

FROM UTOPISTS TO «GEO-UTOPISTS»: (IM)POSSIBLE ROADS TO FINALITY?

1. From Utopists to Geo-Utopists

In 1911, the Vienesse librarian L. Hevesi counted as many as 1150 titles of books and texts on «Utopia». This is clearly a large number, although there should have been more, which were not included in that list. Today however, the number must certainly be a lot higher, although none would be able to tell exactly how much.

This is because Utopia is a recurrent theme in human individual and collective consciousness. Besides, «Social Sciences are also involved in envisaging better possible futures in terms of concrete utopias» (Patomäki, 2006). It is probably true, that there is not a single person on the face of the earth, who has not dreamt of a different world, relieved from injustice, misery and aggression. This said, it is rather surprising that L. Hevesi counted so few books and texts.

From the approaches to Utopian ideals, it can be seen that the roads to Utopia are manifold: philosophical, religious, socio-political (Plato's, J. Valentin, Andreae's, Bacon's, More's, Campanella's and Owen's), or even purely fictitious, e.g. Artus', Harrington's. Hence, the boundaries between a classification of some proposed Utopia as e.g. a «religious» or a «scientific» Utopia can be fuzzy, as shown by McKnight (2007), with his study on Bacon's Utopia.

Yet, the scientific literature hitherto available suggests that we need to focus on the significance of another aspect of Utopia, which, to date, has not apparently attracted the attention of researchers to the extent it deserves. This is the aspect of geographic space. In fact, there is a practical reason for focusing on the spatial aspects of Utopias, this being the actual and ever insatiable quest for well-ordained geographical space satisfying the needs of the modern man.

Hence, this study proposes the new term «Geo-Utopists», to denote those thinkers, who think of better places (be they urban or rural areas) for their fellow citizens or for the mankind in its entirety. Geo-Utopists focus on the geographic space, although they are also concerned with social, political, religious and philosophical aspects of Utopia (aspects with which were mostly concerned the classic Utopists). Geo-Utopists primarily imagine of alternative geographical spaces, where humans would live better (in a Utopia) or worse (in a Dystopia).

Many Geo-Utopists have been geographers, planners and architects, but not all these professionals are Geo-Utopists. This is because for such a professional to be a Geo-Utopist, he/she should have a powerful vision of a *spatially* alternative world. Other professionals may also have such a vision, and this makes them Geo-Utopists as well (i.e. Hausmann).

2. A Geographical explanation of Geo-Utopias

The 18th and 19th centuries held back a surprise for utopian thinking. For first time

ever, Utopia was no longer simply the product of wishful thinking and unrealisable ideals. It gradually became worldly, achievable, reachable and realisable through the works of Architects, Geographers and Planners of that time, who had a theory and a vision of how large geographical areas should be ordained, so their populations would enjoy higher living standards. These centuries made a difference for Europe. With the European empires at their highest, with imperialism, colonialism and exploitation of dependent territories making the metropolises thriving, many European thinkers, leaders, politicians, engineers, scientists, laid out plans to improve the condition of their environment, towns and countryside.

Baron C. Hausmann for instance, transformed a miserable and filthy city that Paris was until then, into an entirely new town, the astonishingly beautiful and well-ordained town that we all admire and cherish nowadays. Hence, more cities longed for their own «Hausmannisation». The effect of industrialisation and the spread of mechanisation have further broadened the range of human impacts on nature, more than has ever been thought of before. Later, it was in Paris again, where Eiffel built his tower (initially despised by Parisians) and transformed another part of the heart of the city into a space of pure modernity.

Modernity thus gradually became a synonym of a better and more convenient lifestyle. This makes us wonder: How far could a convenient life for all be from a real Utopia? It thus comes as no surprise, that probably the most significant Utopists of the 18th and 19th centuries in this context were French, both known and unknown. Take, for instance, the Anonymous author of «Uchronie-Esquisse Historique Apocryphe du Developpement de la Civilization Européenne, tel qu' il n'a pas été, tel qu' il aurait pu être».

As France had its *urban* Geo-Utopists in the late 19th century however, so Great Britain had its own *rural* Geo-Utopists. Since England was the world's pivot in industrialisation at that time, polluted industrial areas and urban sprawls with low quality of life, had already made several thinkers debate the advantages of the industrial age. They imagined how could life possibly be in unspoilt rural landscapes, rid of human civilization. Again, much like the urban Geo-Utopists did for towns, the rural Geo-Utopists (such as Howard and Morris), thought of spaces in the countryside, which would allow people to live in a healthy and environmentally sustainable manner.

Geo-Utopism maintains its dynamics well into the first decade of the 21st century, albeit with unexpected twists. Edge cities, gated communities, fashionable gentrified enclaves, idyllic rural or urban landscapes designed to ensure some peculiar lifestyle fantasies, «yuppie utopias» (Garreau, 1991; MacLeod & Ward, 2002) and other «privatopias» are now spreading the world over. These are often found within short distances from Dystopic hyperghettos and derelict sites. In this sense, the construction by Prince Charles of Britain of the urban village Poundbury in Dorset lastly might appear as an attempt to reverse the current trend in Geo-Utopias, by reviving the traditional English urban neighbourhoods and settlements.

Either way, whether there are Geo-Utopias or Geo-Dystopias, eutopias or dyschronias, there lies ahead a dimly lit avenue, promising and threatening at the same time, connecting the Utopists of the past with those of the modern times. As yet, none knows how to walk on this avenue.

But we do know that, as measurements show, people in the world's biggest cities really walk ten percent faster than they did ten years ago. Further, all those practices of our «accelerated» ways of life (zapping, consuming fast food, speed-dating etc.) have created a new «species», «Homo freneticus», as Salle (2007) points out.

Thus, the quest for vacations and rest, even laziness, which has assumed enormous proportions in the 21st century, reverberates Campanella's Utopist idea (expressed 405 years ago) of no more than four hours work daily. To satisfy this need, «private paradises» to be rent or sold, abound more than ever. These «paradises» are certainly Geo-oriented in that their idyllic locations count more than the political, social or religious setting they may be in.

So, are Utopias going to be only Geo-Utopias in the future? And are they going to be available only to the rich and famous? Are we heading towards a world of sharp differences between Utopias-on-earth and Dystopias-on-earth? How much would it cost to *buy* a «Eutopia» after ten years? Do these questions stem from our ever-widening deviation from the initial ideas of Plato, More and other Utopists' original ideas?

3. Conclusion

Utopists' ideas were examined here from the point of view of Geography. This is not the only way to consider Utopia and Utopism. The present study focused on the attempts of various Geo-Utopists to consider Utopias in the real world, by means of regional and countryside planning (urban and rural Geo-Utopias).

It is thus suggested, that when conventional (socio-political) Utopist thinking is rendered into Geo-Utopist action, then at least *some* of the Utopist ideals stand good chances of being materialised in the real world. This has probably happened in Paris in the past and it might as well happen again, at any place. Because, as this study has attempted to show, beyond focusing on the spatial aspects of Utopias, another common road connecting Geo-Utopists is their strong belief, that their utopian ideals could be feasible and applicable in the real world. To date, examples of such successful realisations can be seen in a rather wide variety of ideological, political, social and religious environments, all over the world. Hence, given the centrality of space to the narratives of Geo-Utopists, we should keep exploring ways, by which «our» geographic spaces will be used in ways that will effectively contribute to make our world a better place to live in.

In 1978, the journal «Le Magazine Littéraire» had a major article on «La Fin des Utopies». The same journal, in 2000, had another major article on «La Renaissance de l'Utopie». Whether they are possible or impossible roads to Finality, some ideas of Utopias will always persist in the human mind, so long as there are Utopists. And there will always exist Utopists, so long as there are thinkers and philosophers, who are able to visualise a better world. Ever since Plato's thinking of Utopia, this anointed better world is yet to come.

References

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F. PAPADIMITRIOU
(Athens)