

by FRED INGLIS

*Searching for Utopia: the history of an idea*

by Gregory Claeys

Thames and Hudson 224pp, hb £24.95

ISBN 9780550 251744

Generalisations about popular sentiment or the dominant mood at a historical moment are only to be risked in a surge of more or less drunken enthusiasm. But in 2011, with two ten-year-old wars still crackling at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, guns in the streets of half a dozen of its capital cities, and bankruptcies threatening all around the inland sea, let alone across the Atlantic, it isn't promising weather for the idea of Utopia.

Nothing daunted, Thames and Hudson, always such beautiful bookmakers, have taken Gregory Claeys's compact yet copious directory of an idea and turned it into a magnificent picture book, gorgeously illustrating the madly Protean nature of the hope and despair of humankind as it takes the measure of the gap between how things are and how they ought to be.

The splendid and innumerable illustrations challenge the reader, of course, to express amazement at the author's omissions (why no *Forest Fire* by Piero di Cosimo, no *Ideal City* by Piero della Francesca?). But this would be churlish where there is such a glorious and unexpected profusion of little-and-well-known imagery.

The closer one looks at the sheer variety, however, the more blurred becomes the purpose, the argument, the very category of the book, and the nearer it moves to the edge of that catchall sitting-room synecdoche, the coffee-table book.

Not that that would be a disgraceful thing to do; enlightenment and delight may well be served up with biscuits, but it surely isn't what Professor Claeys intended? He is Professor of the history of political thought, but there is, alas, very little record of *thought* in his book, and no history at all. It is as if the enormous intellectual effort expended in building the stout architecture of Cambridge historicism these past forty-odd years had never been.

Take Claeys's treatment of his great original, Thomas More. He retells More's tale quite simply, but in a series of shameless anachronisms describes Utopia as "essentially democratic", purses twenty-first century lips over sixteenth century "imperialist tendencies",

and subsumes More's most radical principle, which was the outright abolition of all private property, into vague acknowledgement of 'More's socialism'.

This lack of any exploration of the change in meaning of such key concepts as 'pleasure', 'happiness', 'equality' and, indeed, 'production' marks what is so misleading about the very title of the book, and leaves its author simply enumerating an enormous but fairly familiar reading list. Even so, there are curious omissions, such as the history of "la bonne vaux" inaugurated by Restif de la Bretonne in *Monsieur Nicolas*, and consummated by Alain Fournier in *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and no use made at all of Simon Scharma's monumental *Landscape and Memory*.

The author's uncertainty about the kind of book he is writing regularly transpires in downright banality, such as telling the reader that "In Genesis, God is described as creating the first man, Adam, and then the first woman, Eve", and when, a few pages later, he also captions Hans Memling's *Last Judgement* by telling us that "In Catholic belief, good souls and bodies would be reunited in heaven, while the bad would go to hell", the mildest reviewer might become ribald.

The controlling narrative runs from the beginning to the end and, as the end becomes nigh and dystopia replaces utopia in Claeys's vision of plausibility, he allows himself to give up history altogether. He speaks a curse over Adam Smith for "delivering the culture of choice" (endorsing as he does so the Tory party's ignorant misappropriation of that great moralist) and, in a tumult of clichés ("grasping at straws", "throwing crutches aside", "instant gratification", "out of the woodwork") bundles together in a single malediction the horrors of consumerism while urging upon the human race, no less, and with a slightly glazed sincerity, the necessity of low-order utopianism.

The book needs the steadying touch of Walter Benjamin, who grasped that *all* societies seek to transcend present wrongs in the social order and its production, and do so by searching "the primal past" for its best aspects. Understandably, Claeys has been swamped by the colossal detail of his topic and cannot, you might say, see the trees for the wood.