

## WE'VE NO PLACE TO GO

Uchronia against utopia

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### Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of the concept of utopia and the claim of uchronia as an amalgam of fluxes which sinuously move from the body and caring, regardless of the univocal and linear temporality: overflowing (uchronic) tracks to dispute the imaginary of neoliberal hegemony. This is an essay of shared writing that erotically inhabits inside and outside of academy.

### Keywords

utopia; uchronia; seeds of future; incarnate time; history-desire; care.

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**Utopia is a non-place. It is not to be confused it with a non-space: utopia is sit-uated in that fragment of space which is not yet a place.**

The term "utopia" was coined by Thomas More in his text of the same name, published in 1516, a century and a half before the publication of the *Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica*. In the latter, Isaac Newton proposed an absolute and uniform interpretation of space (and time), the abstract image of an invariable mesh in which all places of the physical universe must be placed regardless of their ontological status.

Thomas More's non-place has nothing in common with a possible non-space that would be conceived at a later date, and they should not be confused. The concept "place" that it includes had not yet been influenced by Newtonian-Kantism, which legitimised a European form of thought as based on an exclusive meaning of causality and truth.<sup>1</sup> According to this, what prevails above everything else is space as a Euclidean canvas where any perception or construction is to be situated; that is, where any place is to be

situated. Only within a linear historical narrative is it possible to think of utopia.<sup>2</sup>

[IMAGEN: c://Users/angelica/Desktop/Utopia/Images/utopos\_1.png]

The pre-Newtonian "place" of 1516 is, therefore, a space full of significance, a space that is and that becomes below what is deemed to have the value of being. The Newtonian "place", from 1687 onward, is the stain on the canvas of space, the mark of the empire, that which does acquire the status of being, leaving to the subordinate sides something that is not. Utopia implies situating oneself in a hierarchically superior position, from which the openings of the non-place – as what is not – are produced: the openings of a distant territory, far removed from the abstract ideal constructed from the non-corporeality that believes itself to be not situated, ideal, but which is in fact located in the only (western, European) territory that has the authority to be, under which any possible overflow is always subjected. The Newtonian void thus imposes itself on the Cartesian ether as something that has a condition of non-being in the continuity of space, because it is not impregnated with a construction based on European hegemonic logic.

**The smooth western hegemony (which is patriarchal, capitalist, colonial) pro-motes a closed and one-dimensional historical narrative that does not take into account overlays or folds.**

From the moment when the Newtonian vision of space and time becomes hegemonic in the West, More's neologism, "utopia," must necessarily be based on an extractivist colonial logic: a non-place in a continuous and unique space becomes simply a lack of awareness about the route that connects us to it in order to name, exploit and dominate it. From this logic, inasmuch as a place that is not (yet), its vulnerability to being conquered is what gives utopian character to a territory that is subject to creative imagination.

Reconsidering it since the Scientific Revolution, Thomas More's *Utopia* imagines new non-places on the other side of the Atlantic, virgin territories not yet penetrated by the imposition of Eurocentric thinking which declares itself superior, logical, democratic and structural, in the same way as the *Civitas Solis* by Campanella is situated beyond the Indian Ocean. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, located in the Pacific, makes reference to the lost, mythical territory, as told by Plato in *Timaeus*, yet he still characterises it as "new", thus linking it to a field of possibility projected onto the future, the launch of a conquest.<sup>3</sup>

The virginal status of non-places (of the New World, in short) accounts for their immaculate smoothness, not (yet) confronted with the power relations

that regulate and structure the world in rough or viscous superimpositions. Their latent capacity of being ripe for exploration, and then colonisation and subordination, is part of their appeal, which makes them speculative yet approachable terrains.

**Utopia requires linear and absolute time. It is a projection within this unique time, which can be combined only in terms of future.**

Utopia responds to the desire for improvement. Its imaginaries include fictional plans for progress and improvement, they promote policies of perfection and wellbeing with a view to reaching the earthly paradise<sup>4</sup> that takes different names: Betsalem, Gilgamesh, Xanadu. Utopia is a non-place that invariably emerges as a prototype of an imaginary country, like the conquest of the New World that constantly involves the search for territories to colonise and project evermore into the future, like an abstraction that, based on the continuity of an unalterable causal arrow, is proposed as a project.

<http://duzhenjun.com/photography/carnaval/>

In this sense, uchronia is originally proposed (by the French socialist philosopher Charles Renouvier) in a scenario contrary to that posed by utopia<sup>5</sup>, since it involves the introduction of projections outside the unambiguous, western hegemonic timeline as legitimised by Newtonian-Kantism. As non-time, uchronia implies the recovery of the time of Aion as an additional layer of truth that cannot be correlated with Chronos, an essentially virtual mythical time.

The time of Aion and the "ethnic temporalities"<sup>6</sup>, which the West considered definitively surpassed in an unequivocal impoverishment of the concept "time" by means of Neoplatonism and then legitimised by Newtonian-Kantism, was something that, in strictly chronological terms, was and was not at the same time. This feature enabled the intersubjective creation of causes in the sense of probabilities of changing the present without having to use future projections that would implicate virgin territories, that is, as rearrangements of what is *here* and *now*. The memory placed there could then constitute, for the community, the conquest of its own collective past.

The legitimisation of the absolutist definition of the concept of "time" by Newtonian-Kantianism, however, invalidated any approach to time that was not chronemic and, as a result, causal and historical thought emerged as the only possible temporal order in which only utopia, the non-place, would arise as an agent of change in its future projection and its opening towards further colonial penetration and subordination. The cause that is susceptible

to being reconfigured in another virtual time dimension is thereafter illegitimate, and only the criterion of truth, deduced from imperial logic, acquires the legitimate ability to recognise historical causes and future projections.

Despite all this, the ability to acknowledge multiple irreconcilable, conflicting ontologies, incapable of any correlation, remains possible and desirable. Postcolonial thinking plays a crucial role there, since the imperialist imperative, even with the colonising pressure to homogenise and secularise time, never ceased to imply the hybrid coexistence of temporalities. This plurality of henophanies, bearers of multiple temporalities, despite having been domesticated through various colonising strategies, exerted unique resistance to the development of a univocal universal history as a causal evolution.<sup>7</sup>

<https://www.laescocesa.org/es/noticias/paracronismos-parte-i>

Even when degraded to a subordinate position by the hegemony of Western causal and productivist thinking, the ability to recognise semi-mythical forms as fruit of the collective memory remains a possibility with which to defend, today, the opening up of uchronic thinking as opposed to the violence of utopian thinking. Before the strict form of utopia legitimised by the Scientific Revolution, based on the subordination of a supposed territorial virginity, the possibility of an inverted desire-history must be defended.

### **Uchronic openings. Uchronia opens spaces so that the seeds of the future can sprout in the non-time.**

By recovering the Aymara aphorism *Quipnayra uñtasis sarnaqapxañani* ("looking back and forth we can walk in the present future"), we could think of sock-like stories that are turned inside out. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui points out, in different indigenous languages we find a temporal conception that historical perspectivism would define as paradoxical and where the opening of uchronia can take place: the past is perceived as something we see ahead of us, and the future is unknown and, therefore, it is behind us, behind our backs.

The gesture of placing the past as something influenced by the future, which constantly emerges and bursts into the present, also appears in the notes for decolonising the unconscious by the psychoanalyst and cultural critic Suely Rolnik. The past does not appear in the present as trauma, as a repetition of the same, but rather, with a nod to Walter Benjamin, as a seed from the future awaiting the right conditions to sprout.

Picking up the term Guarani used to define the throat, *ñe'e raity* ("nest of soul-words"), Rolnik describes the seeds of the future like the affects, like embryos of language (soul-words) that are generated when the body is fertilised by the air of time and the forces of a certain context<sup>8</sup>. These seeds, stored in our throat, are waiting for the right moment and space to get out, to be able to sprout. The politics of desire (or micropolitics) responds precisely to the vital impulse to act, to shape these future embryos, to turn them into forms of expression in a present time.

Within an inverted desire-history perspective, the seeds of the future are not ahead of us, but rather they inhabit a past that is becoming present.

[IMAGEN: c://Users/angelica/Desktop/Utopia/Images/sprout\_4.png]

Our relationship with the past entails, therefore, the daring to dig up the already-buried seeds of the future, so that they sprout again in the *here* and *now*. From a uchronic perspective, that past which is present in the form of a seed of the future is liable to open up another temporal dimension that works independently of world time, and is susceptible to non-correlative vicissitudes.

The seeds of the future, formed in a past that is present, are lodged in our throat, waiting for the right conditions to get out, slide up from the neck into the mouth and be disseminated into the air. This is why it is necessary to take care of the nest, the throat they inhabit, to give them enough time to surface under the forms of present imagination and practices from now.

It is the claim of an inverted desire-story, in which future, present and past overlap and occur in the body at the same time, which allows us to access and make space so that the embryos of language, the seeds of the future can sprout.

Taking these considerations into account, any mixture of times, any uchrony, can only occur in an incarnate space and never outside of it.

### Placing care in the centre as a uchronic *topia*. Situating ourselves, getting involved and taking root.

We propose to distrust both the utopias of progress and the dystopias of the collapse. To abandon these *u-topias* that are formulated within a unique, exclusive and exclusive historical narrative and instead think about present *topias* and uchronic openings. Any type of practice that wants to challenge the stories of neoliberal hegemony has to abandon all forms of positivist utopism to reveal **situated**, **involved** and **deeply-rooted** imaginaries that

place care at their centre. It is not possible to think about critical and imaginary forms that might call into question colonial and neoliberal constructions outside of policies and practices that do not support and defend a shared life that is worthy of the pain and joy of its being lived.

**Rooting us locally. "Defending the vital need for care is equivalent to defending sustainable and flourishing relationships and not simply survivalist or instrumental ones."<sup>9</sup>**

Any utopian thought is formulated from a profoundly abstract gaze that is based on capitalist-androcentric thought, a gaze detached from the finiteness of nature and the vulnerability of bodies<sup>10</sup>. From this abstraction, the white, adult bourgeois male, uprooted from the land and disembodied, is confident that there will always be territories for him to dominate, conquer and colonise. Therefore, his thirst for utopias is never quenched, it spreads over any space, both micro and macro. It is precisely this utopian abstraction that has allowed him to impose a global economic model (the capitalist model) that, due to its need to grow exponentially and expansively to sustain itself, has led us to the ecological and systemic crisis in which we find ourselves.

When thinking about the tools needed to challenge neoliberal hegemony, we must abandon, first of all, any kind of abstraction detached from the land we inhabit. Nature cannot be thought of as a non-place, always susceptible to conquest, and neither as an unlimited store of resources. It is necessary to take into account our ecodpendence and understand that our life takes place on a physically finite surface (the biosphere) and not in a virtually inexhaustible space that we can exploit infinitely and tirelessly.

**Involved. Life goes on incarnate in bodies that share life in a world which pressures us and gives us place at the same time<sup>11</sup>.**

The white, adult bourgeois male, in his abstract universe (typical of Newtonian-Kantism), is not only detached from nature but also from his own body and the links with other bodies, which have made possible and continue to make possible his life. The fiction of that abstract and independent man, the unconceived man, who every day goes to work with his shirt ironed, stimulated by his daily microutopias, ejaculations of the future, success, motivation and self-betterment, hides an immense network of caring practices which are what make possible, first of all, the fact that he has been born and that he breathes, and, secondly, that his life goes on.

Every human life is not a life due to the fact of simply having been born, but rather a possible life that needs constant care for it to be sustained. Life does not stand alone in a virtual abstraction that can play utopian imaginations detached from the caring of bodies.

In order to imagine critical practices that confront and call into question neoliberal hegemony, it is necessary to take into account our interdependence and, therefore, as previously indicated, to focus on care as a fundamental political principle. Caring practices that are not projected into the coming future, but rather activated at every moment of our shared life. Because only by sharing, and caring, do we manage to keep breathing.

### **Situating ourselves temporarily in a multi-layered present.**

There is no care in non-places, via ambitions that are projected into the future or nostalgic longings for a lost past. It is necessarily blended in a living and shared present, a present made of multiple temporal layers that overlap and intertwine, that are told and recounted in common.

Working together collectively involves spinning open narratives, which are constantly in dispute, creating a fabric that includes holes and porosities, flows and overflows, dips and folds. It is about thinking of sock-stories that are turned inside-out, looking at those socks lying under the covers at the foot of the bed. It is about abandoning the locks forged by strategies of domination, and opening ourselves to spaces of listening and learning that involve constantly questioning and rethinking our tools and our privileges.

Following our line of discussion so far, some non-linear (uchronic) ideas for challenging the imaginaries of neoliberal hegemony are:

Situating ourselves, getting involved, taking root.

Proposing spaces in which one can be.

Imagining ourselves inside dream-stories that are turned inside-out, like socks.

Looking after the nest to let the seeds of the future grow.

Stretching and rising, just as plants do in the sun.

Multiplying uchronies likely to be materialised in a shared present situated in another time.

Thinking of ourselves both from our body and from everything that overflows it.

Constantly questioning and rethinking our tools and our privileges.

Uchronia entails rejecting utopia. Rejecting it involves thinking from the body, and from the place.<sup>12</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Utopia is a totalitarian system. There is the presumption of knowing the whole: knowing what is good and what is evil and knowing the objective definition of a perfect man" (Dario Antiseri).

<sup>2</sup> Despite this statement, this essay should not be read as an attack against any critical or imaginary form that has been defined or continues to be defined as utopian. The present authors, however, intend to highlight the fundamental idea of the conquest that is entailed that is entailed within both the etymology and the history of the term: the assigning of a place, of a name, to a "virgin" territory in the "neutral" space.

<sup>3</sup> Comparing Plato's Atlantis with Bacon's New Atlantis is very useful for reinforcing the key idea of this article. In *Timaeus*, the story of Atlantis begins as a concatenation of testimonies that are lost in time in order to bring to the present an Egyptian legend from before the time of writing itself. "You Greeks are always children! [...] You are young in soul, every one of you. For therein you possess not a single belief that is ancient and derived from old tradition, nor yet one science that is hoary with age" said an Egyptian priest (of unknown name) to Solon, who also related it to Critias. The distinguishing feature of this kind of narrative construction is that they feature two parallel times: the mythical, on the one hand, which in turn is irreconcilable with the historical, on the other.

In the case of Francis Bacon, however, the narration of the meeting at Bethsalem, New Atlantis, is quite different: "We sailed from Peru, where we had continued by the space of one whole year, for China and Japan, by the South Sea [...] And it came to pass that the next day about evening we saw within a kenning before us, toward the north, as it were thick clouds, which did put us in some hope of land, knowing how that part of the South Sea was *utterly unknown* [our italics], and might have islands or continents that hitherto were not come to light." Bacon's utopia, then, is not in another time or another space. It is simply a place that is not yet a place (furthermore, it was right there between Peru, China and Japan, territories already well covered by cartographers), a place still unknown.

In this sense, a comment emerges here from Jacqueline Dutton's article "Non-western utopian traditions", in which she questions whether non-Western social idealisations can be characterised as utopian. To do this, she traces, like so many other authors, the roots of utopia back to Plato or Augustine of Hippo, in order to make a parallel with other similar non-Western approaches such as the *datong* of Confucianism, the *taiping* of Taoism or the "Dream" of the worldview of Australian Aboriginals. Our opinion is that this position brings with it a mixing-up of two different conceptions of utopia (a lax one, simply understood as an idealisation, and a strict one, understood etymologically as a non-place that is located in the continuous space that has become the definitive ontology of Western thought). Contrary to Platonic and Augustinian conceptions, but also in certain non-Western proto-utopias such as Confucianism, Taoism or Australian Aboriginal worldviews, what is imagined and what is perceived are necessarily on different ontological levels (because what is described is, strictly speaking, outside the world). Utopias in the strict sense are then defined in terms of the "not yet": that space in the middle of the ocean *not yet* discovered, that point in the universe *not yet* explored. The distance between us and the utopia then becomes a technical distance that is inevitably intertwined with the notion of progress. The present article, however, favours uchronic thought, and this involves defending multiple non-reconcilable ontologies, different truths that co-exist in a state of tension. This is where, in our opinion, the ideal cosmogonies, western and non-western, are found. These cosmogonies are still deemed to be utopias by some authors such as Dutton; but we reject such a view.

<sup>4</sup> "When man tries to imagine Paradise on earth, the immediate result is a very respectable Hell." (Paul Claudel).

<sup>5</sup> If we defend here the use of "uchronia" as opposed to "utopia", it is not because of the original definition by Renouvier that was later reconverted (or impoverished) into a literary genre as "the reconstruction of history using hypothetical data" (in the words of the Royal Spanish Academy), that is, as a counterfactual history. Here, we are not interested in alternative universes or the Jonbar points of science fiction. On the contrary, here we use "uchronia" as a resistance-concept, as a push-concept from which to rethink or question what lies behind the mere emancipatory power of the term "utopia": as we have already noted, the historical burden of that concept, which necessarily situates what is defended by means of its use in a specific relationship with the empty space that must be conquered with a new name, as a new place.

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<sup>6</sup> In the colonised territories there was no uniform notion of time, like Neoplatonic time is the source of Newtonian-Kantism. Ultimately, in terms of the construction of truth, this relegated those territories to a position of non-being. These orders were co-opted in a peculiar way by colonial modernity, and muted throughout the times of capital, the colony, development and progress. But they existed along with them, superimposed onto the field of experience. That was one of the worst dangers for the modern spirit that had spread voraciously: the coexistence of multiple temporalities narrated in an alternate language. The Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène called this "the ethnic temporalities" subsumed into the postcolonial nation's metanarrative. Mario Rufer (2010) has dealt with the examples of indigenous communities in Argentina, as well as the South African Xhosa, as cases of cosmogonies with these "ethnic temporalities".

<sup>7</sup> Sandro Mezzadra and Federico Rahola (2008), 261-278.

<sup>8</sup> Suely Rolnik (2019).

<sup>9</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017).

<sup>10</sup> See the concepts of ecodependence and interdependence in Yayo Herrero (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Marina Garcés (2005).

<sup>12</sup> This essay was composed by means of shared writing. Multiple times have been interwoven. The writings overlap. This exercise set out to question utopia and, in doing so, it has gradually been uchronised.