

Living by Proverbs, Umberto Eco

Living by Proverbs

NO COPY IN THE NUC. And not only that: not mentioned in Brunet or Graesse; not to be found, despite its subject, in the bibliographies on occultism (Caillet, Ferguson, Duveen, Verginelli-Rota, Biblioteca Mágica, Rosenthal, Dorbon, Guaita, and so on), so that it is difficult to obtain information about this anonymous pamphlet, which, apart from bearing no date, was published in one of the usual phantom cities (Philadelphia, printed by Secundus More), with a very appealing title: On the New Utopia [sic] or de Insula Perdita, wherein a most Ingenious Legislatore had created the Republik of Happiness following the Principle by which Proverbes are the Wisdom of Mankind, 8vo (2) 33; 45 (6) (1 white).

The book is divided into two parts: the first sets out the basic principles on which the Republic of Happiness was founded; the second lists its disadvantages and the misfortunes that followed the constitution of that state, and the reasons why this utopia failed after only a few years.

The fundamental utopian principle from which the Legislator started was that proverbs are not only the wisdom of humanity, but that the voice of the people is the voice of God; the perfect state must therefore be based on this single wisdom; all other moral, social, political, or religious ideologies and designs having previously failed because intellectual hubris had distanced them from ancient wisdom (learn from the past, believe in the future, and live for the present).

A few months after this Republic of Happiness had been established, it was quickly realized how the utopian principle complicated daily life. Difficulties arose at once when it came to hunting and obtaining basic supplies, since people followed the principle that those with no dog must hunt with a cat (with poor results). They had originally restricted themselves to fishing, but the fishermen used to take excessive quantities of stimulants, convinced that those who sleep don't catch any fish, so that they were worn out in body and spirit and ended their careers at an early age. Agriculture was in continual crisis, since it was said that when the pear is ripe it falls by itself. It was impossible to make or sell cooking pans due to a deep-rooted mistrust of coppersmiths, given, as we know, that it's the devil who makes the pots (so the coppersmiths tried to make and sell just the lids, for which there was a complete lack of demand since no one was buying any pans).

Traveling by road was difficult: assuming that he who leaves the old road for the new knows what he's left but not what he'll find, U-turns were prohibited (there's no going back to where you began) as well as junctions (he who follows every path will discover many dangers). In any event, all vehicles were banned (slow and steady wins the race) and people were generally discouraged not only from traveling but also from industry, since he who dreams much needs little (which also encouraged the use of drugs). Even the postal services were abolished, since those who want something serve themselves; those who don't send someone else. It was difficult to protect property: a dog that barks doesn't bite, so they were muzzled to stop them from barking and the muzzles were so restrictive that burglars could come and go as they pleased.

A misinterpreted principle of cooperation had established that for a well-dressed salad you want a miser for the vinegar, a wise man for the salt, and a spendthrift for the oil (it was well-known that oil, vinegar,

salt, and pepper make even an old boot taste better): so that every time they wanted to do any cooking (since it is easy to play with fire using someone else's hand) they had to work with someone they considered suitable (or whoever applied for the job). It wasn't difficult to find a spendthrift to make the dressing—a born idiot is the source of perpetual amusement—but it was difficult finding a miser, since no one wished to be described as such and, what is more, a miser is also stingy with his own time (and a miser, like a pig, is excellent after he's dead). In the end, they usually gave up dressing salad since, after all, hunger is the best sauce.

Social life was reduced to the exchange of a few monosyllables, given that silence is golden, it often speaks louder than words, one word is enough to the wise, a closed mouth catches no flies, give every man your ear but few your voice, and man is weakened by the words he speaks and strengthened by those he doesn't (better safe than sorry). What is more, it was well known that when the wine is poured, the wit is gone, that wine brings out joy but also secrets, that drink and bad luck follow the same path, so that convivial gatherings were therefore avoided—and on the rare occasions they took place, they ended in furious violence, since he who strikes first strikes twice. Gambling was also impossible, as a result of a misunderstood principle of cooperation, since he who trusts in chance takes a blind man as his guide, and it was difficult to find a blind man for every player—and then it was enough for someone with one eye to arrive for the game to end in his favor, since in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Games involving skill, such as archery, were forbidden since, sooner or later, the arrow strikes back at he who shoots it.

It was difficult to run any kind of shop: difficult for confectioners, since you get what you deserve, and they were continual victims of their customers' custard-pie humor. Negotiations degenerated into unpleasant arguments since, it being true that it's the rudest one who does the buying, when a customer entered the shop asking how such rubbish could possibly be on sale, the angry shopkeeper would reply, "You're the rubbish, and that whore your mother!" thus provoking what has been called the Zidane syndrome. Finally, as we know, there's always a time to pay and a time to die, and shopkeepers were being ruined by their customers' habitual failure to honor their debts.

In any event, little work was done, because for every saint a feast, so that there were 365 feast days a year (though when the feast is over, the saint's forgotten) with continual celebration, and at table you grow young (and of course, on Saint Martin's Day the must turns to wine). Due to this excessive veneration of the saints, at carnival time, when anything goes, joking was limited to the confines of the barracks, bringing disorder among the entire army. Indeed, starting off from the conviction that I can protect myself from my enemies, but may God protect me from my friends, the armed forces were then disbanded.

Religious life was fraught with difficulties: first of all, it was difficult to recognize priests because clothes don't make the man, and these clerics were always traveling around in disguise. Secondly, bearing in mind that God speaks to those who stay silent, prayer was discouraged.

The administration of justice was a real headache. A criminal conviction was almost unheard of, since confession is halfway to forgiveness, and in any event it could not be made public, since as they say, judge the sin but not the sinner. It was far too expensive to go to lawyers since good advice is beyond all price, and judges were reluctant to call witnesses

to trial, claiming that the more you listen the less you understand (and the few to be summoned were terminally ill, as it was thought that those leaving hospital or the graveyard are always more sincere).

Crimes committed against other members of the family could not be punished (everyone is king in their own home) and industrial injuries could not be investigated as it was taken for granted that the higher you climb the farther you fall (suddenly and at great speed). There was plea-bargaining for the more serious crimes, and convicts could avoid the death penalty by having their tongue cut out (a still tongue makes a wise head, and a raw deal is better than none at all). Sometimes there were beheadings followed by barbarous attempts to organize races between those executed (those who lose their heads have strong legs), with results that were obviously disappointing. What is more, it was very hard to convict robbers, who, believing that courtesy is the key that opens every door, rather than arriving armed, managed to take money and possessions through simple persuasion and then used the defense that the victims had willingly handed over their property. Generally speaking, however, there was a reluctance to inflict any penalty, since those who fear not the sermon heed not the punishment.

At a certain point it was recognized that he who lives by the sword dies by the sword, and the law of retaliation was established and carried out in public. This method brought effective results for crimes such as murder but caused some embarrassing situations in the carrying out of public punishments for the offense of sodomy, and the practice was soon abandoned.

Desertion was not a crime, since he who fights and runs away lives to fight another day, though strangely enough it was a crime to use invisible ink, given that only fools can't read their own writing. Pictures of the dead could no longer be shown on tombs: since all those you think are dead keep cropping up when you least expect them, therefore those who really are dead are better not seen at all. Finally, the judges enjoyed the worst possible reputation by reason of the so-called First Principle of the Bandana: the wrongdoer always blames his accuser (according to the Second Principle the petty thief ends up in prison while the big-time crook ends up in power).

In a republic based on such blatant injustice, the position of women was tragic: popular wisdom had never treated them kindly, establishing that when it comes to fire, women, and sea, there is little to joke about; keep your wife well away from your priest, your best friend, and your brother-in-law; a crying woman and a sweating horse are more false than Judas; woman is a fickle thing; there's no point in locking your doors when women fall in love; women know more than the devil; a woman is first sweet as honey, then bitter as gall; there's no peace in the chicken coop when the hen crows and the rooster stays silent; woman is woe.

Every single day, wives were condemned to hear complaints about their husband's mother, since it was thought that the best way to get through to the mother-in-law is through her daughter-in-law. When they had the misfortune to marry a loving husband, they would be subjected to continual ill-treatment since those who love hard, fight hard (all is fair in love and war), and spinsters couldn't even hope to find an older, less fiery husband since men after the age of fifty-nine leave the women and take to wine.

This basic misogyny made sexual relationships generally difficult: indeed, it was known that wine, women, and tobacco are the undoing of all men—better alone than in bad company—and there was a general mistrust of

amorous behavior, since warm caresses are the sure sign of a guilty conscience. Conversely, adultery was commonly practiced—best make love with the woman next door; you'll save on travel and see her more. As the New Year brings new life, it was thought that children should all be born in January and therefore conceived in early April. But since Christmas is for family and Easter for friends, all conceptions were adulterous, so that the Republic of Happiness consisted almost entirely of illegitimate children.

These sexual difficulties were not even compensated by onanistic practices or the sale of pornography, since (though it is true that a contented mind is a perpetual feast) to look and not to touch is one hell of a task. Cases of homosexuality were not infrequent, since it was thought that birds of a feather flock together (why not? beauty is in the eye of the beholder).

Nor was it felt that many problems could be resolved by doctors, in relation to whom there was the greatest distrust. It was thought, above all, that anxiety was worse than the ailment, that no doctor can cure fear, that doctors' mistakes end up in the graveyard, that the dentist gets fat with other people's teeth, and finally, that not all that's bad is harmful, and where there's life there's hope (at worst they resorted to euthanasia, since desperate ills require drastic remedies). An apple a day keeps the doctor away, and shaving makes you feel good for a day, a wife makes you feel good for a month, and a pig makes you feel good for a year, so people used to kill a pig rather than go to the doctor. The heart cannot be commanded, so there wasn't much work for cardiologists; ear, nose, and throat specialists were notorious for cutting off the nose to spite the face, and veterinary surgeons did not enjoy a particularly fine reputation as they were always looking a gift horse in the mouth and would treat only the most expensive stallions. Doctors preferred to avoid visiting the hospitals, thinking that those who walk with the lame man end up limping.

The last consolation for these unfortunate people would have been games and entertainments. But any sports competition was always decided before it began (when you have them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow). Since a good horseman is never without his lance, horseracing was practically impossible, given the way that the lance impeded the jockey. Traditional mud wrestling was hardly worth it, since when you fight with mud, win or lose, the mud will continue to stick.

The only game that was actually played involved a sort of tall greasy fairground pole, at the top of which a chicken bone was placed (nothing ventured nothing gained).

But do not imagine that citizens, due to the lack of sporting and sexual activity, would take solace in education. First of all, they were mistrustful of schooling, since experience is more important than learning, and they were mistrustful of logic, since ifs and buts don't make history. The teachers were terrible, since those who can, do, and those who can't, teach (nor were the pupils aware of it—he who asks the question makes no mistakes). The study of mathematics was reduced to a minimum, since children got only as far as learning that two's company but three's a crowd. Advanced math was worse still, since there was a taboo against squaring the circle (those who are born round cannot die square). The brighter students were at a disadvantage (those who speak first know least) and quickly fell ill—a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. So they decided it is better to be a live ass than a dead doctor. Once they had completed their studies, students could not present a curriculum vitae when applying for a job, fearing that pride comes before a fall. This tended to lead to unemployment or underemployment (learn an

art and keep it apart). There again, he who at twenty doesn't have it, at thirty doesn't do it, and by forty has lost what little he had.

Technological skills were minimal: recycling systems were forbidden (water that has passed the mill can no longer turn the wheel) and only very slow traditional methods were followed (the seas fill up drop by drop, while the horse lives the grass grows, and haste makes waste).

In short, it is clear that the people of the Republic of Happiness were most unhappy, so that they gradually abandoned the island and its Legislator, who had to recognize that his utopia had failed. Better late than never. As the anonymous author of this pamphlet wisely states, in criticizing the excessive trust in proverbs, old wisdom does not nourish the hungry man, between saying and doing many a pair of shoes is worn out, and you can have too much of a good thing. The Legislator thought that one thing would lead to another, but we recognize the tree by its fruit, and sooner or later the comb finds all the knots. If all's well that ends well, and slow and steady wins the race, conversely, all that's bad ends badly, and he who makes his bed must lie on it, since he who is born miserable dies disconsolate and he who sows when the wind blows, harvests only confusion. All good things come to an end.

It would have been better to know from the very start that there's woodworm in every plank and two sides to every coin. But there's no point crying over spilled milk, and so long as you have your own teeth, there's no telling what the future holds.

And this is also true for our anonymous author of long ago. Let the dead bury the dead. And I have described only what I have read, so don't shoot the messenger.

[A spurious review that appeared in *Almanacco del bibliofilo—Viaggi nel tempo: Alla ricerca di nuove isole dell'utopia*, edited by Mario Scognamiglio (Milan: Rovello, 2007)].

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