PART I

# History

# I

FÁTIMA VIEIRA

# The concept of utopia

## Utopia: the word and the concept

The study of the concept of utopia can certainly not be reduced to the history of the word coined by Thomas More in 1516 to baptize the island described in his book. However, a careful consideration of the circumstances in which the word was generated can lead us to a better understanding of what More meant by the word as well as of the new meanings it has acquired since then.

It must be remembered that in 1516 the word utopia was a neologism. Neologisms correspond to the need to name what is new. By revealing the changes that the shared values of a given group undergo, the study of neologisms provides us not only with a dynamic portrait of a particular society over the ages but also with a representation of that society in a given period. There are basically three kinds of neologisms: they may be new words created to name new concepts or to synthesize pre-existing ones (lexical neologisms); they may be pre-existing words used in a new cultural context (semantic neologisms); or they may be variations of other words (derivation neologisms).[1]

Utopia, as a neologism, is an interesting case: it began its life as a lexical neologism, but over the centuries, after the process of deneologization, its meaning changed many times, and it has been adopted by authors and researchers from different fields of study, with divergent interests and conflicting aims. Its history can be seen as a collection of moments when a clear semantic renewal of the word occurred. The word utopia has itself often been used as the root for the formation of new words. These include words such as eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, alotopia, euchronia, heterotopia, ecotopia and hyperutopia, which are, in fact, derivation neologisms. And with the creation of every new associated word the concept of utopia took on a more precise meaning. It is important, thus, to distinguish the original meaning attributed to the word by Thomas More from the different meanings that various epochs and currents of thought have accredited to it.

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The problem is that the first meaning of utopia is by no means obvious. More used the word both to name the unknown island described by the Portuguese sailor Raphael Hythloday, and as a title for his book. This situation resulted in the emergence of two different meanings of utopia, which became clearer as the process of deneologization occurred. In fact, though the word utopia came into being to allude to imaginary paradisiacal places, it has also been used to refer to a particular kind of narrative, which became known as utopian literature. This was a new literary form, and its novelty certainly justified the need for a neologism.

It is interesting to note that before coining the word utopia, More used another one to name his imaginary island: Nusquama. Nusquam is the Latin word for 'nowhere', 'in no place', 'on no occasion', and so if More had published his book with that title, and if he had called his imagined island Nusquama, he would simply be denying the possibility of the existence of such a place. But More wanted to convey a new idea, a new feeling that would give voice to the new currents of thought that were then arising in Europe. More's idea of utopia is, in fact, the product of the Renaissance, a period when the ancient world (namely Greece and Rome) was considered the peak of mankind's intellectual achievement, and taken as a model by Europeans; but it was also the result of a humanist logic, based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future. Out of the ruins of the medieval social order, a confidence in the human being's capacity emerged – not yet a capacity to reach a state of human perfection (which would be impossible within a Christian worldview, as the idea of the Fall still persisted), but at least an ability to arrange society differently in order to ensure peace. This broadening of mental horizons was certainly influenced by the unprecedented expansion of geographical horizons. More wrote his *Utopia* inspired by the letters in which Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus and Angelo Poliziano described the discovery of new worlds and new peoples; geographical expansion inevitably implied the discovery of the *Other*. And More used the emerging awareness of otherness to legitimize the invention of other spaces, with other people and different forms of organization.[2] This, too, was new, and required a new word. In order to create his neologism, More resorted to two Greek words – *ouk* (that means not and was reduced to *u*) and *topos* (place), to which he added the suffix *ia,* indicating a place. Etymologically, utopia is thus a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial.

But, to complicate things further, More invented another neologism, which was published in the first edition of his seminal work. This second neologism derives from the first, in its composition, and is to be found in

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the poem published at the end of *Utopia* which is presented as having been written by the poet laureate Anemolius, nephew to Hythloday on his sister's side. In the six verses that constitute the poem, the island of Utopia speaks and states its three main characteristics: (1) it is isolated, set apart from the known world; (2) it rivals Plato's city, and believes itself to be superior to it, since that which in Plato's city is only sketched, in Utopia is presented as having been achieved; (3) its inhabitants and its laws are so wonderful that it should be called *Eutopia* (the good place) instead of Utopia.

By creating two neologisms which are so close in their composition and meaning – a lexical neologism (utopia) and a derivation neologism (eutopia) – More created a tension that has persisted over time and has been the basis for the perennial duality of meaning of utopia as the place that is simultaneously a non-place (utopia) and a good place (eutopia). This tension is further stressed by the self-description provided by Utopia in the poem: Utopia, the isolated place (where no one goes because it is a non-place) is also the place where we will not find sketches but plans that have been put into practice. As Utopia and Eutopia are pronounced in precisely the same way, this tension can never be eliminated. Again, this is an aspect which is completely new, and which justifies the need for a neologism. We are, in fact, very far away from *Nusquama*.

### Utopia: the concept and the word

In the above mentioned poem, the island of Utopia points out its affiliation to Plato's city; the quality of this attachment is clearly defined: both Plato and More imagined alternative ways of organizing society. What is common to both authors, then, is the fact that they resorted to fiction to discuss other options. They differed, however, in the way they presented that fiction; and it could not have been otherwise, as More created the word utopia because he needed to designate something new, which included the narrative scheme he invented. In spite of that, the word is used nowadays to refer to texts that were written before More's time, as well as to allude to a tradition of thought that is founded on the consideration, by means of fantasy, of alternative solutions to reality. This is in fact an odd situation: normally, neologisms are used to designate new phenomena. Still, utopia seems to be of an anamnestic nature (i.e., the word refers to a kind of pre-history of the concept); this situation can easily be understood, as More did not work on a *tabula rasa*, but on a tradition of thought that goes back to ancient Greece and is nourished by the myth of the Golden Age, among other mythical and religious archetypes, and traverses the Middle Ages, having been influenced by the promise of a happy afterlife, as well as by the myth of Cockaygne (a

land of plenty). It is thus certain that although he invented the word utopia, More did not invent utopianism, which has at its core the desire for a better life; but he certainly changed the way this desire was to be expressed. In fact, More made a connection between the classic and the Christian traditions, and added to it a new conception of the role individuals are to play during their lifetime.

Apart from this aspiration to better life, More's concept of utopia therefore differs from all the previous crystallizations of the utopian desire; these can in fact be seen as pre-figurations of utopia, as they lack the tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfilment. Although they are part of the background of the concept of utopia, Plato's *Republic*, and St Augustine's *The City of God* differ from More's *Utopia*, as Plato does not go beyond mere speculation about the best organization of a city, and St Augustine projects his ideal into the afterlife (thus creating not a utopia but an *alotopia*).

The concept of utopia is no doubt an attribute of modern thought, and one of its most visible consequences. Having at its origin a paradox that does not really require to be solved (caused by the tension described above), from the very beginning of its history it showed a facility for acquiring new meanings, for serving new interests, and for crystallizing into new formats. Because of its dispersion into several directions, it has sometimes become so close to other literary genres or currents of thought that it has risked losing its own identity. Its diffuse nature has been at the basis of debate among researchers in the field of Utopian Studies, who have found it difficult to reach a consensual definition of the concept.

Historically, the concept of utopia has been defined with regard to one of four characteristics:[3] (1) the content of the imagined society (i.e., the identification of that society with the idea of 'good place', a notion that should be discarded since it is based on a subjective conception of what is or is not desirable, and envisages utopia as being essentially in opposition to the prevailing ideology); (2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized (which is a very limiting way of defining utopia, since it excludes a considerable number of texts that are clearly utopian in perspective but that do not rigorously comply with the narrative model established by More); (3) the function of utopia (i.e., the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action (a definition that should be rejected as it takes into account political utopia only); (4) the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude). This latter characteristic is no doubt the most important one, as it allows for the inclusion within the framework of utopia of a wide range of texts informed by what Ernst Bloch

considered to be the principal energy of utopia: hope. Utopia is then to be seen as a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives.[4]

## Utopia as a literary genre

By opting for a more inclusive definition of utopia, we are not disregarding the merits and particulars of utopia as a literary genre, but recognizing the literary form as just one of the possible manifestations of utopian thought.[5] More established the basis for the steady development of a literary tradition which flourished particularly in England, Italy, France and the United States, and which relies on a more or less rigid narrative structure: it normally pictures the journey (by sea, land or air) of a man or woman to an unknown place (an island, a country or a continent); once there, the utopian traveller is usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its social, political, economic and religious organization; this journey typically implies the return of the utopian traveller to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society.[6] Although the idea of utopia should not be confused with the idea of perfection, one of its most recognizable traits is its speculative discourse on a non-existent social organization which is better than the real society.[7] Another characteristic is that it is human-centred, not relying on chance or on the intervention of external, divine forces in order to impose order on society. Utopian societies are built by human beings and are meant for them. And it is because utopists very often distrust individuals' capacity to live together, that we very frequently find a rigid set of laws at the heart of utopian societies – rules that force the individuals to repress their unreliable and unstable nature and put on a more convenient social cloak.

In order to create the new literary genre, More used the conventions of travel literature and adapted them to his aims. Over the centuries, utopia as a literary genre has been influenced by similar genres, such as the novel, the journal and science fiction. In fact, it became so close to the latter genre that it has been often confused with it. At the advent of science fiction, it was not difficult to distinguish it from literary utopia, as the former made a clear investment in the imagination of a fantastic world brought about by scientific and technological progress, taking us on a journey to faraway planets, while the latter stayed focused on the description of the alternative ways of organizing the imagined societies. Still, in recent decades, science fiction has been permeated by social concerns, displaying a clear commitment

to politics; this situation has given rise to endless debates on the links that bind the two literary genres: researchers in the field of Utopian Studies have claimed that science fiction is subordinate to utopia, as the latter was born first, whereas those who have devoted their study time to science fiction maintain that utopia is but a socio-political sub-genre.

One of the main features of utopia as a literary genre is its relationship with reality. Utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved. Quite often, the imagined society is the opposite of the real one, a kind of inverted image of it. It should not be taken, though, as a feeble echo of the real world; utopias are by essence dynamic, and in spite of the fact that they are born out of a given set of circumstances, their scope of action is not limited to a criticism of the present; indeed, utopias put forward projective ideas that are to be adopted by future audiences, which may cause real changes.

The fact that the utopian traveller departs from a real place, visits an imagined place and goes back home, situates utopia at the boundary between reality and fiction. This fiction is in fact important, not as an end in itself, but as a privileged means to convey a potentially subversive message, but in such a way that the utopist cannot be criticized. In this sense, utopia, as a literary genre, is part of clandestine literature. Anchored in a real society, the utopist puts forward plausible alternatives, basing them on meticulous analysis and evaluation of different cultures. But although literary utopias are serious in their intent, they may well incorporate amusing and entertaining moments, provided they do not smother the didactic discourse. Utopia is, in fact, a game, and implies the celebration of a kind of pact between the utopist and the reader: the utopist addresses the reader to tell him about a society that does not exist, and the reader acts as if he believes the author, even if he is aware of the non-existence of such a society. Still, the reader's notion of reality cannot be pushed too far as otherwise he will refuse to act as if he believed the author. In fact, the fiction cannot defy logic, and the passage from the real to the fictional world has to be gradual. This passage can be softened by the introduction, into the imagined world, of objects and structures that already exist in the real world, but which now have a different or even opposite function. Out of this situation, satire is inevitably born, as conspicuous criticism of the real society's flaws is part of the nature of the genre. When satire is not confined to real society, and is aimed at the imagined society, when the satirical tone becomes dominant and supersedes pedagogy, satire ceases to be a means and becomes an end – and we are then pushed out of the realm of utopian literature.

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### From space to time: euchronia

By inviting us to take a journey to an imagined better place, literary utopia gives rise to a rupture with the real place. This topographical rupture engenders a break of another different kind, a fracture between the history of the real place and that of the imagined society. In fact, at the onset of literary utopianism, we can but find static, ahistorical utopias. Such utopias reject their past (faced as anti-utopian), offer a frozen image of the present, and eliminate the idea of a future from their horizon: there is no progress after the ideal society has been established. There is a reason for this situation: the imagined society is put forward as a model to be followed, and models are frozen images that don't allow for historical change after they have been instituted. The relationship between these utopias and the future is indeed problematic, since the model is offered as a term of comparison with real society, i.e., it is used by the utopist to criticize the present and not to open new paths to the future. In fact, we can say that the concept of time, as we know it, has been banished from these utopias.

In order to understand the nature of this temporal rupture, we have to distinguish the concept of time from its correlates. To St Augustine time is successive; eternity exists simultaneously, being deprived of an anteriority and a posteriority; and perpetuity has a beginning but no ending. So, it is true to say that it is perpetuity that we find in the utopias of the Renaissance, as the inhabitants of those imagined places have an existence, but do not envision their lives as a process of becoming. Those utopias must then be seen as a means for the expression of the utopist's wishes, not of his hope. Confined to remote islands or unknown places, utopian wishes fail to be materialized. Only in the last decades of the eighteenth century are utopias to be placed in the future; and only then does the utopian wish give place to hope.

The projection of the utopian wishes into the future implied a change in the very nature of utopia – and thus a derivation neologism was born. From eu/utopia, the good/non-place, we move to euchronia, the good place in the future. The birth of euchronia was due to a change of mentality, presided over by the optimistic worldview that prevailed in Europe in the Enlightenment. In the Renaissance, man discovered that there were alternative options to the society he lived in, became aware of the infinite powers of reason and understood that the construction of the future was in his hands. In the Enlightenment, man discovered that reason could enable him not only to have a happy life, but also to reach human perfection. More's *Utopia* is the result of the discovery that occurred in the Renaissance; euchronia is the product of the new logic of the Enlightenment.

These discoveries of the Enlightenment were stimulated by another revolution that took place in the field of science. In fact, it was the development of the sciences (in general, and more specifically in the fields of geology and biology) that prepared man to outline new perspectives of the world and of himself. During the Enlightenment, by transferring scientific conclusions to the purely intellectual field, man grounded his optimistic worldview on a global theory of evolution, thus reaching relevant conclusions not only regarding the splendour that would await him in the future, but also regarding the social organization and the economic order of the society he lived in.

The theories of progress that pervaded European thought in the eighteenth century were born in France, a politically unsubmissive country, which was preparing its revolution. Describing the logic of progress in his lectures at the Sorbonne in 1750, Anne-Robert Turgot associated the idea of the inevitability of progress with the idea of infinite human perfectibility. And later in the century, in 1795, in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, the Marquis de Condorcet added to this belief the idea that man has an important role to play in the process. According to Condorcet, progress was already being ensured by history; still, by resorting to science, man would be able to accelerate this improvement.

Inspired by the feeling of trust that characterized the Enlightenment, in 1771 the French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier published the first euchronia, *L'An 2440: Un rêve s'il en fut jamais* (translated into English as *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*).[8] By favouring the notion of time and offering a vision of a future of happiness, euchronia acquired a historical dimension. History was now envisaged as a process of infinite improvement, and utopia, in the spirit of euchronia, was presented as a synchronic representation of one of the rings in the chain of progress. By this process, the imagined society came closer to the historical reality the utopist experienced. By projecting the ideal society in the future, the utopian discourse enunciated a logic of causalities that presupposed that certain actions (namely those of a political nature) might afford the changes that were necessary in order to make the imagined society come true. In this way, utopias became dynamic, and promoted the idea that man had a role to fulfil.

Inherent in this projection of utopia into the future, and aiding the process of convergence of the utopian discourse with the historical reality, was a change at the spatial level, at which Mercier's utopia operated: it no longer made sense, at a time when the utopist believed that his ideals could be rendered concrete with the help of time, to place the imaginary society on a remote island or in an unknown, inaccessible place. Man's trust in his intellectual capacities was thus stretched to the social possibilities of his

country, and it was there that utopia was now to be located. Furthermore, as historical progress was believed to be inevitable, it affected not only the utopist's country, but all nations. The utopian project thus took on a universal dimension.

In France, the turning of utopian discourse towards the future took place in the second half of the eighteenth century, but in England this idea of infinite progress was only to be found among the intellectual elite, with strong connections to French theorization. In fact, this philosophy only took the shape of a popular ideology in England in the nineteenth century, associated with the benefits that were reserved to the nation by the process of industrialization. The optimistic logic that at the end of the eighteenth century led French utopists to the conception of an imaginary ideal society located in the future was thus not shared by the British utopists; and here lies the explanation for the fact that, for a whole century, euchronias were exclusively French.

Although intellectually linked to French optimism, the British idea of progress has a story of its own, and is deeply rooted in British intellectual thought. We can find these roots, with some variants, in the writings of men such as Shaftesbury, Locke and Hume. And it was certainly this optimism that Pope and Swift criticized at the beginning of the British eighteenth century, giving way to a whole set of satirical utopias that made the reader disregard the idea of a perfect future. Indeed, the aim of these texts was to satirize the present through the criticism of an imagined society, and the result of this situation was that the constructive, positive spirit that should preside in utopian texts was in fact lost. It is true that in the utopias of the British Enlightenment we can still find a few examples of the Renaissance aim of suggesting serious alternatives to real society.[9] However, with very few exceptions, these utopias were still based on the idea that only law would ensure social order, thus conveying a negative vision of man; in fact, it can be said that the prevailing tone of the eighteenth-century utopia was satirical, and so more destructive than constructive.

But although British literary utopias only revealed the influence of euchronic belief towards the end of the nineteenth century, this belief was incorporated into political and philosophic essays of the last decades of the eighteenth century and of the whole nineteenth century. The reception of the French and the American revolutions in England undoubtedly played a very important role in this process. The announcement, by Thomas Paine, that his generation would 'appear to the future as the Adam of a new world' (*Rights of Man*, Part II, 1792), actually corresponded to his belief in a renovation of the natural order of things and his conviction that a system combining moral with political happiness would ensure a magnificent future.[10] Through the