In this book Stefano Saracino investigates the importance of utopias in the political discourse of the Commonwealth, when England was ruled without a monarch. He also includes the preceding Civil War period and the beginning of the Restoration which followed it in his study. Saracino’s analysis is based on the following works: *Macaria* (1641) by the circle around Samuel Hartlib; Gerrard Winstanley’s *The Law of Freedom* (1652); James Harrington’s *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656); the works and newspapers of Marchamont Nedham dating from Oliver Cromwell’s rule; John Streater’s *Government described* (1659); William Sprigge’s *A Modest Plea for an Equal Commonwealth against Monarchy* (1659); and four works from the Restoration period under Charles II, *New Atlantis continued* (1660), Antoine Legrand’s *Scytomedria* (1669), Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World* (1666), and Henry Neville’s *The Isle of Pines* (1668).

Saracino searches these works for rhetorical traces of republicanism and/or contemporary utopian ideas. Following in the tradition of research by John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, Saracino defines republicanism as a political language based mainly on references to political writings from Antiquity, their central terms, values, and world views. If authors during the Civil War and Commonwealth used these terms, values, and world views, they could be counted as belonging to the tradition of republicanism. In the case of contemporary utopianism, it is more difficult to establish this sort of textual commonality. Yet Saracino makes an attempt to describe utopianism as a political language by analogy with republicanism. Here, too, he identifies a canonical textual corpus. In the works he investigates, he looks for explicit or implicit references to utopian concepts in the writings of Plato, Thomas More, and Francis Bacon. What united these three classical authors was that they used comparable rhetorical devices in their utopian writings to develop political visions that contrasted sharply with prevailing social conditions. Whether there was also agreement among them relating to terms, values, and world

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views is discussed by Saracino. But what he really sets out to show in his study is that these two political languages—republicanism and utopianism—did not have to be mutually exclusive, as John Pocock explicitly pointed out in the case of James Harrington’s *Oceana*. Rather, Saracino argues, they could enter into a symbiotic relationship, as he demonstrates using the example of Harrington himself.

In most cases Saracino plausibly shows that the texts under investigation can be read as political speech acts in which the authors addressed specific concerns and ideas for reform to political decision-making authorities with the aim of bringing about political change. During the Civil War and just before the return of Charles II, these were the English Parliament; under the Protectorate, Oliver Cromwell. Only the examples from the Restoration period do not fit into this picture. These are either panegyrics praising monarchy as the best form of state, or criticisms of the system of rule, to the extent that this issue figured prominently in them at all, which is doubtful, at least with regard to Cavendish’s *Blazing World*. In any case, the analysis of Charles II’s reign tails off by comparison with that of the years of Cromwell’s rule and the Republic.

Less convincing, however, is Saracino’s claim that utopianism was an independent political language. Sometimes he introduces other terms, for example, when he defines utopia as an ‘independent space of political communication’ (p. 65) without making clear how exactly this term differs from ‘political language’. Chapter IV is entitled ‘Functions of Utopias in Republicanism’. Here utopianism appears to be a rhetorical device for making republicanism possible, for example, by evading censorship or defusing potentially explosive political statements. In subchapter IV.1, however, ‘The Semantics of Republicanism in Utopias’, the relationship between the two seems to have been reversed. What makes me wary is that towards the end of his investigation, Saracino attributes modernizing qualities to utopianism without showing in detail how this worked. His examples are intended to demonstrate that ‘the theory of the state was far ahead of practice’ (p. 292), but they would make it difficult to provide any specific evidence, as none of the models of political reform was ever put into practice in England. In order to demonstrate that the English utopias ‘anticipated the development of the state’, Saracino devotes several pages to punishment practices. In addition to Foucault, he looks at a number of ritual punishments in seventeenth-
century England, and compares these with statements in the utopias he discusses. In these, however, the public humiliations of forced labour and slavery, following Thomas More’s example, often played a greater part than the death sentence. How the thesis of a ‘theoretical and semantic proto-modernity’ (p. 316) can be derived from this finding remains a mystery to the reader.

Saracino’s work provides plenty of evidence that he is much more familiar with the world of texts in England than with the political and social practices of the time. This starts with his rather casual use of terms that are increasingly considered, by historians, as requiring definition, such as, for example, ‘Puritans’. Saracino uses this term frequently without attempting to clarify it, or even referring to what has, by now, become an almost endless literature on the subject. Important writers on the Civil War period are missing; as a representative sample I mention here only Nicholas Tyacke, John Morrill, Kevin Sharpe, Alexandra Walsham, Peter Lake, and David Colclough, all of whom have published significant work on themes that Saracino treats in his work. And the reader is also surprised to find several references to the Common Book of Prayer (pp. 20, 66) instead of the Book of Common Prayer. Not least, the author’s lack of familiarity with England is revealed in his uncertainty about the dating of his sources. Thus he states that the publication date of 1644 given on the title page of the pamphlet The Great Assises holden in Parnassus by Apollo is wrong (p. 273), referring to Joad Raymond’s important study of newsbooks in England, in which 10 February 1645 is given as the date of publication. He could have known that until the middle of the eighteenth century, the mos Anglicanus was followed in England, and that the new year only began with the Annunciation, on 25 March. Thus the date on the pamphlet’s title page is not wrong; Raymond merely gives the date in today’s terms, as is common scholarly practice.

On the whole, therefore, the work conveys a somewhat mixed impression. While Saracino’s interpretation of the individual texts he investigates is convincing, the generalizing conclusions he draws from them are largely unsubstantiated and logically unpersuasive.

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