An End to Endless Toil:
Political Economy and Poetic Form in *Utopia*
by
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Facilis descensus Averno;
Noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis:
Sed revocare gradum, superasque evadere ad auras,
Hoc opus, hic labor est.

Virgil, Aeneid Book VI

The gates of hell are open night and day;
Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:
But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
In this the task and mighty labor lies.

John Dryden’s Translation
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Intro. The Poetics of Political Economy

*Utopia* and the Unevenness of the “Economic”

*The vulgar economists confine themselves to systematizing in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one.*

Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1

*Hitherto, force — from now on, sociality. A pure pious wish, the demand for “Justice.” But Th. More made this demand 360 years ago, and it has yet to be fulfilled.*

Frederick Engels, Draft of *Anti-Duhring*

This thesis argues that Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) was a participant in the historical emergence and development of political economy as a distinct “science.” The implication of this argument is that More’s masterwork, *Utopia*, first published in 1516 for a circle of international, Latin-reading intellectuals, should be read as a work of transitional political economy in narrative form and interpreted as such. In particular, this method of reading should be applied to More’s presentation of labor on his imaginary island, a presentation that contains an essential tension between labor’s economic form and its literary expression as human toil. This is a unity of political economy and poetics that I will be exploring throughout this study. Reading *Utopia* from this vantage point, I argue, opens up a glimpse of the emancipatory possibilities contained within the “rise of the economic.” But, I might add, these are possibilities that must first be disentangled by the minutiae of dialectical criticism.

This is an argument that does not oppose the more traditional account of Thomas More as an inventor of a new “thing” called “Utopia,” a view perhaps best summarized by Krishan Kumar in his book *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times:*
The Renaissance, the Reformation and the European voyages of discover are one conventional and still persuasive line of division between the modern and the ancient and medieval worlds. Utopia is, on this view, a creation of the modern world. It is a modern European novelty. Thomas More did not just invent the world ‘utopia’, in a typically witty conflation of two Greek words (eutopos = ‘good place’, outopos = ‘no place’): he invented the thing. Part of that new thing was a new literary form or genre; the other, more important, part was a novel and far-reaching conception of the possibilities of human and social transformation.¹

I am in near complete agreement with Kumar on his assessment of More’s achievements. More’s Utopia is indeed a creation of the modern world and thus a modern European novelty. It is indeed a new “thing,” a new literary genre, and also a new way of conceiving of the possibilities of human and social transformation. It is all of these things, but yet it is more. It is more than all of these because Utopia represents a moment within the emergence of a new sphere of human life and thus also a new form of thought: the “economic as such” and “economic theory.” In other words, Utopia was present at the birth of political economy and this co-birth has seeped into More’s writing style, his poetic imagery, and his practical choices. This co-birth is the secret to many of the paradoxes of Utopia’s representational structure and thus its continued ability to both inspire and jest. Perhaps most crucially of all, it is the secret of Utopia’s lingering emancipatory potential.

**Utopia and the “Pre-History” of Political Economy**

What is the justification for my assertion that Utopia should be read as a work of transitional political economy? This is a line of argument that diverges slightly from the more “classical” historical materialist reading of More’s Utopia as an observer of the transformations leading to the capitalist mode of production’s birth.

This latter reading, for example, can be found in Karl Marx’s account of primitive accumulation in the historical chapters of *Capital*. There, book I of *Utopia* acts as a representational litmus test of sorts for the transformation of agrarian social relations in sixteenth-century England:

The complaints of these old chroniclers are always exaggerated, but they faithfully reflect the impression made on contemporaries by the revolutions in the relations of production. A comparison between the writings of Chancellor Fortescue and Thomas More reveals the gulf between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. As Thorton rightly says, the English working class was precipitated without any transitional stages from its golden age to its iron age.\(^2\)

Marx frames *Utopia* here as marking a shift between two historical eras, and he goes onto cite it two more times during his account of English primitive accumulation, each time as an historical document.\(^3\) His is a way of reading that approaches *Utopia* as a vessel of historical experiences and thus a record of past ruptures.\(^4\)

I argue, however, that More was not only an historical observer, but also a theoretical *participant* in the development of political economy as a “science.” In connecting More and his *Utopia* to the history of political economy, I am working within a more submerged current of More scholarship. It is a current, however, which can also be traced back to Marx. In a footnote to chapter twenty-five of *Capital*, in which he critiques the theories of Thomas Malthus, Marx lists a group of people who he views as some of the original practitioners of the science:

\(^3\) Ibid., 880n; 898n.
Originally, political economy was studied by philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Hume; by businessmen and statesmen, like Thomas More, Temple, Sully, De Witt, North, Law, Vanderlint, Cantillon and Franklin; and the theoretical aspects especially were studied, and with the great success, by medical men like Petty, Barbon, Mandeville and Quesnay.\footnote{Marx, Capital, 767n. Emphasis added.}

There are two immediate takeaways from this account of political economy’s intellectual lineage. The first is that it is quite significant that Thomas More is mentioned at all. The second, and more relevant for this study, is that More is the earliest historical figure to be listed by far. In fact, More died decades before the next earliest figure was even born (Sully), and he is the only person on the list who lived during the fifteenth century.\footnote{The full names of the practitioners listed in order of birth date (as far as I have been able to establish) are as follows: Thomas More (1478-1535), Maximilien de Béthune, Duke of Sully (1560-1641), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), William Petty (1623-1687), Johan de Witt (1625-1672), Sir William Temple (1628-1699), John Locke (1632-1704), Nicholas Baron (1640-1698), Sir Dudley North (1641-1691), Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), John Law (1671-1729), Richard Cantillon (1680s-1734), Francis Quesnay (1694-1774), Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), David Hume (1711-1776), and Jacob Vanderlint (?-1740).}

More is thus the temporal outlier within this lineage, an outlier status that points to his relative precociousness when it comes to his historical relationship with political economy.


Two in particular are worth mentioning, the first being the 1896 entry for “Thomas More” in Palgrave’s Dictionary of Political Economy. There one finds this observation:
[The] central conceptions [of *Utopia*] are economic. [Thomas More] anticipates Sir Wm. Petty in perceiving that wealth is the offspring of labour, and is still more modern in identifying it with necessaries, and he sees that necessaries imply a composite conception, i.e., of what people ought to and do as a fact accept as such.  

More’s *Utopia* is approached here as having “central conceptions” which are “economic.” These economic conceptions include More’s view of wealth as the offspring of labor, thereby anticipating the later theories of William Petty (who Marx famously labeled the founder of classical political economy). Not only that, but *Utopia* is said to also contain a clear awareness of the relationship between social norms and economic necessity. This is all evidence for *Utopia* containing, not just trace elements of political economy, but rather an active and self-conscious relationship to the emerging science as such.

A similar interpretation of More’s *Utopia* can be found in Joseph Schumpeter’s posthumously published *History of Economic Analysis*. In this grand and sweeping history of economic analysis since the ancient Greeks, Schumpeter includes a short section titled “Note on Utopias.” On the relationship between early modern utopian fiction and economic analysis, Schumpeter writes:

> Only four instances need be mentioned, the works of Francis Bacon, Harrington, Campanella, and More. *And the first three may be dismissed at once as irrelevant to our purpose*: Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627), a fragment—a singular deviation from the creed of ‘inductive science’ preached by its author—and Harrington’s *Oceana* (1656) are of no interest at all; to Campanella’s *Civitas solis* (City of the Sun, 1623) Platonic rays playing around rather commonplace matter do lend a glamour not its own; *but the case of More’s Utopia is different*.  

Whereas previously More was the temporal outlier in Marx’s lineage, here he is the *economic* outlier among contemporaneous utopian fictions. Schumpeter makes it

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8 Higgs, 818.
9 Schumpeter, 207. Emphasis added.
clear that for the purposes of writing a history of economic analysis, such writers as Bacon, Harrington, and Campanella “may be dismissed at once as irrelevant to our purposes.” However, he adds “but the case of More’s *Utopia* is different.” Thomas More, in other words, plays a role in the history of economic analysis through his writing of *Utopia*.

Schumpeter argues that *Utopia’s* relevance for the history of economic analysis stems from its representation of production and distribution in their generality. He writes:

Two things [about *Utopia*] have relevance to analysis, however. First, the general plan of production and distribution of goods: tastes being given, the quantities currently produced, according to government regulations, by all adults except a privileged class of ‘learned’ men—not quite Plato’s guardians, because there is an elected king—are distributed so as to put all districts on a footing of equality on the basis of statistics of current production and by means of a system of public storage. This, whatever else it may mean, is not a bad method to put into evidence the essentials of the functioning of any economic organism.\(^\text{10}\)

Here, instead of looking to book I of *Utopia* (as the “observer” reading does), Schumpeter analyzes book II and its description of an imaginary society. What he finds there is a “general plan of production and distribution” where the “quantities currently produced” are “distributed so as to put all districts on a footing of equality,” a distribution that works “on the basis of statistics of current production and by means a system of public storage.” As Schumpeter emphasizes, this is the adequate substance of *any* functioning economic body. That is to say, all the way back in 1516, Thomas More laid out the bare, general anatomy of the “economic as such.” Schumpeter’s analysis thus provides evidence for the birth of *Utopia* being in fact a *co-birth* with an emergent economic way of viewing the world.

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
By giving (for the time period) a holistic economic analysis of an entire imaginary society, More was able to create a fictional representation that is a peculiar combination of plausibility and implausibility. This is a peculiar combination, I propose, that is best captured through its resultant presentation of labor. This presentation of labor provides a unique opening from which to view the relationship between the historical rise of “the economic” and the lingering emancipatory potential of More’s imaginary island.

My thesis is rather simple: there are two sides to this presentation of labor. On the one hand, *Utopia*’s labor is economic in its representational form and thus “plausible.” On the other hand, Utopia’s labor is also an expression of a poetic critique of toil. This latter, “literary” side to Utopia’s labor stems from a moral aim at the heart of More’s text: the desire to minimize necessary labor in the aggregate. This “implausible” (at least for 1516) and poetic end is achieved through the means of Utopia’s “plausible” economic labor. In other words, the two sides of Utopia’s labor are together *dynamic*, where ends and means complement one another in the name of an emancipatory goal.

However, there is a crucial unevenness to this dual presentation of labor and its concomitant dynamism. Any reading of *Utopia* as a work of transitional political economy must take into account this unevenness and the representational tensions it produces. In fact, as I will show, these tensions are the very source of the compatibility between Utopian labor’s economic form and its toilsome poetical content, and thus the source of this imaginary labor’s emancipatory dynamism. This
unevenness and its “productive” tensions arise from two sources: the poetical and the historical.

**Translation as a Literary Practice: Poetic Unevenness**

*Utopia* was written in Latin for a select group of sixteenth-century, Latin-reading intellectuals. This means that the vast majority of the readers of More’s text, and in particular contemporary readers, have read translated versions of the Latin original. While there is nothing wrong with this, it does mean that certain aspects of the original word choice and syntax are “lost in translation” (or even “gained” in translation, due to the often-ambiguous Latin language that must at times be filled in by the translator). This loss or gain through translation, I argue, particularly affects words that pertain to the representation of labor. This is due to there being two principal ways of speaking about labor in Latin: *opus* and *labor*. This is the Latin version of a dichotomy that exists in many languages—a dichotomy between a word that represents a more creative form of labor and one that represents human toil.¹¹

This dichotomy, I argue, has important poetic implications for the interpretation of More’s *Utopia*. In order to this show this poetic dichotomy in action, I now turn to Sir Thomas Elyot’s 1538 English-Latin lexicon.¹² Elyot was a sixteenth-century English humanist who was most likely tied to Thomas More’s intellectual

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¹¹ Andrea Komlosy, *Work: The Last 1,000 Years*, trans. Jacob Watson and Loren Balhorn (London: Verso, 2018), 39-40. Komlosy argues that this dichotomy goes back to at least the ancient Greeks and their distinction between *pònos* (toilsome work) and *érgon* (creative work).


[https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicons/53/details#search](https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicons/53/details#search)
circle. His lexicon is an invaluable resource establishing not only the English meaning of Latin words, but also for the specifically historical meaning of these words in the context of sixteenth-century English humanism.

Elyot’s lexicon reveals the sixteenth-century divide between the diligence of *opus* and the toil of *labor*. His entry for *opus* translates into English as either rather neutral (“a work,” “a labour” “Eius opere by his means or diligence”) or as relating to necessity (“it is necessary,” “need”). His entry for *labor*, on the other hand, contains a more toilsome articulation (“labour,” “travail”), an articulation that is repeated in the entry for the phrase *fugiens laboris* (“abhoring labor or pain”). However, the divide between the two comes into much sharper focus when their verb and adjective forms are investigated. For example, Elyot’s entry for the verb form of *opus*, *operor*, reads “to work.” But the entry for *laboro* (from the infinitive *laborare*) reads “to labour” and “to be in heaviness or grief.” Meanwhile, under the entry for *laboriosus homo* one finds this definition: “a painful man.” As this sixteenth-century lexicon shows, the act of *labor* is best approached as a state of toil, pain, and heaviness that is explicitly negative in its cultural meaning. It is not without reason that the origin of

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13 Although exact sources are hard to come by, scholars often place Elyot in More’s circle. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry for Elyot notes that after More’s execution at the hands of Henry VIII, Elyot wrote to Thomas Cromwell in order to dissociate himself from More: “lay apart the remembrance of the amity between me and Sir Thomas More, which was but *usque ad aras*, as is the proverb, considering that I was never so much addict unto him as I was unto truth and fidelity towards my sovereign lord” (Stanford Lehmberg, "Elyot, Sir Thomas (c. 1490–1546), humanist and diplomat." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 15 Apr. 2019. http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e8782).
15 Ibid, s.v. “Fugiens laboris.”
16 Ibid, s.v. “Operor, aris, ari.”
17 Ibid, s.v. “Laboro.”
18 Ibid, s.v. “Laboriosus homo.”
the *laborare* purportedly lies in the slipping of slaves under the weight of their heavy loads.\(^{19}\)

There is thus a crucial poetic unevenness between the literary use of *opus* versus that of *labor*, an unevenness that must be taken into account when reading More’s *Utopia*. While both words can involve pain (a different Latin-English lexicon, Thomas Thomas’s *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* from 1587, includes under its entry for *opera* the meanings “pain” and “travail”), it is only *labor* that is negative as such.\(^{20}\) When More chooses to use one over the other is therefore highly important for unpacking his poetic intent. That is why, throughout this study, I will be consulting different translations of *Utopia* for their handling of words and phrases that pertain to “labor” in order to compare them to the original Latin. The translations of *Utopia* that I will be consulting are: the 1995 Latin-English Cambridge edition, the 1964 Yale edition, and the original 1551 English translation by Ralph Robinson.\(^{21}\) In addition to these three English translations, I will also on occasion be consulting Luigi Firpo’s 1978 Latin-Italian edition of *Utopia*, as it is easier to translate Latin into Italian than into English.\(^{22}\) The use of these various translations will concretize More’s poetics in relation to his presentation of labor, and, in particular, his critical presentation of human toil.

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\(^{19}\) Komlosy, 39-40.

\(^{20}\) Thomas, Thomas, *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (Cantebriagiae [Cambridge]: Richard Boyle, 1587), s.v. “*Opera,*” *Lexicons of Early Modern English*, accessed April 15 2019. [https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicons/179/details#search](https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicons/179/details#search). Thomas’s entry for *opera* also includes such definitions as “diligence,” “endeavor,” “study,” “means,” and “workmanship.” These more or less positive meanings are never found under the entry for the Latin *labor*, in either of the two lexicons (See: Ibid, s.v. “*Labor, oris*”).


Historical Unevenness: Emergence of “Labor as Such”

Nevertheless, beyond the lexical, there is the overarching historical gap that mediates the encounter between More’s sixteenth-century Latin and its contemporary translations. This is a historical gap, I argue, that cannot be reduced to the ambiguity of the Latin language and thus the difficulty of rendering it into English (or any other language). Instead, this historical gap operates at the level of shifting material and social practices. An illuminating example of how shifting material and social practices affect translation work can be seen in an 1868 letter from Marx to Engels. In this letter, Marx argues that ideological blinders have caused nineteenth-century German Latinists to mistranslate key passages in classical sources, passages that pertain to communal property-relations:

And we are all very much in the clutches of this judicial blindness: right in my own neighbourhood, on the Hunsrück, the old Germanic system survived until the last few years. I now remember my father talking about it to me from a lawyer’s point of view. Another proof: just as the geologists, even the best like Cuvier, have expounded certain facts in a completely distorted way, so philologists of the force of a Grimm, mistranslated the simplest Latin sentences because they were under the influence of Moser, etc.... E.g. the famous passage in Tacitus: ‘arva per annos mutant, et superest ager’, which means: they exchange the fields (arva) (by lot, hence also sortes in all later Leges Barbarorum), and there remains over communal land (ager in distinction to arva as ager publicus), Grimm and others translate: they till every year new fields, and there is still (untilled) land left over!23

Marx shows that German Latinists such as Grimm mistranslated “the simplest Latin sentences” due to the ideological blinders of their time. What was in the era of

Tacitus a distinction between the exchange of private fields (arva) and the remaining communal land (ager publicus) becomes for nineteenth-century German academics a distinction between tilled and untilled (and thus potentially exploitable) land. Therefore, although nothing changed about the Latin phrase, an overarching historical shift in material practices produced this imposition of the bourgeois present onto the ancient past.

I argue that an analogous process of historical imposition occurs with the presentation of labor in More’s Utopia, an imposition stemming from the unevenness of this labor’s economic form. When reading contemporary English translations of More’s Utopia, one is given the sense that these translators have attempted to capture a concept of labor that is not yet a concept. The prime example of this is the manner in which these translators occasionally take the subtle distinctions and ambiguities of the Latin and impose an explicit mention of labor—in the contemporary sense of the word—onto a phrase that contains no such mention.²⁴ Such impositions do not occur simply because these translators approach Utopia as readers of a non-Latin language. Rather, such impositions occur more precisely because these translators read a sixteenth-century text from the viewpoint of their own historical present.

This historical present (that is, our own) has, I argue, a very different relationship to “labor as such” than the sixteenth century. In putting forth this argument, I am building off Marx’s pioneering analysis of the historical rise of economic labor in his 1857 Introduction to the Grundrisse. In this crucial text, we

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²⁴ I will be giving key examples of such unwarranted impositions throughout this study.
find this observation about how the simplicity of labor in an economic sense masks a much larger historical complexity:

Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form—as labour as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, ‘labour’ is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction.\(^\text{25}\)

“Labor,” which seems to be a simple and trans-historical category, is here revealed to be historically specific, a distinction arising from an economic conceptualization of this labor’s simplicity. In Marx’s account, this conceptualization corresponds to a historically determinate set of social relations. What is dull and trans-historically general becomes—through these social relations—a peculiarly economic concept.

Marx argues that “labor as such” must therefore be approached historically as both an emergent mental act and an emergent material practice. He writes:

Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone.\(^\text{26}\)

In other words, the mental act of confronting a very real totality of heterogeneous labors is one of the preconditions for the historical emergence of “labor as such.” This is a material totality where, crucially, no single (and hence no “particular”) labor can be said to dominate. To the bourgeois mind that confronts this heterogeneous totality, one thing appears as common to all, namely, the universal abstraction of “labor.”

Marx argues that, generally speaking, this is the point of emergence of the abstract mental operation that is economic labor.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 104.
However, this inability to think of labor in a particular form stems not just from the mind, but also from material practices. As Marx continues:

On the other side, this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form.27

Bourgeois mental indifference to labor’s particularity thus corresponds to a distinct social and material practice: the easy transference of individuals from one type of labor to another. Crucially, the specific content of this de-particularized labor is left by society to chance, thereby creating a sense of indifference among its laboring individuals. A categorical separation now exists between the material reality of labor and the particular individuals who labor, thus transforming economic labor into not just a mental abstraction, but also a material or “real” abstraction.28

Marx was well aware that this material or “real” abstraction of labor requires a singular level of social transformation in order to fully emerge as such. This level of transformation, he argues, had in his day only emerged within the most modern iteration of bourgeois society yet—the United States:

Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society—in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category ‘labour,’ ‘labour as such,’ labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at

27 Ibid.
28 In other words, the very abstractness of this phenomenon paradoxically becomes concrete. For an analysis of how impersonal and abstract social forms act not as the “veil” of “real social relations” under the capitalist mode of production, but in fact constitute them, see: Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6.
the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.\footnote{Ibid., 104-105.}

Marx makes it very clear: simple and trans-historical abstractions only gain a practical truth when they are embedded within the social relations of a particular form of society. This, for the Marx of 1857, was the United States. It was only “over there” on the bourgeois soil of the New World that political economy’s point of departure, namely, labor as such, became true in practice.

Returning to \textit{Utopia}, I will now begin to read More’s text as an imaginary “soil” from which to observe the initial emergence of an economic form of labor, as it will come to exist within the treatises of the political economists. To do so, however, is to acknowledge that there are two sides to Utopia’s sixteenth-century labor: one emergently economic, the other poetic. Again, these two sides are mediated by More’s moral desire to reduce toil in the aggregate, and are therefore together dynamic. For on this imaginary island, ends and means complement one another in the name of an emancipatory goal. Consequently, \textit{Utopia}’s economic means cannot be separated from its overarching poetic end. That is to say, by the stroke of More’s pen, political economy and literature emerge together as one complex and evocative (but uneven) whole.
I. Dialectics of Utopian Labor
Soil, Emergence, and the Dual Presentation

“I believe that we can begin from the proposition that utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, that the very possibility of utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation.”

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*

“Then let me implore you, my dear Raphael,” said I, “describe that island to us. Don’t try to be brief, but explain in order their fields [agros], rivers, towns, people, manners, institutions, laws – everything, in short, that you think we would like to know.”

Thomas More to Raphael, *Utopia* Book I

In this chapter, I will begin to read *Utopia* as a work of transitional political economy whose presentation of labor contains two antagonistic sides: labor as an emergent economic form and labor as a poetics of toil. I argue that when Utopia’s labor is analyzed from this dual perspective, these two antagonistic sides emerge together to form an emancipatory tendency unique to the imaginary island of Utopia—the tendency to reduce aggregate toil. This dual perspective is typically lacking in accounts of Utopia’s economics, even those that acknowledge More’s island as a locus of the historical emergence of the economic as such. It is therefore a new, dialectical viewpoint from which to disentangle the emancipatory potentialities that More’s text contains.

However, I will not be declaring, *a priori*, that there is a duality to the labor on Utopia. Far from that, the task of this chapter is to show that such a duality exists. In order to do this, I will be following the advice that Marx gave while criticizing the...

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30 “*Ager, agri*, a field. Sometime a territory belonging to a town, wherein is included fields, meadows, woods, and waters. Sometimes a manor with the demeanes. Sometime the arable field only” (Elyot, *Dictionary*, s.v. “*Ager, agri*”).
economic work of Ferdinand Lassalle. Upon learning that Lassalle intended to approach the science of political economy in a dialectical manner, Marx wrote in a letter to Engels:

> It is plain to me from this one note that, in [Lassalle’s] second grand opus, the fellow intends to expound political economy in the manner of Hegel. He will discover to his cost that it is one thing for a critique to take a science to the point at which it admits of a dialectical presentation, and quite another to apply an abstract, ready-made system of logic to vague presentiments of just such a system.\(^{31}\)

Marx warns us here of the intellectual danger of approaching a subject matter from the outside and forcing it within a pre-existing dialectical logic. To this he counterposes an immanent critique that brings forth a dialectical presentation of a subject matter where there was previously none. I propose to approach the problematic of Utopian labor’s dual presentation in the latter vein of Marx, as opposed to Lassalle. That is to say, I will be closely investigating the representational structure of *Utopia* to show how at a certain point, further knowledge of its labor requires that one present it doubly as both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil. The dual presentation of Utopia’s labor, therefore, emerges from the Latin text itself through an encounter between the early sixteenth century and our own historical present.

In order to reach this dialectical moment of presentation, I will be engaging in both a critique and an extension of Richard Halpern’s pioneering analysis of *Utopia*. I have chosen Halpern because he is an example of someone writing within the Marxist tradition of literary criticism whose analysis of *Utopia* historicizes its economic form.

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However, just like most others, Halpern omits the duality of Utopia’s labor. Nonetheless, he gives a highly insightful reading of *Utopia* that argues this fundamental point:

Granted that *Utopia* cannot be comprehended by any one concept or reduced to a single theme, still it is possible to isolate that element which makes it historically *new* and which distinguishes it from the array of imaginary polities that predate it. Simply put, Utopia is organized primarily around the satisfaction of needs; its governing rationale is the production and consumption of use values…. In answer to the double bind of excess and lack, Utopia installs a rational and equitable distribution of goods, which supplies basic needs and yet avoids invidious accumulation or waste. Utopia exists primarily to house, feed, and clothe its inhabitants; its governing logic is that of utility.³²

I argue that this line of reasoning about isolating what is historically new and distinctive about *Utopia* is correct but incomplete. Specifically, Halpern misses that the new economic logic distinguishing *Utopia* also contains a poetical surplus that is not reducible to the production and consumption of use-values. This is a surplus whose poetics conceives of the act of labor in qualitative terms as a painful form of life. Analyzing this poetical surplus reveals that the governing logic of utility of which Halpern speaks of should simultaneously be grasped as emancipation from toil.

I also argue that the *why* of Halpern’s incompleteness is significant for the verification of Utopian labor’s dual presentation. Somewhat ironically, Halpern’s sophisticated Marxist analysis is incomplete due to his failure to properly investigate Utopia’s “hidden abode of production.”³³ That is, despite arguing that the element distinguishing the island is its explicit organization around the satisfaction of human

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³³ “Let us therefore…leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notices ‘No admittance except on business’” (Marx, *Capital*, 279-80).
needs, Halpern never actually “enters” this abode of production as such. We do, to be sure, encounter such statements as “[Utopia] offers a perfected and idealized arena for communalized petty production and thus for the production of useful values,” but these are not followed by any concrete inquiry into the conditions, goals, and social relations within this perfected and idealized arena. Instead, Halpern keeps his analysis at the level of social property relations, pleasure, consumption, and distribution. This is the fatal flaw of his analysis, for it omits from view the essential mediation that produces Utopia’s foundational distinctiveness in terms of both history and genre.

Once the Utopian abode of production is investigated, this essential mediation is revealed to be More’s representation of the Utopian soil. The particular features of this representation are crucial for understanding not only what is historically new about Utopia (i.e., the emergent economic labor it foregrounds), but also its literary distinctness, its divergence from previous imaginary enclaves. Generally speaking, pre-Utopia “utopias” feature a representation of the soil that is boundlessly fruitful and magical. Such an agricultural deus ex machina allows the fictional inhabitants of these enclaves to live happily without ever engaging in labor. But Utopia’s soil—a factor rarely touched on by commentators—is the precise antithesis of this magical boundlessness. More states very clearly that the soil on Utopia appears to be barren and infertile. However, he then goes on to say that the Utopians yield a greater surplus than anywhere else through their labor. In other words, the true potential “essence” of this soil can only be accessed through determined human effort.

34 Halpern, 164-165.
35 More, Utopia, 179.
Through this representation of the soil, one sees how the very inclusion of labor marks Utopia as divergent from previous imaginary enclaves.

Yet, the economic form of this labor is representationally uneven. Closer investigation reveals it to constitute something other than abstract labor in the modern capitalist sense. There is a crucial historical gap between labor on Utopia and the simple and abstract labor of the *Grundrisse*. By analyzing this gap, I will show how Utopia’s labor begins to appear doubly as both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil. Given this dual presentation, the political economy of *Utopia*, while showing signs of development that place it within the eventual trajectory of the capitalist mode of production is incomplete and uneven in important ways. Through a careful reading of this incompleteness, we find Utopia’s emergent political economy to be mediated by a larger moral aim and project. It is in this moral aim and project, and especially in the economic unevenness thereof, that the emancipatory potential of More’s imaginary island lies.

**Hermeneutic in the Soil: From Fantastic to Practical**

The question of the representation of the soil in pre-1516 imaginary enclaves naturally begins with the ancient Greeks. Not only is their mythology teeming with imaginary and far-away lands, but Greek thought played an essential role in the European humanist moment of which More was a participant. In book I of *Utopia*, More even associates Hytholoday with Greekness by introducing him as a sailor whose “sailing has not been like that of Palinurus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather,
of Plato.”\textsuperscript{36} But in consulting ancient Greek thought, what should be our start-point? The \textit{Odyssey} alone contains a plethora of imaginary enclaves from which to choose, from Calypso’s melancholic island to the hazy land of the Lotus-eaters. Critically, one of the imaginary realms within the \textit{Odyssey}, the island of the Cyclopes, is described as a land with a magical soil.\textsuperscript{37} But the Cyclopes are not usually thought of in “utopian” terms, and it would be a stretch to place them in a direct lineage with More’s \textit{Utopia}.

To reformulate the problem more historically, then: how did More’s contemporaries view his \textit{Utopia} compared to previous imaginary enclaves? Leaving aside the larger question of Plato’s \textit{Republic}, we know of at least one case where a contemporary of More compared \textit{Utopia} to an already-established imaginary enclave: in a prefatory letter included in \textit{Utopia}’s second, third, and fourth printings, the French humanist Guillaume Budè connects More’s island to the semi-legendary Fortunate Isles of Greek mythology.\textsuperscript{38} Budè tells the readers of \textit{Utopia}: “I have discovered, after investigating the matter, that Utopia lies outside the bounds of the known world. Perhaps it is one of the Fortunate Isles, near neighbor to the Elysian Fields. As More himself says, Hythloday has not yet told exactly where it is to be found.”\textsuperscript{39} Here, the great humanist plays along with More’s presentation of \textit{Utopia} as the true account of a faraway island, but he gives this façade his own, semi-mythical twist.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 43-45.
\textsuperscript{37} “From there we sail on, our spirits now at a low ebb, and reached the land of the higher and mighty Cyclops, lawless brutes, who trust so to the everlasting gods they never plant with their own hands or plow the soil. Unsown, unplowed, the earth teems with all they need, wheat, barley and vines, swelled by the rains of Zeus to yield a big full-bodied wine from clustered grapes” (Homer, \textit{The Odyssey}, trans. Robert Fagles [New York: Penguin Books, 1996], 214-15).
\textsuperscript{38} More, \textit{Utopia}, 6.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 15.
Budè’s choice of the Fortunate Isles is a crucial one, for these same Isles appear in the works of two of More’s most beloved writers: Lucian of Samosata and Erasmus of Rotterdam. The former was a first-century satirist whose writings More translated from the original Greek; the latter was the foremost humanist of the sixteenth century and More’s close friend.⁴⁰ We can therefore be certain that More was familiar with both of their representations of the Fortunate Isles, sometimes also referred to as the Isles of the Blest. Significantly for my argument, both Lucian and Erasmus devote considerable attention to their Isles’ soil.

In his True Story, More’s beloved Lucian stops on the Fortunate Isles during his journey to the unknown lands of the Western Ocean. The great satirist describes the Isles as a majestic land full of golden buildings, temples constructed out of precious gemstones, and fine clothing woven from the silk of spiders.⁴¹ However, when Lucian describes the soil of this imaginary polity, he chooses not a majestic, but a fantastic mode of telling:

The land is covered with a profusion of flowers and cultivated trees, which provide shade. The vines bear fruit every month, twelve times a year. But the pomegranate, apple and other fruit-trees were said to produce thirteen times a year, because in the month they call Minoion after Minos, they bear a double crop. Instead of grain, their corn-stalks grow ready made loaves on their ears, like mushrooms. There are three hundred and sixty-five springs of water around the city, and the same number of honey. There are five hundred of myrrh, but these are smaller. There are seven rivers of milk and eight of wine.⁴²

The Isles’ trees bear fruit impossibly quickly; freshly baked bread comes straight from the corn stalk; rivers flow with a bounty of milk, honey, and wine. The fantastic

⁴⁰ Lucian himself appears within the monologue of book II of Utopia: “[The Utopians] are very fond of Plutarch’s writings, and delighted with the witty persiflage of Lucian.” Ibid., 181.
⁴² Ibid, 332.
mode corresponds to the complete absence of labor, and hence of toil, on Lucian’s Isles. In its place, the magical properties of the soil fulfill everyone’s needs. In other words, Lucian has established an imaginary representation of the soil that excludes labor as such from its territory.

The Fortunate Isles are likewise portrayed as a land without labor in Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus describes the Isles as a land “where all things grew without plowing or sowing; where neither labor, nor old age, nor disease was ever heard of.”43 Even more explicitly than Lucian, Erasmus emphasizes the absence of labor on the Isles. Moreover, neither Erasmus nor Lucian arbitrarily imposes his own version of the soil on a previously established imaginary polity. Their representations of this magical soil are confirmed with every mention of the Fortunate Isles in the classical sources, such as Diodorus Siculus’s *Bibliotheca historia* or Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*.44 The pre-sixteenth century literary record is clear: their magical soil ensures that the Fortunate Isles are a land without labor.

44 Diodorus writes in his *Bibliotheca historia*: “The islands, on the other hand, since they were exposed to the breeze and supplied the inhabitants with wholesome air, and since they also enjoyed good crops, were filled with greater and greater abundance, and they quickly made the inhabitants objects of envy. Consequently they have been given the name Islands of the Blessed, the abundance they enjoy of good things constituting the reason for the epithet…. And, speaking generally, the islands we have mentioned have enjoyed a felicity far surpassing that of their neighbours, not only in ancient times but also in our own age: for being as they are the finest of all in richness of soil, excellence of location, and mildness of climate, it is with good reason that they are called, what in truth they are, ‘blessed.'” Plutarch describes in the *Life of Sertorius* the first time Sertorius hears of the Fortunate Isles: “These are called the Islands of the Blest; rain falls there seldom, and in moderate showers, but for the most part they have gentle breezes, bringing along with them soft dews, which render the soil not only rich for ploughing and planting, but so abundantly fruitful that it produces spontaneously an abundance of delicate fruits, sufficient to feed the inhabitants, who may here enjoy all things without trouble or labour.” After Sertorius hears this description, he is, “seized with a wonderful passion for these islands, and had an extreme desire to go and live there in peace and quietness, and safe from oppression and unending wars.” One wonders how many of Thomas More’s contemporaries felt this same way after reading *Utopia* (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, trans. C. H. Oldfather, *Lacus Curtius*. Accessed November 18th, 2018. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/5D*.html. Emphasis added;
But this supernaturally fruitful soil on the Fortunate Isles could hardly differ more from the soil on Utopia, which More describes in book II, along with the bodies of the inhabitants:

In body they are nimble and vigorous, and stronger than you would expect from their stature, though they’re by no means tiny. *Their soil is not very fertile* [Et quum neque solo sint usquequaque fertili], nor their climate of the best, but they protect themselves against the weather by temperate living and improve [medentur] their soil by industry [industria], so that nowhere [nusquam] do grain and cattle flourish more plentifully, nowhere are people’s bodies more vigorous or less susceptible to disease. There you can not only observe that they do all the things farmers usually do to *improve poor soil* by hard work and technical knowledge [ut terram natura malignorem arte atque opera iuvent], but you can see a forest which they tore up by the roots with their own hands and moved to another site. They did this not so much for the sake of better growth but to make transport easier, by having wood closer to the sea the rivers, or the cities themselves. For grain is easier than wood to carry by land [minore enim cum labore terresri] over a long distance.\(^{45}\)

As this long passage shows, the soil on the island of Utopia is the very antithesis of the soil on the Fortunate Isles—anything but lush or magically fruitful. Utopia’s soil is in fact a *terra natura malignus*, that is, barren and infertile.\(^{46}\) More has thus invented for his readers an imaginary representation of the soil that is the negation of the tradition represented by the Fortunate Isles.\(^{47}\)

More’s choice to represent Utopia’s soil as barren and infertile means that labor on his island is a material necessity. Again, this is total break from the


\(^{46}\)Elyot, *Dictionary*, s.v. “Malignus ager.”

\(^{47}\)Even George Logan, one of the few More scholars to make any mention of how Utopia’s soil amounts to a representational break, acknowledges this only in a single footnote: “In fact Utopia owes its nearly self-sufficient status more to the industry of its inhabitants than to the natural advantages of its territory. Hythloday stresses that the Utopians ‘have not a very fertile soil or a very wholesome climate’. … These serious defects in the territory, which find no precedent in the Greek best-commonwealth exercises and would not seem to reflect the Old- or New-World analogues of Utopia, were presumably dictated by theoretical considerations” (George Logan, *The Meaning of More’s Utopia* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983], 194n. Emphasis added).
representation of labor found in previous imaginary enclaves (a representation of absence). No longer are the inhabitants of imaginary lands able to survive by simply gathering the abundant output of a magical soil. Now these fictional inhabitants must mix their labor with a quasi-barren soil to produce their own subsistence. Therefore, just like Marx’s “practical truth” of labor as such emerging on the bourgeois soil of the United States, we can see through Utopia’s soil the emergence of economic labor within the utopian genre, broadly defined. The soil’s need to be worked defines what is new about More’s Utopia, a novelty expressed through the bare inclusion of labor. But, when it comes to the economic form of this newness, the representation of Utopia’s labor remains uneven. As I will show, Utopia’s labor is far from being the abstract and simple concept of the Grundrisse.

In fact, examining More’s original Latin in the soil passage just cited, we find not one but three different representations of labor: industria, ars atque opera, and labor. Taken together, these three make a “cluster” of interrelated words and references in the sense used by Raymond Williams in his study of historical semantics.48 From the viewpoint of today, each word and phrase in this cluster speaks of labor. But we should not overlook the essential differences they contain regarding the how of labor’s representation. That is, although a representation of labor itself distinguishes More’s Utopia from previous imaginary enclaves, it cannot be assumed that this representation fits neatly with an abstract and simple use of the term “labor”. As I will show, the three representations of labor found in the cluster each speak of labor in different senses, with only one of them interpretable as an emergent

48 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 22.
economic form of labor (i.e., a simple and abstract concept). Strikingly, this emergently economic form is the only one of the three to also contain a poetics of toil.

The first representation of labor found in the soil passage is “industria.” More writes that the Utopians use their industria to medeor (“to heal or cure”) their infertile soil. However, what More meant by “industria” in the sixteenth century is different from the meaning of its contemporary English derivative, “industry.” As seen in Elyot’s lexicon entry for industria, there exists a vast distance between the sixteenth- and twenty-first-century meanings of this word. In fact, Elyot’s lexicon lists two definitions for industria. The first one reads “Industria, a virtue comprehending both study and diligence.” The second definition, closely related to the first, reads “De industria, of purpose.”

In the first definition, industria is conceptualized as a virtue whose two components are study and diligence. Through the merger of the two, the Utopians virtuously heal their soil. In the latter definition, industria is expressed more generally as purposeful activity as such. Both terms, despite being nouns, are closer in meaning to the contemporary English adjective “industrious.” Both speak of the purposeful and virtuous attributes of the laboring subject, and not, as with the contemporary noun “industry,” an economic unit. More’s use of industria thus contains a

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49 Elyot, Dictionary, s.v. “Meder, eris, eri.”
50 Ibid, s.v. “Industria.”
51 Ibid, s.v. “De industria.”
52 This connection between industria and the laborer’s virtuous attributes is also seen in book I of Utopia, during Hythloday’s speech on the differences between rich and poor: “the rich are rapacious, wicked and useless, while the poor are unassuming, modest men, whose daily labour [cottidiana industria] benefits the public more than themselves.” More, Utopia, 103.
representation of labor, but in a rather indirect way that cannot be described as a simple and abstract concept.

The second representation of labor in the soil passage is *ars atque opera*, a phrase applied to the very same labor More previously described as *industria*. The prior duality of diligence and study has now become the rhetorical combination of artistic craft and purposeful work.\(^5^3\) This combination of art and work heals the barren soil on Utopia. Crucial here is that, in contrast with his previous use of *industria*, More’s second representation includes a Latin equivalent for “labor.” However, More’s use of *opera* does not stand-alone; it is mediated by his simultaneous inclusion of art, making it thus not labor as such which heals the Utopian soil, but rather the unity of labor and art. Therefore, neither can the second representation of labor be described as a simple and abstract concept.

It is only the third representation of labor in the passage that may be said to approach a simple and abstract conceptualization of labor. However, this instance is more complex than the previous two, for More breaks up the third representation into two separate parts: the act of labor and its rationale. Again:

> [On Utopia] you can not only observe that they do all the things farmers usually do to improve poor soil by hard work and technical knowledge, but you can see a forest which they tore up by the roots with their own hands [*sed populi manibus alibi radicitus evulsam silvam*] and moved to another site. They did this not so much for the sake of better growth but to make transport easier, by having wood closer to the sea, the rivers, or the cities themselves. For grain is easier than wood to carry by land [*minore enim cum labore terrestri*] over a long distance.\(^5^4\)

\(^5^3\) The 1551 Robinson translation even goes as far as to render *ars atque opera* as “by craft and cunning” (Bruce, 85).

\(^5^4\) More, *Utopia*, 179.
More describes how the Utopians rip (\textit{evulsam}, “plucked,” “pulled”) an entire forest from the ground with their own hands (\textit{manibus}) in order to replant it elsewhere.\footnote{Thomas, \textit{Dictionarium}, s.v. “\textit{Evulsus}.” “Hands,” perhaps in the broadest, most instrumental sense of power and collectivity: “\textit{Manus}, a hand, a grapple to fasten ships together, sometime it signifies a multitude of men in the aide of one, sometime power, sometime writing, also the nose or snout of an elephant” (Elyot, \textit{Dictionary}, s.v. “\textit{Manus}”).}

This is the first part of the third representation of labor in the passage, the part where More describes the act of labor. This action entails the pure expenditure of bodily force to achieve a transformation of the natural world. It is a conceptualization of labor that focuses neither of the attributes of the doer (as in \textit{industria}) nor the quality of their doing (as in \textit{ars atque opera}) but on the doing as such, on its power.

The rationale behind this act is crucial, for it shows this labor as tied to a logic and intent quite different from the previous two representations. More explicitly tells his readers that the Utopians do not move this forest in order to heal the soil, but instead to improve the efficiency of \textit{transport}. The labor that is reduced to the pure expenditure of bodily force is thus simultaneously associated with a larger project of spatial rationalization. This is a project of \textit{a priori} rationalization that connects agricultural production to distribution in the cities. Moreover, instead of conceiving of labor in terms of quality (as with both \textit{industria} and \textit{ars atque opera}), this rationalized combination of means and ends broaches the issue of \textit{quantity}. The means of the pure act of doing is linked to an emancipatory quantitative end, where the Utopians engage in bodily exertion here in the present in order to minimize such exertion in the future. \textit{A priori} rationalization is married to quantitative reduction.

This third representation of labor is lexically presented in a simple and abstract way that summons a vision of toil. In the original Latin, the reasoning behind
the Utopians’ forest-relocation reads: *minore enim cum labore terrestri itinere fruges quam ligna logius adferuntur*.\(^{56}\) The Cambridge edition’s translation of this line as “grain is easier than wood to carry” is therefore unsatisfactory, for it misses More’s explicit use of a Latin word for labor, in this case *labor*.\(^{57}\) This word for labor, unlike the past two representations, stands alone and remains unmediated by either art or study. Crucially, this simple and unmediated representation of labor speaks of both economic quantity and toil. In a calculating move, the Utopians tear up a forest because it allows for *minor labor*: not *minor opus* or *opera*, but specifically reduction of a form of labor that stems from the Latin word for toil. The representation of labor that comes closest to a simple and abstract economic usage, then, also brings forth a sense of pained exertion. In this lexical transition within the passage from *industria* to *labor*, one can see a subtle example of the dual presentation of Utopian labor as both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil.

Moreover, there is yet another crucial distinction between the first two versions of labor and the third with its dual presentation: the latter is unique to Utopia. More is adamant that while elsewhere farmers use *ars atque opera* to renew their soil, only on Utopia will you see an entire forest ripped from the ground and replanted in order to reduce the labor of transportation. Only on Utopia will you thus see such a rationalized economic means toward such a toil-reducing end. Labor on Utopia is thus uniquely *dynamic*, not just dynamic in terms of quality (again, the

\(^{57}\) All three of the other translations I have consulted better capture More’s use of the Latin *labor*. The Yale edition reads, “For it takes less labor,” while the Robinson translation reads “For it is less labor and business.” Closely related to the previous two, but slightly different due to its choice to translate the Latin noun into an Italian adjective, the Firpo translation reads “è meno faticoso,” i.e., “it is less laborious” (Surtz, *Utopia*, 103; Bruce, 85; Firpo, 163).
islanders’ *industria* yields crops of unprecedented abundance, but they employ the usual *ars atque opera* existing elsewhere), but more specifically in terms of a rationalized quantity. This third representation renders Utopia’s labor uniquely capable of being quantified and divided as a quasi-abstract “thing.” Yet, at the same time, this conscious and purposeful focus on labor as a rational quantity also entails a vision of embodied toil. This is the dual presentation of labor that More represents as dynamically unique to his Utopia, a particularly economic means toward a particularly poetic end.

Clearly, then, *Utopia* can be productively analyzed in terms of the dual presentation of its labor. However, knowledge of this duality cannot allow us to forget that the island of Utopia is still a “nowhere.” More, with his love of paradoxes, has crafted a peculiar imaginary society that is full of both emancipatory intent and jest. Unfortunately, this paradoxical combination can lead even the most sympathetic of commentators to dismiss its economics as a mere *jeu d’esprit*. One thus finds Father Surtz, translator of the Yale edition, writing, “No one, of course, would hold that [*Utopia*] is serious down to its last line, since the view would be proved to be erroneous by such absurdities as moving a whole forest to avoid work.”58 Here, Surtz draws far too great a distinction between emancipation from toil and love of jest, and loses sight of the much more interesting question: why has Thomas More so purposefully represented Utopia’s labor as different from labor elsewhere (an elsewhere that includes past imaginary enclaves)?

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I propose to address this question by reading *Utopia* more explicitly as a work of transitional political economy. The replacement of a magical soil with a barren one, I will argue, is just the beginning of the island’s emergent economic anatomy. This is an economic anatomy according to which labor is approached through the prisms of both political economy and poetic toil. Again, the dynamism of this dual presentation is mediated by More’s larger moral critique of toil, a critique that finds expression in an emancipatory tendency on Utopia to reduce toil in the aggregate. To corroborate these assertions, let us look, as the next stop on our journey through the Utopian abode of production, to the island’s sphere of agriculture.

**Journey to Agriculture: A Philological Investigation**

Utopia’s agriculture is of a unique nature. It is the island’s only universal branch of production, that is, agricultural labor on Utopia is mandatory—absolutely no one on the island is exempt. More specifies quite explicitly: “Farming is the one job at which everyone works, men and women alike, with no exception.”59 This universality, moreover, renders Utopia’s agriculture unique among nations. A marginal note accompanying the description states: “Agriculture is everyone’s business, though now we [non-Utopians] put it off on a despised few [*Agricolatio communis omnium, quam nunc in paucos contemptos reicius*].”60 This note establishes an important spatial opposition between the “here” of Utopia and the “there” of everywhere else. “Here” on Utopia, everyone takes part in agricultural labor; “over there,” this same labor is forced onto a vilified class. The very point of

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60 Ibid.
common and universal sociality within the island of Utopia is thus, beyond its shores, unsocial and hierarchical as such.

Utopia’s universal sphere of work is structured around regular, two-year work rotations divided between town and country:

Each year twenty persons from each household move back to the city after completing a two-year stint in the country. In their place, twenty substitutes are sent out from town, to learn farm work from those who have already been in the country for a year and are therefore better skilled in farming. They, in turn, will teach those who come the following year. If all were equally untrained in farm work and new to it, they might harm the crops out of ignorance. *This custom of alternating farm workers is the usual procedure, so that no one has to perform such heavy labour unwillingly for too long* [Is innovandorum agricolarum mos, etsi sollemnis sit ne quisquam invitus asperiorem vitam cogatur continuare diutius]; but many of them who take a natural pleasure in farm life are allowed to stay extra years.  

In the first half of this passage, More presents a distinctively economic and technical rationale for these institutionalized, two-year rotations. The staggered structure ensures that there will always be someone in the countryside with the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully tend to the fields. Agricultural production, and thus the labor this production involves, is here rationalized and divided. This rationalization even incorporates the socially necessary knowledge that this productive sphere requires. Most importantly, this institutionalized rotation acts as an embryonic example of Marx’s “indifferent” worker moving from one kind of labor to another with ease.  

Or rather, it is a politically directed transference that approximates—at an early historical instance—the easy and indifferent movement between concrete labors that abstract wealth-creation will eventually produce on a much vaster scale. The imaginary society of Utopia is not yet at such a general level.

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of indifference and easy transfer. On this island, it is only within the rotation system that labor has become delinked from particular individuals in fixed forms.

Yet, as the second half of the long passage shows, the rationale for this institutionalized system is primarily social and cultural. Agriculture is organized in this staggered and universal form “so that no one has to perform such heavy labour unwillingly for too long [Is innovandorum agricolarum mos, etsi sollemnis sit ne quisquam invitus asperiorem vitam cogatur continuare diutius].”63 This rationale expresses a normative view of labor as embodied toil. More embeds this view within Utopia’s technical and economic organization of agriculture, thereby tying its rotation system to a larger moral principle. The embodied toil of agricultural labor is thus partially overcome through a strict limit on its aggregate time.64 Far from being “indifferent” to the relocation of individuals between agriculture and other kinds of labor, Thomas More decrees this universal and moral principle on his island: as far as agriculture is concerned, no one is to toil for longer than is necessary.65 Here we

63 Ibid., 113-114.
64 James Bonar misses this important point about Utopia’s agriculture in his section on Thomas More in Philosophy and Political Economy (1893). He writes: “[More’s] scheme of production and distribution is as follows. Separate occupations are allowed, but besides his or her separate occupation every man and woman must practice the one common occupation of agriculture, which is to be restored to its ancient glory” (Bonar, 63). But agricultural practice on Utopia hardly constitutes some return to days of yore: it is a new and innovative system in its own right. Farming is a requirement of citizenship, not because the Utopians romanticize it, but because they aim to reduce aggregate toil at the level of the collectivity.
65 How would this principle, if implemented, have affected sixteenth-century Europe? An answer to this question can be symptomatically gleaned in the writings of René Choppin, a lawyer and member of the noblesse de robe whom the historian Natalie Zemon Davis identifies as one of the few Frenchmen known to have referenced Utopia in writing during the sixteenth century. Davis cites Choppin statement of 1574: “I wish, by Hercules, that the ancestral custom and institution of the isle of Utopia flourished among us.” However, when it came to actually proposing reforms inspired by More’s island, Choppin selectively quoted from Utopia to serve his own personal, and rather more reactionary, vision for the reorganization of French rural life. His 1574 work De Privilegiis Rusticorum Libri Tres—which argues for France to adopt Utopia’s system by which all citizens engage in agricultural labor for a certain period—quotes the rotation passage but omits the key part where More gives his toil-reducing rationale. Such an omission puts the emancipatory potential of More’s principle (its ability, for instance, to tilt the balance of social and political forces in sixteenth-century France
begin to see how the Utopians’ organization and treatment of labor leads to proto-emancipatory institutions (at least, by 1516 standards) on their island.

However, careful attention must also be paid to the lexical expression of the emergent representation of economic labor in this passage. The historical gap of almost half a millennia which mediates this encounter between More’s Latin and its contemporary English translations cannot be overlooked. This gap cannot be reduced to simply its linguistic character, that is, the difficulties that arise from rendering the grammar and syntax of the often-ambiguous Latin language into English. Instead, this gap includes the shifting material and social practices that mark the Latin and English editions of *Utopia* as products of essentially different historical periods, however many commonalities they may share. These shifting practices complicate the cross-period translation of certain Latin words and phrases, in particular, those that pertain to the representation of “labor.” To show this, I will engage in a brief philological study of this passage in its translation from sixteenth-century Latin into twentieth-century English. Incorporating Marx’s insights from the *Grundrisse*, I will observe the subtle and minute slips that these otherwise masterful translations make regarding the representation of Utopia’s “labor.”

Through a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the historical emergence of the economic as such, I will attempt to bring out the ideological forces that induce these contemporary translators to make such seemingly innocent, but in fact historically revealing slips. These slips point to how the representation of Utopian labor, while

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away from individuals like Choppin) in bold relief. As Davis concludes her brief study: “Rooted in his society of property and hierarchy, Choppin misused More’s *Utopia*. One lawyer dreamed of a society in which peasants would be more effectively exploited than before; the other of a society in which both ‘peasants’ and exploiters had disappeared” (Natalie Zemon Davis, “Rene Choppin on More’s *Utopia*,” *Moreana* 19-20, no. 5 [November 1968]: 91-94).
economically emergent, is not yet a true concept of labor in the sense of the *Grundrisse*. Instead, Utopian labor is an uneven and transitional form that foreshadows, but only tentatively, an historical break between More’s era and our own. There are thus two different historical understandings of “labor” in this encounter: the simple and abstract concept that marks the historical present of the English translations, and the transitional form that marks Thomas More’s early-modern present.

I now turn to the two English versions of the rotation passage where I have identified a translation error regarding “labor” as a simple and abstract concept. In the dual English-Latin Cambridge edition of *Utopia* cited above, the passage speaks of “heavy labour.” The Yale edition of *Utopia* renders this line: “to prevent any individual’s being forced against his will to continue too long in a life of rather hard work.”66 Both versions speak of labor in the same general sense, as toil. The choice to describe this labor as “heavy” or “hard” fits with the entry in Elyot’s lexicon for *laborare* cited previously: “to be in heaviness or grief.” The cultural articulation of the rotation passage in these two English translations is thus hardly objectionable; in fact, both accurately capture the way in which the sixteenth century thought about the Latin *labor*, as an action that produces an embodied state of heaviness.

Where these two English translations err is in their use of the word “labor” in the first place. For when the original Latin is consulted, we find that Thomas More did not use the word *labor*, or any other derivative of it. Neither did he use any Latin word or phrase that describes the act of labor in a roundabout way, such as *industria* or *ars atque opera*. Indeed, there is nothing technical or economic about the original

Latin in this particular instance, and thus nothing “productive.” Importantly, More’s Latin speaks not of labor but of a particular form of life: *Is innovandorum agricolarum mos, etsi sollemnis sit ne quisquam invitus asperiorem vitam cogatur continuare diutius*. The key word in this passage is *vita*, which the Cambridge edition has excised and which the Yale edition qualifies with “work.” *Vita*, “life,” is here modified by the comparative form of the Latin adjective *asper*, which means “rough,” “sharp,” or “unpleasant.” The rotation passage therefore speaks of agriculture specifically—and only—as a rough and sharp *life*. This is the original emphasis of the passage, obscured in the two major contemporary English translations.

This subtle imposition of “labor” onto Thomas More’s Latin reflects the historical gap between the emergent labor of the sixteenth century and the simple and abstract concept that defines the twentieth. This in turn corresponds to the shifting material and social practices that undergird such a conceptual difference. Grafting an otherwise absent word onto a sixteenth century passage brings this historical distance momentarily to the forefront. Writing in 1516, More apparently felt no need to use a word that would roughly translate into English as “labor.” I would propose that this was because he was attempting to capture, not the act of labor, but its particular phenomenology. This is a phenomenology that speaks of toil, or, more specifically, a painful process of life. In terms of both the lexical and syntactic structure of the Latin, this lived process is the singular focus of the original sentence.

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68 Thomas, *Dictionarium*, s.v. “Asper.”
In the original Latin, the crucial syntactic triad of *invitus asperior vita* represents this lived process. In the sixteenth century, *invitus* is explained thus: “Unwilling, against one’s will, by constraint, against heart and mind, maugre his head, in spite of his teeth, will he, nill he”—a semantic cluster foregrounding the will of the individual and the domination of this will by an external force. With this word choice, More expresses a violation of the will, a violation that results in an internal struggle “against heart and mind.” But why is this individual struggling? Clearly because agricultural labor is an *asper vita*. The triad of *invitus asper vita* becomes the figurative means of representing this labor as a form of toil.

There are important poetic implications to this figurative representation of toil. More’s counterposing of the individual will of *vita* to the constrained will of *invitus* produces an image of lived domination. This is a poetic image that is aurally and visually expressed in the repetition of the root *vit-*.

When reading the Latin, the reader of *Utopia* is faced with a lexical inversion of sorts regarding individual agency. Before their very eyes, this reader sees the agency and vitality of *vita* negated to become something *invitus*—a word that chimes with the former even as it conveys the opposite meaning. Importantly, the word that mediates this lexical inversion is *asper*, that is, More’s descriptor for the affective and experiential qualities of agricultural labor. The original Latin thus captures labor’s domineering mediation of life, and the harrowingness of this phenomenon. But again, this is achieved without

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69 Thomas, Dictionarium, s.v. “Invitus & Invitissimus.”
70 Thomas More, jokester as he was, loved to make subtle plays on words. One prominent example of this is an humorous exchange between Peter Giles and Raphael near the very beginning of book I of *Utopia*: “‘Well said,’ Peter replied; ‘but I do not mean that you should be in servitude [servias] to any king, only to in his service [inservias].’ ‘The difference is only a matter of one syllable,’ said Raphael” (More, *Utopia*, 51).
any explicit mention of such mediation; reading this passage today, labor as such has a ghostly presence in the Latin.

Contemporary English translations reify this mediation, making it into a “thing” that they call labor or work. For these translations, the concept of labor is “there”—somewhere—in the original Latin passage, though it does not appear. Twentieth-century translations approach the task of the translator as the bringing out of this purportedly latent content, to make it manifest for their readers. The translator thus becomes the bearer of the “practical truth” of abstract labor that Marx speaks of in the *Grundrisse*. From the standpoint of a commodity-determined society that, practically speaking, sees “labor as such” everywhere, such an imposition is effectively a natural and unconscious part of the translation process. As Marx himself would later go on to write in the first German edition of *Capital*:

> In order to relate their products to one another as commodities, men are compelled to equate their various labours to abstract human labour. *They do not know it, but they do it*, by reducing the material thing to the abstraction, value. *This is a primordial and hence unconsciously instinctive operation of their brain*, which necessarily grows out of the particular manner of their material production and the relationships into which this production sets them.  

Marx speaks here of the material relationships, mediated by value, that produces the unconscious and instinctive reduction of heterogeneous labors into abstract “labor as such.” This is a process that occurs within a developed commodity society, a society both historically and materially different from the transitional one of Thomas More. However, this is precisely the historical form of society that the Cambridge and Yale translators translate *from*. From their own historical present, they reflexively

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attempted to derive too much out of the emergent “raw material” of More’s Latin.\textsuperscript{72}

In doing so, these contemporary translators expose the vast historical distance between \textit{Utopia} and the simple abstraction of labor.

Through their imposition of a notion of labor as a simple abstraction, the contemporary English translators erase the Latin’s singular focus on the “rough and coarse life” of the laborer, and thus the partial alleviation of this form of \textit{life} through strict and standardized rotations. The Cambridge version in particular makes it seem as if the explicitly stated goal is the reduction of the \textit{time} one spends in “heavy labour.”\textsuperscript{73} This, of course, is the economic meaning or “content” of the original passage, but it is not how More formally expresses it in words. The Cambridge edition has taken an initial emphasis on a harrowing form of life and economically transformed it into a direct relationship between labor and time. The economic meaning purportedly latent within the Latin is made explicit, but in the process, the overarching poetics of the passage are lost.

To further clarify what is at stake in the loss of this poetic vision, I now turn to an English edition of \textit{Utopia} whose translation of the passage more accurately reflects the original Latin. This is Ralph Robinson’s 1551 translation, which is closer than the Cambridge and Yale editions to Thomas More both temporally and culturally. Of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} In \textit{Capital}, Marx gives a concrete example of how the abstractions of bourgeois society find expression in the act of writing about the category of “labor.” He uses none other than Benjamin Franklin to show how abstract labor can unconsciously determine the very lexicon of bourgeois writing: “One of the first economists, after William Petty, to have seen through the nature of value, the famous Franklin, says this: ‘Trade in general being nothing else but the exchange of labour for labour, the value of all things is… most justly measured by labor.’ Franklin is not aware that in measuring the value of everything ‘in labour’ he makes abstraction from any difference in the kinds of labour exchanged—and thus reduces them all to equal human labour. \textit{Yet he states this without knowing it.} He speaks first of ‘the one labour’, then ‘the other labour’, and finally of ‘labour’, without further qualification, as the substance of the value of everything” (Marx, \textit{Capital}, 142n. Emphasis added).
\item \textsuperscript{73} The Yale edition follows More’s wording somewhat more closely, as it includes a translation of \textit{vita}. But it too imposes an English word for labor onto the original Latin, in this case “work,” thus also falling partial victim to the ideological field of a society of abstract “labor as such.”
\end{itemize}
crucial significance here is that Robinson’s rendering imposes no direct mention of labor onto the original passage: “This manner and fashion of yearly changing and renewing the occupiers of husbandry, though it be solemn and customably used, to the intent that no man shall be constrained against his will to continue long in that hard and sharp kind of life.”\(^{74}\) Robinson retains the original’s emphasis on a harrowing and painful form of life. He also accurately captures the chain of meaning that Thomas More draws between life, compulsion, and the domination of time—a semantic chain that is, again, mediated by toilsome labor.\(^{75}\) But Robinson, fittingly in my view, never makes this mediation lexically explicit, instead centering the “hard and sharp” life as the true emphasis of the original Latin.

This philological exercise provides further evidence that labor on Utopia has a dual character: it is both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil. My initial investigation into the universality of Utopian agricultural activity showed how More consciously rationalizes labor within his imaginary society. He logically thinks through the distribution of social labor throughout his island, in this case two-year, standardized rotations—which even incorporate the proper distribution of necessary technical knowledge. This rotation system is, crucially, the only branch of production on Utopia with a completely universal sociality. It therefore mediates the entirety of

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\(^{74}\) Bruce, 51. Emphasis added.

\(^{75}\) In his 1971 translation, Firpo finds an innovative way to capture this objective mediation-via-labor without mentioning it directly. His rendering of the wording in question retains the original’s emphasis on a specific form of life: the rotation is imposed per evitare che qualcuno venga costretto di malanimo a continuare troppo a lungo un’esistenza più faticosa (Firpo, 91), “to avoid anyone becoming unwillingly forced to continue too long in a more toilsome existence.” As this excerpt shows, Firpo manages to allude to the absent labor that is the root cause of this form of life. He achieves this careful balancing act by using an adjective, faticosa, instead of a noun such as fatica or lavoro. This use of an adjective that qualitatively alludes to labor allows Firpo to retain the ontological and phenomenological presentation of the Latin original.
the imaginary economic life of the Utopians, making the agricultural labor that each citizen performs during their stint not only a technical or quasi-artistic action, but also a socially mediating one. This is a very early example of a distinctly economic way of thinking, a mode of thought that embraces the abstraction of labor through its separation from particular individuals in fixed forms. The Utopian agricultural sphere experiences an emergence of constant and rationalized movement between different kinds of labors—a fictional version of the economic movement that is the precondition for viewing labor in abstract terms, that is, as something capable of independent division and measurement.

Yet, my philological study also shows this emergent abstraction to be only partial. (It is, after all, just emerging.) With the subtle slips made in twentieth-century English translations in view, we see More’s Latin expressing a form of labor that, though economic, remains tied to a concrete fascination with the life and body of the laboring individual. Despite rationalizing labor on his island, More remains keenly attuned to the ways that labor shapes the laborer. His poetic representation of agricultural labor as a painful form of life speaks to a moral project embedded within the economics of Utopia. This is a moral project so closely intertwined with the practice of More’s writing that it cannot be divorced from its economically emergent double. In the rotation passage, one clearly sees how a rational economics and a poetics of toil emerge together within the Utopian representation of labor.

Perhaps most importantly, the rotation passage further concretizes the structural dynamism or “tendency” that is unique to Utopia, namely, the reduction of aggregate toil. This tendency should be placed in dialogue with two commentators on
Utopia who wrote within the Marxist tradition, albeit in very different ways and approximately eighty years apart from one another. The first theorist is Karl Kautsky, who remarks in his 1893 study of More’s Utopia:

> We observe again that More’s aims are modern, but their realization was prevented by the backwardness of the mode of production of his time. This was sufficiently developed to enable an observer like More, methodically trained and specifically cognizant of the economic conditions, and under the particularly favourable circumstances which England then offered, to perceive its tendencies, but not far enough developed to disclose the means of overcoming these tendencies. Thus More’s communism is modern in most of its tendencies, and unmodern in most of its expedients.  

Kautsky asks his readers to find in Utopia that which corresponds to real potentialities within the capitalist mode of production. He argues that all the way back in the early sixteenth century, More was able to sense the economic tendencies developing around him, and that he suspended these real tendencies within his imaginary island. According to Kautsky, it is these tendencies as such, and not the particular means by which they come about, that mark Utopia’s social organization as modern.

For his part, Louis Marin put forward what we might call a semiotic version of Kautsky’s thesis, one that retains its focus on structural potentialities while also emphasizing the importance of literary form. Influenced by the promise and eventual failure of the “utopian” events of 1968, Marin defines Utopia in general as a specific form of practice (of which More is said to be the inventor). This form of practice, he argues, leads to a specifically “utopian” representation:

> In conclusion, by utopia I mean: first, a utopian practice that neutralizes the historical, political, and real oppositions in a given society. From this point of view the utopian practice is a critical process, but one that remains incomplete.

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as we shall see in a moment. I further mean by this term a utopian representation that totalizes the negated differences or oppositions in a textual construction and that restates them on another plane, *in a new object that is no longer historical, political, and real, but poetic.* It does not refer to the past, but alludes to the new, to the ‘possible’ already at work in the present.\(^{77}\)

Like Katusky, Marin asks us to look for the real potentialities extant within the imaginary space of Utopia. Both point to More as having suspended practices and tendencies within his imaginary island—a stance of social reorganization from which we can still learn from today. But Marin also asks us to look for a specifically Utopian *poetics* of the new. This we will find at the next stop along our tour of the Utopian abode of production: labor productivity and the working day.

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II. Pathway to Emancipation

Abstract Time, Dual Task, Emergence of Productivity

The organization of those who produce wealth with a view to its production with the least possible effort to the producer, and to the avoidance of waste, stamps [More’s Utopia] as economical in its plan. His task is of course made easier by the ideal outline of the book; and by the assumption that communism will work. But it must be borne in mind that the ideal outline is filled in with practical details.

*Palgrave’s Dictionary of Political Economy* (1896)

The previous chapter showed how Utopia’s transitional political economy contains, among various representations of labor, a specifically Utopian form of labor that presents doubly as both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil. This is the form of labor that the forest relocation and the universal rotation both aspire to reduce at the level of the Utopian collectivity. The dual presentation in question is thus bound up with the higher moral aim at the heart of More’s island—the reduction of toil in the aggregate. This moral aim is embedded in all aspects of Utopia’s economic life, from the time allocated to production to the choice of raw materials. In fact, the entire imaginary island can be said to constitute a technical means toward the overarching moral end of reducing aggregate toil. This technical means and its emancipatory potential comes down to a single concept: labor productivity. *Utopia* is a text absolutely fixated on productivity and its potential to free human beings from drudgery.

Within the realm of contemporary More scholarship, the first to explicate a connection between *Utopia* and the birth of labor productivity was the late political theorist Neal Wood. In his 1994 study of More’s *Utopia*, Wood drew attention to the fact that More seems to have been one of the first European thinkers to classify labor
productivity as the central concern of a specifically *economic* way of thinking:

“Unlike previous political thinkers, More emphasized productivity almost to the point of obsession. Nothing comparable to his detailed treatment of economic behavior and organization had appeared before.”⁷⁸ Wood sees this fixation on productivity as evidence of something *new* about production on Utopia. My own argument, that *Utopia* contains an emergent yet uneven representation of a specifically “economic” labor, builds on Wood’s thesis of the historical novelty of Utopian productivity. In this regard, productivity corresponds to a novel view of labor as a quasi-abstract “thing” capable of rationalization, division, and measurement according to precise magnitudes of time.

Much as I employed the observations of Halpern in the previous chapter, I will here make use of Wood’s account of Utopia’s productivity as an entry point from which to unfold my own argument about the emancipatory implications of the Utopian approach to labor. In my view, Wood’s portrayal of the essential relationship between Utopian productivity and a specifically economic form of labor is a cogent one.⁷⁹ Utopia’s labor and productivity, per Wood, combine to create a uniquely Utopian mode of economic life, which Wood sees as mercantile in form:

In contrast to nonessential labor, narrow pursuit of self-interest, and idleness, which constituted much of the accepted way of life in other states, Utopians were supposed to devote themselves energetically and industriously to the prosperity of all. Utopian productivity was consequently so high, especially in cattle and grain, that besides being able to maintain surpluses for two years in advance, ample supplies were available for export. Vast amounts of gold and

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⁷⁹ For example, as Wood observes of labor on Utopia: “More made the crucial distinction, perhaps for the first time, between socially useful and socially useless work: labor required for goods and services contributing to the well-being of the community was useful, that concerned solely with the production of frivolous commodities and unnecessary luxury items was useless” (Ibid., 102).
silver were thus accumulated, to be used for the import of goods that could not be produced at home. More subscribed to what was to become the mercantilistic ideal of the self-sufficient state with large surpluses for export and a favorable balance of trade, thereby drawing in enormous amounts of treasure for future overseas purchases. These economic arrangements ultimately depended on a disciplined, highly productive work force.\footnote{Ibid., 102.}

Wood’s account is particularly laudable for drawing attention to the fact that More represents labor on Utopia as different from labor elsewhere, the former being invariably necessary and serving the common interest. The labor specific to Utopia, he further observes, is tied to a unique sociality of productive life, by which, unlike elsewhere, the Utopians energetically and industriously work for the prosperity of all. Wood then tethers this triad of labor, productivity, and energetic laborers to the mercantilist ideal of the self-sufficient state with a favorable balance of trade.

Nevertheless, this mercantilist reading of Utopia is incomplete as it misses More’s poetic critique of toil, and thus the emancipatory potential of his political economy. Wood aptly foregrounds the specifically economic aspects of Utopia, but does not see that this economic form at the same time harbors an essential poetics. This leads him to judge Utopia’s economic life as overly \textit{punitive} in its approach to labor and idleness, entirely missing how its emergent economics are only a means to the moral end of reducing toil in the aggregate. Wood thus fails to see the tension at the heart of Utopia’s economics, the fact that More’s higher moral aim—which cannot be reduced to political economy as such—is the precondition for the specifically economic articulation of his island. More’s project, I propose, was to think through a problematic of toil, of which the Utopian abode of production

\footnote{Ibid., 102.}
becomes the imaginary solution. In other words, the pathway of the ethical leads More to the anatomy of the economic as such.

This pathway is traversed via two literary modes: the temporal and the theoretical. In terms of temporality, Utopian time appears as abstract, homogenous, and measurable. This representation of time conditions the highly important relationship between the Utopian workday and the imaginary relations of production on the island. This connection between workday and work-relations is part and parcel of the dual presentation of labor. As I will show, unless we see this relationship in the context of both labor’s emergent economics and its poetics, we will misrecognize the aim of the workday, and thus also of its productivity. That is, just like Utopia’s labor, the Utopian workday (which is only six-hours in length) is also of a dual character. This workday and its concomitant productivity entail both the economic imperative to avoid waste and the moral goal of reducing toil. The six-hour workday is thus the dual presentation of labor in programmatic form, an emancipatory institution around which the rest of Utopia’s economic life is structured. But, as I will show, the emancipatory potential of this working day itself stems from the dual character of the imaginary relations of production that constitute its practical origin.

By “theoretical mode,” meanwhile, I mean how More consciously legitimatizes his six-hour workday through political economy as a theoretical practice. Having described the Utopian workday, More pauses to address his readers: “But at this point you may get a wrong impression if we don’t go back and consider one matter more carefully. Because they allot only six hours to work, perhaps you
might think the necessities of life would be in scant supply."

Then follows an argument, by way of economic theory, to the effect that makes this six-hour workday credible. More adduces an economic thought-experiment quite precocious for the sixteenth century. Imagine, he says, if pure economic forces were given the opportunity to roam free, thereby liberating production from the fettering influences of monopoly, vanity, and idleness. Were that possible, then only a small amount of time would be necessary to produce all the conveniences of life. Thus with abstract, homogeneous, and measurable time as his basis, More develops an imaginary economic theory of productivity in order to render plausible his representation of the workday. In doing so, he lays down a theoretical path toward the collective emancipation from toil, one that that—at least in 1516—may only be traversed in the nowhere of Utopia.

**The Poetics of Time: From Endlessness to Abstraction**

Wood’s analysis of *Utopia’s* representation of time grasps its emergent economic side, but not its poetic critique of toil. For Wood, *Utopia’s* representation of time is significant solely because it involves an imperative to produce; as he observes of More and his sixteenth-century contemporaries:

> An increasing sensitivity to waste emerged as the reformers prescribed full utilization of human resources for socially constructive purposes. This recommendation included attention to a hitherto disregarded resource: time. The new awareness of time may have resulted from a keener appreciation of the process of social change, brought about by the writers’ recognition of the good old days in contrast to the impoverished present, and from the relatively recent introduction of the mechanical clock. *Whatever the reason for this growing sensitivity to time, the attitude implied by [Thomas] More and some*

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of the others that each minute of the working day must be made to count in fruitful labor.”

This account of Utopia’s representation of time seems apt but one-sided. It is partially correct insofar as, indeed, there exists on Utopia the imperative to ensure that each minute counts in “fruitful labor”; and this imperative shows that the Utopians approach time as an economic resource and a measure of labor productivity. However, Wood never analyzes the specific form of this temporal imperative. He loses sight (as do many commentators) of the fact that there are two forms of time in More’s text: time, as it exists on Utopia, and time as it exists elsewhere.

This is a dual presentation of time that arises from the imaginary relations of production unique to Utopia. Like most things on the island, these imaginary relations of production are mediated by its labor’s dual presentation as both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil. Yet, Wood only analyzes the emergent economic side of these imaginary relations:

Idleness was the paramount sin of Utopia and the effective use of each citizen’s time was absolutely fundamental. Everyone was expected to make the best of each working day in productive activity and self-improvement. To ensure that all were thus employed and not wasting time in idle and unnecessary pursuits was “the chief and almost the only function” of the two hundred lesser magistrates, the syphogrants, each elected annually by every thirty families in each of the fifty-four constituent city-states (civitates) of the Utopian confederation.

Wood describes how the Utopian relations of production are designed to avoid idleness and maximize the workday’s productivity. He characterizes the relationship between Utopian citizens and their supervisors, the island’s magistrates, in terms of the imperative to produce and the economization of labor time. Wood cites the text to

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83 Wood, p. 102.
emphasize that the “chief and almost the only function” of these magistrates is to ensure that all are working and not wasting time. This task would seem to be a singular one—that of policing time, guarding it as a finite resource that can only be “wasted” (and not, for instance, as something that can be liberated).

However, an examination of the entire passage from which Wood took his quote reveals this ostensibly singular task to in fact be a dual one:

The chief and almost the only business of the syphograns is to take care and see to it that no one sits around in idleness \[ne quisquam desideat otiousus\], and to make sure that everyone works hard at his trade \[sed uti suae quisque arti sedulo incumbat\]. But no one has to be exhausted with endless toil \[perpetuo labore\] from early morning to late at night like a beast of burden \[iumenta\]. Such wretchedness, really worse than slavery \[Nam ea plus quam servilis aerumna es\] is the common lot of workmen almost everywhere except in Utopia \[quae tamen ubique fere opificum vita est, exceptis Utopiensibus\].

The first half of this passage corresponds to Wood’s characterization of the singular task of the magistrates, who indeed perform a police function over the labor of the citizenry. In More’s original Latin, these magistrates enforce the rather lyrical transformation of desideo (“to stay still,” “to abide in a place”) into incumbo (“to endeavor,” “to take in hand,” “to happen,” “to lean upon,” “or fall on a thing”), that is, the absence of human movement into the rhetorical representation of embodied activity. Failure to comply with this mandatory obligation to work results in a severe punishment; as the accompanying marginal note states: “The idle are expelled from the common wealth.”

But the passage’s second half shows the flip side of the magistrates’ task.

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They must ensure that all citizens are working hard, but also not too hard. This is a dual task, one part punitive (the forced imposition of work) and one part emancipatory (the liberation from over-work). At the source of this antagonism between work and over-work is the goal of avoiding a particular relationship between labor and time: endlessness fatigue. Again, the magistrates are described as guaranteeing that “no one has to be exhausted with endless toil [perpetuo labore] from early morning to late at night.” Contained in this statement is a crucial merger of toil and time: the toil of the Latin labor is represented as simultaneously endless and daily, that is, as both an unceasing bodily activity and something that must begin anew each day. The dual task of the magistrates unfolds narratively through this repeating cycle of time, which is experienced as endless.87

The dynamic antagonism of the magistrates’ task discloses a crucial duality in More’s representation of time. There is the form of time that exists on Utopia, and then there is the time that exists nearly everywhere else. The latter is an endless merger of toil and duration leading to a permanent state of bodily fatigue. More captures this poetic temporality, which the Utopian magistrates have banished, in a series of key analogies. The first is a comparison with the bleak lives of draft animals. For More, to engage in perpetuo labore from morning to night is to be like iumenta, that is, “every beast that draws or bears burdens.”88 Thus, unceasing labor is represented as amounting to a loss of humanity, relegation to the ontological status of

87 A similar poetics of endless yet daily toil can be seen in Hephaestus’s warning to Prometheus at the beginning of Prometheus Bound: “When the bloom on your cheek is burnt black by the sun you’ll be glad when night with her veils of starcloud covers up the glare, and again glad when at dawn, the sun scatters the hoarfrost off. But always you’ll be crushed by the load of each, every moment. The one who will set you free hasn’t even been born” (Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, trans. James Scully and C. J. Herington [New York: Oxford University Press, 1975], 30).
88 Elyot, Dictionary, s.v. “Iumentum.”
the nonhuman. Crucially, this is a non-human that exists solely for the use of another. The dual task of the Utopian magistrates, in other words, has banished a temporal state of humiliating domination and fatigue.

More’s next analogy shows how time outside of Utopia is characterized by a combination of pain and sorrow, an endlessness of toil comparable to slavery: nam ea plus quam servilis aerumna est.\(^8^9\) This representation of pain and sorrow mediated by the figure of the slave must be philologically unpacked, for none of the translations consulted so far would seem to do full justice to its sixteenth-century meaning. As with the rotation passage, the difficulty of translating this phrase arises from the way that labor mediates its poetics. In attempting to capture this mediation, translators seem forced to choose between emphasizing either the objective or subjective side of the Latin. For example, Firpo’s Italian edition of Utopia translates the wording in question as Questa sarebbe fatica peggio che da schiavo (“This would be toil worse than a slave”).\(^9^0\) With his inclusion of a word meaning “labor,” Firpo emphasizes the objective action that produces this state of pain and sorrow, thereby making its mediation by labor explicit.

Robinson’s translation, by contrast, keeps to the subjective side of the Latin. His version reads: “For this is worse than the miserable and wretched condition of bondmen.”\(^9^1\) Unlike Firpo, Robinson does not include a word meaning “labor,” focusing instead on the prototypical misery of a slave, an abjection now surpassed by the laborer. Robinson’s translation thus creates an unmediated contrast between the subjective states of the laborer in comparison to the slave, where the mediation of this

\(^{8^9}\) More, Utopia, 126.
\(^{9^0}\) Firpo, 105.
\(^{9^1}\) Bruce, 57-58.
contrast by labor is kept lexically hidden. This subtle difference between Robinson’s and Firpo’s translations raises the question of which more accurately captures the original Latin. As in the case of the rotation passage, a dialectical question presents itself: does More’s original Latin speak of an objective action or a subjective experience?

The answer to this question (as for all dialectical questions) is “both.” The phrase *Nam ea plus qua servilis aerumna est* speaks of both a subjective experience and an objective action. To show this, I will briefly interrogate the meaning of the Latin noun *aerumna*. This word, which centers the original Latin sentence, is listed in Thomas’s lexicon as “a fork or crooked staff, wherewith men did carry trusses on their backs: and by translation, painful labor, care and heaviness of mind: infelicity, misery.” As the reader can see, this definition is simultaneously physical, mental, and affective. It speaks all at once of the pain of labor, the duress of the mind, and a profound sorrow of the soul. *Aerumna* thus means “labor,” but it does not fit into the simple and abstract concept of labor that defines the capitalist epoch. Instead, it is a term that brings forth an image of harrowing toil, an image that cannot be separated from the mental and affective experience of the individual who labors.

A structural critique of toil thus clearly exists at the heart of More’s representation of time. By describing only one part of the Utopian magistrates’ dual task, Wood obscures this mediating critique. His analysis captures these officials’ establishment of an economic approach to time, but it loses sight of their simultaneous removal of a poetic dimension from this same time. This poetic dimension—a sense of endlessness by way of toil—is the pivot on which Utopia’s

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92 Thomas, Lexicon.
time is distinguished from time outside of Utopia. This poetic dimension centers on
the literary figure of the laborer and their quality of life. More’s Latin speaks of the
vita of the opifex that is “nearly everywhere” (ubique fere) one of endless aerumna
and beast-like toil, everywhere except for Utopia (exceptis Utopiensibus). The
Utopian magistrates, by strictly limiting toil, exempt their citizens from this
pernicious form of lived time; this no-place island is thus the only place free of the
constraining endlessness that conditions almost all other topi.

A direct connection may be drawn between the dual task of the magistrates—
and the antagonism it implies between work and overwork—and Utopia’s unique
time-form. Fittingly, right after explaining the magistrates’ dual task, More describes
how the Utopians organize their collective time:

Of the twenty-four equal hours into which they divide the day and the night,
the Utopians devote only six to work. They work three hours before noon,
when they go to lunch. After lunch, they rest for two hours, then go to work
for another three hours. Then they have supper, and about eight o’clock
(counting the first hour after noon as one) they go to bed, and sleep eight
hours.

It is immediately clear that time here is the antithesis of time elsewhere. So far from
being a phenomenon marked by endless toil, Utopia’s time flows independently of
the experience of the laborer in the form of an abstract, homogenous, and measurable
universal. This allows for the creation of a uniquely Utopian form of sociality,

93 More, Utopia, 126.
94 Ibid., 127.
95 This homogenous universality corresponds to the Utopian’s scientific and cosmological knowledge.
More makes it clear that Utopians have an exact knowledge of the astrological movement of natural
bodies: “On the other hand, [the Utopians] have learned to plot expertly the courses of the stars and
movements of the heavenly bodies. To this end they have devised a number of different instruments by
which they compute with the greatest exactness the course and positions of the sun, the moon and the
other stars that are visible in their area of the sky.” Then, More writes later on that “[The Utopians]
divide the year into months, which they measure by the orbit of the moon, just as they measure the
year itself by the course of the sun” (Ibid., 157; 235). For a reading of Utopia’s time that emphasis both
where the Utopians organize, *a priori*, their universal time at the level of society. Their time being rationally subdivided, they are able to fill it with uniform periods of activities at specific points *in* time. This is very different from time elsewhere; non-Utopian laborers know only two temporal points—when toil begins early in the morning and when it ends late at night.

Expanding the number of temporal points from two to twenty-four, the Utopians have liberated time on their island, guided by their programmatic principle that only six hours each day are to be devoted to social labor. This is a decisively *moral* principle; as the accompanying marginal note states “*Moderandus opificum labor,*” that is, the labor of the worker is to be moderated. 96 Again, it is significant that this marginal note uses the Latin *labor* and not, for instance, *opera* or *industria*. This is labor as a form of toil, the expenditure of human effort as such. Moreover, the Utopian six-hour day drastically reduces, not just the time entailed by the workday elsewhere, but also the *intensity* of such exertion. The working day is not just six hours in length but also organized in terms of three three-hour blocks of time. The Utopians work for three hours, rest for three hours, and then work again, presumably with renewed vigor, for three hours more. The Utopian liberation of time thus entails both a reduction of the working day and a reduction of its intensity. This dual reduction not only increases the total aggregate of “liberated time;” it also reweaves and staggers this time within the embodied rhythms of human life.

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96 More, *Utopia*, 126. Fascinatingly, in his Tudor-era translation, Robinson renders the Latin *labor* in this note as “the labour and toil” (Bruce, *Utopia*, 58), apparently attuned to the ambiguity of More’s Latin, its economic and poetically toilsome content.
Utopia’s representation of time thus has an emancipatory dimension, but this only comes out clearly when it is linked to the magistrates’ dual task. Wood’s one-sided analysis of the latter results from interpreting More’s imperative to produce as solely productivist (and hence punitive). Such an approach is understandable at first glance, for without the qualification of *moderandus opificum labor*, More’s preoccupation with making each minute of the workday count in “fruitful labor” would seem to evince an unmediated, productivist streak. But once the duality of the magistrates’ task is fully grasped, it becomes clear that we are dealing with a transitional political economy far subtler and more emancipatory than it would initially seem.

From this dialectical viewpoint, Wood and other scholars would appear to have missed what *Palgrave’s Dictionary of Political Economy* easily grasped back in 1896:

[The] organization of those who produce wealth with a view to its production with the least possible effort to the producer, and to the avoidance of waste, stamps [More’s *Utopia*] as economical in its plan. His task is of course made easier by the ideal outline of the book; and by the assumption that communism will work. But it must be borne in mind that the ideal outline is filled in with practical details.”

*Palgrave’s* entry for Thomas More captures the dual aim of production on Utopia: it is (as noted by Wood and others) to avoid waste, but at the same time (and as passed over by these commentators) to reduce human effort to a minimum. This tendency to economize on both time and toil is what, per *Palgrave*, makes *Utopia* a singularly “economic” work. The dictionary entry does caution that this economic duality is made easier by the “ideal” (i.e., imaginary) outline of the book, but it adds that this

97 Higgs, 818.
outline is full of “practical details.” In the next section, I will investigate these so-called “practical details,” proposing that they could more accurately be described as theoretically practical. That is, they take the form of an economic theory that self-reflexively grounds the material plausibility of the six-hour workday.

**Theoretical Wager: *Utopia* as an Imaginary Economic Space**

How can a six-hour workday, in the early sixteenth century of all historical periods, produce enough to meet a whole society’s collective needs? This is the question that must occur upon reading More’s description of the island’s working day. A six-hour workday in the sixteenth century appears as an economic state of affairs that is, historically speaking, curiously out of place. Lewis Haney’s *History of Economic Thought* puts it rather dryly: “In suggesting a six-hour day, everybody working, and limited property rights, [More’s *Utopia*] was not in accord with the times.”98 Thus do contemporary editions of *Utopia* typically include critical notes contrasting Utopia’s workday with that of actual sixteenth-century English laborers.99 It seems all commentators agree to point out the obvious: a workday of only six-hours would have been anomalous for the early sixteenth century.

What is commented on less often is that Thomas More was keenly aware of this fact. To reiterate More’s aside, quoted in part above:

> But at this point [after the description of the Utopian organization of time] you may get a wrong impression if we don’t go back and consider one matter more

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98 Haney, 114.
99 The Cambridge edition, for instance, includes this footnote: “In England…an ‘Act concerning Artificers & Labourers’, 1514-15, made exorbitant demands upon the time of workmen: daybreak to nightfall from mid-September to mid-March; before 5 a.m. to between 7 and 8 p.m. from mid-March to mid-September” (More, *Utopia*, 127). Analogous footnotes are found in both the Yale edition and the Oxford World’s Classics edition of Robinson’s translation (See: Surtz, *Utopia*, 69; Bruce, 222).
carefully. Because they allot only six hours to work [*sex duntaxat horas in opere sunt*], perhaps you might think the necessities of life would be in scant supply. This is far from the case. Their working hours [*id temporis*] are ample to provide not only enough but more than enough [*non sufficiat modo sed supersit etiam*] of the necessities and even the conveniences of life.\(^{100}\)

More has anticipated his hypothetical reader’s skepticism about his workday, and has come prepared. Incorporating this (natural enough) skepticism into his argument, More responds with a “utopian” wager: that six hours are not just sufficient, but more than is sufficient to meet a society’s collective needs. This wager hinges on a central economic idea: that a certain amount of abstract and homogenous labor time can be productive enough to create mass plenty for all. A discourse of labor productivity thus emerges within the monologue of book II of *Utopia*, a discourse that seeks to answer this lingering question: how can the ideal and emancipatory institution that is the six-hour workday be simultaneously practical?

More’s answer involves what I would term a “political economy of productivity.” By this, I mean his method of argumentation by way of an emergent form of economic theory, that is, an argument that plays with a set of specifically economic forces. These economic forces revolve around the hypothetical transformation of sixteenth-century Europe’s so-called “vices” into a set of social relations more conducive to increasing total productivity. More argues that through this increase in productivity, the immoral “is” of sixteenth-century Europe can be transformed into an economic “ought” of mass plenty and less toil for all. This is a transformation that More grounds in a number of economic preconditions, ranging from the use of intensive and extensive labor inputs, a replacement of “improper” consumption with true necessitates, the dynamics of the price mechanism, and a

\(^{100}\) More, *Utopia*, 129.
universal assignment to useful labor. More argues that if these preconditions are met, then productivity will become great enough to drastically reduce the working day all while meeting society’s collective needs.

More unfolds his “political economy of productivity” by first asking his readers to consider the real economic state of sixteenth-century Europe, which is plagued, he argues, by a series of vices (or to put it more modernly, structural defects) that fetter its productive capabilities. The first, he explains, is idleness:

You will easily appreciate this if you consider how large a part of the population in other countries lives without doing any work at all [magna populi pars iners degit]. In the first place, hardly any of the women, who are a full half of the population, work; or, if they do, then as a rule their husbands lie snoring in bed. Then there is a great lazy gang of priests and so-called religious. Add to them all the rich, especially the landlords, who are commonly called gentlemen and nobles. Include with them their retainers, that cesspool of worthless swashbucklers. Finally, reckon in with these the sturdy and lusty beggars who feign some disease as an excuse for their idleness. You will certainly find that all the things which satisfy the needs of mortals are produced by fewer hands than you had supposed [Multo certe pauciores es quam putaras invenies eos quorum labore constant haec omnia quibus mortales utuntur].

More contends that a six-hour workday begins to be plausible if one considers just how large a percentage of the European population does no work. I will not be considering this argument as historically accurate. (More’s claim that hardly any women work is particularly suspect, particularly if domestic labor is considered). Rather, I would like to point out how it develops a peculiar economic outlook. The theoretical implications of this argument are twofold. First, it asserts that the productive potential of a country can increase if more of the population works, as is the case in Utopia. Simply put, structural idleness leaves a population’s labor

101 Ibid., 129.
potential untapped and underused. This can be characterized as an *extensive* argument, that is, more labor inputs leading to more output.

However, More’s structural-idleness argument is, at the same time, *intensive*, or rather, de-intensive. If idleness is indeed rampant—and, in his eyes, this category includes all women, priests, landowners, feudal retainers, and beggars—then this means that the very long hours of a small group of workers have been producing all useful things this entire time. The intense labor of the few is thus already meeting the collective needs of the many. Idleness, then, does not just limit a nation’s total productive potential; it also obscures a rational estimation of how much social labor is needed in the first place. Once this obscuring veil is removed, and one considers the vast difference between total labor-power and actual working population, the possibility arises of de-intensifying the workday through a society-wide redistribution of necessary labor.

But such a restructuring would require that a society know its collective needs. Here enter the other two vices that plague Europe according to More, vanity and luxury. More argues that both of these vices, in combination with their mediation by money, lead to a misjudging of needs and thus a misuse of economic resources:

> And now consider how few of those who do work are doing really essential things. For where money is the measure of everything many vain and completely superfluous trades are bound to be carried on simply to satisfy luxury and licentiousness. Suppose the multitude of those who now work were limited to a few trades and set to producing just those commodities that nature really requires. They would be bound to produce so much that prices would drop and the workmen would be unable to make a living [*vitam tueri suam*].

102 Luxury and vanity are here framed as leading to superfluous production. In More’s economic vision, there are two types of production: production that is necessary

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102 Ibid., 129-131
(required by “nature”), and production that is “surplus” (impelled by vanity or luxury). Put crudely, the former is a positive good while the latter is a negative expenditure of productive resources. As Wood has already fully described this economic distinction in his study of *Utopia*, there is no need to recapitulate it here. But, I would like to center an aspect of this distinction that is downplayed in the secondary literature, namely, the question of theoretical form.

By this term, I mean that More’s distinction between necessary and surplus production takes on the form of economic theory, in this case a theory of prices. More asks his readers to consider the theoretical possibility (“suppose the multitude…”) of a specifically economic dynamic: the reduction of prices below subsistence levels due to the exclusive production of necessary goods. Such a situation cannot actually occur in sixteenth-century Europe, as More has just described it as teeming with vain and luxurious products. Rather, More is saying that this is a theoretical possibility immanent to a particular ensemble of technical productive forces, albeit an ensemble yet to be fully assembled. This is an economic theory of what could happen if x, y, or z steps were taken. In other words, if superfluous production were hypothetically abolished, then prices would fall too low and a crisis of subsistence would befall workers (*vitam tueri suam*, literally, they would be unable to “preserve their life”). The conditional phrasing of this theory is key because it shows More to be thinking about an imaginary situation that accesses a supposedly deeper economic truth. This

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103 Wood, 102.
104 *Tueri*, from *tueor*, meaning “To defend, keep, maintain, or preserve, to continue still in doing” (Thomas, *Dictionarium*, s.v. “*Tueor*”). Significantly, such reference to “life” not only mirrors the theme found in other passages of *Utopia* (the universal rotation passage, for instance), but it also points to More’s contemplation of the economic implications of dependency on the market for subsistence.
imaginary situation is, in More’s eyes, the economic as such, an “as such” that does not yet exist.

In fact, this theoretical possibility of prices falling below subsistence levels is the exact opposite of More’s description of empirical English prices in book I of *Utopia*. There we find this description of the English wool industry in the context of enclosures:

This enclosing has led to sharply rising food prices in many districts. Also, the price of raw wool has risen so much that poor people among you who used to make cloth can no longer afford it, and so great numbers are forced from work to idleness [*ab opera ablegantur in otium*]. One reason is that after so much new pasture-land was enclosed, rot killed a countless number of the sheep – as though God were punishing greed by sending on the beasts a murrain that rightly should have fallen on the owners! *But even if the number of sheep should increase greatly, the price will not fall a penny,* because the wool trade, though it can’t be called a monopoly because it isn’t in the hands of a single person, is concentrated in so few hands [*manus paucorum*] (an oligopoly [*oligopolium*], you might say), and these so rich, that the owners are never pressed to sell until they have a mind to, and that is only when they can get their price.¹⁰⁵

This description of sixteenth-century England points to rising prices as the economic culprit of the era. Food prices are rising, wool prices are rising, and this produces a real crisis of subsistence similar to the imaginary one previously discussed. More insists, further, that even should the total number of sheep increase, the price of wool would not fall, for the wool trade is, in More’s own words, an “oligopoly [*oligopolium*].”¹⁰⁶ A combination of material interest (or greed) and the absence of

¹⁰⁶ Schumpeter credits More with the coinage of “oligopoly,” in a passage worth quoting to demonstrate that this “utopian” author was also a pioneer of economic theory: “As regards the theory of the mechanism of pricing, there is very little to report before the middle of the eighteenth century. The contributions of even the brightest lights, such as Barbon, Petty, Locke, do not amount to much, and the vast majority of the Consultant Administrators and Pamphleteers of the seventeenth century were content with the kind of theory they found or could have found in Pufendorf…. People were quite familiar with the pattern of monopoly, on which they bestowed an impulsive hatred, and with competition, which they conceived to be the normal pattern without bothering to define it. But as early
real competition conspire to keep wool prices artificially high. More’s analysis shows a strong grasp of sixteenth-century England’s economic dynamics and class structures. Being perfectly aware that empirical prices do not always fall, however, he nonetheless maintains that they could fall, if only the messiness of the empirical world were somehow made to coincide with a more fundamental economic reality.

Accessing this economic reality requires that the “vices” of Europe be replaced by universal labor participation and useful production. As More continues in his economic thought-experiment in book II of *Utopia*:

> But suppose again that all the workers in useless trades [*inertes artes*] were put to useful ones, and that the whole crowd of languid idlers (each of whom consumes as much as any two of the workmen who provide what he consumes) were assigned to productive tasks [*in opera universi atque eadem utilia collocarentur*]—well, you can easily see [*facile animadvertis*] how little time [*quantulum temporis*] would be enough and more than enough to produce all the goods that human needs and conveniences call for—yes, and human pleasure too, as long as it is true and natural pleasure.

Within this economic hypothesis, the *inertes artes* (*iners*, “without any science or craft,” “idle person,” “unprofitable”) and the idle crowd (*turba*, “a multitude or assembly of people”) are banished from the commonwealth.\(^{107}\) More’s phrasing of this hypothesis is key for understanding his economic vision, as he writes *in opera universi atque eadem utilia collocarentur*, with *eadem* meaning “the same.”\(^{108}\) The practitioners of the *iners ars* and the idle crowd are thus gathered together and

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\(^{107}\) Elyot, *Dictionary*, s.v. “*Iners, inertis*;” “*Turba.*” More’s combination of *arte* and *iners* is thus a pun, amounting to “artless art.”

\(^{108}\) Thomas, *Dictionarium*, s.v. “*Eadem.*” An English translation is “wholly set to work that is also useful work.” I thank Professor Aresu for his consultation on my translation of this phrase.
universally set (\textit{collocarentur}, “to set in a place”) to useful work.\textsuperscript{109} This economic precondition matches Richard Halpern’s astute observation that “\textit{Utopia}’s historical ‘pre-science’ consists not only in its ability to imagine a particular social organization but also in its premature capture by the ideology of political economy, resulting in a conception of Utopia as a society that effects the ‘liberation’ of use value.”\textsuperscript{110} In this passage, More does exactly as Halpern describes; he “liberates” use value through a theoretical unity of universal and useful work. Such a liberation leads to the possibility of mass plenty and natural pleasure for all.

But, More presents this plenty as not only a liberation of useful things, but also as a drastic temporal reduction. It is specifically “\textit{quantulum temporis} [from \textit{quantulus}, meaning ‘how little or small’]” that is at the root of all this plenty, i.e., a direct relationship between a quantity of labor time and wealth.\textsuperscript{111} This is the fundamental economic reality that is, according to More, fettered by vanity, luxury, and idleness. These fetters obscure the fact that everything that produces both material (objective) wealth and human (subjective) pleasure comes down to a rather small amount of homogenous labor time expenditure.\textsuperscript{112} However, once these obscuring fetters are removed, then it becomes \textit{facile animadverti} \textit{(animadverto, “to consider,” “to take heed,” “to set my mind”)}, that is, easy to recognize this truth as

\textsuperscript{109} Elyot, \textit{Dictionary}, s.v. “\textit{Colloco, care.”}
\textsuperscript{110} Halpern, 163.
\textsuperscript{111} Elyot, \textit{Dictionary}, s.v. “\textit{Quantillus, & quantulus.”}
\textsuperscript{112} This should not be interpreted to mean that More thinks necessary labor time \textit{is} value or \textit{is} wealth. Rather, More’s thoughts on labor time more accurately fall within the “pre-history” of classical political economy. He gestures toward, even prefigures (if such a word can be disentangled from its teleological connotations) such a theoretical discourse, but this is not yet an identity of concepts.
plausible. In other words, by removing those fetters, More argues that labor productivity can emerge in all of its (for the time period) dynamic implications.

More projects this emergent productivity onto the imaginary space of his Utopia, revealing its working day to be grounded in economic theory. More asserts that Utopia corroborates his economic hypothesis about the preconditions of labor productivity: “Nearly all the remaining populace [of Utopia] being neither idle nor busied with useless occupations, it is easy to calculate how much good work can be produced in a very few hours [*proclivis aestimatio est quam paucae horae quantum boni operis pariant*].” This is how the Utopians know that six-hours of daily work are sufficient to meet their collective needs. Since everyone on the island works at a useful trade, the Utopians are able to calculate (*aestimatio*, the “praising or valuing of a thing,” “estimation, or valuation,” “consideration or weighing of a matter”) the material output of six hours of necessary labor. According to More, it is this rationalized and economic approach to labor (which is unique to Utopia) that makes the six-hour workday plausible. Rational calculation is thus the precondition or “condition of possibility” of the vast reduction of aggregate toil that occurs on Utopia.

This rational calculation extends to Utopia’s emergent conception of goods as containing certain quantities of “embodied labor.” Turning again to the “reality” of Utopia, More states: “Apart from [everyone working and at useful trades], they have it easier because in most of the necessary crafts they need less labour [*minore opera*]

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114 Surtz, *Utopia*, 73. I have cited the Yale edition of *Utopia* in this instance, as the Cambridge edition’s version of this passage omits the translation of both “aestimato” and “boni operis.”
115 Thomas, *Dictionarium*, s.v. “Aestimatio, onis, f.g. verbal.”
than people elsewhere do.”\textsuperscript{116} As proof, More cites the construction and garment industries on his island. Regarding the former, he writes:

First of all, building and repairing houses everywhere demands the constant labour of many men \textit{[multorum assiduam ubique requirit operam]}, because what a father has built, his thriftless heir lets fall into ruin; and then his successor has to reconstruct, at great expense, what could have been kept up at a very small charge. Even more, when a man has built a splendid house at vast cost, someone else may think he has better taste, let the first house fall to ruin, and then build another one somewhere else for just as much money.\textsuperscript{117}

It is a universal phenomenon, that is, that construction requires the constant \textit{(assiduam, “continual,” “diligent,” “laborious,” “sufficient,” “often, daily”)} labor \textit{(operam)} of many individuals working together.\textsuperscript{118} This need is conditioned by the vanity and luxury of heirs, who allow their fathers’ property to fall into disrepair. This labor involved thus stems not just from the technical conditions of production, but also from the cultural sphere, which is characterized by vice.

The island of Utopia, due to its replacement of vice with rational necessity, is the lone exception to this general requirement. Construction here involves far less labor than elsewhere:

What is the result? With the minimum of labor \textit{[ut minimo labore]}, buildings last very long, and masons and carpenters sometimes have scarcely anything to do, except that they are set to hew out timber at home and to square and prepare stone meantime so that, if any work be required, a building may the sooner be erected \textit{[maturius possit exsurgere]}.\textsuperscript{119}

The absence of vanity and luxury ensures that few new houses need to be built on the island, and that the houses that do exist require \textit{minimus} (“the least and smallest of

\textsuperscript{116} More, \textit{Utopia}, 131.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{118} Thomas, \textit{Dictionarium}, s.v. “Assiduus, a, um.”
\textsuperscript{119} Surtz, \textit{Utopia}, 73-74. I have once again cited the Yale edition because the Cambridge’s rendering of \textit{maturius possit exsurgere} omits the speediness of future building projects. The Yale translation’s choices are confirmed in both Robinson’s and Firpo’s translations (see: More, \textit{Utopia}, 133; Bruce, 61; Firpo, 111).
all,” “very little,” “small”) labor for their upkeep. This creates a situation where workmen have so little to do that they end up moving on to other tasks that will make the building of any new houses even quicker (maturius, “speedier,” “quicker,” “riper”). Economization of labor on Utopia thus leads, in a virtuous circle, to further economization. This shows how the emergent economic side of Utopia’s labor is embedded in various material practices throughout the island. There exists a rationalization and tendency toward the constant reduction of labor-time expenditure.

But this ever-lessening of labor time expenditure is not just emergently economic; it is also deeply bound up with reference to human toil. As throughout this study, careful attention should be paid to More’s choice of phrasing here in representing labor. In the paragraph cited above about the practice of construction in general, More describes the labor of upkeep as opera. But in the wording specifically devoted to Utopia, he makes a shift, describing this same labor as labor, and even qualifies it with minor. This lexical changeover matches the difference between non-Utopian and Utopian milieus already discussed with regard to the soil passage: there, More characterizes ars atque opera as the domain of farmers everywhere, whereas only on Utopia would you see an entire forest moved and replanted in order to reduce the labor of transport. In both of these examples, opera is treated as existing everywhere, but only on Utopia is there specifically minor or minimus labor. This is yet another subtle example of the dual presentation of Utopia’s labor, where the same concept is coded as both economic and toil, and therefore as uniquely dynamic.

120 Thomas, Dictionarium, s.v. “Minimus.”
121 Ibid, s.v. “Maturior.”
122 More, Utopia, 179.
A similar shift from *opera* to *labor* can be seen in More’s description of the production of clothing on Utopia. After discussing buildings, More asks his readers:

Consider, too, how little labour [*paucis operis egeant*] their clothing requires. Their work clothes are unpretentious garments mode of leather or pelts, which last seven years. When they go out in public, they cover these rough work clothes with a cloak. Throughout the entire island, these cloaks are of the same colour, which is that of natural wool. As a result, they not only need less woolen cloth than people anywhere else, but what they do need is also less expensive. Even so, they use linen cloth most, because it requires least labour [*At lini minor est labor eoque usus crebrior*].

More first describes how the technical process of clothing production on Utopia requires less labor (*operis*) than elsewhere. This is in part because the islanders’ lack of vanity and luxury allows them to go about in undyed cloaks. But is also, besides from this cultural factor, because the Utopians consciously choose raw materials that require less labor, such as linen instead of the usual wool. More emphasizes the deliberateness of this intent, framing the reduction of labor as a conscious consideration: *minor est labor*. Again, we find More combining *minor* with *labor* to foreground the reduction of toil. Significantly, this reduction is not just technical, but also experiential: *minor est labor* describes both the technical requirements of production and the lived experience of the laboring subject. Utopia’s emergent conception of goods as containing “embodied labor” is thus simultaneously a conception of embodied toil. This is yet another example of how labor on Utopia presents as an economic means toward a toil-reducing end.

This economic means and toil-reducing end appear throughout book II of *Utopia*. It is a relationship between means and end that takes on a number of different forms, from that of imaginary relations of production (the magistrates’ dual task) to

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123 Ibid, 133.
imaginary economic theory ("suppose the multitude . . .") and imaginary embodied labor. These imaginary yet practical forms show how More is thinking through a moral problematic that leads him to the economic as such. But this latter fact, by itself, should not be overplayed. The "nowhere" of Utopia is uniquely economic in its organization; this is manifestly clear to many readings, and it is often beside the point. But the overarching reason that this is the case, that is, the end it serves, is the reduction of toil. This latter point is not so clear, as shown by the many scholars, Marxist or otherwise, who do not center it in their analyses. Clarifying this point means entering the Utopian abode of production, critiquing its content, and allowing its dynamism to appear as what it is: both an emergent economic form and a poetics of toil. Only after this is done can the emancipatory potential of its representation of productivity come to the fore.
III. Realm of Disembodied Freedom
Mind, Body, and the “Productive Force” of Leisure

In the last analysis, their community, as well as the property based on it, resolves itself into a specific stage in the development of the productive forces of working subjects – to which correspond their specific relations amongst one another and towards nature. Until a certain point, reproduction. Then turns into dissolution.

Karl Marx, Grundrisse

In this final chapter, I would like to take this investigation back, so to speak, to the soil. The soil passage constitutes, in many ways, the essential hermeneutic for this study as a whole, containing as it does not just a representation of the soil that differentiates More’s island from previous imaginary enclaves, but also a dynamics of productivity (“Nowhere do grain and cattle flourish more plentifully”) and a presentation of labor emphasizing both economic form and toilsome content. With this insight as our starting point, we embarked through the Utopian abode of production, which we found consistently characterized by the same dual presentation of both labor and productivity. This thematic recurrence suggests that Utopia’s uneven economic form harbors a holistic aspiration, and that its dual presentation of labor is the key to unraveling its representational secrets.

Yet the soil passage features another, equally important element: its representation of the Utopian body. The soil passage begins with the declaration that “[i]n body [the inhabitants] are nimble and vigorous [Corpore sunt agili vegetoque], and stronger than you would expect from their stature, though they’re by no means tiny.”124 This corporeal representation reverses the usual imagine in Utopia of a

124 More, Utopia, 179.
heavy, toiling body that suffers. Of critical significance is that the adjective rendered here in English as “nimble,” *agilis*, means both nimble and light.¹²⁵ Thus, amid the quantitative expansion of material goods and the quantitative reduction of toil, a new body type emerges—one defined by its *lightness*. The uniquely Utopian body is here counterposed to the heavy, toiling bodies of elsewhere.

This light and nimble body, I propose, constitutes a “productive force” (in Marx’s sense) that is unique to Utopia. Making such an argument, of course, calls for first addressing the by no means self-evident question of just what the Marxian sense of a productive force is. In problematizing the term “productive force,” I follow Derek Sayer, who in his 1987 study *The Violence of Abstraction* argues that “neither material objects, nor social phenomena, are inherently or universally productive forces by virtue of their ‘innate’ properties alone” and that hence “[Marx’s] concept is inherently a relational, and therefore an historical and contextual one.”¹²⁶ In other words, what a “productive force” *is* is only discoverable by reference to the particular ensemble of social and material relations in which it is embedded.

Sayer continues, however, that there nonetheless exists, within these “productive forces,” a mediating thread: the collective capacities of associated individuals. This connective factor comes to the fore, he maintains, when Marx’s concept is put back in dialogue with classical political economy:

Indeed, an alternative translation of Marx’s *Produktivkräfte* – that of productive *powers* – is rather more revealing of the sense he gave the term. “Productive powers” was in the fact the original concept in classical political economy which Marx rendered in German as *Produktivkräfte*. Whereas a “force” can be conceived as a thing, an independent entity, standing alone, a

¹²⁵ Elyot, Lexicon.
power is always an attribute of something. For Marx, the power in question is specifically that of social labour. “The” productive forces – a reifying formulation – are precisely the powers to transform nature (and with it human nature) of social labour. Productive forces are thus an attribute of human beings in association, their collective capacities, not a set of things as such at all.\footnote{Ibid., 27.}

There is therefore no such thing as “the” productive forces; instead, there are only the collective capacities of individuals in association with one another. To reduce these collective capacities to material “things” would thus be to reify what is fluid, social, and actively present; to misrecognize, that is, what was there the entire time.

Where does this leave *Utopia* and the “productive forces” specific to it? Informed by Sayer’s explication of Marx, I will show that the Utopians’ light and nimble bodies represent an attribute of their mode of association that brings forth new collective capacities. This body type’s importance to Utopia’s imaginary productive forces is hinted at in More’s playful declaration that “nowhere [*nusquam*] do grain and cattle flourish more plentifully, nowhere are people’s bodies more vigorous or less susceptible to disease.”\footnote{More, *Utopia*, 179.} Both material output and body type, then, condition the “nowhere” status of Utopia. Of these two “utopian” attributes, it is the former that is more clearly a productive force from the technical point of view. As we discussed in chapter two, More gives this material output and its concomitant productivity a rather complex (for the early sixteenth century) theoretical justification and form.

Here I would demonstrate, however, that not just the productivity of labor, but also the associated body that performs it, is a productive force. This corporeal aspect represents an expanded and emancipatory conception of “productive forces,” one that conjures a form of wealth irreducible to either material output or labor time.
expenditure. Involving both a well-rested body and an active mind, this is a productive force that takes up Utopia’s dynamics of quantitative reduction (reduction of the workday, of necessary labor time, reduction of idleness) and transforms it into a new way of being.

Liberation of Time: Between Body and Mind

The productive force that is the Utopian body rests, despite its uniqueness, on the prior achievements of Utopia’s more classically productive elements, that is, its labor productivity. This productivity is emphasized especially at the end of the “Their Occupations” section of book II, in wording that reflects the dual presentation of Utopia’s labor:

Since there is an abundance of everything—as a result of everyone working at useful trades and the trades requiring less work [opera pauciora sufficient]—they sometimes assemble great numbers of people to work on the roads if any need repairs. And when there is no need even for this sort of work, then they very often proclaim a shorter work day, since the magistrates never force their citizens to perform useless labour [Neque enim supervacaneo labore cives invitos]. The chief aim of their constitution is that, as far as public needs permit, all citizens should be free to withdraw as much time as possible from the service of the body and devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind [ab servitio corporis ad animi libertatem cultumque] For in that, they think, lies the happiness of life.129

Once again, More ascribes the Utopians’ unheard-of abundance to the universality and usefulness of their work and its minimal technical requirements (opera pauciora sufficient). The vast increases in material output engendered by these preconditions allow the Utopians to turn to other necessary tasks, such as tending to their roads (which, again, in quickening the transport of agricultural goods, also reduce Latin

129 More, Utopia, 133-5.
labor). Just as with More’s description of the construction of houses, then, a rational economization leads to further economization on Utopia.

Such economization upon economization results in the regular reduction of the workday, even below its usual six hours. As in the rotation passage, the Utopian citizens are never forced—invitos, the same word rendered in that passage, as discussed in chapter one, as “unwillingly”—to perform superfluous or “needless” toil (supervacaneo labore).130 However, unlike the universal rotation, this reduction is on the scale of hours rather than years. In carrying out their dual supervisory/emancipatory task, the magistrates seem to be vigilant for every conceivable moment that could bring a further reduction of the workday. The scale of this reduction is thus daily and dynamic in its capacity to affect the lives of Utopians—a dynamism resulting in not just an accumulation of material goods, but also the equally crucial accumulation of liberated time.

As the passage makes clear, this great freeing of time is the imaginary island’s singular goal. Again:

The chief aim of their constitution is that [reipublicae institutio hunc unum scopum in primis respicit], as far as public needs permit, all citizens should be free to withdraw as much time as possible [plurimum temporis] from the service of the body and devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind [ab servitio corporis ad animi libertatem cultumque] For in that, they think, lies the happiness of life [vitae felicitatem].131

More characterizes this accumulation of time as the unum scopum in primis (with scopus literally “a high rock,” signifying “a mark, where men do shoot”).132 But most important is this goal’s poetic rationale; it is to decrease time spent in “service of the

130 Thomas, Dictionarum, s.v. “Supervacaneus.”
131 More, Utopia, 133-35.
132 Elyot, Dictionary, s.v. “Scopus, & scopulus.”
body” (*servitio corporis*) and increase time spent in free cultivation of the mind (*animi libertatem cultumque*). Here we see the accumulation of liberated time expressed through the dual presentation of Utopia’s labor: the island’s organization around rational economic lines, that is, simultaneously harbors a poetic view of the body in toil. Time away from immediate production is thus time away from the oppressive needs of the flesh.

In addition to this dual presentation, however, the passage broaches a third concern: the mind and its cultivation. It is here that we finally begin to see the *positive* attributes of Utopia, and not solely its obsession with quantitative reduction. All of More’s poetic critiques of toil, all his theoretical pontifications on the price mechanism and the proper use of linen—these all lead to this singular goal of liberating and cultivating the mind. More even characterizes this cultivation as the very substance of happiness. Yet this positive goal is nonetheless tied, at a certain level, to equivalence with its embodied antithesis. Loss at one end of the opposition flows directly into the other. Such a dynamic and fluid connection shows More to be thinking through the interrelation between mind and body, and thus its mediation by the economic organization of his island.

This interrelation between service of the body and culture of the mind is again seen during More’s discussion of Utopia’s leisure. With so few working hours, the Utopians must decide what to do with all of their free time. In theory, such an abundance of time should be one of the most emancipatory aspects of the imaginary island. But this is not quite the case, as Utopian leisure turns out to be an awkward mixture of absolute individual choice and stringent societal regulation:
The other hours of the day, when they are not working, eating or sleeping, are left to each person’s individual discretion [id suo cuiusque arbitrio permittitur], provided that free time [ab opificio suo liberum] is not wasted in roistering or sloth [non quo per luxum aut segnitiem abutatur] but used properly in some chosen occupation [ex animi sententia in aliud quippiam studii bene collocet].

Importantly, the use of free time on Utopia—what the Robinson translation poetically refers to as “void time”—is left to the personal judgment (arbitrio, “arbitrament,” “judgment,” “advice”) of the individual. Utopia imposes no detailed structure on the hours not devoted to work, nourishment, or sleep, in sharp contrast to its tightly organized twenty-four-hour day as whole. In this sense, Utopian leisure is a realm of personal autonomy and self-determination.

This realm’s freedom, however, is not absolute, but qualified, as there are strict limits on what is permissible during Utopia’s “void time.” As More describes, the Utopians are barred from misusing (abutatur, “to abuse,” “to use a thing dishonestly… [or] contrary to that, that it serves for”) their free time in either luxus or segnitiem. Elyot’s lexicon defines the former as “all superfluity or excess, as well in carnal pleasure, as in sumptuous fare, apparel, or building”—a definition encompassing all that is vain, luxurious, and tied to the delicate pleasures of the flesh. The Utopians are thus not to engage in (or reintroduce onto the island) precisely those “vices” whose banished has conditioned their unprecedented productivity. What has been purged from the sphere of production cannot, in More’s eyes, be allowed to reappear in the sphere of leisure. In other words, such leisure is

133 More, Utopia, 126.
134 Bruce, 58; Thomas, Dictionarium, s.v. “Arbitrium.”
135 Elyot, Dictionary, s.v. “Abutor, abusus sum, abuti.”
136 Ibid, s.v. “Luxus, luxuria, & luxuries.”
still a form of “service of the body,” hence incompatible with the island’s chief aim of reducing such embodied service.

The Utopians are thus induced, by way of political fiat, to a form of leisure that enthusiastically embraces learning and the cultivation of the mind. During void hours, the Utopians are to be engaged in some sort of “good study” (*studii bene*). More characterizes this choice of study, however, as *ex animi sententia*, that is, “according to my appetite, or as I would desire it.” Again, Utopian leisure represents a mixture of absolute individual choice and stringent societal regulation. Many activities are prohibited during the islanders’ free hours: but when it comes to what they are *allowed* to do, they are asked to look within themselves, discover their own (educational) desires, and act accordingly.

This circumstance results in one of the key features of More’s imaginary island: a population of well-rested bodies that are constantly engaged in learning. On this island, the gains of physical rest flow directly into activity of the mind. This is a state of affairs that was recognized by Karl Kautsky in his study of *Utopia*:

More’s intention is—and this is quite a modern feature—to free the citizens of his commonwealth as much as possible from physical labour, in order to procure them leisure for intellectual and social activity. His chief means to this end are the organization of labour, to avoid all the useless work which the existing anarchy introduces into economic life, and which was comparatively slight in More’s time, and finally the restriction of wants.

Identifying the intent behind Utopia’s reduction of “bodily” time—that is, increased time for the mind—Kautsky emphasizes the historicity of this aim, describing it as “quite a modern feature” here, and in a subsequent passage, as “a quite a modern idea which formed no part of primitive or of Platonic communism. Primitive man was

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137 Ibid, s.v. “*Ex animi sententia*.”
138 Kautsky, 209.
debarred from the enjoyment of scientific activity.” Much as with the presence on Utopia of labor and its not-particularly-fertile soil, this emphasis on universal leisure time for intellectual activity differentiates More’s island from its predecessors. Kautsky’s analysis confirms that, despite certain regressive features, Utopia’s leisure contains an emancipatory interrelation between restful bodies and active minds.

This interrelation between body and mind, I propose, is not just emancipatory in terms of leisure, but also in terms of production. That is, the structural relationship that More articulates between body and mind constitutes a “productive force” that asks us to think of social wealth beyond either material quantity or labor time expenditure. To be sure, this productive force has as its precondition the great productivity and concomitant free time that are (in 1516) unique to Utopia; but once these are taken into account, the unity of well-rested bodies and active minds emerges in all of its productive, and more specifically practical, potential.

**Well-Rested Bodies and Productive Minds**

Can a body at leisure “produce” and thus be a “productive force?” Posing this question means reversing the typical approach to leisure in terms of consumption. As it is usually told, we go to work to produce and then leave this sphere in order to consume (and hopefully consume enough to be able to return to work the next day, and so on). Part of this consumption is that of consumption of material goods, but

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139 Ibid., 234.
140 Universal leisure, that is, for all citizens. This universality does not apply to the enslaved on the island. Fully analyzing the implications of Utopian slavery would be beyond the scope of this study; but in any case the existence of this institution even here should color any potentially too rosy or unqualifiedly “emancipatory” reading of More’s *Utopia.*
another, crucial part is the “consumption” of free time. Leisure, it is supposed, is thus a form of consumption in opposition to that of production.

I would like to problematize this distinction, not so as to assert that “production is everything” on Utopia, but in order to show that production is not everything; that, in fact, the strict dichotomy of a sphere of production versus that of consumption itself stems from a thoroughly productivist world—of which Utopia is not yet a part. To explain, I would first critique Kautsky’s analysis of Utopia. The strong grasp he evinces regarding the island’s economics, moral aim, and emancipatory potential does not extend to his analysis of the so-called “superstructure” of Utopia (its culture, philosophy, and religion). This is because Kautsky separates Utopia’s economics and culture into two independent spheres, with no organic connection between: “The philosophy and religion of Utopia constitute an important corroboration of More’s literary and scientific attitude… but they have no organic connection with the communism of his ideal commonwealth.” 141 But, to the contrary, there is indeed an organic connection between More’s “communism” (that is, his economics) and his philosophy. In fact, it is only by turning to the philosophy of the Utopians that one begins to see the productive potential of Utopia’s leisurely bodies.

It is specifically Utopia’s philosophy of pleasure that mediates the relationship between its leisurely bodies and its productive forces. This philosophy encompasses two categories, the mental and corporeal. Accompanied by the marginal note “Classes of true pleasure [Verae voluptatis species],” More writes:

141 Kautsky, 229.
[The Utopians] distinguish several classes of pleasures which they confess to be genuine, attributing some to the mind and others to the body. Those of the mind are knowledge and the delight that arises from contemplating the truth, the gratification of looking back on a well-spent life, and the unquestioning hope [spes non dubia] of happiness to come.\footnote{More, Utopia, 173.}

For the Utopians, true pleasure of the mind consists of learning, remembrance of one’s virtues and accomplishments, and faith in the future and next life. This conception of learning as a “true pleasure” clearly relates to the island’s chief aim, and to the opposition it poses between service of the body and cultivation of the mind. This conception is clearly also a potential productive force; if learning induces true pleasure, then the “production” of useful knowledge is more likely to occur. But while this focus on mental pleasure is important, it cannot be called the authentic source of the productive potential of Utopia’s leisurely bodies.

This authentic source is, rather, the Utopian body itself, and the pleasure that is peculiar to it alone. However, this latter is of a highly specific form, for the Utopians classify bodily pleasures into two subgroups:

The first is that which fills the sense with immediate delight [sensum perspicua suavitate perfundit]. Sometimes this happens when bodily organs that have been weakened by natural heat are restored with food and drink; sometimes it happens when we eliminate some excess in the body, as when we move our bowels, generate children, or relive an itch somewhere by rubbing or scratching it.\footnote{Ibid.}

All of these sensations listed under the first classification fall within what is typically understood as a bodily pleasure: eating, drinking, sex, scratching, and defecation—pleasures, in other words, that stem from the satisfaction of a physical need. More even describes this category of pleasure as suavitas (“sweetness,” “pleasantness”) and
perspicuus (“clear,” “plain,” “easy”).\textsuperscript{144} These are all pleasures that are simple and sweet in their ability to satisfy the particular needs of the body.

However, the Utopians do not consider the pleasures of this first subgroup as constituting true bodily pleasure as such, but rather as inseparable from the logic of pain. More writes:

Anyone who thinks happiness consists of this sort of pleasure must confess that his ideal life would be one spent in an endless round of hunger, thirst and itching, followed by eating, drinking, scratching and rubbing. Who can fail to see that such an existence is not only disgusting but miserable. These pleasures are certainly the lowest of all, as they are the most adulterated – for they never occur except in connection with the pains that are their contraries.\textsuperscript{145}

If meeting immediate needs were the true form of bodily pleasure, then one could logically maximize pleasure by being constantly in need—a view that is, according to More, absurd. Thus viewing immediate pleasures as invariably preconditioned by pain, More formulates the Utopians’ conception of true bodily pleasure as a state of bodily health as such, any immediate pleasures notwithstanding:

The second kind of bodily pleasure they describe as nothing but the calm and harmonious state of the body, its state of health when undisturbed by any disorder. Health itself, when not oppressed by pain, gives pleasure, without any external excitement at all. Even though it appeals less directly to the senses than the gross gratifications of eating and drinking, many still consider this to be the greatest pleasure of all. Most of the Utopians regard it as the foundation and basis of all the pleasures, since by itself alone it can make life peaceful and desirable, whereas without it there is no possibility of any other pleasure. \textit{Mere absence of pain, without positive health, they regard as insensibility, not pleasure.}\textsuperscript{146}


\textsuperscript{145} More, \textit{Utopia}, 177. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 173-5. Emphasis added.
This state of calm and harmonious health, “undisturbed by any disorder,” thus emerges “without any external excitement at all.” In the Utopians’ conception of pleasure, this undisturbed bodily state is the precondition for all other forms of pleasure. For in the absence of the health, peace, and the desire for life that this bodily state brings (which, for the Utopians, is already a form of pleasure), there can be no further joys. The general health of the body is, clearly, the Utopians’ origin-point of pleasure as such.

This view of bodily health is worth emphasizing because it entails a qualitatively particular state of being. Again, More states that “[m]ere absence of pain, without positive health, [the Utopians] regard as insensibility, not pleasure.” In other words, the reduction of pain, or even its removal, does not suffice for the attainment of true bodily pleasure, which requires, rather, the transformation of this pain-minimization into a qualitatively new state of being. This new state of being should be put back in dialogue with the chief aim of the island and its quantitative and temporal opposition between body and mind, for it shows that the Utopians do not aspire, as might appear from the description of the tendency to shorten the workday, to simply reduce toil and increase mental contemplation. Rather, they seek to ensure that this quantitative relationship eventually becomes a new way of existing pleasurably—a transformation of quantity into quality that posits the undisturbed body as the focal point of true pleasure.

This undisturbed, healthy body contrasts loudly with More’s most visceral analogy for the bodies of non-Utopians: beasts of burdens, invoked, as discussed, in More’s differentiation of the Utopian workday from the endless labor of elsewhere.

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147 Ibid.
More uses this analogy again near the end of book II, except in this instance, laborers
are not like beasts of burden, but are now characterized as living worse than beasts:

What kind of justice is it when a nobleman, a goldsmith, a moneylender, or
someone else who makes his living by doing nothing at all or something
completely useless to the commonwealth, gets to live a life of luxury and
grandeur, while in the meantime a labourer, a carter or a carpenter or a farmer
works so hard and so constantly that even beasts of burden would scarcely
endure it? Although this work of theirs is so necessary that no commonwealth
could survive a year without it, they earn so meager a living and lead such
miserable lives that beasts would really seem to be better off. Beasts do not
have to work every minute, and their food is not much worse; in fact they like
it better, and besides, they do not have to worry about their future.\footnote{148}

The bodies of non-Utopian laborers are represented here as even more degraded than
those of draft animals. Beyond the island’s shores, the toil of the laborer is such that
even large animals would hardly endure it. This second use of the animal analogy
confirms the impression that, in More’s view, true bodily pleasure is found solely on
his imaginary island. It is only after the heaviness of toil has been greatly reduced that
a society can give thought to achieving harmonious health and thus also true bodily
pleasure.

This positive and harmonious state of health is, indeed, crystalized in the
uniquely light and nimble body More speaks of in the soil passage: “nowhere are
people’s bodies more vigorous or less susceptible to disease.” In the paragraph
immediately following, More expands on this bodily uniqueness:

The people are easy-going, cheerful [facilis ac faceta], clever [sollers], and
like their leisure [otto gaudens]. They can stand heavy labour when it is useful
[corporis laborum (quum est usus) satis patiens], but otherwise they are not
fond of it [ceterum alias haudquaquam sane appetens]. In intellectual pursuits
they are tireless [animi studiis infatigata].\footnote{149}

\footnote{148} Ibid., 243. Emphasis added.\footnote{149} Ibid., 181.
This passage contains quite a number of crucial descriptions for the Utopian people. These are said to be facilis (“light,” “easy”) and facetus (“merry,” “pleasant”).\textsuperscript{150} Far from being mentally slow, they are sollers (“skilled,” “skillful,” “clever,” “expert”).\textsuperscript{151} Importantly, they are a people who rejoice (gaudens, “delighting in”) in otium (“vacation from labour,” “leisure,” “quietness,” “idleness,” “lack of business”).\textsuperscript{152}

This passage represents the book’s most fleshed-out description of the personality and body type unique to Utopia. But aside from foregrounding lightness, cleverness, and love of leisure, this description also frames the leisured body as a “productive force” in the sense of an individual’s increased capacity to withstand embodied toil. Utopians rejoice in leisure, but they are eminently capable of bearing (patiens, “that can suffer,” “endure,” “abide,” “sustain”) bodily labor (corporis laborum) so long as it is useful (quum est usus).\textsuperscript{153} Crucially, this ability to withstand useful labor is qualified by the adverb satis, “enough, as much as one do need, sufficient, able enough.”\textsuperscript{154} The Utopians are a people, then, whose vigorous and healthy bodies allow them to endure just enough bodily labor as is socially necessary. Here we see Utopia’s dual presentation of labor applied to the very bodies of its inhabitants. More’s description of these bodies corresponds to the precise economic requirements of his island, which, like most everything about Utopia, harbors a critique of embodied toil.

\textsuperscript{150}Elyot, Dictionary, s.v. “Facilis, factilei;” “Facetus;”
\textsuperscript{152}Thomas, Dictionarium, s.v. “Gaudens;” Elyot, Dictionary, s.v. “Otium.”
\textsuperscript{153}Thomas, Dictionarium, s.v. “Patior, eris.”
\textsuperscript{154}Ibid, s.v. “Satis, adverb.”
In the passage above, the Utopians’ grudging engagement in bodily labor is counterposed to their mind’s inexhaustible love of learning: “In intellectual pursuits they are tireless [animi studiis infatigata].” The measured fatigue of corpus labor has thus been transformed into an infatigata of the animus. Through this textual and thematic opposition, More shows how a boundless love of learning emerges from the body type unique to Utopia. The harmonious and undisturbed body that is the foundation of all further pleasure allows for a pleasurable relationship with knowledge itself, a striving mental energy to match the light and leisurely body.

This boundless relationship to learning, emergent from the healthy bodies of the Utopians, constitutes, I contend, an additional productive force, one that begins to conceptualize wealth beyond material output or labor time expenditure. As More describes: “Once stimulated by learning [exercitata literis], the minds [ingenia, ‘the nature, inclination, or disposition of a thing,’ ‘also wit,’ ‘wisdom,’ ‘will,’ ‘fantasy,’ ‘invention,’ ‘cunning’] of the Utopians are wonderfully quick to seek out those various skills [inventiones artium] which make life more agreeable.” During their many leisure hours, the Utopian whose mind is occupied in learning manages to invent all sorts of ways to make life more comfortable for all. This is a mind that is itself a productive force, albeit a force having nothing to do with either technical tools or the expenditure of physical labor. From the viewpoint of the early sixteenth century, this is a rationalized vision of leisure time imbued with certain productive values; but crucially, from the viewpoint of today, this is a de-reifying representation of leisure that begins to break down an ossified dichotomy between wealth production and wealth consumption.

155 More, Utopia, 183; Thomas, Dictionarium, s.v. “Ingenium.”
More gives two examples of mental quickness resulting in a more comfortable life for all, in this case, the art of printing and the manufacture of paper. He writes:

Two inventions, to be sure, they owe to us: the art of printing and the manufacturing of paper. At least they owe these arts partly to us, though also in good measure to themselves. While we were showing them the books printed on paper in Aldine letters, we talked about what paper is made of and how letters are printed, though without going into details, for none of us had had any practical experience of either skill. But with great sharpness [acutissime] of mind they immediately [statim] conceived how to do it.” While previously they had written only on vellum, bark and papyrus, they now undertook to make paper and print with type. Their first attempts were not altogether successful, but with practice they soon mastered both arts.156

This representation of the workings of a leisurely body and its boundless, “productive” mind—a mind capable of quickly grasping a whole artisan process from the barest outline, and of putting this comprehension to masterful practice—may be seen as a form of wealth creation, one that could be put in dialogue with Marx’s discussion of free time as a productive force. It is in the Grundrisse, specifically its “Chapter on Capital,” that we find this statement about the productive and emancipatory potential of free time: “The saving of labor time [is] equal to an increase of free time, i.e., time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power.”157 As Marx continues:

Free time—which is both idle time and time for higher activity—has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject. This process is then both discipline, as regards the human being in the process of becoming; and, at the same time, practice [Ausübung], experimental science, materially creative and objectifying science, as regards the human being who has become, in whose head exists the accumulated knowledge of society.158

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156 Ibid., 183-185.
157 Marx, Grundrisse, 711.
158 Ibid., 712. Emphasis added.
Marx emphasizes the ability of free time—here framed as both idle time and time for higher activity—to transform the producer into a different type of subject. This is a new subject that is one part discipline (necessary for developing capacities, or, in Marx’s language, “becoming”) and one part practice—the practice of the human being who has become (and “in whose head exists the accumulated knowledge of society”). It is this new human type with their accumulated knowledge who, according to Marx, reenters the production process as the greatest productive force of all.

While there are important differences between Marx’s vision of the new human subject and More’s vision of the mind that is infatigata (for example, there is no true “idle time” for the Utopians), they share a crucial similarity: leisure time can lead to the redefinition of what constitutes a “productive” subject. Marx and More alike believe that through the reduction of the time one spends in the immediate production process, the productive powers of society as a whole can in fact be increased. This is leisure time framed, not as passive consumption, but as “production” in the emancipatory sense, that is, the production of a new body type, even a new human being. Such a vision of productive forces, of what can constitute such a force, asks us to think of social wealth beyond either the expenditure of labor time or an increase in material output. Again, in More’s case, this is a form of wealth that posits the pleasure of the harmonious body as the precondition for the mind’s productiveness, a precondition mediated by a vast reduction in the workday. All the way in the early sixteenth century, then, More was contemplating how quantity might be transformed into (an as yet imaginary) quality.


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Ryan, Dermot. “Marx’s ‘Universal Passport’; or, Critique as a Practice of Translation.” Boundary 2 43, no. 3 (August 2016): 105-129.


