

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY RENAISSANCE UTOPIANISM:  
CONCEPTIONS OF IDEAL AND VIRTUOUS GOVERNMENTS  
IN GASPARO CONTARINI'S TREATISE ON VENICE,  
AND THOMAS MORE'S *UTOPIA*

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**Abstract:** In the early sixteenth century, humanists involved in their state's government imagined an alternative society as a form of political philosophy, inventing a genre of literature which became known as "utopian" after the most prominent example, Thomas More's *Utopia*. One of More's acquaintances, Venetian Gasparo Contarini, wrote a treatise about his native city in the 1520s which resembles other utopian works in content, form, and function. Both of these works speak to similar concerns these counsellors had about their respective states, as well as contemporary conceptions of ideal governments and virtuous citizenship. Their texts were likely intended to inspire rulers and their fellow citizens to active reformation of society and greater civic virtue. A tension between whether this ideal society could be attained, or was impossible, can be seen in these two works, as Contarini disingenuously argues it already existed in Venice. While *Utopia* has been the subject of extensive scholarship, there has been little analysis of Contarini's *De magistratibus* within the study of Renaissance utopian writing. A comparison between these two texts illustrates that Contarini's purportedly accurate description of the workings of Venice's government follows many of the genre conventions, humanist values, and aspirations of other contemporary utopian writing.

**Keywords:** *Utopia*, utopian writing, Renaissance political philosophy, humanism, Thomas More, Gasparo Contarini, *De magistratibus*, commonwealths, civic virtues, conceptions of nobility.

Utopian literature envisioning an ideal world was a popular genre in late Renaissance Europe. With roots in classical literature, humanists in the sixteenth-century adopted the genre as a dialectic and rhetorical device to make political arguments, in an attempt to persuade, subvert, or inspire. Concerned about the disorder and corruption around them, they hoped to convince rulers and fellow citizens of the necessity to reform their current society, through contrast with the ideals expressed in their works. This trend, which expanded during the seventeenth century, is usually first associated with Thomas More's 1516 work *Utopia*. The word in its original Greek means "no-place," and is phonetically identical to *eu-topia* meaning "good place." These two meanings fuse in More's book to take on a new connotation as an imagined good place which does not (and cannot) exist.

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However, there is one example of a utopian tract written about an existing city, which included many of the same tropes and intentions as others of the genre. A contemporary of More's, Venetian patrician Gasparo Contarini wrote a treatise in the same period as *Utopia* about his native city, *De magistratibus et republica venetorum*, which was published in 1543 although written two decades before. The two humanists were acquainted, and some scholars believe they may have discussed the idea of utopia and its purpose as political philosophy and exemplum in 1521, before Contarini wrote his own treatise.<sup>1</sup> In any case, it is more than likely that Contarini had read *Utopia* before starting *De magistratibus*. While ostensibly a political disquisition, Contarini's work should be included within the category of utopian literature, because the Venice it depicted was a romanticized and theoretical version of the city and its political structure. It also had the same goal of influencing political thought and prompting reformation. Both are views of exemplary cities; however, More's is an entirely imagined world and Contarini's an idealized version of an existing place.

This study will address the similarities and differences between these two texts, and the reasons for the disparities. The focus is limited to the discussion of noble government and virtue raised in Contarini's book, which has the narrower scope of the two, and Book II of More's *Utopia*, which was widely known by Italian humanists. Locating their views within the sixteenth-century philosophical debates, particularly regarding Plato's *Republic*, I will also relate them to other Renaissance utopian writing, and place Contarini's work within the genre's forms and functions. While the two texts form the basis for my thesis, it is the political and social philosophy being expressed within a historical setting of which this study is most concerned, rather than the language or textual attributes themselves.

There has been extensive scholarship on utopian writing, which in English has primarily focused on More, Desiderius Erasmus, and the northern Renaissance humanist circle, suggesting that *Utopia* arose out of their collective discourse.<sup>2</sup> Much of the Anglo-centric scholarship has focused on the genre post-*Utopia*. However, scholars of Italian

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Gilbert, "Religion and Politics in the Thought of Gasparo Contarini," in *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of E.H. Harbison*, ed. Theodore Rabb, Jerrold Seigel (Princeton 1969) 114–115.

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Davis, "Thomas More's *Utopia*: sources, legacy and interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge 2010) 29–32.

utopianism trace the beginning of the movement earlier, to quattrocento writers and architects, including Leon Battista Alberti and Filarete, and their ideations of perfect physical cities.<sup>3</sup> A humanist circle comprising Anton Francesco Doni, Ortensio Lando, and Francesco Sansovino was involved in translating and mediating More's book for an Italian audience, including publishing the first vernacular version of Book II in 1548. Kristin Gjerpe emphasized that contemporaries, reading these vernacular editions without the contextual material provided in the Latin original, viewed Utopia as a paradox, an unobtainable place which they nevertheless still aspired to.<sup>4</sup> Contarini, who most likely read More's complete text in Latin before writing *De magistratibus*, may have understood it somewhat differently: as a paragon, but not impossible to achieve. If More's intent was to inspire leaders to strive for higher civic virtue, to emulate the equality and equilibrium achieved by the Utopians, then Contarini's can be read as a response, a description of what he (disingenuously) argued already existed in a comparable form in Venice.

There has been little exploration of Contarini's *De magistratibus* within the genre however.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Gleason, who has written extensively on Contarini, engages with it as an aspirational, even propagandic work, rather than utopian.<sup>6</sup> She suggests that rather than More and the northern humanist circle, it may have been through interactions with other ambassadors such as Florentine Giovanni Corsi that Contarini developed his ideas. Their discussions about republican virtues and ideals, especially in contrast with the Habsburg monarchies they viewed up close, came during a period when both Venice and Florence were having to forge new political and diplomatic paths in Italy and Europe.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Grendler, "Utopia in Renaissance Italy: Doni's 'New World'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, n. 4 (Oct-Dec 1965) 479.

<sup>4</sup> Kristin Gjerpe, "The Italian Utopia of Lando, Doni and Sansovino," in *Thomas More's Utopia in Early Modern Europe: Paratexts and Contexts*, ed. Terrence Cave (Manchester 2008) 47-66.

<sup>5</sup> A paper by Andrea Robiglio, "Realizing Utopia: Gasparo Contarini's Portrait of Venice," was delivered at the Sixteenth Century Society Conference, in Bruges, August 2016. However, I was unable to consult this text.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Gleason, "Reading Between the Lines of Gasparo Contarini's Treatise on the Venetian State," *Historical Reflections* 15, no.1 (Spring 1988) 254-255.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome, and Reform* (Berkeley 1993) 111-113.

More's *Utopia* has been credited with creating, or re-inventing, the utopian genre.<sup>8</sup> While we cannot know how much it inspired Contarini, it poses an excellent example with which to compare the utopian ideals in *De magistratibus*. These two texts, written by men in similar positions although with differing political challenges to their state, contain many parallels. Their conceptions of ideal governance dedicated to order, ruled by a communal body of virtuous and active citizens, reflected the humanist ideas circulating in their respective and overlapping networks. However, the values they shared did not extend to ideas of nobility and equality, as was represented in their respective works. This is the focus of this study; a contrast between the political and social philosophy relating to noble virtues contained within the two texts. Following this, I will situate Contarini's text within the broader genre, illustrating that the method and intent of his written thought experiment were consistent with Renaissance utopian literature.

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Gasparo Contarini's *De magistratibus* describes an ordered and stable republic, governed in turn by its virtuous citizens, with their only intent the best interests of the commonwealth. The citizens of Thomas More's *Utopia* are also keen to preserve the harmony of their society through dedication to its civic government, achieved through the active participation of all of its citizens. These are highly regimented and monitored societies, in which it is emphasized that the success of the state rests on the collective virtue of its citizens, all elements of utopian writing.<sup>9</sup>

The government structure in both authors' works was similar, but their views on the intertwined notions of nobility and virtue diverged in important ways, and reflected a fundamentally different conception of an ideal society. Two key differences in these texts relate to ongoing fifteenth- and sixteenth-century arguments about noble rule, and about conspicuous wealth and property ownership. While both praise mixed constitutions made up of elected princes, a senior lawmaking body, and

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<sup>8</sup> William Boelhower, "Three Early Modern Genres: A Microhistorical Approach to 'World Literature,'" *Atlantic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2019) 31. This speaks only to the literary conventions, because as other scholars have noted, utopian thought has anthropological roots across all cultures and eras. Fátima Vieira, "The Concept of Utopia," in *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (n. 2 above) 20; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (London 1990) 1.

<sup>9</sup> Grendler, "Utopia in Renaissance Italy" (n. 3 above) 483.

popular rule, Contarini advocates for one made up only of the inherited aristocratic class, while More suggests that all but the slaves (foreigners and punished citizens) should be enfranchised. And where More has Utopia's citizens eschewing signs of conspicuous consumption, or even individual possession of property, Contarini's Venice is built on a system where participation in the political process will gain financial rewards, and displaying signs of this wealth is encouraged as a way of indicating virtue. This conception of virtue is crucial to an understanding of both states, and its importance to their authors and the broader sixteenth-century humanist community is demonstrated in these texts.

More (1478–1535) and Contarini (1483–1542) were contemporaries, and had similar educational and occupational backgrounds. While More was the son of a lawyer rather than an aristocrat, they were both of a similar status at the time of writing their texts, and belonged to overlapping humanist circles of friends and correspondents.<sup>10</sup> There are many other parallels in their lives including a devotion to their shared Catholic religion, with both considering vocations as monks in early adulthood. Their books were written within a decade of each other, while both authors were in important positions as members of their respective governments. In 1516, at the time of writing *Utopia*, More was a Member of Parliament and a new member of Henry VIII's Privy Council. He would go on to become Lord Chancellor, one of the highest posts in England, until a split with the King at the time of the English Reformation cost him his position and then his life. *De magistratibus* was begun in the years 1520–25, during the period in which Contarini was the Venetian ambassador to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.<sup>11</sup> This was one of his first posts upon entering the Venetian government, and his skill at diplomacy led to a career as a diplomat and

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Mayer, *Thomas Starkey and the Commonwealth: Humanist Politics and Religion in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge 2002) 43–44; J.B. Ross, "Gasparo Contarini and His Friends," *Studies in the Renaissance* 17 (1970) 230n.

<sup>11</sup> There is some debate about these dates. The most in depth assessment was done by Felix Gilbert in "The Date of the Composition of Contarini's and Giannotti's Books on Venice," *Studies in the Renaissance* 14 (1967) 172–184, where he concludes that the bulk of the text was written during Contarini's time in Habsburg Spain, with either some revisions or additions to the last book completed in the early 1530s. Elizabeth Gleason acknowledges this conclusion, but uses the later date as a key point in her work on Contarini's reaction to the Peace of Bologna. Elizabeth Gleason, "Confronting New Realities: Venice and the Peace of Bologna, 1530," in *Venice Revisited: the History and Civilisation of the Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore 2000).

conciliar representative.<sup>12</sup> He was eventually made a cardinal by Pope Paul III, where he was active in the early Catholic Reformation.

In both societies described the citizens are focused on their commonwealth above all else, and are active in its efficient, peaceful, and just administration. They believe that this ideal polity was best achieved by the *unanimitas* of its citizens, provided they were equal, and displayed the virtues of wisdom, continence, reason, and selflessness.<sup>13</sup> Power would belong to the people, who would choose representatives from amongst themselves for positions of lawmaking, justice, and diplomacy abroad, allowing no one person or faction of citizens to gain more influence or power than another.<sup>14</sup> They were republics, in the Renaissance understanding of the term, which was often oligarchic and could include an elected executive figure. This was based on the example of ancient Rome, where in pre-Christian conception governments received their authority from the populace, rather than from God.<sup>15</sup> Contarini credits the Venetian patrician authority to their ancestors, nobles who fled the attacks of the Huns and other barbarians to form a new society in the Rialto. They in turn created the Venetian constitution using their own profound wisdom based on the examples of the ancients, and the “imitation of nature.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Utopians were awarded their constitution by their founding King Utopus, the epitome of virtuous and wise leadership.<sup>17</sup> The wisdom of these constitutions is almost unquestioned, although Contarini does acknowledge that there have been amendments made in order to adapt to changing economic and political circumstances beyond Venice’s borders.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ross, “Gasparo Contarini” (n. 10 above) 229.

<sup>13</sup> Gasparo Contarini, *De magistratibus et republica venetorum* (1543) trans. Lewis Lewkenor (London 1599) via EEBO, 5, 8, 34; Edward Muir, “Was there Republicanism in the Renaissance Republics? Venice after Agnadello,” in *Venice Revisited* (n. 11 above) 147; Skinner refers to this unison as *universitates*. Quentin Skinner, “Political Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C.B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler (Cambridge 1988) 392.

<sup>14</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 77–78.

<sup>15</sup> James Hankins, “What Was a Republic in the Renaissance?” in *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge; London 2019) 63–102; Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 390.

<sup>16</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 5–7, 78, 149; Myron Gilmore, “Myth and Reality in Venetian Political Theory,” in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale (London 1973) 433.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas More, “Utopia, Book II” (1516) in *Oxford World’s Classics: Three Early Modern Utopias*, ed. Susan Bruce, trans. Ralph Robinson (Oxford 1999) 50, 54, 108–109.

The political reality was that in early sixteenth-century Europe, most states had embraced a monarchical form of government. England had a parliament and Privy Council, but both were primarily advisory bodies, not a true balance to the power of the Tudor monarchy. In the Italian peninsula, the city states had gradually shifted to princely rule, believing it to offer security from outside threats, as well as the inner political turmoil and factionalism which had allowed those princes to seize power to begin with. Even the paragon of republicanism, Florence, would follow its neighbours and re-embrace the Medici. During the same period, humanist writers also began advocating for a *pater patriae*, based on their renewed interest in classical Greek texts, including Latin translations of Aristotle and Plato.<sup>19</sup> Erasmus wrote that the ideal state could be achieved, as long as “there is a prince whom everyone obeys, that the prince obeys the laws and that the laws answer to our ideals of *honestas* and equity.”<sup>20</sup> Theorists believed that a learned and virtuous prince would guide his state to peace and stability, provided he could remain above the squabbling and corruption of his court politics.<sup>21</sup> More speaks to this courtly corruption in Book One of *Utopia*, saying of court life: “...rather than being able to do any good, you find yourself among colleagues who are easily able to corrupt even the best of men before reforming themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

Contarini agrees that it is necessary to have a leader at the head of the government to guide the rest, quash civil dissent and conflict, and inspire his fellow citizens.<sup>23</sup> It is likely that Contarini preferred the idea of monarchical rule, but pragmatically realized that a republic was the only way to ensure a “good” government, depending on the virtue of a larger body rather than a single man, with which More would agree.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> E.g.: need for new judicial bodies to deal with the *terraferma*. Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 101, 103–104; Gleason, “Reading Between the Lines” (n. 6 above) 264.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle was believed by many in the sixteenth century to have been in favour of a monarchical form of government, resulting from the monarchist translation and interpretation of his *Politics* by the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni in 1438. Jonathan Woolfson, “Between Bruni and Hobbes,” in *Reassessing Tudor Humanism*, ed. Jonathan Woolfson (Basingstoke 2002) 197, 202–205; Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 413; Quentin Skinner, “Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Virtue of True Nobility,” in *Visions of Politics, II: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge 2002) 216.

<sup>20</sup> Erasmus, “*Institutio Christian Principis*” (1516) quoted in Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 217.

<sup>21</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 216–217, 221.

<sup>22</sup> More, “*Utopia*,” quoted in Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 221.

<sup>23</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 12–13, 37–41, 77–78.

<sup>24</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 9–10, 13; Gilmore, “Myth and Reality” (n. 16 above) 431. Thomas More, ‘Epigram 198,’ quoted in Cathy Curtin, “‘The Best State of the Commonwealth,’ Thomas More and Quentin Skinner,” in *Rethinking the*

While the Venetians elected a doge for life from among the most esteemed and experienced men in their commune, Contarini stresses that this is not a King, who can too easily become a tyrant, but rather a figurehead, constrained by laws and with little true power.<sup>25</sup> He praises the mechanisms inherent in the Venetian constitution which prevent ambitious and glory-seeking men from seizing control, such as they did in ancient Rome.<sup>26</sup> In this way he diverges from the contemporary humanist thinking about *fama* or personal prestige, and reflects the medieval scholastic view that “the desire for human glory destroys any magnanimity of character.”<sup>27</sup> Leon Battista Alberti had heralded *fama* in his treatises on art and architecture, but in his own utopian book on leadership, agreed that seeking glory and fame was dangerous in a ruler.<sup>28</sup> Rather than a king, Contarini praises the Venetian ancestors’ “wisdom and virtue” in establishing a mixed constitution, a form of government mentioned in Aristotle’s *Politics* and Plato’s writings, but more emphatically advocated for in Cicero’s *De republica*.<sup>29</sup>

This ideation followed a philosophical phase of what Quentin Skinner called “Neo-Romanism,” in which greater liberty could be found in a mixed-monarchical state, provided the ultimate power remained with the people.<sup>30</sup> In Venice this was made up of the life-term elected doge, an elected Senate made up of experienced elders, and the Great Council, a common body made up of all citizens.<sup>31</sup> From this last group were elected all the magistrates, and members of powerful

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*Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, ed. Holly Hamilton-Bleakley (Cambridge 2006) 105–106.

<sup>25</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 10, 13–14, 37, 40–41, 67; Gilmore, “Myth and Reality” (n. 16 above) 432.

<sup>26</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 13–14, 77, 95–96.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Re regios*, quoted in Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 413.

<sup>28</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *Momus, or the Prince* (1446) ed. Virginia Brown and Sarah Knight, trans. Sarah Brown (Cambridge 2003). The self-interest and desire for glory is broadly the theme of the book, but is mentioned specifically on pp. 205 (6), 217 (18), 291 (21),

<sup>29</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 15; Ross, “Gasparo Contarini” (n. 10 above) 215; Woolfson, “Between Bruni and Hobbes” (n. 19 above) 204–206. Woolfson notes that Aristotle limits a mixed polity to *politeia* or combination of an oligarchy and democracy; Gleason, “Reading Between the Lines” (n. 6 above) 258; Plato: Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 417; Plato, “Republic,” in *The Faber Book of Utopias*, ed. John Carey (London 1999) 12–13.

<sup>30</sup> Curtin, “Best State of the Commonwealth” (n. 24 above) 94, 98.

<sup>31</sup> ‘A mixture of estates...Princely sovereignty, a government of the nobility, and a popular authority.’ Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 14.



judicial authorities such as the Council of Forty for short terms, through which the various nobles cycled.<sup>32</sup>

More's Utopia has a similar government structure, although with greater enfranchisement and more direct representation, with every member of every household participating in elections of their delegates called Philarchs. These representatives, who are elected every year, form two bodies, one higher than the other. They in turn choose a prince, who, like the doge, is ruler for life, but has limited powers.<sup>33</sup> The Chief Philarchs, like the Senate, meet often to debate all matters concerning the commonwealth, with the most important issues being taken to the larger council.<sup>34</sup> By the sixteenth century, the northern humanists had begun to read Italian treatises on government, and others besides More were advocating for a form of mixed constitution, while still retaining a monarch.<sup>35</sup> A key to this model is that the monarch would not have more power than the populace in its plurality, and would not be allowed to exercise "royal prerogative."<sup>36</sup> In other writings, More advocated for King Henry VIII to listen more to his advisors, and for a consultative government.<sup>37</sup>

Both described societies have safeguards in place to prevent tyranny by either the elected high council, or by the doge/prince. The biggest threat to a republic was factionalism, which More sees as possible through collusion between the prince and Tranibores (high council), but can be avoided through transparency and oversight.<sup>38</sup> Contarini describes the strenuous election procedures in Venice, which for example prohibited more than two members of a household from acting as electors together, or serving in the same magistracy.<sup>39</sup> For Contarini this is pragmatic, as he recognizes that the security and success of his

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<sup>32</sup> Contarini details these bodies, their roles, and their selection process in great detail in Books II–IV.

<sup>33</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 45, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>35</sup> Woolfson, "Between Bruni and Hobbes" (n. 19 above) 203, 206–207; Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 445–446.

<sup>36</sup> Curtin, "Best State of the Commonwealth" (n. 24 above) 98–99.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>38</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 56.

<sup>39</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 25, 32–33, "there cannot happen to a commonwealth a more dangerous or pestilent contagion, then the overweighing of one part or faction above the other: for where the balance of justice stands not even, it is impossible that there should be a friendly society and firm agreement among the citizens," 67.

commonwealth rests on the incorruptibility of its government structure.<sup>40</sup> He acknowledges that there have occasionally been problems, and many of the patricians have not lived up to their aristocratic status, but suggests as long as they follow the constitution as laid down by their enlightened ancestors, and devote their energies to the state, they can preserve its greatness.<sup>41</sup>

Both More's Utopia and Contarini's Venice share a core set of values, including what the Renaissance philosophers and students of ancient thought (referred hereafter as humanists) referred to as *virtù*. This active form of virtue signified strength and forcefulness, and the ability to persuade, even coerce to obtain a desired outcome. This quality of political rather than moral virtue was deemed essential for the ruling class, as it put pragmatism to work for the good of the commonwealth (or for the ruler). This was articulated by Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince*, which was written in 1513 but not published until 1532.<sup>42</sup> While More and Contarini would not have read this work before writing their own books, the ideas were floating in the humanist discourse through classical texts such as Aristotle and Cicero. These ancient writers discussed *virtus* as a republican ideal, before Machiavelli stripped it of moral virtue.<sup>43</sup> Contarini sees this *virtù* as being inherent in the Venetian patriciate, descended from their forebears, manifested in their continued resilience in the face of attack, even after setbacks against the League of Cambrai.<sup>44</sup> Their single-minded pursuit of peace and stability indicates their collective *virtù*, and also Venice's civic virtue. It could be argued that this is as strongly articulated in Utopia, where the communal desire supersedes the individual.

A core belief of sixteenth-century political philosophers was that the *optimus status* of a commonwealth depended on the virtue of its citizens.<sup>45</sup> The laws must be just, and its citizens must be able to live

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<sup>40</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 12; Gleason, "Reading Between the Lines" (n. 6 above) 255–256.

<sup>41</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above), 67, 82; Gleason "Reading Between the Lines" (n. 6 above) 259.

<sup>42</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, 'VI', in *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford 2005) 20–23.

<sup>43</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Machiavelli and the Misunderstanding of Modern *Virtù*," in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, ed. David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati, Camila Vergara (Chicago 2017) 141, 143–148.

<sup>44</sup> Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini* (no. 7 above) 121–124.

<sup>45</sup> Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 448.

lives of dignity, but those can only be achieved through the goodness and diligent attentions of its ruling class.<sup>46</sup> More, who briefly allows that Utopia's citizens may not be as selfless and purely virtuous as they are described for most of the book, wants to eradicate vice altogether.<sup>47</sup> Sloth in particular is singled out, as a crime against the commonwealth, preventing the citizens from devoting their time and efforts to its operation.<sup>48</sup>

This advocacy of industry and engagement with society and the workings of the state is also More weighing in on a significant argument of the Renaissance, that of the *vita activa* versus the *vita contemplativa*. Both More and Contarini had considered monastic life, ultimately rejecting it as many sixteenth-century humanists did in favour of a life of public office, believing they could serve God and their state better in society than removed from it.<sup>49</sup> In their texts, both are exponents of the active life, or *negotium*, as opposed to a withdrawal from society for the purpose of textual study and contemplation. This was another difference between their ideal cities and the princely states surrounding them. The latter allowed the courtiers and other leisured classes time for *otium*, or freedom from public duty, which could then be devoted to learning, writing, and other pursuits.<sup>50</sup> As republics, Venice and Utopia were based on the precedent of ancient Rome, and especially the writings of Cicero, who advocated for civic engagement and citizen participation in government by educated and philosophical citizens.<sup>51</sup> More describes

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<sup>46</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 215, 218.

<sup>47</sup> There are mentions of the possibility of conspiracy, tyranny, adultery, sedition. More credits parents with teaching young Utopian citizens morality and to avoid vice, as well as the priests. More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 55–56, 64, 91, 108–109, 114. However, he is quick to point out that pleasure is not a vice, including sex, and only those things which would hurt another are to be discouraged. 78–79. Paul Grendler stated that More believed that man was inherently good, and would do the right thing if placed in the right environment. Grendler, "Utopia in Renaissance Italy" (n. 3 above) 480.

<sup>48</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 67, 112.

<sup>49</sup> Mayer, *Thomas Starkey* (n. 10 above) 44–49; Curtin, "Best State of the Commonwealth" (n. 24 above) 94; Ross, "Gasparo Contarini" (n. 10 above) 200–201, 206–211, 217, 219–220.

<sup>50</sup> Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 420, 429.

<sup>51</sup> E.g.: "what is praiseworthy about *virtus* is always to be seen in action." Cicero, *De officiis* 1.15.19, quoted in *Ibid.* 420. Eric Nelson argues that More, like many of the northern humanists, was an anti-Ciceronian, and therefore unlikely to base his idealized society on Cicero's writings on republican civic humanism. This contradicts the findings of other scholars, including those in note no. 53 below. His core thesis, that Lando, Doni and Sonsovinio advocated for a withdrawal from the *vita activa* in the later cinquecento and used *Utopia* as inspiration for this, may have missed the clarification Kristin Gjerpe identified— that they were working off of an incomplete and de-contextualised version of

the Utopians as like busy worker ants, solely motivated by the propagation of their efficient and structured commonwealth. While education is valued, and they are allowed time for learning and reading, this is not *otium*, but active self-improvement to ensure their wisdom and therefor virtue.<sup>52</sup> This is an extension of More's core belief, that there was no more noble or virtuous life than in public service, but strikes a Neoplatonic balance, allowing for both philosophy and action.<sup>53</sup>

Critically, unlike *Utopia*, where every natural-born male resident of the state is able to participate in their government (provided they have not broken one of the few essential rules), only the inherited nobility are included in Venice's idea of citizenship.<sup>54</sup> To everyone's eyes but Contarini's, this is an oligarchy, made up of a select aristocracy that had allowed few new members in the centuries since its conception.<sup>55</sup> He excuses this by explaining that the servant class (those of "ignoble birth") is necessary for the functioning of the city and its commerce, and that popular governments are destined to devolve into civil dissent and strife.<sup>56</sup> He also claims the servant class is happier for not having to participate.<sup>57</sup> Contemporary thinking on the inherent "nature" of people argued that some groups were born to be slaves, and required leading.<sup>58</sup> This echoes Plato's argument in the *Republic* that there are intrinsic

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More's work. Nelson, "Utopia through Italian Eyes: Thomas More and the Critics of Civic Humanism," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, n.4 (2006) 1042–1044; Gjerpe, "The Italian Utopia" (n. 4 above) 48–9.

<sup>52</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 58–59, 62, 67, 86–87; Curtin, "Best State of the Commonwealth" (n. 24 above) 100–101.

<sup>53</sup> D.R. Morrison, "The Utopian Character of Plato's Ideal City in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*. ed. G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge 2007) 242; Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 428–429, 448–9; Curtin, "Best State of the Commonwealth" (n. 24 above) 93–94, 100, 108.

<sup>54</sup> There is not space in this essay to examine the differences in women's roles between More's imagined world and Contarini's, however, women play a much larger role in their society in Utopia than they do in Venice, although can be magistrates or leaders in neither.

<sup>55</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 17–18. Unsurprisingly, Contarini defines oligarchy much more narrowly as being only the highest nobility or most wealthy. This fits with his ideas of citizenship extending only to the lower rungs of the aristocracy. In fact, he speaks forcefully against the idea of an oligarchic government, believing it to be almost as tyrannical as a monarchy. Ibid. 33–34. Elizabeth Gleason argues against this, saying the Contarini was in favour of an even smaller government of 31 men, limited to just the doge, advisors and Council of Ten. I can find no evidence in the text to support this. Gleason, "Confronting New Realities" (n. 11 above) 179.

<sup>56</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 16.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 83.

<sup>58</sup> Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 407.

virtues in certain natures, and only some are born with the capacity for the wisdom and reason most commonly found in the aristocracy.<sup>59</sup> Newly wealthy men and their households are excluded from public service, seen as too uncivilized or uneducated to hold the virtues necessary to participate.<sup>60</sup> Like in the *Republic*, merchants, who “lust for money and strive for political gain,” are excluded from leadership roles.<sup>61</sup> Quattrocento scholar Poggio Bracciolini had also written disdainfully about the new wealthy merchants and their aspirations to nobility: “I certainly cannot see what kind of nobility can be acquired by trade, for trade is judged by the wise to be vile and base, and nothing that can be regarded as contemptible can be related to nobility in any way.”<sup>62</sup> Tellingly, Contarini, who had spent much of his education focused on the teachings of Aristotle, does not mention the Greek philosopher’s logic that only those with the money and time of the leisured aristocracy can devote it to the learning and practice required to become virtuous leaders.<sup>63</sup> Instead, he denies that wealth plays a factor in the entitlement of the nobility to lead, and opposes any opportunity for social mobility at all.<sup>64</sup> Where all of Utopia’s citizens have the possibility for advancement into the “learned class” of rulers, Contarini, the eldest son in one of the most powerful families in Venice, had a vested interest in keeping the oligarchy closed to new members.<sup>65</sup> He does insist that there is social mobility, with lower and less prestigious posts being awarded to those of the “meaner and lesser” sorts, but in reality the Venetian patriciate was becoming more closed, and more protective of its exclusivity.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Plato, “Republic” (c. 375 BCE) in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. II, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) ed. and trans. B. Jowett (Oxford 1953) 473d, 474c, pp. 332–333; Morrison, “Plato’s Ideal City” (n. 53 above) 239; Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 417; Gilmore, “Myth and Reality” (n. 16 above) 432.

<sup>60</sup> In fact, Contarini is dismissive, even derisive about the newly rich, ‘those of the basest sort’ who believe they can gain access to the government just because they have gained status through their earned wealth. Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 17.

<sup>61</sup> Plato, “Republic,” (n. 59 above) 582, 583a pp. 454–455.

<sup>62</sup> Poggio Bracciolini, *De Nobilitate* (1440) quoted in Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 225.

<sup>63</sup> Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 442, 448–449; Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 225–226.

<sup>64</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 17; Gleason, “Reading Between the Lines” (n. 6 above) 256–257.

<sup>65</sup> More, “Utopia” (n. 17 above) 60; Ross, “Gasparo Contarini” (n. 10 above) 206.

<sup>66</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 95; Mayer, *Thomas Starkey* (n. 10 above) 45; Stanley Chojnacki, “Identity and Ideology in Renaissance Venice: The Third Serrata,” in *Venice Revisited* (n. 11 above) 283. Exclusivity outlined in Stanley

Contarini can reconcile this idea of an inherited noble class with the humanist concept of *virtus vera nobilitas* (virtue is true nobility) because Venice's ancestors had created a mechanism for electing only those seen as virtuous, albeit only from a group of citizens defined by their inherited nobility. Virtue in the Venetian republic was defined by a devotion to the commonwealth, ahead of personal gain or ambitions, and wisdom gained from education and experience.<sup>67</sup> This was a combination of Ciceronian civic humanism and Venice's own foundational myth. *Virtus vera nobilitas* was a popular sixteenth-century conception, stating that true nobility came from a possession of virtue, rather than wealth or inherited status.<sup>68</sup> This was a break from the scholastic period of the late middle ages, which linked nobility exclusively with an inherited aristocracy. Brought about by the renewed study of classical writers such as Cicero and Plato, writers starting with Dante began to claim that "there is nobility wherever there is virtue" or "nobility is born of *virtus* alone."<sup>69</sup>

This is crucial to More's text, which takes as its basis the credo that virtue alone ennobles, and explicitly rebuts the idea that virtuous nobility can be inherited.<sup>70</sup> In a society where (almost) everyone is equal, there is no place for inherited nobility. Instead, they use exemplary forbears to inspire virtuous action:

"they set up in the market-place the images of notable men and of such have been great and bountiful benefactors to the commonwealth, for the perpetual memory of their good acts, and also that the glory and renown of the ancestors may stir and provoke their posterity to virtue."<sup>71</sup>

There is a subtle difference in Contarini's treatise, as one of its purposes is to maintain the status quo, preserving the power of the patrician families of the *Libro d'Oro*.<sup>72</sup> Francesco Petrararch (1304-1374),

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Chojnacki, "In Search of the Venetian Patriciate: Families and Factions in the Fourteenth Century," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J.R. Hale (London, 1973) 47-90.

<sup>67</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 51.

<sup>68</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 223, 227; Curtin, "Best State of the Commonwealth" (n. 24 above) 100.

<sup>69</sup> "*È gentilezza dovunque è vertute.*" Dante, "Canzone Terza," in *Convivio*, IV (c.1305) (Florence 1490) EEBO, np.; Poggio Bracciolini, *De nobilitate* (1440) quoted in Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 423; Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 416-417, 421-423; Hankins, *Virtue Politics* (n. 15 above) 235.

<sup>70</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 79; Skinner, "Political Philosophy" (n. 13 above) 448, 450.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>72</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 51, Chojnacki, "In Search of the Venetian Patriciate" (n. 61 above) 71. The "Book of Gold" listed the families that belonged to the closed ranks of the patriciate, most identified during the *Serrata* or closing of the Great Council at the end of the thirteenth century. This process is outlined

and the quattrocento humanists, had written about the distinction between inherited wealth and power and true nobility, suggesting that virtue had to be enacted in each generation.<sup>73</sup> Their texts, and the discourse which followed, created the intellectual hegemony in which Contarini in particular was immersed. His innate conservatism and self-preservation motivated the writing of this fundamentalist treatise, extolling the younger members of the Venetian aristocracy to return to the path set out by their ancestors in the face of challenges to Venetian supremacy by the Papacy, Habsburgs and Ottomans. In this way he follows quattrocento Florentine Chancellor Leonardo Bruni, who, writing about the Florentine inheritance of authority from Rome, is clear that this legitimacy does not automatically confer nobility:

“In my view, all who allege a magnificent descent and put out images of their illustrious ancestors should be obliged by a kind of necessity to imitate the virtues of those from whom they say they are descended...Legislators and teachers of republics wish for nothing more than for an enlivening competition in the virtues to be poured into the spirits of citizens: unless I’m mistaken, it’s that which principally creates nobility... Not so much to swell with pride about their brilliant descent as to reckon it enjoined upon them by necessity to show themselves not unlike their distinguished ancestors in integrity, piety, goodness, industry—in sum, every form of probity in public and private affairs, and to be zealous in the pursuit of the virtues, without which they cannot keep the rank of their ancestors.”<sup>74</sup>

This distaste for unmerited nobility continued in later utopian literature, expressed in Tommaso Campanella’s *La Città del Sole* (1602), where the interlocutor states of the ‘ “They [the city of the sun’s citizens] laugh at us because we... assign nobility to those who are ignorant of every craft and live in idleness, keeping a host of dissolute and idle servants about them to the great detriment of the state.”<sup>75</sup> Contarini’s Venetians are not these idle inherited nobility; they are virtuous participants in their thus virtuous state, and therefore noble in the Renaissance definition.

In both worlds the citizens are working together for the greater good of the commonwealth, but only in Contarini’s Venice are they rewarded

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in Gerhard Rösch, ‘The *Serrata* of the Great Council and of Venetian Society, 1286–1323,’ in *Venice Revisited* (n. 11 above) 67–88.

<sup>73</sup> Hankins, *Virtue Politics* (n. 15 above) particularly 156–160, 225–227.

<sup>74</sup> Leonardo Bruni, ‘Preface to Plutarch’s *Life of Aemilius*’ (1407) quoted in *Ibid.* 226–227

<sup>75</sup> Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun: a poetical dialogue* (1602) trans. Daniel J. Donno (Oakland 1981) 43. He also states (to the European representative of the status quo) “it is your custom to exalt the ignorant either because they are noble or because some powerful faction chooses them.”

in any material way. In More's Utopia the smooth running of their state, and the happiness of their harmonious society are enough reward. More's interlocutor Raphael Hythloday specifies that while they welcome "felicity" and pleasure, being virtuous oneself is the ultimate compensation.<sup>76</sup> In order to prevent the inevitable vices of greed, envy, and gluttony, and to prove the equality of his imaginary citizens, More has specifically constructed his society to not allow for private property.<sup>77</sup> They do have pride, but it is in their commonwealth, and in their own moderation and conscientiousness.<sup>78</sup> This pride is illustrated in descriptions of their temporary houses and gardens, to which great care is taken in maintaining and cultivating an attractive home, for pleasure as much as for shelter and necessity.<sup>79</sup> The citizens dress alike and with no ornamentation, share in communal meals, and raise their children in common.<sup>80</sup> Their only use for money, earned by trading their surpluses, is to fund the mercenaries needed for inevitable war.<sup>81</sup> Gold and gemstones, rather than being used as symbols of exalted individual status or wealth, are given practical utility or used as toys, and are worn as a form of punishment rather than reward.<sup>82</sup> Any symbols of status have no place in their society, as nobility is shown through action, not outward signs.<sup>83</sup> Hythloday describes the arrival of ambassadors from another country, dripping in silk, gold and jewels, and then reports the Utopians' reactions of disdain and pity to the shame these accoutrements must indicate.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 76. This of course ties in with Catholic views of salvation. Tempting as it is to bring religion into this discussion, especially about works written in this decade, that is too large a subject to cover in this paper.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 64, 69–70.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 54–55, The descriptions of their property is reminiscent of Leon Battista Alberti's comments on pride taken in a well built and maintained home, "when it has been well designed and properly executed, who would not look at it with great pleasure and joy...who would not boast of having built something? We even pride ourselves if the houses we live in have been constructed with a little more care and attention than usual." Alberti, 'Prologue,' *On The Art of Building in Ten Books* (1485) trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Boston 1988) 4.

<sup>80</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 51, 60–61, 64–67.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 70, 100–102.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 71–72, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above) 231.

<sup>84</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 72–74. Cathy Curtin also points out that Henry VIII had issued sumptuary laws aimed at curtailing conspicuous consumption and the ostentation of the rising merchant class, obviously as big a problem in More's England as in Contarini's Venice. Curtin, "Best State of the Commonwealth" (n. 24 above) 100.



In contrast, the noble magistrates of Venice are not forbidden from showing signs of their wealth and status, according to Contarini. They are worldly men with a variety of familial and commercial interests aside from their public roles. Contarini does not acknowledge any conflict of interest in trade or other business, but we can assume that some magistracies could be quite lucrative for families with investments in trade. The various posts were compensated out of the city's treasury, although Contarini is clear that the lower magistrates are not paid enough to get rich.<sup>85</sup> An illustrative section is in part II of the *De magistratibus*, where Contarini describes the compensations the doge receives for taking on this role, acknowledging that since the doge does not (and cannot) have greater power than his patrician peers, he is given a substantial income, as well as allowed overt symbols of his office. These are specified as having "princely honour, dignity and royal bearing" befitting a king. He is also given a special hat to wear, the horned linen hat called the *corno ducale*, as well as being permitted to wear clothes made of purple and gold cloth, traditionally associated with royalty.<sup>86</sup> This is in contrast to the limitations on dress decreed by Venice's Senate throughout the period, most notably in 1512. These sumptuary laws, which also addressed the decoration of homes and the costs of banquets and wedding celebrations, were intended to curb the perceived immorality of the lower classes dressing in as ostentatious a manner as the patricians.<sup>87</sup> This is critical to an understanding of Contarini's vision of Venice: it is a culture that values selflessness and labour for the good of the common state, but it does not stress equality. In fact even within the aristocracy, differentiation based on status was not discouraged, provided it illustrated virtue, and not just wealth.<sup>88</sup>

Ironically, it is these outward signs of status and wealth that would have demonstrated the virtues both Contarini and More praise. Those that were allowed to wear the silk robes, who could host extravagant parties or live in the most elaborate homes, and that gained the wealth of their offices, were those that had risen up through the ranks of

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<sup>85</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 95.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 42–44.

<sup>87</sup> Felix Gilbert, "Venice in the Crisis of the League of Cambrai," in *Renaissance Venice* (n. 61 above) 278–279.

<sup>88</sup> as an example, the description of the ceremonies after the death of a doge indicate that the varied levels of government are dressed in different robes to signify their status. Donatto Gianotti, "Sundry Notes," in Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 156–157; Girolama Bardi, "Notes," in Ibid. 180.

magistracies to influential ambassadorships, seats on the high councils, or the dogeship. They had earned these elected posts in recognition of their noble virtues, and as a result of their commitment to the commonwealth. As Contarini writes, “To those then that excel the rest in virtue, the cheapest honours are due, as being most worthy, and above the equality of the rest...”<sup>89</sup> Equality is not essential for a utopia, as seen in Campanella’s *La Città del Sole*, which is a meritocracy. At least in Venice the elite officials are elected democratically (and exhaustively) by the Great Council; in the “city of the sun” they are nominated by their peers, but chosen by a tiny oligarchy, based on ability and knowledge alone.<sup>90</sup>

Later in the century, Frenchman Jean Bodin discussed two competing views of property ownership and displays of wealth and status. In one perspective, the use of personal goods as a way of indicating superiority indicated a lack of virtue. In the other, to take from some and divide amongst all was equivalent to stealing, no matter the benefit to all. He suggests Thomas More was a follower of the former philosophy, which is certainly clear from *Utopia*.<sup>91</sup> Eric Nelson suggested these distinct incompatible Renaissance opinions represented a subtle difference in the ancient Greek and Roman worldviews. In his explanation the Greek outlook sublimates individual desire for the good of the whole society, for the sake of civic happiness. Whereas the Roman emphasis is on individual sovereignty, but also justice in the service of the common good. What squares the circle is the active engagement in civic life of the citizens.<sup>92</sup> If the Italian humanists were “neo-Roman” as Skinner suggests, then Nelson argues that the northern Erasmian humanists, including More, reflected the neo-Greek views.<sup>93</sup> Contarini, on the other hand, through his endorsement of *gloria* and the accumulation of wealth and symbols of status, is obviously following the Roman tradition. Nelson’s paradigm provides an interesting way to view the differences between the two utopian visions, although in other respects, such as government structure, both Utopia and Venice take after the Roman republic.

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<sup>89</sup> Contarini, *De magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 35.

<sup>90</sup> Campanella, *City of the Sun* (n. 75 above) 43, 95.

<sup>91</sup> Jean Bodin, V:ii, *The six Bookes of a Common-weale*, trans. Richard Knolles (London 1606) EEBO, 569–572.

<sup>92</sup> Nelson, “Utopia through Italian Eyes” (no. 51 above) 1029–1032.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 1034, 1039.

Descriptions of apparel and ornaments is a common trope in early modern utopian literature. In Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627) the explorer narrator, Hythloday's counterpart, is met by lavishly dressed ambassadors from the island of Bensalem, in a scene mirroring the arrival of *Utopia*'s Anemolian ambassadors.<sup>94</sup> However, rather than looking at the silk robes and opulent decorations of the ambassadors as being a sign of their immorality, they are recognized as being indicators of their status within the Bensalem society. Like the Utopians, the inhabitants of this island do not have use for money or possessions except for trade purposes, so symbols of wealth are not relevant.<sup>95</sup> In this case the ornamentation represents the honour earned by the elders of the island, revered heads of their households, or members of the high council. Even without commercial or intrinsic worth, it has value as an indicator of the virtues of the noble learned class.<sup>96</sup> Other Renaissance works have shown the rewards for virtue and honour to be as varied as more wives, as in Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, or the best of the communal food, as in *La Città del Sole*.<sup>97</sup>

Interestingly, while More created an ascetic life for the Utopian citizens, in the frame of his book his eponymous surrogate acknowledges that without money and luxuries "all nobility, magnificence, worship, honour, and majesty, the true ornaments and honours, as the common opinion is, of a commonwealth, utterly be overthrown and destroyed."<sup>98</sup> This is a similar argument to Plato's in *Republic*, in which his interlocutor insists the inhabitants of any ideal city must have "relish to their meal," by which he means more than the minimum requirements, even luxury. More does not answer this question explicitly, but Plato does, in a way that is directly relevant to *Utopia*'s concern with equality. "How a luxurious state is created... for by extending our inquiry to such a state we shall be more likely to see how political justice and injustice originate."<sup>99</sup> In other words, by

<sup>94</sup> Francis Bacon, "New Atlantis" (1627) in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. V. ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath (London 1857) 362, 368, 386–388, 395–396.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 384.

<sup>96</sup> This is an interesting paradox in Bacon's work, the expression 'precious' used by the Salomon's House Father to describe the gemstones they have in Bensalem. He mentions that they are of great beauty, but does he see also the economic value of them as a commodity? Ibid. 406.

<sup>97</sup> Michel Montaigne, "Essays," in *Faber Utopias* (n. 29 above) 54; Campanella, *City of the Sun* (n. 75 above) 51.

<sup>98</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 123.

<sup>99</sup> Plato, "Republic" (n. 59 above) 372d–373a, pp. 255.

introducing some treats, the door will be opened to a desire for more, leading inevitably to inequality and vice.

In this respect, as well as an acceptance of the inevitability of war and conflict, More's vision of an ideal world is still rooted in his understanding of the weaknesses of human nature. His view is pragmatic, and he understands the impossibility of his utopian experiment. As Hythloday states, the utopian laws would be adopted throughout the world, if only it wasn't for human's pride.<sup>100</sup> In contrast, Contarini's rose-tinted view of Venetian society, while not an accurate picture of its reality, is rooted in optimism of what Venice could be (again). His is not the no-place of *u-topia*, but the opportunity of *eu-topia*.

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Thus far I have explored through a comparative analysis the relation between the ideas of *De magistratibus* and *Utopia*, addressing the content and political philosophy of the two texts. *De magistratibus* bears many of the markers of utopian writing, including the isolated setting of a unique and superior society, where the citizens are free and harmonious. Following the parameters outlined by Ruth Levitas, what follows is a brief discussion of the form and function of utopian literature, and how Contarini's treatise fits within the Renaissance conventions.<sup>101</sup> Fátima Vieira and Levitas have outlined the characteristics of utopias, and traced the changes in conception and genre over time, with Vieira refining Levitas's literary analysis of form, function and content by identifying some of the characteristics of early modern utopias. Both highlight that categories of utopianism are broad, and argue that what unites them is an ideology in opposition to the current society, the "expression of desire for the better way of being." They also rightly point out that their form and function are historically contingent.<sup>102</sup>

More provided an outline of the tropes in a poem included in the original Latin version (which was not published in the early Italian editions). These include that Utopia is set apart, distant from the rest of the world, necessitating travel to reach it; that it must be superior to

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<sup>100</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 122.

<sup>101</sup> Levitas, *Concept of Utopia* (n. 8 above) 2–6.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 8, 181, 189–92; Vieira, "Concept of Utopia" (n. 8 above) 5–8, 19

every other known society, including that envisioned by Plato; that the virtues of its citizens and of its laws ensured a continued *eutopia*.<sup>103</sup> These criteria set it and the utopian texts that followed apart from earlier examples, such as St. Augustine's *City of God* (c. early fifth century CE), which envisioned heaven, and Plato's didactic speculation in the *Republic* (c. 375 BCE). In Renaissance conception, a utopia was created by humans, not dictated by God, and whether a thought experiment or not, was described as if it could exist.<sup>104</sup>

The genre form as it developed following *Utopia* built on More's guidelines. Firstly, the early modern examples were inspired by the descriptions of distant and exotic places, following the publication of travel literature by Amerigo Vespucci and Christopher Columbus, which had widely circulated.<sup>105</sup> The visitor travels to a far off and isolated land, where he is then informed about the city's incredible attributes by a citizen narrator. Contarini neatly circumvents this by announcing at the start of *De Magistratibus* that he witnesses the awe of new arrivals to Venice.<sup>106</sup> He then proceeds to describe the city, its people and its laws, much like Hythloday and other utopian interlocutors. This starts with its location 'in a remote and secret place', not unlike the island nation of Utopia, fulfilling the genre convention.<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, in the English edition published in 1599, the translator Lewis Lewkenor serves the function of the traveller coming across this superior society from afar. In his "Letter to Reader" he states he has been to many countries, and has conversed with their virtuous citizens, and they are all universally appreciative of Venice. This ignites his own desire to visit this exalted land, as described in the text by Contarini which he has translated.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> More, "A shorte meter..." in *Three Early Modern Utopias* (n. 17 above) 127–128; Vieira, "Concept of Utopia" (n. 8 above) 5.

<sup>104</sup> Vieira, "Concept of Utopia" (n. 8 above) 6–7.

<sup>105</sup> Ralph Robinson, "Introduction," in Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Ralph Robinson (London 1556; reprint London 1869) 4; Susan Bruce, "Introduction," in *Three Early Modern Utopias* (no. 17 above) ix–x; Boelhower, "Three Early Modern Genres," (n. 8 above) 31–2; Gjerpe, "Italian Utopia," (n. 4 above) 58

<sup>106</sup> "Having oftentimes observed many strangers, men wise and learned, who arriving newly at Venice, and beholding the beauty and magnificence thereof, were stricken with so great an admiration and amazement, that they would, and with open mouth confess, never anything which before they had seen, to be thereunto comparable, either in glory or goodness..." Contarini, *De Magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 1

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 3.

Secondly, and uniquely to early modern utopias, these cities exist in parallel to the present, rather than in the idealized past, or in a speculated future, as would become common.<sup>109</sup> The travellers are able to visit the utopian worlds, but still return to their current society in order to pass on what they have learned. This is most true for *Utopia*, as well as those in the seventeenth century like Bacon's *New Atlantis*. This static view of the perfect society has no future, as there is no way to improve, and the teleological levers which control its essentially utopian qualities prevent its decline. This is a critical utopian quality of Contarini's depiction of Venice: it described an ahistorical version of the *La Serenissima*'s idealized past, but in the context of its present political condition.

Thirdly, Contarini, like Hythloday and other guide narrators, expects visitors to his utopian Venice, and readers, to take the lessons they have learned back to their own lands, and to their own societies. This request for dissemination of what the visitor/reader has learned would have been intended to inspire further discussion and philosophical discourse, as well as to prompt their fellow citizens to active participation in change for the good of their commonwealths. Their route to a better society was different—for More innovative, but for Contarini conservative—but they were inspired by the same neoplatonic ideals.

There was little more important to Renaissance rulers, political theorists, and other humanists than concord and stability of the state. The effective and harmonious functioning of the commonwealth was essential to survive the various threats to the state and society. Religious division, economic and social insecurity, and challenges from other states were omnipresent, and social order above all was deemed necessary to strengthen the commonwealth and unite its citizens. More's narrator Hythloday claims that the Utopians "define virtue to be life ordered according to the prescript of nature."<sup>110</sup> This ordered quality is emphasized by both authors, and echoes a need for control, organization, and stability desired by many in Renaissance Europe. As

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<sup>108</sup> Lewis Lewkenor, "Letter to Reader," in Contarini, *De Magistratibus* (n. 13 above) Ar–A2v.

<sup>109</sup> Bruce, "Introduction" (n. 105 above) xii–xiii; Vieira, "Concept of Utopia" (n. 8 above) 8–9.

<sup>110</sup> More, "Utopia" (n. 17 above) 77. Contarini also refers to this relationship to natural order, *De Magistratibus* (n. 13 above) 149.

historian Paul Grendler wrote, utopian writers were willing to sacrifice the “regimentation of the lives of the inhabitants for the sake of the city as a whole.”<sup>111</sup>

*De magistratibus* deviates from other utopian writing in that in addition to spurring change amongst his fellow Venetians, his text could also be used for outwardly propagandic purposes. At a politically unstable time in the Venetian state, Contarini is particularly worried about disorder, which could allow disintegration of the Venetian government, and allow one of the larger European powers to take control of their territories and trade.<sup>112</sup> After the Venetians were defeated by the League of Cambrai in 1508–16, they had retreated from the *terraferma*, focusing their attentions inwardly. As ambassador to the court of the Habsburg Emperor during the writing of the *De magistratibus*, Contarini understood the weak position of Venice in this period of the Italian Wars, and was trying to at once build up *La Serenissima*’s image to her potential subjugators, and reinvigorate the republican commitment of his fellow patricians.<sup>113</sup> The real Venice, on the wane after centuries of dominance in the Mediterranean, is the anxious society in decline that Contarini was keen to inspire to regeneration. This is a key attribute of utopian literature, the contrast between reality and ideal: the intended function of the Renaissance utopian texts was to provide an example or template of a balanced and ordered commonwealth, demonstrating the moral and social reforms necessary to create such a society.<sup>114</sup>

It could be argued that the political and social structure in *De Magistratibus* is too pragmatic to be truly ideal, but this too can be a feature of the genre. Like More, Contarini allows for the existence of greed, and other vice in his description of his society, but the true virtue of the government he describes is that it can override these human failings. As discussed above, debate over different forms of governance and ideas of virtue and *virtù* were key to the formulation of utopian thought in the sixteenth century.

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<sup>111</sup> Grendler, “Utopia in Renaissance Italy” (n. 3 above) 479.

<sup>112</sup> Gilmore, “Myth and Reality” (n. 16 above) 433.

<sup>113</sup> Gleason, “Confronting New Realities” (n. 11 above) 170–171, 179.

<sup>114</sup> Grendler, “Utopia in Renaissance Italy” (n. 3 above) 483; Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” (n. 8 above) 8-9.

Gasparo Contarini was not the only Italian to adopt the utopian genre, although he may have been the only one who overlapped with the circles of northern humanists who engaged in this form of political philosophy, and who likely appropriated the genre directly from More's original text. Francesco Sansovino published an early Italian edition of *Utopia* in Venice in 1561, which was very popular, leading to five other editions before 1607.<sup>115</sup> Sansovino would later write a treatise of his own praising his adopted city, and stated that Venice was as close to Utopia as could be found.<sup>116</sup>

Both *Utopia* and *De magistratibus* are invaluable tools for historians, as they illuminate the ideals and values of the Renaissance through the words of prominent members of the government. However, both present challenges for modern readers attempting to understand Renaissance utopianism. It is difficult to discern More's true opinions, since he uses a dialogue format to put forward his conception of an ideal city, arguing against his straw-man narrator throughout the text. Scholars have also for centuries debated his intent in writing *Utopia*: as a blueprint for a new society, a foil against the contemporary reality, or an inspiration for his colleagues as a path to follow.<sup>117</sup> Contarini's intent is relatively clear: to bolster the image of Venice to its neighbours and enemies, and to inspire the next generation of the noble ruling class to continue the traditions initiated by their ancestors.<sup>118</sup> But under a critical reading, alongside other contemporary sources, it is obvious that his portrayal of an ordered and equal Venice was not the reality of the time.<sup>119</sup> This casts doubt on all his claims, not just that Venice was as stable and peaceful

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the second book only of *Utopia* was published in a collection entitled *Il governo*, detailing the governments of other (real) cities. It was translated by another utopian writer, Ortensio Lando. Terence Cave "Introduction," in *Thomas More's Utopia* (n. 4 above) 59; Boelhower, "Three Early Modern Genres," (n. 8 above) 31.

<sup>116</sup> Cave, *Thomas More's Utopia* (n. 4 above) 63, 65.

<sup>117</sup> Eg: Quentin Skinner and Terence Cave suggest it was purely a thought experiment, meant to stimulate conversation about the nature of a perfect commonwealth. Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (n. 19 above); Cave, *Thomas More's Utopia* (n. 4 above) 10–11; Paul Grendler suggests it was to provide a model for European rulers. Grendler, "Utopia in Renaissance Italy" (n. 3 above) 480, 483. My own view leans towards the former, because its ideals are irreconcilable with humanity's innate imperfections. This is the argument made by many about Plato's imagined Callipolis, as a provocative paradigm, e.g.: Morrison, "Plato's Ideal City" (n. 53 above) 234–235.

<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth Gleason, "Reading Between the Lines" (no. 6 above) 252, 254–255n, 265, 270; Ross, "Gasparo Contarini" (n. 10 above) 230.

<sup>119</sup> For a discussion of the "myth of Venice" and other dissenting contemporary accounts, see: Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (London 1980)



as he depicts, but that the actual machinations of electing and running a government were as free from factionalism and corruption as he asserted. Contarini was not the first to advertise the merits and glories of *La Serenissima*, or what would become known as the ‘Myth of Venice,’ but he was the first insider to do so, and in such detail.<sup>120</sup> His idealized description of his beloved native city then serves as an example of utopian fiction rather than a true political treatise.

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<sup>120</sup> Skinner, “Political Philosophy” (n. 13 above) 417; Gilmore, “Myth and Reality” (no. 16 above) 434, 439.