

On Righteousness and Dignity. Two Challenging Issues since Early Modern Times

Maria de Jesus Crespo Candeias Velez Relvas
Universidade Aberta, Lisboa; CEAUL / ULICES

In the so-called civilized, developed Western countries, especially after World War II, legal documents have been produced and measures taken to prevent both violations in the field of human rights, human dignity and human integrity, and aggressions upon the natural environment. Consequently, many initiatives of diverse kind have also been taken by citizens, individually, and by private associations, collectively. Concepts such as righteousness, equality, tolerance and freedom are nowadays considered fundamental issues that should prevail in any society.

Balance and righteousness thrive however on a very thin layer. We are, in fact, living in an era of duality and antithetical paradigms. Ours is not a world of global tolerance towards ‘the other’, no matter his/her social, economic, cultural, racial, political or religious background; neither is it a world of global respect towards the unique, exquisite planet we inhabit. Atrocities are daily perpetrated in places where human rights and the respect for nature are disregarded, due to corrupt, dictatorial regimes, or to ignorance and ancient, traditional habits. In spite of all the efforts undertaken by innumerable organizations and by a large community of researchers, asymmetry persists, assuming a gigantic, unacceptable proportion at an age of so many great achievements.

As we know, early modern times were ruled and characterized by very different principles and concerns. The medieval conception of the universe had been absorbed and adapted by the new era: each being still occupied a precise place in a precise sphere, according to a pyramidal hierarchy that presupposed relations of despotic supremacy and submission, theoretically not accepted today. Thus, for example, the concept of slavery – notwithstanding the obvious contradiction with Christian principles, it naturally fit in with the ancient worldview. However, the origin and roots of today’s

positive achievements are to be found precisely in those same times, also notwithstanding an apparent or inherent contradiction.

Renaissance and Humanism, above all, contributed to a rather different cosmology on a large scale, characterized by that unique symbiosis between ancient and new presuppositions and theories, which comprehended a complete new vision of Man and of Man's potentialities. In such a context, the sea voyages and the contact with other worlds and beings were undoubtedly extremely relevant to the changes in early modern times and to the configuration of the whole world, then and several centuries later. The-above mentioned duality is anchored in the 15th and 16th centuries, as well, and was originated by that same symbiosis, i.e. by the interaction between the old worldview and the new one.

Two English Renaissance texts – Thomas More's *Utopia* (c. 1516) and Walter Raleigh's *The Discovery of Guiana* (1595) – appear to have gone far beyond the presuppositions and conceptions of their own age. That was certainly due to the authors' solid, humanistic educational backgrounds, and because they approach deep, universal and timeless domains, such as dignity, tolerance and respect, or, in a single word, righteousness.

Let us first observe More's work. Among a myriad of meanings, we may glimpse in *Utopia* the search for perfection or, at least, the search for the literary construction of it: the island is isolated from everything except the Greek culture and the Christian influence; slavery does exist but it is not hereditary; euthanasia takes form and consistency 'avant la lettre'; the studies are organized according to the humanistic *syllabus* of the sixteenth-century English universities; and war is considered "fit only for beasts" (1989: 87).

Justice, on the other hand, is also a central theme, constituting one of the author's major concerns. "Book 1", previous and external to the report but functioning as its Prologue, corresponds precisely to a detailed dissertation on the ideal of justice. More repudiates many of the problems that afflict his own society (theft, enclosure, mendicity, vagrancy, for instance) but, above all, criticizes issues that would become universal and permanent, namely death penalty, war and the inappropriate, wrong, inefficient execution of justice, which go hand in hand with despotism and intolerance.

"Book 2" discloses the organizational structure of the Utopian world, continuously ruled by justice and equity. Everything is meticulously planned: the

architectural design of cities and buildings; the cleanliness and salubrity of premises; the family; society; childcare, healthcare and education; culture; punishment; civil rights; duties; freedom; religion; ethics.

The Island of Utopia is indeed marked by the absence of problems, of unhappiness and, above all, of injustice; therefore, the implicit perfection corresponds to something that every human being, in any time or place, longs for. It is the state, the city, or the city-state conceived according to a universal ideal which the work's full title so well reveals: *Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia*. Concomitantly, a set of attitudes or ways of life, either active or passive, is vehemently condemned: pomp and ostentation; pride; vice; wealth when used to illicit business or evil purposes; intolerance towards the ones who are weaker; poverty, misery and illness. Moreover, the narrative constitutes a didactic apology for an irreproachable moral behaviour and for virtue because only a virtuous society is founded upon equality and equity.

It is of course impossible to ignore that the extreme perfection and the Spartan rigidity of this idealized world simultaneously introduce a sense of uneasiness and restlessness, arisen from the obvious uniformity in all aspects of life, from the severe restrictions to individual liberty, from the apparent absence of affective bonds, and from prohibitions and punishments. To an equal extent, we may infer the belief that no human society can be totally perfect or attractive, as Saint Augustine's *City of God* is.

But let us keep close to the evident positivity and the sense of anticipation in *Utopia*, bearing in mind More's permanent and genuine craving for perfection. As we know, the Utopian world anticipates the future concepts of welfare and of democracy, as well as their diverse beneficial aspects, while putting in evidence the sense of righteousness, justice, human dignity and respect – self-respect and respect for 'the other'. Simultaneously, the caustic criticism that underlies the whole work is mostly contained in the subtle rhetorical devices of antithesis and inversion, which deeply concur to the elaborate process of *argumentatio*: by showing what Utopia is, Thomas More shows what the European countries – especially his own country – are not; by describing alternative forms of government, ways of life and social structures, and by portraying a perfect and desirable Commonwealth, More points out what those same countries could and should be.

Likewise, Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discovery of Guiana* is characterized by a sense of anticipation, and it must have triggered contradictory reactions in those times of discovery and colonization.

As a matter of fact, this Elizabethan text anticipates what we now call an ecological perspective that may be perceived through the author's own relationship with, and respect for, the exuberant, mysterious and often threatening natural environment; through the Indians' interrelationship and intercooperation with the place where they lived; and through the Spaniards' violation and destruction of that same place, while exhaustively exploring its natural resources and enslaving its inhabitants.

Raleigh was already portraying, in a strong, amazing way, what would lamentably become common in every colonized territory in the oncoming centuries. In reality, the Renaissance courtier, who was a soldier, a scholar, a navigator and a brilliant poet, reveals a peculiar view on the European influence on societies with different ways of life, culture, tradition and religion, and on the huge, new, green world where the white man proved to be but a total alien.

Beyond Raleigh's purpose in carrying out his expedition to Guiana – which, as a matter of fact, is dubious and utopic – what strikes me as being remarkable is the author's relationship with the tropical rainforest and its dwellers. He exhibits an innate curiosity and interest for everyone and everything he sees. The text contains long, dynamic and colourful descriptions of the many tribes and individuals he meets and reports on their customs, their physiognomy, their religiosity and housing, along with a genuine interest for the surroundings: he seeks to accurately register the name, localization and length of rivers, as well as the name of trees, plants and animals.

At the same time, we see Raleigh always associated with the natives, who are his guides, companions, hosts and precious sources of information. Rather than assuming the typical, expected attitude of the European who considers himself a superior being in the recently discovered territories, the author frequently acknowledges that he and his crew would not have survived without the Indians' wisdom, experience, generosity and good will. At the same time, he openly criticizes and condemns the Spaniards' brutal attitudes, reporting on their many atrocities and vehemently repudiating the way the Spanish colonization had already assumed.

In his report, Sir Walter Raleigh delineates, also 'avant la lettre', universal and timeless issues that continue at stake in the 21st century, and also proves to be acute when dealing with the concepts of justice and welfare, righteousness and tolerance,

greed and rapacity, human dignity and happiness. On the other hand, far from the age when nature was to be systematically brutalized and plundered, the work anticipates both that age – which is our age – and its own duality.

Through subtle, diverse and complex rhetorical processes, *Utopia* and *The Discovery of Guiana* emphasize, therefore and above all, that it is up to Man, in any time and place, to decide whether he wishes to use his immense potentialities in favour or against the world he inhabits and where he is but a small of its parts.

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