

Utopia's Legacy (A Postscript)

Eduardo Portella

There are several ways to approach utopia and to appraise the range of vital sustenance and broken promises that it conveys. As a starting interpretative strategy, one might consider utopia as a canonized idea: utopia is nothing if not a construct of Paradise on Earth. That is the form under which it prospered from the Renaissance on, spinning into a vote of confidence for the New World.

The times we live in today are hardly canonical, yet we see no end to the demise of total creeds. Here and there, foundational utopias begin to lose their glimmer. They have failed to meet their most radiant promises or they have squandered, upon the rocky curves of a low modernity, their most gratifying paradigms.

Utopias relate to the world as a whole, in its totality. They have much to do with a one-way manner of thinking. Utopia is where a false but comforting sense of Truth can be fabricated, sustained and restored. It needs only to be active and inventive. Literature and utopia got along brilliantly at first sight. Utopia for some is an efficient programming mechanism for the State. For others it is the imaginative literary genre that dominated Renaissance rhetoric.

As they embarked on their grandiose expansion, imperial forces used their exclusive rights to universal Truth to banish any semblance of difference. Missionaries and mercenaries went each about their businesses, sparing no efforts to promote an identity without otherness, confident in a worldview that was at best univocal – and indeed hermetically, impermeably shut.

Utopia was not injured by a stray bullet, nor did it fall to any other, more advanced, type of artillery. It just happens that concepts which promise totality usually end by revealing a totalitarian edge. Utopia became a casualty in the collapse of totality. Utopia along with its diluted offshoots – probability, planning, prediction – offset the balance in the unity of the time structure, constantly adjourning that promising agreement between memory, the daily occurrence and premonition.

Utopia and ideology are engaged in an endless dialogue of the deaf. While masking reality, ideology uses its dubious realism to restrain the forces of utopia.

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Utopia's projections into the future appear all the more deceitful against the backdrop of the present's blatant hubris: the insatiable present that snatches up the past and the future. Utopia began to ail when it saw the disenchantment of the world and the malaise of civilization building up among the heaps of the future's debris.

The dream-making machine that lulled us for so long may lie broken and abandoned, but the paralyzing effects of its utopian narcotraffic are no less widespread. With its claims that 'the best is yet to come', utopia has excelled as a colonization strategy.

Of all the eventualities facing the early Americas, utopia was clearly the first and the most fascinating. In the beginning, there was not the Word; there was Utopia: Utopia at the height of its powers of revelation and amazement, of promising and irresponsible invention. The Word, itself subordinated to the principle of perfectibility, struggled to impose its grammar and its force. Giddy from breathing this excessively pure air, the colonial system went on to compose the initial characters of a dangerous alphabet.

The meeting between the Americas and the Renaissance Europe that was just emerging from the Middle Ages was more than enough to breathe new life into the idea of utopia. Promised lands lent themselves to the unfolding of millenary prophecies and were destined for utopian consecration. But the relentless utopian credo, for all its bases in flights of the imagination, was also fed by concrete interests. Its élan was not devoid of economic, religious and political incentives. Utopia was not only an engine of history, shaping the world in unforeseen ways, it was also a powerful narcotic, dutifully feeding our complacency.

There is something prematurely triumphant about the utopian doctrine that won us over and maintains, to this day, a hold over our imagination, however much we tend to attenuate our discourses with timid reservations. Carlos Fuentes' words are most evocative: 'the illusion of the Renaissance persisted, despite all that argued for its denial, becoming a constant in Spanish-American desire and thought. We were founded by utopia; utopia is our destiny'.¹ I would deem this voyage a reckless one, for it is clearly driven by fate. And if not carefully shielded from the type of consecration that thrives in times of majesty and grandeur, the notion of fate is a recipe for historical delusions.

Utopia is a pretext for procrastination, for a future forever deferred, for a present avoided. In utopia, the structure of time loses its unity. We have reached a point where we must leave aside the commemorative speeches and begin to assess the adverse effects of utopia. Utopia goes astray when it puts off needed appraisals of the present, preferring to focus on archaic antagonisms. And that is when it becomes hardest to resist the temptation to return to the paradise of full and stable paradigms.

Fascination for utopia, in the case of Brazil, has in no small way led to the continuous adjournment of well-timed political endeavours. The sleepy and belated giant has all too often succumbed to the siren song of utopia. The credit of utopia has hence worn itself out in the current accounts of our history. But on the other hand, the negativism that devotes itself to unyielding exercises in antagonism is entirely bereft of autonomy to fly. It comes to be an attitude of dependence, living solely off

the verbal surplus of the very nucleus that it opposes. Caught up in these push-pull factors, utopia, or at least its southern representation, settles for a certain conformism. Utopia becomes an endorsement of idleness.

Another interpretation that comes to mind, for all its nostalgic overtones, would admit that pretensions to totality, be they armed or disarmed, have led nowhere. It would strive to rebuild the lost unity, cohesion and, no doubt, totality.

But Latin America, as it projects itself into the 21st century, still does not know what to make of this maybe intimate, apparently empathetic notion which once conveyed so much peace and tranquility – utopia.

It has been constantly repeated that our America was born under the sign of utopia, and that thus it has remained, trapped and comfortable – at least in the case of Brazil – and cultivating 'divine promises of hope'. Our more or less devoted advocates have rarely spared words of praise for this supposedly soothing utopian vocation. They could hardly admit, in those inaugural instants, that the danger of insular utopias lay not in the fascination exerted by such paradisiacal islands, but in the glorification of insularity. The supposition was that individual happiness could do without sharing. It took time for a reasonable distinction between the possible utopia and the impossible chimera to develop. Some prefer to believe, with quite plausible arguments on their side, that this line of demarcation was never clearly established. Others, of course, are more optimistic.

One opportunely provocative question that continues to stump Latin America is: how can it rebuild itself without resorting to its congenital utopianism? We hardly know what to make of these ill-defined spoils of utopia that we hold in our hands. Are they a war trophy or a Trojan horse? How can we manage this protected heritage, how can we come to grips with this legacy, without embarking on a critique and an auto-critique of utopia?

And then there are those who prefer to do without utopia, and try to live the possible life, in the rubble of modernity's final collapse. As the virtuous hero, who previously held centre stage, gradually gave way to the virtual protagonist on the everyday communication highways, the traditional concept of utopia lost its sense of direction and broke down. Thus shattered, split into pieces, divided into parcels, is utopia still utopia? We must admit, at any rate, that it is high time we critically revisit utopia. What we have to go on makes our task quite daunting; even if, at least in the countries of America, utopia's legacy is not so Faustian.

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We can hardly be content with reinventing utopia by resorting to the imagination. That would be no more than proceeding, repeating, without moving on. What we must do is recognize, describe, perhaps evaluate the widespread disappointments and the fortuitous breaks in what has been a long, beleaguered process. Utopia is not one to lay down its weapons. It leaves us with a legacy that is more or less amended. And, still, it leaves us with an uncertain hope – a hope nevertheless – that we might build or reconstruct this legacy in light of the lessons learnt on the way and of those yet to come. The possibilities of tomorrow depend, today more than ever, on

our greater or lesser aptitude for transformation, on the vigour of our relationships, and on whatever talent we are able to perfect for peaceful coexistence.

Eduardo Portella

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

Translated from the Portuguese by Frances Albernaz

Note

1. Carlos Fuentes (1992) *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.