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Literary Utopias: My Personal Journey

Abstract: In my paper I point out that the study of literary utopias has been and still is a constant focus on my scientific research. It has accompanied me in different historical and political contexts, helping in analysing and interpreting their complexity. The metaphor I use is that of *Utopia as a tree* with deep roots from which many branches spread out. In my first book on this topic, I suggested that Utopia could be considered on the whole as a literary genre, characterized by a continuous metamorphosis over time and space. Within such a theoretical framework, I addressed how a variety of utopian main themes, i.e. the journey, the island, and the dream, have been treated in pillars of utopian English literature. Eventually, what fascinated me is that Utopia allowed and still allows me to look at major problems and questions of my contemporary time taking a “lateral” perspective and envisaging new, usually unexpected, political horizons.

Keywords: Literary Utopias; Utopian Structure; Symbolic Imaginaries; Island; Voyage; Dream; Contemporary Utopian Tensions.

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First, I want to thank very warmly my friends and colleagues Sorin Antohi, Gregory Clayes and Corin Braga and the other member of the Scientific Committee for having invited me to this important conference. Secondly, I am glad to be again in Romania, a nation which has a great tradition of utopian and scientific writers. This invitation has allowed me not only to re-visit my passion towards Utopia/Utopianism but also to analyse the motivations that have driven me to study it. Furthermore, I shall try to understand why today Utopia is important not only for understanding the complexities of our historical moment but also for solving them.

I want to divide my paper into four parts. In the first part I analyse the reasons why Utopia has been the focus on my scientific research, stressing how its meaning has changed according to different historical moments. The second and third parts are a reappraisal of utopia as a literary genre undergoing a continuous metamorphosis over time and space and of the three utopian imaginaries, i.e. the journey, the island, and the dream. Finally, in the fourth part I will sketch interesting utopian ideas and tensions appearing on the contemporary horizon.

I. The value and the strength of Utopia resides in its method, which consists of a pars “destruens”; the deconstructive analysis of reality in which the writer operates, and of a “construens” pars, the planning of an alternative reality. Utopia, then, is conceived as a method¹ of dissent and criticism, but also as the anticipation of, and preparation for, an alternative society. Ernest Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope* (1919), posited the existence of a Utopian impulse, an anthropological given that underpins the human propensity to imagine our lives in radically different terms. The utopian impulse, for Bloch, is a necessity and an existential need, urging us to act; in this sense, Utopia is closely linked to political activism. The utopian method feeds on the desire for change.

The idea of Utopia as moral education and the concept of desire are central to the utopian project and it was taken up again by Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Raymond Williams and, in 2005, by Frederic Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*.² For these thinkers the utopian method combines existential, political, and aesthetic elements. It is the combination of these three elements that has driven me to study Utopia during the sombre years of Italian terrorism. The aspect of Utopia that fascinated me then, and still does now, is its being a polysemic object of study which encourages interdisciplinary and comparative approaches uniting literary, political, and ethical aspects. Such an approach puts utopian scholars in a complex hermeneutical position.

Examining the twentieth century from its start to the end, what is hard to miss is that it was shot through by moments of both great utopian tension and

stasis. It is a parable whose curve signals an alternate process in which the line rises to the apex, and then falls in relation to the complex historical events happening in Europe and in the world.

In the first decade on the twentieth century, the historical avant-gardes showed their strong tensions in artistic experimentations and in architectural planning. The role of the artists in the avant-gardes, their utopian creativity and, later, the exploiting of these by ideology confirm the hypothesis developed by sociologist Karl Mannheim in those years. In *Ideologie und Utopie* (1929), Utopia acquires an explosive strength, it is a carrier of revolution, capable of modifying reality.

A hundred years ago, this deep desire for renewal and rebirth pushed thousands of young Europeans to enlist as volunteers in WWI, and convinced numerous intellectuals to embrace an interventionist stance. But the myth of war, built by the rhetorical propaganda of Europe’s ruling classes, crumbled when the world was faced with the slaughter in the trenches. From the sense of desperation spreading in the first aftermath of the war, the great European anti-utopias emerged, characterized by a lucid anticipation of the totalitarian regimes that were to come. The tragic experience of WWI revealed the dangers of Utopia as a totalizing model and as an aberrant expression of a government trying to direct every single aspect of social life. Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism emerged as a sort of degenerate utopias, imposed and maintained by violent means of coercion.

In literature the main anti-utopias of the twentieth century, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) by Herbert George Wells, *We* by Evgeni Ivanovic Zamyatin (1922),

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley (1932), *Glasperlenspiel* by Hermann Hesse (1941) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell are merciless satires of the totalitarianism, materialism and consumerism of the mass societies exemplified by the USA. On the formal level, the most significant innovations brought by these utopian narratives are introspection and epistemological relativism, both intimately connected to the discovery of the unconscious and to the diffusion of psychoanalytic theories. After the Great War, there was no place in Europe for the representation of utopia, but only for the worst of all possible worlds. As Tom Moylan pointed out: "In the twentieth century it was necessary to destroy utopia in order to save it"³. In the second part of twentieth century, in America and in Western Europe, in the Sixties, there was a renaissance of utopian tension and planning, reaching its climax in 1968. With the dark years of terrorism, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the crisis of Communist regimes, a cold season reappeared, and, once again, the death of Utopia was declared. But did 1989 mark the end of utopian thought or rather the necessity for its transformation? In the following years utopia and utopian tension returned in the works of feminist writers, in utopian communities, in pacifist movements and in ecotopias, demonstrating that the utopian thinkers had learned to negotiate sexual, ethical, and cultural difference, and Utopia become a way of declaring one's political stance. Many utopias were founded on the currents of Western philosophical thought, including the works of Bloch and Benjamin who suggested that Utopia and Utopianism were inseparable. At the end of the millennium, the need for new social

models forcefully emerged yet again. Utopia was discussed when a new idea of Europe was being drawn up, and the concept of national identity was being rethought. The twentieth century also witnessed great progress in the sciences and innovations in technology, accompanied by great political programmes. Those who believed that the implementation of such programmes would have brought about social betterment were forced to admit tragically that they had, in fact, given rise to repressive regimes⁴. Moreover, left-wing intellectuals who had believed they would see Utopia realized in the practical socialism of the ex-USSR could not avoid feeling bitter disappointment: it was this disenchantment that pushed utopian thinkers to question the foundations of Utopia and then reconstruct it with new conceptualizations. Even though some scholars have defined the twentieth century as "the graveyard of utopian writing", from the late 1960's onwards (in the last three decades of the century) there was a great flourishing of utopian and science fiction writing by women especially in North America. Utopian and science fiction were recognized by feminist writers both as a privileged strategy to deconstruct the patriarchal system, and as a fertile ground for narrative and stylistic experimentation. The rethinking of Utopia carried out by women writers such as Ursula Le Guin, Johanna Russ, and Marge Pierce has led to a redefinition of the genre, which has widened its boundaries to welcome the concept of "critical utopia", in the sense of a Utopia that examines its own limits and proposes alternative solutions which are always dynamic: horizons rather than fixed objectives. In critical utopias the attitude of the inhabitants has also changed: no longer

passive executors of orders, they are individuals, actively involved in the realization of possible alternatives. They endeavour to explore human potential strategies, and revolutionary tactics to face and transform an unsatisfying reality.

II. I wrote my first article and book on utopia in 1979 in the years which followed the students' movement in the sixties in USA and in Europe. The seventies were complex years, so-called "anni di piombo" in Italian, "the "years of Terrorism". But as Bertold Brecht says: even "*In dark times will there also be singing? Yes, there will be singing about dark times*". But just in those dark times hope and tension towards a better future had not failed and for this reason I started studying literary Utopias following Russian formalist critic Vladimir Propp. The metaphor I want to use is that of Utopia as a tree from which many branches spread out. The 1970s witnessed an intense debate on the formal characteristics, the "literariness" and the narrative strategies of Utopia. Before Utopia had been studied mainly from a political and philosophical perspective. In utopian texts its literariness is essential mainly for two reasons: first, the utopian writer makes skilful use of the most complex rhetorical strategies since he/she must persuade the reader of the perfectibility of the utopian project. Second, Utopia is an ingeniously calculated game played in the space between two poles: *reality*, on the one hand, and *fiction*, on the other.

Studying Utopia as a literary genre in a diachronic perspective, its literariness has a source of advantages and disadvantages. The fundamental advantage has been the possibility it has offered the utopian writer

to publicly air what may result from the heretical, or even subversive themes, or simply ideas that are ahead of the time and place in which the writer is located and operates. On the other hand, the disadvantage may spring from the fact that the utopian message does not receive a complete re-codification of an adequate reading and remains at the surface of the tale where the work is but a mere literary exercise, a game, a *jeu d'esprit* offering a pleasantly escapist digression, yet also a little more.

Moreover, Utopia is not a static genre, but a genre which evolves in time and space. The shape of Utopia as a literary genre varies from one age to the next, not only because of changing aesthetic criteria, but also due to the ideological stance of separate and successive utopian writers. Only by considering Utopia as a literary genre, are we open to investigate diachronically the evidence of possible interference and/or contamination by other genres, such as the tradition of imaginary journey, travel literature, the Robinsonade, satire, romance, the French "conte philosophique" and the novel. Utopia is a hybrid genre in which elements of both high and popular tradition are mingled, a hybrid plant in which elements of classical thought (Plato, Aristophanes) and Hebrew thought are present (millennialism and chiliasm).

One of the main characteristics of the utopian novel is intertextuality, i.e. the dialogue that the utopian writer establishes with other utopian texts which allows a circularity of "topoi" and themes. Utopia has a specific structural paradigm and semantic constants (insularism, absolute transparency, collectivism, pedagogism) which can change owing to different historical contexts as well to different personalities and biographies of the utopian writer.

Another structural marker of the utopian text is its “verbal inventiveness”, the creation by the utopian writer of extravagant names for places with symbolic meaning, if at times ambiguous. It will suffice to recall a few of the fanciful evocative names of the islands marked on the map of Utopia (Jansenia, Icaria, Christianopolis, Lewistania) or some of those given by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, in his *Le città invisibili* (1972) (*The Invisible Cities*): Ipa-zia, Armilla, Eutropia and so on.

Language is therefore central to the utopian text, both as a linguistic game of invention (e.g. anagrams, puns), a kind of semantic challenge the reader must take up in an attempt to decode correctly the text, and as the need to create a new idiom which will be the vehicle of the new society, a set of pure and perfect terms in which to couch the new world’s perfection. Thus, Utopia must also be viewed as the rich linguistic vein of lexicon-grammatical invention and discovery it has, over time, become.

In the structure of utopian text at least three levels of discourse can be pointed out, i.e. THE MYTH, the SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE, and the NORM *PRESCRIPT*. Hence the tremendous variety of readers’ responses. The intimate link between rational concept and narrative scheme, between political themes and the images meant to represent them in the utopian discourse, can create a *double pleasure* in the reader. On the one hand, what we have is the intellectual pleasure which stems from contemplating the ingenious product of the utopian mind, a perfect mechanism much like a game of combination of the diverse possibilities of experience. On the other hand, the pleasure also

consists in the vision of the ideal society, entirely devoid of the evils and adversities of one’s present life, in a topographically remote or inexistent place and totally outside historical place.

In *Utopia* – the archetype of the genre – Thomas More was deeply aware of the fundamental characteristic of the utopian novel, that it is “a speaking picture” as Philip Sidney said of poetry. At the end of Book One, Raphael Hythloday, answering his interlocutors, Peter Giles and More himself, on the validity of Utopian society, firmly states: “But you should have been in Utopia with me, and seen with your own eyes, the manners and customs as I did for I lived there for more than five years, and would never have left, if it had not been to make that new world have known to others”.⁵

As Italo Calvino pointed out, the utopian writer describes the vision of his ideal society of absolute otherness with extreme precision and with an obsession for minute details and particulars to create the illusory quality of the icastic vision itself.

III. I want to focus on three important utopian imaginaries: the voyage, the island, and the dream.

The Voyage

To investigate the meaning of the journey to utopia means restudying, retracing the intricate maze, the intimate connection that exists between utopia as a literary genre, travel literature and the imaginary voyage. The voyage foregrounds the mythical component of utopia, underlines how much fiction and reality are fundamental features of this genre and finally obliges us to speculate, yet again, on

the ambiguity of the status of the traveller-character and the pact he/she establishes with the reader. From my very first studies on utopia as a literary genre, I had tried to highlight how the actual voyage to utopia was not simply a technical device to allow for the swerving, the distancing from the familiar and the well-known, in order to land onto the utopian *otherness*. The journey, with all its stages (going, initiation-permanence-return), its dangers, its hurdles to clear, since it is rooted in myth, shapes with symbolic and metaphoric meaning the whole structure of the utopian paradigm. Utopia, the place of harmony and absolute good, does not appear to the visitor at once in its wholeness in classical utopias, it is never a datum, but it is the offshoot of progressive *discoveries*. Utopia appears to the traveller-character as the conclusive stage of an initiation journey. In this sense the journey influences the very structure of the utopian project, the knowledge of another country proceeds in stages, either through the dialectic dialogue between the traveller-character and his/her guide, or through a real path that the traveller takes inside utopia itself. The traveller-character in utopia, for the very reason that he/she is *inside* and *outside* utopia, is able to compare it to the society he/she has left, and at the same time is able to understand the civilizations of other peoples. Like the ethnologist, Lévy-Strauss points out in his book, *Le regard éloigné*, the traveller must proceed with a double movement of detachment (*dépaysement*) and assimilation with the *otherness*. The technical device of “estrangement” is characterized by this double movement. Utopian travellers are curious, they have a taste for *exploration* and *discovery*. They often justify their

departure by an internal urge: restlessness, inability to find interesting what surrounds them, of seeing themselves in the role society has thrust upon them.

This ideal voyager sets off with the precise aim of carrying out a global documentary enquiry: his exploration answers precise scientific, political, economic, and civic queries. His travels to utopia are thus not only a path of knowledge, but also an experience which profoundly changes him. In this case, his voyage taking him to utopia is intertwined with parallel stories that transform the voyager, predisposing him to the encounter with the utopian *elsewhere*. His voyage is a lesson on cultural and philosophical relativism, liberation from bias, the creation of open mindedness, a tool for knowledge. Experiencing and encountering different realities, meeting the other, educate the traveller’s personality, open his mind, predispose him to what the Greek Cynic, and later Stoic, philosophers identified as “cosmopolitanism”, that is being citizens of the world. The perception of the utopian “elsewhere”, which traveller and reader are by now ready to encounter, is harmoniously inserted in this perspective. The voyage across utopia rounds off the transformation, making the traveller a new man. The voyage thus assumes a fundamental role in the utopian paradigm and episodes long considered gratuitous and clumsy digressions have the important function of marking phases and of offering a series of intermediate stages in the discovery of the radical otherness.

The Island

As regards the island, the working hypothesis in my studies is that in the

utopian literary tradition the island is a structural metaphor for signifying the *otherwhere*: a metaphor which stresses the bipolar components of the myth itself. The island is in fact a necessary device for the construction of the concept of otherness, of *ou-topos*, in the double sense of nowhere and *eu-topos*, place of goodness. The positive elements are rooted in the concept of the island as a magic circle which encloses and protects, which contains a self-sufficient universe, a place of security complete in itself, where peace and serenity reign. In this sense, the island reworks the *topos* of the Garden of Eden inhabited by good-natured natives, and enriched by luxuriant vegetation as well as prolific, tamed animal species. The negative components are related to the dangerous cliffs of its coast, and especially to the hardness of the mineral soil, which alludes to stagnation and paralysis. In this sense, the enclosure of the magic circle no longer offers protection but becomes a place of isolation and seclusion, a claustrophobic trap. Thus, the island is no longer blessed, but insidious, aggressive, full of deceptive lures.

The Dream

The other example I have chosen is *News from Nowhere* by William Morris (1896), which follows the trend that the Canadian critic Northrop Frye defined as arcadian and pastoral in opposition to the legislative and statutory, whose symbol is the construction of the city where rational and normative aspects prevail. In *News from Nowhere*, the vision is not that of a regulated society but of one in which man lives in contact with nature.

The protagonist, William Guest, back home after a harsh debate on “the Morrow

of the Revolution” at the Socialist League, falls prey to a deep, bitter discontent before falling asleep. Morris employs the dream as a strategic technical device which transports the reader into the world of 2003 and changes the narration from the third person to the first one to convey a vivid, realistic picture of the new society. The very presence of the dreamer in utopia, with his painful awareness of living a precarious and unstable experience undermines the entire utopian structure and diminishes the traditional fixity of the earlier utopias. In the first chapters Morris feels like a man who has landed “from another planet” since his deep estrangement is rendered by the continual clash between the world he has left behind and the new one. In the description of the utopian place the myth of the Golden Age returns: Morris’s Nowhere is characterized by a symbolic natural abundance. Summer is the season; the land is fertile. This natural abundance corresponds with an abundance of feelings. In Nowhere, mankind is beautiful, happy and in harmony and lives in everlasting youth: “the second childhood of the world,” an age that Morris regarded as a central moment in man’s life for his creativity is rooted. A journey which allows him to immerse himself in the emotional sphere and which emphasizes the importance of imagination, of inventing a society characterized by a renewed quality of life. The surprising modernity of Morris’s thought lies precisely in the emphasis he places on the centrality of the *Power-Desire* relationship, his understanding that even in a future communist society, following the elimination of class divisions and the exploitation of the working class, desire that stands for pleasure and creativity constitutes an essential element in human life.

The utopian world which Morris projects is set in the future, not in an unknown place but in England and, more precisely, in London and its surroundings.

I would like to quote the final phrase of *News from Nowhere* since it marks the passage of the dream as an event linked to subjective experience, an individual re-birth, to the dream-vision which synthesizes the longing, the hope, and the collective anxiety of a people which sets in motion an intense political upheaval: “Yes, surely! And if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision. Rather than a dream.”⁶

IV. In the first part of my paper I underlined the importance of Bloch for the renewal of the discourse of Utopia. Bloch says that “Hope is the opposite of security” and the “precarity of hope” is what may still help us today to renovate the discourse of Utopia”. Nowadays, in a period characterized by a crisis in the old forms of politics, and of democracies themselves, there is a strong need to reclaim utopian thought, to imagine an alternative model to capitalism, and to deregulated profit.⁷ (On this issue I would like to mention the Conference held in Budapest in April 2023 on *Utopia and Democracy*.)

I would like to draw attention to some utopian demands, some utopian tensions appearing on our own horizons. We are in gloomy days: the tragedy of our era is our incapacity to think of anything different from our present. But as I said in the opening section of my intervention, it is in the darkest moments that utopia is most needed. What are the signs of a Utopian revival? I would like to address eight recent phenomena:

1. The concept of Happy Decrease (Serge Latouche).
2. The need for Justice (Armatyia Sen and Jacques Derrida).
3. Ecology and the birth of Ecological Communities.
4. Creativity and Art (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Svetlana Boym).
5. The creation of Scientific Networks.
6. Cosmopolitanism.
7. Healthy ageing and Utopia of rejuvenation.
8. Artificial Intelligence (AI): Utopia or Dystopia?

1. The Concept of Happy Decrease

There is an urgent need for political alternatives: global politics is dominated by the false Utopia of growth, or “continuous development”, the twin processes of climate change-global warming (a significant result of which is excessive carbon dioxide emission), and global dimming (caused by as a result of atmospheric pollution) punctuate our obsession with growth. Resource depletion is, in the case of oil and water, already at the root of conflicts around the world. In this context, where politicians and entire nations are aware of the urgency of the situation, Utopia is even more necessary, if by Utopia we mean the ability to re-think the production of our livelihoods, our social relationships, and the agencies of transformation. Against this background Serge Latouche⁸ highlights how humanity can be saved from ecological disaster if it abandons the paradigm of limitless growth which has dominated liberal capitalism and the market economy. For Latouche, happy decrease is a concrete Utopia with eight objectives: *re-evaluate*, *reconceptualize*

restructure, *redistribute*, *re-localize*, *reduce*, *re-use*, *recycle*.

2. The Need for Justice

I find similar utopian tensions in some works by Armatya Sen's⁹ and Jacques Derrida¹⁰ on the importance of justice. In his later writings the French philosopher proposes an open, dynamic concept of justice, and envisages a utopian tension in this aspiration to justice. Derrida sees the need for a "desentimentation of the superstructures of law that both hide and reflect the economic and political interests of the dominant forces of society", a demand which the Irish scholar Eugene O'Brien, commenting on this passage, says: "It is here that I see a central articulation between deconstruction and Utopian studies. In terms of the so-called ethical turn in deconstruction, wherein issues of politics, law, and society have become increasingly central to Derrida's writings, if one were to look for an overarching structure within which to fit these musings, then that structure would have to be a Utopian one"¹¹. Moreover, Derrida keeps us alive to the practice of criticism, understanding that social and political transformation is an incessant project that must not be relinquished: a critical reading of the *polis* which constitutes itself through exclusion or effacement. How is justice done? What justice do we owe others? And what does justice mean? These are questions that must be asked, regardless of the consequences, especially when the established authorities wish to silence them. The idea of global justice is the inspiration of the "Make Poverty History Movements", which is surely one of the most compelling utopias of the twenty-first century.¹²

3. Ecology and the Birth of Ecological Communities

The creation of eco-friendly communities based on renewable energy technologies demonstrates that there is a desire to form communities based on common interests and motivations. Environmentalist worries (about the increasing frequency of droughts, floods, unseasonable frosts, and cyclones) have driven the formation of these communities, which are characterized by alternative technologies (see, for example, The Centres for Alternative Technology in Wales or in Denmark).

4. Creativity and Art

I would like to quote, regarding this aspect, both Spivak's and Boym's statements. Spivak affirms¹³ the poietic value of literature, that is its capacity of creating, through imagination, alternative vision of reality. Svetlana Boym, a scholar who has long studied the relationship between utopia and nostalgia, in her recent essay, foregrounds how art, artistic creation, with its capacity for "estrangement", allows for the investigation of the unexplored potentialities of modernity through "deviations". According to Boym,¹⁴ "estrangement" is not only a literary strategy, but also a political attitude; it allows those who adopt it to estrange, to displace themselves and consequently to see reality from another point of view, and to explore hitherto unexplored areas of modernity.

5. The Creation of Scientific Networks

I would really like to stress the importance of research as a possibility of creating networks, communities of scholarly researchers, tackling complex issues using an interdisciplinary methodology. Nowadays

there is an awareness that a parcelled type of culture is no longer adequate to our modernity, an excessively specialized knowledge does not seem appropriate for the study and comprehension of the complexity of the modern world: the huge questions that technological and scientific development, from atomic energy to genetic engineering, have posed, require a clarity of analysis that only an integrated knowledge can offer. Excessively specialized learning does not pay: Research in both Humanities and Science is perhaps one of the ways of bettering our society and the quality of the lives of all.

6. Cosmopolitanism

The philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah, as well as sociologist Ulrich Beck reckon that it is important to reflect on the concept of cosmopolitanism in a globalized world that tends dangerously towards homogenization and the new risks of the global market. Sociologist Ulrich Beck states that cosmopolitanism is an ancient, magical word, and that, because of this, talking about cosmopolitanism in our current society, which he defines as “second, self-reflexive modernity”, it is more appropriate to talk about a “cosmopolitan gaze”, representing the nucleus of an adequate sense of reality.¹⁵ A cosmopolitan gaze means a sense of the world, and particularly a sense of the lack of borders. In a world of global crises and of dangers generated by new technologies, the old distinctions between inside and outside, national, and international, us and them, lose their binding nature and in order to survive there is a need for a new type of realism, a cosmopolitan realism. There is a widespread awareness of

the need to embed cosmopolitanism in our globalized reality, to deprive this concept of its abstract, unreal features. It is primarily necessary to be aware that cosmopolitanism is a complex idea, hiding ambiguous, contradictory aspects, and that there exist flat, mundane, and superficial forms of cultural cosmopolitanism. The new enemies of cosmopolitan society are, as Beck warns us, visible at the very core of the West: the most dangerous of these being post-modern nationalism. Paradoxically, in the era of globalization, in every corner of the world ethnic identities are being dusted down and emphasized. Hence the rebirth of racism and xenophobia. Unbridled and unrestrained global capitalism is eroding the culture of democratic freedoms, radicalizing social inequalities, and threatening the principles of justice and basic social security, encouraging populism.

In his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), anthropologist Kwame Anthony Appiah¹⁶ states that two threads are intertwined in cosmopolitanism: the first is the idea that we have moral duties towards others, the acknowledgement, that is, of our responsibility towards every human being. The second is that not only do we consider the value of human life in itself as important, but also that of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and cultures that endow them with significance. The feature that transpires from this new re-interpretation of the concept of cosmopolitanism is not only harsh criticism of all obtuse and petty-minded forms of nationalism and international politics, but above all the new logic at the basis of cosmopolitanism, no longer a disjunctive, *either ... or*, one typical of nationalism, but

a new, inclusive logic, postulating *both... and*, a logic, then, which joins universalism and differences. For this reason, rather than talking about cosmopolitanism in the singular, it is important to discuss cosmopolitanisms, in the plural, since there is no single language of cosmopolitanism, but rather, many languages, many idioms, many grammars. There is no unique cosmopolitanism, there are many, mingling with local, deeply rooted traditions, which are ethnic, anthropologic, religious, and, sometimes even national (but not nationalistic!). At the beginning I mentioned the importance of “embedding cosmopolitanism in reality”, of embodying it, of depriving it of its abstract connotations: cosmopolitanism must take form in the places to which we feel an elective affinity. The cosmopolitan project is a transcultural one where, as Salman Rushdie states about his famous novel *Satanic Verses*, what triumph are the hybrids, the commingling, the transformations deriving from new, unexpected combinations of people, cultures, political ideas, films, and songs. This is the great opportunity that mass migration grants to the world, and that Rushdie has always striven to embrace.

I agree with Martha Nussbaum when she states that cosmopolitanism is first and foremost an “educational project”. Young people must open up to the world, to new perspectives: being citizens of the world means widening one’s knowledge, becoming informed on the situation of other nations. Being cosmopolitan means believing in certain universal values: believing in respect for human dignity, and the chance for every individual to pursue happiness. “If we really do believe that all human beings are created and endowed with certain

inalienable rights, we are morally required to think about what conception requires with and for the rest of the world”¹⁷. Being cosmopolitan does not mean enhancing and giving worth to differences, but rather opening oneself without prejudice and paying particular attention to local diversity. Faced with complex problems such as world hunger, social injustices, ecology, we need global policies. As Martha Nussbaum said: “Any intelligence deliberation about ecology – as also, about the food supply and population, requires global planning, global knowledge. And the recognition of shared future”¹⁸.

7. Healthy Ageing and Utopia of Rejuvenation

Turning back time with emerging rejuvenation strategies:

Ageing is associated with the functional decline of all tissues and a striking increase in many diseases.

- Although ageing has long been considered a one-way street, strategies to delay and potentially even reverse the ageing process have recently been developed.

- There is now compelling evidence that the ageing process is plastic and that it is possible to revive aged cells and tissues.

- Studies – mostly in experimental animals – provide compelling evidence that the ageing process is malleable and that it is possible to revive aged cells, tissues, and organs.

- They also raise the exciting possibility of translation to address human ageing and age-associated diseases.

- The coming years will undoubtedly see exciting developments in ongoing efforts to better understand, delay and potentially reverse ageing.

8. Artificial Intelligence (AI): Utopia or Dystopia?

Recently on March 22, 2023, a document signed by more than 30 thousand people has been released suggesting a “Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter suggesting an immediate pause for at least 6 months regarding the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4.

AI systems with human-competitive intelligence can pose profound risks to society and humanity, as shown by extensive research and acknowledged by top AI labs.

“Advanced AI could represent a profound change in the history of life on Earth and should be planned for and managed with commensurate care and resources.”

Unfortunately, this level of planning and management is not happening, and there is an out-of-control race to develop and deploy ever more powerful digital minds that no one – not even their creators – can understand, predict, or reliably control.

- Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves:

- *Should* we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth?

- *Should* we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones?

- *Should* we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete, and replace us?

- *Should* we risk loss of control of our civilization?

The spirit of Utopia consists in the hope that is born from historical memory and in the critical awareness that behind every truth there are other potentialities that are to be freed. Without a vision of

an alternative future, we can only look nostalgically back to the past, or unthinkingly maintain what we have, mired in the unholy apocalypse that is now. Politically we need Utopia, sociologist Alain Pessin stated that the concept of utopia in the social imagination is still current, because in a globalized world tending towards uniformity, *utopian imagination and creativity* are fundamentally important. According to Pessin, the other feature of utopia in the new millennium is its *malleability*, which allows it to satisfy new social dynamics and consequently its capacity for renewal: “No longer an abstract Utopia, a rigid model, but, instead *une utopie concrète, une utopie pratique*: that is, utopias that can be realized”¹⁹.

The last point is that of *solidarity*, and it is certainly no coincidence that a recent issue of the journal *Utopian Studies*²⁰ was devoted to this theme. In their writings, philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Michel Maffesoli stress how important the ethics of solidarity is, exactly because we are witnessing, within the current world, a dangerous disappearance of social ties. Solidarity has become central to our contemporary world, characterized by an alarming crisis of democracies, which have crumbled, and by the huge problems connected to migratory flows, and the waves of xenophobic hate, populism, and violence in metropolitan areas. The need for an ethics of civil life has been affirmed by women²¹; an ethics of values such as solidarity, welcoming others, peace, knowing how to talk to each other and the acceptance of diversity. Martha Nussbaum,²² in her books, has tried to understand how mature deliberation and education of inter-subjective feelings may contribute to the development of

a democratic society. The reciprocity of love means respect for the personality of others: indeed, empathy does help us to perceive the qualitative oneness of other people, thus fostering understanding of those who are different from us and allowing us to understand what we are capable of. Emotions such as love, compassion, allow not only a greater mutual comprehension, but also understanding oneself, one's own capabilities.

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NOTES

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2. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire called Utopia and Other Science Fiction*, London and New York, Verso, 2005.
3. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, New York and London, Methuen, 1986, p. 46.

4. Norberto Bobbio, *Profilo ideologico del Novecento*; Milano, Garzanti, 2005.
5. Thomas More, *Utopia*, a cura di Luigi Firpo, Torino, UTET, 1970.
6. William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, ed. by J. Redmond, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 182.
7. Alain Badiou, *Ribellarsi è giusto! L'attualità del Maggio 68*, Nocera, Orthotes, 2018.
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12. www.makepovertyhistory.org/
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