

Humanism and Technology: Comparative analysis of More's *Utopia*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and Miguel Real's *O Último Europeu 2284*

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Abstract

Being a creation based on Christian Humanism, Utopia went through several changes, many of which are already present in More's narrative. Bacon's *New Atlantis* brought one of the first radical transformations about. The closed, agrarian, and immutable Utopian island opened itself to the world and promoted change through controlled scientific research. However much of what More conceived was maintained: *New Atlantis* is still an island lost somewhere in the middle of the ocean, protecting its privacy and secrecy, evolving through the inclusion of selected external information, but avoiding exchanged. In Miguel Real's *O Último Europeu 2284* [The Last European 2284] the narrative starts in part of the European continent, with diffused borders, but unquestionably defined as a perfect utopian society, technological and scientifically advanced, and actively engaged in providing its citizens with the necessary *otium*, in the sense of the Greek word *skole*, meaning intellectual activity. After the destruction of this utopian and pacifist Europe, there is the creation of a new one, in the almost desert island of Pico, in the Azores. Once again, this utopia is crashed, and what endures as hope for future generations is a handwritten manuscript describing the two shattered future Utopias. The thread to explore in the paper is that of how humanism evolved through the last 500 years, taking these three paradigmatic literary utopias as base stones.

Keywords: Utopia, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Miguel Real, Humanism, Technology, Progress.

1. More's *Utopia*

Much has already been said on More's *Utopia*¹ (1965), and whole libraries are still waiting to be filled with a myriad of still unwritten texts, in different languages and times, presenting new analysis triggered by this short narrative. This is a rare hypothesis only bestowed upon the most excellent literary achievements, upon those that overcame the hard test of time and culture and, regardless of readers' particular circumstances, will keep on challenging new interpretations and triggering new emotions. *Utopia* is a never-ending spring of inspiration and the best and more thorough criticism remains incomplete. Even the outstanding André Prévost's analysis, probably one of the best ever written, in my opinion, cannot give all the answers (1978).

In this paper, *More's Utopia* will be the foundation stone to study some aspects of the relationship between humanism and science choosing to focus on three different but complementary periods. According to Pina Martins, an outstanding Portuguese scholar on Renaissance and humanism, the *studia Humanitatis* are so designated because they are the best way to form the whole human being. Cultural education gives form to the free citizen, the one who is fully aware of taking part in the life of his city (Pina Martins, 1969: 5). According to Pina Martins, this movement is not a rupture with the past, but rather an integration; the ancient being renewed in its grafting of the new; in these terms, the lesson seems to have persisted until the Enlightenment (1969: 8).

It is now consensual the idea that Erasmus and More worked together in an educational project that would be concluded with the publication of a diptych constituted by *In Praise of Folly* (1509) and *Utopia* (1516) or “in praise of *sapientia*”, the discourse of the *Morosophos* (Pina Martins, 2009: 82; Prévost, 1978: 66).

For *Utopia* to achieve its goal in Erasmus/More project, the praise of knowledge had to be grounded in the hard reality of everyday life. Therefore, *Utopia* could not be confined to the second book, the first to be written. It had to confront what might be possible someday, somewhere, with what actually was. Moreover, the harsh reality of the present is the only thing that can be changed (the past is gone, the future a mere potentiality). Therefore, a Lucian’s *Morosophos* as Erasmus saw Thomas More, had to show the two sides of the coin. One cannot change what one does not know or the result will be mere wishful thinking or to use a semantically more appropriate word “*rêverie*”. Though the Humanists had a weird sense of humour, they were all deeply committed to the task of being, primarily, educators of citizens.

They also knew that, as Pico so eloquently put it, human beings have the ability to be either similar to angels or to the beasts according to one’s choices. The role of the educator is to deal with both kinds. They found the best and the worst in all places, at every social level.

Yes, the humanists were elitists; they formed a closed group to which one had access by merit. They were quite a small group in European society, in spite of the important transformations, for better and for worse, that came out of their written texts, and their “games” of influences and their letters.

Humanists were all connected with the various political spheres, within the church but mainly within governments and courts and their survival depended on these political ties. However, they were also fiercely critical and experts on what we might call “semantic entanglements”. They were always on

the verge of the abyss.

This powerful small elite was unanimous in the concern and search for the true meaning of words, on their destiny as educators, on their belief that the ways of the world could be changed through human endeavour, on their urge to restore ancient wisdom and use it to make a better society. They no longer believed their fate depended on spiritual or divine intervention, though they were all religious minds. However, one unsolved question divided them: how could they change society? Working within the political spheres, or stepping out and defending their independence as thinkers and scholars. This is one of the debates expressed in *Utopia*, alongside with the discussion of the best way to govern a city.

In the space allotted to me, I will only be able to scratch surfaces. The search for science in *Utopia* hardly goes further than the humanities. That is the ground the first humanists’ new better, the one that should be at the basis of all other knowledge. There are several humanists who were doctors, mathematicians, and so forth but what we now call science would spring only in the second period of the Renaissance.

More’s Utopians have a natural inability for invention. Foreigners bring the press and books from antiquity. Nevertheless, utopians lack the sparkle for invention precisely because they do not engage in exchanges with the rest of the world. However, as Lyman Sargent says, if we were poor peasants in 1516 we would find life in *Utopia* to be extremely appealing. On the other hand, maybe not, because as peasants:

[We] would not have heard of it at all, and even in the unlikely event that [we] could read, [the book] was only available in Latin. [...] Secondly, if [we] did come to hear of it, [we] would have filtered it through [our] understanding of the world, an understanding in which reason played a very small part. (Sargent, 2004: 2-3)

Maybe this was one of the things More would like to discuss further with Raphael. Or again maybe not, because:

When Raphael had finished his story, many

things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described - not only in their method of waging war, their ceremonies and religion, as well as their other institutions, but most of all in that feature which is the principal foundation of their whole structure. I mean their common life and subsistence - without any exchange of money. This latter alone utterly overthrows all the nobility, magnificence, splendour, and majesty which are, in the estimation of the common people, the true glories and ornaments of the commonwealth.

I knew, however, that he was wearied with his tale, and I was not quite certain that he could brook any opposition to his views, particularly when I recalled his censure of others on account of their fear that they might not appear to be wise enough, unless they found some fault to criticize in other men's discoveries. (More, 1965: 245)

So definitely, Raphael had a bad temper! However, hidden in the constant irony that flows through *Utopia*, the problem of the lack of exchange goes further than simply the absence of money. The problem with the utopians is their lack of individuality, a value too great for going unnoticed by any humanist.

This "praise of sapientia" shares with the *Praise of Folly*, or Lucian's *True Story* the subtle irony, the same sense of humour, the same taste for the half said and the half implied, for veiling the true meanings under layers of misguided hints.

Probably that is why we keep on scrutinising this complex tapestry that requires intelligence and also the knowledge and the ability to place it in its proper ambience: inside an elite, writing and laughing and taking pleasure in shared knowledge, books and ideas, but acutely aware of the reality and its ugliness.

2. Bacon's *New Atlantis*

Thomas More and Francis Bacon share many things. Both were politicians, both fell in disgrace - one lost his head the other in honour. Both were eager for knowledge, and both were humanists,

though in different periods. I confess my complete agreement with Brian Vickers regarding a certain lightness that leads some critics to classify Bacon as anti-humanist (2000). This can only be defended by someone forgot to look at the sources, the way humanists taught us to do. Or as Vickers puts it: one should always "trust the author rather than his interpreters" (2012: 204).

Bacon had a humanistic upbringing, and the disciplines of the trivium were fundamental for his varied activities, either public, political or scientific. As many humanist, among them Erasmus, Bacon had a strong reaction to Ciceronianism, to the overvaluation of rhetorical devices over the matter discussed. But this by no means allows us to consider Bacon an anti-humanist. As Vickers proves:

'The duty and office of Rhetoric', [Bacon] wrote, 'is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will.' Well aware that rational processes can be disturbed, Bacon declares that 'the end of Rhetoric is to fill the Imagination to second Reason, and not to oppress it'. Its role is corrective, supportive, protecting reason from disturbance and forming a channel for the passage of virtue. (2000: 151)

This said Bacon's *New Atlantis* is a literary narrative that follows the path first scoured by More. Both use Plato as their starting point, both are concerned with the transformation of human conditions, both imagine an ambiguous narrative though by different means: More using irony and semantical contradictions, Bacon by leaving his text "incomplete". I do believe that Bacon wanted the narrative to be as it is, opened to the future, using rhetoric to trigger Reason.

While More is concerned with changing living conditions through a lengthy process of individual civic and moral education, Bacon believes science will be the answer to:

The prolongation of life. The restitution of youth to some degree. The retardation of age. The curing of diseases counted incurable. [...] The increase and exaltations of the intellectual parts.

(Bacon, 2002a: 488-489)

More would certainly agree with all this, but while utopians try to follow an ecological natural life to achieve a longer and healthier lifespan, Bensalamites believe this will be achieved through science.

For both authors, only an educated mind can accomplish the discovery of better ways of living. However, Bacon discovered the major weakness in the utopian society: it cannot stay isolated; it cannot become frozen in time. Bacon found the answer in Plato, though not in the same dialogue More uses. Bacon's philosophical base stone in *The Laws*, Plato's late revised version of the ideal city².

There are, I think, many reasons for Bacon choosing of the *Laws*, instead of the *Republic*, as More did. To mention briefly one: the political and religious situation in Britain. Bacon was a defender of monarchy as the best political system. However, Parliament and Court were in turmoil almost since the beginning of Stuart dynasty, and Puritans were increasingly pressing for more Parliamentary power and enhanced control of kingship.

Bacon needed his utopia to be an aristocratic one, with different social and economic levels, but one that had the possibility to evolve in time. That is impossible in Hythlodæus' Utopia. Bacon saw society as a living organism, and to preserve it from degeneration Plato offered two basic solutions - prospective travels abroad and a ruling council. Says Plato in the long and painstaking (and painful) dialogue:

No state will ever be able to live at a properly advanced level of civilization if it keeps itself to itself and never comes into contact with all the vices and virtues of mankind; nor will it be able to preserve its laws intact if it just gets used to them without grasping their raison d'être. In the mass of mankind you'll invariably find a number—though only a small number—of geniuses with whom it is worth anything to associate, and they crop up just as often in badly-ruled states as in the well-ruled. So the citizen of a well-run state, provided he's incorruptible,

should go out and range over land and sea to track them down, so that he can see to the strengthening of the customs of his country that are soundly based, and the refurbishing of any that are defective. Without this observation and research a state will never stay at the peak of perfection; nor will it if the observers are incompetent. (Plato, 1997: 951a-d)³

This council, which should consist partly of young men and partly of old, must have a strict rule to meet daily from dawn until the sun is well up in the sky. Its membership is to be: (1) those Priests who have won high distinction, (2) the ten Guardians of the Laws who are currently the most senior, (3) the Minister of Education for the time being, together with his predecessors in office. No member should attend alone: each is to bring a young man of his own choice, aged between thirty and forty. The discussion at their meetings must always center round their own state, the problems of legislation, and any other important point relevant to such topics that they may discover from external sources. They must be particularly concerned with those studies which promise, if pursued, to further their researches by throwing light on legislative problems that would otherwise remain difficult and obscure. Whichever of these studies are sanctioned by the older members should be pursued with all diligence by the younger. (1997: 951d - 952a)

Here Bacon found the key to justify the importance of the House of Salomon or the House of the six days. Evolution is guaranteed through the exchange of ideas, artefacts, and knowledge. There is no reason to impose communitarianism, considered inadequate, and the King, though a central figure in the social hierarchy, may become none existent in political terms, since:

[The Council Members] have consultations, which of the inventions and experiences which we have discovered shall be published, and which not: and take all an oath of secrecy, for the concealing of those which we think fit to keep secret: though some of those we do reveal sometimes to the state, and some not. (Bacon, 2002b: 487)

We all know that who controls knowledge does indeed also hold the power. Therefore, the members of the House of

Salomon, who choose those fit to carry on the research, ensuring the continued survival and legacy of this body of knowledge, and the constant perfecting of that political and social community, govern New Atlantis, in fact.

3. Real's *O Último Europeu* 2284 [The Last European 2284]

Miguel Real's novel (2015), published last year in celebration of *Utopia* 500 years, follows More and Bacon humanist tradition transposing it to modern Europe, or even more accurately to the Modern European Union. Today we look at this Union and it seems to be on the verge of dissolution. In *The Last European* the European utopia is utterly destroyed leaving one single last prove of its existence - the novel itself, handwritten by the last living European citizen. With his death, it is not only Europe that disappears from the earth; it is our whole culture that is destroyed.

There are several important innovations regarding this novel that, as More's and Bacon's, is a mixture of utopia and dystopia from the point of view of the narrator/protagonist known as Headmaster.

All history comes from his perspective, in a mixture of times, memories and present actions journalistic report The Headmaster is the last heir of humanist culture and through his long life and profession as keeper of European Museums; he is simultaneously witness and founder of utopias and their subsequent destruction/evolution to dystopias.

The book he commissions himself to handwrite is to become the proof utopia is possible, but also easy prey for dictatorial governments.

Reading *the Last European* we learn how a small conclave in the European continent managed to create and endure, for a century, a kind of technological utopia. Baconian science attained its peak with the production of endless ecological energy, taken from earth's

core, and the creation of a supercomputer that controls everything: food, energy, provided unbreakable security, and controlled citizens' freedom, not by constraining them but by giving them all they wish. The inhabitants did not work, simply enjoyed the virtual reality that allowed them to experience skydiving, mountain hiking or a day at the beach, or whatever they wished.

A board of scholars supervised urban life, decided on behaviour penalties, and protected European cultural heritage.

This utopia is menaced by a dictatorial imperial China and ignored by an American utilitarian empire. Until the day the Chinese managed to temper with the source of energy and by cutting its supply bring New Europe to a dramatic, bloodshed invasion and utter destruction.

The Headmaster escapes with a few hundred citizens and lands on the Island of Pico, in the Azores. There, in the small island inhabited by one Portuguese family, The New Europeans rebuild a small ecological utopia from scratch. Everything goes according to plan, in utter secrecy, until the use of the internet, recovered after the construction of some computers using parts and bits of old ones brought from nearby islands, calls the attention of the American empire. What triggers their attention to the Island was not the amount of information exchanged through the net, but the quality of the searches only needed and used by well-informed experts.

As they discovered the island was inhabited they also discovered a rare and highly important natural matter whose scarcity made it more important than gold, and definitely more important than life itself.

Military troops are sent to the archipelago America claims as its property. The Europeans are tricked with promises of living as a free and united community within American soil, but in fact, they are too educated and inquisitive and would disrupt American monotony. So adults and adolescents are exterminated in secrecy, and young

children delivered to American families to be raised as common ordinary indifferent people.

Summing up Miguel Real creates a utopia based on science and knowledge and humanist values that are destroyed by European hubris, by their absolute faith in the technology and knowledge and by their confinement. The second utopia is a modern ecological one, not perfect, rather seeking constant improvement, both intellectual and scientific. And this too is destroyed because it exposed itself and was powerless when confronted with utilitarianism and stupidity

Utopia will always be transitory, as life itself.

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¹ There are several editions of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The one I chose to use is the standard Yale edition, therefore all citations will refer to this edition, but whenever necessary, other editions will be referred in the endnotes.

² For recent detailed and thorough analysis of Plato's *Laws* see Christopher Bobonich (2010; 2002).

³ Emphasis added.