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## **Utopia as a method of embodying hope for the future in the present: Huxley's ideal society in *Island***

*ABSTRACT: Utopian studies have traditionally focused on the idea of the perfect society, proposing or criticising it. Now a new perspective is emerging that sees utopia as a method for thinking about alternatives to the present and prefiguring possible futures. In this sense, it actively contributes to the ethical-political debate by proposing and evaluating principles and practices to improve individual and collective life. In this essay, I have explored this perspective by focusing my analysis on *Island*, a utopian novel in which Aldous Huxley pragmatically explores the potential of utopia as an analytical tool for critically examining the present, embodying a desirable and feasible alternative and proposing its contribution to utopian thought. Huxley's contribution can be summarised as a call to consider the future as open and feasible and to adopt a pragmatic attitude that allows alternatives to be thought and practised every day, since the future is created and recreated in every moment.*

*KEYWORDS: perfect society, utopia, future, prefiguration, Huxley.*

### **Introduction**

In the context of science fiction production, utopias represent the endeavour to imagine an alternative and better society than the present one, in which the potential of human intelligence is developed and used for the better. Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962) is a fruitful example. Utopias have always been in dialogue with philosophical debates about the best way to live individually and the best way to organise society. Today, the value of this discussion is even greater, as the "polycrisis"<sup>1</sup> that humanity has been facing for decades seems to make it difficult

1 Morin and Kern 1999, 73. Introducing the concept of "polycrisis" the authors write: "it would be beneficial to be able to hierarchize 'crisical' problems so as to concentrate attention on the foremost or major problem [...] [Nevertheless] one is at a loss to single out a-number one problem to which all others would be subordinated. There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem" (73-74).

to imagine societies as described by utopias. We need to focus our efforts to understand how we can build a desirable and just future.

Since the word first appeared as the title of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the ambiguity of meaning has sparked endless debates, culminating in the current meaning: i.e., the good place (εὖ+τόπος) that is nowhere (οὐ+τόπος). Once the ambiguity is overcome, a question arises: is this place described as non-existent because it is believed that it can never exist, or because it does not exist in the present but could or should exist in the future? There is no direct answer to this question, as the endless debates on this topic show. What is particularly remarkable about the debate on *Island* is the persistence presence of a multitude of contradictory interpretations. This phenomenon is far less pronounced in the interpretation of other novels. Huxley's utopia is defined as an escape from reality<sup>2</sup>, a hypothesis<sup>3</sup> or a description and prescription<sup>4</sup>. According to another perspective, *Island* is defined as an exercise in optimism<sup>5</sup> or pessimism<sup>6</sup>. This discussion is valuable as it has illuminated the complexity of the utopian tradition and its fruitfulness in terms of reflection on the present, the past and the future. Scholars have always found some valid elements in Huxley's essays as well as in his novels to support their specific interpretations. However, the need for positioning leads scholars to ignore certain aspects of the works and emphasise others, creating an incomplete picture.

I think it makes more sense to adopt the new perspective that is emerging in the philosophical and sociological debate, which interprets utopia as a method<sup>7</sup> for thinking about alternatives to the present. This pragmatic approach solves the contradictions outlined above: Utopia can be seen as an interpretation of the past and the present that describes an alternative reality with the aim of prescribing what to do and what not to do in order to achieve a better society, according to each author's opinion. It is both a pessimistic hypothesis, because it is the imaginary construction of a possibility that will not necessarily materialise, and an optimistic prediction, because it could materialise, perhaps not exactly, but similarly. Unfortunately, this perspective has not been explored much. It would allow us to bring into the ethical and political debate some sources of inspiration that are usually ignored and that can provide moral philosophers and political scientists with new ideas<sup>8</sup>. Bringing together important findings from different disciplines is becoming increasingly fruitful for contemporary knowledge.

In this article I have analysed the contribution of utopian literature to the ethical-political debate. The aim was to broaden our understanding of the functions of utopias and to examine the extent to which they are useful in imagining, embodying

2 Matter 1975.

3 Meckier 2022.

4 Zigler 2015.

5 MacDonald 2001, Mureşan 2014.

6 Beauchamp 1990, Sreenan 2017.

7 Levitas 2013.

8 Mathisen 2001.

and proposing alternative ways of living and political-social alternatives in order to build a better society.

To explore this question, I have focused on Huxley's *Island*, in which he pragmatically explores the possibilities of a synergetic integration of knowledge and practices that he sees as the best of Western and Eastern cultures. The novel represents the synthesis that Huxley found at the end of his life between the search for deep knowledge about the world and the attempt to put his conclusions into practice and evaluate their results. By comparing his essays and novels, I have analysed his vision of literature, utopia and the present and future society; the influences that have most shaped his thinking; the way he applies his philosophy in *Island* and the contribution that his philosophical and literary project has made to the ethical and political debate of his time and to this day.

I found that Huxley engaged on all fronts to question the society he lived in, the utopian novels of his time, the possible futures and the meaning of life. *Island* is the pragmatic proposal that provides an answer to all these questions, a desirable and realisable alternative that gives us both hope for the human possibilities, and principles and ideas to ponder. It is not a perfect society that can be replicated in every detail, but it is the embodiment of hope for the future in the present. Huxley's most important lesson is that if we want to create a better future, we must focus our efforts primarily on deepening each individual's awareness of themselves and the world, not just on growing our scientific knowledge and technical skills. The development of a flourishing life and a harmonious society is an ongoing process, that requires consistent and persistent effort. There is no singular end point for this process, as it is a continuous journey of growth and evolution. This means that utopia can really actively engage in the ethical-political debate, by discussing alternatives to the current reality and prefiguring possible futures, proposing a set of values and basic principles that act as a "dense directionality"<sup>9</sup> and leave the future open.

The analysis of Huxley's proposal challenges the traditional interpretation of the purpose of utopia. The crucial contribution of utopian literature to the ethical-political debate is the realisation that ideals are there to be aspired to, not achieved. True ideals, such as the perfect society, are "*working hypotheses of action*"<sup>10</sup>. They are only useful if we use them consciously, continue to imagine alternatives to what is not working, and imagine possibilities for a life of dignity and fulfilment on an individual and societal level. Recognising that perfect happiness, perfect freedom and perfect justice cannot exist allows us to continue to work on them in a pragmatic way and not fall into potentially fatal simplifications or idealizations of reality.

9 Deriu 2022, 107. The translation is mine.

10 Dewey 1971, 262. Emphases are in the original.

## 1. Huxley perspective on society, literature and utopia

At the end of nineteenth-century century, it seemed that scientific-technological progress, industrialisation and rationalisation would lead to an improvement in everyone's daily life, but wars, authoritarianism and the crises that followed alarmed writers. The traditional positive declination of utopias was undergoing a change, as several authors began writing negative utopias, also referred to as dystopias or anti-utopias<sup>11</sup>. This strand includes one of Huxley's most famous works, *Brave New World* (1932), in which a world state uses genetic engineering and conditioning to create a social hierarchy based on abilities that are predetermined before people are born. In dialogue and disagreement with the enthusiastic novels of his contemporary authors, in particular H. G. Wells<sup>12</sup>, Huxley tells us that stability and progress, if pursued as ends in themselves, cannot lead to a better society. On the contrary, in the absence of some form of critical reflection, individual and collective, on how to achieve them, they could produce the worst possible outcomes.

With *Brave New World* Huxley begins to give literary form to his diagnosis of the present and the ideas he develops about possible futures. His evaluation has a pragmatic feature: he introduces elements of the most important psychological, scientific and philosophical theories of the time into his novel and takes their premises to the extreme to test their possible developments. Literary utopia – positive or negative – sits alongside essays as a place to discuss ideas, propose hypotheses, make predictions and assess where they lead. Although Huxley's initial intent was creating a satirical hypothesis, he himself recognised that his ideas were becoming predictions<sup>13</sup>. The boundaries between hypothesis and prediction blur when one seriously addresses fundamental ethical-political issues. On the one hand, Huxley is startled by how his parody of Wells' optimism is a concrete possibility about the human future, on the other hand, it is clear to him that its realisation remains an extreme possibility and that the value of such a depiction is to challenge the scientific positivism that governed the debate at the time.

Huxley continues to enact the dialectic between hypothesis and prediction begun in *Brave New World*, first re-discussing and deepening his critique with his second dystopia, *Ape and Essence* (1948), and finally with the utopia *Island*. For the purposes of this article, it is neither possible nor essential to deepen the analysis on *Ape and Essence*. To highlight the philosophical value of Huxley's pragmatic approach it is sufficient to reflect on the differences and similarities between his two main novels, *Brave New World* and *Island*. In an interview that Huxley gave at the time he was writing *Island*, he stated that the novel was “a kind of reverse *Brave New World*”<sup>14</sup>. In 1932 Huxley had been concerned with depicting the appalling

11 Suggested definitions for the various terms can be found in Sargent 2006.

12 Matter 1975, Meckier 2022.

13 Meckier 2022.

14 Brooks 1963, 198.

consequences that scientific positivism would bring<sup>15</sup>, and thirty years later he brought his reflections to a conclusion by representing “a potential outcome to our successful and humane application of scientific method in the life sciences”<sup>16</sup>. He creates a “society in which real efforts are made to realise human potentialities”<sup>17</sup>. This decision came after years of reflection about the subject, and only at the end he decided to develop it into a novel.

There is a close relationship between Huxley’s philosophical and literary project, as he admits: “the struggle is how to embody the ideas”<sup>18</sup>. His essays and novels dialogue, there is no separation between the two ways of exploring ideas, only a difference in form and function. One could say that essays represent analysis and abstraction, and novels represent synthesis and practice, but even this classification would oversimplify the matter, unless one considers both as the two sides of the same coin, which do not exist except together and in a mutual relationship. As Izzo reports, Huxley declared several times his struggle to combine “fiction – that is, a compelling narrative – with the exposition necessary to discuss the means and methods that his utopian ‘phantasy’ required”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, it is not surprising that, as revealed by Julian Huxley, his brother considered *Island* to be “one of his major contributions to serious thought”<sup>20</sup>.

Literature’s function, for Aldous, is to express his thoughts in a form accessible to as many people as possible. *Island*’s simple plot was necessary to highlight the internal aims of the novel, namely, to stimulate critical reflection on the dynamics and tendencies of contemporary society and propose new ways of coexistence between human beings as well with other living beings.

Huxley was clear that art is “not an end in itself”<sup>21</sup>, it “can only point in the direction from which redemption comes”<sup>22</sup>. In the essay *Tragedy and the Whole Truth*, Huxley states that if tragedy is a distillate of reality, the “Whole-Truthful art”<sup>23</sup> manages to reflect the complexity of reality by integrating every element, from the most crucial to the insignificant ones. Good art, for him, possesses more truth than reality itself as artists can grasp the entirety of reality, possessing it; unlike people to whom things mostly happen. Good literature evokes a feeling in the reader which Huxley summarizes in the formula: “This is what I have always felt and thought, but have never been able to put clearly into words, even for myself”<sup>24</sup>. Literature can shed light on a part of reality that was not previously

15 In a letter to his father, Huxley describes *Brave New World* as “a comic, or at least satirical, novel about the Future, showing the appallingness (at any rate by our standards) of Utopia” (Huxley 1969, 351).

16 Zigler 2015, 104.

17 Brooks 1963, 198.

18 Brooks 1963, 199.

19 Izzo 2015, 113.

20 Huxley 1965, 24.

21 Watt 1968, 150.

22 Huxley 1950, 114.

23 Huxley 1931b, 14.

24 Huxley 1931b, 5-6.

evident, therefore revealing alternatives that would remain hidden if the reality is explored in small pieces, as an analytical perspective do.

The effect of good literature induces resignation and acceptance, which Huxley considers positively because it produces a “milder catharsis”<sup>25</sup> that it is deeper and lasts longer than a strong but transient emotion. *Island* fit into this framework: Pala’s society is not suspended in time but infused with concrete life. Huxley’s intention in writing the novel is to evoke a sense of catharsis in the reader, which is reflected in the protagonist’s own journey towards enlightenment. Huxley cannot avoid introducing his ideas theoretically through a text-within-the text, i.e., the pamphlet *Notes on What’s What, and on What It Might be Reasonable to Do about What’s What* written by the Old Raja, one of the founders of modern Pala. But through Will Farnaby’s development he gives a concrete example, embodying his ideas. Huxley’s efforts to combine theory and practice are indicative of his pragmatic and constructive approach to philosophy and literature.

Huxley offers the principles guiding Pala’s society as a contribution to the ethical-political debate in a way that can be more appalling than essays. It addresses the whole society, not just philosophers and sociologists, as every person can think and choose utopia every day, not just experts. Now that we have established that Huxley uses utopia as a method to participate in the debate on ethical-political theory and practice, it is necessary to further explore the content of his contribution.

## **2. The formation of Huxley’s thought and his contribution to the ethical-political debate**

As already mentioned, a central concern that Huxley pursued throughout his life was the realisation of human potential. He explores theoretically the synergetic integration of knowledge and practices, which he considers to be the optimal synthesis of Western and Eastern traditions, and attempts to put this into practice in *Island*. His thinking is multi-layered; he is interested in many disciplines: Natural sciences, psychology, politics, art, ecology, sociology, philosophy, history and religion. To reconstruct all the influences to which he was exposed in the course of his life would be interesting, if demanding, but would go beyond the scope of this essay. I will limit myself to recalling those that seem most important to me in order to understand, at least in outline, the conclusions he reached at the end of his career and which he used as the basis for the design of his utopia.

Huxley takes a holistic view of the human being, seeing him as a unity of mind and body<sup>26</sup>. As Zigler points out, three important influences can be recognised in Huxley’s thinking<sup>27</sup>. The first was D. H. Lawrence, from whom he learned that the

25 Huxley 1931b, 15.

26 “If one would live well, one must live completely, with the whole being – with the body and the instincts, as well as with the conscious mind” (Huxley 1959, 7).

27 Zigler 2015. For details of the argument see 7-14.

human being “is an animal that thinks”<sup>28</sup>: to develop fully, we must take into account both our physical and mental parts. The second is G. Heard, who made him realise that human evolution up to that point was mainly physical and not psychological: it is therefore necessary to strive for a greater development of consciousness. The third is F. M. Alexander, who suggests to him that the development of the mind-body relationship, which can also be defined as spiritual development, can be practised for general well-being without necessarily resorting to religion.

*Island* embodies one of the possible realisations of Huxley’s philosophical perspective, combining the strengths of different disciplines to produce a theory that can be used as a tool to achieve happiness and freedom. Palanese institutions strive for a “pragmatic holism that takes into account the health of both body and mind”<sup>29</sup>. It is postulated that the optimal state of happiness is one that comes “from within”<sup>30</sup>, and is not derived from external sources. The Palanese are encouraged from an early age to participate in activities that promote both physical health and awareness. Huxley’s approach involves not only integrating various disciplines, but also building mutually beneficial relationships between Pala institutions. This facilitates the optimization and maximisation of opportunities for “incidental learning and socialisation”<sup>31</sup>.

Huxley’s holistic perspective is reflected in every aspect of Pala’s life. Education is not limited to youth but is a lifelong process that encompasses the entire population, from childhood to death. The rite of passage to adulthood represents a symbolic moment in which young people climb a rock face and engage in a meditation session with the help of a psychedelic mushroom they call “*moksha*-medicine”<sup>32</sup>. The drug triggers a moderate hallucinatory state in which the conventional boundaries of time and space become blurred. During this experience, a priest provides verbal guidance by explaining the only authentic purpose of life, i.e., the cultivation of self-awareness and the realisation that each person is a constituent part of a greater wholeness, which is life itself. In this way, the young participants can experience the fundamental unity of creation both physically and intellectually.

In this context, we can recognise the influence of both Western and Eastern culture. A Western influence comes from Bergson, with whose philosophy Huxley shares the view that ultimate reality is something that the intellect alone cannot grasp, since it is only a contraction of a more comprehensive reality<sup>33</sup>. The oriental influence comes from the philosophy of yoga, from which he derives the idea of total awareness as “the ultimate yoga – being aware, conscious even of the unconscious – on every level from the physiological to the spiritual”<sup>34</sup>. He was fascinated by the idea that enlightenment is not an external phenomenon, but a possibility within

28 Huxley 1931a, 159.

29 Curtis 2011, 97.

30 Huxley 1966, 298.

31 Zigler 2015, 106.

32 Huxley 1968, 138.

33 For a discussion of Bergson’s influence on Huxley see Taylor 2018.

34 Huxley 1999, 265.

the world itself. This concept also shapes his approach to utopia. The pursuit of enlightenment and the realisation of this state in an optimal social context is a central aspect of Huxley's utopian vision. It can be seen as an underlying motif that can be found in every moment of Pala's life and also guides the development of the novel's protagonist.

Another significant influence on Huxley is that of J. Dewey, with whom he shares the potential for human improvement, but not the certainty of its inevitability<sup>35</sup>. At the end of the above-mentioned ceremony, the priest warned the assembled young people not to rely too much on Pala's elders and social institutions. They can only provide individuals with access to "techniques and opportunities"<sup>36</sup> that can facilitate their path to awareness, but it is important to understand that any meaningful personal growth and development must ultimately come from within. Externally influencing people who do not have the desire or willingness to develop themselves is an inadequate approach to promoting their autonomy. Based on this concept, Huxley's project can be read as an existential utopia aimed at describing and activating enlightenment<sup>37</sup>. Huxley rejects all forms of determinism, whether pessimistic or optimistic. Instead, he claims that it is our individual choices and actions that "define ourselves and give meaning to our lives"<sup>38</sup>.

While the developing of awareness is the responsibility of the individual, as Huxley noted, it is equally true that one cannot develop such a will without a social context that favours such development. The question therefore arises as to whether the creation of a good society presupposes the prior existence of an educated society or an educational system capable of producing such a society. In other words, do we first need good citizens or a good form of government? This is as important as it is an old ethical and political question. In order for the development of awareness to affect not just few people, but every member of society, Huxley considers the creation of an appropriate social context to be fundamental. Huxley does not only allude to institutions; he uses Dewey's concept of democracy as "primarily a mode of associated living"<sup>39</sup> and points out that a necessary ingredient is a "democratic *community*"<sup>40</sup> committed to it. This consideration removes a doubt that might arise from the previous emphasis on the individual level. Assuming that society exists only in the relationships between its members, it points the way out of the dichotomy between individual and social salvation by emphasising the dialectical process that leads from the individual to society and vice versa. The enlightenment of a few individuals will inevitably precede broader social change. These individuals will – in turn – influence the society around them and possibly pave the way for the enlightenment of others.

35 Zigler defines Huxley and Dewey as "*meliorists*" (Zigler 2015, 28). Emphasis in the original.

36 Huxley 1968, 173.

37 For a broad elaboration of this perspective see MacDonald 2001.

38 MacDonald 2001, 109. In this passage, MacDonald refers to Sartre's philosophy (see Sartre 1967).

39 Dewey 1997, 87.

40 Zigler 2015, 98. Emphasis in the original.



This process can continue until collective enlightenment is achieved. However, the work must continue indefinitely for each new generation.

The main purpose of Huxley's novel is to address the complex question of how to improve our individual and collective well-being and happiness. For Huxley, utopia represents a pathway to actualising the full potential of the human being, encompassing its "physical, intellectual and spiritual capabilities"<sup>41</sup>. In *Notes On What's What* Huxley suggests that only a comprehensive approach can bring about real change, stating that "nothing short of everything will really do"<sup>42</sup>. This means that the key to a fulfilling life lies in promoting awareness of objectives that lead to "fulfilment, self-knowledge, liberation"<sup>43</sup>, and the achievement of "common or garden health or happiness"<sup>44</sup>. All other factors, including science, technology, progress, and power, should be seen as tools rather than ultimate goals. Failing to recognise this may lead to decisions with unforeseen negative consequences. In essence, the pursuit of happiness involves understanding human potential and nurturing positive qualities while minimising negative ones.

Meckier argues that Huxley sees a positive utopia as a hypothesis that is "either unrealizable or unsustainable"<sup>45</sup>; however, Huxley's perspective goes beyond the dichotomy between hypothesis and prediction. I agree with Zigler viewpoint that *Island* is both a description of a possible utopian society and a prescription that provides suggestions for future utopias. Nonetheless, my contribution is even broader, as I believe that Huxley is proposing a prefiguration, that is, both a description of a possible future world as he dreamed it, and a set of principles and values to follow that the author believes can improve the individual and collective situation, even if they do not necessarily replicate the society he proposed in *Island*. He suggests that the path to a happy and free life, as well as the creation of an ideal, good society, lies in finding ways to realise our potential, using utopia as a tool to imagine alternative ways of living, producing, and organizing our individual and collective lives. Huxley emphasises the fact that every situation and problem has a multitude of causes and that there is no single solution that can be applied universally to address all situations and problems simultaneously. Consequently, it is essential to consider and address all factors from a variety of perspectives and with a variety of means. Utopia can be seen as one of the "multiplicity of co-operating remedies"<sup>46</sup> necessary to achieve a state of greater happiness and autonomy, both individually and collectively.

41 Meckier 2022, 78.

42 Huxley 1968, 134. This concept had previously been articulated by Huxley in the chapter entitled *What can be done?* which appears in *Brave New World Revisited* (Huxley 1958).

43 Huxley 1968, 143.

44 Huxley 1968, 143.

45 Meckier 2022, 88.

46 Huxley 2000, 84.

### 3. *Island* as the embodiment of Huxley's hope for the individual and collective well-being

The critical approach to society and human potential led Huxley to conclude that there can be no perfect society, but he did not give up hope of possible improvement. One of the most common objections to the concept of utopia is the pursuit of perfection<sup>47</sup>, which is perceived as unrealisable. However, this criticism does not apply to *Island* or to most utopias<sup>48</sup>. Sargent describes utopia as a “photograph”<sup>49</sup> that has a past and a future and contains the possibility of change. The society depicted in *Island* is not perfect, any more than it was in *Brave New World*. In the latter it is still necessary to eliminate certain individuals who cannot adapt, in the former it is still necessary to receive an education<sup>50</sup>, there is suffering<sup>51</sup>, Pala itself is invaded by Colonel Dipa, the dictator of a neighbouring nation<sup>52</sup>, at the end of the novel. Perfection, like any other ideal, is unrealisable, but that does not preclude that people can – and for Huxley, should – strive to improve their material and spiritual conditions, and that society in general can become better.

While not exactly replicable, Huxley finds the principles, teachings and policies of *Island* useful and applicable<sup>53</sup>. Some of the practices he describes had already been implemented, as they were inspired by historically existing experiments and cultures. In the 1930s, he learned about the social experiment that was taking place in Dartington<sup>54</sup>. Founders Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst acquired 825 acres of land in Devon, England, in 1925 and over time established a village with a school, farms, an arts center and various local businesses. They created a community that embodied an alliance between Western and Eastern cultures and was based on the

47 Levitas 2013.

48 Sargent 2006.

49 Sargent 2006, 13.

50 Zigler emphasises the pragmatic nature of Huxley's decision to institutionalise education in Pala, which contrasts with Dewey's conventional view of utopia as a perfect society. Dewey believed that schools were unnecessary in the context of a utopian society. See Zigler 2015, 115-116.

51 There is a passage on sorrow in the book *Notes on What's What*, which Will Farnaby is advised to read to understand the principles that guide Pala. It declares that even if most of the sorrow we experience is avoidable, there is still some “unavoidable. It is the sorrow inherent in the human condition, the price we must pay for being sentient and self-conscious organisms, aspirants to liberation, but subject to the laws of nature and under orders to keep on marching, through irreversible time, through a world wholly indifferent to our well-being, toward decrepitude and the certainty of death” (Huxley 1968, 85).

52 Contrary to the assertion of Meckier (2022), among others, the conclusion of Huxley's utopia through the invasion of Pala does not entail its absolute impossibility in pessimistic terms. It is, in fact, an integral part of Huxley's pragmatic approach. Huxley is conscious that an exact replication of Pala's social arrangement is unfeasible. Nevertheless, he maintains that its significance is “supremely real” (Watt 1968, 159).

53 Zigler 2015.

54 For a more detailed examination of Huxley's relationship with Dartington and the differences and similarities between this and the Palanese society, see Parsons 1987.

principles of Rabindranath Tagore and J. Dewey. The principles were re-adapted to that context, also thanks to the support of scientists and scholars from a variety of disciplines<sup>55</sup>. The Palanese society seems to be an echo of this social experiment, as it was founded through the joint efforts of a Scottish doctor, Andrew MacPhail, and the Buddhist ruler of Pala, the Old Raja. Huxley visited Dartington several times and he wrote in a letter in 1963 that he considered it “one of the few places in the world where one can feel an almost unqualified optimism”<sup>56</sup>. At Dartington, Huxley had seen first-hand the potential for a self-governing, self-sufficient society that worked and embodied an alternative way of life.

Dartington is not the only example: the ritual of transition to adulthood described above reflects Huxley’s personal experience with mescaline, which he discusses in *The Doors of Perception* (1954). Huxley was also inspired by similar rituals of some American tribes<sup>57</sup>. Another important source of inspiration is the Oneida Community founded by J. H. Noyes in upstate New York<sup>58</sup>. Huxley selectively borrows from this community certain practices, particularly sexual practices, in which he finds a similarity to those of yoga philosophy<sup>59</sup>, to create a social arrangement in *Island* that mirrors something that already exists.

The numerous sources of inspiration that permeate Palanese society seem to illuminate the novel’s epigraph, which has been interpreted in different ways by scholars. Huxley quotes a passage from Aristotle’s *Politics*<sup>60</sup>, which states that in “framing an ideal we may assume what we wish, but should avoid impossibilities”<sup>61</sup>. In this passage, Aristotle engages with the system of governance presented in Plato’s *Republic*<sup>62</sup> and *Laws*<sup>63</sup>. Aristotle argues that Plato’s proposal fails to consider several elements that make it invalid and therefore impossible. Interestingly, he emphasises relations with neighbouring states. They must be taken into account, if the goal is not isolation. A connection between the epigraph and the end of the novel, with the conquest of Pala by the neighbouring state, seems necessary. But what does that mean? Could it mean that Pala can only exist in isolation and that Huxley considered a positive utopia impossible<sup>64</sup>? This can only be asserted on the assumption that Huxley wanted to describe a perfect ideal society, which is not the case. Certainly the long-term survival of a society like Pala is impossible, as no society can exist in isolation from the others. In fact, one of the central themes of

55 Parsons 1987.

56 Huxley 1969, 957.

57 Huxley references these rituals in numerous written works, including letters, lectures, and essays. A comprehensive collection can be found in Huxley (1999).

58 For an analysis of the relationship between the practices of the Palanese society and those of the Oneida community, see Zigler 2015, 119-123.

59 Zigler 2015.

60 Aristotle 1943.

61 Aristotle 1943, 94.

62 Plato 2000.

63 Plato 2016.

64 Meckier 2022.

Palanese education is the ecological principle that nothing exists in isolation from others. Even Pala cannot remain isolated and is consequently invaded.

Nevertheless, the demise of a singular utopia does not negate the broader function of utopia itself. On the contrary, it underscores the value of Huxley's "pragmatic dream"<sup>65</sup> as he suggests imagining other possible alternatives to change the real world and "make this world a place fit for fully human beings to live in"<sup>66</sup>. One should take seriously Huxley's appeal to the reader and to himself not to consider Pala as a model that can be replicated identically elsewhere, as Huxley also suggests through his characters<sup>67</sup>: it can be a source of ideas to exercise our individual and collective imagination, to envision the future we wish for in everyday reality, and to begin to make it possible.

The purpose of utopia is thus confirmed by the literary representation of the "desire to be otherwise, from the individual and collective point of view, subjectively and objectively"<sup>68</sup>. The future is seen as a space of possibility and not as an inevitable continuation of current trends, as a matter that can be shaped by many forces and not as a crystallization of the present. Utopia can therefore be seen more as an "analytical tool"<sup>69</sup>, a method of recreating the present and training the imagination to see the future as open to a wide range of possibilities. In this sense, the telling of futures is tantamount to the production of futures. This interpretation solves the problem between description and prescription, between hypothesis and prediction: utopia actively participates in the ethical-political debate by presenting and discussing political-social possibilities, thus offering a prefiguration of possible futures.

To take MacDonald's perspective and view imagining utopia as a "rational activity"<sup>70</sup> rather than a benign form of madness, is to recognise this as an assessment of our faith – or lack thereof – in human nature. Are we as a species capable of working together to create better societies? If we look back into the past, the progress that has been made so far in many areas, albeit incomplete and with major shortcomings, seems "genuinely utopian"<sup>71</sup>. On the basis of what has been said so far, the answer to the question seems to be affirmative. The evidence for the possibility of utopia is open, but one must decide to pursue it, for the future is created in the present. In a letter to his brother in December 1962, Huxley, reflecting on the problems of humanity, writes that an undesirable future is only

65 Huxley 1969, 944.

66 Huxley 1969, 944.

67 As Will Farnaby gradually becomes aware of Pala's society, he finds himself questioning whether such an exemplary model can be replicated identically elsewhere. Huxley's response to this inquiry seems to suggest that while it is indeed impossible to create an exact replication of Pala in another context, its guiding principles could be creatively adapted to function within other societies.

68 Mandich 2022, 15. The author attributes this definition of utopia to Levitas 2013. The translation is mine.

69 Mandich 2022, 15. The translation is mine.

70 MacDonald 2001, 111.

71 MacDonald 2001, 112.

inevitable “if we choose to do the things that make it inevitable, and refuse to do the things which will permit us to avoid it”<sup>72</sup>. In this passage Huxley shows how pragmatic his attitude is, neither pessimistic nor optimistic. It is a suggestion that is of great importance in today’s debates. When we think about what is wrong with our behaviours and the organization of our societies, we must remember that alternatives are possible. But they can only be created from the present, day by day.

For Huxley, *Island* would then be the conclusion of a journey that began with *Brave New World*. Over the course of his life, he deepened his critique of the principles, dynamics and tendencies he registered in nineteenth-century society until he embodied his hope for a positive solution to the horrors of totalitarianism, scientific positivism and consumerism. Huxley believed that a happy and healthy society is achievable if the false premises of the system in which one lives are seriously recognised, in this case the extractivist, individualist and consumerist project of capitalist systems based on an ideology of infinite growth and domination over nature. A utopia, like *Island*, can guide the concrete realisation of a happy and healthy society. Nevertheless, it is necessary to discuss the proposals critically and to understand them creatively, i.e. by those who want to make the attempt to rethink and adapt them with their methods and in awareness of their historical and social context<sup>73</sup>.

## Conclusion

In this article I argued that utopia is a method of cultivating the imagination and of contributing to the discussion about a range of possible futures. The effectiveness of projects such as Huxley’s *Island* would be considerably diminished if they were perceived only as fantasies. Alternatively, their theoretical depth can be appreciated if they are seen as concrete and purposeful utopias. They can contribute to the collective debate by providing both theoretical and practical insights into how to live well and best organize society to achieve the highest levels of happiness and freedom.

If we look beyond the specifics of individual utopias, we can see that, in general, the aim is not to find the perfect society, but to make a pragmatic effort to propose concrete hypotheses about possible futures. Prefigurations that can and will inevitably change, because the future is created and recreated at every moment. It can therefore be concluded that utopias play a central role in stimulating both critical reflection and creative imagination. In the context of the current crises, its

72 Huxley 2007, 485.

73 The same *Notes on What’s What* – the pamphlet provided to Will Farnaby to familiarise him with Palanese society – does not delineate the reforms that have been implemented to establish it. It “merely states the underlying principles” (Huxley 1968, 34). Once more, Huxley makes it clear to the reader that he does not intend to put forward a definitive plan for creating an ideal society. For Huxley, the fundamental issue is to identify the most appropriate principles to be followed, and he is contributing to the ongoing debate on this topic.

positive-purposeful role becomes particularly valuable as it can help to rethink the fundamental values and principles that shape modern societies and to imagine new ways of living that can help to ensure the long-term sustainability and happiness of humanity on Earth.

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