

Thornton C. Lockwood

### 3 What Thomas More learned from Herodotus about Utopia

#### 1 A Utopian Reading List

Thomas More reports that Raphael Hythloday introduced the islanders of Utopia to the literature of the Greeks. Although Hythloday did not bother with Latin authors (since aside from its poets and historians he thought there was nothing in that language that they would value), on his fourth voyage to the island he provided them with a small library. To wit,

Thus they received from me most of Plato's works and more of Aristotle's, as well as Theophrastus' book *On Plants*, though the latter, I'm sorry to say, was somewhat mutilated....- They are very fond of Plutarch's writings, and delighted with the witty persiflage of Lucian. Among the poets they have Aristophanes, Homer and Euripides, together with Sophocles in the small typeface of the Aldine edition. Of the historians they possess Thucydides and Herodotus, as well as Herodian. (II: 75–76)<sup>1</sup>

That Hythloday decides to include Herodotus amongst the twelve authors that comprise his Canon of the classical Greek corpus suggests that he (or More) placed tremendous value on Herodotus as a source of wisdom for the Utopians. But Herodotus' inclusion on the Utopian reading list invites the question: What is it in Herodotus' *Histories* that the Utopians should learn?

In order to determine what the Utopians (or Thomas More himself) learned from Herodotus, I want to consider a related question, which is whether we should think of Herodotus in any way as a utopian political theorist. Although the *Histories* records important political events in Archaic Greece, such as the constitutional reforms of Lycurgus and Cleisthenes (2.65–66, 5.66–69) or the emergence of the tyranny of the Peisistratus in Athens (1.59–64), the accounts are brief and not especially focused on constitutional details.<sup>2</sup>Familiar, too, is

---

<sup>1</sup> For references to More's *Utopia* I quote from Logan et al. 2002, with Roman numerals indicating book and Arabic numbers indicating pages; for the Latin text, I use Logan et al. 1995. Clay and Purvis 1999: 11–15 examines the other authors on the Utopian reading list for their significance.

<sup>2</sup> For references to Herodotus' *Histories*, I quote from Grene 1987 (with occasional adaptation), using Arabic numbers for book and paragraphs; for the Greek text I use Hude 1927. Bloomer 1993 argues that Herodotus identifies superlative *nomoi* as instances of the deeds and wonders that

Herodotus' praise of Athens and Sparta: That it was the former, who through self-government was ultimately the savior of Greece against the Persians (5.78, 7.139). Or, in the words of Demaratus, that the latter grounded their freedom and courage in their obedience to law (7.102, 7.104, 7.209). Nonetheless, the only political or utopian theorizing in the work appears to be the three paragraphs that make up the "constitutional debate" in which Persian usurpers—including the future king Darius—consider the respective merits of *isonomia*, oligarchy, and monarchy (3.80–82). My question—whether Herodotus is a utopian political theorist—seems rather quickly answered in the negative. Such a verdict, I will argue, is premature. No doubt, when *modern thinkers* political theorize—in utopian or pragmatic fashion—their written products look like Aristotle's prose (or that of Rawls) much more than anything that what one finds in Herodotus. But it would be historically chauvinistic to deny Herodotus the status of a political theorist solely because he does not share our modern analytical or rhetorical framework. Aeschylus' tragedies, Aristophanes' comedies, Xenophon and Plato's dialogues, and Aristotle's lectures also theorize about politics albeit from the perspective of very different genres, but that is just to note that "political theorizing" in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Century Greece is a much richer and more varied intellectual phenomenon than it is today. Reflection on Herodotus as a political thinker invites salutary reflection on the narrowness of our own notions of political theory.

The accuracy of applying the term "utopian" to Herodotus depends upon one's understanding of utopianism. To use the language of Manuel and Manuel 1979, although there are "wellsprings" of utopian thought in classical authors, the concept of utopia is Thomas More's patrimony (12–13).<sup>3</sup> What More intends by the term is elucidated by Anemolius' "Six Lines on the Island of Utopia" (one of the ancillary materials that More published with *Utopia*), which captures at least two of the most important senses of the term:

"No Place" (*utopia*) was once my name, I lay so far (*ob infrequentiam*);  
 But now with Plato's state I can compare,  
 Perhaps outdo her (for what he only drew  
 In empty words I have made live anew  
 In men and wealth, as well as splendid laws):  
 "The Good Place" (*eutopia*) they should call me, with good cause. (Logan 1995: 14)

---

the proem of the *Histories* identify as worthy of preservation. Although that claim is not inconsistent with my own views about Herodotus' theoretical or normative exempla, it fails to do justice to the ethical or political significance of some of those superlatives.

<sup>3</sup> Clay and Purvis 1999 note that "until 1516, there was no such place and no such thing as utopian literature" (1); nonetheless, they too detect the roots of More's utopian insights in passages from Herodotus (4, 162–65, 168–172).

By “utopia” More seems to mean both an especially good place, but I think equally one which in some profound sense is “infrequent,” other, or “no place.” Anemolius (or More) certainly thought that the best constitution of Plato’s *Republic* was in some sense an exercise in utopian political theorizing and I think a good case can be made for also locating such utopian reflection in Herodotus’ *Histories*. Throughout the first four books of the *Histories* he examines the social and political customs of peoples from around the known world that I think are utopian in both of More’s senses of the term. Admittedly, Herodotus presents his stories as chronicles that either he himself has observed or which he has learned about from others (1.5) whereas More’s *Utopia*, literary contrivances notwithstanding, is a work in speculative theorizing about political and social institutions.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, More’s apparent borrowings from Herodotus and his inclusion of Herodotus on the Utopian reading list suggest to me that More learned something important about utopia from Herodotus.

My chapter argues that Herodotus’ reflections on the political and social customs of distant peoples warrants the classification of him as a political utopian thinker who had much to teach the residents of More’s island of Utopia. In the first part of my chapter, I argue that although Herodotus shows a lack of interest in the constitutional organization of political communities, his keenness for examining cultural institutions with political significance warrants us calling his work “political.” In the second part of my chapter, I argue that Herodotus is more than a mere chronicler of political institutions insofar as he provides a “market” of political institutions that he not only describes but evaluates, all of which are decidedly “no where.” Herodotus’ depiction of political mores and customs to his contemporary audience warrants us describing him as a political theorist, regardless of his remarks about cultural relativism. In the third part of my chapter, I argue that we should consider Herodotus a qualified utopian political theorist because of his reflections on Archaic Greek colonization and his contrast of superlative and deficient political constitutions and customs. Finally, in my conclusion I argue that More’s own practice of utopian theorizing may deflate some of the tension between utopian and non-utopian political thought, a lesson I think he learned more from Herodotus than Plato.

---

<sup>4</sup> As Rist 2016 shows, More’s *Utopia* raises a host of exegetical and philosophical questions in its own right. Although I dwell upon some of the tensions in More’s work in the conclusion of my chapter, my chapter is ultimately focused on Herodotus rather than More.

## 2 Is Herodotus' *Histories* Political?

As Sara Forsdyke notes, prominent in the interpretation of Herodotus' *Histories* is a strand of scholarship that dismisses him as “a naïve storyteller who had no deep (*sic*) of understanding of (or interest in) politics” (Forsdyke 2006: 224).<sup>5</sup> Although Herodotus reports a number of historical events that are central to the development of Archaic Greek political institutions, his interest in them is admittedly selective. Take, for instance, his analysis of autocratic rule in Athens in the 6<sup>th</sup> century under Peisistratus and his sons (c. 560–539 BCE), an example of a more general Archaic political development in which autocratic rulers or “tyrants” established political power with populist appeals amidst infighting among aristocratic families.<sup>6</sup> Herodotus reports to us the factional squabbling—between men of the coast, the plain, and the hills—that presented the opportunity for Peisistratus' seizure of power and his three different coups. But Herodotus seems more interested in details such as Peisistratus entering Athens with Phya (during the 2<sup>nd</sup> coup in 539 BCE), masquerading as Athena, because of the light that it sheds on purportedly sagacious Athenian judgment [1.59–64]). Unlike, say, the account of Peisistratus in the *Athenian Constitution*, in Herodotus there is little discussion of his populism, his economic or tax policies, his building program, his transformation of the magistrates, or analysis about why his reign (unlike his sons) was long-lived.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, Herodotus' selectivity concerning Peisistratus suggests an almost tawdry interest in the fabulous details of his ascensions to power (for instance, his self-inflicted wounds, his use of theatrical trickery, or the “uncustomary” treatment of his Alcmaeonid wife). But the family of the Peisistratids are part of much larger—and quite politically attuned—narrative that runs almost the length of the *Histories*. Herodotus is especially sensitive to the place of the Alcmaeonid family in the development of Athenian political institutions and clearly the Peisistratids are a sort of foil to them (6.123).<sup>8</sup> Further, the Peisistratids are re-occurring characters, as it were, in the broader narrative of Athenian dem-

---

5 Forsdyke evinces Victor Ehrenburg, who comments on 5.67 (the discussion of Cleisthenes' reforms) that Herodotus “had no discriminating knowledge of political and constitutional issues” (224).

6 Dewald 2003 contextualizes Herodotus' complex treatment of Archaic tyranny, of which the Peisistratids are but one dynastic example.

7 The closest Herodotus comes to such an analysis is his claim that Peisistratus “in no way degraded the existing magistracies or the ordinances but governed the city well and truly according to the laws that were established” (5.59); cf. *Ath. Const.* 13.5, 16.1–9.

8 See further Fornara 1971: 54–57 and Moles 2002: 37–42.

ocratic freedom. As Herodotus notes, it is only after Athens sheds its Archaic tyranny that it begins to manifest the strengths and virtues of self-rule (5.78). The sons of Peisistratus also are ever waiting in the wings, hoping to be re-installed by the Persians either at the battle of Marathon, or upon Xerxes succession to the throne, or at the siege of the acropolis (5.65, 6.107, 7.6, 8.52). Although it may be fair to say that books V–IX of the *Histories* are less focused upon the constitutional details of political change (hence barely a single paragraph each on the reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes [1.29, 5.66]), it seems equally selective to characterize the work’s sweeping narrative about the development of Athenian freedom as being insufficiently “political.”

The analysis of non-Greek customs in the first four books of the *Histories* is especially sensitive to social and political customs and furnishes a political anthropology with extensive details—something unimaginable for a thinker with “no discriminating knowledge of political and constitutional issues” (Forsdyke: 244).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Herodotus and More share similar outlooks and interests in the social and political customs of political philosophizing. Although More describes the organization of offices on his island (II: 43–48, 82–83), he spends far more time discussing their socio-political customs, such as their labor practices (II: 48–53), their system of distributing goods (II: 53–58), their systems of commerce (II: 58–63), their attitudes towards marriage and burial (II: 78–81), their foreign policy and military organization (II: 83–93), and their religious beliefs and liturgical practices (II: 93–107). Rather than think of either More or Herodotus as insufficiently “political,” I would suggest that both authors challenge us to think of politically significant factors of a society that extend beyond constitutional specifications or the organization of political offices.

In the first four books of the *Histories*, Herodotus surveys at length the customs and practices of several major societies, including Persia, Babylon, Egypt, Scythia, and Libya (the latter two include numerous smaller social entities or groupings). Several political themes predominate across his analyses. First, several *logoi* raise the problem of cultural assimilation and the permeability of societal boundaries. At one end of the extreme are the Scythians, who execute their ruler Anacharsis for daring to practice Hellenic religions and dress in its attire (4.76–77); at the other end of the spectrum are the Persians, whom, Herodotus reports, welcome foreign customs more than any other peoples (including the practice of Greek pederasty [1.135]); somewhere in between lies the case of Egypt, which initially eschews Greek practices (2.91; cf. 2.154), but which,

---

<sup>9</sup> Although my analysis is oriented by parallels between More and Herodotus, Ward 2008 also argues that the cultural *logoi* in books I–IV are the basis for Herodotus’ political philosophizing.

under the reign of the philhellenic king Amasis, establishes the port of Naucratis for Greek merchants and conducts alliances with the Theran colony at Cyrēnē (2.178–82). As Thucydides reminds us in Pericles’ funeral oration (2.39), the question of assimilation speaks more broadly to the openness of a society, with Athens and Sparta located at extremes of such a spectrum. Such openness (or its lack) determines the political freedoms and social trust within a society.

A second socio-political theme that Herodotus chronicles in several *logoi* is the question of the malleability of social, political, and gender roles. Herodotus points out that Egyptian gender roles are the opposite of those practiced in Greece; everything from whether a specific gender identifies with the household or the public sphere to whether one urinates standing up or sitting is reversed in Egypt, which suggests that gender roles are enormously flexible (2.35). Although Socrates in the *Republic* makes clear that his “female drama” is controversial for an Athenian audience (*Rep.* 5.449c–451c), Herodotus reports numerous societies in which women are held in common (1.216, 4.104, 4.172, 4.180, 4.203) and several in which men and women practice gender-egalitarianism (4.26, 4.112). Political equality (or more precisely, political inequality) is also a matter of flexibility: Herodotus tells the story of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Median king Dēiocēs whom he claims was the first to establish political authority through the construction (literally) of a multi-walled palace at Ecbatana. Herodotus observes

When all was built, Dēiocēs was the first who established this ceremony: that no one whatsoever should have admittance to the king, but that all should be transacted through messengers and that the king should be seen by none; moreover, to laugh or to spit in the royal presence was shameful for all alike. These solemnities he contrived around his own person so that those who were his equals and of the same age, brought up with him, and of descent as good, and as brave as he, might not, seeing him, be vexed and take to plotting against him but would judge him to be someone grown quite different—and all because they did not see him. (1.99)<sup>10</sup>

The story of Amasis’ ascent—one I will examine at greater length in part III of my chapter—represents the same phenomenon (2.172).<sup>11</sup> Although it is true that malleability is not a constitutional feature of a society, the possibility of constitutional change or reform is a function of political malleability.

A third socio-political theme that Herodotus focuses upon in several *logoi* is the question of land distribution and economic inequality. As Hadas points out,

---

**10** Contrast Dēiocēs’ establishment of political authority with Egyptian inability to live without a king (2.147).

**11** Atack 2020: 13–38 explores at length the place of Dēiocēs and Amasis as examples of Herodotean monarchs.

it is quite likely that More's depiction of the Utopian attitude towards silver and gold—Utopians use the metals only for chamber pots, shackles for slaves, and jewelry to mark criminals (II: 60–61)—is adapted from Herodotus' depiction of the Ethiopian use of golden fetters for their prisoners (3.22–23; cf. 3.130).<sup>12</sup> But Herodotus the political anthropologist also keenly observes the practices of land distribution in different societies.<sup>13</sup> The Scythians, for instance, determined how much property each of its members would possess based on how much territory one could ride on a horse in a single day (4.7). Of the societies that Herodotus studies, Egypt seems to have the most experimentation with policies of land distribution. Apparently under the reign of King Sesostris,<sup>14</sup> land was divided into equal plots (hence spurring the discovery of geometry), the product of which was subsequently taxed by the realm (2.109). Additionally, a caste system was put in place in which warriors were allocated twelve plots of land, untaxed, for their service to the Pharaoh (2.168). But Herodotus also tells the charming story of an upstart King Sethos<sup>15</sup>—a priest of Hephaestus—who eliminated caste privileges for warriors. Sethos met the Assyrian army with his own that was “not one of warriors, but shopkeepers and handworkers and fellows from the marketplace” (2.142). Thankfully for the Egyptians, field mice gnawed through the leather of their opponents' quivers and shields, bringing about their defeat on the battlefield. More, of course, identifies structural poverty as the main cause of crime in his England and eliminates private property from the island of Utopia (I: 15–17, II: 43, 46, 59–60).

Herodotus is clearly an interested observer of political culture even if his focus is not necessarily on its constitutional structure or the arrangement of offices. He depicts a wide array of political and social institutions as radical as anything one might find in Plato or Aristophanes, several of which More incorporates into his construction of Utopia. Herodotus focuses upon aspects of political culture that serve as the structural basis for constitutional establishment and reform, such as the openness and malleability of different communi-

---

<sup>12</sup> See Hadas 1935: 113–14. Herodotus repeatedly underscores the arbitrary or conventional value of precious metals. The Lydians are the first to use gold and silver for currency and cultures that have an abundance of gold use it liberally for many purposes (1.94, 1.215, 3.98, 4.195–96).

<sup>13</sup> If Aristotle is any guide, the issue of land distribution is central to classical “utopian” thought. In his account of best constitutions in *Politics* II, he examines the programs of land distribution found in Plato, Phaleas of Chalcedon, and Hippodamus of Miletus (*Pol* 2.5, 7–8). Aristotle himself proposes a radical redistribution of landed property in his own best constitution (*Pol* 7.10).

<sup>14</sup> That is Senusret III (1878–1841 BCE), or perhaps an amalgamation of several pharaohs.

<sup>15</sup> That is Shabataku (c. 702–690 BCE).

ties. But a political thinker does not simply observe a multitude of political practices or social institutions (utopian or otherwise); he or she also evaluates those institutions. If Herodotus' *Histories* are clearly "political" in their content, it remains to be shown that he himself is a political theorist.

### 3 Is Herodotus a Political Theorist?

Although the evidence from the first part of my chapter suggests that Herodotus is attentive to and sophisticated in his analysis of socio-political aspects of different societies, it is altogether another question whether we should view him as a political theorist who reflects upon and evaluates political culture. Nonetheless, given the evidence I have furnished so far, the burden of proof falls upon those who wish to deny the claim that Herodotus is a political theorist. One can think of two arguments against the claim that we should view Herodotus as a political theorist. First, although both Herodotus and More show a fascination with political and social customs, one might argue that whereas More derives political institutions in Utopia based on principles of equality and justice, Herodotus, as an historian, merely chronicles political events or institutions in different societies. Political history and political theory may overlap, but Herodotus, one might argue, falls more clearly in the former rather than the latter category. Secondly, one might argue that Herodotus' discussion of cultural and political relativism—and his apparent endorsement of Pindar's claim that "custom is king over all" (3.38)—is inconsistent with the practice of normative political theorizing, especially insofar as such theorizing evaluates trans-cultural customs and norms. Such an argument denies that thoroughgoing cultural relativists can justify the evaluation of trans-cultural politico-social institutions and that Herodotus is indeed such a cultural relativist.

The claim that Herodotus merely chronicles rather than theorizes political culture is undermined by a consensus in Herodotus scholarship that his narration of events from Archaic Greece is intended to illuminate, and thus theorize, the late 5<sup>th</sup> century events of his contemporary audience, who lived through at least the earliest years of the Archidamian War (431–421 BCE).<sup>16</sup> Whereas Herodotus' predecessors chronicled (without evaluation) the *res gestae* of Persian

---

**16** A number of explicit references in the *Histories*, such as those to the Peloponnesian Wars (6.98, 7.235, 9.64, 9.73), suggest that Herodotus was composing the *Histories* as late as the 420s. See further Fornara 1971: 41–44. Harrison and Irwin 2018 generally (and 8–16 specifically) explore the subsequent consensus that formed around Fornara's interpretive framework and the challenges of dating the work's composition.



kings, Fornara 1971 persuasively argues that Herodotus' *Histories* are written selectively to show the relevance of the decline of the Persian Empire to those living under the Athenian Empire, especially the central lesson that greatness is ephemeral and "human happiness is never stable" (1.5). But if Herodotus selectively presents the experience of the Persian Empire as a lesson to his late 5<sup>th</sup> century audience, then he is doing far more than merely chronicling the past; rather, he re-imagines the past in light of the present and presents the past as a cautionary tale about imperialism.<sup>17</sup> As Raaflaub 1978 puts it, "the tragic poet occasionally uses myth to analyze and interpret for his audience some of the most urgent political problems they are facing in the capacity as citizens. In a similar way, I suggest, Herodotus uses the *Histories* of the past to shed light on contemporary issues."<sup>18</sup> Herodotus' use of the past clearly puts him in the camp of the political theorist, reflecting on the theoretical ramifications of the past, rather than that of the political historian.

Although scholars such as Fornara, Raaflaub, and Balot have ably sketched out ways in which Herodotus' Persian War narrative in *Histories* V–IX evaluates late 5<sup>th</sup> century political practices and implies cautions about Periclean imperialism, less clear is how the various ethnic *logoi* might present a form of political theorizing. I suggest that the chronicles of other cultures and institutions in Herodotus' *Histories* function somewhat like the way Socrates likens a democratic regime in the *Republic* as a place that "contains all kinds of constitutions, as a result of its license" (*Rep.* 8.557d4–5). Certainly More appears to have drawn upon Herodotus' account of customs in such a fashion (a point I will return to in my conclusion). The culturally diversity of Herodotus' ethnic *logoi*—from the pacifistic tribes of the Argippaei and the Garamantes, who own no warlike arms (4.23, 4.174), to the "Man-eaters" who neither practice justice nor uphold any laws (4.106)—present a veritable "supermarket" of anthropological practices for the political theorist to reflect upon and evaluate. As I show in part III of my chapter, clearly Herodotus evaluates such practices as superior and inferior.

Nonetheless, one might argue that such evaluations are undercut because of Herodotus' apparent endorsement of Pindar's claim that custom is king, a position that precludes any such normative standpoint according to which one could

---

<sup>17</sup> According to Raaflaub 1987, Herodotus teaches that "if the hunger for power becomes excessive, if imperialism, disregarding justice and the rights of others, is pursued to the extreme and becomes a goal in itself, then danger is inevitable (247; cf. Raaflaub 2002: 164–183). Balot 2001: 99–135 develops at length Herodotus' critique of Athenian imperialism.

<sup>18</sup> Fornara 1971: 23, 35–36, 61 already suggested that Herodotus is an imaginative author, more like a dramatist than a chronicler; Raaflaub 1978 develops Fornara's original insight at greater length.

evaluate different political practices. After reporting that Cambyses' irreligious treatment of Egyptian practices proves that he was not in full possession of his faculties, Herodotus reports that

If it were not so, he would never have set about the mockery of what other men hold sacred and customary. For if there were a proposition put before mankind, according to which each should, after examination, choose the finest customs in the world (*nomous tous kallistous ek tōn pantōn nomōn*), each nation would certainly think its own customs the best. Indeed, it is natural for no one but a madman to make a mockery of such things....These are matters of settled custom, and I think Pindar is right when he says, "custom is king of all" (*nomon pantōn basilea*).<sup>19</sup> (3.38)

One might argue that Herodotus embraces a form of political relativism in which trans-cultural objective theorizing is impossible.<sup>20</sup>

Herodotus' position is nuanced and, as I showed in the first part of my chapter, he clearly believes that political institutions are variable and malleable. Nonetheless, it is wrong to ascribe to Herodotus uncritically a position of cultural relativism based on his quotation of Pindar in 3.38. First, Herodotus invokes Pindar's view of *nomos* within his overall evaluation of Cambyses in order to show that Cambyses was an incompetent—indeed, a "violently distracted" (*emanē megalōs*)—king. Whatever relativism stems from the assertion that "custom is king" does not preclude positive and negative evaluation, which lies at the basis of political theory. Secondly, however much Herodotus appreciates the complexity of trans-cultural comparisons, he is deeply committed to trans-cultural ethical lessons, first of which is his claim that good fortune does not abide in the same place (1.5). From the account of Croesus in Book I to that of Pausanias in Book IX, Herodotus repeatedly reminds his audience of that trans-cultural, trans-historical lesson. In contemporary parlance, although Herodotus accepts the truth of descriptive moral relativism, I believe he would reject both moral objectivism and metaethical moral relativism (Gowans 2019). The

---

**19** Plato's *Gorgias* quotes Pindar as saying, "Law (*nomos*), the king of all, of mortals and the immortal gods, brings on and renders just what is most violent with towering hand" (484b4–8). Since Pindar's verses on *nomos* do not survive, it is difficult to say whether Herodotus, Plato, or either is representing Pindar's view accurately. For further details see Asheri 2007: 436–37. On the ambiguity of the term *nomos*, see Humphreys 1987 and Thomas 2000: 102–134.

**20** Scholars who have interpreted Herodotus to endorse a form of relativism include Thompson 1996: 135–140 and Roy 2010: 149–172. *Histories* 3.38 is standardly included in discussions of ethical relativism, which Herodotus is uncritically taken to endorse (e.g., Wolff 2018: 21–22). By contrast, Fornara 1971: 23 and Hau 2016: 172–193 place Herodotus within the framework of moral didacticism.

Herodotean political theorist can justify the claim that although specific moral customs—such as whether one buries, cremates, or eats the dead—may vary between cultures, nonetheless there is a transcultural norm that survivors ought to respect and honor the dead.

## 4 Is Herodotus' *Histories* a work of Utopian Political Theory?

The first two parts of my chapter have provided evidence to support the claims that Herodotus has a keen interest in political anthropology and that he does not simply record such observations but that he engages them in a theoretical or evaluative way. It remains for my chapter to consider whether Herodotus is in any way utopian in his reflection on the political institutions of non-Greek cultures and peoples. But here I want to defuse a potential objection. Ryan Balot has argued that

Apart from a few outliers, classical thought was quintessentially post-utopian. Classical thinkers were post-utopians, above all, because they saw no way to guarantee the good life for human beings. They took this view for several related reasons: the universe is not providential, and luck has too much power to shape our lives; human reason either cannot recognize the human good or cannot remake the world so as to produce the human good reliably; and human beings are not naturally sociable or co-operative animals. (Balot 2008: 78)

Balot does not say whether Herodotus falls into his “post-utopian majority” (which includes Hesiod, Thucydides, Polybius, Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus). But if the common characteristic of his “post-utopians” is a modesty about the possibility of systemic political change (“they supplied no visionary social blueprints” [78]), then utopians must be immodest suppliers of visionary social blueprints.

As I stipulated at the beginning of my chapter, I draw my notion of “utopian” from reflection on More’s *Utopia*: To call a program or institution utopian is at a minimum to identify it as something infrequent or rare and something which is good (perhaps even superlatively so). But I contest Ryan’s implied claim that utopians are immodest visionaries. I do not think it follows that because a constitution or cultural practice is utopian that therefore other societies should take it as a blueprint for change.<sup>21</sup> Rather, one sense in which I take a constitution

---

<sup>21</sup> Clay and Pulvis 1999 note that the island “utopias” of the ancient world (e.g., those of Eu-

or practice to be utopian is if the practice presents a cultural or political “mirror” that critically sets in contrast another society’s own practices and grounds incremental improvement (a point to which I will return in my conclusion). More’s discussion of the Utopians’ attitude towards international law makes clear what I have in mind. About the Utopian attitudes towards international treaties, More writes that

While other nations are constantly making, breaking, and renewing treaties, the Utopians make none at all with any nation. If nature, they say, does not bind man adequately to his fellow man, what good is a treaty? If a man scorns nature herself, is there any reason to think he will care about mere words? They are confirmed in this view by the fact that in that part of the world, treaties and alliances between princes are not generally observed with much good faith. (II: 83)

Rather ironically, More goes on to point out how “sacred and inviolable” are the treaties in Europe, which are observed by princes who are “all so just and virtuous” (II: 83); clearly, the practices of the Utopians with respect to treaties is intended to cast a critical shadow upon the practices of European princes. But More goes on to note that Utopia is a world “as distant from ours in customs and manner as by the distance the equator puts between us” and that “perhaps if [the Utopians] lived here they would change their minds” (II: 84). It is hard to imagine that More is proposing that England abandon all its treaties or forego making new ones in its international relations. The “rareness” or “infrequency” of Utopia makes possible practices, such as forgoing international law, the practicality of which would otherwise be seriously limited in normal societies. I submit that Herodotus presents political practices and institutions that function in a fashion similar to those proposed in More’s *Utopia*.

If one may be utopian without offering a visionary blueprint for social change, how might Herodotus be utopian? Herodotus’ discussion of the Libyan colony of Cyrēnē provides a first example of the sort of utopian political theorizing I think he practices in his *Histories*.<sup>22</sup> In Herodotus’ account of the establishment of the colony of Cyrēnē, its *oikistēs* Battus I claims that:

---

hemeros and Iamboulos) do not posit ideal “blue prints” for other societies to copy. Manuel and Manuel 1979 note that More’s Utopia is hardly a paradise: it presupposes the enduring existence of crime and warfare between states (123–127).

<sup>22</sup> Cyrēnē features in both the Egyptian and the Libyan *logoi* (2.161). In the former case, it is a Cyrēnaean victory over Apriēs’ army (composed of foreigners, although supporting his rule over Egypt), that precipitates a populist rebellion against him, one led by Amasis (2.161, 2.169). In the latter case, Herodotus seizes upon the story of the colonization of Cyrēnē (c. 630 BCE) as the historical backbone of his Libyan speech.

The Cyrenaeans sent to Delphi to ask what order of government they should set up that they might live to the best advantage (*ontina tropon katastēsamenoi kallista an oikeoien*). The Pythia instructed them to bring in from Mantinea, in Arcadia, a commissioner for reform. The Cyrenaeans made their request, and the Mantineans gave them the most renowned of their citizens, whose name was Demonax. This man came to Cyrēnē, and, having learned all the details, divided the people into three tribes. The arrangement was as follows: one section was made from the Theraeans and the original Libyan inhabitants, their neighbors; one from the Peloponnesians and Cretans; and a third from all the islanders. In another change, he set aside certain domains and certain priesthoods for King Batatus, but all the rest of the original possession of the kings he assigned as public property (*es meson tō[i] dēmō[i]*). (4.161).<sup>23</sup>

The colonization of Cyrēnē is an example of the more general phenomenon: Greek colonies provided Greek political theorists with an unprecedented opportunity “to start from scratch” in their reflection on well-ordered political arrangements. Plato’s *Laws*, for instance, is presented as a dialogue that reflects upon how to draw up the Cretan colony of Magnesia, of which the character Cleinias is a founder.<sup>24</sup> Herodotus himself, along with Protagoras, were colonists in the PanHellenic colony that Pericles helped to establish at Thurii in the 440s.<sup>25</sup> Herodotus’ discussion of Cyrēnē shows that he is familiar with the opportunity for political theorizing that colonization presents.

Herodotus’ dialogue on constitutions provides a second example of utopian theorizing that includes reflection on and the determination of superlative constitutions. The dialogue takes place between three major Persian figures in the *Histories*, Otanes, who argues for the supremacy of *isonomia* (a form of popular rule), Megabyxus, who argues for the supremacy of oligarchy, and Darius (who argues for the supremacy of monarchy). As Rosen 1988 notes, “Herodotus’ political views are obliquely presented in his recording of a conspiracy, a revolution, and the first political dialogue in western literature” (39).<sup>26</sup> Within the dialogue, Darius argues that

Suppose, for the argument, that all three constitutions are the very best—the best democracy, the best oligarchy, the best monarchy. I declare to you that, of these three at their best,

---

<sup>23</sup> Demonax’s diminution of royal prerogative and the reorganization of tribal structures presents a number of parallels with Cleisthenes’ Athenian reforms of 508 (5.66).

<sup>24</sup> Ober 1998: 290–93 argues for a similar perspective on Aristotle’s account of the best constitution in *Politics* 7–8.

<sup>25</sup> See further Ostwald 1991. Munson 2006: 257–273 surveys Herodotus’ remarks about western colonization in light of his connection with Thurii.

<sup>26</sup> The constitutional debate has generated much commentary, including most recently Pelling 2002, Lévy 2003, Roy 2012, Sissa 2012, Allen 2013, and Linderborg 2019.

monarchy is far superior. Nothing is manifestly better than the one best man. He will have judgment to match his excellence and will govern the many blamelessly, and what measures he must devise against ill-doers will be wrapped in a similar well-judging silence. (3.82)

Darius' arguments against oligarchy and democracy amount to the claim that a plurality of rulers—whether few or many—inevitably leads to faction (in the case of oligarchy) or demagoguery (in the case of democracy), both of which will eventually end up in some sort of despotism. The basic structure of the argument shows surprising similarity to the argument for kingship in either Plato's *Statesman* or Aristotle's *Politics*. Its presence in the text argues against the claim that Herodotus is anti-utopian because it shows him theorizing about the best constitution.

A third example of Herodotus' utopian political theorizing consists in his identification of superlative practices or institutions (as distinct from constitutions). In his examination of gender roles within the Babylonian *logos* and cultural assimilation in the Egyptian and Scythian *logoi*, Herodotus juxtaposes and evaluates different cultural practices. In the case of Babylonian gender customs, Herodotus first recounts what he calls "wisest" (*sophōtatos*) and "most beautiful" (*kallistos*):

In every village, once a year, the people did the following: as the girls in the village became ripe for marriage, they gathered and brought together all such to one place. There was a great throng of men surrounding it, and the auctioneer put the girls up, one by one, for sale. He would begin with the best-looking, and after she had been sold and brought a great price, he would auction off her whose looks were next best. They were all sold to live with their men. All the rich men of Babylon who were disposed to marriage outbid one another in buying the beauties. But those of the lower classes who wanted to marry were not set on fairness of form but took the uglier girls, with money to boot. For when the auctioneer had gone through all the best-looking girls, he would put up the ugliest or one that was crippled, and would sell her off: 'Who will take the least money to live with this one?' The money came from the sale of the good-looking girls, so those who were handsome portioned off the ill-favored and the cripples. (1.196)<sup>27</sup>

Herodotus notes that this superlatively wise custom has been allowed to elapse and that instead those without wealth now prostitute their children to generate dowries (1.196; a practice also found in Lydia [1.93]). Alongside such a practice is what Herodotus calls the most shameful (*aischistos*) of Babylonian customs:

---

<sup>27</sup> Asheri 2007 notes that "no Babylonian evidence exists for such a custom, and the entire description gives the impression of a utopian, half-comic Greek fantasy" (210).

Every woman who lives in that country must once in her lifetime go to the temple of Aphrodite and sit there and be lain with by a strange man....When once a woman has taken her seat there, she may not go home again until one of the strangers throws a piece of silver into her lap and lies with her, outside the temple....Those women who have attained to great beauty and height depart quickly enough, but those who are ugly abide there a great while, being unable to fulfill the law. Some, indeed, stay there as much as three or four years. (1.199)

As Saxonhouse 1996 notes, “The word ‘democracy,’ to be sure, never surfaces in the discussion of Babylonia, but the egalitarianism at the heart of the principles of ancient democracy, an egalitarianism here based not on nature but constructed by human ingenuity, is at work” (41). The first institution—the sale of brides—seeks to offset natural or skin-deep advantages and insure the marital success of those who are unsuccessful in the genetic lottery. The institution is utopian, and so justifies Herodotus’ superlative, because it alleviates the arbitrary advantages of wealth and beauty. By contrast, of course, the rite of sexual passage—regardless of its affront to a woman’s consent over her sexual choices—is shameful because it reverses the intention and the effects of the sale of brides: women are penalized, indeed potentially detained for years, based on the same arbitrary characteristics of sexual attractiveness. Herodotus’ contrast of the two practices within close textual proximity is meant to underscore the utopian wisdom of the first and the dystopian shameful of the second; both illustrations elucidate institutional mechanisms for addressing arbitrary inequality within one and the same culture.

The Egyptian and Scythian *logoi* juxtapose social treatments of assimilation cross-culturally. In the Egyptian *logos*, Herodotus tells the story of king Amasis who overcame Egyptian Hellenophobia and produced a quasi-open society during his own reign. Herodotus originally notes that the Egyptians historically avoided Greek customs, and indeed, the customs of any people other than their own (2.91).<sup>28</sup> But Amasis—a “man of the people” (*dēmotēs*) who became king, brought prosperity to his land, ruled his people with wisdom (*sophiē*),

---

**28** Herodotus notes that during the reign of Psammetichus (663–609 BCE), Egyptian children were turned over to Ionians who had supported his revolt against his fellow eleven kings in order that they could learn Greek (2.154). But Psammetichus kept the Ionians physically isolated in Egypt and gave no indication of adapting their customs. Egyptian antipathy towards the Greeks appears to originate in their defeat by colonists from Cyrēnē during the reign of Apriēs (a.k.a. Wahibre Haaibre c. 589–570 BCE), a defeat that ultimately led to a rebellion led by Amasis against Apriēs (4.159, 2.161–162, 2.169).

and himself died without undergoing a reversal in fortune<sup>29</sup>—contrived ways to express his philhellenic views and increase the openness of his kingdom. He introduced what Herodotus calls a “blameless law” (*amōmos nomos*) concerning the livelihood of his subjects, one that Solon himself imitated in Athens (2.177). He established Naucratis, a major port city, for Greeks to trade and dwell in, made offerings at Delphi, and established alliances and friendship with the Greek colony at Cyrēnē (2.178, 2.180, 2.181). By contrast, in the Scythian logos, Herodotus tells the story of Anacharsis, a Scythian who travelled over much of the world—sight-seeing (*theōrēsas*)—and had gained great wisdom (*sophiēn pollen*). After making a prayer at a Greek festival to Cybele for safe passage home, he fulfilled his promise and celebrated her rituals upon his return to Scythia. A fellow Scythian observed his use of foreign customs, informed the king, and the king executed Anacharsis himself (4.76).<sup>30</sup>

Although Herodotus produces the story of Anacharsis (and Scyles) to illustrate the Scythian practice of taking extreme steps to avoid non-Scythian practices and to preserve their own customs (4.76, 4.80), it seems difficult not to read his plight in contrast with that of Amasis. Although both Egypt and Scythia were xenophobic or closed societies, the wisdom of Amasis allowed him to overcome Egyptian *nomoi* against foreigners and positively, if incrementally, improve Egypt through trade and interaction with Greek colonies. Indeed, Amasis’ transformation of Egyptian *nomoi* appears to be a counter-argument to the claim that “custom is king” (3.38).<sup>31</sup> Amasis presents an example of how a closed-society can be nudged towards an open society, unseating the governing xenophobic *nomos* and instituting the reign of a new, more open one. The evaluation of social and political customs, the evaluation of different forms of constitutions, and the reflection on how to establish a well-ordered colony present examples of Herodotus practicing utopian political theorizing. Admittedly, Herodotus is doing many other things in his text and his examples are not visionary blueprints. But then again Thomas More himself calls into question whether utopian theo-

---

**29** 2.172, 2.177, 3.10. Herodotus notes that Amasis reconciled his people to their servitude by mixing hard-work with a lack of aloofness (2.173–174). As noted earlier, Herodotus notes that Sethos tried to emancipate the Egyptian people from the institution of kingship but that they could not live a day without a king (2.141, 2.147). Presumably Amasis recognizes the limits to which Egyptian *nomoi* can be changed (even while himself changing their xenophobia).

**30** Herodotus also offers the story of Scyles, who also imitated a Greek way of life and was also executed—by beheading—on the spot, when he was observed following Greek practices (4.78–80).

**31** As Saxonhouse 1996 notes, the story of Amasis suggests “that there is nothing by nature that gives one man rule over another, that (in modern liberal terms) no one is so different from another to justify his or her rule over another” (48).



ricing consists in supplying immodest visionary social blueprints, a claim I would like to examine briefly in my conclusion.

## 5 More's Utopian Incrementalism

In his contrast between utopian and post-utopian thought in antiquity, Balot 2008 claimed that one of the reasons why post-utopians were modest about their social ambitions was because “the universe is not providential, and luck has too much power to shape our lives” (2008: 78). No doubt, such a point appears to be a wedge between More's *Utopia*—which although not explicitly Christian, is certainly compatible with Christianity—and Herodotus' *Histories*, which over and over demonstrates his thesis that many states that were once great become small, that many that were once small become great, and that “good fortune never abides in the same place” (1.5). Herodotus appears to embrace a profoundly tragic worldview in which prosperity is fragile, the vicissitudes of time level all, and—following Solon—we should call no person happy until he is dead (1.32).

But if Herodotus is modest in his theological expectations, it is intriguing to note that More was equally modest about the possibility of improving society by means of political theorizing. In the first book of *Utopia*, the character of Thomas More and Hythloday debate the possibility of the third wave of Plato's *Republic*, namely the claim that to bring a just state into existence either kings must philosophize or philosophers must be kings (*Rep.* 5.473de). Hythloday is deeply suspicious about the possibility that he, as a philosopher, could successfully advise a king with wisdom because of the pressures to tell the rulers what they want to hear (and in the context of their discussion, what they want to hear is to expand their territory and justify additional revenue measures [I: 28–32]). Thus Hythloday concludes that “there is no place for philosophy in the councils of kings” (I: 34).

By contrast, the character of Thomas More in the dialogue presents an “incremental” or what he calls “an indirect approach” to political reform.<sup>32</sup> He describes it as such:

---

<sup>32</sup> Rist 2016 notes that the two books of *Utopia* were composed at different times and argues that the “Augustinian incrementalism” of the first book is at odds with the more ambitious theorizing of the second book (776–784). Although I do not believe that my claims about Herodotus' influence on More are inconsistent with those of Augustine, More may have drawn upon multiple perspectives in support of his position. It remains striking that the Utopian reading list includes only Greek (pagan) authors (even though Hythloday introduces the Utopians to

If you cannot pluck up bad ideas by the root, or cure longstanding evils to your heart's content, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth. Don't give up the ship in a storm because you cannot hold back the winds. You must not deliver strange and out-of-the-way speeches to people with whom they will carry no weight because they are firmly persuaded the other way. Instead, by an indirect approach, you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully—and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible. (I: 35)

If we can assume that the character of Thomas More in any way speaks for the author Thomas More, then at least on the grounds of More's description of political practice, Herodotus seems much more of a "utopian" than not. At several places the author More suggests that although Utopia presents a blueprint of sorts for a new society, its intention is primarily to offer what the French humanist Guillaume Budé described in a letter to Thomas Lupset, the printer of More's book, in July 31, 1517. After praising More's treatise at length, he claims that "Our own age and ages to come will discover in [More's] narrative a seedbed, so to speak, of elegant and useful concepts from which they will be able to borrow practices to be introduced into their own several nations and adapted for use there" (117). If Herodotus is not a utopian in the sense of the author of a blueprint for the radical transformation of society, he nonetheless appears to be a resource for utopianism as conceived by the philosopher who coined the term.<sup>33</sup>

## References

- Allen, D. (2013), "The Origins of Political Philosophy," in G. Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Histories of Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 75–95.
- Asheri, D., A. Lloyd, and A. Corcella. (2007), *A Commentary on Herodotus, Books I–IV*. O. Murray and A. Moreno, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Atack, C. (2020), *The Discourse of Kingship in Classical Greece*. London: Routledge.
- Balot, R. (2001), *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Balot, R. (2008), "Utopian and Post-Utopian Paradigms in Classical Political Thought," *Arion* 16: 75–90.

---

the basic tenets of the Christian faith, which the Utopians believe is consistent with their own religion, presumably derived on the basis of natural reason [II: 93–94]).

**33** I am grateful to audiences for comments at the conference for Ancient Utopias at Leuven Belgium in March 2016, at a panel on Herodotus' political thought at the Northeast Political Science Association annual meeting in November 2016, and at Denison University in March 2017. I am also grateful for written comments on the chapter from Susan Sauvé Meyer, Carol Atack, and John Knight.

- Bloomer, W.M. (1993), "The Superlative *nomoi* of Herodotus's *Histories*," *Classical Antiquity* 12: 30–50.
- Clay, D. and A. Purvis. (1999), *Four Island Utopias*. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.
- Dewald, C. (2003), "Form and Content: The Question of Tyranny in Herodotus," in K. Morgyn (ed.), *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and its Discontents in Ancient Greece*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 25–58.
- Fornara, C. (1971), *Herodotus. An Interpretive Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Forsdyke, S. (2006), "Herodotus, Political Histories, and Political Thought," in C. Dewald and J. Marincola (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 224–241.
- Gowans, C. (2019), "Moral Relativism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/moral-relativism/>>.
- Grene, D. (1987), Herodotus, *The Histories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hadas, M. (1935), "Utopian Sources in Herodotus," *Classical Philology* 30: 113–121.
- Harrison, T. and E. Irwin, (eds.). (2018), *Interpreting Herodotus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hau, L.I. (2016), *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hude, C. (1927), *Herodoti Historiae*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Humphreys, S. (1987), "Law, Custom and Culture in Herodotus," *Arethusa* 20: 211–220.
- Linderborg, O. (2019), "The Place of Herodotus' Constitutional Debate in the History of Political Ideas and the Emergence of Classical Social Theory," *Akropolis* 3: 5–28.
- Lévy, E. (2003), "Les dialogues perses (Hérodote, III, 80–83), et les débuts de la science politique," *Lalies* 22: 119–145.
- Logan, G.M., R. M. Adams, and C. H. Miller, eds. (1995), *More: Utopia, Latin Text and English Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Logan, G.M. and R. M. Adams, eds. (2002), *Thomas More, Utopia*. Rev. Edition Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manuel, F.E. and F. P. Manuel. (1979), *Utopian Thought in the Western World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moles, J. (2002), "Herodotus and Athens," in E.J. Bakker, I. J. F. De Jong, and H. van Wees (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*. Leiden: Brill, 33–52.
- Munson, R.V. (2006), "An Alternate World: Herodotus and Italy," in C. Dewald and J. Marincola (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 257–73.
- Ober, J. (1998), *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens. Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ostwald, M. (1991), "Herodotus and Athens," *Illinois Classical Studies* 16: 137–148.
- Pelling, C. (2002), "Speech and action: Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48: 123–158.
- Raaflaub, K.A. (1987), "Herodotus' political thought and the meaning of Histories," *Arethusa* 20: 221–248.
- Raaflaub, K.A. (2002), "Philosophy, Science, Politics: Herodotus and the Intellectual Trends of his Time," in E.J. Bakker, I. J. F. De Jong, and H. van Wees (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*. Leiden: Brill, 149–186.

- Rist, J.M. (2016), "From Dreamland 'Humanism' to Christian Political Reality or from Nusquama to Utopia," *Review of Metaphysics* 69: 739–785.
- Rosen, S. (1988), "Philosophy and Revolution," in his *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry*. London: Routledge, 27–55.
- Roy, C.S. (2010), *Political Relativism: Implicit Political Theory in Herodotus' Histories*. Ph.D. thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Roy, C.S. (2012), "The Constitutional Debate: Herodotus' Exploration of Good Government," *Hisos* 6: 298–320.
- Saxonhouse, S. (1996), *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Sissa, G. (2012), "Democracy: A Persian Invention?" *Mètis* 10: 227–261.
- Thomas, R. (2000), *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science, and the Art of Persuasion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, N. (1996), *Herodotus and the Origins of the Political Community: Arion's Leap*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ward, A. (2008), *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Wolff, J. (2018), *Introduction to Moral Philosophy*. New York: W.W. Norton.