Utopian project and practices in the Auroville intentional community

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the concept of utopia to highlight its epistemological ambiguity and therefore identify the different interpretation of it within the Utopia Studies literature. The intentional community of Auroville, Tamil Nadu, India, will be taken as case study to deepen the tension between an interpretation of utopia as perfection, characterized by the definition of blueprints for the imagined space, and one that looks at the concept as a transformative and dynamic process of imagining possible alternatives. Beside the comparative, critical, prefigurative and transformative functions of utopia (Levitas, 2013), the attention given to the experimental and concrete dimension will serve as a bridge for an in-depth reflection on the emancipatory and political nature of utopian everyday practices.

Key words

Experimental utopia, everyday practices, blueprint

Introduction

The etymological ambiguity that the term utopia implies entailed the development of two main interpretative currents, as much in the social sciences as in literature: one related to the understanding of utopia as a good (*eu*) place, therefore potentially attainable even if not in present conditions - a desirable future state able to steer current action; the other related to the understanding of utopia as no (*ou*) place, unattainable state of things "[that] remains just around the corner or just over the horizon" (Sargisson, 2004, p. 3). Although it is not possible to mark a clear line between the two, according to Levitas (1990, 2007, 2013) it is the latter one that became, during time, the prevalent interpretation, beholding utopia "dismissed as an irrelevant fantasy or traduced as a malevolent nightmare leading to totalitarianism" (Levitas, 2013, p. xiii). On the contrary interpreting utopia in terms of desires and imagination of alternatives potentially reachable lead us to the challenging process that moves from imagination to action encompassing within the broad set of utopian contributes "the attempt not just to imagine, but to make the world otherwise" (*ibid*.).

This paper draws on the epistemological ambiguity that the term utopia implies: we can recognize on the one hand an interpretation that implies seeking for perfection and thus defining blueprints; while on the other utopia can be understood as a transformative and dynamic process of imagining possible alternatives which may lead to the challenging process that moves from imagination to action, to way of doing, of living and inhabiting. The first paragraph will acknowledge the critiques that utopia gathered over time in order to understand a more recent tradition that attempted a rehabilitation of the term (Bloch, 1986 [1959]; Moylan, 1986; Sargisson, 1996, 2000). Driving on the refusal of the fixed character of the utopian plan, the critical (Moylan, 1986), transgressive (Sargisson, 1996) and experimental (Lefebvre, 1961) utopias will be

explained. "Critical utopianism is a practice of simultaneous and on-going critique and creation; it is not only critical of what exists, but is explicitly self-critical and proceeds through immanent critique" (Firth, 2012, p. 16) and thus it abandons the tendency of constructing absolutes on one hand and drawing blueprint vision on the other, hence liberating space for a processual, always open, and internally multifaceted, interpretation of utopia. Acknowledging the utopian character of many intentional communities (Kanter, 1972) the second paragraph will consider the role of prefigurative utopian projects in fostering social change along with a broader consideration upon the meanings and potentials of *utopian everyday practices* (Cooper, 2016). To explore deeper the tension between the utopian project - characterized by a vision of the desirable future state more or less detailed - and the utopian attitude or tension - in terms of processes needed to reach the vision as well as everyday practices - int the third paragraph the intentional community of Auroville (Tamil Nadu, India) will be presented.

An utopian desire

The oscillatory movement of the concept of utopia from a maximum abstraction, typical of the early utopias, to a worldly rooted level - tracing its evolution in the last centuries we can recognize a concretization turn parallel to the process of industrialization and the emergence of socialist utopias - made utopia understandable both as a means as well as an end. As a mean to question ourselves about the future and to experiment in the present, utopia in its dialectical form "continues to provide an extraordinarily useful orientation for the activities of radical scholars" (Brenner, 2008, p. 245-46).

Nevertheless, the important warnings given by the totalitarian drifts of the first half of the twentieth century fueled the development of a vast body of criticism mainly based on the recognition of how the logical passage utopia-perfectibility-imposition could give form to the potential relationship between utopia and violence. The understanding of totalitarian drifts developed by thinkers like Popper or Arendt brings out a concept of utopia as inevitably tending to coercion, to imposition through the use of force. Although according to Levitas "laying totalitarianism at the door of utopia is a political move that is intended to make any aspiration to social change impossible" (Levitas, 2013, p. 98), it is undeniable that the appeal to utopia was in the darkest periods of recent western history "functional to development as a reserve area of trend models and as a weapon to build political consent" (Tafuri, 2007 [1973], p. 67)[1]. Therefore, although utopia as a political project has gradually lost its strength in the face of the events of the first half of the twentieth century - "Stalinism, National Socialism, the 1930s crisis of capitalism, the Holocaust and two world wars had shattered people's beliefs in modernity's claims to reason and progress. Utopia as a cultural genre has never really recovered from this crisis" (Beaten, 2002, p. 14) - it is not, nevertheless, advisable to make slippery generalizations. In fact, although the tendency to prefigure a state of perfection has been part of the history of utopia "Sargent, the foremost authority on utopian literature, endorses this, saying that «[v]ery few actual utopias make any pretense to perfection», and that «many utopias welcome the possibility of change». And yet it remains the case that «conventional and scholarly wisdom associates utopian ideas with violence and dictatorship»" (Levitas, 2013, p. 8).

Wright's (2007, 2010, 2011) and Levitas' (2007, 2013) works well represent, even if differently, the attempt to abandon the solidity of static and detailed visions, of rationally constructed blueprints, in favor of a greater awareness of the changing and adaptive process of social antagonism, of the force of diversity within the battle between rationality and irrationality that characterizes the collective (Firth, 2012). Similarly, Tom Moylan (1986) and Lucy Sargisson (1996, 2002) highlighted with

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[1] All the texts that, as the one just quoted, will be found in bibliography in different languages from English have been translated by the author.

their work the emergence of a body of contributions that focused on those experiences and explorations articulated around the process of building collective desires - or, said otherwise, what Sargent calls 'social dreaming'. This set of contributions has seen the emergence of Moylan's 'critical utopianism' of and Sargisson's 'transgressive utopianism', two concepts that have in common the belief that the utopian intent does not necessarily induce the design of blueprints or the search for a state of affairs based on a sense of absolute truth from which to descend the choice of an ideally perfect future. The importance given by Moylan to the critical dimension of utopia and, therefore, to the capacity of re-articulating over time with the changes of society and its structures emerged together with an understanding of reality as strongly conditioned by the structures that define society itself and therefore socially oriented, if not produced. According to him, only remaining open utopia will be able to guide action, to push individuals to articulate and experiment, and thus lead to the extreme the limits of the possible. "In the 'critical utopia' the attitude of the inhabitants of the utopia has also changed; they are no longer passive followers of orders, but individuals who are actively involved in the creation of possible alternatives" (Fortunati, Ramos, 2006, p. 5).

Although the tension towards change plays a fundamental role in both *perfect* and *critical* utopias, the mechanisms at work to implement such change are significantly divergent. The first, characterized by the "fantasy of achieving some kind of social harmony – whether through the idea of the rationally functioning market, or through communist modes of organization – coupled with the structural impossibility of achieving this, is a dialectic of desire which continually produces new political identifications and renewed attempts to grasp social totality" (Newman, 2011, p. 351). While referring to the latter "we should not dismiss the powerful drive and political value of the utopian imaginary as a form of critical reflection on the limits of our world. However, rather than seeing utopia as a rational plan for a new social order, we should see it, as Miguel Abensour suggests, as an 'education of desire': 'to teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and, above all to desire in a different way' (see Thompson ,1988, p. 791)" (ibid, p. 356).

This suggests a methodology of interpreting (some) utopias not as blueprints but as explorations and articulations of the process of desiring production (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 35), thus dividing utopias into two different functional types. On the one hand, we have the utopias of dominant ideologies such as neoliberalism and conservatism (Levitas 1990, p. 188) as well as the counter-hegemonic utopias of Marxism (Day 2005), which are based upon truth claims and specific assumptions about human nature and can have totalizing effects. On the other hand we have utopias which are active, playful or experimental articulations of the imagination, to be found for example in the theories of Nietzsche (McManus 2005) or in those fictional or practiced utopias which are self-critical and reflexive, and contain internal processes for the articulation of multiple different hopes and desires (Moylan 1986, p. 28; Sargisson 1996, 2000), (Firth, 2012:, p. 90).

Imagination and exploration are therefore the pillars of a process that advances by trial and error, and which would characterize what Lefebvre called *experimental utopia* and that is "the exploration of human possibilities, with the help of the image and imagination, accompanied by the incessant criticism and the incessant reference to the problems posed by the 'real'" (Lefebvre, 1961, p. 192). In attempting to explore the relationship between the real and the possible, to reclaim what is possible because already part, often in a repressed form, of what is real (Brenner, 2009), utopia would become an evocative tool, an image of constant tension towards a desirable future. Lefebvre in *The Right to the City*, emphasizes precisely the need to rethink the category of the real not as a field of today's possibilities but as a interpretation of the reality that embraces the paradoxical and puts it to work (Lefebvre, 2014, [2009], p. 109).

The forms of space and time will be invented and proposed to practice, unless proven otherwise. Lets imagination manifest itself; not the fantasy that fosters escape and evasion, which conveys ideologies, but that which engages in appropriation (of time, of space, of physiological life, of desire). [...] The reflection that tends towards the fulfilling action could be seen as both utopian and realistic at the same time, since it proposes an overcoming of the opposition between the two terms. It can even be said that the maximum of utopianism will reach the maximum of realism. (Lefebvre, 2014, [2009]: 110-112).

Lefebvre's utopia is therefore immanent and potential, but at the same time practiced and real; already alive, both in urban planning and in daily action and imaginary. Its presence must only be revealed. Therefore, the experimental approach to utopia that Lefebvre proposes would involve the study not only of the underlying impetus, but also "implications and consequences. They may surprise you. What are they, what will the socially successful places be? How to find out? According to what criteria? Which times, which rhythms of daily life are inscribed, are they prescribed in the spaces created, that is favourable to happiness? Here is what is interesting" (Lefebvre, 2014, [2009], p. 106).

An utopian experiment

The emphasis given to the experimental dimension, where everyday life is a fundamental element in the movement from the real to the possible, opens to a broader reflection: if "utopia is not simply a place, it is a practice" (Moylan, 1986, p. 89). Therefore, its transformative and breaking role emerges strongly in the movement that passes, without a pre-established order, from criticism, to desire, ideation, actualization and finally to transformation. The link highlighted by Moylan between utopia and autonomous social movements and by Sargisson between utopia and intentional communities tells precisely of the dialectical relation between theory and practice (Pasqui, 2008). Abandoning an interpretation according to which praxis is a "circumscribed but unitary field of human action" (*ibid*, p. 49) separated and subordinated to theory, it is possible to recognize the growth of researches that looked at the utopian in its materiality - the literature that interpret intentional communities as concrete utopias is quite abundant (Kanter, 1972; Sargisson, 2004; Schehr, 1997).

Cooper, in the wake of Levitas and Bloch contributions, focuses on the concept of *everyday utopias*: rich in the dynamic and procedural dimension that admits failure and conflict everyday utopias, even if supported by a vision, do not interpret and raise the latter as final goals but as orientative lights. According to Lefebvre the everyday life is intrinsically ambiguous, dynamic, and oscillating; thus "the notion that Lefebvre regards the everyday as the sphere of mindless, dehumanizing routine to be contrasted unfavorably with exceptional events and experiences, whereby daily life must be 'liberated' through a transformative praxis that ushers in some sort of idealist utopia, is therefore a distorting caricature". (Gardiner, 2004 p. 239). It is not a matter of preferring the exceptional, the creative as opposed to the repetitive but rather of grasping the connection and the oscillating motion between the two. According to Gardiner (2013) it is precisely within the configuration of the 'moments' - points of contact between ordinary and exceptional that reveal themselves within the field of possibility - that the utopia of everyday life unfolds. If the 'moment' arises from the immanent possibility of the real and is therefore intimately connected to the context that shapes it, then its breaking character in a stereotyped everyday - which on the one hand is influenced by and on the other supports the structures of society - becomes interesting as it represents metaphorically the awakening (Harrison, 2000). The everyday as an explicit field of action, where the individual does not passively endure but is an active agent, involves a deeper attention to the logic underlying everyday practices and their modes, 'rituals', of acting.

As said, intentional communities have been extensively interpreted as "places where people try alternatives and try to live their dreams on a daily basis. They are utopian social experiments in microcosm from which we can learn as social scientists" (Sargisson 2004, p. 4). These experiments are often characterized by the delimitation of boundaries of influence, by the definition of a specific "*place* capable of being circumscribed as *its own space*" (de Certeau, 2010 [1990], p. 7). But how to recognize such boundaries? Is it the presence of a definite plan, also in terms of spatialization, the element that aggregate or is it the voluntary choice, the embracement of values and scopes or as Bohill (2011) would say ethics as a practice, that creates the pillars on which the utopian, in terms of everyday, deploys?

An utopian space

As just mentioned, the spaces that utopia creates and shapes can differ considerably. Without deepening here the evolution over time of the relation between utopia and its space, it can be useful to recall how More's "Utopia is an artificially created island which functions as an isolated, coherently organized, and largely closed-space economy […]. The internal spatial ordering of the island strictly regulates a stabilized and unchanging social process. Put crudely, spatial form controls temporality, an imagined geography controls the possibility of social change and history" (Harvey, 2000, p. 160). Oversimplifying we can look at the conceptual distance between the early utopias and the contemporary ones as the firsts aimed at a state of perfection either imaginative (therefore mainly critical) or achievable through a process that would involve authoritative means – one's idea of perfection might, and probably will, differs from other's one in any plural society. Regarding the organization of territory, this aim for perfection found its expression through fixed and static visions of the organization of space achievable thanks to an already planned sequence of actions. On the other hand, the more recent interpretation that looks at utopia as an attitude highlights its transformative character and therefore, understanding it as a dynamic and not linear process, liberates space for a processual, always open, and internally multifaceted approach to planning.

The chosen case study, the intentional community of Auroville[2], is peculiar for the presence of a strong utopian character which can be interpreted both as the search for final state of perfection and as an open process of experimentation, two interpretations that seem mirrored in the inhabitants' positions about the vision of the future Auroville. On one hand the process of making Auroville's utopia concrete is interpreted as strongly intertwined with the implementation of the initial vision also in terms of spatial planning, on the other the attempt to abandon any *blueprint* visions toward a more incremental and open process, therefore dismissing the initial masterplan, recalls assonances with the contrasts between the interpretations of utopia itself within the academia. I argue that the two previously described epistemological visions of utopia (as a *blueprint* and as a *process*) coexist, interact and constrain each other, with crucial implications on the process of *production of space* in this utopian community (Lefebvre, 1976 [1974]). If, as Lefebvre puts it, "each new form of political power introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space. Each such form commands space, as it were, to serve its purposes" (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 281) then, what makes Auroville is a particularly interesting case study is precisely the existence of both tendencies. Auroville, as other intentional communities with strong utopian characters, deploys a pre-figurative function that implies the aim of demonstrating the possibility of organizing and living otherwise: it can be understood as an attempt, an utopian experiment, willing to address "what is not by developing alternative imaginary societies" (Stillman, 2001, p.

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[2] Auroville is a intentional community based on the teachings of Sri Aurobing. Located in the south of India, near the city of Ponicherry in Tamil Nadu, the community was founded in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa, la Mère, and gathered over time more than 2.700 members.

11). Guided by the idea of unity in diversity, to be understood as an appreciation of differences and not homologation under a single creed, the number of people who have decided to take part in this unusual and ambitious experiment is slowly but steadily growing[3]. Auroville is not a local authority in the administrative sense of the term; however it has its own independent governmental structure protected, and participated, by the Indian Central Government[4] by virtue of the value recognized to the experiment. Therefore on the one hand Auroville can be interpreted as an *autonomous space* "where people want to build non- capitalist, equality and solidarity forms of political, social and economic organization, through combinations of resistance and creation" (Pickerill, Chatterton, 2006, p. 730) given the high level of autonomy and the possibility of developing with great flexibility internal forms of self-government; on the other the strong link with the Central Government entails some constrains that cannot be underestimated. Without being able to express worthily the complexity and variety of forces that move the development of this experiment as well as the problems that accompany it - first of all the relationship with the context both on the local scale, characterized by a considerable gap in terms of wealth and lifestyles; and on the global and national one if we look at "the dynamics of normative integration beyond the nation-state that are clearly at play" (Kamis, Pfister, Wallmeier, 2015, p. 15) - the restitution that follows can only be partial.

Going back to the dialectical relation between *perfect* and *critical* utopias we can state that are precisely these two extremes, on the one hand the perfect form for the imagined society and on the other the willing to leave the experiment intrinsically open, and their projection on the issue of material manifestation - the forms and the kinds of spaces that the community will create - that have restrained along time the development of a shared vision about the spatial organization of the community. Acknowledging the critiques that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother moved towards the dogmatic crystallization typical of religions affirming their dangerousness and totalizing drifts, it is fundamental to highlight how the importance given to the concept of freedom, to the absence of rules or immutable laws and the lack of definition of a predefined political structure have led to the development of an interesting experiment of self-government tending to anarchy. "She explained that the experience of Life itself «should slowly elaborate rules which are as flexible and wide as possible, to be always progressive. Nothing should be fixed» (Mother on Auroville, 7-21)As for the social organization of Auroville, she foresaw to 'divine anarchy' (Vrekhem, 1997, p. 413). She also pointed out that the world will not understand it, however, «men must become conscious of their psychic being and organize themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws – that is the ideal» (Words of the Mother, Vol. 13, 219)" (Datla, 2014, p. 28). According to these words we can recognize a strongly incremental approach in the definition of the physical, institutional and political structure of the community. Thus, although over time the level of formalization of the internal governance and decision-making processes has gradually increased, the tension between anarchy on the one hand and the need for organization, albeit incremental and spontaneous, on the other has continued to influence the development of the city. The concept of self-guided society (Lindblom, 1990), capable of listening and adapting its forms through questioning and confrontation should not however be imagined, in relation to the studied context, as immune of difficulties and problems. While on the one hand the progressive growth of institutionalization does not seem to have involved, yet, a crystallization of procedures and an inability of institutional learning, Auroville finds itself in an extremely delicate moment in this sense. The distance between the city plan as imagined at the foundation time[5],

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[3] From 200 members in the early '70; 800 in the early '90; 1.500 around the beginning of the millennium; and finally more or less 2.700 today.

[4] The relation between the Central Government and the community is intense. In order to face a legal dispute in 1980 the Government issued the Auroville Act to centralize temporarily the legal responsibility of the community. This emergency provision (n.59/1980), "an Act to provide for the taking over, in the public interest, of the managment of Auroville for a limited period and for matters connected therewith of incidental thereto" (http://bombayhighcourt.nic.in/libweb/actc/1980.59.pdf last access 25/08/17) was followed in 1988 by the approval if the "Auroville Foundation Act": "the Auroville Foundation Act constituted Auroville as an Autonomous Body of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The township as an experiment in Human Unity including recognition of its original Charter now had a formal legal status" (Stuart, 2011: 110). Still today the community is economically supported by public funds.

[5] The initial plan for the city of Auroville, ideally imagined of 50.000 inhabitants, was developed by Roger Anger between 1965 and 1968 under the supervision, in the early stages at least, of la Mère (Auroville's founder and guide).

confirmed through a Master Plan in 2001, and today reality is extreme: the growth expectations have been largely disregarded and the settlements have grown up responding more to contextual needs than to the presence of a plan; the division of functional zones was only partially respected and the current density is far from the predicted one. However, albeit this distance has raised questions around the appropriateness of such plan in today circumstances and therefore around the possibility of revisioning it, collective and constructive discussions around the topic seem extremely complicated given their interlace with the level of spiritual beliefs. Oversimplifying we can recognize in the Auroville experiment both the tendencies toward crystallization of a spatial imagined form and toward the complete abandonment of any form of formal spatial planning in favour of spontaneous development. Accordingly, if we interpret "the constitution of lived space through practices [as what] makes rule visible in its spatialization" (Kamis, Pfister, Wallmeier, 2015, p. 2) then it is indeed the utopian attitude of the inhabitants that are looking for self-determination and freedom that undermine the possibility of reaching the (*perfect*) city as imagined.

Conclusions

It can be surely argued that Auroville is an utopian community, but what makes it so? As we have seen, perfectibility in a plural society cannot be taken as a viable ambition and therefore the progressive abandonment of static and fixed solution toward incrementality and adaptability becomes vital in leaving the experimentation process open. However, even if the Auroville experiment seems still open, within the community is taking place an important drift toward the definition of an ideally perfect state of things that seems to find in the image of the desired city its highest representation. Will then be utopia reached only when the city will be built? As a community that eminently shows the ability to aspire as understood by Appadurai, and finely read by de Leonardis and Deriu (2012), where the close interconnection between desire, aspiration, context and practicality is constantly explored and the limits of imagination are questioned, Auroville exemplifies the understanding of utopia as desire for change, as ability to aspire.

Recalling the concept of *everyday utopias* it can be argued that the elements that make this community such a persuasive context to study utopia are not mostly residing in the image of the city itself but rather within the everyday: "there is the acknowledgment that trivial and ordinary things can be done in a different way, for which the re-imagination of the everyday operates as a device of transformation *in actu*. The change is achieved precisely in the conviction that it can be achieved in the micro-social dimension of the seemingly insignificant gestures of the ordinary (Croce in Cooper, 2016, p. 11). Accordingly, utopia is no longer interpreted solely in the light of its ability to break the frames and create new equilibriums and new forms, but also as an expression of the unexpected and the bizarre, a way of acting in the lines of everyday life with the aim of subverting assumptions, rethinking the basic concepts, the stereotypical readings, that characterize these daily practices.

Bravo (1977) highlights the strongly contradictory features of utopia within the relation between an understanding of it "as a component of progress, of the process of advancement of humanity in a vision of general evolution of relationships among men and between men and things" and its tendency to contain "in itself factors of immobility, of preservation of the status quo" (Bravo in Firpo, 1977, p. 361). Thus, Bravo emphasizes an important conceptual node: the balance between utopia as a vision to strive for within a path whose dynamism is given precisely by the tension toward change; and the static nature of an ideal that, even when revolutionary, endangers its own transformative potential due to the fixity that characterizes it. Auroville is an exemplary case to look at the relation between fixity and spontaneity because of the great autonomy that

characterizes it. If according to Tamdgidi we identify the desire, individual and collective, accompanied by critical function, as the necessary ingredients for the development of the utopian attitude, as it "involves making effort, whatever their scope, towards imagining, theorizing and/or practically realizing that future goal in the here and now" (Tamdgidi, 2003, p. 131), then Auroville has a great potential precisely given its unique autonomy and its capacity to aggregate people that have in common a strong dissatisfaction with the world as it is (La Mère, 1966). "The inhabitants of the [critical] utopia force themselves to explore human potential and revolutionary strategies and tactics to confront and change an unsatisfying reality. Utopia, then, is no longer static and is no longer a system which has been planned one time for all, but a continuous battle to achieve a better world" (Fortunati, Ramos, 2006, p. 5).

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