And yet when these insatiably greedy and evil men have divided among themselves goods which would have sufficed for the entire people, how far they remain from the happiness of the Utopian Republic, which has abolished not only money but with it greed!

Thomas More's hostility to greed was characteristic of Renaissance humanism. The distinctive aspect of his discussion of greed in *Utopia* is that he invented a society free from this vice which he located, twenty-four years after Columbus' first voyage, in the New World. Was More alone in imagining the New World through humanism? Humanism was the dominant intellectual force of Renaissance Europe. In what way did it shape Europe's 'discovery' and conquest of the New World? My aim is to explore this question in relation to the English (or, more precisely, anglophone) understanding of America from More's generation, early in the sixteenth century, through to the demise of the Virginia Company in 1625. Humanists were active in New World projects throughout Europe, but it was in England, I shall argue, that the humanist imagination dominated colonising projects. Frequently, prominent English humanists – John Rastell, Thomas Smith, Philip Sidney, Humphrey Gilbert, Walter Ralegh – were at the forefront of colonisation. Many others who were prominent humanists (or patrons of humanists) – Richard Eden, John Florio, Dudley Digges, Henry Wriothesley – were also involved in the projects. We also find that many men of more humble birth, such as Captain John Smith, employed their education in the *studia humanitatis* as a tool of colonisation. But what in the humanist imagination drew these men to the New World? And why,

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² Our subject is anglophone because while dominated by the English, many of these projects involved Welsh, Scottish and Anglo-Irish interests. Moreover, Scottish, Welsh and Irish (settling the Old English) colonies were projected. As we shall see, these projects all employed similar humanist tools.
more than in any other European country, did the first period of English colonisation assume the form of a humanist project?

Profit and possession are central to our understanding of the motives for European expansion. These motives have great intuitive appeal. Greed, a desire that serves only itself, is a powerful explanation of human action, particularly actions that lead to the destruction of entire cultures, the death of millions and the dispossession of those who survive. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Renaissance humanism furnished arguments of profit and possession for early English colonisers. The highest aim of humanism was glory, and what better way to achieve glory, promoters of colonies asked, than to conquer barbarian lands? While historians remain largely unaware of the impact of humanist culture on European expansion, it is clear that an understanding of that impact would support their central conclusions on the motives of profit and possession.

What may cause surprise is that humanists were deeply sceptical of profit and nervous of foreign possessions at the same time that they saw both as possible sources of glory. These 'adventurers' were formed by the Platonic (and Ciceronian) dictum that 'man was not born himself alone'. According to humanist moral philosophy, we are social animals and as such we have a duty to pursue the good of the community. This means putting self-interest to one side, which in turn demands the cultivation of virtue. Profit and luxury divert us from active participation in public life. The Roman cultural heritage (upon which humanism was built) showed that foreign possessions were one of the most likely sources of luxury and corruption. A variety of Roman sources, including the histories of Sallust and Tacitus, show that the luxury of Rome’s colonies was believed to be a source of effeminate...
and ‘Asiatic’ influences and consequently the cause of a decline in virtue and the decline of the Republic. For some Romans, for example Cicero in *De officiis* (*On duties*), these problems of conquest reach further into a more general concern about the justice of empire, a concern that exceeds fears for the Republic and extends to the treatment of other peoples.

Drawing a parallel between the experience of Rome and their own encounters with the New World, humanists perceived colonisation with nervousness, anxiety and, sometimes, outright hostility. Indeed, through to the first quarter of the seventeenth century, these concerns overshadowed discussions of colonies. Profit and possession, it was repeatedly emphasised, were secondary aims or were denied to be aims at all. ‘Beware my hearers’, Alexander Whitaker declared in the first sentence of his 1613 report from the Chesapeake, ‘to condemn riches.’

He echoes book 1 of *De officiis* in which Cicero, who for Renaissance humanists was pre-eminent among moral philosophers, states that ‘nothing is more the mark of a mean and petty spirit than to love riches.’

Cicero’s comment is made in the context of an argument in which even honour and glory are treated with scepticism and subordinated to justice. He mentions conquest as one of the pitfalls for the vices of greed and the excessive appetite for glory. For early English would be colonisers, glory had to be separated from profit and allied to the exercise of virtues such as courage in death, temperance in subduing desire, justice in the treatment of native Americans and the pursuit of the ends of God, not Mammon. The mental world of the early modern English was not, of course, entirely inhabited by dead pagans. When colonisers argued for the pursuit of glory they usually placed the glory of God first. Religion complemented the humanist preoccupation with virtue and the scepticism of greed.

Underlying the humanist nervousness of profit is one of the principal factors dividing classical and early modern European culture from that of modern Europe. Following the rise of liberal individualism and the industrial revolution, selfishness and the profit motive came to be perceived as potentially positive social forces. Of course, selfishness may well have been
as present in classical and neo-classical cultures as under twentieth-century capitalism. Why else would Cicero and Thomas More have spent so much energy writing against this vice? The difference between the cultures is that, under liberal individualism, selfishness is understood to be the engine of wealth and wealth is believed to be desirable, whereas in early modern culture both selfishness and wealth are perceived as threats to the fabric of the community. Cicero, one of the most influential writers on self-interest, is at best ambivalent on the subject. He believes it is unrealistic or even dangerous not to consider questions of advantage (as some Stoics had argued), but he insists that honour and virtue must always prevail, even if honour demands death. This view came to be widely held in the Renaissance and early modern period. Of course, we must question whether such sentiments were genuine when applied to European conquest, and we shall come to this problem. It is clear, however, that America was first colonised by people who stated that a glorious death in pursuit of the desires of their god was preferable to dishonourable self-preservation. In the twenty-first century such people would be more likely to be described as terrorists than as the proto-capitalists that historians have discerned. These self-described ‘adventurers’ would not, of course, recognise either category.

What was humanism? At about the same time that the New World was being ‘discovered’ by Europeans in the late fifteenth century, a new learning was becoming established in England. This was the studia humanitatis: the revival of the Greek and Roman disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, history, moral philosophy and poetry that had flourished in Italy for more than a century. From the mid-fifteenth century the English, in common with northern Europeans in general, began adopting this new education system, greatly extending the existing medieval tradition of studying the classics. Through the course of the sixteenth century the studia humanitatis became entrenched in England, first in schools and then universities. At the same

12 On humanism and the studia humanitatis, see Kristeller, Renaissance thought and its sources, pp. 21–3.
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time, numerous treatises were published outlining the education of boys in the studia humanitatis. Literate culture came increasingly to be dominated by this revolution in learning. Works within the disciplines of the studia humanitatis were produced following the classical models.

One of the fundamental distinctions made within humanist texts was the classical, characteristically Ciceronian, distinction between the contemplative and active life. The study of the classical disciplines was, according to this distinction, essential for the contemplative life. At times this understanding of contemplative life would reach a pessimism in which withdrawal was portrayed as the only alternative to participation in a corrupt society. In general, however, humanists, and particularly northern European humanists, maintained on the authority of Cicero that the contemplative life was a preparation for the active.\(^{14}\) The skills of the studia humanitatis, and the wisdom, justice, courage and temperance that those disciplines were believed to impart, were to be employed in the active life. This meant that the classical disciplines would be a source of reflection for immediate political concerns. Classical and humanist texts were employed to reflect, for example, upon political and military ethics.\(^{15}\) In an even more direct way, however, the humanist disciplines could be employed as the language of the medium of everyday life; the life, as Petrarch had put it, of the street.\(^{16}\) Thus according to the humanistic understanding of the relation between the contemplative and active life, the study of the classical disciplines was to be employed, for example, in political life, military affairs, the law courts, in commerce and in religion.

Several studies have explored the role of the humanist disciplines in religious reform but, to a large degree, the study of Renaissance humanism has been confined to those pursuits humanists themselves would have regarded as contemplative. It is true that many contemplative pursuits reflected on the active life, and no humanist would have denied that any form of speech or writing was a kind of act. Nevertheless, humanists insisted on distinguishing levels of engagement with civic life. It is surprising to find, therefore, that our understanding of the use of the studia humanitatis in civic life is anecdotal. Our knowledge of the use of classical learning to understand the colonisation of the New World, which was perceived as an extension of the civic sphere, has likewise been anecdotal and yet, as I argue, the studia humanitatis was fundamental to that understanding.

\(^{14}\) Skinner, The foundations of modern political thought, 1, pp. 193–262.
\(^{16}\) Seigel, Rhetoric and philosophy in Renaissance humanism.
Humanism and America

The fear of corruption drove some humanists to oppose the foundation of colonies altogether. Those who did pursue colonisation did so because they found an outlet for the humanist passion for the vita activa, a means to exercise virtue in the foundation and conservation of a commonwealth – the highest calling of the active life. Moreover, when the promoters of colonies spoke of the glories of serving the commonwealth they did not always restrict their meaning to the English commonwealth. Their first duty was, of course, to their sovereign and to England. Frequently, however, the understanding of virtuous duties in the service of their sovereign extended to the foundation of new commonwealths. ‘Commonwealth’ was a translation of res publica, or republic. For the early modern English, it meant simply a coherent political body defined by mutual obligations. A commonwealth could be a guild, a business, a parish, a town, a city, the state or, in this case, a colony. The creation of colonies could be represented as the creation of discrete commonwealths, separate from England but under the imperium of the crown. In 1610, for example, the Virginia Company advertised for ‘men of most use and necessity, to the foundation of a Common-wealth’.

The language of the vita activa was quasi-republican. This presented a problem. In the courtly world of northern Europe, the expression of Roman republican sentiment was limited. The possibilities for a life of virtuous action were even more limited. Humanists made great progress in reconciling much of the republican thought central to the studia humanitatis with princely societies. England was commonly portrayed not simply as a monarchy but as a mixed constitution, a layered political structure that provided many opportunities for political participation for men and women of almost all estates. Humanism, as we shall see, provided the ideological architecture for this constitution. But a tension between the values of the humanist education system, with its emphasis upon self-government, and Renaissance European culture persisted. The opportunity to establish new commonwealths provided a means of political expression both for those who had no desire to be in conflict with their monarch and for those (particularly as the conflict between monarch and Parliament deepened

20 On the political participation of women, see Tim Harris, ed., The politics of the excluded, c.1500–1650 (London, 2001). While they were involved in colonising, women did not directly participate in the promotion of colonies between 1500 and 1625.
under James I) who did seek political expression outside the confines of their society. In similar fashion others chose literary means to pursue the same ends.21

The humanist character of English colonisation can, therefore, in part be explained by tensions between the studia humanitatis and its reception into northern Europe. But why, as I argue, did humanism do more to shape the English understanding of the New World than that of other Europeans? The answer lies in part in the dependence by the English crown upon the grant of private patents for establishing colonies. It is true that all European colonisation began in this way. Christopher Columbus was licensed by the Spanish crown to establish colonies, as were the conquistadors (even if retrospectively). Similarly, in 1541 Francis I of France granted the right to colonise to Jean François de laRoque de Roberval, just as in 1578 Elizabeth I granted the first English patent for colonising in America to Humphrey Gilbert. As silver and gold were plundered in huge quantities from Mexico and Peru, the Spanish crown moved quickly to exercise close military, political and financial control over its New World possessions. It had little need to persuade anyone to provide support for the conquests (except, of course, on the question of justice). By contrast, in the period with which we are concerned, English colonising projects were persistently unsuccessful. They consumed rather than produced resources. As a consequence, the crown provided legal support but otherwise kept colonial matters at arm’s length. The success or failure of the enterprises rested entirely on the ability of private interests to raise capital and personnel. The colonising attempts of the French Huguenots were the most striking European parallel with the model of English colonisation. The Huguenot projects were also licensed to private interests and enlisted men of humanist education in their support. Those men, as we see in ch. 2, included a number of English humanists, such as Richard Eden, who gained employment with their French co-religionists and subsequently came to prominence in the promotion of English colonies. Such was the common identification of English and Huguenot colonisation that joint projects were planned. However, the massacre of Saint Bartholomew’s Day in 1572 and its aftermath limited further French Protestant involvement in the New World, and in 1627 Huguenots were officially banned from venturing to the New World by Cardinal de Richelieu.22

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22 For the ban, see ’Article XVII de la charte de la compagnie des Cent-Associés’, Mercure de France, XIV, 245, cited in Pierre Clément, Lettres, instructions et mémoires de Colbert (Paris, Imprimerie
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Falling back upon their wits and their education the English would be colonisers appreciated that an enormous persuasive project would be required to gain the necessary support. The creation of private colonising grants corresponded with the peak of the *studia humanitatis* in England. This new intellectual world was fundamentally rhetorical in character. At the heart of humanism was a belief that the moral world was contingent and that all political action, or indeed, all social relations, rested upon moral persuasion. As his model of ‘deliberative’, or political, rhetoric the English humanist Thomas Wilson used an example from Erasmus of ‘An epistle to persuade a young gentleman to marriage’. Rhetoric was, accordingly, a central discipline of the *studia humanitatis*. It was thus to the *studia humanitatis* that the promoters of colonies turned to convince their audiences to part with their purses and, if necessary, with their lives. ‘If losse of life befall you by this service’, argued Robert Johnson in *The new life of Virginia*, ‘yet in this case too, wee doubt not but you are resolved with constant courage.’

It is often argued that the private grants to European colonisers reflected a medieval and feudal mental world. The position of the conqueror resembled that of the feudal lord. This argument is perhaps true of the Spanish conquistadors, who could understand their actions as an extension of the reconquista or, like Columbus, the crusades. It is also true that Ciceronian values could be reconciled with feudal England. It is difficult, however, to fit a feudal image upon English colonising enterprises in which the language of self-representation concerned the rewards of virtuous political action, a language of the classical commonwealth and of the city. We shall see that Walter Ralegh appealed to both traditions, but as silver and gold proved elusive, the English rejected the possibility of emulating the conquistadors.

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35 This is not to say that civic language was employed exclusively in cities. It was a language also used for the parish ‘commonwealth’. On the parish as republic, see Mark Goldie, ‘The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England’, in Harris, *The politics of the excluded*, c.1500–1850.

36 See also Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world. Ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven, 1999).
We can say, therefore, that humanism provided the tools of persuasion necessary for the projects to gain support. But we can go further than that. We must remember that the prospective colonies were represented as new commonwealths. For the humanist imagination, persuasion, or oratory, was fundamental to the foundation of a new commonwealth. When humanists questioned the origins of political society, the answer was not merely that it lay in a natural sociability (which was certainly not assumed in the opening of Cicero’s *De inventione*) but an act of persuasion. According to Cicero, ‘there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields’, but a man of great eloquence ‘transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk’.29 Humanists attempting to establish colonies seized upon the idea that oratory was necessary to establish new commonwealths; indeed it is through this idea that they understood the process of gaining support for their projects. The emphasis upon persuasion reflected the understanding that the colonies were new commonwealths and simultaneously complemented the necessity of raising private support. Promoting the enterprises had a double imperative: first, the practical necessity of raising finance and personnel for private projects; and secondly, what we might call the ‘imaginative’ understanding of that first process, namely, the performance of oratory in the foundation of new commonwealths. This imaginative, ideological, dimension was no less practical than the first. For humanists, nothing could be more practical than the performance of an act in the foundation of a commonwealth.

One consequence of this understanding of the relation between oratory, or promotion, and the foundation of commonwealths, or colonies, was that the English produced more literature promoting colonisation in this period than any other European country. Through to the demise of the Virginia Company, numerous tracts and pamphlets in particular, but also histories, verse and plays, were produced debating the virtues of colonisation. This literature was composed by a wide a variety of authors from noble to humble birth, by authors who never set foot in America, by others who participated in voyages, and by many who lived in the New World. In this book, I will be concerned with the whole range of these texts because they all participated in the oratorical foundation of the commonwealths.30

30 Cf. David Beers Quinn, *New American world: A documentary history of North America to 1622*, 5 vols. (London, 1979), V, p. 233. Quinn excludes some material from his documentary history: ‘no examples... of the sermons preached to potential subscribers are given’ because ‘they are long-winded and of intermittent interest’.
The presence of civic, quasi-republican, thought in early English colonisation brings us to the myths concerning the origins of American liberty. From Thomas Jefferson to the patriotic American historians of the early twentieth century, early American colonisation was seen as the foundation of American liberty. Since the 1930s, this understanding has been overturned. It has been argued that early colonisation was devoid of political content. The driving force was commerce. The story of the foundation of liberty has become a story of the foundation of capitalism and individualism. Certainly, as I will argue, this emphasis upon commerce is misplaced. Moreover, a language of citizenship does appear to have been employed in early American colonising projects. It was, however, a citizenship conceived in terms of duties and not the rights-based citizenship valued by the patriotic historians.

It is true that studies of the transmission of civic thought in early modern Europe have, since the 1970s, described a movement from Florence to the English republic to the American revolution which gave little attention to the intervening periods. Indeed, the standard accounts held that England was devoid of republican thought prior to the civil wars. Recent studies have shown, however, a widespread consciousness of quasi-republican thought in the Tudor and early Stuart periods. This consciousness prevailed despite the limitations placed upon political participation by the culture of the court. This was a time, as Patrick Collinson has said, when citizens were cloaked as subjects.

The studia humanitatis were, of course, heuristic. Ancient texts could be read in a variety of ways to support a variety of political interests from


33 See, for example, Pocock, The Machiavellian moment.


36 Patrick Collinson, De republica Anglorum; or, history with the politics put back. Inaugural lecture delivered 9 November 1989 (Cambridge University Press).