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What can utopia do for us?

Rodrigo Toniol

In his book 'Lumières de l'utopie,' published in 1978, the Polish historian Bronislaw Baczko presented a classification of studies dedicated to the theme of utopia along five main lines. Firstly, he discussed research approaches that deal with utopias as a literary genre, seeking to investigate their discursive strategies and narrative procedures. Secondly, those that focus on utopian thought itself, its transformations, its main themes, and ramifications as an object of reflection – a kind of utopianism. Thirdly, those that problematize the process of emergence and consolidation of specific utopian movements, a type of sociology of the utopia, which privileges the analysis of the institutions that engendered such experiences, their characteristics, and formulations. Fourthly, studies that explore the symbolic universes of utopias by placing them within broader mythological, messianic, or millenarian narratives. And finally, studies that seek to understand the relationship between utopias and historically situated political ideologies.

The classification proposed by Baczko allows him to announce his intellectual project as an attempt to overcome the confinement of utopia to a literary genre, moving in a more historiographical direction from which utopias become a fruitful thread for tracing the 'history of social dreams.' Almost two decades after Baczko's book, the French historian Jean Delumeau (1997) published 'A Thousand Years of Happiness. A History of Paradise.' In this book, Delumeau discusses how we went from a nostalgia for Eden, the lost paradise to the hope of a new earthly paradise, often secularized, which makes room for ideas of progress, rational, and planned societies.

The analytical proposals formulated by Baczko and Delumeau have different natures and consequences. However, we can bring them closer together as we recognize that both are committed to advancing toward a kind of meta-utopia. Both aim to think about utopian visions without reifying them or making them things in themselves. For my part, as an anthropologist of religion, I see utopia as a technology of imagination that allows us to think, by contrast and approximation, about the utopias of Others – such as those attributed to indigenous societies and millenarian movements – and about our utopias, in realms such as ecology, globalization, and socialism.

Raymond Trousson (1997), to whom we owe a classic book on the utopian genre, shows us that utopia has no place in the medieval world, in which spirits yearned above all for the establishment of the divine kingdom on earth or for a paradise after death, but not for an ideal society situated in a mundane and historical future. The effect of Trousson's argument is wide-ranging, starting with the recognition that utopia, this technology of imagination that is so specific and at the same time so

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widespread, has never had such a privileged place as in modernity. The utopian imaginations that emerge in modern times carry a set of characteristics that allow us, like Baczko and Delumeau, to conceive of utopia as way of thinking about imagination itself.

At the dawn of modernity, between the 16th and 17th centuries, our utopias took on very lasting characteristics. Taking as references Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, Fray Tommaso de Campanella's *City of the Sun*, published in 1613, and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, published in 1626, we can outline some of these characteristics. Firstly, the modern utopian paradigm has a particular relationship to space. In these three books, we can identify an insularity or apparent isolation of the utopian societies described. In the case of More's work, King Utopus, the city's founder, severed the isthmus connecting his lands to the mainland, thereby transforming them into an island. Great walls surround Campanella's City of the Sun. Bacon's Atlantis is an island lost in the ocean, which was only found by Europeans when a storm led them to this unknown place. This is a central characteristic since it refers not only to space but also to the founding tension of utopia: between the real and the ideal. Now, as the term itself indicates, u-topia, a topos outside the topos, is the 'non-place that doesn't happen and yet seeks its place,' as philosopher Henri Lefebvre (2008, 43) put it. Lefebvre goes on to say that there is nothing abstract or unreal about this non-place that does not yet have a place. On the contrary, it is real insofar as it constitutes a reference for different places. This is why the isolated characteristics of the utopian societies described by the books mentioned above all point to a rupture, a virtual exceptionality, inscribed on the horizon of the real.[1]

As the Brazilian architect Guilherme Wisnik (2001) has already pointed out, the sense of transformation to which the idea of utopia points indicates a 'becoming' that marks the present with a particular direction for the future. However, this is a becoming which, when constituted in the unfolding of a temporal experience, occurs in the form of a relationship of spatial disjunction: the distancing between subject and object. Etymologically, the expression coined by Thomas More in the sixteenth century refers to a project that takes place in space, founding a new place through the negation of what exists. Its root is not the Latin locus, with its static and circumscribed definition, but a hybrid based on the Greek notion of topos, whose definition is based on movement. That is why spatial utopia is also always a temporal utopia: It is about a place that does not yet have a place. However insular they may be, the utopian societies formulated in modernity, unlike representations of previous places of perfection such as Eden – static and unchanging – are constructions that can be multiplied. As Baczko said, 'Nothing prevents us from inventing new perfect communities, just as the very installation of this paradigm in the imagination incites and stimulates us to "play Utopia"' (1984, 68).

This special issue does not play 'with' utopia. In the words of its editors, the aim is to trigger a discussion around the usefulness of 'utopia' as an analytical category in the metalanguage of the study of religion's. That is, how 'utopia' could be taken as a concept that can be mobilized to compare and redescribe empirical realities in a way that is theoretically informed and heuristically fruitful (see Kirsch and Rota in this issue). This special issue is thought-provoking and readers will undoubtedly get a

[1]Following Lefebvre (2008), the virtual object of thought is a possible object; although not empirically verifiable, it is not fictitious.

renewed appreciation for the possibilities that the notion of utopia can offer to the study of religion's. In line with my proposition of utopia as a technology of imagination in modernity, the texts in this special issue promote an opening that allows us to articulate imaginations that play with past, future, and present, inscribing them in a space that is yet to be. Conceived as an analytical category in the study of religion's, we can now see utopia in events and situations that do not claim to be utopian. From this opening, for example, I can recognize experiences such as those of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a Brazilian neo-Pentecostal church active in more than 150 countries that have produced exciting shifts in time and space through the materialization of Christian Zionism. In Brazil, three milestones in this neo-Pentecostal utopian imagination have gained concreteness and reality in recent decades.

At the end of the 1990s, the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Bishop Macedo, was directly involved in creating the Nova Canaã Farm in Irecê, Bahia. The project was based on the Israeli kibbutz model, bringing together community utopia and technological solutions to overcome water shortages in Brazil. Active for more than two decades, the farm has served school-age children and teenagers and, in a way, has anticipated a trend, which would later become clearer, of recognizing the territory of Israel as a societal model to be followed across the world.

The second milestone was the inauguration in 2008 of the Jerusalem Cultural Center in the former industrial suburb of Rio de Janeiro. A 730-square-meter model, built based on archaeological work, marked the beginning of the Church's attempts to reconstruct replicas of Jerusalem's sacred sites and also to develop a narrative, presented on video, which brings the history of the Universal Church closer to the prophecies of the Old Testament.

And finally, the most impactful of the projects was the construction of the third Temple of Solomon in monumental proportions, with material coming directly from Israel, in the city of São Paulo. The construction of this Temple cemented the connection between Brazilian Pentecostalism and the world of Israel.

This symbolic conversion is visible in the dress of the pastors in some services, and in the presence and use of devotional objects such as the Ark of the Covenant and menorahs. Next door to Solomon's Temple is nothing less than the Biblical Garden, a theme park whose guided tour is led by shepherds dressed as Old Testament priests. On the tour, visitors follow the journey of the Jews led by Moses through the desert, the sacrificial rituals, and the construction and destruction of Solomon's first and second temples. At the end of the journey through the Garden, visitors come to a side door that leads to the third (and final, as in the biblical prophecy) Temple of Solomon, built by Bishop Macedo. This prophecy, like others, can also be read as a form of utopia.

The Church's perspectives were based on a form of reverse syncretism. It demonizes Afro-Brazilian religions while relying on them to highlight the qualities of neo-Pentecostal exorcism. In other words, the Universal Church brings close what it condemns (the 'demons' of Afro-Brazilian religions) precisely to demonstrate its effectiveness in getting rid of them. The Universal Church's objects of reference and aesthetic provide insight into two broader trends: the evolution of its theology and its strategic approach to other religious traditions in recent decades. In this case, the expansion of the symbolic repertoire seems to go hand in hand with the Church's territorial expansion strategy. When the national territory was the space to be evangelized, the counterpoint with

Brazilian religions of African origin guaranteed their reverberation in the national cultural broth. This reference lost strength as the Universal Church expanded its operations to several other countries. The connection with Judaism, therefore, provides a broad repertoire of references and inscribes the Church in the global history of Christianity – bypassing the entire history of Catholicism. In short, the Universal Church praises Judaism to position itself within a historically significant context. It is not without reason that, in recent years, the Universal Church has circulated a replica of the Ark of the Covenant in the countries where it is based, and where its arrival is always received as a significant event.

The second, more general theological movement is the endeavor to rebuild Solomon's Temple: The Universal Church appeals to a king rather than a prophet, drawing on the importance of these figures in the Old Testament. It chooses to refer to a political theology of domination, a theology of the Temple, and a project of territorialization of the sacred. Looking more carefully at Solomon's Temple helps us understand the reconfigurations of evangelical political activism in Brazil. Until the early 1980s, the Universal Church was defined by the widespread principle that 'believers don't participate in politics'; this was soon replaced by the motto 'brother votes for brother.' Today, politics is seen as a space for Christian action and brought inside the Temple; more than that, like in Solomon's domain, the Temple is the place from which politics is thought of. Thus, the references to Israel in the manifestations of the new Brazilian conservative wave echo the theological horizon of national neo-Pentecostalism. A fundamental element of the new politics derives from this: the emergence of a new type of messianism.

In the experience of the Universal Church, the technology of imagination, and the unusual spatial and temporal displacements of Brazilian neo-Pentecostalism stand out. Now, the third Temple of Solomon, that non-place prophetically announced in biblical times, has materialized in the Brás district, on the outskirts of a city in the Global South. There, Bishop Macedo's political project skillfully delivers a unique touristic-religious experience. It connects visitors with the Hebrews, creating a sensation of being transported to a place beyond the ordinary constraints of time and space. At the same time, the Temple of Solomon in São Paulo exerts an imaginative force over the thousands of other temples of the Universal Church. The oil that anoints the faithful throughout the country is extracted from the olive trees of the Biblical Garden using the same method as the Hebrews. Solomon's Temple is a modern and contemporary utopia, a place out of place, a place beyond all places, a nostalgic and prophetic time, an experience of the future in the present.

It's not my task to re-present the articles in this special issue. That would be equivalent to trying to produce a unity between texts that do not share a univocal perspective on what utopia is. More coherent than such a doomed-to-failure effort, I have followed the organizers' provocation and, from reading the articles, explored how utopia yields as an analytical category.

However, I want to emphasize that the seven texts in this volume can take up the traditions of utopian studies, as described by Baczko, and point in new and creative directions. Three main axes could be used to organize the reading of the articles presented here. The first would articulate two texts, Adrian Hermann's 'Futures of an Unknown World: Utopian and Dystopian Visions of Religion's in Ada Palmer's Terra Ignota Series' and Laurent Mignon's 'Back to the Future? The Place of the Religious 'Other'

in Ismail Gasprinsky's Islamic Utopia.' Both take as their source of analysis utopian imaginations that have taken shape through literature, a privileged way for moderns to exercise their imaginations of the world. A second axis would associate the articles 'A Processual Perspective on Utopia as a Lived Social Project: The Case of a Ghanaian "Christian Town,"' by Anne Beutter and E. Sasu Kwame Sewordor, 'Vernacular Utopia,' by Anja Kirsch, and 'Anything is Possible: Word of Life and Utopian Thinking during the Revolutionary Processes in Estonia, 1987–1991,' by Nele Dresen, whose sociological concerns relate to concrete utopian experiences: their morphologies, characteristics, and effects on those who imagined them and made them a lived reality. Finally, 'The Future Never Dies. A Relational Approach to Secular and Religious Entanglements of Posthuman Utopia,' by Oliver Krüger, and 'Utopias for Boomers. Religion, Psychology, and Sovereignty in the Long Sixties,' by Andrea Rota, brings up 'religious' questions of utopia that acquire scientific and projective posthuman future contours.

This special issue should be read in its entirety since its value stems from the awareness that utopia as an analytical category is good for thinking about the various ways of imagining the world, which seems to me precisely what drives the social sciences.

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