
The Genealogy of the Utopian Millenarianism in the Oporto Philosopher Agostinho da Silva



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The Israeli philosopher Martin Buber published a politico-philosophical essay in Hebrew in 1946 that was translated into English three years later with the title *Paths in Utopia*. In this work, Buber identifies the utopian propensity with the general aspiration for the idea of justice, an idea that, according to him, is manifested in two forms – the religious, conceived as an eschatological and messianic image of a perfect time, and the philosophical, conceived as an ideal image of perfect space. The first concept involves questions of a cosmic, ontological and metaphysical nature, while the second is confined to the immanent sphere of the structural and general functioning of society as well as with man’s ethical conduct. According to Buber, the eschatology or the perfect vision of time is distinguished from Utopia or the perfect vision of space by the fact that the former is based on the belief in a transcendental act deriving from a superior and divine determination, irrespective of man’s will in playing an active role in the construction of a future kingdom of general well-being. With Utopia it is man’s decisive, conscious will, free from any link with transcendence, that reigns supreme in the modelling of the perfect social space. Buber adds, however, that since the age of Enlightenment the eschatological vision of the setting up of a harmonious kingdom on earth through a providential act of divine intervention has lost its appeal and has given way to the modern idea of progress as formulated by the eighteenth-century free thinkers, and then systematised by their nineteenth-century followers, in accordance with five basic points: (i) the proclamation of a discernible continuity, not free from upsets, hesitation or setbacks, of the evolution of man’s social and spiritual history, which, in their

sequence, reveal an immanent sign of ontological and material perfectibility; (ii) that this continuity is governed by historical laws rationally inferred through the analysis of events generated by man and not deduced by the belief in a providential scheme of divine ordination; (iii) that by means of knowing these laws the quality of the ineluctable advance of a determined period of progress to a succeeding period can be predicted; (iv) that this progress requires man's will in order to be achieved; (v) finally, that this scheme of thinking is a laicised version of an eschatological vision of history based on the idea of the millennium.

For the history of ideas, beliefs and teleological concepts, the idea of the millennium has become a dominant, guiding principle in Western Judaeo-Christian mentality; it is an expression whose content is congenial with the principle of hope that, as demonstrated by Ernst Bloch, generates the spirit of Utopia looking towards the future. In its various possibilities, this idealized future is known differently by a set of ideological and doctrinal formulations, such as the days to come, the golden age revisited, the divine entry into the Seventh Age, the Parousia promised to the believers, the earthly reign of the Messiah, a society of economic justice, the final phase of the cosmic process that will definitely erase the insufficiencies, the calamities and the mistakes accumulated by man throughout his own and necessary history. The label "millennium" is a cultural and scholarly established formula to define such general hope in a better future, deriving its lexical formation from the Latinized word "thousand" to refer to the time lapse of general Christian bliss as it is prophetically stated in St. John's Book of Revelation:

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus (...) they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years (...) the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and Christ and shall reign with him a thousand years. (Revelation, 20:4-6)

For Norman Cohn, author of *Pursuit of the Millennium*, the notion of human salvation aggregated to this idealized future is characterised as being of a "collective" type (as it encompasses a group of faithful people), "earthly" (due to the promise that it will be carried out in this world), "imminent" (as it should occur shortly and suddenly), "total" (regarding the degree of perfection attained), and will be executed by means of an external, supernatural intervention. But let us focus on the Western millenarianist movements. From

the adepts of the Free-Spirit in the later Middle Ages to the Jehovah's Witnesses of the early twenty-first century, and encompassing several sectarian religious movements at different times, the amazing survival of this same ideological formula of apocalyptic inspiration on the transformation of the world can be perceived as a continuous reproduction of the belief in the value of the literal truth of the eschatological prophecy announced in the last canonical book of the Bible. In their different mode of interpreting and acting according to the sacred text – whether peacefully or violently – the millenarianists, based on this interpretation, exhibit their salvationist will through two positions, i.e. either confidently waiting for the coming of the heavenly kingdom (post-millenarianism) or actively preparing for the consummation of the promised land of justice, peace and abundance (pre-millenarianism), that should precede the final phase – the end of the history of the earthly world, thus corresponding, according to St. John's vision, to the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven (Revelation, 21).

Despite its simple etymological origins and its primitive semantic significance, the concept of the millennium is redolent with added subtleties and complexities that derive from: (i) the divergent interpretations of the prophetic-apocalyptic texts that gave rise to those two – pre- and post-millenarianist – sectarian attitudes; (ii) the theoretical contributions of those thinkers and authors who stand for the thesis of a teleological-transcendental vision of history; (iii) the interpretive proposals of scholars and exegetes of the millenarian phenomenon.

The irresistible attraction of future time is, therefore, a way of thinking and acting that, in the Western intellectual tradition, acquired a strong eschatological hue via the influence of an original belief – from among the various religious beliefs of ancient peoples –, that of the Jewish people: a belief which led this people to self-proclaiming as the human agent of the realisation of a necessarily benign and redemptive plan of the Creator of the World, regarded as the one and only God. One may even state that the providential, segmented and apocalyptic conception of history, based on the idea of a linear, progressive apotheosis of the end of time, and which enjoyed widespread acceptance in the Western world, had its original, mythical illustration in the Semite belief in the alliance, as narrated in chapter 17 of Genesis, between God and a descendent of Noah, Abram, later baptised as Abraham, the father of peoples, to whom was promised the future possession of a land of safety and

abundance. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were the Jewish prophets at the time of the Syrian invasion and, later, of the Exile, who emphasised and promoted the powerful myth of the coming of the Messiah-Saviour to fulfil such divine promise. Around six centuries after Isaiah, about 165 AD, another prophet, Daniel, drew up what is considered to be the oldest and most complete canonical apocalypse of the Old Testament, revealing to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar the meaning of two dreams the latter had had which had left him intrigued. These dreams, involving four animals and a polymorphic statue respectively (chapters 2 and 7), symbolised, in the prophet's interpretation, the fall of the four great earthly empires that followed each other in the Middle East (biblical exegesis identified them as the Assyrian, the Persian, the Hellenic and the Roman empires) and which would precede the imminent foundation of the fifth, and last, empire, of divine inspiration.

As to the Christian millenarianist ideas, Norman Cohn's study, limiting its thematic scope to the millenarian movements that arose in northern Europe during the Middle Ages, is highly documented and instructed as to the revolutionary effects of the literal interpretation of the prophecy attributed to St. John. From 431 onwards, i.e. after the Council of Ephesus, the widespread belief in the millennium was duly manipulated by self-proclaimed prophets and messianic leaders who used such belief as an efficient ideological expedient to encourage heterodox religious practices – *ergo* heretical – and to promote social revolts among starving, credulous legions of poor peasants to whom were promised the kingdom of heaven by the Christ-Redeemer. It is no wonder, therefore, that medieval scholastic theology, with St Thomas Aquinas at its head, constantly condemned any attempt to explain the course of human history based on prophetic interpretations, preferring instead to encourage ideological vigilance against any insidious utopian-millenarian mental eruption.

But the spirit of Utopia cannot be fenced in and arises when and where it is least expected. At the end of the 12th century, the Cistercian monk Joachim – the abbot of the Curazzo monastery in Calabria, where he was born in 1135, and founder of a monastery and a monastic order that lasted until 1570 at Fiore – formulated, after an intense study of the scriptures and with the benefit of several spiritual visions, a salvationist, prophetic-utopian interpretation of the history of humanity. And he did it with the encouragement and approval of Pope Lucius III, within the institutional and doctrinal corpus of the *Ecclesia Romana*, of

which he was an unsuspected devotee without ever having suffered the censure or the stigma of practising heresy during his life.

In his own way, Joachim of Fiore was a philosopher of history trying to provide a logical meaning and a coherent explanation for the temporal course of the world. In order to achieve this purport, he based all his theory on an elementary principle of reason that was able to discern the meaning of the past, present and future of the worldly order of human affairs. In twelfth-century Europe, of course, this principle of reason could not be sufficient nor immanent, but necessarily transcendental, induced from Christian theology and from the narrative content of the Bible, i.e. the original code and sacred book viewed as encompassing the essential truth about the history of the world, God's purpose and His progressive revelation. For Joachim of Fiore, influenced as he was by the "idols" of his time, the canonical Bible, which had been defined by various Roman Catholic Councils, was the book in which God manifested His will and communicated His one and triadic nature as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, but also the book in which He cryptically set forth a plan for a progressive, ecumenical enlightenment that needed to be deciphered. It contained a compendium of the history of the spiritual past of mankind and, simultaneously, the key to its future history, which, when all was said and done, could only be coherently understood and interpreted in the light of that divine will and nature.

World History would thus be divided into three phases or states: that of the Father, that of the Son and that of the Holy Ghost. Each of these three states would be divided into seven periods (number seven, which had already been used by St. Augustine to establish his universal chronology, has its biblical foundation in the analogy with the seven days of the Creation), the *aetates*, each one designated by the name of a famous person of sacred history. According to Joachim, after the discordant, impure active life, therefore, would come the concordant, pure contemplative life led by the new spiritual man, a being of wisdom and peace, in tune with the strict law of God and free from the servitude of evil inclinations. Joachim's conviction regarding man's future status is peremptory when he states: "We will not be what we have been, but will begin to be other" (*apud* Manuel, 1979: 58). It was, after all, a fideistic conviction in the rhythmic, benign transformation of history, in mankind's phased ascension towards teleological good and happiness, a conviction which, not being a part of the Church's official doctrine, awakened and legitimised both the

expectations of change and the social movements of the medieval disinherited peasants. But it was also a conviction that would later become secular in theories of social emancipation and in philosophies of progress that announced an ultimate, worldly perfect time, and which, among many other formulations drawn up by eighteenth and nineteenth-century free thinkers, range from Auguste Comte's state of positivist religion and Robert Owen's fraternal community, to the communist society set out by Karl Marx or Hegel's projected Prussian state – the finished consummation of the absolute Idea.

In seventeenth-century Portugal, the prophetic-Utopian thesis of the fifth empire inspired by biblical sources had as one of its most powerful defenders the Jesuit António Vieira (1608-1697). But he wasn't the only one. The ideological, political and social situation in seventeenth-century Portugal was particularly propitious for visionary appraisals concerning the transformation of the fatherland and the whole world. The prophetic-millenarian positions of nationalist content that were disseminated and propagated in Portugal, especially between 1630 and 1670, i.e. during the period between the crescendo of the popular expectation of the restoration of political independence from Spanish rule and the phase of consolidation of national sovereignty, was characterised by the relatively generalised eruption of a euphoric, messianic- nationalist hope and by the ideological, revolutionary force that induces utopianism.

Since the millenarianism of the Portuguese Jesuit was of a hermeneutic nature, essentially derived from the interpretation of the Bible as to the advent or instauration of the thousand-year kingdom of (Portuguese) saints, he awaited a final resolution of man's history that clearly presupposed a transcendental, providential intervention – in which the Pope, the Portuguese monarch and the Portuguese people would play a decisive role in launching the blessed age of a thousand years as predicted in the Book of Revelation. As a fervent Catholic, Vieira tried to accommodate his utopian millenarianism to the dogmas of the Church, an accommodation that was difficult to be metaphysically held in a century deeply stained by intolerance among different religious creeds and by a particularly ferocious persecution of the Jews. From an eminently religious point of view, António Vieira seems, therefore, to view the fifth empire as being voluntarily recognised by the universal revelation of the supreme truth in the person of Christ although doctrinally open to the ritual diversity of the religious worship of God. From an existentialist point of view it would be a

state characterised by the pre-libation of future glories, governed by the physical laws of temporal life, a kind of earthly prelude to eternal good fortune, in which man, finally finding perpetual peace for a thousand years, would live an exceptionally long and healthy life carrying out his normal activities in a fraternal, saintly manner. In a script that Vieira left incomplete and which was published as an appendix to *Apologia das Coisas Prophetizadas* (*An Apology of Predicted Events*), the following can be read:

The first temporal happiness of this highly fortunate kingdom will be that one without which no other can be truly called happiness, and which in itself encompasses almost everything that can be enjoyed in this life, which is peace. There will be universal peace in the whole world, both wars and weapons will cease to exist in all nations and then the prophecies that so many prophets have made and have been explained by expositors but never really understood will be fulfilled. (Vieira, 1994: 287, my translation)

This peace would lead to such a revolution in habits and be accompanied by such a change in the spirit of life that Isaiah's prophecy referring to the wolf living with the lamb would finally be fulfilled.

In the context of twentieth-century Portuguese literary culture, the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) took up the utopian-millenarianist idea (or, in his words, the myth) of the fifth empire with conscious deliberation, renewing its content, ridding it of its more immediate biblical and theological implications and attempting to found it not as a mere formal possibility but as a real objective possibility. Like Vieira, Pessoa also recollects data in order to demonstrate its ideal potential, disapproves the course of events in order to demystify them, protests in order to exalt, exhorts in order to stimulate, predicts in order to emphasise his utopian creed. Aligning himself with António Vieira's thought – and this is the core meaning of the second part of his poetic work *Mensagem* (*Message*) – Pessoa recollects in order to set forth what one may call the knowing utopian function of the “Portuguese sea”, this sea being understood not so much as an expression of national greatness, but more as a double allegory representative of (i) the real possibilities, or with pleonastic emphasis, the possible possibilities, those which lead to the effective discovery of what is new, but also (ii) the symbolic possibilities of transcending the given world, the historical world, that of the (four) known material empires. Of the five national symbols named by Pessoa that make up the Portuguese (utopian) sea-dream, the second is entitled “The Fifth Empire”. Beyond trying to define or determine its possible nature, however, this

empire is presented as an indispensable form of animistic discontent, as a logical necessity or final cause of man's quest, as a reality made possible by active, anti-conformist idealisation, as the fabric of a profound desire or vision of the human soul.

In the context of the Portuguese culture of the second half of the twentieth century, it was the Oporto thinker Agostinho da Silva (1906-1994) who took over and gave a new emphasis to the legacy of the Portuguese utopian millenarian hope. He extended the view of a Vieira and a Pessoa in an indefectible future of jubilation and of the existential pacification brought to the world through the cooperation, through the example or through the "sacrifice" of the Portuguese nation or, in other words, of the ideal Portuguese nation. Of that nation which, in its real/symbolic greatness, but also in its symbolic/real faults, Agostinho recounted/mythicized in several texts, always with the purpose of presenting it as a crucial piece or cipher of the cosmic process that, necessarily or with the cooperation of human freedom, would come to a end with the hoped-for redemption of the world. In the wake of the prophetic-messianic tradition of Western culture, of Hebraic roots, the Portuguese nation, by what it has historically performed and what it has still to perform, by what it has temporally achieved and what it has still to achieve, may be viewed, according to Agostinho da Silva, as a symbol of a hope or of an intimate desire of eschatological purport. History, science, philosophy, literature, culture, all the creations of the human mind were, in Agostinho da Silva's view, skilful means, so to say, for the understanding of the consummation of this eschatological process, in which the best national idiosyncrasies or the most positive and significant events in the history of Portugal – of which sailing on endless, uncharted seas, discovering new lands, linking and re-linking separated continents, uniting people and marrying distant, unknown cultures – operate as utopian-ideal signs of the metaphysical, essential unity of Being. For Agostinho da Silva, this is the Portugal that matters: the Portugal of a messianic and millenarian vocation, the Portugal of myth and Utopia or, perhaps, to use a more daring expression, of the Utopian myth, not the Portugal of ideology and politics; the Portugal inspired by the force of mystery and by the gamble of discovery, not the restless Portugal of ambition and imperialist power; the Portugal of being and not the Portugal of having; the Portugal of hope, vision, brotherhood and voluntary, silent sacrifice, represented by paradigmatic Portuguese characters like the poet king Dinis and his wife saint queen Isabel (who, in the thirteenth century, welcomed into the kingdom

the Fraticelli, Spiritual Franciscans, disciples of Joachim of Fiore, propagators of the religious cult of the Holy Ghost) – and by the Holy Prince Ferdinand (who, with his martyrdom, expiated and redeemed the court Machiavellianism that had exchanged brotherly life for the reason of state, i.e. that had exchanged the allegiance towards the infinite freedom of the spiritual empire for the preservation of the contingent, delimiting frontiers of the material empire) – and by Luís de Camões (who wrote on the “Island of Love”, making it not so much a prize of the voyage to India but more as a sample of a nostalgic-oracular condition, a paradise to be retrieved) – and by Fernão Mendes Pinto (the adventurous, legendary pilgrim of polymorphic identity who lived according to the “metaphysical of the unpredictable” in a permanent state of surprise and of overcoming adversity). This is the Portugal of Vieira and Pessoa, prophets of the Fifth Empire – transcending the “sorrowful, austere and wretched sadness”, in the words of Camões, of the mediocre and repressive times in which they both lived, and pointing out instead, by various hermeneutic means, to other life possibilities. But it is also the Portugal of the democratic local rule, of people’s free wasteland, of the communal feasts, of the Pentecostal festivities, of democratic, popular government, of the sharing of the public administration, the Portugal of the geographic discoveries, of the positive, adventurous and contemplative fruition of life, the ideal Portugal, spreading across different continents throughout the centuries, surviving rather as a language without frontiers than as a fatherland or fatherlands confined to the geography of their territories. It is this highly idealized view of the history of Portugal and of its national identity that embodies Agostinho da Silva’s idea of the fifth monarchy. The history of Portugal, or rather, a certain history of Portugal, viewed as more mythical than real, operates as a sort of prospective draft of the Utopia of the fifth empire in Agostinho’s thought. As it occurs with Pessoa, Agostinho da Silva assigns a higher heuristic value to the logic of myth, regarding it as the epitome of a permanent and wishful truth, than to the methodology of history – which he ultimately views as an intricate and subjective-like attempt to reconstitute an illusory narrative of objective past facts.

His text *Considerando o Quinto Império (Considering the Fifth Empire)* is a sort of guide for the followers of this project. It is written in the most spiritually engaged way, and one can read it as an echo of a monastic order, as a set of general principles both for the ruling of an intentional community and for the pursuit of man’s perfectibility and

ontological transcendence. These are Agostinho da Silva's ideal prescriptions and wishful predictions:

We will have as an ideal of government that there will be no government, just as there would be none in paradise, and we will see the whole of history as a slow but sure preparation, not through the wisdom of man but through the patience and tenacity of God, so that, passing above all the theocracies and all the aristocracies and all the democracies, we will come to the solution of the governor-governed antinomy.

We will have as an ideal of economy that there will be no economy, just as there would be none in paradise, being only the duty of each one to flourish as well as he can and the right of each one to find what he needs: let us also destroy the producer-consumer, freedom-security antinomy.

We will have as an ideal of people those that will have destroyed the antinomy of child and adult, of the ignorant and the wise, of man and woman; we hope that there will be no school, nor books nor marriage in the V monarchy: just as it is in heaven.

And finally we will have as an ideal of thinking, from where everything comes forth, a complete fusion of subject and object, a non-thinking. To put it in relative theological terms, we wish to see from the Father and from the Son, the knot of the Spirit that unites them: in such a way that we all become absorbed in his non-thinking. Which will once more bring into focus, this time without heresy, Joachim of Fiore and his Kingdom of the Holy Ghost and its Fleur-de-Lys Kingdom. (Silva, 1989: 197-200, my translation)

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