

Vita Fortunati*

University of Bologna

Aldous Huxley: a pioneer of an ecological and pacifist vision

I would like to open this contribution of mine with a quote from *Ape and Essence*, because it contains all the elements of the critique Aldous Huxley directed at western society, and at the same time it is an attempt at explicitly formulating a new model for society:

Progress- the theory that you can get something for nothing; the theory that you can gain in one field without paying for your gain in another; the theory that you alone understand the meaning of history; the theory that you know what's going to happen fifty years from now; the theory that, in the teeth of all experience, you can foresee all the consequences of your present actions; the theory that Utopia lies just ahead and that, since ideal ends justifies the most abominable means, it is your privilege and duty to rob, swindle, torture, enslave and murder all those who, in your opinion (which is, by definition, infallible) obstruct the onward march to the earthly paradise. (Huxley 1949: 39)

My essay focuses on Aldous Huxley's' later essays, and in particular on the collection titled *The Human Situation* (1959) and on his novel *Island*, published a year before his death in 1962, where he, with renewed vigour, reprised themes which are still today of great importance, such as integrated culture, pacifism, ecology, syncretism between western and eastern cultures, decentred communities, and, above all, the concept of perception, i.e. the "vision" of a society proposing an alternative to the capitalistic and consumerist one he saw gaining ground, especially in the United States.

The starting point is the one relative to the importance of an integrated society. In his essay, *Integrated Education* (1978), Huxley synthesised his thought and expressed his concern about an excessively specialised culture; according to him, it risks losing sight of what are the central and fundamental issues of mankind. To avoid such danger and to try to solve urgent and complex problems, it is necessary to dip into knowledge deriving from different disciplines. In this perspective, intellectuals are some sort of '*pontifex*', «builders of bridges», capable of connecting the arts and the sciences, of uniting facts as observed in a detached, objective manner, to the world of immediate perception, of uniting moral and scientific assessments.

Different disciplines should stop keeping separate and make an effort to open a mutual dialogue. On this subject, Huxley uses the powerful metaphor of celibacy: the separation between the different types of knowledge has led to what he calls the ‘celibacy of intellect’, that is ‘super specialisation’ provoking a dangerous dichotomy between the mind and the body, the intellect, and passions, between reason and instincts. In society scientific discoveries should, in truth, touch the sensibilities of human beings, and this is the reason why artists should be able to find the words to describe them. Huxley moreover underlines the importance of scientists being humble in their work and in their research, the way great scientists have always been, because being humble fosters a willingness to keep the ethical implication of one’s work in serious consideration. Huxley, unlike his brother, biologist and geneticist Julian, more than once stated that the duty of a writer and an intellectual was stressing that the progress of science and technology should always proceed by the side of and be tempered, mitigated, by compassion (according to the word’s Latin etymology, *cum-patior*, suffer and partake of the suffering on others) and, in particular, humbleness. The progress of civilisation is not only to be measured on its scientific and technological conquests, but also by the presence of values such as compassion and especially its citizens’ high level of critical awareness (vd. Dees 2015).

Another recurring theme in Huxley’s production is that of war, which the writers saw as intrinsically connected to the nationalistic ideology, one of the great scourges of the twentieth century. In the essays written between the two world wars, and more precisely between 1931 and 1935, he called this period one of the most dreadful, both from the standpoint of the economy and of its politics. It was in this very period that Huxley engaged in pacifism, actively opposing war. In 1935 he joined the «Peace Pledge Union», held public conferences on the pacifist cause and in 1936 he wrote «What you are going to do about it? The case for Constructive Peace», followed, in 1937, by the publication of *An Encyclopaedia of Pacifism*. Huxley’s resolute, firm stance for pacifism, both before and during World War 2, was opposed not just by his brother, Julian, but also by other intellectual writers of the British left (Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, George Orwell), who saw the advance of fascist militarism as a grave danger that had to be withstood. But for Huxley it was possible to break the chain of war only by radically opposing it, because any military solution would have only led to further conflicts, followed by more military solutions and thus on and on, “ad infinitum”. Indeed, he claimed that arms do not ensure security; on the contrary, they foster war. In his 1959 essay *War and Nationalism*, Huxley wanted to deconstruct the many prejudices lurking within this subject. First amongst these, the one considering war as something utterly inevitable, man being a ‘naturally’ aggressive and combative animal. Framing the issue from a biological point of view, according to Huxley, it is plain to see how rare a phenomenon war between organised groups of the same species is. War between humans is a social phenomenon and it is strongly conditioned by human symbolic systems, and in particular by one of the most disastrous and powerful ideologies of modern life: nationalism (Huxley 1978: 86–87).

He links the theme of nationalism and war to the education children receive in school, because it is instilled in the various educational systems via schoolbooks. In his essays

Education and Peace (1937) and *Science, Liberty, and Peace* (1946), Huxley claims that, even in countries where democracy is established, history is taught with books that select facts by linking them to various wars and display positions in favour of war. He admired Montessori's pedagogic systems because in her writings she explained how certain educational methods do not train children at school to become adults with the courage to say what they think, but rather persuade them to passively obey anything they are taught, without allowing them to overcome shyness. In these essays Huxley tries to deconstruct the idea that a nation is founded on a territory, on a language, on an ethnos.

Nationalism is clearly an ideology exploited by various governments to foment war and which can from time to time be coloured by different ideologies. It is, in other words, an abstract idea which can be manipulated by totalitarian regimes, and it is particularly dangerous in highly technologically literate mass societies, because their governments are capable of building powerful instruments of war. Huxley, who witnessed two world wars, claims that war is an instrument of death, not just because millions of deaths were caused by the atomic bomb, but because via the production of armaments it strengthened the weapons industry. It is at the root of American capitalism, and of western prosperity and riches; investing capital in armaments created an ever-growing divide between the extremely rich and the poor.

In *Education and Peace* Huxley critically examines American society, where economic and military power is in the hands of an oligarchy responsible both of armaments and of economic investments. He claims that it is necessary to fight indifference, passivity and moral insensitivity, dangerous features he sees pervasive in mass societies, despite the bloodbath and the horrors of two world wars. The radical nature of his thought is very close to the process of 'pacific resistance' that Gandhi had developed and that, for Huxley, was the only valid form to oppose the armaments of industrialised nations: a resistance which, before being political, had to be individual and moral. He also tried to explore nonviolent ways to change the shape of politics, since he was firmly convinced that the noble end of defeating fascism would end by being corrupted by the brutal methods employed to arm Great Britain and the United States. This policy of 'pacific resistance' could be carried out only through a radical change in humanity, which had to pass through a critical perception of reality, which also entailed a continuous discipline of body and mind. Huxley defined this ongoing discipline «a training in the art of spiritual insight», which allowed people to free themselves from those «bad habits» that develop not just at a moral, but also at a cognitive, intellectual, and emotional level. In elaborating this concept, he strongly felt the influence of William Blake, because the poet likewise held that cultivating the imagination meant increasing creativity. It was only through this process, according to Huxley, that we would manage to know ourselves, to free ourselves from conventional thoughts and stereotypical notions. Huxley's radical pacifist stance can be understood if one keeps in mind how important the knowledge and study of religions had been for him; not just the mysticism of the West (San Giovanni della Croce), but also that of the East, of Buddhism (Gautama Buddha) and of Hinduism, a

sort of eclectic and secular mysticism, so to speak. He was very interested in the meditation techniques developed and practiced in various religions (Huxley 1956: 36).

The third point that makes Huxley such a currently relevant author is his ecologic vision. During the years when he lived in California (from 1937 to 1963), he came into contact with the first environmental (green) movements¹ and he grasped the importance of ecology as a *systemic science*: science which had to converse with many disciplines, and which proposed a new alliance between the human and the biological sciences. Huxley adopts a systemic approach, consisting in eliminating dualism and studying, with the contribution of several disciplines, the interactions between man and nature. Huxley's approach is like that of environmentalists who strive to study the interactions between balances and imbalances, between organization and disorganizations in complex systems. In his essays, he anticipated many environmentalist ideas in a historical period in which political, social, and economic energies were all centred on technological progress, on industrialisation and on the concept of limitless growth. Instead, Huxley thought it was fundamental to overcome the anthropocentric position, because nature has her rights, as well as every other creature living on this earth, be it animal or vegetable. He possessed a clear awareness of the bond between man and nature, of the interdependence and connection of mankind to all that surrounds it (vd. Huxley 1980).

All the natural cycles of the physical and biological environment, all the factors life depends upon, had limits, according to Huxley. He interpreted natural processes as dynamic and complex, and at the same time, mutually interdependent. By altering one factor, the others were influenced and modified, and, once a certain threshold was crossed, the balance and integrity of the system was disturbed and upset. He hoped for a non-binary vision of man, with no separation between body and mind. His was a holistic, unitary vision, in harmony with Eastern philosophies: the individual as an open system interacting with the environment and the context wherein, they are inserted. His essay *Man and His Planet* (1954) summarises many of the ideas Huxley expressed throughout his work. The basis of this essay was the fundamental thesis of his philosophy according to which good ends are only achieved through appropriate means. There existed a clear and close correlation between ends and means, since the ends cannot justify the means, for the plain and obvious reason that the means employed will determine the nature of the ends achieved. Moreover, his environmental interest was food for thought for environmentalists because he tried to connect his own pacifism and eclectic mysticism with a moral proposal in which the value of 'compassion' and 'respect' should not be addressed just to all other living beings, but also encompass the organic and inorganic natural world, such as rocks and mountains. To define the diverse rhythms in the dynamics of human and natural systems, it was necessary, according to Huxley, to be aware of the existence of a difference between 'historical times and biological times', which follow different rhythms, since human history is a negligible span compared to Earth's biological history. He applied this principle to the analysis of the development of civilisation carried out by felling forests to build roads: by enacting this process of destruction, man has devastated the face of the planet we live on. To counterbalance this pessimistic view Huxley admitted that man, thanks

to travelling, had brought plants and animals from different parts of the world, thus giving no small contribution to the ecological variety of the planet. The final judgement however remains very negative: man has lived on this planet for too often as a parasite infesting and destroying its host. The writer also highlights the dangerous processes of exploiting the soil: deforestation for timber to create fleets, the metal industry, the intensive use of pasture. One of the dangers for the planet's ecological balance that Huxley identified is also population growth. He had been analysing the complex problem of over-population (*Adonis and the Alphabet*, 1956) in relation to the limitations of the planet's capacities, and, in particular, he had reflected on the nature of man as a living being, always underscoring the importance of a cultural and programmatic principle of environmentalism, the principle of limits. From this perspective, it may be said that Huxley, as later environmentalists would, made the «culture of limits» one of his theoretical cornerstones, thus contributing to the elaboration of the concept of «sustainability» (*idem*: 139).

In his important essay *The Double Crisis* (1948) he criticises not only industrial society and consumerism, but he identifies industrialism as the main factor causing the planet's environmental degradation (vd. Bedford 1973: 83). In this sense Huxley was a forerunner and in harmony with future environmentalists, who would criticise a vision of the world founded on economic and quantitative parameters, with the tendency to monetarise all and every aspect of life. He strove to fight a conception of life that identified the best way of improving the lot of humanity with economic growth and increased production. He bitterly attacked the American approach to immediate reward that, in his opinion, would reveal itself to be counterproductive in the long run (Charter 1962: XII).

The ideas I have tried to enucleate are found in Huxley's last novel, *Island*, which represents not just a compendium of his critical thought, but also his last will and testament. The frame of this work of his had already been announced in Huxley's introduction to the 1946 reissue of *Brave New World*.² I do not have time to go deeply in the analysis of *Island*, But I briefly want to enucleate some essential points.

Pala is thus called "the forbidden island" a place no journalist had ever visited; it represents a possible way out both from the capitalistic society that makes people passive consumers, lacking all critical sense, and from the dirigisme present in totalitarian societies. In the novel, the attitude of Pala's inhabitants is exemplified in Doctor McPhail's character

We don't want the Communists, but neither do we want the Capitalists. Least of all we want the wholesale industrialization that both parties are so anxious to impose on us for different reasons, of course. The West wants it because our labour costs are low, and investor's dividends will be correspondingly high. And the East wants it because industrialization will create a proletariat, open fresh field for Communist agitation and may lead in the long term to the sitting up of yet another People's Democracy.

We say no to both of you, so we are unpopular everywhere. Regardless of their ideologies, All Great Powers may prefer Rendag-controlled Pala with oil fields to an independent Pala without.

If Dipa attacks us, they'll say it's most deplorable; but they won't lift a finger. And when he takes us over and calls the oilmen, they 'll be delighted. (Huxley 1976: 52)

The inhabitants of Pala refuse an economic conception based on the drive to productivity and systemic industrialization. Lenin's Axiom: "Electricity plus socialism equals communism" has been overturned, by means of a more global approach, capable of keeping into consideration a close correlation between economics, politics and ethics (*idem*: 167).

Pala is a society founded on supportive cooperation, characterised by being decentralised in small, self-supporting communities,³ using renewable resources, by the ethics of nonviolence and by simplicity. More than once, in his essays, Huxley, expressed his objections against statism, and his support of independence and cooperative regional autonomy (Huxley 1937: 100–101).

What's more, Pala, despite being extremely rich in oil, has managed to avoid giving any concession for the exploitation of its reserves. It appears to be a society with a low level of industrialization, based on the environmentalist concept of 'sustainable development', where natural resources are considered a limited, non-renewable capital. Technology is never 'neutral'. It is closely connected to the goals of its application, to ethics, to the scientific culture wherein it is conceived, and, most importantly, to the social cultural and environmental implications deriving from its use.

Thus, there follows the issue of the choice of the means employed; that is, what sort of technology should be used to conciliate the ends. On this matter Huxley anticipated the debate on the necessity of appropriate technology advocated by later ecologists in the 1990's. Huxley, like some ecology theorists, advocates 'appropriated', 'intermediate', 'soft' technologies, fitting the needs of a certain population, in a determined social and economic context, in order to match good means to good ends. The idea of intermediate technologies has had a strong influence in industrialized countries in the search for alternative technologies, in particular to supply renewable, non-polluting, sources of energy. Indeed, ecologists support research and development to better exploit solar and Eolic energy, based on two non-polluting sources, sun and wind, that Huxley also urged developing and researching. In *Science, Liberty, and Peace* (1946: 159) Huxley stated the importance of these renewable sources of energy.

In *Island*, too, Huxley reprised the theme of the relationship between man and machines: he warned against the danger of idolizing machines; man should not become a slave to technology, but carefully maintain independence from technological media (1929: 750). As regards the organization of labour, in Pala the principle of maximum efficiency, typical of industrial societies, is overturned (*op. cit.*: 157); here the philosophical concept of work is founded on the value of human personality and its self-realization, because work cannot be subordinate to maximum efficiency, but to the fulfilment and satisfaction of the inhabitants; in Pala, part time work and the rotation of different crafts are practiced (*idem*: 172).

The work ethics of the inhabitants of Pala is thus imbued with the enhancement of human personality and with assessing work in qualitative terms rather than quantitative ones; for

this reason, like many environmentalists, Huxley strives for an affective re-evaluation of the concept of work, to draw the work and the personal spheres nearer, by proposing a reduction in work hours, greater flexibility compared to hyperspecializing, the creation of autonomous activities of a self-producing kind, generating durable, recyclable products. If, in *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley criticized consumerism, centralization, hyper-specialization and hyper-organization of work, in *Island* he proposed, as an alternative, flexible, part time work, the concurrence of means and ends as a way to self-fulfilment. Consequently, the inhabitants of Pala prefer satisfaction and job flexibility, as well as volunteer work in various sectors, to efficiency.

The reason for this diversification is, moreover, an educational, formative factor for the people of Pala, in accordance with the overall, complex thought advocated by environmentalists (*idem*: 172).

In the parts of *Island*, that discuss the education, medicine, sexuality, science and philosophy of the latter's people, the systemic approach sought by Huxley appears evident, as he tried to combine the best of both West and East philosophy, the new alliance also supported by environmentalist.

The education in Pala is global, based on a holistic vision. Children are taught ecology to enable them to learn the complexity of the relationships existing between human beings and nature, as well as the latter's limits (*idem*: 247).

In the novel, Huxley also clearly expresses the ecologists' axiom that all organisms modify, to a greater or lesser degree the ecosystems they inhabit. Being part of ecosystems, the presence of one or the other individual or species is destined to influence the way said ecosystem works (Charter 1962: XV). Moreover, consistently with the Huxleyan reciprocity of the 'means and ends' binomial, and with the awareness of interrelations, in Pala, an ethical conscience, which is the premise of political environmentalism, is imparted (Huxley 1976: 247).

"Self-awareness" is a concept of the utmost importance for the inhabitants of Pala; it means being careful of living in a mindful and critical way, and cultivating love and sympathy for the other. Thus, even if the 'forbidden island', due to its pacifist beliefs, will not take up arms to defend itself from Dipa the dictator, who wants to exploit its oil reserves, and will fall under his rule, the reader is left with a deep impression of this vision of an alternative society. This is a universe allowing and fostering a perfect harmony of body and mind, of man and nature, where each individual is well aware of being part of a whole, and of being capable of creating links with others, inasmuch they are human beings. This is the hope that Huxley hints at in the last pages of the novel, although the island experiment will end after Pala's invasion.

In this sense the utopian island of Pala appears to be the symbol of Huxley's spiritual and cultural search, because in it he tries to match and harmonize the results of natural science and technological culture with Eastern philosophies, both Buddhist and Hindi. It is thus no coincidence that Serge Latouche, the economist philosopher⁴ champion of the 'concrete utopia' of degrowth, chose to place Huxley within the line of the precursors of this theory.

Aldous Huxley is an interesting example of an intellectual who managed to unite the two cultures, scientific and humanistic, and who dedicated his life to the search of new perspectives and as yet unexplored horizons. His motto “Aùn aprendo” (I keep learning) brilliantly exemplifies his lucid critical attitude towards the reality surrounding him and his observation of nature. His critical thought is a complex combination of rationality and creativity, of scepticism and mysticism that finds his synthesis in the philosophical principle of being “realistically idealist”.

NOTES

¹ Huxley met the American environmentalists Fairfield Osborn (*Our Plundered Planet*, 1948) and William Vogt (*Road to Survival*, 1948) with whom he exchanged interesting correspondence. The period following the second world war was named “The Age of Environmental Innocence” and in during these years an important role was played by Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring* (1963).

² D.K. Dunaway, *Huxley in Hollywood*, Bloomsbury, London, 1985, p.432. “It is a kind of fantasy, a kind of reverse of *Brave New World*, about a society in which real efforts are made to realize human potentialities. I want to show how humanity can make the best of both the Eastern and Western World. So the setting is an imaginary island between Ceylon and Sumatra, at a meeting place of Indian and Chinese influence.”

³ Huxley did some research and studied some models of supportive cooperation see A.Maurini, *Aldous Huxley The political Thought of a Man of Letters*, Lexington Books, 2017, p.141” the Tennessee Valley Authority cooperative community, groups of workmen in New Zealand, the Consumers’ Cooperative Movement and the Partinico of Danilo Dolci”.

⁴ See :S.Latouche, *Breve trattato sulla decrescita serena*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2008 ed anche dello stesso autore , *Come si esce dalla società dei consumi*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2011; *Per un abbondanza frugale. Malintesi e controversie sulla decrescita*, Bollati e Boringhieri, Torino, 2011.

Works cited

- Bateson, Gregory (1977), *Verso un'ecologia della mente*, Milano, Adelphi.
-- (1984), *Mente e Natura*, Milano, Adelphi.
- Capra, Fritjof (1986 [1983]), *The Turning Point. Il punto di svolta*, *Scienza, Società e cultura emergente*, Milano Feltrinelli.
- Daly, Herman (1981), *Lo stato stazionario*, Firenze, Sansoni.
- Dunaway, Davis King (1985), *Huxley in Hollywood*, London, Bloomsbury.
- Huxley, Aldous (1929), *Machinery, Psychology and Politics*, in "The Spectator", 23.11.1929: 750.
-- (1937), *An Encyclopaedia of Pacifism* (Ed.), London, Chatto and Windus.
-- (1949), *Ape and Essence*, London, Chatto and Windus.
-- (1959), *The Human Situation*, Lectures at Santa Barbara, London, Grafton Books.
-- (1962), Introduction to S.P.R Charter, *Man on Earth: a preliminary Evaluation of the Ecology of man*, Sausalito, Angel Island Publication.
-- (1970 [1947]), *Science, Liberty, and Peace*, London, Chatto and Windus.
-- (1975 [1956]), *Adonis and the Alphabet*, London, Chatto and Windus.
-- (1976), *Island*, London, Triad Grafton.
-- (1963), *Literature and Science*, London, Chatto, and Windus.
- Ilich, Ivan (1974), *La Convivialità*, Milano, Mondadori.
-- (1982), *Per una storia dei bisogni*, Milano mondadori.
- Lasch, Christopher (1992), *Il paradiso in terra. Il progresso e la sua critica*, Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Latouche, Serge (1992), *Il pianeta dei naufraghi*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri.
-- (1992), *L'Occidentalizzazione del Mondo*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri.
- Ophuls, William (1991), "The Politics of the Sustainable Society" in Andrew Dobson (Ed.), *The Green Reader*, André Deutsch.
- Morin, Edgar (1990), *Il Metodo*, Milano Feltrinelli.
-- (1983), *Science avec Conscience*, Paris, Seuil.
- Pearce, David/ Anil Markandya/ Edward. B. Barbier (1989), *Blueprint for a Green Economy*, Earthscan Publications, London.
- Sachs, Wolfgang (1992), *Archeologia dello sviluppo*, S. Martino di Sarsina, Macroedizioni.
- Schumaker, Ernst Friederich (1974), *Small is Beautiful*, London, Abacus.
- Tiezzi, Enzo (1990), "I predatori dell'arca ecologica" in Paolo Degli Espinosa (a cura di), *La società ecologica*, Milano, Franco Angeli.
- U.K. Greens in the European Parliament, "Agenda Vert", *Green papers*, 6, Avril 1992.