On *Utopian Thought*, a *Future Perfect* and *The Language of Plants*

Patrícia Vieira[1] interviewed by Ilda *Teresa de Castro*[2]

PART I

Interview on the book *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought* and on the book series *Future Perfect: Images of the Time to Come in Philosophy, Politics and Cultural Studies*.

The presentation of the *Future Perfect* series mentions that it «stands at the intersection of critical historiography, philosophy, political science, heterodox economic theory, and environmental thought, as well as utopian and cultural studies». *Existential Utopia* was published in 2011. I would like to invite you to talk about utopia and the future.

What has been the role of utopia in modernity?

When Thomas More coined the term "utopia" in 1516, he inaugurated a new genre that is inextricably linked to modernity. There had been precursors to More's text, such as Plato philosophical description of an ideal society in *The Republic* or, in a theological context, Augustine's perfect *City of God*, which contrasted with the corruption of the *City of Men*. But the innumerable utopian narratives, written from the 16th century onwards, reveal the connection between utopianism and the mind-set initiated by the European Renaissance and developed in the Enlightenment.

What were some of the main features of this genre? A critical posture vis-à-vis contemporary society, which contrasted sharply with the more perfect polity described in those texts and, most importantly, the confidence that the present could and should be changed, in order to approximate this desirable ideal. Undergirding every utopia is a belief in the perfectibility of human communities. Utopias are tied to an understanding of the future as open and infinitely malleable, defined only by humanity's resourcefulness and ingenuity.

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What seems to be the importance of utopia in the creation of a better future?

Since many utopias have been written, all claiming to describe a flawless social order, the obvious question arises: which of them got it right? What would be a perfect society? And would this dream not immediately turn into a nightmare, if any of the many utopian writings were to be realized?

The normative, prescriptive bent of many utopias that claim to know what humans want and need is the reason why many late modern thinkers are skeptical about utopian experiments. If we always measure our actions against a model that will forever remain unreachable, we are bound to despair. What is more, many atrocities were justified as a means to reach a desirable utopian goal, which functioned as a transcendental principle regulating human conduct. Both left- and right-wing totalitarianisms have often been interpreted as utopias gone wrong, where unspeakable crimes were committed in the name of an ideal.

Does this mean the end of utopia in our post-modern present, which has grown weary of grand utopian designs? In the co-edited book *Existential Utopia*, we have tried to reformulate the concept of utopia, foregrounding its existential dimension. Rather than a complete blueprint for a new world order, we see utopia as part of historical becoming, pointing in the direction of social, political and economic possibilities for human and non-human forms of life yet to be explored. Existential utopia keeps the wish to build a better future, all the while avoiding the temptation to determine once and for all its final shape.

Similarly, the *Future Perfect* book series invites scholars to reflect on different visions of the future, which can only be done by rethinking the very concept of futurity. What do we really understand by the future? In which ways different conceptions of futurity determine our actions in the present? How can we conceive of a future that is not merely an extension of the here-and-now?

What is the relevance of utopia and of the future in our critical post-modernity?

In our apolitical, technocratic societies, the future has become nothing more than a continuation of the present *ad infinitum*. In the end of the past century, with the demise of Soviet-style communism as a viable socio-economic and political alternative to capitalism, it seemed that historical development had come to an end. The beginning of the twenty-first marked a turning point, with a number of protests and revolutions signaling that the march of history was continuing.

Still, many of these political mobilizations have not yielded substantial results. Barak Obama's presidential campaign slogan that he was the "change we need" led to nothing more than "politics as usual" when he came into office. Egypt's revolution was stopped in its tracks with the rise to power of another military government. But the lack of real political options is revealed nowhere more starkly than in the recent uprising in the Ukraine. The country is, as it were, between the devil and the deep blue sea, facing a choice between a Western, IMF-, US- and EU-backed market economy and Russian-style oligarchic capitalism. There are, it seems, no truly different options on the table.

The role of utopia and, more broadly, of a reflection about the future, is precisely to open up a space to think of the future *qua* future, that is, as something different from and potentially at odds with the present. While technocratic politics tries to convince us that there are no alternatives to a future already laid out before us and determined by the demands and constraints of the market, utopia reminds us that "another (better) world is possible" and stimulates our unending pursuit of this goal.

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How can we try to avoid committing the same or new mistakes in the name of utopias and use utopia as a theoretical and practical tool?

The challenge in thinking about the future is to resist the temptation of over-determination, which would completely close off the possibility of newness entering the world, to borrow Salman Rushdie's expression, all the while not giving up on shaping the time to come altogether. In other words, we need to keep our openness to the unpredictability of the future –to the "à-venir", in Derridean terminology– and, at the same time, recognize that some versions of the future are more desirable than others. A more egalitarian and just future, where humans live peacefully side by side with other life forms is certainly preferable to the ecological disaster and the rampant inequality that we are witnessing today. Embedded in everyday lived experience, existential utopia helps us to think such a future and hopefully, to turn it into reality.

PART II

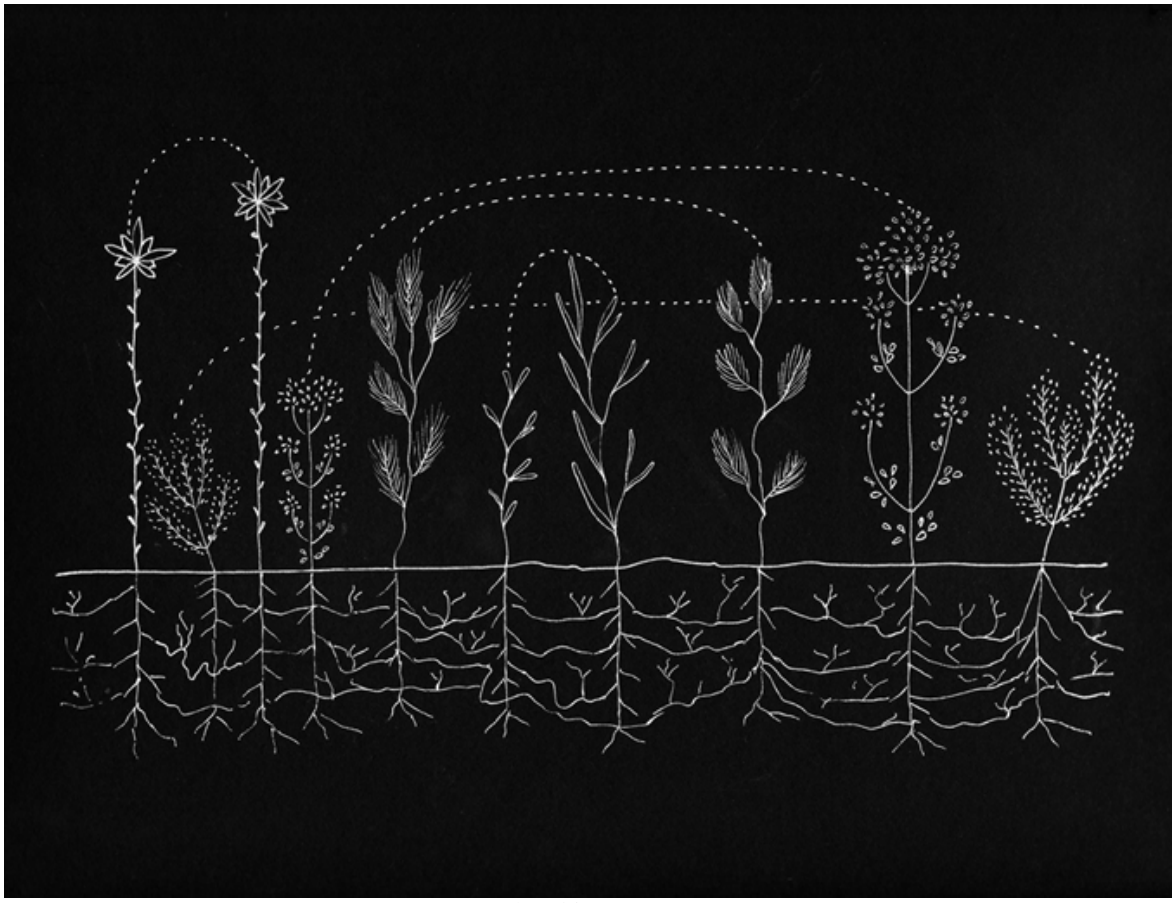
Interview on the book *The Language of Plants* (co-edited by Patrícia Vieira, Monica Gagliano and John Ryan -forthcoming).

The response to the call for papers for *The Language of Plants* was overwhelming. Does this mean that the scientific community is really changing its way of looking at the non-human?

We are currently witnessing a slow change in the way plants are understood. Recent scientific studies have shown that plants send signals to each other, for instance through their roots or through air-born chemicals, which convey a variety of information, from warnings about potential predators to indications about where to find water. The *Society of Plant Signaling and Behavior* brings together plant biologists, ecologists, biochemists, and so on, working in this relatively new field. Scientists have known all along that plants are not merely passive, insensitive beings, but new research has revealed the extent to which they act upon and respond to their surroundings.

In the humanities and the social sciences, "plant studies" is a relatively new field that includes research on plant rights, plant-human interaction, the ontology of plants, or the aesthetic representation of plants in literature, film and the fine arts. This research moves away from a traditional understanding of plants as one of the lowest levels of the "great chain of being," often reduced to the role of "mirrors" of human moods and feelings. Instead, it highlights that plants have their own modes of being and expression that are not inferior to those of humans and of animals. Although there is still no association focusing exclusively on plant studies in the humanities, the *Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment* showcases some of the new research being done in this field.

Our goal in *The Language of Plants* is to create a dialogue between scientific research on plants and novel approaches to plant life in the humanities. That is why one of the editors of the book, Monica Gagliano, is a biologist, the other, John Ryan, is a specialist in the environmental humanities, while my own areas of expertise are literature, film and philosophy. Amongst the contributors to the volume we have plant ecologists, entomologists, biologists, philosophers and literary critics. Our goal is to go beyond disciplinary boundaries and bring together different approaches to the field of plant studies.



Draw by *Ilda Teresa Castro*

What is the actual paradigm shift in the human conceptualization of vegetation, as opposed to the classical anthropocentric paradigm?

I will limit my response to the humanities, which is the field I know best. For a number of years already, "animal studies" has been making inroads into the humanities. Scholars working on this subject have long been questioning the so-called anthropocentric paradigm and revealing the porous boundaries between humans and non-humans. Plant's studies extend many of the same concerns to vegetal life. In philosophy, for example, Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking* shows the marginality of plants in Western thought and invites us to rethink their mode of existence, drawing comparisons to human life. The aim is not to create a new hierarchy of beings that would now rank plants first but, rather, to give each being – plants, animals humans, and even (why not?) non-living entities – their due.

One might speculate about what triggered this "vegetal turn" in the humanities. Is it perhaps because plants are endangered that we are now keener to think about them, to reflect upon their inherent worth? Or are we merely returning to ancient religious practices that regarded some plants as ensouled, something we can still witness in some parts of the world, where the worship of tree spirits is fairly common? I suspect that the two are at play, together with the exhaustion of the anthropocentric paradigm, both on a theoretical level and because of its increasingly devastating consequences to the lives of plants, animals and humans.

In *The Language of Plants*, we try to escape the traps of anthropocentrism by focusing not only on human discourses about plants and on the limits of human language in describing the botanical world

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but also on the language *of* plants, *i.e.*, on the communicative modes that constitute the language plants use to make sense of and navigate their worlds. Of course, in describing the language *of* plants, we can never fully escape our human-centered bias, but this does not mean we should not give it a try.

What are we talking about when we talk about plant ethics and what kind of implications the discussion of plant ethics brings to the classical view of ethics?

While we tend to reduce ethics to the relations between human beings, the concept can be extended to encompass human-animal and human-plant interactions. At the root of ethics, we find the Greek word "ethos," meaning habit or custom. What is out habitual behavior towards plants? Is this behavior consistent with what we know about plant life? Can our attitudes towards plants be modified and why should they be changed? Should our approach to plants be legally codified in plant rights, which would create a bridge between ethics and politics? All of these are questions address by plant ethics.

What about the motivations and expectations of your publication?

There are two main motivations behind *The Language of Plants*. The first is primarily academic and has to do with the wish to bring together scientists and humanities scholars working on plants. There is a profound gap dividing the sciences and the humanities, coupled with a mutual mistrust that impoverishes both fields. Research on plants is, by nature, cross-disciplinary and one of the goals of the book is to sow the seeds for collaboration on this subject across traditional academic boundaries.

The second motivation to edit this collection has to do with plant ethics, discussed above. Plant studies aims to make us reflect on the current instrumental treatment of plants that are simply there to be used and abused. The challenge of *The Language of Plants* is to contribute towards changing this view of the vegetal world. The very idea that plants can communicate makes us consider them in a different light and, hopefully, grant them more respect.

Interview by email, April/May 2014