The Epistemology of Utopia
The Epistemology of Utopia: Rhetoric, Theory and Imagination

Edited by

Jorge Bastos da Silva
# Table of Contents

Contributors.......................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction: Revis(it)ing the Rationales of Utopianism................................. 1
Jorge Bastos da Silva

**Part I: Beginnings and Ends**

Pigs in Heaven? Utopia, Animality and Plato’s *Hūopolis* ......................... 8
Antonis Balasopoulos

Thomas More, Utopian in Spite of Himself: On Necessary Accidents
in Intellectual History........................................................................................................... 28
Jorge Bastos da Silva

The Utopia of a Past Golden Age? Friedrich Schlegel’s Early Romantic
Conception of Greece ......................................................................................................... 49
Asko Nivala

Classics of Sociology and Modern Social Utopias:
Displacing Knowledge Boundaries ................................................................. 65
Teresa Mora

“Make this Planet a Garden”: Bertrand de Jouvenel’s Idea of Arcadia
and the Debate on the Future in the 1950s and ’60s................................. 80
Heli Paalumäki

The Future of Utopia........................................................................................................... 94
Krishan Kumar

**Part II: Some Places and Idioms of Utopia**

“The Camel (The Ship of the Desert)”: “Fluid Geography”, “Globality”,
Cosmopolitics in the Work of Immanuel Kant........................................... 120
Diane Morgan
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“To Kindle a Light of Meaning in the Darkness of a Mere Being”:</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards a Hermeneutics of Utopia and Aspects of Language, Myth,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor, and Desire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brendon Langer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Ocean that is Disarmed into Letters: Utopia and Psychoanalysis...</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edson Luiz André de Sousa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Utopia Has You by the Throat: Alternative Utopian Paradigms</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Communist Romania</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corina Kesler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey Matter: Quotidian Utopia in Ian McEwan’s <em>Saturday</em></td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stankomir Nicieja</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisiting the Happy Valley in Alan Jacobs’s <em>Eutopia: The Gnostic</em></td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Land of Prester John</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katarzyna Pisarska</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION: 
REVIS(IT)ING THE RATIONALES 
OF UTOPIANISM 

JORGE BASTOS DA SILVA

The emergence of Utopian Studies as a dynamic field of inquiry situated at the crossroads of several disciplines within the province of the Humanities is a striking development of the past few decades. It is symptomatic of a general trend towards the overcoming of epistemological and institutional boundaries, and it has borne fruit in a number of ways. For one thing, it has worked toward redeeming the concept of utopia itself from the negative connotations derived from twentieth-century totalitarianism, its dystopian denunciation by the likes of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell, and the distrust of major thinkers such as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin. Faced with such a legacy, Utopian Studies has striven to recognize the place of utopia among what historian Jay Winter has aptly called the “forms of transformational political thinking” (2006: 208). Utopia, it may be argued, is one way of standing – acting, reflecting, creating – against the objective debasement of everyday life. It is a mode of approach to flawed reality (one mode among others) which tries to find significance in ordinary experience. It is a quest for meaning – and meaningfulness – and a quest for permanence, which entails a refusal of both alienation and ephemeralization. It amounts to a quickening of understanding and of action, grounded in a belief in the perfectibility, if not of humanity as a whole, at least of individuals in a specific social situation.

Any defence of utopia necessarily entails a critique of “bad” utopianism. Roger Scruton is right in censuring the “addiction to unreality” that undermines unreasonably optimistic modes of thinking which trust the best-case scenario will inevitably occur (2010: 25). In his spirited attack on what he dubs “the utopian fallacy”, he remarks: “The important point about utopia (…) is that it cannot arrive. There is no such condition (…), and a deep, if subliminal, knowledge of this fact prevents utopians from attempting a full critical description of the state they have in mind” (idem
But, needless to say, not all utopians are so evasive, and it is inaccurate to assume that all manifestations of utopianism are either quixotically or perversely blind to the real conditions of human existence. As luck would have it, the dominant tenor of utopian writing in our time points to just the opposite. The prevalence of dystopian visions, surely, is not alien to “the uses of pessimism” Scruton holds dear. In any case, such reticence is not easily discarded. It should be granted, perhaps, that it becomes all the more pertinent when one witnesses post-communist countries in Europe becoming capitalistic only to share in the troubles of the current economic crisis, or the Arab Spring amounting to a promise of liberation from secular “republican”-totalitarian regimes but hazarding an equally undemocratic verge towards religious fundamentalism. The frustration of social energies and political hope undoubtedly offers a sobering spectacle.

There is thus no place for a naïve apology for the utopian spirit. Quite the contrary. Bearing in mind the heavy burden left by “the age of extremes”, as Eric Hobsbawm (2003) has described the twentieth century, one can only hope that the contemporary conscience has an ingrained distrust of political prophets. To the extent that we do, indeed, reject or resist the extreme versions of utopianism, we may be supposed to retrieve the spirit of what a distinguished Victorian man of letters, Matthew Arnold, simply chose to call culture:

> culture directs our attention to the natural current there is in human affairs, and to its continual working, and will not let us rivet our faith upon any one man and his doings. It makes us see not only his good side, but also how much in him was of necessity limited and transient; nay, it even feels a pleasure, a sense of an increased freedom and of an ampler future, in so doing. (1993: 77)

Culture, Arnold submits, is a form of awareness, of alertness even. It is liberating and it has a particular cautionary value; it is, hence, ethically vital and politically useful. Furthermore, it involves a sense of critical detachment which verges on irony toward the given, while entertaining broad, optimistic prospects for the future.

Utopia, it may be suggested, is in this exact same sense a form of culture. And Arnold neatly offers the concept of anarchy as its opposite. The utopian mind has often, in its misguided, totalizing ambitions, aspired to stand as the remedy for anarchy, but culture – as described by that true heir of the Enlightenment, regardless of how little appreciative he professed to be of the eighteenth century – urges us to be suspicious of revelations and blueprints. It teaches us to be weary of secular messiahs
and of the most extravagant programmes of social engineering. In the words of Kant’s famous exhortation, it challenges us *to dare think for ourselves*.

It is perhaps easy to talk or write disparagingly about utopias and utopians. Both words have been subjected to an obvious process of demotization, by which they have ambiguously been made to denote projects or expectations whose feasibility is found questionable. As hinted above, they have also been demonized, by being frequently (and not always inaccurately) identified with regimes and ideologies one does not hesitate to decry. Yet the noblest expressions of the utopian impulse aim at correcting imbalances in actuality. They combine expediency and desire, realization and hope. They fight against the expected renunciations of everyday life – or the plenty of its unworthy enjoyments, depending on the circumstances. Utopian discourse – and utopian initiative – highlight the breadth of the possible. They semioticize the not-there, an absence which is turned into an imaginative, and sometimes a definitely political, opportunity. By undertaking the critical interrogation of the given, utopia is a figure not only of inversion but of transcendence and fulfilment.

Inevitably, it is a figure of paradox as well. In what ways can a commitment to *irreality* avoid being merely escapist, alienating of self or manipulative of others? In what ways can “an ideal of enhanced sociability”, postulated by Gregory Claeys (2013) as the “centre of gravity” of utopianism, be reconciled with resistance to the social constraints that produce what we may for short call “the well-rounded person”? The answer lies in not allowing the utopian perspective to become finished and sealed – in never allowing it to become an ideology. Utopia is to be preserved as a nurturing of possibilities, devoted to the critique and the transformation of the world – and of itself.

Champions of utopia maintain the crucial value of an outlook that is denaturalizing and as emphatically averse to fatalism as to complacency. Fredric Jameson proclaims resoundingly: “there is no alternative to Utopia” (2005: xii). Lyman Tower Sargent contends in a similar fashion: “we must choose Utopia. We must choose the belief that the world can be radically improved; we must dream socially; and we must allow our social dreams to affect our lives” (2007: 306). Richard Rorty claims that “historical narrative and utopian speculation are the best sort of background for political deliberation” (1999: 234), while Edward Rothstein points out: “Utopias represent an ideal toward which the mundane world must reach. They are examples to be worked for. Utopianism creates a political program, giving direction and meaning to the idea of progress; progress is always on the way toward some notion of utopia” (2003: 3).
In addition to the nuanced engagements with its central, defining concept, and ultimately to its vindication, the rise of Utopian Studies on an international level has also involved the acknowledgment of the relevance of cultural phenomena which would otherwise perhaps pass unnoticed. The recognition, sometimes the celebration, of “utopian” aspects in political thinking, theology and religious experience, the arts, philosophy, etc. has significantly extended the range of empirical objects to which the concept of utopia is held to pertain. While opening up a vast territory for potential expansion, this is one direction in which the word “utopia” sometimes risks being stretched until it starts wearing thin, slipping into purely rhetorical status.

Finally, on the theoretical plane, the cultivation of Utopian Studies has contributed to the revision and renewal of methods and assumptions, participating in the process of cross-fertilization between, e.g., the social sciences and architecture, aesthetics and geography, the study of literature and the study of politics. The practice of Utopian Studies is at one with the crossbreeding of conceptual apparatuses which has obtained between the variety of academic configurations in which its advocates happened to be originally trained.

Indeed, the multi- and interdisciplinary field of Utopian Studies has arisen thanks to the commitment of scholars whose interests shifted – or, more precisely, converged – at a certain stage of their professional engagement with literature, political thinking, sociology, philosophy, religion, urban planning, film and other arts, both creative and performative. A change will perhaps become noticeable in the near future, with younger scholars already becoming affiliated with Utopian Studies from the start of their careers. For at present, Utopian Studies has its own established research centres and projects, courses, degrees and international societies. Its development is reflected in an increasing number of specialized publications as well as in the annual conferences of the Society for Utopian Studies (USA, founded in 1975), the Communal Studies Association (USA, 1975) and the Utopian Studies Society (Europe, 1988).

There is inertia in every academic discipline. Arguably, it is its particular kind of inertia that distinguishes each discipline by providing it with its core identity. However, no framework of intellectual inquiry, even if it ultimately becomes institutionally endorsed and crystallized, may be allowed to lose sight of its specific ethical and epistemological potential, of the much-needed ability to continually revise the rationales of its identity and to expand – or sometimes narrow – the compass of its concerns. Disciplines cannot thrive without that measure of indiscipline
which entails the kind of problematization that alone can bring them to full maturity.

The present volume takes into account the international development of Utopian Studies in recent decades. Its aim is to provide critical revisions (revisitings) of the assumptions and methods of the discipline (some of which are often not made explicit in research) through a set of theoretically-informed essays that at the same time focus on a number of different manifestations of utopianism. In other words, the essays in this collection combine a discussion of theories, practices and ideologies with original assessments of a range of topics, either textual-interpretive or historical-political – from Plato’s Republic and Thomas More’s Utopia to modern-day cosmopolitics and “glocalization”, from the intellectual legacy of thinkers like Kant and Durkheim to state communism and the intersections of contemporary fiction with esotericism and science. While not covering all the varieties of utopianism past and present, nor all the branches of its study, the collection offers a wealth of approaches and eclectically brings together provocative assessments of authors, texts and social realities spanning two and a half millennia, from the oldest, groundbreaking utopian text in the western tradition to a very recent novella, which, as it turns out, is formally and thematically very conservative.

The overall purpose of this collection involves the assumption that if the products of the utopian imagination are meaningful, both the meanings they convey and the manner in which they generate meaning ought to be considered. The contributions to this volume therefore do not focus exclusively on what may be called the ontologies of utopia (i.e. the more or less explicit claims regarding the way things are or the way they ought to be). Rather, they evince an awareness of the constructedness, verbal as well as conceptual, of utopian visions and values – of the fact that utopian discourses produce, enable and/or frame a particular take on, and knowledge of, reality, by enacting arguments and strategies of persuasion which arise from specific cultural-historical contexts. All essays bear upon the mutual inadequacies of self and world, and on instances of human idealism, inventiveness, reasonableness – and sometimes irrationality – striving to overcome those inadequacies.

In one of his major elegies of hope and disappointment (and hope still), in the album The River, the rock singer Bruce Springsteen asks: “Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true?” (1980). I believe I can speak for all the contributors to this volume and say that the answer is: No.
Notes

1 I wish to thank Gregory Claeys for allowing me to read his article in advance of publication.

2 My argument recalls the examination of utopia and ideology as dialectical opposites in the now classic studies of Karl Mannheim (1968) and Paul Ricoeur (1986).

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PART I:

BEGINNINGS AND ENDS
In the course of his magisterial *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson dwells on Theodor W. Adorno’s understanding of the essence of utopianism. For Jameson, this understanding hinges on the German philosopher’s horror of human history, viewed as a form that has been hopelessly entangled with natural history and has hence been vitiated by a “ceaseless and frantic activity of which capitalism is only the latest and most frenetic stage” (Jameson, 2005: 174). Self-preservation, according to this profoundly anti-progressivist view, is less an instinct than an ideology: it serves to rationalize and legitimate human antagonism in societies organized around “scarcity and power” (*ibidem*), rendering selfhood the archetypal form of all property ownership. Imagining utopia, in this view, would then involve a privative procedure, whereby it is not simply commodity ownership but selfhood, taken as a historically poisoned, badly ideological construction, which must finally be relinquished in exchange for a vision of blissful existence. This is why, as Jameson points out, Adorno’s critical rejoinder to Kantian ethics – that one must “try to live” so that one may believe one’s self “to have been a good animal” (Adorno, 1973: 299) – is only a “partly ironic” one (Jameson, 2005: 174). In Adorno’s vision,

Utopia (...) would emerge as a state in which, as with animals, a life in the pure present would become conceivable, a life divested of all those fears of survival and anxieties about the future, all that endless tactical and strategic struggle and worry (...) a vision of a population of sentient beings grazing in the eternal present of a garden without aggressivity or want. (*idem* 174)

Such a view of utopia certainly sounds strange; after all, and at least from Aristotle on, non-human animals have been excluded from the realm of ethical decision.¹ So what exactly, species-wise, is a “good” animal, and what would it mean to become one? But then, if, as Darko Suvin was to remark, SF (of which utopia is taken to be “the sociopolitical subgenre” [Suvin, 1979: 61]) is really to be understood as “the literature of cognitive
estrangement” (idem 4, 7-8), it is in such questions that something like a utopian mode of thinking emerges. For it is precisely “cognitive estrangement” that is at stake in both Adorno’s ethical ideal of the human as “good animal” and in Jameson’s lyrical description of utopian humanity as “a population of sentient beings grazing in the eternal present”. In both Adorno’s and Jameson’s statements (which must then be understood as relating to “utopia” not merely as a content but also in terms of form), estrangement figures as the precondition for a thought that may only emerge negatively, by rattling at our customary, habituated understanding of such things as “human nature”, “ethics”, or “happiness”.

Were one to ask whether such statements belong to something we could properly call philosophy, one would be hard put to provide an unambiguous answer: one of the basic issues a work like Jacques Derrida’s The Animal That Therefore I Am addresses is precisely the relationship between the history of philosophical discourse and animal life, the capacity of philosophy as we have known it to think concerning “the animal”. Such thinking, Derrida observes, rather “derives from poetry”; indeed, it is “what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of” (Derrida, 2008: 7). Thinking the animal in ways that exceed its status as a static, unresponsive object, interrogating or subverting the boundaries that separate it from an inquiring human subject, are occupations fit for what Derrida might call “the margins of philosophy” – a thinking of and at the limits of the human itself. But in a way, such thinking, it seems, has been quite congenial for utopia – and not merely in thinkers like Adorno or Jameson, but in the practitioners of utopia as poiēsis, as a type of literary construction. In an essay on More’s Utopia, for instance, Christopher Burlinson concludes, after careful study of the surprisingly many and differently significant animals that More’s founding text contains, that “animals provide a figure in which the human and non-human can be brought together, where the differences between animals and humans are acknowledged but where their place in the world of our ethical concerns is re-evaluated” (Burlinson, 2008: 38).

If on closer inspection the genre’s early modern progenitor turns out to be a virtual Noah’s ark of figuratively charged animals (England’s metaphorically carnivorous sheep, the hens whose eggs Utopian farmers hatch artificially, the ape that destroys one of the books that Hythlodaeus was taking to Utopia, the cattle butchered by slaves and the fear of contamination from their offal, dogs and hares), so does the genre at large, from Swift’s overwhelmingly rational and unpronounceable Houyhnhnmss to Orwell’s pigs. Engagement with the animal is, however surprising at first thought, an eminently logical possibility in utopian texts: if Suvin is
indeed correct in placing “cognitive estrangement” at the heart of SF (and I think he is), then the poetic reconfiguration of humans as animals and of animals as humans (or the textual production of undecideable entities in-between, from Kafka’s “creatures” to SF cyborgs and non-human forms of sentience) is a way of compelling the reader to interrogate aspects of social life, economic organization, political activity, gender or sexuality that have been long naturalized and made invisible by habituation. As such, engagement with animality is – at least in principle – no less useful as a device of cognitive estrangement than the far more extensively discussed devices of spatial or time travel.

This means, in turn, that if “utopian epistemology” consists in the production of social, political, or ethical knowledge critically, through the interrogation of the ideological limits imposed on what we believe we know about ourselves, our values, propensities, limits, desires or needs, then animals as figural, representational entities – and animality as a figure of the alien, the socially repressed and perhaps even the ultimately redemptive – are likely to deserve far greater attention than has generally been the case in both literary histories and individual textual studies of utopia. I intend to explore the possibilities inherent in such a problematic by dwelling on a foundational utopian text that is far older than More’s Utopia: Plato’s The Republic, written in all likelihood, around 370 BCE. It is a work of philosophical utopianism, undoubtedly, but it is also a work where fable and narrative play vital roles – as is often the case with works concerned with narratives of origins and foundations, and hence with questions that can only be contemplated through the strategic mediation of a fiction: “the story of politics, the story of the origin of society, the story of the social contract, etc.” (Derrida, 2009: 9). Finally, and much like the philosophical fables of which Derrida speaks (Aristotle’s, Machiavelli’s, Hobbes’s, Rousseau’s, and so on), it is a work where the production of meaning turns out to have much to do with the animal – indeed with a whole menagerie of animals, even if they are only figurative ones.

I

One of the most interesting slips of interpretive memory when it comes to The Republic involves the customary response to the deceitfully simple question “how many ideal cities does the book contain”? The almost universal answer is of course “one, the Kallipolis” – a response that is almost as hasty as it is licensed by the text itself. Those who have forgotten all about the possible candidacy of a city described and discussed in Book II, after all, are unconsciously influenced by no other
than Socrates, who is also quick to forget about it around line 374, even though he has offered its description himself, and even though he has previously praised the city as both “true” [ἀληθινὴ πόλις] and “healthy” [ηὐγείας] (Plato, 2003: 372e). Certainly, some of the book’s interpreters have not taken Socrates’s eulogy seriously, regarding it instead as another item in the long list of “Socratic ironies”. On the face of it, this is an understandable stance: ἱὐσταίνη, the name of the city in question, means “city of pigs”, and this hardly predisposes one to regard it as the embodiment of any sort of recognizable human ideal. Yet this demeaning moniker does not originate in Socrates but in Glaucon (372d). While, on the other hand, Kallipolis, the good or virtuous [καλός] city, appears to provide a far more suitable name for a utopia, there have been an influential few who have read it as ironically flawed and hence as not quite meant to be desirable – while others went so far as to take it for an earnest dystopia of totalitarian state control. And there is always the fact that Glaucon, who is responsible for the millennia-long bad press of our habitually forgotten city, is not unambiguously the paradigm of goodness and virtue either – not to mention that he is prone to a certain degree of unflattering irascibility.

But before we say more about the enigmas the ἱὐσταίνη presents to literary and philosophical interpretation, it would be wise to briefly remind those who have read their Republic (but draw a symptomatic blank on the city of Book II) of the contextual circumstances surrounding its birth and ignominious death in the text. The Republic, or Of Justice as it is also known, begins with a chance encounter, during a religious festival, between Socrates and Polemarchus, son of the merchant and oligarch Cephalus, who invites him and Glaucon to his father’s home for conversation and company. Socrates accepts, so he soon finds himself chatting with the elderly Cephalus, who philosophizes rather self-indulgently on the experience of ageing. Socrates proves rather tough as an audience for Cephalus’s self-congratulating parody of grey-haired and hard-earned wisdom, and the conversation quickly shifts from the question of what makes for contentment in old age to the fateful question of what constitutes a just life, and therefore justice itself – the subject of the entire rest of the dialogue. Feeling rather ill-at-ease with Socrates’s probing inquiries, Cephalus hastily leaves the scene to his son Polemarchus, who, together with Glaucon, his brother Adeimantus and the sophist Thrasyseychus (who happens to be at Cephalus’s home at the time), constitute Socrates’s interlocutors for the remainder of the dialogue. The first book then consists in a spirited debate on the nature and comparative advantages of justice and injustice: first between Socrates and his sophist
adversary, then, when this has ended in the sophist’s quick defeat, between Socrates and the two siblings, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who step into the fray by picking up the gauntlet of the *advocatus diavoli* – the skeptical naysayer, who can challenge Socrates to go beyond the merely conventional and tradition-bound praising of justice.

The “city of pigs” is introduced when Socrates proposes a change of course from what he now proclaims an effectively aporetic conversation, and toward an analogical model of thinking that will substitute justice in the individual with justice in the *polis*, thus allegedly rendering justice “larger” as an object of enquiry and easier to locate:

So I began by saying, quite frankly, “This is a very obscure subject we’re inquiring into, and I think it needs very keen sight. We aren’t very clever, and so I think we had better proceed as follows. Let us suppose we are rather short-sighted men and are set to read some small letters at a distance; one of us then discovers the same letters elsewhere on a larger scale and larger surface; won’t it be a godsend to us to be able to read the larger letters first and then compare them with the smaller, to see if they are the same?” (368 d)

Hence it is that the political discussion of justice is inaugurated, though just what “political” might mean is a daunting – and for now, premature – question in its own right: for defining the “political” presupposes first obtaining a definition of *polis* itself. But this is a goal which impels Socrates to move in the opposite direction of the metaphorical “magnification” he originally proposed. He now adduces a microscopic vision that dilutes the city to the fewest possible human components, so as to procure a kind of pure, unadulterated version of the sphere of political life wherein justice might be effectively sought:

Let us make an imaginary sketch of the origin of the state. It originates, as we have seen, from our needs. (...) Well, then, how will our state supply these needs? It will need a farmer, a builder, and a weaver, and also, I think, a shoemaker. (...) So that the minimum state would consist of four or five men. (369c-369d)

At the same time, this enterprise of *meiosis*, of trimming down or of “world-reduction”, as Fredric Jameson might call it (2005: 270), has already been undermined by a kind of textual counter-energy. This consists in the well-nigh universal drive of *pleonexia*, of wanting more and/or better (Hintze, 2009: 20ff). Cephalus, who is seen “sitting garlanded on some sort of an easy chair” (Plato, 2003: 328c), professes to celebrate his release from the sensual and sexual appetites of a younger
age (329c-329d), but is uncomfortably reminded (by Socrates) that his supposedly stoic capacity to not let old age cause him unhappiness might have something to do with the material comforts guaranteed by his wealth (329e-330b); Thrasymachus is forced to admit that the unjust man is one who “wants more than his share” (*pleonèktein; idem* 349c), but also to concede that the just man does so as well, at least toward those who are unjust (*pleon ehein; pleonèktei*, 349c-349d); Glaucon professes his dissatisfaction with how easily Socrates has dispensed with Thrasymachus and requests a far more rigorous defense of justice as a good in itself (358a-358d), while Adeimantus argues that the objections raised by his brother are inadequate and have to be suitably reinforced (362d); and even Socrates admits that in his conversation with Thrasymachus he let himself get carried away and has lost the proper argumentative track, acting “like a greedy guest who grabs a taste of the next course before he has properly finished the last” (354b). A piggishness of sorts seems to prevail over everything prior to the discussion of the “city of pigs”, whether in the form of the sensual and sexual appetite of tyrants and bad men or in the lust for words and for verbosity, this last becoming so unmanageable that a conversation which originally seems to conclude in one book takes ten to finish.

It is then quite paradoxical, given the Republic’s early and prolific emphasis on a well-nigh global desire for more, that the city of pigs is both introduced in the context of a thought experiment in conceptual minimalism – in the cognitive benefits of making do with less – and one that is dispensed with quickly, after only a handful of words. No less strangely, the city as such seems to be the very embodiment of the rational and consensual restraint of appetitive desire (see, e.g., McKeen, 2004: 79-82) – in short, the very opposite of what modern western readers would be expected to imagine as a “city of pigs”. But the paradox is at least partly a superficial one. First of all, the “city of pigs” is no inverted anticipation of the porcine dystopia of *Animal Farm*, but a city of human beings that have only peremptorily and perhaps questionably been called pig-like. Secondly, it is crucial to keep differences in cultural semantics in mind: though pigs were not held in higher esteem in classical Greece than they tend to be in western cultures today, they were objects of contempt for entirely different reasons. The vices they emblemized were not lustfulness, avarice, filth and greed, but dull imbecility, lack of “cultured” refinement, lack of ambition, and hence, however implicitly, lack of that ethically ambiguous principle of excess that the Greeks called *pleonexia* and that Glaucon, who dismisses the city, certainly exhibits. Orwell, who
wanted his porcine Napoleon capable of both ambition and diabolical intelligence, is then at Plato’s antipodes in more ways than one.

II

But let us return to the question of the actual character of this widely misunderstood city. Cities, Socrates argues, generally originate in lack, and more precisely in the lack of individual self-sufficiency. Hence, the causal origin of political life is the fact that we cannot entirely supply for ourselves but need to collaborate with others to do so (369b). The city of bare necessity \( \text{anagkaiotē polis} \) would need only a handful of people – “four of five men”, as Socrates has said – to provide food, shelter and clothing (369d). But, as it turns out, the principle of the division and specialization of labor, which a reading of the Republic as a whole would reveal as virtually synonymous with the Socratic understanding of “justice” itself,\(^{12}\) would mean that these four or five would need to increase with the addition of others. These additional recruits of the “city of words” (369c) would help the four or five originally imagined do their work in more quantity and with better quality (370c). Since they would be able to supply them with the best available tools for their skills, they would free much of their time, so that these skilled artisans could concentrate on doing what they are best fit for. Socrates adds, however, that the city will also require imports; thus, he introduces a number of merchants besides the farmers and other workers of the original group of the city of bare necessity (371a). The city will also, he proposes, have to include a market for the exchange of goods, and hence retailers to staff it and some sort of currency to make trade possible (371 b-371d). Finally, it will need “wage-earners” \( \text{misthōtoi} \), by which Socrates seems to designate a group of proto-proletarians, to be distinguished from his original core of specialized craftsmen: people “who have no great powers of mind to contribute, but whose physical strength makes them suitable for manual labor” (371e). And this where the additive process comes to a (temporary) halt: Socrates asks Adeimantus if he does not now believe their imaginary city “full grown” (371e, \( \text{telea} \): “complete”, “perfect”) and Adeimantus provisionally agrees. What follows is Socrates’s intensely lyrical evocation of the contentment and happiness that would characterize such a city – the textual core of its candidacy for the status of the Republic’s forgotten utopia:

They will produce corn, wine, clothes, and shoes, and will build themselves houses. In the summer they will for the most part work unclothed and unshod, in the winter they will be clothed and shod suitably. For food they
Antonis Balasopoulos

will prepare wheat-meal or barley-meal for baking or kneading. They will serve splendid cakes and loaves on rushes or fresh leaves, and will sit down to feast with their children on couches of myrtle and bryony; and they will have wine to drink too, and pray to the gods with garlands on their heads, and enjoy each other’s company. And fear of poverty and war will make them keep the numbers of their families within their means. (372a-372c)

Temperance, conviviality, peaceful demeanor, spontaneous social harmony, vegetarian dietary habits, avoidance of cruelty to animals, spontaneous and organic spirituality: this, in so many words, is the life that many twentieth-century communitarians, especially since the late sixties, have found far more compatible with their ideals of the good life than Kallipolis itself, with its strict and militaristic outlook, its infamous prohibition of poets, its ascetic and vigilant guardians and its philosopher-kings. But Glaucon, the living embodiment of what the Republic will later identify as one of the three parts of the soul (cf. Plato, 2003: 441a, 441c-441d, 442b-442c) and as the feature specific to the Guardian class – namely thûmos, spiritedness in all its implications, including anger and aggression – is already annoyed by the description. “You picture them enjoying dinner without relishes” [opson, my translation], he remarks (372c). It does not seem a substantial objection, and Socrates is happy to oblige, always in word only, of course:

I had forgotten; they will have a few luxuries. Salt, of course, and olive oil and cheese, and different kinds of vegetables from which to make various country dishes. And we must give them some dessert, figs and peas and beans, and myrtle-berries and acorns to roast at the fire as they sip their wine. So they will lead a peaceful and healthy life and probably die at ripe age, bequeathing a similar way of life to their children. (372d)

But this is already, however unexpectedly, the last we will see of this city of peaceful contentment, for it is now that Glaucon makes his second, lethal intervention: “Really, Socrates, (...) that’s just the fodder you would provide if you were founding a community of pigs!” (372d). Surprisingly, Socrates takes no offense at the insult addressed against the virtuous community he has drawn, though he does come to its defense by providing its explicit characterization as “the true one, like a man in health” (372d). Instead of insisting on the importance of consensus on this momentous point, he is all too willing to concede that perhaps the procedure for identifying the origins of justice and injustice in the polis should move on, to a more complicated hypothetical state of affairs. Thus the city of pigs quietly gives way to the truphôsan polin, the city of luxury, which, as
Socrates warns, will also be a phlegmainousa polin: a “hot”, “feverish”, “swollen” city. It is there that all the sensual appetites contemporary readers would be predisposed to associate with the “piggish” gluttony of unfettered consumerism will be found: “a variety of delicacies, scents, perfumes, call-girls [hetairai] and confectionary”, and also the “fine arts of painting and embroidery” and materials like “gold and ivory” (373a). And it is there, in a delightful textual irony, that real pigs will appear, for the citizens of such a city will want pork rather than what Glaucon cholerically disdained as “pig fodder” for food (373c; see Hintze, 2009: 52-54).

III

Why does Socrates not insist on the virtue of the city of pigs before abandoning it for one he warns is a feverish and bloated one, a city of pigs in our own, contemporary understanding of the term? Why does he nonetheless not denounce it either? And why does he entirely demur from confirming or negating the existence in it of what he said he intended to find there, namely justice? This is a cluster of questions implicated in the considerable amount of contemporary critical disagreement over the meaning of the “city of pigs” and its place in the larger ethical, political and philosophical context of the Republic. Following (and extending) Donald R. Morrison’s initiative, I think we can sketch a number of conflicting interpretive positions. According to the first, the city is simply insignificant to the argument, a mere foil or a “false” start like the abortive discussion of individual justice in Book I (see Annas, 1981: 78; and Morrison, 2007: 251). In the second, the issue is rather that the city relies on a spontaneous harmonization of appetitive desires that is impossible, as Glaucon proves in deed rather than simply argument (see Reeve, 1988: 45-49, 171, 176-178; and Morrison, 2007: 251). A third position is that such spontaneous harmonization is possible within a community where “enlightened self-interest” prevails (McKeen, 2004: 80, 85), but that it is also highly “contingent” and dependent on “lucky circumstances” (idem 71, 90). A fourth position credits Glaucon’s point of view over Socrates’s by implicitly reading thēmos in light of the famous Aristotelian distinction between zein and eu zein, that equation of political life with a “good life” that is both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to bare, beastly life and hence furnishes the foundation of justice, even if such politicizing thēmos also involves an irreducibly dangerous, potentially bestializing element. Let us remember Hannah Arendt’s influential exposition of this Aristotelian (rather than Platonic) logic, according to
which “the city of pigs”, with its prudent “fear of poverty and war”, would hardly qualify as a political community, a polis proper:

To leave the household (...) demanded courage because only in the household was one primarily concerned with one’s life and survival. Whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and too great a love for life obstructed freedom, was a sure sign of slavishness. Courage therefore became the political virtue par excellence, and only those men who possessed it could be admitted to a fellowship that was political in content and purpose and thereby transcended the mere togetherness imposed on all (...) through the urgencies of life. The “good life”, as Aristotle called the life of the citizen, therefore was not merely better, more care-free or nobler than ordinary life, but of an altogether different quality. It was “good” to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process. (Arendt, 1998: 36-37; emphases added)17

A fifth position, that of Morrison himself, radically challenges the largely negative consensus on hūopolis by arguing that the city of pigs is not merely as stable as the Kallipolis, but also more organically unified and ethically superior – indeed, it “is the Republic’s ultimate utopia, its best city” (Morrison, 2007: 252). The problem is that in order for it to be realizable it must also be “possible to have a city whose citizens are like Socrates” (idem 253) – an eventuality which Socrates might be surmised to have abandoned as unlikely, particularly after witnessing Glaucon’s irate and impatient intervention. Finally, we might sketch a sixth interpretive direction, which foregrounds the idea that the ambiguities of pleonexia always already inform the dynamic of “the city of pigs”. The conceptually foundational (for both Plato and his contemporary readers) distinction between need and desire is never stable or secure; hence, the city is always already in the process of transforming itself into something that supersedes it, always already tending, however naively and unconsciously, toward the truphōsa polis which inevitably takes over it (see Hintze, 2009: 33-34, 36-39, 44-46).

I find some of these readings, particularly those that dwell on the ambiguities that haunt the professed minimalism of the hūopolis, strong and convincing. But they share a weakness that has been avoided only by approaches that resort to the rather idealist, not to mention anachronistically Aristotelian and perhaps more properly Arendtian emphasis on the specifically human and specifically political nature of “the good life”: they tend to say little of substance concerning the core
issue of the Republic – justice – and its import for the rather inglorious fate of the “city of pigs”. Let us cut straight to the chase: The hūopolis is evidently happy and peaceful as can be, but is it just? Or are there reasons for which it cannot serve as a model for justice and needs to be abandoned? These questions cannot be answered in the abstract, without taking into account the very specific meaning “justice” obtains in the Republic: it is the principle of balance and harmonization between differentiated, specialized and potentially warring classes of the city population and parts of the soul (Plato, 2003: 443d-443e, 444a-444b). Let us pause for a minute here: Platonic justice is a properly political affair, surely; it can be found where there is political life proper. But this also means that it cannot be a principle of pre-political life, though happiness and contentment and good health and piouness may well be. Is the city of pigs a political city, then? Can it be considered a state, as many contemporary translations in English have it?

It most definitely does not possess either an army or a ruler, for it does not have any need for either (see McKeen, 2004: 73). Hence, it is without that principle of violent division that, in a number of the foundational modern speculative narratives on the emergence of the “state”, generates the split between “society” or “community” and the properly “political” sphere in the same gesture with which it confers to the state its famous monopoly of legitimate force. Here is Engels, writing in 1884:

The state is therefore by no means imposed on society from without; (...) it is a product of society at a particular stage of development; it is the admission that this society has involved itself in insoluble contradiction and is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to exorcize. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interest, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict (...) and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state. In contrast to the old gentile organization, the state is distinguished firstly by the grouping of its members on a territorial basis. (...) The second distinguishing characteristic is the institution of a public force which is no longer immediately identical with the people’s own organization of themselves as an armed power. This special public force is needed because a self-acting armed organization of the people has become impossible since their cleavage into classes. (Engels, 1986: 208-209)

Genetically, the army of specialized warriors or Guardians is in fact a feature of the luxurious city and can only arise in it: the incessant and uncontrollable appetite with which it has been speculatively endowed
makes it imperialistically aggressive and prone to war (Plato, 2003: 373e-374a). But on the level of figuration, this only means a change of animal register, as the flabbily pacific figure of the pig is displaced by the belligerent one of the shepherd dog, itself an emblem of the political function Michel Foucault has described as “pastoral power”.21 “Don’t you think”, I asked, “that the natural qualities needed in a well-bred watch-dog have a certain similarity to those which a good young man needs for Guardian duty?” (375a). The watch-dog, Socrates explains, combines the qualities that would be vital for any Guardian, for it is capable of ferocity towards enemies and gentle and protective behavior towards friends – in other words, of the friend-enemy distinction which Carl Schmitt would place at the heart of the “concept of the political”.22 Dogs capable of making this distinction are of course trained and domesticated ones – dogs that have been habituated to their current function by being removed from their former kin and current deadly enemy, the wolf. Accordingly, near the end of the third book of the Republic, Socrates will observe that the Guardians must find a camp that “will best enable them to control any internal disaffection or to repel any attack by an external enemy, descending like a wolf [hōsper lūkos] on the fold” (415e).

Training – education – does not simply allow the Guardian class of watch-dogs to keep the sheepish artisans and workers of the city safe from the teeth and claws of armies of enemy wolves; it is, in essence, what keeps the watch-dogs themselves from reverting to enemy status, what maintains the precarious boundary line between dog and wolf, protective and destructive thūmos, friends and enemies, external and internal threats, the Guardian and the tyrant.23 “It would be the most dreadful disgrace for a shepherd to keep sheep-dogs so badly bred and trained that disobedience or hunger or some bad trait or other led them to worry the sheep and behave more like wolves than dogs” (415e). Just as the appetite for luxury, then, has created conditions that call for the protection of formerly pacific pigs by belligerent dogs, so has the dangerously ambiguous nature of the dog, its all-too-close proximity to its wolfish enemy, created the need for a privileged fraction of Guardians, the Guardians proper – recipients of a long and strict education and capable of holding the potentially dangerous class of armed “auxiliaries” under tight rein.

We have thus arrived, almost surreptitiously, at Kallipolis, which is precisely the city that will use rational, philosophical wisdom to restrain the violence of a professional soldiery against temptations that would be destructive for the city.24 Kallipolis is the city that needs true philosophers because it needs good soldiers, whom it needs, in turn, because its appetitive ambitions, those that elevate the city to properly political status,
are dangerous for its own good. In effect, Platonic justice sublates, in the properly Hegelian sense, both the spontaneous self-restraint that characterizes the swinish denizens of ἴουοπολίς and the pleonexia that drives all appetites in the τριφθόσα πολίς. Justice emerges in the text not as a spontaneous but as a mediated good, one that thought can gestate only after negating or purging the negative excesses of appetite and violence that have already intervened to sabotage the “naïve” philosophical romance with the utopia of the city of pigs. Christopher Rowe puts it with great acumen:

The “true”, “healthy” city, which satisfied itself with necessities, would itself have been a good and just one; in Glaucon’s “fevered” city, by contrast, with its requirement for all sorts of luxuries, justice will require additional measures to cure, or check, the “fever”. (...) Some mechanism is needed, not only to repel external enemies but to impose internal control if people are inclined to break the laws, and the auxiliaries will fulfill these roles – both of which, one might add, would apparently have been unnecessary if “fever” hadn’t been let into the city in the first place. (Rowe, 2007: 43, 45)

And there you have it: for justice to be conceptualized as a political virtue, one needs to imagine a πολίς proper, not a mere community for the mutual servicing of needs. In order to obtain that, one needs to engender a principle of division that the state will both embody and reputedly regulate or contain.25 And in order to obtain the state, one needs to accept not simply the thûmotic denunciation of mutually beneficial “cities of pigs”, but their philosophical forgetting as well. The Republic is the “mature” utopian romance between philosophy and the state, with the latter already construed as an institutional form of excess26 (a pleon chein) that is necessary in order to control and regulate appetitive and violent excesses. Philosophy must tolerate both appetitive and statist excess if it wants to justify and legitimate its own necessity as their educative instrument. No wonder that a contemporary green anarchist like Michael Becker wishes to underline the “tragic force” of Plato’s text, where the “inherent” justice of the “simple, primitive” city of pigs is sacrificed for the “failed project” of civilization (Becker, 2010: 3). Pigs have tended to become sacrificial victims all too often, not least when it comes to philosophers. But it seems to me a question of justice to keep in memory, with and against philosophy, the violence with which the Platonic text forgets not only “that political man is still animal” but also that, as far as its own figurative and representational operations are concerned, “the animal is already political” (Derrida, 2009: 14). It seems a question of justice to query this constitutive