

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE GARDEN AS REPRESENTATION IN ECOLOGICAL UTOPIA(S)

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Relations between utopia and ecology are far from being easy. Indeed, the speeches that claim to be defenders of the central importance of the ecological and environmental issues, under the current problem of civilisation, define themselves essentially as critics of modernity. But, “utopia”, introduced as a new concept in 1516, by Thomas More, is the more intense and powerful synthesis of all magnitudes and threatening shadows of modernity.

1. Modern Utopias: Values and Criticism

It would be incorrect to consider that utopia only arose, in its substance, in the sixteenth century, through the narratives of the Portuguese fictional navigator Rafael Hitlodeu. Indeed, Thomas More, a great connoisseur of the classical heritage, imitated, in his *Utopia*, the platonic style and atmosphere, where the demand for a representation of the world as it should be, and not as it was, was clearly present. Thus, *The Republic* may well be regarded as the model of pre-modern classical utopias.

Despite More’s being less platonic than he in fact thought (see the educational place he devotes to manual work, unthinkable for a classical Athenian), the truth is that the British chancellor, and future Saint of the Catholic Church, was not yet a completely modern utopian thinker. These features will be reserved for authors like Campanella and, in particular, Francis Bacon.

What are then the main features of the genetic code of modern utopias? In a brief perspective, they can be enounced in the following manner:

- Substitution of ethics by the fusion of technology and science (Descartes and Bacon).
- Belief in the transfer of the infinite theological and/or metaphysical to the physical world: progress, exponential growth, development, mobilisation, acceleration...
- Rejection of the existence of insuperable limits by techno science in alliance with the state, the market, or with both.

As for Plato, the vehicles of demand for an ideal city were essentially of persuasive nature, involving a massive recourse to education and self-disciplined ethics, to the modern, such as Descartes and Bacon, the essential motor of change towards a longer life, comfortable, predictable and less tragic would pass by the dusk of the “speculative philosophy”, of the Second Scholastic, and by its replacement for a “useful philosophy”, resulting from the alliance between knowledge and the manipulation of Nature, between the science and technology.

Over the past three centuries, we have seen the vibrant parade of this ideological stake in the imprecise opening of the world to modulations of our technoscience. The world and the Earth appear as raw material, amorphous and unlimitedly robust, ready to be transformed by the free decision of a human demiurge. The infinite is no longer a predicate attributable only to the God creator of Christianity, or to the pure ideas of old metaphysics, being transferred to the indefinite and inexhaustible human creativity, armed by the wing of technology.

In the last century alone, between 1901 and 2001, the propulsive force of technoscience caused the human population to increase fourfold and economic wealth fortyfold. A critic of exponential modern utopianism calls attention to the fact that, despite this enormous wealth, poverty and shortages affect, even today, more than half of humanity. But any modern Doctor Pangloss, prophet and partisan of the alliance between technology and science, will promise a world increasingly better and more “infinite”, in the next hundred years.

The values of the modern utopias assume characteristics transversally large and powerful, affecting all spheres of social life. Laconically we can localise and frame these values in the following way:

- Unconditional belief in progress and its vertical hierarchy of purposes. The various modalities of “progress” are mutually exclusive and allow themselves to eliminate the pluralism, seen as an undesirable factor of delay.

- Scientism, science and technology as ideologies. The investment in science is beyond the epistemological level, becoming a true act of faith, an *a priori* inside and outside the criticism sphere. Most recently, scientism has manifested itself in a radical insanity, e.g. in the case of transhumanist authors, according to whom the current *hardware* of the human condition is an obstacle to an unlimited application of technologies, a new engineering of the human beings being urgent! It reminds one of the motto of the Hanseatic League: *navigare necesse, vivere non est necesse...*
- Idolatry of the state (and/or the market) and its competences. The modern utopias seek ‘subjects’ that mobilise and activate. Over the past two centuries there has been strong oscillation between the two strongest rivals: the state and the market.
- Ideology of the “end of history”. Time is “spaced”, is seen as a route to be implemented, as a goal to achieve. To that extent, a paradox occurs between the ‘new infinite’, inherent to the different types of modern humanism, and the imperative to realise history, of the “finite”, finally fulfilling the implicit mission in the various programmes of modernity.
- Design of politics as *conflict (Feind-Freund)*. The modern utopias require a political activism that is not compatible with commitments. Today the politics of battle, of life or death, of war between “visions of the world” (*Weltanschauungen*) prevail. The notion of politics as caution, realism and a search for consensus ceases to make any sense, as the dichotomy of Carl Schmitt, outlined above, signifies.

In the face of such a powerful axiological architecture, what we can detect, as significantly common contra-values, in the myriad of speeches related to ecology and environment, can subsume in a field which is essentially critical.

We can therefore speak of values of an ecological criticism of modernity, as well as their driving utopias, in the following way:

- Pluralism of purposes, refusal of vertical hierarchy. The pluralism of the human world, as Hannah Arendt says, derives from the fact that there are only men and not “man”. That applies to the narrative and projects of life. The horizontality of respect should replace the verticality of arrogance.
- Critique of the mismeasure of technology and technoscience. What is at stake is not a Luddite attitude of refusal of technology, but the rejection of an acephalous and uncritical vision of the risks of the technological society, as well as the founded evil of an infinitely robust vision of

the ability of nature to support our ecological sins without crisis or oscillation.

- Suspicion against the state and its present powers. The same applies to the market. As there are no ends that deserve privileged treatment to the point of eliminating all others; there are no eschatological vehicles of exclusive choice.
- Perception of the future as openness. Time is regarded as radically different to the predictability of space. The future can only be opened, and not seen in the predictability of a horizon whose contours are offered as available.
- Politics as co-operation, even if compelling. It is the inevitable response to a “modern” design of politics that was about to sacrifice the human species in a nuclear holocaust (which is, today, more latent, but has not yet been defeated or definitively excluded).

2. Landscapes of the Present Noosphere

The environmental crisis brings us to two different discursive attitudes. From its diagnosis, it is assumed as an ecological criticism of the utopian impulse. From its dominant discourse, however, with which that crisis maintains an ambiguous and uncertain relationship, it leads to an unstable, faltering and contradictory reflection.

In some situations, the speech of exponential growth, one of the versions of modern utopianism, has become a kind of frightening “double bind”. Just read what is written in the world today when it comes to the construction of new airports. Almost simultaneously, the voices of the defenders of large structures appear, taking into account the rapid expansion of the number of passengers carried over the last decade. But, right at its the side, remarks are made, ashamed, by those who draw attention to the fact that we have likely already achieved “peak oil” (which is reached at the time when more than half of all existing oil reservations have been explored), finding little cheer in the possibility of indefinitely feeding a means of transport which relies solely and exclusively on this energy source. The same semantic field also includes the official discourse that promotes air transport and, at the simultaneously seeks to combat climate change.

The official discourse about demography contains another example of the “double bind”. In the same sentence it is possible to detect information that refers to: a) the need to control the population growth, due to its environmental impact, b) drawing attention to the huge rate of youth unem-

ployment in European countries, and c) defending public policies to increase birth rates (...)

It is not surprising, therefore, that within the social groups that defend environmental concerns the visions of the future sustained in recent works do not result in ecological alternative utopias, but in real ecological dystopias:

- The interest in the societal collapse with strong environmental roots can be found in authors such as: Joseph A. Tainter, Richard Heinberg, Jared Diamond, John Michael Greer².
- The proposal that the terrestrial ecosystem ('Gaia') 'reacts catastrophically to accumulated human aggressions through climate changes is reflected in James Lovelock³.
- The theory that the inevitable disappearance of oil in the coming decades will generate a new Middle Ages, a period of 'Long Emergency', is the central theme, among others, of James Howard Kunstler⁴.
- The assumption that humanity may have exhausted its ability to provide adequate responses to the vastness of the global crisis, appears clearly on the thesis of the 'failure of ingenuity', advanced by Thomas Homer-Dixon⁵.

3. The Garden as a Metaphor of an Alternative Modernity?

It is public knowledge that the ecological criticism is not limited to denouncing the evil founded in modern utopias which has a strong technoscientific accent. Sustainable development, today's canonical vision of the ideal future for environmentalists, became popular in the political *mainstream*, as a result of the Brundtland Report, released in 1987. There are, however, several problems. This concept presents a huge difficulty. It is too Hegelian, too dialectical, and even contradictory, to be understood nowadays. It must be explained and commented on in its details and complexities.

Moreover, "sustainable development" is a concept that aims to describe and characterise a political, economic and social process of transformation and change. It is a formula absolutely anti-utopian, in the sense that, in the first approximation, it is neutral from the imagistic point of view. On the contrary, when we think of modern utopias, our thoughts immediately turn to the vision of the Island of Bensalem, to the *New Atlantis* of Francis Bacon, with its House of Solomon, the first scientific academy in the world, and the first outline of technocracy invented by the

human mind. It is difficult to conceive the meaning of “sustainable development”. Our emotions become silent; our sensitivity has no representation in space and time (even imaginary) as support.

Are we doomed not to have any representation of what could be designated as ecological utopia? Is it that sustainable development does not allow us to open any door to the field of the symbolic, of the iconographic? I think the answer is not necessarily negative, if we read between the lines of the very modernity, if we look to Holzwege, to use an expression by Heidegger, if we go through attempted or poorly explored paths.

It is in this line that we come to the figure of the garden as a possible representation for an ecological utopia, for a figuration of a sustainable society, which at the moment, we can only see through a great feat of imagination.

The first contribution to this elevation of the garden to the status of icon of the ecological utopia can be selected from Voltaire. In 1759, in his work *Candide*, in the period of intellectual turning of European culture, still under the influence of the state of shock produced by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, Voltaire ended his story with these familiar words: “We must cultivate our garden” (“Il faut cultiver notre jardin”). With that, Voltaire recovered the dusk of a long tradition of metaphysical speculation, of which the theodicy of Leibniz and the optimism of Alexander Pope had been the last representatives.

Henceforth, the remedy to the tragedy of the human condition would have to be sought in the immensity of history, in space and time, and not through a rational reconciliation of our mind with the designs of a transcendent Providence. Humanity would need to ally with nature through hard work, transforming the world into a garden. Well, here we see the combination of two elements that will have a different success in the selective process of modernity. The transfer of *Jenseits*, from the “beyond” to the “here and now”, defined as the field built by the collective and historical effort of mankind, became a genetic trait, absolutely inevitable, of the modern authors, from Voltaire to Hegel and Marx, from Comte to Feuerbach and Nietzsche. The same cannot be said, however, of the figure of the garden, and the idea of an alliance with nature. Those elements of the speech of Voltaire would ultimately become residuals and peripherals, in view of the advent of the paradigm of domination of technology, which would silence the voices that, cautiously, proposed an “alliance” as an alternative to “exploitation” and “domination” of and in nature.

One of the most illustrious, albeit unconscious, followers of Voltaire was Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States of America. Against the mainstream of

his epoch, he always criticised the dangers to liberty and customs of a society dominated by industry and urbanisation. He kept faithful, until the end of his life, to what can be designated as a pastoral ideal:

“Those who labour on the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people (...). While we have land to labour (...) let our workshops remain in Europe.”⁶

4. The Garden as a Possible Future

The theory that gardens can be presented as an imagistic anticipation of the future may be found in the work of different authors. This is the case with Massimo Ferriolo, for whom gardens play a dual role as projects of memory and future⁷. Or, present themselves as an “ethical and aesthetic design of the good and beautiful place” (“progetto etico ed estetico del bel luogo buono”⁸). The garden can even be interpreted, as a foundation of the world, almost as a “divine” act, certainly close to the figure of the demiurge: “He who draws a garden acts as a God or a demiurge, he turns the cases into cosmos” (“Celui qui dessine un jardin joue comme un dieu ou un démiurge, il transforme le cahos en cosmos”⁹).

But nobody has gone as far as Rosario Assunto in the relationship between the conceptualisation of the garden and criticism of modern, urban, industrial, technologically violent, and temporally unsustainable society. Thus, the Garden of Eden would not be much of a concept to study archeologically, but a proto-image of an alternative future, the civilisation metaphor of a mankind that has been able to win “technology”, which reduces the holy trinity of beautiful/good/true to the pure functionality of the useful, moreover in an insecure and ephemeral way (...)

For Assunto, the essence of the garden, as project of civilisation meets a triple conjunction, which we can integrate without difficulty into an economy semantic of the utopian:

- Balance between the useful and the beautiful.
- Harmony between the productivity of man and fecundity of nature.
- Balance between the garden and field, in a landscape of connections and exchanges.

In the same line of “sustainable” joints and harmonies, we can find the long study of Aurora Carapinha dedicated to the particularities of the “Portuguese Garden”. Here we can find the utopian dimension of the picture of the garden:

“À paisagem normalizada, monofuncional e sectorialmente organizada, corresponde um traçado de jardim regular, onde recreio e produção são mundos separados (...) A conciliação entre produção e recreio no jardim português é um facto, um determinismo natural (...)”¹⁰

Finally, in a brief summary, we identify what the image of the garden should not be, and what it should be, to act as a representation of ecological utopia of a sustainable society.

The garden should not be designed:

- As a *wilderness*, or *Selva oscura* (to use the term of Dante), as if humans could be disinterested spectators of an independent nature, and largely threatening.
- As a Garden of Versailles (model of decoupling), as if nature could be reduced to a mere background, to a natural capital, replaceable by artificial capital.

Instead, the garden should be and represent:

- An economy of communication, of the opening to a wider world than that which is permanently maintained by human labour and that should be a result of this.
- A work and a production of life and its reproduction that respects the *sources* that exist in the *resources*, always aiming for its regeneration and renewal, instead of its destructive consumption¹¹.
- A *habitat* of solidarity-building, establishing justice in space, but also in time, between the living and those not yet born¹².
- The fullness of life as a condition and a limit of the technological fullness, in contrast to the unsustainable vertigo of technological supremacy¹³.

Notes

1. University of Lisbon.

2. Joseph A. Tainter, 1988; Richard Heinberg, *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2003); Richard Heinberg, *Powerdown. Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World* (Forest Row: Clairview, 2004). Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004); John Michael Greer, 2005.

3. James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia. Why the Earth is Fighting Back – and How We Can Still Save Humanity* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

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4. James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency – Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Grove/Atlantic Inc., 2005).
 5. Thomas Homer-Dixon.
 6. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia (1785)*, Query XIX, 678-679.
 7. Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, *Giardano e Paesaggio dei Romantici* (Milan, Edizioni Guerini e Associati, 1998), 169.
 8. Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, *Etiche del Paesaggio. Il Progetto del Mondo Umano* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2003), 164.
 9. Michel Baridon, *Les Jardins. Paysagistes-Jardiniers-Poètes* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 2002), 19.
 10. Aurora da Conceição Parreira Carapinha “Da Essência do Jardim Português,” vol. I, (PhD diss. University of Évora, Évora, copied text, 1995), 368.
 11. Holmes Rolston III, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
 12. Jean-Marie Pelt, *Solidariedade nas Plantas, nos Animais, nos Humanos*, trans. Fernando Marques (Lisbon: Mareantes Editora, 2005), 136.
 13. Hermínio Martins, “Catastrofismo e plenitude. Para uma sociologia das calamidades revista e ampliada”, *Episteme*, Ano II (Setembro de 1999-Fevereiro de 2000): 31-68.