Metábasis.it
PHYLOSOPHY AND COMMUNICATION

ONLINE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
WITH *PEER REVIEW*
WWW.METABASIS.IT
May 2025 year XX n. 39

TECHNO-UTOPIAS AND TECHNO-PHOBIAS – THE MYTH-MAKING OF THE TECHNOCRATIC IDEAL IN MODERN SOCIO-POLITICAL THOUGHT.

DOI: 10.7413/18281567277

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Abstract
Starting from the beginning of XVI century, political utopias managed to structure models of escape/redesign of social arrangements by proposing a new interweaving of freedom of knowledge and scientific implementation of power in which the technocratic element was declined in contradictory ways, sometimes as emancipation from particularisms, sometimes as a censurable stigma of control. The result is an imaginal production that will develop, over the last four centuries – through both a literary and visual narratives – into a worth-exploring, intertwined nature-technology relationship, running along a dual and fascinating line, in limine between perfection and dystopia, hope and catastrophe, praxis and ideology.

Keywords: sophocracy, technocracy, power, political dystopias, political utopias.

1. Two Competing Models

The current global political scenario seems to strongly revive one of the most defining contrasts in Western political thought, which is certainly worth examining: the opposition between the sophocratic and the technocratic ideal. In their respective classical forms, the former is traditionally associated with a form of government inspired by the knowledge and virtue of its rulers, while the latter, by contrast, favors expert technicians, scientists, and professionals over elected politicians or representatives chosen by birth or wealth. In an extremely – and perhaps overly-concise – formulation, the sophocratic ideal prioritizes wisdom, ethics, and truth, whereas the technocratic ideal embraces utility, efficiency, and expertise.

Two preliminary clarifications seem necessary. First of all, both concepts can relate not only to forms of government, but also to forms of political thought. In other words, they pertain both to the practical sphere of "governing in the best way" and to the ideal sphere of "imagining the best government". Secondly, as one might expect, these two positions have, over the centuries, intertwined and at times overlapped, complicating the analysis considerably.

I have spoken of the imaginary of the optimal government because I intend to test the historical consistency of these two concepts within the framework of Western utopian-political thought. I believe that such an analysis can provide not only a fascinating but also an extremely useful hermeneutic key for our purpose. Positioned in a "social elsewhere", set at a providential distance from existing political reality[1], utopian thought is capable of weaving two valuable epistemological threads: on the one hand, it allows us to observe the evolution of the concept of "political optimum" over the centuries; on the other, it simultaneously offers an evolutionary picture of what is considered politically perfectible, undesirable, or even corrupt. The analysis of the whereabouts of utopias – what, etymologically, represent the "nowhere" *par excellence* – will hopefully allow us to examine both the affinities and the divergences between the two models in question.

2. Plato and the totality of Knowledge

In *The Republic*, Plato offers what is still considered the political paradigm of the sophocratic ideal, assigning – through the voice of Socrates – the rule of the *pólis* to philosopher-kings, those who pursue the Idea of the Good. Being capable «to grasp what is always the same in all respects», the philosopher differs from the sophist, who merely «possesses professional instruction»[2]. The Platonic text undoubtedly acknowledges the importance of the division of labor and the various techniques necessary for the functioning of the *pólis*, which is based on the famous division into three classes

[1] «[…] utopia, in its most qualified definition, is rather an ectopia, that is, a consciously and deliberately eccentric position in relation to those that exist and operate» (G. Chiodi, *Tacito dissenso*, Giappichelli, Torino 1990, p. 64). It is precisely this "eccentricity", meaning its permanent distance from politics, that allows utopia to maintain a sufficient critical detachment from political matters. Unless otherwise indicated, the English translations of the cited texts are my own.

[2] «[…] while those who cannot – those who wander among the many things that vary in every sort of way, are not philosophers», Plato, *Republic*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge 2004, p. 176 (vv. 484b). Note how the concept of *techne* in Plato still encompasses both the truth-oriented meaning of the "political art" and the practical aspect of "political action," where both are guided by the form of the Good.

(artisans, warriors, and philosophers). However, it is indisputable that only the philosopher is entitled to political leadership, as only the knowledge of the Good can ensure mastery of the *politiké téchne*. From the Good emanate not only truth (*alétheia*) and knowledge (*epistéme*) but – extremely important – its results are also useful (*krésimos*) itself. The form of the Good is in fact «the most important thing to learn about, and that it is by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial»[3]. As the sole keepers of wisdom, the only ones «capable of reaching realities that are always in the same way and identical to themselves», philosophers may even lie for the good of society. This is the famous doctrine of the "noble lie" (*gennáion pséudos*), which, when «modeled as closely as possible on truth», is administered as a *phármakon* (remedy) to deter both enemies and friends from reckless intentions.

The Good requires knowledge, not flattery: rhetoric is deemed a mere "technique" directed toward personal interest and aimed at persuading others through adulation and sophisms. In short, the sophocratic ideal of *The Republic* appears "pure" in that it identifies the philosopher, as the custodian of knowledge, as the only truly "qualified" social engineer. This position would exert a profound influence on the quintessential utopian-political imagination of the Renaissance.

3. Utopia, Technocracy, Modernity

The sixteenth century was marked by profound technical and economic transformations that challenged the medieval order and gave rise to new social paradigms. Politics gradually distanced itself from religion and, more generally, from a "transcendent" symbolic foundation of authority, adopting a modern structure inspired by rationalism and pragmatism, thus becoming, in other words, a "science" of politics. The most evident consequence was that *politiké téchne* abandoned its original ancillary role to ethics, evolving into a sufficiently autonomous technique of government, one that could be planned in its objectives and evaluated in its results. To conceive politics as a science meant to introduce themes (such as the legitimization of authority, assessments of consensus, and limits to sovereign power) that were fully modern.

Political technique and utopian imagination began, from this century onward, an auroral epistemic contest: power inevitably fueled the dream of its own transcendence through knowledge, while

[3] Ivi, vv. 505a.

knowledge, in turn, critically examines power, forcing it either to entrench itself or to reconsider its nature. It is no coincidence that only a handful of years separated the first draft of *The Prince* by Machiavelli (1513-14), an immortal masterpiece of political pragmatism, from *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516), the archetype of utopian-political literature and the custodian of a political narrative model destined to influence generations.

The society described by More (which aspires, through unmistakable references, to be a penetrating critique of his English homeland) is organized according to principles of efficiency and rationality: private property and wage labor are absent, replaced by communal ownership of land and goods; harmony between city and countryside is profound, both in terms of productivity and social structure. Some proto-technocratic elements (or rather*, technological aspects of production*) might be identified in the meticulous economic planning, the proportional distribution of resources, or even the regulation of labor, based on an equitable assignment of duties among citizens. However, these aspects appear to be merely instrumental to a concept of good governance (in opposition to England's parasitic and aristocratic economic system) that remains fundamentally wisdom-based: *Utopia* is, above all, the ideal place of freedom of thought, religious tolerance[4], and fair, proportional justice[5]. Power is not entrusted to engineers, scientists, or specialists, but to rulers chosen for their wisdom and virtue.

A similar political structure is found in *The City of the Sun* (1601-02), where Tommaso Campanella envisions an ideal society governed by a priest-philosopher (*Metaphysician*), assisted by three "collateral princes" (Pon, Sin, and Mor)[6]. Once again, technique and science appear subordinated to a broader theological and philosophical vision, celebrating – consistent with Campanella's inspired religious naturalism – a complex form of knowledge (a fusion of philosophy, astrology, religion, and science) as the legitimate foundation of political authority.

[4] The inhabitants of *Utopia* profess openness toward different religious denominations; however, the community is strongly guided by moral and spiritual values, in contrast with the characteristic ethical neutrality of the technocratic vision.

[5] More's well-known criticism of the death penalty for theft in England is evident: in *Utopia*, not by chance, death is considered «too cruel and extreme a punishment for theft, and yet not sufficient to refrain men from it» (T. More, *Utopia*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1912, p. 33). Thieves, who are usually needy and hungry, are instead directed toward craftsmanship or agriculture.

[6] «The *Potestà* takes care of wars, peace, and the art of warfare [...] the *Sapienza* oversees all sciences, as well as doctors and magistrates of both the liberal and mechanical arts», (T. Campanella, *La Città del Sole*, Artetetra 2018, p. 71); «*Amore* is responsible for procreation, uniting males and females in such a way as to produce a good lineage» (ivi, p. 74).

However, it is Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) that particularly stands out. Bensalem, the island where the English philosopher sets his ideal society, is governed by a peculiar institution, the *House of Solomon* or *The College of the Six Days' Work*, which oversees scientific studies and research. The inhabitants of Bensalem construct underwater machines and even seem to have «some degrees of flying in the air»[7], while special agents (the *Merchants of light*) secretly gather technical innovations from other nations. Whenever the College deems the dissemination of certain discoveries harmful to society, it withholds that knowledge from both the public and political authorities[8].

Conceived as an ideal realization of the scientific method proposed in *Instauratio Magna*, Bacon's utopia is founded on a decisive shift from the classical *sofocratic* ideal. Three aspects highlight this transformation. First, we observe the early signs of an emancipation of science from politics: the role of custodian of the public good shifts from the philosopher to the scientist, who even assumes authority over the dissemination of knowledge – in other words, *téchne* begins to carry the weight of *epistéme*. Second, we witness a shift in the moral agency of the scientific institution, which is now explicitly entitled to deception. The contrast with the *Republic* is striking: in Plato, philosophical knowledge may deceive in the name of truth; in Bacon, scientific knowledge may withhold information in the name of well-being. As a result, *téchne* (understood as the governance of society based on scientific parameters) begins to embody *ethos*, initiating the modern dilemma of a science capable of determining not only the practical concept of well-being but also the much higher notion of what is politically just.

Certainly, the proto-scientific utopia of *New Atlantis* remains an exception, and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political imaginaries continue to uphold a natural and rational ideal that is fundamentally *sofocratic*. Yet, albeit slowly, *téchne* seems to be breaking free from the transcendental embrace of the Good, beginning, however tentatively, to claim its place – *causa sui* – among the seats of an ideal government that is increasingly worldly, efficient, and measurable.

[7] F. Bacon, *New Atlantis*, p. 40 CTMS Publishers, Dallas 2020, p. 40.

[8] «[…] we have consultations, which of the inventions and experiences which we have discovered shall be published, and which not; and take all an oath of secrecy, for the concealing of those which we think fit to keep secret: though some of those we do reveal sometimes to the state, and some not», ivi, p. 41.

4. The Eighteenth Century and the Reasons for Utopia

Starting from the second half of the eighteenth century, rational thought – rationally elevated to the status of a probative axiom of human nature – begins to claim social nobility. Its ethical consequences soon manifest: the legitimacy of political institutions is subjected to the equalizing scrutiny of reason, and the long-standing social divisions based on nobility and wealth come to be perceived as unjust *precisely* because they are irrational. No longer merely imagining a better world, Reason now undertakes the revolutionary project of *actual* social change, transforming into the modern *raison politique*. It thus becomes difficult to draw a clear boundary between dreams and political manifestos, as utopian narratives of the eighteenth century remain stubbornly suspended between the two (one might even call them *Mesotopias* for this reason).

In *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* (1793) and *De la législation ou Principes des lois* (1776), Gabriel Bonnot de Mably advocates for the abolition of private property and the establishment of public education for all social classes. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), one of the most famous didactic-literary utopias of all time, celebrates the adaptability of the archetypal English explorer, sustained by a threefold and unwavering faith: the superiority of Western intellect, the proud determination of a subject of His Majesty, and a stubborn yet humble Puritan devotion.

In some cases, ethical transformation serves as a precursor to the idea of progress: in *L'Île des esclaves* (1725), Pierre de Marivaux envisions a society in which masters and oppressed individuals switch roles, promoting a moral reflection on equality and justice as essential elements of civil and political advancement through the expiation of guilt (by the former) and forgiveness (by the latter). The first *dischronic* utopia in history[9], *L'An 2440* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1770), is founded on a solid scientific optimism: the future Paris is clean and artificially illuminated, many diseases are easily cured, and machines alleviate the burden of heavy labor. Technology, though carefully managed[10], has thus saved humanity.

[9] By setting his story in the future, Mercier replaces the classical spatial criterion with a temporal one. Upon closer examination, this narrative device is itself a new "technique of the imaginary," capable of projecting its political ideal beyond the limits of space.

[10] As in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, some unspecified technologies are deemed too dangerous to be disclosed and are therefore carefully kept hidden from the community.

The imagined form of government «neither monarchical, nor democratic, nor aristocratic, but rational, made for men»[11] appears hierarchical yet meritocratic, centered on labor, anti-colonialist, and opposed to the infamous practice of *lettres de cachet*. And yet, at the helm of the city, we still find «a philosopher-king, worthy of the throne because he disdained it, more jealous of the happiness of men than of the specter of power, fearing his successors and fearing himself, he offered to restore the states to their ancient prerogatives»[12].

Once again, we encounter a *sophocratic* model – an outcome that may seem unexpected but is not surprising. Rationalism remains the ideal (and indeed the only) *trait d'union* between technique and nature. Reason, far from being merely an *outil de calcul*, asserts itself as a true act of devotion, capable of elevating society not only morally but even spiritually above the obsolete and crude spectacle of aristocratic and high-clerical "superstition"[13].

A few but significant examples suffice to highlight a crucial shift in the vision of the relationship between technology and politics. If the technocratic model still enjoys a political *favor* today – an aura of anti-ideological impartiality that psychologically sustains it – this *favor* can likely be traced back to this period, to that epochal liberation from the partisanship of the old (though well-oiled) mechanisms of the *Ancien Régime*. It is an undeniable historical merit, one that positivist thought will adopt in the following century, transforming it into a subtle *instrumentum ideologicum* of future political history.

5. Evolution and Dialectic of the Imaginary in the Nineteenth Century

The Industrial Revolution, with its structural upheaval of productive techniques, imposed a new and decisive «epistemological rupture»[14], ultimately completing the emancipation of technology from the original sophocratic dimension in which it had been embedded. With the *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), Ricardo not only revolutionized economic theory but also clarified that the future of politics would be determined by the management of the relationship between wealth

[11] L-S Mercier, *L'anno 2440*, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari 1993, p. 238.

[12] Ivi, p. 251.

[13] It is no coincidence that atheism is entirely absent in Mercier's utopia.

[14] A. Sciortino, *Il governo tra tecnica e politica: le funzioni,* in *Il Governo tra tecnica e politica*, a cura di G. Grasso, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli 2016, p. 10.

distribution and production techniques. The Enlightenment concept of rational progress, based on the idea of a harmonious collaboration between man and nature, was in some ways overturned; industrial production now rewarded efficiency as a social goal and elevated those capable of optimizing it.

The centuries-old and gradual inversion of the Platonic hierarchy appears to reach completion here: social engineers are no longer philosophers but producers, legitimized by the "moral infamy" (as denounced by Marx in the most impassioned pages of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*) of the bourgeois theory of capital. The past and destiny of humanity, including the "political" man, were now debated on economic grounds. Technology, understood as a historical-anthropological interpretation of society, appropriated not only political time but also the pre- and meta-political imaginary, becoming a process that was both ideal and necessary, a hermeneutic of techno-scientific models (and no longer, as in the eighteenth century, of rational-political models) from which it seemed increasingly senseless to disengage.

The study of man remained anchored in comparative methodologies, yet, unlike in the previous century, taxonomies became hierarchical: comparative anthropology explained the origins of races, evolutionism rewarded adaptability, and dialectical materialism predicted the future. Scientific data shifted from the field of *epistéme* – understood as descriptive knowledge of the "here and now" – to the realm of *alétheia* – understood as prescriptive knowledge of the from now on. In the readings of Marx and Engels, the very concept of "utopian" would be derived, in a negative sense, from the distance (or incorrect understanding) of the economic laws of production (and from the resulting political demands of the proletariat): Fourier, Owen, and Saint-Simon were labeled as "utopians" precisely because «none of them considered themselves representatives of the proletariat»[15].

Fourier, in his *Manuscrits publiés par la Phalange* (1853), imagined a community of approximately 1600 individuals (the Phalanx), based on collective ownership and the active participation of all (simultaneously producers and consumers) in profits, in proportion to their contributions to the common wealth. The Phalanx was housed in the Phalanstery, an architectural structure with unprecedented forms that allocated space in accordance with the division between labor and leisure, while the most important decisions were made by the wisest and most experienced members, gathered in the Academy. Fourier's construction foreshadowed a fusion of ideals, where economic technology,

[15] F. Engels, *L'evoluzione del socialismo dall'utopia alla scienza,* Editori Riuniti, Roma 1969 [1880], p. 27.

in opposition to the brutal laws of capitalism, seemed to ascend to a kind of *wisdom of téchne*, an ideal social engineering arising from the accord between skill, economy, and ethics.

To achieve this, utopia was compelled to descend into the realm of feasibility, to become a social project or at least to imagine itself as one. In *Voyage en Icarie* (1840), Etienne Cabet maintained More's narrative *topos* of the journey, but his objective was to transform society into a real socialist community. His preference for direct democracy was mediated by the presence of commissions organized by productive sector, capable of influencing popular bodies with their expert assessments: economic technique thus gained further political weight, even within the ideal imaginary.

Both in Cabet and Fourier, the recognition of socio-economic laws further thinned the distinction between utopian imagination and political project[16]: nonetheless, the harmony between technology and wisdom remained, by the authors' own admission[17], an extra-historical event, emerging either from a collective but transitory effort or even from an act of philanthropy, that is, from the individual action of a member of the very bourgeoisie that was bureaucratically constructing the class of producers that Marx and Engels sought to annihilate.

Where scientific socialism cast doubt on the "technocracy of capital", nineteenth-century literature painted dystopian imaginaries[18] oscillating between satire and horror, haunted by the specter of an excess of scientificity in sociopolitical aspirations.

One lesser-known example is *Travels in Phrenologasto* (1825), published in colonial India by the Englishman Trotter, a curious dystopia narrating the adventures of Balscopo, an Italian explorer who, traveling in his hot air balloon, lands on the asteroid kingdom of Phrenologasto, located between the Earth and the Moon[19]. In Phrenologasto, society is entirely devoted, even normatively, to the science

[16] Cabet strenuously fights for the realization of his project: in 1848, he publishes a pamphlet titled *Réalisation de la communauté d'Icarie* and plans an Icarian colony in the United States. The idea, partly due to the negative opinion of the London communist organ to which it had been presented, will, so to speak, call the Icarian project back to the reality of its utopia – one that, from a Marxian perspective, fails to account for a general overturning of capitalist laws.

[17] «We will imagine that the experiment is supported by a sovereign or a particularly wealthy man [...] or by a powerful company [...] that intends to avoid hesitation and therefore directly organizes the Great Harmony» C. Fourier, *Manuscrits publiés par la Phalange*, Editions Anthropos, Paris 1853, p. 45.

[18] In this case, I use the term *dystopia* in its current value-based sense (that is, as a negative utopia, a place where a fatal deterioration of one or more elements of the existing sociopolitical reality occurs) rather than in its epistemological sense (which, by contrast, refers to a utopian place – ideal and not necessarily worsening – located in a different geographical position from the "real" geography of the author).

[19] It is curious to note how the story is founded, from the very beginning, on a scientific failure: in fact, Balscopo has failed in his original goal, which was to reach the moon through his technical knowledge.

of phrenology[20]: experiments and brutal decisions are legitimized in the name of a supposedly unassailable rationality. The protagonist, initially fascinated by the cold, phrenological political reason, gradually comes to understand its ruthless and falsely logical nature, ultimately advocating for the reasonableness of human nature, founded on the union of reason and sentiment[21].

Travels in Phrenologasto fits within a techno-phobic dystopian tradition, inaugurated in the previous century with *Gulliver's Travels*[22] and masterfully sublimated in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), a techno-dystopian masterpiece in which the dangers of uncontrolled experimentation explode, pushing the dream of governing téchne beyond the natural limits of control. In the figure of Dr. Moreau, a violent autocratic scientist, the worst excesses of politics and science coalesce, as if the former were in thrall to the sinister symbolic aura of the latter. The creatures on the island[23], humanized through brutal experiments, are subjected to "the Law", a code of conduct imposed upon them through the terror of punishment: this is the symbolic backdrop of a grim biotechnology of power, an ominous pre- and post-Foucauldian nightmare, where mechanisms of domination operate not only through psycho-disciplinary normalization of bodies but also, above all, through their brutal bio-physical decomposition and recomposition.

The resulting ethical hybridization is absolute: on the one hand, the human scientist, a potential guardian of rationality, is consumed by the omnipotence of his absolute power, becoming the most brutal of beasts; on the other hand, the human-beasts, helpless incarnations of "bare life", are imprisoned between the human and the non-human, manipulated and stripped of autonomy, forced into an inevitable rebellion to reclaim the deeply human right to their original non-humanity.

Suspended between identity dystopia and the terror of an uncontrollable, unnatural post-humanity, the narrative imagination of H.G. Wells foreshadowed, in just a few pages straddling Gothic fiction

[20] Conceived at the end of the eighteenth century by the Austrian anatomopathologist Franz-Joseph Gall, organology (later known as phrenology, from the combination of *phrén*, mind, and *lógos*, knowledge) posited the division of the brain mass into a determined number of localized areas, each corresponding to the activation of specific abilities and the identification of characteristic traits of an individual's personality.

[21] Cfr. G.M. Ambrosio, *Derive dell'utopico*, Artetetra Edizioni, Capua 2022.

[22] Particularly reminiscent here is the third voyage, in which Gulliver, upon encountering the flying island of Laputa – not so dissimilar from Frenologasto – finds himself dealing with a community of mad scientists, highly skilled in technology, astronomy, mathematics, and music, yet utterly devoid of even the slightest sense of practicality.

[23] Notice how the insular form, traditionally a geo-symbolic refuge for an ideal world, safeguarded from the corruption of humanity, is here overturned into its exact opposite: a prison where every madness of authority is permitted and from which escape is nearly impossible.

and speculative science fiction, the most profound philosophical-political reflections on the dangers of science without ethics, technocracy without humanity, and power without limits.

6. Techniques and Politics of the Imaginary in the Twentieth Century

Alternating between hopes and fears regarding the relationship between technology and power, the technocratic utopias of the twentieth century offer a sort of epistemological sublimation of the "industrial imaginary" of the previous century. On the one hand, the power of technology promises efficiency, equality, and sustainability; on the other, it challenges individual freedom and weakens the role of politics in its classical deliberative form, leaving the debate open on the ethical and social implications of the "rule of experts". Certainly, the political ghosts of the First World War would push towards the imagination of a technical knowledge emancipated not only from governmental power but also from the usual elective endorsement and even from the prevailing rules of price-based economics. This, in essence, is what the "technocratic creed" of the *Technate Project*, promoted by the *Technocracy Inc.* movement in the United States in the 1930s, aimed to achieve. Strongly critical of both traditional liberalism and the dynamics of representative democracy, the Movement proposed a technocratic leadership capable of ensuring an equitable social distribution of resources and an optimal functioning of infrastructures[24].

In the second half of the century, the technocratic imaginary splits into two fundamental strands, linked to the respective ideological blocs. The Soviet Union, eager to present itself as a "real utopia" driven by techno-ideological forces, employs science and technology as propaganda tools for economic and social planning. The construction of large infrastructures and model cities such as Magnitogorsk and Bratsk, Nikita Khrushchev's *Virgin Lands* campaign launched in 1954, and the launch of *Sputnik* three years later are examples of the techno-political rationalization of nature in its new cosmic extension. A rich literary tradition also emerges, combining individual heroism and

[24] The *Technate* project, led by engineer Howard Scott, was based on five fundamental postulates: a technical government composed of experts from various fields (engineering, economics, energy, etc.) replacing the traditional representative political and party-based system; the abolition of the price system and the introduction of an economy based on energy, where economic value and transactions are measured in energy units (*energy certificates*) instead of money; centralized planning of the entire economic apparatus to optimize efficiency and ensure an equitable distribution of resources; sustainability and automation of labor tasks to eliminate unnecessary human work and reduce waste; and the elimination of the traditional market, structured around supply and demand, replaced by the direct distribution of goods and services based on a scientific model.

socialist ideals, in which technology (agricultural, industrial, military) is often glorified – sometimes in idealized narratives – as an instrument in the hands and at the service of the people. It is not difficult to discern, in these projects of social engineering, a dual symbolic function that merges the utopia of a society governed by science with the *objective*, technical proof of socialism's ideological superiority over the capitalist bloc.

The Western utopian imaginary is more complex, oscillating between the science-fictional dream of universal, pan-political or apolitical technocracies, or interstellar leagues united by noble ideals[25], as opposed to the nightmare of worlds in which, conversely, humans are consumed by the logic of a blind and ruthless technology. The path carved in this latter direction by *1984* (1948) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), two of the most harrowing totalitarian dystopias with a technocratic drive, is all too well known. We will simply observe that while Orwell denounces the horror of a technology (military and informational) devoted to pervasive mass surveillance, wielded by a power that has lost all connection to the original meaning of the "political", Bradbury, on the other hand, emphasizes the complicity of an apathetic and lethargic society, passively enchanted by the siren call of hyper-individualistic comfort. The relationship between civilization and narcosis would become one of the key themes of Aldous Huxley's dystopian fiction: *soma*, the drug prescribed to the inhabitants of *Brave New World* (1932), keeps suffering at bay – yet, beneath the surface, it saps all potential for dissent and cultivates a bleak scenario of a surgically mechanized existence and a society crushed by eugenics and mind control. However, even *moksha*, the substance used by the inhabitants of Pala, the paradise of the remarkable *Island* (1962), to achieve spiritual elevation, can lend itself to alienating and uncontrolled excesses. The novel's dark ending, with the Palanese increasingly drawn to the economic promises of oil wealth, seems to foreshadow a scenario in which fascination with technology and money becomes the inevitable and suffocating fate of all *socialitas*, regardless of temporal and spatial coordinates.

The twentieth century, however, is also the age of cinema, which allows for striking visual representations of techno-dystopian scenarios. With *Brazil* (1985), Terry Gilliam offers one of the most sophisticated and unsettling reflections on the concept of bureaucratic dystopia. Sam Lowry,

[25] Let us recall here the peaceful and experimental imaginary of the *Star Trek* television saga, which first aired in 1966. The series revolves around the interstellar voyages of the *Enterprise*, a spaceship of the Confederated Fleet, manned by a multicultural crew deeply united in its mission.

the protagonist, works at the *Ministry of Information*, an institution that censors and suppresses individuals in a vortex of forms, paperwork, and endless administrative procedures. His only escape is sleep, in which he dreams of soaring through the air, freeing himself from the world that is slowly eroding him. When a typographical error (confusing the surname *Tuttle* with *Buttle*) leads to the wrongful arrest and death of an innocent man, with no one able (or willing) to correct it, an unexpected spirit of rebellion takes hold of Sam, who comes into contact with "terrorists" dedicated to sabotaging the system. Captured and imprisoned, he ultimately retreats into one last dream, imagining his escape and a happy life with Jill, the woman of his dreams, while in reality, he remains bound and on the verge of being tortured.

By combining the nightmarish control narrative of *1984* with the Kafkian labyrinthine verbosity of *The Trial*, *Brazil* presents a surreal and satirical vision where power, control, alienation, and subjectivity are centrifuged into a totalizing and oppressive bureaucratic apparatus. The *Ministry of Information* recalls Orwell's *Ministry of Truth*, and both institutions resort to violence. However, while Orwell depicts a system which is still, in some way, guided by someone, Gilliam's retro-futurism prefers a bureaucratic totalitarianism suspended between what Hannah Arendt calls the «philosophy of the bureaucrat»[26] and the convoluted legal nightmare of *The Trial*. In this surgical utopia of self-surveillance, every individual is reduced to the sole function of serving a machine that both precedes and transcends them. An impersonal machine, based on rigid and incomprehensible procedures, invincible precisely because it is sustained by the senseless self-referentiality that fuels it. In place of Orwell's *Big Brother* – a panoptic and violent enforcer – we find an equally insatiable yet blind and deaf bureaucratic organism. The effect of such an organization is clearly the dehumanization of the individual, reduced to a mere bureaucratic file: every citizen is a number, a code to be processed, and any attempt at rebellion is suppressed not by soldiers but by clerks armed with stamps and dossiers.

Praised by critics and over time becoming a cult classic of dystopian science fiction, *Brazil* remains a work of extraordinary relevance – an *exaggeration of the present* rather than a dystopia of the future, a masterful examination of the consequences of what David Graeber has called «the age of total

[26] « […] the bureaucrat shuns every general law, handling each situation separately by decree, because a law's inherent stability threatens to establish a permanent community in which nobody», H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace & Company, NY 1979, p. 216.

bureaucratization», witnessing «the gradual fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose ultimate purpose is to extract wealth in the form of profits[27]».

7. Final Considerations

At the conclusion of this brief journey, the utopian imaginary appears to have gradually abandoned its original sophocratic framework–aimed at achieving a supreme good of an ethical and sapiential nature at the social level – in favor of a technocratic ideal, in which the supreme good is instead tied to the criterion of maximum efficiency. This epistemological and ideological shift was promptly perceived by utopian worlds, which are inherently critical yet porous to the surrounding social scenarios: what was once considered an immutable sapiential zenith of optimal governance has undergone technological transformations previously unimaginable. As we have seen, the responses to this shift have been highly divergent, ultimately oscillating between celestial confederations and infernal dystopias.

From another perspective, the utopian imaginary of recent decades reflects the assumption of a technocratic model that is *inherently* anti-ideological, a hypothesis seemingly supported by the potential incorporation of the technocratic paradigm within regimes based on different ideologies, from Marxist-Soviet systems to neoliberal States. This has fostered the utopian narrative of worlds miraculously sustained by peaceful and harmonious social collaboration, underpinned, in turn, by a technocratic choice perceived as socially wise *because* it is efficient, that is to say capable of guaranteeing qualified results precisely *because* they are quantifiable.

In establishing itself as one of the most pervasive ideologies of contemporary times, technocracy grapples with a kinship, however intricate, with the bureaucratic ideal. It may be possible to delineate the key stages of this evolution. First, the consolidation of a bureaucratic mentality on a global scale (paradoxically, precisely at the moment when, at the end of the last century, policies of *debureaucratization* and *deregulation* were being emphatically implemented in Italy) has shaped the ideal contours of a consortium based on the formal guarantee of social structures; in other words, it has recognized in the meticulous functioning of the administrative apparatus – and in the officials responsible for operating it – a social value, namely, an *ethic* linked to the *formal correctness of*

[27] D. Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, Melville, House, Brooklin – London 2015, p. 21.

procedures. The next stage saw this ethical-procedural ideal acquire a teleological status, transforming itself from a "good social practice" into a "socially desirable end". This was a historically crucial moment, as it allowed bureaucracy to establish itself within that liminal space where conscious preference and the inheritance of a deep tradition – one spanning the past four centuries – merge and blur. From being a simple historical-procedural marker, a mere technical safeguard for political decisions made elsewhere, the bureaucratic structure has, in other words, risen to the status of a political end of modernity.

This transformation has enabled – and here we reach the third and final stage – the bureaucratic technique to ascend to the "conscious level" of political processes. Technique has thus detached itself from bureaucracy, transitioning from an administrative instrument into a political goal, in other words from bureaucracy to technocracy. In summary, while bureaucracy celebrates data as a *process*, technocracy prizes data as a *result.* The former has led to a quantification of political processes, constraining them; the latter has absorbed them, assuming their values and agendas. Ultimately, both claim their own utopian scenario: bureaucracy envisions a world governed by blind procedural rigidity, while technocracy envisions a rule by experts who can dispense with popular representation. Needless to say, these utopias, in inverse terms, constitute dystopian threats to the "classical" democratic model, which is founded on the subordination of administrative acts to the law and on the political accountability of those who make decisions on behalf of society.

Turning to the underlying symbolic structure of technocratic utopias, one is reminded of a distinction that, though not entirely forgotten, is increasingly less perceptible to contemporary sensibilities: the difference between *poiesis* and *praxis.* In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines *poiesis* as the activity aimed at producing a useful object, while *praxis* is a free activity, not directed toward a productive outcome[28]. Practical thought, in other words, retains the rigor of creation while being liberated from the obligation of utility. The acceleration of productive processes has, however, resulted in the compression of the "practical" space of *lògos*, which has been overwhelmed by the relentless "poietic optimism" of *téchne.* In short, thought has increasingly less time to *imagine,* while technology has ever more space to *realize.* Regardless of how one judges the outcome, it is evident that utopian worlds (that is, the *places of non-places*) today seem to be losing that characteristic

[28] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 4-5 (1139a-1140b).

*"*ectopicity*"* we discussed at the outset – that permanent and providential distance from reality that once ensured their critical freedom and pedagogical-political function. As a result, utopias are either becoming bureaucratized into political science manuals or, conversely, dissolving into the – at times remarkable, yet teleologically distinct – variegated universe of science fiction.

Like the reality upon which it reflects, the contemporary utopian landscape no longer seems capable of distinguishing between the sophocratic model, led by the philosopher, and the technocratic model, directed by the engineer – ultimately forgetting even the risks that both models, in their extreme forms, conceal. While the former is prone to the totalitarian danger of ideological "historicism" (as famously analyzed by Karl Popper), the latter conceals – well-shielded behind an indefinitely "open", revisable, and anti-ideological phenomenal superstructure – an engineering noumenon of well-being that is increasingly elusive (and thus, ever less debatable). By presenting itself as an indispensable truth-bearing thread among diligently associated subjectivities, the *kràtos* of today's *téchne* appears to be precisely that of surviving beyond and despite the technocrats themselves. It has implanted, even in the free spaces of the imagination, mechanical outposts aimed at the automated measurement of "the Good" – a process defined by algorithmic assessments that are increasingly beyond the consultation, management, and control of the very recipients of that good.

Supported by techno-populist narratives of various kinds and promoted as the perfect alternative to the ideological failures of the past century, technocratic projects today brandish, almost universally, the monopoly of an Edenic, disinterested, apolitical epiphany of well-being. In the end, this seems to be the political masterpiece of modern technocracies: presenting themselves as structures that are ideally anti-political, meta-political, or apolitical, surpassing even the confines of ideological *praxis*, to transform into genuine neo-metaphysics of the political – where even the opposition between dream and judgment, desire and fear, utopian and dystopian, appears perilously blurred.

Metábasis.it
PHYLOSOPHY AND COMMUNICATION

ONLINE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
WITH *PEER REVIEW*
WWW.METABASIS.IT
May 2025 year XX n. 39

MIMESIS
Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
via Monfalcone, 17/19

AlboVersorio Edizioni
& AlboVersorio Edizioni
di Ass. NonsoloSophia
nonsolosophia@gmail.com

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Varese n. 893 del 23/02/2006.
ISSN 1828-1567