



TASA The Australian
Sociological Association

Contact Email for September 2016

In 1516 Sir Thomas More, an English lawyer, social philosopher, author, statesman and noted Renaissance humanist, wrote a book describing a fictional island society in the Atlantic Ocean called Utopia (from the Greek meaning: *a good place*). Where people live, what he conceives as the perfect life. This is all well and good, but no one believes that this ever happened. There have always been wars to dominate, to squash conflicting ideas or gain wealth. Yet evidence is now emerging that suggests that such a place did exist, not in the Atlantic but in the Indus river valley in what is now Pakistan.

From 2600 to 1900 BC, what appears to have been a peaceful society existed. It extended over at least 800,000 square kilometres, in which there were two major cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro and more than a 1,000 other towns and villages. They had what we would consider to be modern Town Planning. There were no defensive city walls, or castles, and a sewage system as good as ours today. They traded internationally, particularly with the middle east. They had the written word to record their transactions and probably their history. The problem with their writing is that no one knows how to translate it. I have been fascinated with this place for many years and the one thing that sticks in my craw is that a 19th century English railway engineer, had many of their buildings pulled down for the brick to be crushed and used as ballast for his railway track.

So it seems there was one place and time when people did not solve disagreements by fighting, where people could live in peace, undisturbed by conflicting political, religious or commercial ideas. What does Sociology make of such a place? Most of our major theories have concentrated on what is happening now, and a few have added this is where it will lead. It seems to me that we have usually left it to others if anything is to be done about a situation. I know in one research situation I was asked to tackle, was where two conflicting professional ideas were causing confusion and harm to the people they were supposed to be helping. I came up with a solution which would solve the situation, but I didn't stick around to see if it would work, or be available to assist the transition. I thought that was someone else's job.

I agree with George Herbert Mead's point that "The behaviour of an individual can only be understood in terms of the behaviour of the whole social group of which he is a member, since his individual acts are involved in larger social acts, which go beyond himself and which implicate the other members of that group" Sociologists look to describe the social actions of their immediate vicinity and to some extent the larger amorphous group that is the realities for the world population. The President of Ireland, as I have mentioned before is a Sociologist, and he has recently said that "the role of the university lies in enabling citizens to develop the tools to address the great challenges of our time." It seems the only tools we have available to us at the moment are conflicting political, religious and commercial ideologies which are to be used to destroy all the others.

Utopia may not be impossible, as has been shown 4,000 years ago. However, if we are to achieve it today we have to find new ways getting rid of the ways of conflict we have devised and find new ways of living together. This is a social problem, what can we do about it.

Alan Scott, Continuing Education Officer.