The Greeks and the Utopia: an overview through ancient Greek Literature[*]

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Introduction

The ideal of a perfect life characterized by harmony both among men and between men and nature, apart from evil and sickness, immune to old age and even to death, a world so perfect that does not exist and/or could not, in the end, be realized: these ideals are widespread in almost all of the world cultures, and they constantly appear through times since the beginning of human history. When the present life does not satisfy one's expectations, when the present conditions seem to worsen more and more, it is common to dream of another life and of another world that are not simply 'other' than the present, but also – and foremost – a perfection of the present. This 'other' and 'perfect' life is usually located in a different time and/or different place[1]. As to time, the model of a happy and perfect life is usually projected to the primordial phase of human existence, the so-called "Golden Age", such an age that may be nostalgically recalled with and without the auspicious feeling of its rebirth[2]. As to place, the same model is usually located in a distant, unknown – or completely imaginary – area, often at the borders of the known world. The huge distance in terms of location between the unsatisfying real world and the 'other' world tends to confer fantastic traits to the latter, or, still better, traits of which one can just dream in the present, unsatisfying world.

In both cases, however, that model mostly tends to convey the specific trait of 'nonexistence'. As a matter of fact, the Greek-rooted term "utopia" literally, and significantly, means "no-place/no-where"[3]. Interestingly, this term has not been coined by the ancient Greeks. The first who used the word 'utopia' was the British philosopher Thomas More when, in 1516, he wrote about an inexistent, imaginary island in the Atlantic Ocean where he located a society characterized by a perfect socio-political system, with equality, tolerance, justice, pacifist attitude as hallmarks, and without any trace of misery; in short, a world far different from the current England in which More was living, a world that he named "Utopia". *De optimo Rei Publicae deque nova insula Utopia,* 1516 (= *On the best State and on the newly discovered Island Utopia*) is indeed

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[1] See, e.g., Farioli 2001, pp. 3-4; 187-188.

[2] See Gatz 1967, pp. 28-51; Zimmermann 1991, p. 60; Farioli 2001, pp. 15-17.

[3] Utopia is the result of a compound term consisting of the negative adverb 'ou', meaning 'not/no', and the word 'topos', meaning 'place'.

the title of the short work where More indulged in creating a perfect state in the "non-place" island[4].

Although the term is a modern creation, which means that the concept itself of utopia was stranger to ancient Greeks[5]; although, in his first usage, the term specifically refers to the politics and to a specific literary genre, i.e., the so-called "literary utopia"[6], utopian thought and utopian motifs are identifiable in ancient Greek literature and culture since its very beginning. The modern utopia itself with its political implications, as first theorized by More, traces back to an ancient Greek tradition of searching for the so-called *aristai politeiai* (= the best constitutions) whose first model is the *Res Publica* by Plato[7].

Utopian thought and motifs

An utopian motif is, for instance, the perfectly happy life dislocated in time and place. The first occurrence of this ideal life is found in the poem *Works and Days* of the archaic Greek poet Hesiod (8th. cent. BC). In ll. 109-120, within the concise history of humanity (the so-called 'myth of the five races of men') that the poet outlines to describe the gradual deterioration of life from the origin to the current world, Hesiod recalls the first age of men, the 'Golden Age', when men "lived like gods, with carefree heart, free and apart from trouble and pain", and when "the fertile earth produced fruit by itself" (translation by R. S. Caldwell, Focus 1987). The first occurrence of the same ideal dislocated in place, at the borders of the known world, can be found in Homer, *Odyssey* 7. 114-128, in the description of the land of the Phaeacians where Odysseus happened to stop in his homecoming journey[8], a land where fruit trees grew tall and flourishing at any time, in winter as well as in summer.

The difference, however, between these two occurrences does not simply concern the dislocation (time vs. space). The possibly nostalgic feeling identifiable in Hesiod's recall of the golden age – considering his reproach to and discontent with his current time (the "iron age": *Works and Days*, 174-201) – makes it be the mythic archetype of utopian thought and motifs more than Homer's description of what is one of the several remote places Odysseus touched in his unfortunate way home. Interestingly enough, in Hesiod we can also find – far before than Plato - the archetype of what later will become the root, so to say, of the modern utopia and utopian thought in terms of theorization of a perfect political construction. In another passage of his *Works and Days* (ll. 225-251), while explaining the benefits of respecting Justice (*Dike*) and disregarding Outrage/Violence (*Hybris*), Hesiod set the picture of two far different cities against each other: the city ruled by *Hybris* – that is, an equivalent of the condition of

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[4] Ferguson 1975, p. 7 suggests that More intended a pun on 'eutopia', which means 'good, favourable place'. On the ambiguity of the origin of 'utopia' from 'ou-topos' and 'eu-topos', with reference to More's coinage, see also Quarta 1987, pp. 188-192.

[5] It is very significant to note that the term itself does not exist in the ancient Greek vocabulary. The absence of a word is symptomatic of the absence of the concept that word embodies.

[6] It is an almost common opinion that utopia as literary genre consisting of political and philosophical writings appears only in modern time, approximately in the 16th.-17th. centuries: see Momford 1969, pp. 101-109; Ferguson 1975, p. 7; Zimmermann 1991, p. 56; Farioli 2001, p. 5.

[7] On More's debt to Plato, see Mumford 1922, pp. 11-12, Farioli 2001, p. 7. The scholarship concerning More's *Utopia* if very extensive. For a good summarizing analysis, see Davis 1981, pp. 41-66.

[8] See Baldry 1956, pp. 4-7; Ferguson 1975, pp. 13-14; Zimmermann 1991, pp. 59-60; Farioli 2001, pp. 20-22.

his current time – and the city ruled by *Dike* – which is something Hesiod hoped for and, in some way, proposed as model of the ideal city-state. It is indeed a city where famine and disaster never haunt men, the earth bears men food in plenty and peace prevails. Despite the clear idealized undertone of these Homeric and Hesiodic images, both poets did not have any awareness of the utopic nature of them, that is, there was not any 'utopistic' intention behind those images.

The ancient Greeks thus did not have a conscious concept of utopia, nor did they consciously formulate utopias. Nonetheless, since Hesiod the two fundamental traits of the modern concept of utopia can be identified, namely: (1) the ideal of a perfect and blessed life, immune to any troubles and full of every kind of goods, combined with (2) the ideal of a perfect state, where justice and peace predominate.

The combination of these motifs and the further development that each of them, both separately and together, later undergo in ancient Greek culture, have made it difficult to classify their literary expressions, that is, to assess to what degree a work, or a portion of a work, can be considered as being an utopia. However, the specificity of the literary genres in which we can find 'utopian-oriented' works, and the influence that the different historical-political conditions have had in shaping those works from the archaic to the post-classical period (8th.- 3rd. cent. BC), require an attempt of classification.

'Utopian-oriented' works: an attempt of classification

The multiplicity of the conceptions that the several scholars who have so far focused on utopia with reference to the ancient world have produced is disconcerting[9]. The multiplicity and its disconcerting effect are, indeed, a sign of the difficulty to deal with this specific topic when it refers to Greece, where – as said above – utopian literature did not exist *stricto sensu*. One of the major difficulties that scholars have had to face consists of finding the right frames in which to enclose the 'utopian-oriented' works of ancient Greeks. The age-old debate concerning the definition itself of utopia certainly contributes to that difficulty[10]. The dynamic relation between vision and reality is often at issue in defining utopia and is what scholars often do not agree on. If vision is a creation of a mental image, i.e., an image that exists only in our mind, its starting point is, however, the reality, be that mental image abstraction or release from reality. Abstraction and release may confer different traits on utopia and, in some way, determine the different purposes of the utopia itself. Abstraction implies a process of distillation, so to say, that is the removal of something from something else along with an inevitable subsequent replacement for the removed parts. For instance, removing all unpleasing aspects from a certain concrete situation and replacing them with newly created aspects, i.e., the *ideal* aspects to which one may strive, is an act of abstraction from reality. Release rather implies distraction, a departure from reality in terms of temporary evasion from its narrow and unpleasing rules by replacing it with an imaginary world. Both abstraction and release imply a replacement, and utopia is nothing but that replacement. Where abstraction marks the creation of an utopia, the

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[9] For a synthesis of the above mentioned multiplicity, with indication of detailed bibliography, see Zimmermann 1991, pp. 55-56.

[10] About the debate on the concept of utopia, see Davis 1981, espec. pp. 12-20; Verra 1985; Dawson 1992, p. 10; Colombo 1987, espec. pp. 11-16.

purpose may be that of offering a plausible alternative to the unsatisfying present; whereas evasion from that present may be the result of an utopia motivated by the desire of seeking an immediate release from the difficulties or frustrations of the current life. From here a general classification of *utopia of escape* and *utopia of reconstruction* originated[11]. The first is a *purposeless* utopia, "a sort of house of refuge" to which to flee when it becomes too complicated to carry through the hard reality. It is a substitute for the concrete world that leaves it the way it is. The second is a *purposive* utopia, it attempts to provide a condition for the release from the reality in the future by seeking to change the current world, or to reconstruct it. The reconstruction would concern not simply the physical/material environment (institutions, socio-political system etc.) but – and foremost - the mental attitudes of the beings that inhabit it, which means to create a new set of habits and values, different net of relationships, and so forth[12].What both kinds of utopia have in common is, again, their starting point, that is, an unsatisfactory reality, which is usually a time of decay.

Utopias of reconstruction

By applying the above classification to ancient Greek culture, we may say that Plato's *Res Publica*, which is regarded as the unquestionable ancient example of utopia – the way in which utopia is conceived starting from Thomas More[13] - belongs to the *utopias of reconstruction*[14]. Plato's work dates from the time of both the social disintegration that the Peloponnesian War[15] had provoked and the degeneration of the democratic system established since Pericles, a system that entrusted political power to the majority of the people, which could have not been really adequate to decide on political issues[16]. In proposing the new, ideal society Plato advocates the 'competence' principle: not everyone has the right to administer the politics, since not everyone has equal capacity to rule. Only those who possess appropriate political skills can govern a state. Making political decisions requires good judgment; it requires wisdom which, in Plato's philosophy, consists of knowledge of the right, noble, good and advantageous. And, to Plato's eyes, the philosophers are those who possess this knowledge. They must be chosen from among the smartest and most courageous children, and must undertake a long, sophisticated educational training[17]. When they reach the last stage of their education, being illuminated by the idea of the good, they are the only ones able to reflect on such timeless values as justice, beauty, truth, and moderation, and to govern the city accordingly[18]. As politics requires competence so understand and run all the other spheres that characterize a society, the 'competence' principle runs parallel to that of specialization which, in turn, inevitably leads to a stratified society. Indeed Plato proposes a state organized into three specialized classes: beside the Philosopher-rulers,

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[11] See Mumford 1922, pp. 12-15.

[12] See Murmford 1969, pp. 21-23.

[13] That is, as product of political-philosophical theorization: see above nn. 8, 9. See also Bertelli 1987, p. 224 and n. 12.

[14] On Plato's project see Mumford 1922, pp. 29-56; Ferguson 1975, pp. 61-79; Bertelli 1987, pp. 228-235; Quarta 1985; Id. 1987, pp. 175-176; Schofield 2000, pp.194-249.

[15] The Peloponnesian War was one of the most crucial events in ancient Greek history; it was the war between the two chief city-states, Athens and Sparta, for the control over the entire nation. It lasted about thirty years (431-404) and ended up with the defeat of Athens and the decline of its splendor.

[16] On Plato's criticism of the democracy, see *Res publica* 557a-564a.

[17] See Plato, *Res publica* 484d, 539e.

[18] See Plato, *Res publica* 501b, 517b.

which constitute the leading class, there are the 'Auxiliares', and the 'Artisans/Producers'. The 'Auxiliares' are the soldiers whose basic task is to defend the city against external and internal enemies; the 'Artisans/Producers' are the rest of people that provide the labor force, so to say. The success of this ideal state depends not only upon the wise decisions of the philosopher-rulers; it rather depends upon the harmonious interaction among the three classes which takes place when each class performs its own role appropriately, and does not try to take over the functions of the other classes (*Resp.* 433a-e)[19]. To Plato's eyes, this is a state where justice prevails. Indeed, according to the appropriate meaning of the Greek term for justice, i.e. *dike*, justice is the equity that assigns to each individual and social group its due part, and ensures that each "does one's own work" (*Resp.* 433a)[20].

One of the main objections, if not the main in absolute terms, that any utopia of reconstruction has to face concerns its realizable nature, i.e., how much it is capable of taking place. Plato is not an exception and he has been criticized by his own disciple Aristotle because of the inapplicable traits of his political model[21].

Utopias of escape

The engagement in politics is the typical and prevailing trait characterizing works and projects classifiable as utopias of reconstruction. As to ancient Greece, this is due to the centrality of the *polis*-life[22], that is, of the community life, in the interests of all citizens who, thanks to the democratic system and traditional values, were always actively involved in any event and activity: from the public debate on specific issues to the festivals' organization. The central importance of the life of the *polis* is the hallmark of the 5th BC, when the splendor of ancient Greek civilization reaches its apogee. After the disastrous Peloponnesian Wars between the two chief *poleis* (Athens and Sparta) and with the conquests of Alexander the Great (4th. cent. BC), all ancient Greek social and cultural institutions suffered from a deep, irremediable crisis. Hence, a progressive change in content and style of the expressions of the Greek utopian thought takes place. Novels telling of wonderful places, mostly islands, located far away, at the extremities of the world, where to take refuge from the unsatisfying present flourishes between the 4th and the 2nd. cent. BC. Indeed, it is in this period that stories of marvelous voyages to exotic, happy places are written for the very first time. It is worthy to mention *The land of Merope* by Theopompus from Chios who projects in that imaginary land the dream of

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[19] So Plato says: "Each one man must perform one social service in the state for which his nature is best adapted...; ... to do one's own business and not to be a busybody is justice".

[20] The Greek word for justice, *dike*, implies a kind of distributive meaning in that it expresses what is just for each individual to be rendered . Indeed, the homonym divine personification *Dike* is the one that assigns the due portion of justice in terms of reward and punishment accordingly to each circumstances (see, *e.g.*, Hesiod, *Works and Days* 222-251, which I partially quoted above).

[21] See Aristotle, *Politics* II, 7.1266a, 32ff. On Aristotle's criticism of Plato's 'ideal' state, see Lanza 1971; Bertelli 1977; Id. 1987, pp. 235-239; Stalley 1991. In Aristotle, we find information concerning other elaborations of ideal political models, or better 'utopias of reconstruction', that preceded Plato's *Res publica*, namely that of Hippodamus and that of Phaleas, datable between the mid and the end of the 5th. cent. BC. To Aristotle's eyes, both "are nearer to those which have been actually established and by which states are governed at present" than the model proposed by Plato (*Politics* 2.1266a ss.); their objectives were regarded as more practical and accomplishable and, thus, able to reconstruct the current society. On Hippodamus' and Phaleas' works see Bertelli 1987, pp. 244-248; Dawson 1992, pp. 21-26, 29-31.

[22] Polis is the typical Greek term connoting the political units into which ancient Greece was divided, that is, the so called 'city-state'.

a reborn Golden Age; *The city of the Sun* by Iambulos who tells of a wonderful island in the Indian Ocean where he landed as shipwrecked and where he found a perfectly happy society. These novels are mostly classified by scholars as expressions of the so-called 'Fantastic' Literature, and are regarded as model of the modern utopian literature. These novels recuperate utopian motifs that we found in earlier expressions of Greek literature, such as the myth of the Golden Age, motifs now intentionally proposed to offer an escape from the real world. They thus mark a definite shift from the commitment in reconstructing the socio-politic reality to the release from it[23].

Between utopias of reconstruction and utopias of escape: the comedy

In addition to the philosophical theorization and the novels where, in different times and with different purposes, as we have just seen, Greek utopian thought and motifs develop, there is a peculiar literary genre that plays a major role with reference to the topic here under discussion. It is the comedy, namely the so-called 'Old/Attic' comedy which, together with tragedy, flourished in the 5th cent. BC.

In ancient Greece dramatic spectacles, mostly consisting of comic and tragic performances, were the core of civic, religious festivals, such as the Great Dionysia[24], that played an essential role in the life of the city-states (*poleis*), in particular in the life of classical Athens. They did not constitute a mere form of entertainment intended for pleasure of a casual audience. The audience, as well as the organizers and most of the performers, were citizens and were present in their role as member of the community. The plays themselves were, in several respects, about the city. According to the specifics of the literary genres to which they belong, while tragedy pursues the 'pitiful and fearful', comedy pursues the 'ridiculous' (see Aristotle's *Poetics* chap. 5 and 6). And, whereas ancient Greek tragedy tended to use traditional myths as plot, comedy tended to superimpose a fantastic situation on the real, current world - i.e. the city life - by making fun of that world which was, in the end, the basis of the fantasy itself. The pursuit of ridiculous and the fantasy contribute to a quite common view of comedy as meant to temporarily release the audience from anxiety and daily preoccupations. The laughter that the comedy provokes progresses from the restraint imposed by the society, with all its demands and problems, to the freedom[25], in terms of releasing from inhibitions, fears, cares, so that people may enjoy the moment and relax.

This viewpoint is generally traced back to Bakhtin's theory concerning the Carnival as celebration of a temporary liberation from "the prevailing truth and from the established order". In this perspective, laughter is essentially an assertion of freedom[26]. In the last decades Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival has been often used as tool of literary

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[23] See Bertelli 1987, pp. 239-243; 248-252.

[24] The great Dionysia or City Dionysia were an annual festival devoted to the god Dionysos, the patron of theater and wine. They were celebrated in the spring and represented a major focal point of communal reorganization.

[25] It would be, however, important to note that laugher and comedy are not completely, or not necessarily, interrelated. As Sypher says, "Comedy may, in fact, not bring laughter at all; and, certain tragedies may make us laugh hysterically" (1956, p. 205). Similar distinction between laugher and comedy is argued by Potts 1948, p. 19. It is an important distinction which applies, as we will see, to some of ancient Greek comedies that would provoke a bitter smile rather than laughter.

[26] The major part of Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival is in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (trans. by H. Iswolsky - (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). The quotation is from *Rabelais* cit., p. 10.

criticism, and as such it has been applied to ancient Greek comedy, as well[27]. Indeed, in ancient Greek comedy we do find two basic motifs that typically mark the so-called "carnivalesque" literature: the 'Land of Plenty' – also known as 'Land of Cokaygne' – and the 'Upside down Worlds'. Carnival, in Bakhtin's definition, is a time of feasting and enjoying the material world, as well as a time when hierarchies are suspended and official authority is subverted and mocked to a point to determine a reversal of the real and typically dominant order. While the 'Land of Plenty' motif embodies the material enjoyment promoted by the Carnival, the 'Upside down Worlds' expresses the subversion or, still better, the reversal of the normal hierarchies characterizing the present, real world. Both represent an utopian interruption into the ordinary course of the real, current life.

The 'Land of Plenty' motif presents the same traits of the utopian motif of the 'Golden Age': it is a place where there is no need to work since there is food in abundance which is spontaneously, by itself – so to say - produced and offered to men. More emphasis is put on the sophisticated elaboration of any sort of meat. While in the utopian motif of the 'Golden Age' the fertile earth simply produced fruits by itself, in the 'Land of Plenty' there is abundance of tasty dishes that self-reproduce; or, by replacing the natural products, these sophisticated dishes run in the rivers, or fall from the sky as rain. Like the 'Golden Age', so this land is characterized by ideal conditions of peace and equality. Yet, the gastronomic trait is what prevails[28]. The plot of several ancient Greek comedies is built on the 'Land of Plenty' motif. The 'Land' itself is differently located in time and space in each comedy: in Aristophanes' *Fryers*, for instance, and in Pherecractes' *Miners*, it is located in the Underworld; in Pheracrates' *Persians* this ideal hedonistic land is identified with a far away country; in Teleclides' *Amphictyons* it is projected in a remote, past age[29]. In all cases, it represents an alternative, perfect world, a world that does not exist; hence the generic label which is applied to these plays, i.e.,'Comic Utopian'.

The 'Upside Down World' motif refers to the reversal of the normal hierarchies and the traditional values characterizing the real world. The typical kinds of hierarchies' reversal that this utopian motif conveys are the gynaecocracy – where the women are in power and represent the civic authority - and the zoocracy – where the authority is held by animals. Titles of comedies, such as the *Fishes* by Archippus, the *Old Women* by Pherecrates and the *Soldieresses* by Theopompus, say us much about this utopian motif that ancient comedy developed[30].

As said above, both motifs refer to traits that some scholars consider as being in common with the Carnival; hence the view of ancient comedies' performance as an oasis, where there is to temporarily escape from the reality, has been postulated. There are, however, at least two objections to make in front of this view, one pertaining to the

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[27] About the application of Bakhtin's theory to ancient comedy, see: Carriere 1979; Rosler 1991; Mastromarco 1992, pp. 364-366; Silk 2000, pp. 75-76, 307; Faraioli 2001, pp. 27-137.

[28] On this motif see Farioli 2001, pp. 10-12 and 221-224; Davis 1981, pp. 20-22; with special emphasis on the gastronomic component see Pellegrino 2000.

[29] The above mentioned comedies did not survive entirely; the number of fragments that from those comedies remained is such to allow scholars to rebuild partially the plot and to discuss about them with reference to the utopia issue, too (see, e.g., Pellegrino 2000; Farioli 2001). Only eleven comedies have entirely survived from the antiquity, and all of them are Aristophanes' plays.

[30] See Farioli 2001, pp. 13, 139-186.

specifics of the 'Upside Down World' motif, the other concerning the intrinsic nature of ancient Greek comedy itself. As to the first objection, it has been observed that representations of the 'Upside down World' constitute what is called 'dystopia' rather than utopia. Dystopia is defined as negative utopia in that the imaginary society is one that, by reversing the current reality, ends up emphasizing its negative traits to such a paroxysmal degree that it becomes a negative and undesirable society. While utopia refers to the model of a just, happy and perfect society for which to strive, dystopia rather refers to the model of a pervert society from which to protect oneself[31]. This kind of vision may rather serve to unmask the flaws of the actual world. The ridiculous way in which this kind of representation is proposed in ancient comedy still makes it a tool of releasing people from the reality through laughter – as the Carnival's theory applied to comedy would demand. But, laughter – we may point out – is twofold: it is lighthearted and joyful on one hand, deriding and jeering on the other. The latter well fits some basics features of ancient comedy, such as parody, satire and personal abuses. These considerations lead to the second objection mentioned above which pertains to the intrinsic nature of ancient comedy, that is, its being inextricably embedded in all aspects of the life of the *polis*. 'Political' is, indeed, a typical adjective scholars use when they refer to ancient Greek comedy, or, still better, to some plays of the main representative of this literary genre, Aristophanes. Although the connotation of Aristophanes' comedies as political is somewhat ambiguous and object of dispute, the term is appropriate if used in its original, ancient meaning of "of, for, or relating to citizens; having relation to public life"[32]. Indeed, any dramatic action in Aristophanes' plays has its starting point in issues pertaining to the *polis*' life, from the exhausting war between Athens and Sparta (the Peloponnesian War) to the crisis of the theater, from the corrupt politicians to the new intellectual trend, that of the Sophists, and so forth. Invective, abuses and criticism both of current vicious situation and of prominent, individual members of the *polis* are widespread in comedy and carried on through jokes[33]. This means that the reality itself is never completely transcended, no matter the presence of utopian motif, such as the 'Land of Plenty' and the 'Upside down World'. Yet, ancient comedy in general, and Aristophanes' plays in particular are often discussed and interpreted in terms of 'utopian' work.

Aristophanes and utopia: a controversial issue

Among the ancient comic playwrights Aristophanes is the most well known, and his creativity is almost unparalleled. Typically Aristophanes' plays picture Athens as being in the grip of deep troubles (as it was in the reality!), such as – as said – the Peloponnesian War, corrupt politicians, dangerous intellectual trends, unjust legal system, and so forth. To overcome the current problem, a problem that is not imaginary at all, on the contrary it strictly pertains to the real, current life of the *polis*, the

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[31] See Colombo 1987, p. 11-12. The term dystopia has a Greek root, as well. It is the result of a compound word consisting of the prefix 'dys' – meaning 'hard, bad, unlucky' – and the term 'topos'. It thus literally means "hard, bad place'. As such it can be seen as the opposite of utopia/eutopia. Despite the clear etymological meaning, scholars do not completely agree on the definition of dystopia. Some use 'anti-utopia' as synonym of dystopia; some others objected to this use of 'anti-utopia' because it conveys a mutual exclusion between utopia and dystopia, whereas utopia does not completely exclude dystopia: both are projected in an imaginary world with different characteristics, yet imaginary, not-existing. On the difficulty to define dystopia and on its ambiguous relation to utopia, see Moneti 1987, pp. 321-340.
[32] See LSJ, *s.v. politkos*.
[33] See D'Angeli-Paduano 1999, pp. 25-33.

protagonist of the play, the so-called comic hero, devises a fantastic plan, which proves the poet's inexhaustible imagination. To give a few examples both of the unlimited imagination that determines the comic plot, and of its link with the current reality, when the war has become tiresome and intolerable and the civic assembly did not want to listen to the good reasons for making peace, Dicaeopolis – one of the best known Aristophanic hero – makes a private treaty with the enemy (in the comedy *Acharnians*), and Trygaeus – another well known Aristophanic hero – flies to heaven on a beetle in order to free and bring down on earth the goddess Peace that has been imprisoned by War (in the comedy *Peace*). Then, both heroes celebrate the achieved peace with a banquet characterized by abundance of tasty dishes and wine, which recall the motif of the 'Land of plenty'. As such, indeed, the prospective world at peace is pictured. If Athens itself has become tiresome Peiseteros and Euelpides – other main Aristophanic characters – decide to run away and to build a new city in the sky, which is then celebrated through an abundant banquet, as well (in the comedy *Birds*). And, if the living poets are inadequate, incapable of providing Athenian people with inspirational and educative plays, Dionysus – another Aristophanic protagonist – undertakes a trip into the Underworld in order to find and take back an old poet (in the comedy *Frogs*).

These very few and concise examples of Aristophanes' plots show an utopian tone in that the alternative plan for overcoming the problem and reaching a 'perfect' *status* belongs to the realm of the imagination, and nowhere (= *utopia*) can it be realized[34]. Furthermore, that alternative plan does offer a moment of relax and release from the reality through the amusement that the comicality of the plan itself produces. Yet, Aristophanes' plays cannot be seen as just proposing utopias either of escape or of reconstruction. Behind and through the specific comic plan there is mostly the denouncement of the flaws of the real world and the stimulus to reflect on it and to promote a reaction. Personal abuses and references to historical facts, ridiculous that may be, anchor the audience in the reality by working as a constant reminder. That of Aristophanes is, indeed, a 'serious-comic' poetry, i.e., a combination of the serious and the comic "into a consonance which allows us to laugh at the moral incongruities of life..." with the purpose of making us more sensible and self-critical35.

The seriousness of Aristophanes' plays is object of long debate[36]. Scholars question whether Aristophanes must be taken seriously in all of his personal attacks or one should think that is his just making joke of prominent members of 5th century Athenian society, to make people laugh at them. The debate has produced a polarized view according to which Aristophanes is either a satirist or a clown. Therefore, for some, Aristophanes' comedy was intended to have a strong effect on the political and social status of Athens, by promoting a civic awareness of the surrounding reality, and thus prompting reactions. For others, the poet meant only to amuse and to grant, through his fantastic inventions, a means of evading reality.

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[34] In addition, the gastronomic component – that is, the marvelous banquet through which the new condition is celebrated – contribute to the utopian tone: see Zimmermann 1991, pp. 69-70.

[35] Giangrande 1972, espec. 7-12; 15-19. On the 'serious-comic' component of Aristophanes' poetry see Ercolani 2000 and Lauriola 2009. Concerning the laughter as vehicle of teaching serious thing, see also Sutton 1980, 2, Vilardo 1976, espec. 81.

[36] See, *e.g.*, Silk 2000, pp. 37-38. Within the myriad scholarly works on the issue, for a good synthesis of the positions see Napolitano 1999 and Lauriola 2009.

It is evidently an open-ended question, and one cannot but side with the view that appears most likely on the grounds that both texts give and of some authorial statements that we can find in them. Aristophanes' several claims to the pedagogical task of poetry in general (see, *e.g.*, *Frogs* 1030-1035; 1054-1055, *etc*) and of comedy in particular (see, *e.g.*, Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 500-501; 633-658, *etc.*) have led me to have no doubt about the seriousness of the poet's message conveyed through laughable, witty and fantastic ideas[37]. Aristophanes' laughter could thus serve a serious, moral purpose, and not simply amusement and evasion.

Among Aristophanes' plays three in particular have been seen as interpretable in terms of utopia. These three comedies are *Birds*, *Lysistrata* and *Women at Parliament*[38]. What they have in common with reference to the specific features of the utopia is the 'Upside Down World' motif: the hierarchies are reversed and the power is held by animals in *Birds* – although, as we will see, only in words – and by women in *Lysistrata* and *Women at Parliament.* Yet, this feature does not make them really 'utopian' play[39].

Lysistrata **and** *Women at Parliament*

Lysistrata is the third of the so-called pacifist-comedies, *i.e.*, plays where the pursuit of peace is at issue, *Acharnians* and *Peace* are the other two.

Lysistrata, the comic heroine, is an Athenian woman who takes the initiative to form an alliance with the all Greek women that, putting aside their hostility[40], join together with the purpose to substitute the men in the political decisions and to obtain peace at any cost. They thus organize a kind of *coup d'etat* by a sex strike to force their men to negotiate the peace. They also take over the Acropolis to control the state treasury that men use to fund their war. The operation of the strike is extremely funny. The plan is, evidently, fantastic and – as said – proposes the utopian motif of the 'Upside Down World': the war and the authority – typically male prerogative – will be a women's business from now on[41]. These aspects, together with the joyful success of the plan, have led scholars to consider the play as a form of utopia. Some think it is a utopia of escape; a few others consider it as utopia of reconstruction, or, still better, *Praktische Utopie*, 'practical' in that it produces a situation which, although appears fantastic, in principle is realizable, and is not certainly 'beyond human capabilities'[42].

'In principle' we may agree with this interpretation, but in fact Aristophanes did not mean to propose an alternative plan. He was denouncing the miserable state of war and the inability of men to find a firm solution. By granting women the power and the

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[37] Indeed, when asking inspiration for composing, so the poet says in *Frogs* 389-390: "May I utter much that's funny, and also much that' s serious" (Translation by J. Henderson, *Aristophanes* LCL 1998-2002). Additionally, accurate analysis of the lexicon of Aristophanes' comedy (see, *e.g.*, Taillardat 1965[2]; Noël 1997; Zanetto 1999; Wilkins 2000; Beta 2004; Lauriola 2006, 2006a, 2009a), and of some peculiar dramatic devices the poet uses (Lauriola 2009) tend to confirm the serious undertone here under discussion.

[38] See, for instance, Schwinge 1977 (who actually interpreted all comedies of Aristophanes as form of utopia: see below); Bertelli 1987, pp. 248-250; Zimmermann 1991, pp. 63-64, 75-94.

[39] With reference to this issue, I think it is significant the fact that in a book devoted the utopia of the classical world, such as that of Ferguson (1975) , and in more generic books outlining the history of utopia, such as those of Mumford (1922) and Davis (1981) – there is no mention of Aristophanes' plays.

[40] The hostility is due to the fact that the women belong to opposite sides involved in the war.

[41] That the task of women was to care for domestic choirs, while that of men was to go to fight finds its first expression in the 8th. century BC poet Homer (see *Iliad,* 6. 490-493).

[42] Schwinge 1977, p. 57.

initiative to put an end to war by such a peculiar operation as the sex strike, the poet seems to bitterly imply that no rational solution of the political problem is possible. The whole comedy is interwoven with polemic references to real personages and situations responsible for the decline of the current world, which implies an anchor in the reality and, on the author's side, a commitment in making people reflect and react. Therefore, *Lysistrata* seem rather to be a bitter satire of the current situation than a pure utopia.

Similar considerations apply to *Women at Parliament*, with a difference, however, to be taken into account: the possibility to refer to it as 'dystopia'. Like in *Lysistrata* so in this comedy women involve themselves in politics. This comedy was composed and performed in a period of extreme crisis for Athens that, after being defeated in the Peloponnesian War, was impoverished and fallen. Led by the Athenian Prassagoras, a group of women plan to sneak in the city-assembly to persuade men that the state was so deteriorated that there was no other way of escaping but to try the only thing never thought: to entrust the city's rule in the women's hands. Disguised as men to take part of the city's assembly and propose their plan, the women succeeded, and, when it is the moment to practically take the power, the leader Prassagoras announces the new political settlement, *i.e.,* a form of communism according to which not only the properties and goodies in general are available to everyone and must be commonly shared, but also the women: "All women – Prassagors declares – and men will be common and free, no marriage or other restrain there will be" (ll. 613-614).

The presence of the utopian 'Upside Down World' motif and partially of the 'Land of Plenty' motif; the proposal and fictional realization of a new form of society, all of these traits would justify the interpretation of this comedy as a literary expression of utopia, a *Mechanische Utopie*, that is an utopia which not simply is realizable, but it also shows the possibility of "determining a change that can really guarantees an extremely happy condition of life…"[43].

In fact, considering some details of the newly proposed political form – such as the paradox and/or unpleasing situation determined by the rules regulating the male-female relations (unpleasing at least for a good portion of the citizens)[44] – there is the permanence of some negative attitude responsible for the decline of the state – such as the reluctance to obey the law (ll. 746-833) and the tendency to draw one's own wages out of the city store and to end caring for the state when that salary ends (ll. 205-206). What Aristophanes seemed to put on the stage is a 'dystopia' or negative utopia, if not a parody of contemporary communist-oriented theories that the poet thus satirized by emphasizing paradoxical outcomes[45]. The bitter tone underpinning this comedy, the absurdities that, in the end, the alternative form of society arouse to a point to become a nightmare for somebody, lead to think that Aristophanes is here proposing another way to denounce and reflect on the reality, though a fantastic way, as just it happens in the other comedies.

Birds and utopia

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[43] Schwinge 1977, p. 62.

[44] For instance, the new rule according to which the least favored, such as ugly and/or old women, must come first (ll. 618-619) is certainly a nightmare for men, as it is well shown by the scene in which three old women, following this rule, quarrel over and harass a young men who is trying to make his way to his sweetheart in a balcony (ll. 936-1111): the humor is rather reduced to mere nastiness.

[45] See Farioli 2001, p. 13 and 26.

Composed and performed in 411 BC., after a series of failures on Athenian side in the Peloponnesian War and a *coup d'etat* resulting in the establishment of an oligarchic government, the comedy *Birds* is considered by some scholars as Aristophanes' masterpiece[46]. It is certainly the most complex and most ambiguous among the comedies that have entirely survived until nowadays. Generally speaking, *Birds* has been seen as the one that would mark a shift some scholars identify throughout Aristophanes' career, that is, the shift from a serious 'political' commitment in the very first comedies to a kind of depoliticization in the later comedies, in favor of more 'escapist' and joyfully fantastic plays, including the two ones we have above analyzed[47]. The 'role', so to speak, usually ascribed to the comedy *Birds* as marking the border between two different kinds of Aristophanes' comedies ('political' and 'depolicitized') is certainly due to the dramatic plot of this comedy that, perhaps more than any other, has always evoked the idea of utopia. Two men, Peiseteros and Euelpides, sick of the current situation in Athens, abandon the city in search of a place where to found their own town. They find this place in the air, namely between the sky and the earth, among the clouds, in the realm of the birds. After some negotiations with the birds to obtain their consent for using their space, Peiseteros and Euelpides found Cloud-cuckoo-town and proclaim the kingship of the birds over both the gods above and the humans below. The life with the birds as rulers is outlined by the leader of the project, Peiseteros, as one of great convenience, freedom and comfort. The new city-state is thus meant to be the opposite of the current Athens, that is an Athens purified from all of its flaws and negativity which are mostly personified by a series of visitors that represent undesirable types characterizing the contemporary Athenian public affairs, such as an Oracle-monger (ll. 958-99) fostering popular superstition; the astronomer Meton (ll. 992-1020) representing the modern intellectual with impious interest in celestial phenomena; the Decree-seller (ll. 1035-1057) symbolizing Athenian imperialist officialdom; the so-called Sykophant (ll. 1410-1469) embodying the current self-interest abuse of the legal system, and so forth. These visitors are all *ad hoc* banished from the new city.

The absence of the current negativities, the location itself of the new city-state, and the depiction of the life with the birds as free from restrictions and pressures in a such a way to recall the life of the 'Golden Age', the 'Upside Down World' motif (birds are given the civic power, at least in words!), all of these traits have led, for years, most scholars to think of Birds as "a creation of airy wishful thinking"[48], and thus as a comedy of pure escape from the hard current reality into poetic fantasy; in a word as a *Phantastische Utopie* 49.

That this plot is inspired by dissatisfaction with the contemporary Athenian institutions is undisputed; and that this is, usually, the first stimulus which may lead to utopian construction is undeniable, as well. But was Aristophanes' intention to really propose an alternative state and, meanwhile, offer a chance of release from the harsh reality by putting on the stage a marvelous society?

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[46] See Magnelli 2007.

[47] See, for instance, Auge 1979, pp. 71-72. For a synthesis of the scholarly position on this issue, see Lauriola 2009.

[48] Dunbar 1995, p. 5.

[49] Schiwnge 1977, p. 49. It is significant the fact that the entire Part 1 entitled "The Theory and Practice of Utopia" in Dobrov's collection of essays on the Old Comedy (1998) is devoted to Aristophanes' *Birds*.

By more closely analyzing the specifics of this comedy, scholars now tend to dispute whether the foundation of the new town under the hegemony of the birds should be read as an: "imaginary, comfortable, undemanding place free from all physical, political and social discomforts and restrictions of Athens", or as an allegory that aims at seriously denouncing the contemporary political *status quo*[50]. Indeed, the newly founded 'airy' town appears to be an image of contemporary Athens with its imperialistic goals and its pretentious and manipulative democratic government. Peiseteros, the one that persuaded the birds to use their space for the new city by appealing them with the mirage of power, eventually turns himself into a tyrant (ll. 1706 ff.), and even makes birds food for the banquet that will celebrate the new city and his own triumph, birds classified as "guilty of an oligarchic plot against the state" (ll. 1583-1584). The new society far from being the peaceful, free from restrictions, undemanding place became "a complex image of Athens' own contradictions"[51], a "dystopian nightmare vision of grandiose proportions"[52], that is, an unpleasing, negative society that should induce the audience to reflect on. "It is in the active and engaged discussion of the political issues raised by the play that *Birds'* meaning resides"[53]. This comedy can be thus seen as a piece of political satire and parody at the same degree as the previous comedies to which scholars, generally speaking, are more prompt to grant a political undertone.

In line with this new 'anti-utopian' view of *Birds*, I think it is possible to add to a subtly political interpretation, remembering the broad meaning that the term 'political' conveys when applied to classical Athens. The key element for a serious political reading of this comedy is undoubtedly the behavior of the comic hero, i.e., the ways he manages to build the new city with the characteristics that it then ends up having. Through this character Aristophanes is making serious points not only about the costs of war, in particular the costs to democracy[54], but also about the corruption and decline of traditions and culture that to Aristophanes' eyes the Sophists, new intellectuals, mainly teachers of rhetoric, were determining[55]. Peiseteros not only proves to be an image of corrupt politician, apparently acting for the people well-being; he also proves to be a sophist through the manipulative usage of the language at the expense of good and justice, which is what Sophists taught, in Aristophanes' opinion, and what the poet criticized. Sophists produced speakers whose words lacked a basis in fact but were spun out in a dazzling way that befuddled the listeners and dulled their critical senses, only to dissipate into thin air. By using language as primary tool to assert their values, the Sophists were seen as a threat for existing tradition. In *Birds* Peiseteros persuades the birds to let him found a town in their realm with the illusion of giving them the command over gods and humans. The persuasion is achieved through speeches elaborated in such a way as to subtly affect the listeners and thus influence their decision, no matter whether their content is true or false. By deliberately using "big words that may enfeeble the listeners' mind" (ll. 464-466), Peiseteros manipulates everyone who could put at risk his plan: from the birds to the gods themselves. The

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[50] For a synthesis of the scholarly debate on this issue, see Magnelli 2007, pp. 111-114.

[51] Konstan 1998, pp. 16-17.

[52] Hubbard 1998, p. 25. Similarly Romer (1998, p. 66) talks of *Birds* as "generally disturbing and broadly dystopic in implication".

[53] Romer, 1998 p. 53.

[54] See Slater 2002, pp. 148-149.

[55] As to the representation and criticism of the Sophists in comedy, see Carey 2000. For a recent analysis focusing on Aristophanes and the Sophists, see also Lauriola 2009.

subtle, manipulative use of language, as taught by the Sophists, let Peiseteros become the absolute ruler of the new city. His is a language characterized by obscure, vacuous, airy-smoky words, yet impressive. That 'air' and 'smoke' are the specific hallmarks of the Sophists in the critical view of Aristophanes is well-established in *Clouds*, where, not accidentally, Socrates is suspended in a basket in the air. With reference to this, the choice itself of Peiseteros to found the new city in the air might be neither accidental nor due to an utopian aim: the air is the appropriate home of the new intellectuals and their language. Although fabulous, the place itself of the new city is not completely inspired to an arbitrary fantasy; it rather holds a contact with the current reality, that characterized by the airy-sophisticated speeches delivered to the detriment of the people[56].

A few possible conclusions

Through our short investigation on the topic 'utopia' in ancient Greece we have seen that, despite the Greek root of the term itself, despite the presence of 'utopian motifs' and 'utopian-oriented' works in Greek literature, it is not possible to identify real 'utopias', at least with reference to the archaic and classical period, i.e., the period of the major splendor of Greek civilization. Significant, in my opinion, is the absence of the term itself in ancient Greek language, which – as said above - means they did not have the concept of 'utopia'. Aristophanes' *Birds* may be considered as emblematic of this peculiar aspect of ancient Greek culture: a comedy that almost undoubtedly, for centuries, has been regarded as a piece of escape and utopia *par excellence* ends up being a piece of political and socio-cultural satire, and thus deeply rooted in the reality.

What the ancient Greek 'utopian motifs' and 'utopian-oriented' works have in common with the concept of utopia, which is rather an 'offspring' of modern times, is the original *stimulus* to build 'no-where' states, i.e., the dissatisfaction with the current situation. To promote a critical reaction – as it is the case of Aristophanes – and/or to propose a realizable alternative state or just evasion – as it is mostly the case of modern utopia – then, we may think, depends upon both the intentions of the author and the historical conditions of each period.

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[56] In an in-progress work of mine I intend to carry on a detailed analysis of the protagonist's usage of the language, in order to demonstrate how *Birds* can be also seen as a piece of cultural satire carried on against the Sophists, to the same degree as the comedy *Clouds*, which has always been unanimously recognized as an 'anti-sophist' play.

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