Pierre DESTRÉE – Jan OPSOMER – Geert ROSKAM (Hgg.), Utopias in Ancient Thought. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde Bd. 395. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2021, XIV + 309 S., 3 s/w-Abb., EUR 129,95. ISBN: 978-3-11-073820-9

The publication of Thomas More's most famous work, *De optimo Reipublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia*, founded a precise genre, the so-called *utopia*. However, Thomas More was indebted to an ancient and well-established tradition, which could be considered – retrospectively – as "utopian thinking". The collective volume *Utopias in Ancient Thought* intends to reconstruct the main expressions of this genre in Antiquity: by considering examples from ancient philosophy, comedy, parody, and historiography, the authors offer insights into the birth and development of the utopian genre, which offered the background for More's *Utopia*. The volume collects the papers originally presented at a conference in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve in 2016; several other invited contributions were later added to the resulting proceedings. The volume analyses the topics of "Utopia" and "Golden Age" in ancient literature and philosophy with numerous in-depth analyses – not assigned to separated thematic sessions – each supported by rich and updated multi-language bibliographies. A useful *index locorum* concludes the volume.

The first paper by Giulia Sissa, *The Quest for the Best. Praise, Blame, Utopia* (p. 1-39), advances the following hypothesis: Athenian comedy founded the utopian genre, which is inextricably associated with "praise". Indeed, the utopian genre is a form of praise, i.e., a marvellous elegy of what is supremely excellent. In this way, it compels its public to pursue and achieve the best conditions and, at the same time, it makes people aware of any unordered assets of contemporary societies. In classical Athens, where public speeches, epideictic oratory, and the search for perfectionism thrived, comedy offered the opportunity to laugh in response to the ridicule of despicable customs and political decisions, so as to induce people to desire something better.

Stephen E. Kidd, in his *What Will We Do When We Get There? Utopia and Dicing in Greek Comedy* (p. 41-56), considers the two kinds of ideal conditions usually described in ancient literary traditions: paradise/afterlife (in the light of the "Golden Age" motif) and utopia. The first emphasizes the luxury, happiness, pleasure, leisure, abundance of food and drink, and play that one can experience in the afterlife as rewards for his or her past conduct. On the contrary, ancient depictions of utopian societies emphasize to happiness but not laziness. They hold in high regard virtue, self-commitment to the (common) good, and hard work: hence the absence of play. Indeed, utopias are conditions that must be achieved through self-improvement: behind utopias, there are no paradises

but something to attain by working hard and perfecting oneself; leisure is only a reward that comes in another dimension.

Thornton C. Lockwood's paper, *What Thomas More Learned from Herodotus About Utopia* (p. 57-76), reconstructs the presence of Herodotus in Thomas More's *Utopia*. According to Lockwood, Herodotus was a political thinker: he analysed the customs and practices of several people. This offered him the opportunity to reflect on problems concerning cultural assimilation and on the malleability of social, political, and gender roles, with some afterthoughts that deal with land distribution and economic inequality. In other words, his interest in political anthropology forced him to assume a theoretical or evaluative attitude towards politics. In this way, he evokes utopian motives in his political analysis, especially when focusing on past examples of perfect and well-ordered cities (the first Greek colonies), best constitutions, and good practices and institutions: these are all models that should be replicated. The same approach animates More's Utopia.

Carol Atack's contribution, *Temporality and Utopia in Xenophon and Isocrates* (p. 77-102), considers the presence of utopian motifs in Xenophon's and Isocrates' works. More precisely, the author highlights how utopia is connected, in their writings, both to past and future: examples of ideal societies can be found in the past, which thus becomes something to be achieved in the future and an occasion to despise the present condition. In Xenophon's *Lacedaemonion Respublica* and *Cyropaedia* and in Isocrates' *Panegyricus*, *Aeropagiticus*, *Helen*, and *Panathenaicus* we find a conservative and traditionalist attitude towards past societies, fixed in their (good) legal, moral, and constitutional arrangements, which serve to highlight Sparta's, Persia's, and Athens' present degeneration, especially if compared to their ancient utopian past.

Julia Annas, in her *Plato's Ideal Society and Utopia* (p. 103-119), analyses the three perfect cities depicted in Plato's dialogues. The *Kallipolis* of the *Republic* is a form of utopia; therefore, it does not offer an example of a constitution that must be established precisely as described by Plato; it is simply an element that helps people interpret the degeneration of present societies. Moreover, the Antediluvian Athens described in the *Timaeus-Critias* represents a model of a virtuous and ideal city, the opposite of Atlantis, a pure dystopia whose image mirrors democratic and imperial Athens. Finally, the Magnesia of the *Laws* represents, for Plato, the true perfect society that must be established in case a legislator rules over citizens who have already been suitably educated.

On the contrary, Dimitri El Murr, in his *Plato and Utopia: Philosophy, Power, and Practicability in Plato's* Republic (p. 121-143), considers the project of political and social reform outlined by Plato in his *Republic* in terms of practicability: a

fundamental element for its realization is to praise the figure of true philosophers. Their excellent nature is described in the central books of the *Republic*, which emphasize the desirability and practicability of a philosophical government after refuting the ridicule of the so-called "three waves". Plato is well aware that he needs another image of the true philosopher, one that defies the negative stereotypes of popular opinion. As such, persuasion of the superiority of the philosopher is a pivotal element in ensuring the future establishment of the *Republic*'s perfect society.

Antony Hatzistavrou's paper, *Plato and the Utopia Within Us* (p. 145-165), looks at the psychological underpinning of utopian models in Plato: through an appropriate reading of some of its dialogues, it is possible to sketch a utopia "within us", i.e., "the rule of reason", and how to realize it. This is viable through the subordination of irrational desires to rationality and, therefore, through the acquisition of a specific type of high-level knowledge, either dialectics (*Republic*) or the power to unify the various cardinal virtues (*Laws*). This rule of reason can be established either by receiving proper education, which exerts control over irrationality, or by relying on an institutionally controlled rule, in other words, by subordinating oneself to the institution of law.

Christoph Horn, *Aristotle's 'City of Our Prayers' Within the History of Political Utopianism* (p. 167-183), considers the case of Aristotle. It is certainly true that Aristotle attacked the feasibility and practicability of Plato's ideal cities of *Kallipolis* and Magnesia. However, in the later books of his *Politics*, he sketches a model of the ideal *polis*, the "city of our prayers", which relies on the normativity of virtue and happiness: the best city is the one that leaves room for its citizens to attain virtue – and thus happiness – and grants such virtuous citizens political power. Consequently, all forms of positive constitutions (kingdom, aristocracy, mixed constitution) are good as much as they respect this ideal model.

Suzanne Husson's paper, *Utopia and the Quest for* Autarkeia (p. 185-197), observes that those Cynics who claim to be self-sufficient and totally free do not legitimate and imply a solitary life, since there are different levels of self-sufficiency or *autarkeia*; as such, Diogenes of Sinope's utopian society, depicted in his *Politeia*, is not inconsistent with his practical ideal of self-sufficiency. First, there is personal *autarkeia*, namely when human good depends on nothing else but reason, soul, and virtue. Consequently, this does not mean that one should live individualistically and separated from the political context to which he or she belongs. Second, there is another form of *autarkeia*, which coincides with the attainment of the good through a contemplative life: nonetheless, philosophers have to perform ethical virtues since they are not simple intellects like, for ex-

ample, the Aristotelian god. Finally, there is proper Cynic *autarkeia*, which coincides mainly with a renunciation of corporeal and material desires: as such, Cynic sages do not pursue solitude, but a condition of no physical needs, from which originates freedom from social conventions, thirst for power, wealth, and prestige, in other words, moral liberty.

Gretchen Reydams-Schils's article, *Were the Later Stoics Anti-Utopians?* (p. 199-212), analyses the claim that later Stoics rejected utopianism, in contrast to the first generation of Stoics, such as Zeno of Citium, whose *Politeia* shows utopian motives: more precisely, later Stoics such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius stressed the importance of living "in accordance with nature" – i.e. aligning the rational nature of human beings with the nature of the universe – and its related corollary, namely that a person has no control over the actions and choices of other individuals; involvement in socio-political activities has modest expectations, because one cannot sway the reasoning of another citizen. Nonetheless, the Stoic sage will participate in politics since moral progress could be at work in socio-political communities; just as the sage is meant to guide ordinary human beings towards the best disposition, ideal politics can affect socio-political practices.

Sean McConnell, in his *Cicero and the Golden Age Tradition* (p. 213-229), considers Cicero's *De re publica* and *De legibus*, where he engages with the topic of the ideal state and just society, as well as the tradition of the Golden Age. Cicero finds a historical example of a perfect state (not a conceptual state) in Rome's history: good politicians, rational constitutions, and invaluable expressions of the best human nature were part of Rome's past; this description possesses a normative value, since past – and perfect – age must be restored; consequently, it works as a model for present conduct. Thus, Cicero is optimistic about implementing the ideal past state in practical politics.

Iris Sulimani's paper, *All Over the World: The Utopian Idea in Diodorus Siculus* (p. 231-254), analyses utopian literary motives in Diodorus Siculus. In his work, there are six islands explicitly described as utopian and ideal states located at the edges of the actual map of the world: the isle of Panchaea, of Iambulus and the Hyperboreans, the islands in Lake Tritonis, in River Triton, and in the Atlantic Ocean; they are all fertile, well-watered, and rich in precious metals so that their inhabitants do not need to work hard. Diodorus shows how they are part of the real world, for example by reminding his readers that they were the destination of mythical and historical journeys; moreover, they are described in a fashion to resemble real and well-known islands. As such, Diodorus subtly claims that utopia is part of the real world, its condition can be extended to other areas, and the extremes of the *oikoumene*, the "inhabited world", are reachable.

Inger N.I. Kuin's contribution, *Laughter in Lucian's Utopias of the Dead* (p. 255-276), considers utopian and humorous eschatological scenarios in some of Lucian's works. Following the tradition of gallows humour about death, dying, and the underworld, Lucian describes utopian post-mortem existence. In the case of the Island of the Blessed, there can be recognized the typical utopian motives of fertility and opulence; its inhabitants pass their time with music, poetry, and laughter, but they also quarrel and fight. This serves to cast doubt on the possibility that unlimited pleasure produces unlimited happiness; in fact, this may lead to ennui and over-satisfaction. Lucian's irony towards post-mortem eschatological happiness unveils this precise scenario. Moreover, in other depictions of the afterlife, which stress its soberer condition, Lucian ironically subverts the egalitarian world praised, for example, by the Cynics: as such, he offers a deflation of utopian and egalitarian worlds.

Finally, David Engels, in his *Tao Yuanming's 'Peach Blossom Source' and the Ideal of the 'Golden Age'* (p. 277-303), offers an analysis focused on the cultural comparison between Greek utopias and the ideal society depicted in the Chinese "Peach Blossom Source". The author claims that Greek utopias and Golden Age societies were usually established by gods and divine humans and placed under strong political institutions. On the contrary, the image of the perfect state praised in the Chinese "Peach Blossom Source" encourages a return to an ancient state of humanity – against contemporary decadence – and, as such, no subordination to strong political forms of government. Moreover, in this ideal society there are no god-like humans or divinities who lead people; there are only humans in their purest nature, who rely on individual morals – and not on the power of institutions and religion – to achieve the best condition.

The volume as a whole offers a very exhaustive and convincing analysis of the significant impact that the Utopia and Golden Age genres had in Antiquity: each contribution, if read singularly, is a valuable means for scholars who desire to enrich their understanding of a precise author. If read in succession, the articles offer a detailed reconstruction of the development and consolidation of this topic in the history of Greek and Roman philosophy and literature.

Dr. Federico Casella
University of Pavia (Italy)
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Sezione di Filosofia
Piazza Botta 6
27100 Pavia
Italy
E-Mail: f.casella02@gmail.com