From the Political Utopia to the Philosophical Utopia—and Rescuing the Political Utopia, on Second Thought

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In the chapter I wrote for the Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature, I set out to offer an outline of the history of the concept of utopia by highlighting the way the meaning of the neologism created by Thomas More has changed over the centuries. As I evinced then, after its de-neologization the concept of utopia underwent several semantic renewals, having been used by different authors to refer to a variety of things. This fluctuation of meaning, I then tried to show, was largely due to the never-ending tension that prevails between the concept of utopia (literally a “nonplace”) and that of eutopia (a “good place”).

According to some scholars, this tension originates in an apparently inescapable idea of circularity. Louis Marin describes it as a “well-formed proposition” that Thomas More subtly conveyed to the reader, thus leading him to despair: “happiness is not of this world, the end of this world is happiness.” This circularity certainly creates a paradox, and it could well be that More generated it without intending to offer a solution. Marin is very clear as to the aim of utopian discourse: “Not only is utopia not ‘realizable,’ but it could not be realized without destroying itself. The very function of utopia requires that it not indicate the ways and means of its effectuation, nor signify the goal to be attained and propose for construction the perfect City. Utopia is not tomorrow, in time. It is nowhere, not

tomorrow nor once upon a time.” To Marin, the utopian discourse displays the “power of the negative in literary texts” and opens up blanks that will enable the expression of the once “inexpressible”—le neutre, as Maurice Blanchot called it. This is utopia’s major function and its ultimate end.

Marin’s praise of the utopian discourse is thus based on its ability to provide space for new ideas that are presented as food for thought rather than action plans. His approach to utopia is in fact coherent with the 1970s’ view of utopian literature. On the one hand, as a post-structuralist, he questions the referential function of texts (and thus neglects authorial intention). On the other hand, he responds to the 1950s’ and early 1960s’ passionate anti-utopian diatribes against utopian thinking, which had been inspired by Karl Popper’s denunciation of radical utopian engineering (as opposed to piecemeal social engineering).

But are we reduced to reading the tension between utopia and eutopia as resulting only in an endless circularity, however fruitful it may be in terms of the imagined alternatives? From my point of view, Fernando de Mello Moser presented a more productive approach when he suggested that utopia is informed by a dialectic structure that calls for the intervention of the reader. According to Moser, More provided the reader with a thesis (Book I) and an antithesis (Book II), and expected him to reach conclusions, to “write” the synthesis, thus escaping the circularity of the utopian discourse. In this essay I will ground my working hypothesis on the idea that a similar reasoning may be applied to contemporary utopian thinking. Although, as I will attest to below, utopia has lost the clear ideological commitment it used to have at the time of the grand utopian narratives, contemporary utopian thinking is still based on a dialectical strategy that the author expects the reader to be involved with. As in the dialectical method, utopian thinking provides us with different points of view about a subject and engages us in the pursuit of truth.

In a short video clip available on YouTube, the Uruguayan journalist, writer, and novelist Eduardo Galeano explains that he was once in the city of Cartagena de Indias, giving a presentation at the local university with the Argentinian film director Fernando Birri, when one of the stu-

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3 Ibid., 344 (my emphasis).
5 Cf. ibid., 177.
dents asked Birri what the use of utopia was. According to Galeano, Birri offered an inspired definition, to which Galeano subscribed totally: utopia is on the horizon, and we know that we will never reach it—that if we walk ten steps toward it, it will walk ten steps away. But, he said, it is essential to our lives, as it inspires us to walk.

The success of this video clip (it easily reached over one million views) seems to indicate that the idea of utopia still appeals to many people. But it also appears to suggest that the prevailing idea of utopia is defined not in terms of its form or content, but rather in terms of its function. This picture is, however, very different from the one that Ruth Levitas describes in *The Concept of Utopia*. According to Levitas, the definition of utopia that focuses on its function is typical of the Marxist tradition, to which utopia either performs “a negative function of preventing social change or a positive function of facilitating it, either directly or through the process of the ‘education of desire.’” In the case of the definition presented by Galeano, the idea of desire is clearly conveyed, but it entails rather a process of “education for desire.” Utopia is above all defined as a driving force (the moving hope Ernst Bloch has so insistently described), and the nature of the horizon seems to have only a relative importance.

This definition of utopia seems to be consistent with the attitude that prevailed among utopian scholars in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the end of ideology was proclaimed, and after 1989, when the death of utopia was announced. As Lyman Sargent put it, “the case against utopia,” headed by Karl Popper, was mainly built upon the idea that utopia entails the notion of perfection, thus not providing space for change. As this utopia presents a blueprint informed by a human rationality that does not admit invariables, it is thus more likely to bring about dystopia to those on which the new social order is to be imposed. On the other hand, the “case for utopia,” which has found in Ernst Bloch its most enthusiastic proponent, was informed by the idea that utopia is an absolute necessity, innate to the human species, giving expression to an imagination that, grounded in a good knowledge of human reality, provides the reader with

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9 “It is a question of learning hope” asserts Ernst Bloch in the introduction to his monumental *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996), vol. 1: 3.
positive images of the future that are meant to inspire the creation of a better society.\textsuperscript{10}

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union gave strength to the idea that utopian narratives should be dismissed as dangerous. It was thus within this framework that the advocates of utopia started enhancing its function and marginalizing its content. The notion that utopias are not strictly informed by a political plan provided the basis for the distinction between the \textit{political utopia} (which entails a political project) and the \textit{philosophical utopia} (which implies a utopian attitude). The success of the video clip where Galeano explains that utopia is set on a horizon that is never meant to be reached indicates that it is the philosophical view that informs contemporary utopianism. It seems, however, to provide ground for Marin’s reading of utopianism as an unsolvable tension. Does it mean that the philosophical utopia does not provide the reader with space to perform his agency? On which principles is the philosophical utopia grounded, how does it operate, and what does it demand from its readers?

The philosophical utopia has found one of its most passionate advocates in the Portuguese philosopher and educational sciences expert Adalberto Dias de Carvalho. In order to draw the distinction between the political utopia and the philosophical utopia, Dias de Carvalho resorts to two French philosophers. From Giles Deleuze, Dias de Carvalho borrows the idea that we have to distinguish between the concepts of \textit{présent} and \textit{actuel}.\textsuperscript{11} Participating in a conference on the philosophical work of Michel Foucault in 1988, Deleuze explained the difference between these two concepts and how instrumental they are to the understanding of the Foucauldian perspective of time. On the one hand is what we already are (our \textit{présent}), which is part of history; on the other hand is what we are becoming (the \textit{actuel}). History is the archive, what we are and what we have ceased to be, while the \textit{actuel} is what we are becoming, a sort of “another-becoming.”\textsuperscript{12} The new “paths of creation”\textsuperscript{13}—as Deleuze termed

\textsuperscript{12} Gilles Deleuze, “Foucault, Historien du présent,” \textit{Magazine littéraire} 257 (September 1988): http://1libertaire.free.fr/DeleuzeFoucault03.html. The French term that Deleuze used was “devenir-autre.”
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., “Chemins de créations” is the original in French.
it—are inscribed on the level of the *actuel*, of what we are becoming.\textsuperscript{14} Elaborating on these ideas, Dias de Carvalho elucidates that for Deleuze, the *présent* is the historical present, in function of which both past and future are situated; the *actuel* is inscribed in the *avenir*—another form of time, a time of philosophy, which needs to be understood as a counter-time of history. As Dias de Carvalho explains, although the *actuel* is born out of history and never ceases to interact with it, it cannot be reduced to history because it does not aspire to be fulfilled in it. It is, above all, a “time of becoming,” full of possibilities.\textsuperscript{15} This conception of time, Dias de Carvalho claims, is characteristic not of the political utopia, but of the philosophical utopia, which is inscribed in the *avenir* under the form of a counter-time of history, asserting, in this sense, a critical negativity with regard to the present.

The philosophical utopia described by Dias de Carvalho has an additional characteristic that he tries to explain by resorting to the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Maler. Maler, in fact, offered a workable distinction between the political utopia and the philosophical utopia by contrasting the concepts of *ideal* and *idealization*. According to Maler, the philosophical utopia belongs to the realm of the ideal, and is very different from the concept of the *project*, which belongs to the realm of the idealization. The political-ideological utopia is based on the coincidence of the idealization with the ideal; in the philosophical utopia, Maler suggests, the ideal always exceeds the idealization.\textsuperscript{16} Maler thus values the notion of utopian surplus put forward by Ernst Bloch, and contends that this surplus is needed because it makes the utopia dynamic at the same time that it discloses a critical awareness of what is being idealized.

The notion of philosophical utopia thus defined by Dias de Carvalho seems to suit the idea of utopian thinking described by Galeano: contemporary utopian thinking does not offer blueprints, it explores possibilities. Although it may incite us to define the nature of our horizon (our ideal), it does not force us to stick to the end to our idealization, as the ideal is informed by a surplus of desire, which provides us with space for a constant redefinition, and is ready to accept the notion of error, which it

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.


incorporates when reformulating its new horizon. Thus, each time we take
ten steps toward it, utopia walks ten steps away from us. And this happens
because the philosophical utopia does not face the future as the inevitable
consequence of the present, but rather, as Benoît Timmermans puts it, as
a network of possibilities.17

In order to understand this idea of the future as a network of possibili-
ties, we will have to go back to the concept of avenir and reflect further on
how it differs from the concept of futur.18 As Gérard Klein clarifies, the
notion of avenir is a rather recent concept derived mainly from literature.
Futur refers to what is written, to what is bound to happen; it is unique,
as the past is, and is in fact the continuity of the past and the present.
Human beings do not know it, but they have certainly tried to predict it.
The notion of avenir is more complex and larger. It includes everything that
may happen, everything that may be invented. By definition, it is multiple
and plural. In this sense, it is absolutely unpredictable, as it hosts a myriad
of very interesting possibilities. According to Klein, from antiquity to the
seventeenth century, futur was the only workable notion—people thus tried
to guess what eventually would happen in a sort of a prophetic attitude.
But when in 1644 Francis Cheynell published Aulicus his Dream, of the
King's Sudden Coming to London, a six-page text that described an imagi-
nary visit of Charles I to the city of London after the English Revolution
to find how it had changed with the abolition of the monarchy, the notion
of avenir was introduced. The birth of euchronia, which would only really
be in fashion after the nineteenth century,19 signals a new way of thinking
about the future—imagining it, inventing it, and, consequently, wishing to
contribute to its creation.20 Contemporary utopian thinking is character-
ized by this attitude. From the perspective of utopian thinking, the future

18 I am using the words in French as the distinction is not discernible in English.
19 Euchronia literally means “the time of perfection”, and within the context of
utopian literature it refers to a “good place in the future”. The first euchronia
is usually attributed to the French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier (L’an 2440:
Un rêve s’il en fut jamais [Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred],
published in 1771). However, the euchronian logic can already be found in
Cheynell’s text. It should be pointed out, though, that euchronian literature
only became common in the mid–nineteenth century.
is not a *futur*, but an *avenir*; it thus has a multiple nature, and can only be described in the plural.

By thinking of the future as a network of possibilities, utopian thinking opposes, against the prophetic attitude that prevailed until the seventeenth century, a *prospective* attitude, and aims at the exploration of a set of possibilities that are intimately linked to each other. In order to understand what is implicit in this attitude, we will have to reflect on the Latin etymology of the word *prospective*. The word derives from the association of the prefix *pro* (forward) with the verb *specere* (look) and the suffix *tivus* (intensity of action). When we think of a prospective attitude, we have in mind the action of looking forward as well as the intensity and the intentionality of that look. While prophecy implies the simple enunciation of a vision (i.e., a static attitude), the prospective attitude implies interest and movement. It implicates the person itself in the vision; it presupposes searching, creation, and novelty, and expresses a wish to go beyond what is known—to enunciate not to what we *will be* (to resort to Deleuze’s argument about time) but what we may become.

However, it is important to understand that these possibilities that we imagine and invent are by no means divorced from reality. As the Swiss educator and philosopher Pierre Furter so often claimed (inspired by Ernst Bloch), utopia only makes sense when it is directed toward the future, when it derives from a reflexive and critical examination of the present and when it gives priority to the psychological dimension of its fulfilment. Utopian thinking implies, from this perspective, the constant questioning of the real, historical *locus*. It is the result of an intelligence that tries to perceive things that are born out of the real but that are in fact beyond the real. In spite of its prospective dimension, utopian thinking is to be applied to the here and now, in the moment and the place where we imagine different futures for humanity.21

The way that Furter describes utopia is indeed of paramount importance for understanding contemporary utopian thinking. Moreover, to Furter, utopia does not offer final truths; the truths it offers are the result of the dialectical transformational movement that it establishes with the real world.22 This idea of a dialectical transformational movement cer-

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tainly highlights the engaging nature of contemporary utopian thinking, and offers a good argument against those who tend to dismiss the philosophical utopia on the grounds that it has lost connection with the real world. In fact, the philosophical utopia relies on its function to educate for desire, which is in fact comparable to the catalytic function that, in Mello Moser’s view, More expected *Utopia* to perform. Thus, at the same time as it teaches the reader to hope for change, the philosophical utopia provides different views on a particular subject, and expects the reader to reach his or her own truths.

The catalytic function reveals itself, above all, in the prospective search for solutions. To the Portuguese philosopher Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the most important dimension of utopia—the one to which we really must pay attention if we want to overcome these times of crisis—is precisely this prospective dimension. In the last chapter of *Toward a New Common Sense*, curiously titled “Don’t Shoot the Utopist,” Sousa Santos maintains that the only possible path is that of utopia, or “the exploration, through imagination, of new ways of human possibilities” based on the conviction that we are capable of creating something “radically better for which we are willing to fight, and to which humanity is entitled.”23 The connection between the utopian imagination and reality is also emphasised by Sousa Santos, who sees its purpose as twofold. For Sousa Santos, utopian thinking highlights what is missing in the present. Furthermore, although it may seem to be distant from reality, utopian thinking resorts to the present in order to imagine new possibilities, and combines what exists in new ways and on new scales, thus taking into the center what used to be on the margins.

In *Brief Notes on Science*, the Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares describes the idea of scientific progress in a way that, in my view, may help us better understand these ideas. Tavares argues that everything small may be positioned in such a way so as to make it look much bigger—for instance, we simply need to bear in mind the brutal experience of seeing our finger as suddenly bigger than a skyscraper. According to Tavares, scientific progress occurs when someone dares to look at reality in a different way, that is, out of the corner of his eye:

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Observing out of the corner of one’s eye indicates, in science, the commencement of a new hypothesis.
What is observed from the centre of one’s eye is the obvious, it is what is shared by the multitude.
In Science, as in the world of inventions, observing out of the corner of one’s eye is seeing the detail, it is seeing that which is different and which may be the start of something meaningful.
Observing reality out of the corner of one’s eye, i.e.: thinking slightly to the side. From here all of the important scientific theories were born.24

Looking at utopia in the light of these theories means understanding it mostly as a strategy of searching for signs or for possibilities that have yet to be revealed, but which are available to us—we just need to want to look for them in order to find them.

The philosophical utopia that underlies contemporary utopian thinking thus trusts the reader with the most difficult task: confronting a thesis (the real world or the initial proposition) and an antithesis (the alternative utopian vision that works as a reaction to the proposition), the reader is expected to reach a synthesis by reconciling the common truths of both thesis and antithesis to form a new proposition, which may well benefit from the reader’s own input—the result of his own looking out of the corner of his eye. But what is most important is that he understands that this is a never-ending process, and that once he proposes a new thesis, it must be opposed by a new antithesis, so that new propositions may be formulated.

Contemporary utopianism has walked away from the political utopia not only in reaction to the attacks perpetrated by anti-utopians, but also as the result of the realization that when utopia is offered as a blueprint or final truth, it is likely to engender dystopia. It now presents itself in the form of the philosophical utopia—as a device to promote critical thinking and a strategy for the search of transitory truths. As we have seen, this research is by no means divorced from reality, as the real world is always taken as the first proposition. But it depends, for its effectiveness, on the reader’s willingness to participate in the search. Was Louis Marin right, after all, when he described the desperate circularity of utopian thinking? When applied to contemporary utopian thinking, Marin’s diagnosis fails

24 Gonçalo M. Tavares, Breves Notas sobre Ciência (Lisboa: Relógio D’Água, 2006), 75; my translation.
because he did not see that the reader is part of the utopian equation, as it is the spiral and not the circle that best represents the dialectical method. Marin was right, though, when he asserted that utopias are not to be realized. That, however, is so only because within the dialectical method the synthesis is always to be taken as a new proposition—a thesis requiring to be challenged in the process of searching for new (transitory) truths.

The philosophical utopia thus presents itself with an unprecedented ambition in assuming that the reader will be capable of critical thinking, and expecting him to contribute toward change. It certainly is a long way from the political utopias offered by “men of genius,” to use Marx’s words, who in the nineteenth century had aimed to contribute to the education of desire by offering very clear visions of the future.25 By setting the reader in the epicenter of utopian thinking, the philosophical utopia embraces the mission of promoting an education for desire, and presents utopian thinking as a particular mode of looking at and interacting with reality—a sort of “resistance” and “transformation” of reality from within, as Deleuze and Guattari said of the “utopias of immanence.”26

But will the promotion of this strategy based on the education for critical thinking be enough? In his paper “Critical Pedagogy, Utopia and Political (Dis)engagement,” Darren Webb offers a lucid view on the consequences of this strategy when applied to the field of education. Drawing on the distinction proposed by Levitas between the notions of utopia-as-system and utopia-as-process (which basically correspond to the notions of the political utopia and the philosophical utopia, respectively),27 Webb proves how the rejection of utopia-as-system resulted in limiting the potential for political intervention based on the utopian pedagogy of educators who claim to be influenced by Paulo Freire’s utopian pedagogy but who seem to ignore that Freire believed that the human beings need blueprints to propel them toward a better future.28 Webb successfully describes

26 Deleuze and Guattari describe the utopias as acts of resistance. In their view, these utopias contribute to change and progress by showing new ways of being, living, and sensing the world through the form of virtual becomings.
the shortcomings of an education that is focused only on a future-oriented pedagogy of hope—on the belief that different futures are possible, that utopia is a collective human process, that the present is incomplete, and that our mission is to find what is missing. Although the belief in counter-hegemonic possibilities is no doubt essential, the liberal rejection, a priori, of blueprint utopianism has reduced utopian pedagogy to a process of questioning (and transformed the process itself into an end) and emptied utopia of valid guiding images. In an argument that is worth revisiting, Webb concludes that political visions need to be revalidated and offered not as blueprints, but as images that may guide and direct transformative action, which will otherwise run the risk of being entrapped in endlessly open projects. Webb does not stand, however, for a return to utopia-as-system. What he intends to demonstrate is that the distinction between utopia-as-system and utopia-as-process is false, and that “without content and vision utopian spaces run the risk of remaining empty and barren,” thus resulting in what Erik Olssen called “a political paralysis.”

Although Webb is mainly concerned with pedagogical issues, his conclusions are no doubt applicable to what has been said here about contemporary utopian thinking. The problem of contemporary utopian thinking is that it has invested too much in its function and has neglected its potential contents. By pinning its hopes on the reader and his capacity for critical thinking and the syntheses he may reach, it has neglected to offer idealizations that may guide him in his pursuit of truths. Revisiting Dias de Carvalho’s description of the philosophical utopia, we may say that the ideals have been presented as too vague, the idealizations too elusive and distant. As Galeano has rightly explained, we need utopian horizons because they will inspire us to walk. But if we are not given concrete examples of horizons, the energy of potentially transformative utopian thinking will be lost in an endless search.

We need to rescue the political utopia from the exile that it has been forced into. What is more, the real task that contemporary utopian thinking needs to undertake today is to invest in a dialectical approach to the political utopia (the thesis) and the philosophical utopia (the antithesis) that, through reaching a synthesis, may enable us to sustainably overcome the times of crisis in which we currently live.

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