a reality, and where, for this reason, the people [Volk] everywhere wanted and had to speak for themselves, the picture was most needed as a means of propaganda. . . . [T]he image is one of the most important intellectual tools in the struggle of revolutionary classes and times.”

Fuchs was also inspired by Kautsky’s work, *Thomas More und seine Utopie*, and composed his lengthy preface to *Utopia* carefully. Unfortunately, the actual translation by Wessely was slated, particularly by Fuchs’s comrades from *Vorwärts* and the *Süddeutscher Postillon*. The anonymous critic in *Vorwärts* suggested that Fuchs’s preface was a mere compilation of Kautsky and Ziegler and that More’s work deserved rigorous editing and shortening to make it inexpensive. Fuchs responded quickly in the *Postillon* that the translation of More’s complete text, not distorted and abbreviated like so many previous German translations, and the five original illustrations added value to the
Despite this criticism, Wessely’s translation resurfaced again in 1945, and a selection of passages from More appeared in an anthology in 1945–46. The Marxist pedagogue and educational reformer Paul Hermann August Oestreich (1878–1959) contributed to a multivolume project, *Dokumente der Menschlichkeit* (*Documents of Humanity*), in 1919. His four volumes reprinted selections from More, Campanella, Blanc, Fourier, Cabet, and Weitling, highlighting the work of the utopian socialists and their forebears and complementing the overall blueprint of the volumes as a critical reflection on political and social orders and systems. The preface by the publishers of the collection, which also featured Kant, Fichte, Swift, Claudius, Forster, and the utopian socialists, highlighted the educational and transformatory purpose of the documents, including Thomas More: “‘Die Welt fängt im Menschen an’—unter dem Zeichen dieses Dichterwortes steht unsere Bücherei. Sie sammelt Zeugen für die Verwirklichung des Guten—die Führer und Lehrer menschlicher Erhebung als Mithelfer am Neubau der Welt” [“The world begins in man”—this poetic citation is the foundation of our library. It collects witnesses for the realization of the morally Good—the guides and teachers of human elatedness as aids to the rebuilding of the world]. One of the criticisms of previous translations of *Utopia* was the quality of the translation and the completeness of the text. Tony Noah’s translation of 1920, *Utopia*, went back to the original Latin, and her introduction presented a brief but well-informed biography of Thomas More, which was received positively in the socialist periodical *Die Neue Zeit*, edited by Kautsky. Post–World War I German translations were particularly critical of More’s work as an example of British liberal justification of colonialism and imperialism. The
historian Gerhard Ritter published another translation of *Utopia* in 1922, with a preface by his teacher the historian Hermann Oncken.31 It was based on the critical edition by Michels and Ziegler. Ritter took More’s *Utopia* at face value, ignoring the satirical form of the book, and read it as a document of imperialism, an interpretation that Ritter initially shared with Oncken.32 Ritter’s later work *Machtstaat und Utopie* (*Power State and Utopia*) (1940) revised this reading and focused on the aspect of the welfare state in *Utopia*.33 *Utopia* found also a way into Swiss culture and literature. The Swiss translator and editor Alfred Hartmann published a new translation of *Utopia* in 1947, with further reprints in 1981 and 1986, and a short biography of Erasmus.34

The translation by Hubert Schiel, a librarian and ecclesiastical historian, sought to revise particularly the “socialist” slant that late nineteenth-century editions and translations promoted. As a Catholic, Schiel struggled with the ambivalence in the text between Christian principles and early socialism *avant la lettre*, stating that we do not know how far More’s satire went: “[Der] kirchentreue Christ bei der Schrift dieses katholischen Heiligen mit mehr oder weniger verlegenem Kopfschütteln . . . [sich] behelfen muss” [The faithful Christian is forced to shake his head in embarrassment when reading the writing of this Catholic saint].35

With the creation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the term *utopia* and consequently translations of the original text by More were scrutinized under the lens of “real socialism.” The self-fashioning of the GDR as a “realized utopia” challenged the necessity of the term and concept of utopia; however, writers used the term as a form of political critique of the socialist regime of the GDR (“dark utopias”) or as motivation to
implement state socialism fully and consistently. In the latter vein, More’s *Utopia* and the contemporary *Civitas Solis* were frequently hailed as precursors of utopian communism. The classical philologist Curt Woyte newly translated *Utopia* for his Leipzig edition in 1949, the year of the foundation of the GDR (with reprints in 1950 and 1982) based on 37 An English edition based on the Ralph Robinson translation was published in 1955, with a German commentary by the East German scholar Joachim Krehayn. 38 Here as well as in his edition of Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), Krehayn spoke critically of abstract utopianism and highlighted the role of real socialism as the only logical and historical consequence of utopian socialism.39

One of the problems after 1989 was that utopia was quite carelessly equated, on the one hand, with ideology and, on the other, with a specific model of utopia: the classical utopia in the vein of Thomas More. Fukuyama declared the “end of history” and the beginning of a “concert of democracies” or post-utopian realism.40 In Germany, it was the historian Joachim Fest who declared the end of utopia in 1991 after the fall of the Berlin Wall, aligning *Utopia* and the Third Reich to failed utopian experiments that must never be repeated.41 We must, however, acknowledge that utopias were written after 1989, integrating, in the case of Germany and Central Europe, the reinvention and creation of new nation-states.42 Thus translations and new editions of *Utopia* were published after 1989, with reprints and/or reworkings of Kothe’s, Ritter’s, and Schiel’s translations.

The most recent translation into modern German was published by the translator and fantasy writer Michael Siefener, *Utopia: Die erste literarische Utopie der Neuzeit (Utopia: The First Literary Utopia of the Early Modern Period)* (2013), based on Ralph
Robinson’s translation. The project of a more colloquial translation aims to introduce modern general readers to the book and inspire them to critical reimaginings of “contemporary turbo-capitalism” (gegenwärtigen Turbokapitalismus).43 Thus, far from being a mere historical document, *Utopia* has maintained its function as a (albeit paradoxical) critical, inspirational, and transformatory text for five hundred years.

Notes

The quote in the title is from Franz Werfel, “Lächeln Atmen Schreiten”: “Die Welt fängt im Menschen an.” In this essay I refer to a selection of translations that are significant in the translation/reception history of *Utopia*. For a list of complete translations into German, see Anreas Heyer, *Sozialutopien der Neuzeit: Bibliographisches Handbuch* (Berlin: Lit, 2008); Romuald I. Lakowski, “A Bibliography of Thomas More’s *Utopia*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 1, no. 2 (1995): 6.1–6.10,


2. This idea of Cockaygne and cornucopia was then perpetuated in the English country house myth; see Nicole Pohl, *Women, Space, and Utopia, 1600–1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), chap. 3.


7. Lochrie, Nowhere in the Middle Ages, 52.


10. “Diewyl nun dise policy der Innsel Utopia, wie oben angezeigt die bastgeordnete älteste und bestendlichste yewelten gewesen und noch seyn soll, so von den menschen ye angesehn worden, hab’ ich darumb die histori sollicher Innsel Edlen, Strengen, Ersamen Wysenherrn als waren liebhabern aller recht uffgesetzten policyen und burgerlichen Regiments, zu einem pfand (der Dankbarkeit), wie obanzeigt, uß der latinischen in die tütsche sprach, so ich in diser loblichen Statt Basel gelernt, transferieren wollen.” [As the policy of the island Utopia, as shown above, had been the oldest and significant world and still is, according to readers, I wanted to dedicate the
history of such an Island with the honorable, strict, and praiseworthy wise men who are all lovers of rightful policy and council government, with great thanks as indicated above translated from Latin into German as I learned it in the righteous city of Basel]. Ibid., sig A5r.


Gebräuchen, darinnen gleichsam in e. Muster oder Model eigentl. fuürgestellet u. angezeigt wird, d. beste Weiß u. Art e. loöbl. u. wolbestelten Policey u. Regiments.

Beschrieben durch den hochgelahrten und welt-berühmten Herrn Thomam Morum . . .

Mit vielen chönen Kupfferstücken und Land-Beschreibungen . . . [Exact and detailed description of the quite magnificent and really wonderful/but not very known island Utopia: including a complete account of all incidents, cities, inhabitants and customs, traditions and practices including the wisest, laudable and consistent policy and rule. Described by the eminent and world-famous the Honorable Thomas Morus . . . with many beautiful prints and geographic descriptions] (Frankfurt am Main: verlegt in Henning Grossens Buchhandlung, 1704); and Thomas More and Alberici Gentilis Angli [Joseph Hall], Ausführliche Beschreibung der Insul Utopia, worinnen so wohl die überraschend herrlichen und gantz wunderbahrlichen Umstünde dieser bisshero wenigen bekannten Insul als auch aller deroeselben Gelegenheiten, Städten, der Einwohner und des Landes Sitten, Gewohnheiten und Gebräuchen angezeigt, zugleich aber die beste Art und Weise eines löblichen und wohl-bestellten Policey- und Regiments-Wesen ausführlich vorgestellet wird . . . Erster Theil [Exact and detailed description of the quite magnificent and really wonderful/but not very known island Utopia: including a complete account of all incidents, cities, inhabitants and customs, traditions and practices including the wisest, laudable and consistent policy and rule. Described by the eminent and world-famous the Honorable Thomas Morus . . . with many beautiful prints and geographic descriptions, pt. 1], 2 vols. (Erfurt and Leipzig, 1730).

13. Joseph Hall and Alberico Gentili and Gregorius Wintermonat, Utopiae pars II. Mundus alter & idem: Darinnen außführlich und nach notturfft erzelet wird, was die

juridical discord, injurious medicines, unequal advantage in trade will be pacified and a strong rich and happy State and almost a Golden Age will be restored] (Cölln, Germany: Marteau, 1700).


21. Wessely also translated Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1900). The publisher was M. Ernst, Verlag für Gesellschaftswissenschaft, Munich.


25. Quoted in ibid., 303.


29. Oestreich, *Utopia*, my translation


33. Gerhard Ritter, *Machtstaat und Utopie* (Munich: Oldenburg, 1940) [

35. Thomas Morus, Thomas Morus: “Utopia,” ed. Hubert Schiel and Alexander Heine (Essen: Phaidon-Verlag, 1997), 17; my translation. See also Des Heiligen Thomas Morus Utopia das ist Nirgendland oder Von der besten Staatsform—Übertragen und eingeleitet von Hubert Schiel [Saint Thomas More’s Utopia which is Nowhere; or, Of the best state—translated and introduced by Hubert Schiel][AQ: INSERTION CORRECT?]] YEs (Cologne: Pick, 1947).


