

Introduction

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You mean in the city we have just been founding and describing, our hypothetical city, since I don't think it exists anywhere on earth.'

'No, though there may perhaps be a pattern or model laid up in heaven somewhere, for anyone who chooses to see it - and seeing it, chooses to found a city within himself. *It makes no difference whether it exists anywhere, or ever will. It, and no other, is the only city whose politics he would engage in.*'

Plato (2000: Book 9, 592ab)¹

A complete community constituted out of several villages, once it reaches the limit of total SELF-SUFFICIENCY, practically speaking, is a city-state. It comes to be for the sake of living, but it remains in existence for the sake of living well. That is why every city-state exists by NATURE, since the first communities do. For the city-state is their end, and nature is an end. [...] It is evident from these considerations, then, that a city-state is among the things that exist by nature, *that a human being is by nature a political animal*, and that anyone who is without a city-state, not by luck but by nature, is either a poor specimen or else superhuman.²

Aristotle(Book 1, 1252b-1253a 1998: 3-4)

And it will happen that after he has brought down everything which is in the world, and has sat down in eternal peace on the throne of the kingdom, then joy will be revealed and rest will appear. And then health will descend in dew, and illness will vanish, and fear and tribulation will pass away from among men, and joy will encompass the earth. And nobody will again die untimely, nor will any adversity take place suddenly.

Judgement, condemnations, contentions, revenges, blood passions, zeal, hate, and all such things will go into condemnation since they will be uprooted. For these are the things that have filled this earth with evils, and because of them life of men came in yet greater confusion. And the wild beasts will come from the wood and serve men, and the asps and dragons will come out of their holes to subject themselves to a child. [...] And it will happen in those days that the reapers will not become tired, and the farmers will not wear themselves out, because the product of themselves will shoot out speedily during the time they work on them in full tranquillity. For that time is the end of that

which is corruptible and the beginning of that which is incorruptible.
Baruch(1983: 645-646)

Meanwhile, though in other respects [Raphael] is a man of the most undoubted learning as well as of the greatest knowledge of human affairs, I cannot agree with all that he said. But I readily admit that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized.
Thomas More (1518, 1965: 245-247)

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail.
Progress is the realisation of Utopias.
Oscar Wilde (1st ed. 1891, 1912: 43)

Even the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages was tolerant by modern standards. Part of the reason for this was that in the past no government had the power to keep its citizens under constant surveillance. The invention of print, however, made it easier to manipulate public opinion, and the film and the radio carried the process further. With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end.

George Orwell (1989: 214)

Utopia(s), Worlds and Frontiers of the Imagination

1. The roots of Utopia

The idea of Utopia springs from a natural desire of transformation, of evolution pertaining to humankind and, therefore, one can find expressions of "utopian" desire in every civilisation³. Having to do explicitly with human condition, Utopia accompanies closely cultural evolution, almost as a symbiotic organism.

Maintaining its roots deeply attached to ancient myths, utopian expression followed, and sometimes preceded cultural transformation.

In the Western culture, this mythic desire for a better life gave origin to a long tradition of narratives, philosophical conceptions, political ideologies, artistic works, architectural plans, etc.

2. Myth becomes earthbound

This year we celebrate 500 years of *Utopia*, or expressing it in another form; we celebrate the author who brought Utopia from the dominions of myth, religion, and metaphysics to the concrete, actual world while keeping it in the realm of fiction.

Utopia as a mode gained form in a genre. This transformation happened, probably, in the most fortunate way. Thomas More condensed in a short narrative almost all possible ways of assuming definitely the permanent, sometimes desperate, need for transformation felt by the “political animal”. At the same time, he somehow entrusted on each human the responsibility to find ways to live a better life, to assume the responsibility of seeking new paradigms, to improve existing ones.

More’s ambiguous narrative has, in latent, all the forms literary utopia has been developing through the last 500 years. It also challenges architects, scientists, philosophers, politicians to explore beyond the known reality, using imagination, to discover other “better” worlds.

More’s challenge is not for perfection. Being a Christian humanist, he knew better. His challenge points to the route of improvement, to a process of constant reevaluation of different options, of imagined alternatives, all faulty (because they are product of human endeavour) nevertheless better solutions.

The island of Utopia is not a perfect world, but always bear in mind that it is not intended to. For us, living in the 21st century, it would definitely be a dystopia, but then, as says Lyman Sargent, if we were poor peasants in 1516 we would find life in Utopia to be

extremely appealing. Or maybe not, because as peasants:

[we] would not have heard of it at all, and even in the unlikely event that [we] could read, it 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)

3. Utopia, reason and imagination

More ends his narrative expressing both doubts and expectations. And he even leaves his narrative opened to further development. Many did try to develop it though few had the ability to understand the meanings of either the doubts or the openness.

Some corrected what they felt was missing in the Island of Utopia. Just to mention two examples: Campanella and Bacon understood that reason was calling for science to emancipate itself from philosophy and assume a central role in social organisation. Centuries later, under the dominium of positivism, Oscar Wilde made a call for the importance of a central element that, since Enlightenment, was being progressively discarded: desire.

To move forward, to improve, to find Utopia, one needs reason and imagination. These two drives, so often understood as antagonists, must become complementary, balanced. If one prevails, hell gets loose. So warns Orwell, turning his dystopian *1984* into a serious warning. Dystopia results from either reason without imagination, or from imagination without the restraints of reason. But also from the lack of ethic values, of respect for the Other, or simply due to pure stupidity.

4. 500 years later

Why do we, Westerners, still celebrate Utopia?

We live better than the vast majority of world population and yet we are not pleased. Too many things just do not seem right, not to say some are

preposterously wrong.

We have better technology, but its use is also responsible for, at least, a critical climatic crisis.

We have better and faster forms of communication, but this is not synonym of better communal life. Isolation, solitude, loneliness prevail in the world of instantaneous communication.

Democracy triumphed in most western cultures, but politics and some (too many) politicians seem to have stopped after reading Machiavelli's *Prince*, retaining only the ideas of how to remain in power regardless of any ethical or social values, aiming at economic individual wealth.

Knowledge has never before been so easily accessible to so many people, but bombastic headlines, scandalous *faits divers*, corruption, and lack of critical reasoning seem to threaten of extinction our millenarian culture.

Thomas More, returning to his beloved London today probably would yield due to the absence of humanist values in Western society. The vast majority of the people are no longer poor, illiterate peasants, but neither do they work six hours a day and enjoy or search for knowledge during the rest of the time.

To tell the truth, More's beloved London was hell too in the 16th century: unethical political elites, unjust judiciary system, and poverty and ignorance menacing constantly the vast majority of the people.

5. Conclusion

What have we learnt in 500 years?

That Utopia is definitely the country we strive for, not a perfect land, not a perfect society. However, one can surely imagine and build a better one. A society that might lay its foundations on the wealthy western culture, with the benefits of science and technology, with the respect of difference, seen as an enrichment. Human diversity is like natural diversity: it must be protected, cherished, developed, and enhanced. In addition, hubris, that ever-menacing feeling must be restrained. Utopia has to

be reinvented every day, an unfinished and unfinishable task laid on the shoulders of every human being. A shared responsibility but also an individual one.

Through the next almost five hundred pages (virtually close to one for each year since *Utopia* was published) researchers on the fields of Architecture and Urbanism, Arts and Humanities present the result of their studies on the different areas of expertise under the umbrella of Utopia. Past, present, and future come together in one book. They do not offer their readers any golden key. Many will leave questions unanswered, as they should.

When we stop asking: "What if...?" we stop evolving, and then human society is as good as dead.

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¹ Emphasis added.

² Emphasis added.

³ See, Gregory Clays (2011: Chapter1),
Fátima Vieira (2010), Raymond
Trousson,(2000),and Frank Manuel

(1973; 1979). Fortunately the list does not,
end here. Therefore, consider these
references as a challenge for further
investigation.