

*Utopia in Portugal, Brazil and Lusophone African Countries*, Francisco Bethencourt (ed.), Peter Lang (Bern, 2015). ISBN 978-3-0343-1871-6

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This collection of essays grew out of a symposium organised at King's College London by Francisco Bethencourt. The symposium brought together historians and students of literature and the different approaches of these two branches of scholarship, and the different language which they use to convey their ideas are a feature of the volume.

A reader approaching this topic should certainly start with Bethencourt's introduction "The Power of Utopia" and his masterly essay on "The Unstable Status of Sebastianism." As can be seen from these and the other essays in this collection, the term "Utopia" has been used to describe everything from imagined ideal societies, to religious ideas of eternal life, to the rhetoric of charismatic leaders, Anarchists, and Neo-malthusians. It is used to describe the visions of totalitarian dictators as well as those of liberals and radical revolutionaries. In short, it seems, that any form of idealism can be considered as a manifestation of Utopia. Fairy tales and imaginative children's literature are forms of Utopian literature, as are the worlds imagined by the writers of science fiction. "Utopian" has even been a term used to describe the work of some architects and town planners.

Utopian thought, apparently, can be a process, or a dialectic, even a dance, and need not have any concrete form at all. As Maria-Benedita Basto puts it, "utopia is a dialectical movement creating heterogeneous relations between past, present and future" (p. 183). It can be the aspiration to create a new generation of men (as in Helena Buescu's essay on the Isle of Love in Camões *Lusiadas*) and need not concern itself with a reformed and idealised society at all. Leaders who can be placed somewhere on the spectrum of charismatic through to messianic litter the historical record. In this way even bandits and pirates become harbingers of alternative societies and Carnival becomes a glimpse of another world order.

This may well raise the thought in the mind of the sceptic that "Utopia" is an umbrella term that is too wide to have much meaning, and it is perhaps typical of the

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pragmatic British, who traditionally have been deeply suspicious of ideologies, that the term “Utopian” has come to be synonymous with the “impossible.”

“Sebastianism” is repeatedly referred to throughout the book and in many ways is a phenomenon specific to the Lusophone world. It ranges from the political movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which apparently really anticipated a return of king Dom Sebastião, to anticipations of the arrival of a charismatic leader and to religious messianism in general. Here the excellent essay by Nancy Naro takes the topic to nineteenth century Brazil and the violent and disturbing movements among the peoples of the backlands.

The appeal of Sebastianism is always to people who are disenfranchised, exiled or powerless. It is the politics of a society in which ways to challenge the elite are otherwise non-existent. Sebastianism is not so much a call to rebellion or reform but a process that delegitimises the ruling elite. It is soft dissent as opposed to outright opposition. Sebastianism began with the need felt by many Portuguese to delegitimise Spanish rule and became a way by which people adapted to imperial decline and foreign occupation. It came to form a streak of unreality in the mentality of the Portuguese and historians will find that the idea that Portugal had a “universal mission,” which formed part of the “Sebastianist” vision of António Vieira in the seventeenth century (described in Patricia Vieira’s essay) echoed in the colonial rhetoric of Salazar in the twentieth.

That Marxism has always been tinged with Utopianism is fundamental to understanding its appeal. In José Neves’s essay, the Communist festivals in twentieth century Portugal became an “anticipation of a postconflictual age” (p. 220), while for António Vieira, as for Marxists two hundred years later, “to know the future is the path to humanity’s emancipation” (p. 74). This certainty was the lure of Marxism as well as of religious prophesy.

Literary Utopias, like those of More, Swift, or Morris, have always presented a critique of contemporary society but there is often only a small step from this kind of Utopia to the sort of dystopia imagined by Huxley or Orwell. This transition occurs when the ideas of dictators for a new society and a new world order come under close inspection or when people are forced to examine the implications of the supposed perfect society. Manuela Lisboa quotes Saramago, “if there was no death, there could be no resurrection, and if there was no resurrection there would be no point in having a church” (p. 146). Living for ever, like the idea of enjoying complete leisure, turn out to be profoundly

dystopic – as are the imaginings of Anarchism and Neo-malthusians, as Diogo Duarte shows in his essay.

This book raises questions and challenges the reader on every page. It offers an open door to an intellectual world that may not be familiar to many English readers. Sadly the deliberately obscure language used in some of the essays in this book makes their content largely inaccessible to readers who have not been initiated into the freemasonry of literary criticism. Nevertheless this book is essential reading for anyone interested in the history and literature of the Portuguese-speaking world. As Manuela Lisboa writes, “Portugal’s self-narrating *grand récit* has repeatedly anchored itself in the hope of utopian never-never dreams: metaphysical (Catholic) salvation; everlasting empires; kings returned from the dead; and more recently European Union geese with an infinite supply of golden eggs” (p. 166).