

# Utopian Thought and the Survival of Cultural Practices in Mexico

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It is worth remembering that utopian thought in the modern era, at least in the sense of the Renaissance, was born out of Europe's encounter with the Americas. Then America seemed to have all the features needed to host the construction of a new world that might match the requirements of art and reason: a world whose towns would be planned in accordance with a geometrical and social order that would leave nothing to chance. The story of European utopian thought and the ideal city whose aim was to ensure happiness for all moved away from communitarian ideas and clearly favoured individual values. Those values included respect for nature, promotion of pragmatic experience, confidence in human knowledge, but they were above all dedicated to building great cities, taking account of the needs of community life and all the questions that raises in a context where the individual takes precedence over the collective.

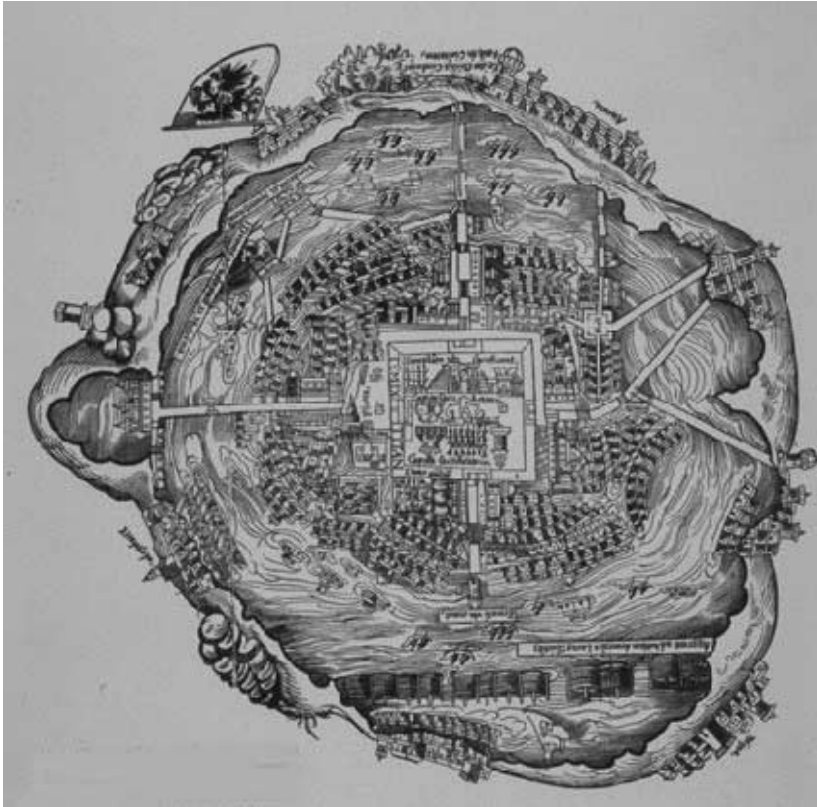
When Thomas More's book was published (1516) the Spaniards had already reached the islands of the Caribbean and landed on the *terra firma* of the New World, a world they immediately saw as a great promise, the opportunity for some to discover infinite wealth and for others to establish 'a more equal justice' or build the future far from the corruption and great vices afflicting the old Europe of the time. Though Thomas More's utopian idea arose from an impulse to improve the social situation of the workers of his native land, a utopian thinking more adapted to the Iberian context – that of Erasmus and Luis Vives – was also coming to the fore at that time in America. It was a thinking marked by the conflicts and tensions of the Reformation and Counter-reformation, a thinking that buzzed with the cultural influences resulting from the Muslim conquest and the Christian Reconquest.

Granted, visions of utopia did not emerge only from the contact between European consciousness and American reality but also from an older utopian mentality, coming from the Greeks in particular. But because of the encounter between the two continents it was no longer a question of a *u-topos* but a possible *topos*: the 'place' discovered in all its certainty. People could go beyond the 'imaginary place' and find

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Plan of Tenochtitlán, from the *Praeclara Ferdinandi Cortesii de nova maris Oceani Hispania narratio*, Nuremberg, 1524, probably made for Hernán Cortés. Chroniclers take up 2-calli (2-house, in 1325) as the date of the founding of Tenochtitlán. Copyright © Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris.

they were faced with the need to think about organizing a space, a territory and societies living in it. It was not only a matter of newly discovered lands. Since those lands were already inhabited, a 'utopia', in other words a model of a concept of living, could not therefore be superimposed on the pre-existing model. For those who were not part of the armed conquest, in the words of Alfonso Reyes, 'America is beginning to be defined in the eyes of humanity as a possible field where a more egalitarian justice, a more clearly understood freedom, a more complete happiness may be achieved'.

Two processes of domination are at work here: one supported by the force of arms and the other by the power of ideas and beliefs. The forces opposing each other are as familiar as the intellectual debates that attended the development of the most diverse forms of the design and organization of the colonization process. It is worth emphasizing that the utopian ideas of those who, from the outset, had assessed with

a decided sensitivity the vitality of native cultures did not succeed in preventing their thinking from modifying and moulding those cultures.

There were few who could understand the civilizations that had come to maturity under the sun of pre-Hispanic times. And so Tenochtitlán fell, born of a mythical idea, founded with all the distinctive features of ideal cities which other ancient peoples had imagined. When one culture is taken over by another it is impossible to measure the transformation it undergoes: disappearance of the codes in which written memory is noted down; the silent story told by the few architectural remains, barely enough to assess the depth of scholarship, its abstraction and its academic applications. This was the case with sculpture and painting, medicine, astronomy, as well as the artistic capacity that is expressed through poetry and literature, those witnesses to a profound spirituality and a thought as rich in philosophical and ethical concepts as in religious ones, which is seen in the strict adherence to rituals. For example the Nahuas had a marked historical awareness and a legal system based more on ethical principles than the idea of property. In this sense their morality was founded on the requirement to emphasize community over individual. The rules and principles of that community composed of extended family units could have governed the phalansteries thought up by Europeans.

And so it is clear that the utopian legacy of someone like Bartolomé de las Casas, Vasco de Quiroga or Bernardino de Sahagún, which still survives in certain enclaves of Mexico, is not the result of a mechanical transplantation. It depends on the Indians' ability to organize their social life for themselves. In any case it was on the basis of an in-depth analysis of old pre-Hispanic societies' organization and structure that Father de las Casas drew up his statements supporting the indigenous people's ability to govern themselves.

Following the 'utopian foundation' the colonial powers, directed by the King of Spain, found themselves at the apex of the social pyramid. And so the hierarchical organization was strengthened and by virtue of that very fact became more complete and oppressive. The dominant forced the dominated to assimilate. But while the republics of Indians reinforced certain types of discrimination, they made it possible to preserve, so to speak *in vitro*, their inhabitants' cultural characteristics, a markedly corporatist social order and forms of local government, and the economic mechanisms and religious and ritual life. At the same time those enclaves created the conditions that then enabled identity to be supported by the durability and survival of a subject culture, defensive in nature and nearly always choosing isolation. Furthermore, though we know the present-day structure of indigenous communities, for example in Michoacán and Chiapas, has emerged from colonization, we need to examine still further existing cultural models in order to observe the intensity and persistence of communitarian life, faithful to its customs and expressions, which are traditional in both form and content.

We should note that a majority of the utopian trends coming from the old world put forward the idea that the world of the good savage should remain untouched: savages are all good because they are all equal and there is no exploitation of some by others in the midst of perfect nature. With Bartolomé de las Casas, and even more Vasco de Quiroga, the apologia for the Indian arises from a combination of his ideal of humanity and his profound rejection of the ill-treatment inflicted on the con-

quered by the conquerors. The apologetic fervour motivating de las Casas could be dazzling: for him the native people were perfect from the physical, historical and ecological point of view. Flora and fauna existed in total harmony with human life. De las Casas put the people's healthy, well-disposed character down to that nature, as well as the fertility and *joie de vivre* they enjoyed because of 'the hygienic character of their food'. The original inhabitants of those areas were models of monastic prudence, had a sense of economics and politics, and good sense ruled family and social relations. They lived in the towns with a civic sense, the distribution of labour was carried out rationally through corporations of peasants, artisans or warriors. All the tasks of a complex community were performed with dignity.

As far as the rich are concerned, they invest capital in the service of this community, which causes industry and commerce to prosper. Priests, judges and those who govern know perfectly well how to perform their tasks without needing supervision. The Indians are not only capable but superior.

Among other things de las Casas lays the utopian foundations for a new anthropology. The only barbarous feature he manages to discern among the Indians is ignorance of the faith.

As for Vasco de Quiroga, detailed examination of his writings shows especially a preoccupation with the reconstruction of communities that had been turned upside down. Of course he would change the people's relationship with their land, re-centring them on new spaces, but preserving old communitarian features that had gone before. Looking to the proper working of the 'hospital city' he had planned, Vasco de Quiroga did not overlook a single detail: education, spiritual and professional training; leisure occupations for the people; production in countryside and town; ways of dressing and eating in daily life and on feast-days; laws that governed property, not forgetting any aspect of social life and the good rules likely to ensure equity and distributive justice. According to Vasco de Quiroga, utopia – the supreme law leading to social plenitude – demanded individual effort sufficient to achieve necessary but not excessive contentment. It was about living a good life and contributing to the community's progress. There equity and the exercise of justice were deemed indispensable to the protection of the goods and interests of the whole group.

Through a structure on which another, formal one was superimposed, the pre-Hispanic remains from certain areas of Michoacán tell of the life of a community that was to support a local government, retain the extended family as a basic nucleus, and practise an agricultural and craft economy and religious worship as the main links in community life. And so a substantial part of what remains from Don Vasco's era comes from earlier times, when groups descended from highly hierarchical politico-religious structures were already used to organizing work and leisure, running tax regimes and public building projects, arranging accommodation, regulating domestic and foreign trade, organizing religious worship, daily life, rituals, festivities and above all war.

When we talk about utopia it is right to look forward, but at the same time we cannot help looking back. The spiritual current that ran through those lands before

and after the European intervention was to mould their unique, distinctive character. We have no need of evidence when we say that the defenders of utopian thought were able to carry out a project that lasted because they based it for the most part on principles similar to those that governed the social life of the indigenous peoples. Those principles influenced the social hierarchy of the upper classes and also the community organization of the ordinary people. We should not forget the important events taking place in the Iberian peninsula, especially the *comunero* movement in Castille that defeated the monarchy at a certain moment with its model of social justice. The tension between those two tendencies, in the mother country as well as the viceroyalty of New Spain, was finally resolved, as we know, by the formation of European powers which managed to consolidate the basis of the system relying on the accumulation of capital and private property.

Cultural internationalism or the quest for a foreign utopia are not a flight from reality. On the contrary, they encourage us to seek out their roots knowing that in doing so they are not far from universal values. Utopia is not entirely a culture of synthesis, the melting-pot that is so often evoked, but it must reflect the cross-fertilization that is peculiar to cultural diversity on the face of the world. It would probably be, as Luis Villoro says, the most fertile paradox: what distinguishes us from one another is what gives us a perspective on the universal.

The unfolding stream of ideas that went before us, whose great tributaries met on American soil, is dotted with radical ideas we are hardly aware of. As we reassert the value of pre-Columbian thought, art and conception of the cosmos, we are seized with nostalgia for a lost world and the desire to be ourselves (Octavio Paz), to rethink our utopia. Culture becomes a compulsory route to attain afresh the notion of a collective patrimony capable of expressing community and rooted in our lives.

History has speeded up and nationalist fervour has become both redundant and a dead-end as regards the direction taken by global history – one typified by the supremacy of a single model known as the end of history, or even any utopian idea or project likely to orient the community. In this context Mexican culture, the one that recognizes itself in its particular origins and questions imported doctrines poorly adapted to local life, has a whole programme to carry through. The traditional Catholic and scholastic conception associated with an ideology belonging to the privileged classes, superimposed like a cathedral on the pre-Hispanic pyramid, is now applicable only to a very limited sector. The positivist liberal conception too has withered. We must acknowledge that at a certain period both of them interpreted the world as a unit and gave meaning to the State's action in firmly guiding education and the collective project. But in the cultural circles comprising the large numbers excluded from the common project the search for a utopian model is an endless process and the vision of the future cannot do without the retrospective vision.

Early culture must be part of the most legitimate of universal trends even if, in the area of thought, the world is today passing through one of the most critical moments in contemporary history. According to the model peculiar to the most fertile period of cultural nationalism, we need to look to our roots for the keys to boundless universality.

We need to combat the lack of guiding doctrines, the scarcity of utopian vision

and collective spiritual goals with the lines of continuity of the cultures that have shaped us. We need to avoid falling into a new cycle of imitative culture and dependence. The discovery of our particular characters, our specificities, has been authentic enough to allow us to confront *globalizing* movements with a distinct personality, without losing our unique perspective or abdicating our authenticity.

Thus the goal of utopia might be as follows: to transcend nationalism and, with the help of culture, to rise to the level of the problems and preoccupations common to the rest of humanity with regard to science, the environment and human rights.

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*Conaculta*

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell