

## CHAPTER I

*The common good and the built environment*

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Siena is an ancient city but as we know it today it is largely the result of building undertaken over a sixty-year period, from 1287 onwards, by a group of nine magistrates, ‘The Nine’, from whom the nobility, judges and notaries were excluded. We know something about their ideology from the paintings which they commissioned for the room in which they met to deliberate, the ‘Sala dei Nove’: Lorenzetti’s famous allegories of good and bad government, painted between 1338 and 1340 (Figure 1).

The room is rectangular, with windows to the south, and the fresco runs round the other three walls. The window thus functions to include the real world of Siena within the painting.

By means of this simple leap, practical politics (the actual ‘good’ government of ‘The Nine’ that takes place daily in the room) ideally merges with the painted allegorical Virtues (the figures surrounding the good Governor) and the sacred realm (in the form of the Mater Misericordia frescoed in the preceding room and embodied in the shape of the piazza outside) in a complex sequence of scenes that iconographically convey many symbolic readings simultaneously, while their novel realism speaks directly to the humblest petitioner.<sup>1</sup>

The north wall, facing the window, begins in the top left with a picture of Divine Wisdom hovering over Justice. In her left hand she holds a copy of Scripture; in her right the scales of distributive and commutative justice, the first dealing with the relation of parts and whole, the second with relations between persons. Cords from the scales of justice come down to

<sup>1</sup> D. Mayernik, *Timeless Cities: An Architect’s Reflections on Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Westview, 2003), p. 186. Twenty-five years before Lorenzetti, Simone Martini had painted the *Maesta* in the General Council Chamber, a painting of the Virgin Mary which likewise emphasised both Justice and subordination of the will of the individual to the common good. The inscription on the steps which lead to her throne read, ‘The roses and lilies which spangle the fields of heaven do not delight me more than wise decisions.’

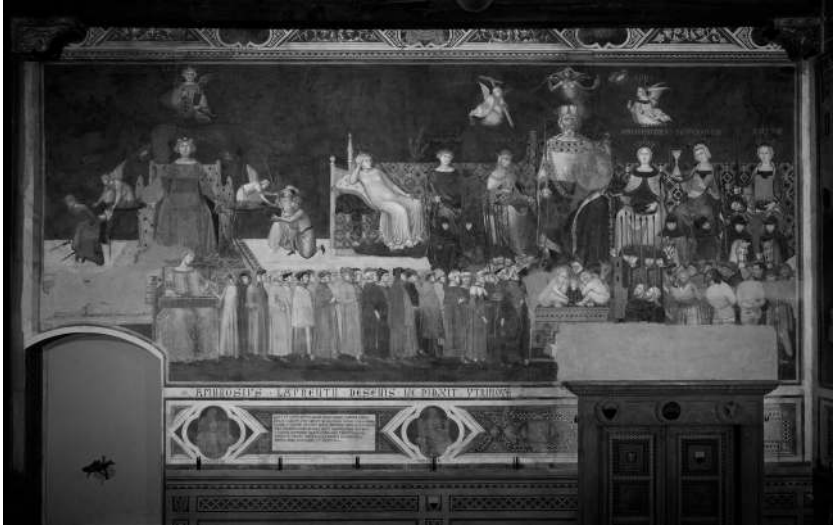


Figure 1. *The Allegory of Good Government*, 1338–40 (fresco) by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1285–c.1348)

the figure of Concord, who twines them together and holds a carpenter's plane – a metaphor for the need to see that no one pursued their ambitions at the expense of others.<sup>2</sup> Siene government took extraordinary steps to overcome the factionalism of big family loyalties, appointing yearly ombudsmen from outside the city to facilitate the task of government and making it illegal for them either to dine with, or receive gifts from, citizens.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-four elders – the elders of the book of Revelation transposed to fourteenth-century Siena to show that it anticipates the Heavenly City – pass the cords to Ben Commun, the Common Good, in whose right hand the cord ends. Common Good sits like a judge on a long bench flanked on one side by Peace, Fortitude and Prudence and on the other by Magnanimity, Temperance and Justice. The theological virtues of Faith, Charity

<sup>2</sup> D. Norman, 'The Paintings of the Sala dei Nove', in D. Norman (ed.), *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280–1400*, vol. II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> The podestà, or powerful one, had to reside in a different *terzo* from his predecessor and was not allowed to receive gifts from citizens or to eat with them. He was not to move more than one day's journey from the city. He was normally chosen from a cadre of men from Lombardy and Emilia. When his term of office came to an end he had to stay in the city for at least a week while his financial affairs were investigated, and this was no mere formality. Sometimes pay was withheld or docked if conditions had not been properly fulfilled or damage had been done to communal property. D. Waley, *Siena and the Siene in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 44.

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and Hope hover above.<sup>4</sup> At the bottom of the painting an inscription runs, ‘Wherever this holy virtue – Justice – rules, she leads many souls to unity, and these, so united, make up the Common Good.’

On the east wall is a depiction of good government. Good government provides security: within the city walls people get married, build, go to school, weave, make shoes, bring in food and drive in sheep. A group of girls perform a dance to a tambourine.<sup>5</sup> Outside the walls, presided over by Securitas, who hangs an offender, people farm and grow the crops with which the city will be fed, hunt and carry goods in peace. The text below the picture celebrates Justice, the chief of the virtues, rendering to everyone their due and securing peace.

The opposite wall depicts the effects of bad government. A scroll over the painting says, ‘Where justice is bound nobody struggles for the Common Good or fights for law, but rather permits the rise of tyranny, which has no desire to do anything against the base nature of the vices which are here united with it, in order to give fuller rein to evil.’ Tyranny here is flanked by the vices – Cruelty, Treason, Fraud, Fury, Division and War, while Pride, Avarice and Vainglory take the place of the theological virtues. Justice is bound and there are looting, rape and destruction. Fear replaces Security. Under bad government the land is uncultivated and then, of course, the people starve.<sup>6</sup> The text below the painting notes that where Justice is bound the common good is lost.

The painting has been called ‘a distillation of Augustinian and Thomist thought’.<sup>7</sup> Thomist thought, it is probably fair to say, was the leading ideology in Italy, and even Europe, at the time, and it was especially dominant in Siena. The vast Dominican church of San Domenico had been begun in 1226, not long after the founding of the Dominican order, and guarded the entrance to the city from the east. Siena’s most famous preacher, San Bernadino, who preached in the Campo to huge audiences, was a Dominican. Its most famous saint, Catherine, was a third-order Dominican and is buried in the Dominican church. This did not mean that Siena was a theocracy. On the contrary, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Siena blurred the distinction between sacred and secular. ‘Just as the ostensibly secular Palazzo Pubblico in the central Piazza del Campo embodied sacred messages’, comments David Mayernik, ‘the Dominicans in their house were conversely entrusted with secular responsibility.’<sup>8</sup> Thomism had a

<sup>4</sup> J. Hook, *Siena: A City and its History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Norman thinks they are young men, or more precisely itinerant professional entertainers. ‘The Paintings of the Sala dei Nove’, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> Hook, *Siena*, p. 90.    <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.    <sup>8</sup> Mayernik, *Timeless Cities*, p. 190.

sophisticated political theology, at the heart of which lay the idea of the common good. Dominican theologians had learned from Aristotle that the good life is a life in common. ‘Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city’, Aristotle had written, ‘the good of the city is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard. The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine.’<sup>9</sup> Aquinas glossed this in Christian terms by arguing that God is the common good of all things and all reality, even stone, ‘loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good’.<sup>10</sup> An intense discussion about the nature of the common good ran throughout the thirteenth century, in the course of which Aristotle’s insights were amplified by those of Augustine and of Scripture. Aquinas, for example, understood the common good of human society partly in terms of the unity of order, through which the mutual relation of individuals in peace and harmony gives the means of securing their ultimate goal and partly in terms of the unity of goodness so that the happiness of the life of virtue is the goal of every individual’s activity.<sup>11</sup> When ‘The Nine’ were re-ordering the city Remigio de Girolami was writing about the common good in nearby Florence, arguing that the common good of political community must be defined as peace and harmony.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on security in Lorenzetti’s painting shows that he has learned this lesson: his vision of the common good is informed by an Augustinian sensibility only too aware of the evil that men do.

As Lorenzetti suggests, the re-ordering of Siena by ‘The Nine’ took the common good as a central theme. ‘The Nine’ of course constituted an oligarchy, and ‘the common good’ had no implication, either for them or for Aquinas and the Dominican theologians, of equality. It did, however, mean that everyone was *included* in the community. Octavio Paz has argued that hierarchical societies do better than egalitarian ones at including culturally different groups in a common moral order because they can give and accept moral meaning to different levels of wealth and power. Some are poor and weak but all are included in a common social body where the strong and

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b, in *Complete Works*, ed. J. Barnes (Cambridge University Press, 1984), vol. II, p. 1728.

<sup>10</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 60 vols. (London: Blackfriars in association with Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964–81), 2a2ae 26.3, vol. XXXIV, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> M. S. Kempshall, *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

rich have special obligations to look out for others.<sup>13</sup> Equal justice before the law was insisted on. The city was divided into thirds, and each *terzo* had a magistrate whose job it was to defend the poor. These Advocates were paid for by the commune. There was also an energetic effort to see both that inexpensive food was available and that the city had adequate water (though there was not adequate sanitation – Alberti commented that the city stank throughout the year!). In other words, the common good meant making sure that the grounds for an adequate life together were established.

But second, the common good included the beautification of the city. No less a person than San Bernadino noted ‘how vital to the city are the arts and crafts and how useful it is when they are legitimately exercised . . . This is our foundation, and we shall see that it is impossible to live well, if the arts and crafts are not properly exercised.’<sup>14</sup>

‘The Nine’ undertook a huge public building enterprise, including parks and the extension of the Cathedral, ‘for the honour of the commune of Siena, and for the beauty of the city’.<sup>15</sup> Because there was no rigid distinction between secular and sacred the Cathedral was understood as ‘the mirror of all citizens’. ‘All the iconographic and decorative schemes of the Duomo are civic in inspiration.’<sup>16</sup> ‘In no area of civic government . . . did the Sienese mania for corporate decision-making manifest itself so consistently and so regularly over so long a period as it did in the building of the cathedral. And such corporate decision-making was bound to have artistic and cultural consequences.’<sup>17</sup>

Siena is, of course, most famous not for its cathedral but for the great market place, formed where the three hills on which the city is built converge (Figure 2). The Campo, says Judith Hook, ‘is one of the most successful uses of space in any city, with an articulation which is unique’.

Both an autonomous and a total work of art, every element is essential to the whole, and no one part has any artistic value without the rest. It is a perfect example of urbanisation, created at a time when shape and proportion were determined neither by a surviving classical model . . . nor by the rationalizing, linear demands of renaissance architecture which it was early enough to escape. It was rather an intuitive, intentional adaptation to the needs of the medieval town. Reflecting the corporate organization of Siena, the Campo was the deliberately designed centre

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in R. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. Sullivan, A. Swidler and S. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> Hook, *Siena*, p. 88.    <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.    <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.    <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



Figure 2. Piazza del Campo, Siena

of the secular and administrative life of the city, distinct from, but always related to, its religious heart which lay in the area around the cathedral.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of Thomist theology, with its belief that grace perfects nature, grounded in the analogy of being, we have to think not of a circle with one centre, but of an ellipse with two foci – the Cathedral and the Campo. Certainly the meaning of the common good is enunciated by the Cathedral: there we learn what the wisdom and justice which inform the common good are; but they are instantiated in the Campo and the Palazzo Pubblico. There is no sacred and secular divide of the type familiar since the eighteenth century. Indeed, because the common good is grounded in God, the origin and end of all things, it embraces all creation.

The Campo was large enough for the whole citizen body to meet, whether to hear a sermon, celebrate a feast or witness an execution. It was the place where food was distributed during famines. No one was allowed to bear arms in it. It was ‘a physical expression of the ideal of good government, of substitution of love for city in place of loyalty to faction’.<sup>19</sup> Building regulations ensured harmony without uniformity. The private palaces which bordered the Campo were completed by the Palazzo

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 72.    <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

Pubblico, which had the highest tower, thus symbolising the priority of the common good over any individual fortune. The tower's bell marked the curfew, summoned councils and signalled the lunch break. The very built form of the Palazzo Pubblico was supposed to represent the themes of good government, with the ombudsman or podestà in one wing, 'The Nine' in another and the Treasury and the General Council in between. At the same time, 'from the beginning the Palazzo was conceived of as an aesthetic object, as a work of art, expressing the aspirations of the Siense people'.<sup>20</sup> The paintings by Martini and Lorenzetti which adorned it were thought of not as decoration but as a proper part of the common good.

Contrast this with the rebuilding of another small and ancient city five hundred years later, the city of Exeter in which I live. In his catalogue of the buildings of England Nicolas Pevsner comments on the charm of pre-war Exeter, which had a jumble of medieval streets such as York has preserved. This was changed with one of the 'Baedeker raids' in 1942. The bombs fortunately missed the Cathedral, but they destroyed almost the whole of the heart of the old city. Thomas Sharp, the author of one of the two best-known books on town planning of the day, was brought in to advise on rebuilding. Throughout Britain rebuilding was poorly done, partly because of lack of money but even more because architects lacked any confident and beautiful vernacular to appeal to (I shall say more about this in Chapter 10). However, Sharp was responsible for one of the first pedestrian precincts to be built in Britain, 'Princesshay', so called because it was opened by the future Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>21</sup> The development was small-scale and fairly charmless, used mostly by local shops. The precinct gave out on to Bedford Square, where the largest building was the Post Office, an important place in welfare state Britain, the place where people went to collect their pensions, often to bank their savings and to obtain dog licences and TV licences, as well as to post letters and parcels and to send telegrams. The Square, in the very heart of town, was a significant public space. Demonstrators gathered there, people sang carols at Christmas, charities set up their stalls, and when farmers' markets came into fashion this was where they were held.

Some time in the next fifty years this complex was acquired by 'Land Securities', a company which was founded in 1944 and made its money, initially, in developing bomb-damaged cities and now gets its return from

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> 'Hay' is Devon dialect for 'hedge' or 'boundary'. So there are a Southernhay, a Northernhay and a Friernhay in Exeter. The name was a compliment to the future monarch.

rents in inner-city areas, and which actively redevelops them to increase this income. The rental value of the post-war scheme could not have been great, and, as the Millennium approached, a complete redevelopment was proposed. The plan was displayed in Bedford Square and attracted much local interest and even greater opposition. The first plan was seen off, but a second was at once put forward, the main difference being that the new plan was now, according to the best Jane Jacobs orthodoxy, mixed-use. The same display, the same request for comment – which was as far as ‘consultation’ went – the same opposition, but this time the proposal was accepted, the bulldozers moved in and in due course the new Princesshay was opened. Visually the new development is an improvement on the old. The architects have opened up some powerful views of the Cathedral, their line is varied and not dominated by the right angle, and there is variety of finish. However, what has been lost is public space. Princesshay is now discreetly policed by private security guards. It is not possible for homeless people to sell *The Big Issue* there. There are no small shops, and the precinct is dominated by chain stores. The farmers’ market was turfed out to a location at the edge of town where it cannot survive. The Post Office was moved from its previous central position to somewhere where it can be accessed only by an escalator. Its previously busy shop has already been shut down. There seems to be an assumption that a café culture, a culture of affluence, constitutes the public realm.<sup>22</sup> The year after the development opened the New Economics Foundation judged Exeter to be the ‘clone town’ of Britain – the city centre with the fewest independent shops.

The obvious difference between these two redevelopments is that in the latter there is an assumption that consumption replaces the common good. Whereas the city of Siena owned the Campo and built it ‘for the honour of the commune of Siena, and for the beauty of the city’, Land Securities redeveloped Exeter, like hundreds of thousands of redevelopments over the past forty years, to make sure its shareholders got the best return on their investment.

Is there a connection between commitment to the common good and the beauty of cities like Siena? David Mayernik thinks there is. ‘What Florence and Siena most deeply share’, he writes, ‘is that they saw their urban forms, and especially their skylines, as directly representing the hierarchy of their collective civic values.’

<sup>22</sup> When I asked a taxi driver what he thought of the new development he replied robustly that he had never been there. ‘It’s not for the likes of us’ was his comment. He and his family shop and take their refreshment in the old and still working-class area of St Thomas.



*The common good in a multicultural society*

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This is truly remarkable to us – who have effectively surrendered our cities’ skylines to chance and developers for the last hundred years and more, surrendering thereby any opportunity to make them speak in other than economic terms . . . Cities that speak must be designed, and . . . their forms can speak eloquently, like an accomplished orator, both in plan (walls, streets and squares) and in profiles or skyline. But the job of the orator, as Cicero and Plato would have it, was as much concerned with what to say as with how to say it; what our cities have to say is all of our responsibility to decide, or else it will be decided by default.<sup>23</sup>

Loss of meaning is at the heart of his diagnosis of what is wrong with our own cities.

Forms that arise without meaning are arbitrary and therefore at best meaningless. At worst they are bearers of meanings we may not endorse (consider the cynical message of the Manhattan skyline, where the city’s hierarchy of values, if it matches the heights of the buildings, is solely economic in scale). In noble cities redolent with meaning we find the best of our human capacity to intervene in the world and leave behind a legacy that allows our children to most fully live the good life.<sup>24</sup>

Mayernik is arguing that we cannot build our towns and cities, or indeed even our houses, well without an idea of ‘common civic values’. I want to elaborate that suggestion in terms of the idea of the common good and I want to begin by asking whether the language of the common good any longer makes sense.

THE COMMON GOOD IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

In their reflections on the common good the Dominican theologians drew on a long tradition which they debated, refined and amended. In particular they drew on Aristotle, who taught that human beings are by nature communal animals, and that they ‘by nature’ seek the good life together. The polis was a fact of nature because human beings were not self-sufficient and the political community was understood as a common project. What they meant by the common good was the question of how to identify the true human end, something which Aristotle identified above all with the practice of justice. We have seen how Lorenzetti interpreted it. The common good ultimately derives from the Divine Wisdom, or the Holy Spirit, which inspires that justice which ‘brings many souls to unity’. This understanding of the common good, as we have seen, lay behind the rebuilding of Siena. It expressed a ‘culture in common’, to use Raymond

<sup>23</sup> Mayernik, *Timeless Cities*, p. 194.      <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

Williams' term, which found architectural expression in both city and Cathedral.

There are a number of questions to put to the idea of the common good, and in this chapter I begin by asking whether such a vision is of any relevance in a multicultural situation where different ethnicities, religions and views of the world have to learn to live together cheek by jowl. Can we agree on the 'true human end' which ought to shape our collective endeavour? The violent rhetoric of the 'clash of civilisations' and of radical Islamism would suggest we cannot. Is not the best we can hope for in that situation the ability to live together with tolerance? Bhikhu Parekh has argued that multicultural societies throw up problems that have no parallel in history. 'They need to find ways of reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity, achieving political unity without cultural uniformity, being inclusive without being assimilationist, cultivating among their citizens a common sense of belonging while respecting their legitimate cultural differences, and cherishing plural cultural identities without weakening the shared and precious identity of shared citizenship.'<sup>25</sup> Wherever there have been great cities, of course, there has been a plurality of cultures. The difference today, we could argue, is that in Western polities at least, there is both a legal and a cultural obligation to respect the rights of the other. In this situation is 'shared citizenship' all that we have? By the latter I take it that we mean such things as governance, the economy and transport, but even here some suggest that very little can be agreed in practice. To such scepticism the economist Albino Barrera suggests three minimum conditions for specifying the common good: the maintenance of justice, the nurturing of interpersonal relationships and a conscious effort towards a fair division of shared resources.<sup>26</sup> He thinks of the common good in terms of the instantiation of a society of due order in which not simply criminal justice but the justice of exchange and the justice which respects fundamental needs of all people are honoured.<sup>27</sup> A working democracy, we could say, is a society which, whilst far from perfect, is a society where these issues are at least acknowledged and where attempts to realise them are consistently made. In his 2009 Reith Lectures Michael Sandel argued for 'a new politics of the common good' which would prioritise 'the infrastructure

<sup>25</sup> B. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 343.

<sup>26</sup> A. Barrera, *Economic Compulsion and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> These are the Aristotelian ideas of justice taken up by Aquinas: commutative justice (equivalence in exchange) and distributive justice (maintaining the rights of every member of the community).